

Right on the Money Short Guide

Right on the Money by Emma Lathen

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Characters

The regular cast of characters from the Sloan Guaranty Trust is less central to the action of this novel than in earlier Lathen works. Everett Gabler and Charlie Trinkham, Thatcher's able assistants, serve here largely as a chorus, commenting on the action whenever they drop by Thatcher's office.

Even Miss Corsa, Thatcher's invaluable secretary, is all but invisible here, only once confining Thatcher to his desk and his Sloan duties. Tom Robichaux appears again, this time representing ASI in the merger and providing much opportunity for comedy; when he learns, for example, that Alan Frayne has stayed in the family firm for fifteen years, even though divorced from the Eckers' daughter, Robichaux, who has been married so frequently that he goes through "in-laws like boxes of Kleenex . . . regarded Alan Frayne's tenure in the Ecker family as a record-breaker."

Following the pattern of several of the earlier books, Thatcher himself is initially less actively involved in the events than he was, for example, in *Going For the Gold* (1981) or *Sweet and Low* (1972). The Sloan's interests in the buy-out are represented by Ken Nicolls, who appeared as the junior executive in *When in Greece* (1969) and *By Hook or by Crook* (1975). Nicolls has only recently inherited the Ecker account, and thus he and Thatcher entertain some doubts as to Nicolls's ability to handle everything. But Thatcher cannot resist the opportunities to take part in the action and, as the deal gets into murkier and murkier waters, Thatcher takes a more active role. He remains calm, detached, and dryly humorous, moving toward the solution that no one else seems able to spot. The police detective on the case comes to Thatcher, in fact, for enlightenment in this weird and Byzantine world of business.

At the Ecker Company and at ASI, there is a wide range of personalities, notably Conrad Ecker, a self-made man who believes he has all the answers; his wife Alice, a strong matriarch who will do whatever it takes to protect those she loves and who knows exactly how to handle the often volatile personalities in her family; Phil Pepitone, the diamond in the rough at ASI who trusts no one but Irene, his secretary of many years; Victor Hunnicut, the ambitious young executive who disastrously miscalculates the outcome of his machinations; and Gardner Ives, the ineffectual president of ASI who can never quite grasp how things have gotten out of his control.

All characters are delineated with cool, comic detachment, a technique which allows the readers to view the events and even the murder without letting their emotions hamper the experience.



Social Concerns

At the core of *Right on the Money* are the issues of corporate buy-outs and the rapidly disappearing small family firm, topics frequently in the news in recent years. The novel contrasts a small, highly idiosyncratic yet successful family-run business, the Ecker Company, and a large, up-to-date corporate giant, Aqua Supplies, Inc. The buy-out is a result of the retirement — due to poor health — of the son and heir-apparent of the Ecker Company's founder and president, Conrad Ecker. ASI is looking to diversify, and the Ecker Company appeals to them as a solid company that will bring profits and access to the retail market. But problems develop, due to the various power games the management teams on both sides are playing.

Green Crow the Dollars (1982) examined the dynamics of a family-run business, largely focusing on the general lack of drive and business acumen in the subsequent generations of the founder's family. However, in *Right on the Money*, as was the case in *By Hook or by Crook* (1975), the next generation is not only actively involved but also competent.

Since his son Douglas's retirement, Conrad has left the day-to-day running of the company to his nephew, Bob Laverdiere, Bob's wife Tina, and his former son-in-law, Alan Frayne, allowing Conrad the freedom to tinker with new inventions. The three have been doing an admirable job, yet Conrad decides to sell out to ASI because there is no son or grandson to succeed him.

As Lathen reminds us, "in family firms as in family farms . . . a sale to strangers is not a commercial transaction, but the death of a dream."

In contrast to the Ecker Company, ASI is a large, impersonal corporation where self-interest is the norm and company loyalty is all but nil, especially among the junior executives.

Each member of management, junior or senior, coolly calculates how each development in the acquisition will directly affect his place in the company and how he can turn every event to his advantage.

The novel also examines the character and integrity of the next generation of corporate leaders. At ASI, Victor Hunnicut is one of a number of bright young MBAs whose entire lives are centered on advancing their careers, whatever the cost to themselves or to others. Once Vic determines that the proposed Ecker acquisition will not benefit him but may in fact provide an opportunity for one of his fellow junior executives, he sets out to sabotage the acquisition through spreading rumors about the Ecker Company's financial irresponsibility and about the motives of the senior executive who proposed the acquisition. The superiors at the company pay little or no attention to these bright young men; in fact, until Hunnicut starts his machinations, few of the senior management even know who he is. There is no guidance given, since the senior officers are too wrapped



up in protecting their own turf to worry about the juniors. Hunnicut's immediate superior notes that Vic might have "straightened out. All he needed was to do some growing up."

But there is no executive willing to be in loco parentis for Vic or the others as they make their way in the business.

