

# Prizzi's Honor Short Guide

## Prizzi's Honor by Richard Condon

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## Characters/Techniques

Charley Partanna and Irene Walker are among the most likable characters in Condon's oeuvre. Although they must ultimately face up to the reality that one of them is going to have to kill the other, each is sketched with a degree of affection and a tolerance for human foibles most unusual in a Condon novel. This also carries over into the portrayals of minor characters, several of whom are viewed with a sympathetic rather than an analytic eye. This is accomplished despite the fact that Charley, Irene, and their comrades are, objectively speaking, coldblooded killers who are ruthlessly violent with anyone who stands in their way. This saccharine view of hard-edged people is something new for Condon — *The Manchurian Candidate* is typical in its sarcastic treatment of even the most innocuous people — and it may well herald a more mature conception of character that will free him from his previous reliance upon stereotype.

The primary technical means Condon uses to achieve this effect is the juxtaposition, without authorial comment, of descriptions of the mundanities of Charley and Irene's day-to-day life with low-key accounts of their criminal activities. If their contract killings were depicted graphically, with mentions of widows and orphans, this would certainly work against our acceptance of them as sympathetic protagonists; similarly, any representation of them as swingers or jet-set types would strain our capacity for thinking of them as normal people. But since Charley and Irene are introduced to us as "just folks," possessing the usual number of warts, blemishes, aches and silly ideas, we find it easy to relate to them; and since their crimes are narrated in a nonjudgmental tone suitable for any other type of job description, we can also imagine ourselves performing similar actions. Although the reader periodically pulls up short and realizes that Condon is taking a pretty flippant view of some decidedly awful crimes, it is a measure of his skill at concocting a coherent narrative that one quickly returns to suspending one's disbelief in this daring and ultimately successful story.



## Social Concerns

Prizzi's Honor offers a detailed account of the methods of operation of one of the major American Mafia families. Although its protagonists, Charley Partanna and Irene Walker, are professional murderers who have also committed many other crimes, they are treated as executive employees of a large business enterprise rather than as members of a criminal gang. They take pride, in fact, in the consummate skill with which they and their colleagues perform their work: At one point the Mafia is described as "the most efficiently run business organization in the country."

This matter-of-fact acceptance of the functional role of the Mafia goes even farther than the "hoods are human, too" ethos of Puzo's *The Godfather*. In the latter, the human qualities of the Mafiosi establish that their crimes are being committed by men rather than monsters, but this still does not exempt them from moral censure. In Prizzi's Honor, on the other hand, crimes are technically illegal acts that are nonetheless necessary and, in effect, justified by the Mafia's provision of high-demand products such as drugs, gambling, and prostitutes. As Condon presents them, the Mafia are an essential part of the social order, just about as American as apple pie and certainly much more useful than the flag-waving politicians, pontificating priests, and bribe-hungry policeman who constitute the balance of its cast of characters.

# Themes

The near-infinite ability we have for deluding ourselves is a thematic strand never far below the surface of Prizzi's Honor. Time and time again, people go to the most extraordinary lengths to convince themselves that the obvious will not happen: The mystical significance of blood ties is invoked as a means of shutting out the knowledge that relatives are untrustworthy; children are loved so irrationally that their unchecked impulses threaten their parents' survival; lovers are so desperately desired that even the chance of murder seems a small price to pay for their favors. Condon's conception of the almost endless malleability of human nature has here been amended to include the self as one of the major causative factors in delusional thinking and behavior. If this is somewhat less paranoid than *The Manchurian Candidate's* (1959) focus upon our susceptibility to external coercion, it is still a deeply pessimistic view of our capacities for transcending our psychic and physical environments.

# Adaptations

Prizzi's Honor was made into a motion picture in 1985. Directed by John Huston, with a script written by Condon and Janet Roach, it featured Jack Nicholson and Kathleen Turner in the starring roles of Charley Partanna and Irene Walker. William Hickey, Lee Richardson, Robert Loggia, Anjelica Huston, and John Randolph were the most prominent members of a fine supporting cast. The film was commercially successful and was generally well received by reviewers, although a minority found it impossible to accept the premise that professional killers could be sympathetic protagonists.

# Literary Precedents

Stories about loveable/honorable gangsters abound in the literature of many countries, from Robin Hood to Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925).

Condon's twist on his immediate predecessor, Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), is that his characters are more than family pawns, believing that their lives are worthy of their profession.

Loyalty to self honor supercedes (but does not replace) honor to the family.

## Related Titles

Prizzi's Honor was followed by Prizzi's Family (1986), Prizzi's Glory (1988) and Prizzi's Money (1994).





# Copyright Information

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