At Ecker, Conrad, in his selfish concern for his own comfort and for his own offspring, also ignores the tension among his three officers and does little to guide them through this crisis. They, too, are scrambling to figure out the likely effect on careers from the buyout, but their concern for their own careers is tempered by concern for family unity. Tina Laverdiere, the sharpest of the three and the only one who could easily survive outside of Ecker, is secure about her own career; but she worries about her husband, Bob, who cannot measure up to the leadership qualities of the now-retired Douglas. Alan Frayne, divorced for fifteen years from Ecker's daughter, tries to be the family peacemaker and to make Conrad's life easier, but the proposed buy-out makes it all too clear to him that he really is not family.

The Sloan, on the other hand, takes the care and nurturing of its junior officers seriously. In fact, as he does frequently in these novels, Thatcher actively monitors and advises the junior Sloan executive in charge — in this case, Ken Nicolls, familiar from several earlier novels — building up his confidence, standing by him when the situation gets tricky, and welcoming his insights.

As was the case in both *Something in the Air* (1985) and *East Is East* (1991), the novel has a highly competent female business executive, Tina Laverdiere, whom all but Victor Hunnicut recognize as "a lady with a good head on her shoulders" and highly skilled in her field. However, she is the exception: the novel portrays an otherwise exclusively male business hierarchy, and in this way the novel seems to hearken back to the early novels in the series, where women were secretaries, wives, and mothers. For example, Conrad Ecker's wife Alice is a strong woman, but she remains a power behind the throne who uses common sense and domestic skills to control her family. The other women are largely undeveloped and seem to impinge very little if at all on the business world or on the males' conscience. In fact, the men in this novel still have little sense of how to cope with women. In one memorable scene, Tina Laverdiere becomes hysterical when her husband is arrested and collapses on Tom Robichaux, Thatcher's much-married friend.

All the men present, including two of the male members of Tina's family, are helpless and extremely uncomfortable.

The situation is only resolved when the female office manager is summoned to deal with Tina. The men then adjourn to a bar for a drink and blame each other for the contretemps.

One other contemporary issue is briefly raised. Prior to the negotiations to acquire Ecker, ASI, in its quest for diversification, had acquired Sparling, a company that produces tubing and pipes. This acquisition causes alarm at ASI when it is revealed that

Sparling, to make itself more attractive to buyers, had sold gun barrels, via an intermediary, to Libya. But while the case causes consternation among ASI higher-ups, little comes of it.

Techniques

In *Right on the Money*, Lathen continues to employ her successful pattern by focusing on a small, select group of characters, the classic "closed society."

In a sense, though, this is a case of two closed societies colliding — the Ecker Company and ASI. The settings are by and large restricted to the headquarters of the two companies, and the discomfort that occurs when on each other's terrain emphasizes the basic conflict between the two. Lathen plays up the physical differences of the two sites: Ecker is housed in an old mill building, with no boardroom or elaborate research facilities, a situation that shocks the ASI representatives. Nor is corporate protocol observed: board meetings are held in Conrad Ecker's kitchen and an ASI official is taken aback when the Ecker office manager shakes his hand and calls him by his first name. ASI, on the other hand, is housed in "aggressively modern" buildings and has a "series of safeguards that protected the high and mighty."

The most important setting away from these two sites is the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, where both Ecker and ASI have booths for the National Association of Kitchen Suppliers annual trade show. In the course of the convention, Lathen throws all the likely candidates for murder together and, through overheard conversations and confrontations, manages to provide potential motive and opportunity for all the major characters to murder Victor Hunnicut. The murder itself is nicely ludicrous: Hunnicut is stabbed with a skewer from the Ecker Company's barbecue display, and much of the early stages of detection involve discovering when "a solitary mushroom" was last seen on the skewer.

Other outside settings include two charity events, one a fund raiser for a PBS station and the other a musical evening in honor of the Julliard where the Eckers' grandson is conducting a student ensemble. In a chapter entitled "Paying the Piper," Thatcher, no lover of classical music, turns immediately to the list of donors in the program, assessing the financial generosity of his competitors. It is here, while blocking out the strains of a sentimental musical arrangement of Americana, that Thatcher, meditating on American bromides such as "Mother knows best," arrives at the solution to the murder.

The structure of the novel follows Lathen's usual classic pattern, beginning with Thatcher on Wall Street being brought into the case via a client or colleague; focusing on a closed society, and leading up to Thatcher's solving and explaining the crime in the final two chapters. Lathen also continues her practice of using chapter titles with financial connections — such as "Working Stiff" for the chapter in which the body is discovered — to add irony. All in all, the formula works well as usual, keeping the reader amused and guessing to the end.



Themes

While the business deal at the center of *Right on the Money* involves large amounts of money, the focus is on the lust for power and the various stratagems to gain it at both ASI and the Ecker Company. Victor Hunnicut, the victim, is a study of naked ambition.

He has no private life, no hobbies other than fencing, and evaluates every move in terms of how it will affect his career.

His methods are underhanded, largely because, as his fencing instructor says, he has "no dash on the attack." His superiors at ASI and the chief victims of his malicious rumors are Phil Pepitone, right hand man to ASI's president and the prime mover behind the Ecker acquisition; and Sam Bradley, the head of ASI's research and development division who has failed to produce a winning product in years. Pepitone is notable for having worked his way up from the bottom, and he knows exactly how to play the corporate game and keep his head — indeed, by the end of the novel he has fought back from internal exile and is poised to be its next president. Bradley is also a veteran survivor of corporate power plays, and he calculates his every move and speech. Unlike Hunnicut, however, Bradley understands how people react in the corporate environment, and thus he also comes out at the end with career and position intact.

In the Ecker Company, the power games are complicated by family structure. The ownership of the company stock is divided between Conrad and his sister and will pass to their offspring, Douglas Ecker and Bob Laverdiere. While the younger family members handle the day-to-day running of the firm, Conrad is clearly in charge and makes the major decisions for the company based upon business acumen and family interest. He is, however, autocratic and stubborn, and these traits lead to tension and uncertainty among the Laverdieres and Alan Frayne. Conrad's driving desire to make enough money through the sale of the company to ensure the financial comfort of his son also breeds resentment. Thus, there are games here, too; for example, when there is a fire at the company offices and the Laverdieres are first summoned to the scene, Tina prevents Bob from immediately calling Conrad, hoping that Bob will be able to prove his ability to cope with a crisis and thus gain points with Conrad.

The novel also contrasts the success and integrity of the small Ecker Company with the stagnation and opportunism of ASI. In the course of the investigations into Ecker, no one can find any fault with the business — no tax evasion, no illegalities, no toxic spills, no consumer fraud, no labor disputes. Customers and business associates alike have nothing but praise for the company. The company is so healthy, in fact, that it arouses the awe and admiration of Thatcher and his colleagues at the Sloan. ASI, on the other hand, is coasting on its current product line and must resort to buying out other companies like Ecker to boost its earning and gain new ideas. ASI is further tainted by its ownership of Sparling, even though the illicit sale of gun barrels to Libya occurred before the acquisition.

Key Questions

Like all Lathen novels, *Right on the Money* takes its subject matter from contemporary events in the financial world. There has been much discussion since the 1980s, for example, about naked greed and the lack of ethics among the young MBAs being turned loose in America's business world, and Victor Hunnicut is a good representative of this type. Also an issue touched on by this novel, the decline of the family firm, is an issue of continuing concern in modern America.

1. Given that the murderer escapes in this novel, how is justice served? For answers, examine the character of Detective Giorni, who does the footwork on the case but comes to Thatcher for advice; note the reactions of the various characters to the flight of the murderer; note how the author makes the victim unsympathetic.

2. What is the portrait of marriage in the novel? What are the ramifications of it? For clues, examine all the marriages shown: the Eckers, the Ives, the Laverdieres, Tom Robichaux's; note the comments on divorce and its relatively light and ironic treatment; contrast the conservative view of marriage as the bedrock of a stable society with that of the novel.

3. Contrast the corporate "families" in the novel. Compare the family at Ecker, the "family" at ASI, and the "family" at the Sloan Guaranty Trust.

Examine the values and behaviors of each, noting which ones are given positive readings to discover the forces that Lathen thinks should be shaping Wall Street. What are these forces?

4. Is the portrait of the male-dominated business world realistic, given the changes that have occurred in the last twenty or so years? Examine the male reaction to women, comic and serious. Note that Tina Laverdiere, the strong woman executive, does not avoid the stereotypical roles of housewife, mother, and corporate wife. The other strong women are in traditional roles: Alice Ecker and Irene (Pepitone's secretary); the men seem comfortable with these women, although the women tend to control the men in subtle ways. What do these portraits suggest about how businesses are run?

Literary Precedents

Henissart and Latsis have themselves expressed their indebtedness to the classic mystery writers they had read before their collaboration began — Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Josephine Tey, and Agatha Christie.

There is one writer of the classic British closed society mystery who should also be mentioned: Georgette Heyer. In her mysteries, one finds that same lightly ironic and detached tone that is used so well in Lathen's novels, and Heyer's novels such as *They Found Him Dead* (1937) and *Behold, Here's Poison* (1937) frequently revolve around the problems of family-run businesses. Her detective Hannasyde is more jovial than Thatcher, yet he also remains more the acute observer than a fully developed character.

Related Titles

Right on the Money has much in common with other novels in the Thatcher series. The structure is familiar and, while less in evidence than usual, Thatcher's colleagues from the Sloan pop in and out of his office, adding humor and commentary. As in *East Is East* and others, much of Thatcher's involvement in the case comes from his desire to help and support another Sloan officer — here Ken Nicolls — as well as, of course, his insatiable curiosity.

The focus on the conflicts involved in acquisition of one company by another crops up in *Green Grow the Dollars* (1982) and *Money to Go* (1969). Both novels also examine family-owned firms in crisis, as does *Hook or by Crook* (1975). The concern with the moral fiber and ambition of the younger generation is a frequent topic in Lathen, notably in *Going for the Gold* (1981) and *East Is East* (1991).



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