

# River's End Short Guide

## River's End by Nora Roberts

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# Characters

Roberts develops her characters to advance her plot and her consideration of the basic themes of the novel. This is not to say that the characters are merely mouthpieces for a particular thematic or social concern.

Far from it. Although lacking in subtlety, the principal characters are convincingly and strongly drawn as men and women of action, with enough powers of reflection to keep them interesting but not enough to weigh them down. They do more than they think. Noah Brady, the son of Frank and Celia Brady is a journalist, a writer of nonfiction books about real crime, especially murder. He is also a "hunk," strong, sensitive, incredibly sexual, brilliant, perceptive, wise, and courageous. He is also possessed of a very strong and frequently exercised sex drive, yet capable also of a deep sensitivity to women, nature, mothers, and every member of Olivia's family. He works efficiently at his writing for endless hours, has a serious and compelling yet naive knowledge of wines, foods, and cooking. And he is so seductively persistent in overcoming the objections of the heroine that some scenes of sex border on rape. Yet he is characterized not as a womanizer but as a powerful lover who has found his true love in Olivia MacBride, desiring nothing more than to leave all former connections and cleave only unto Olivia. As a writer, he is a dedicated practitioner of his craft as, in his early thirties, he turns to his project of writing a book on the Julie MacBride-Sam Tanner case. He is faced with the daunting challenge of winning over the MacBrides, which he must do step by step, individual by individual, to the cause of his book. Portrayed as a skilled interviewer, a skilled and perceptive practical psychologist, Noah is one who can win the cooperation of his sources by being honest, sympathetic, and a keen interpreter of human nature, qualities he has inherited in part from his parents. The acorn does not fall far from the tree.

The heroine of the novel is Olivia ("Livvy") MacBride, the daughter of Julie MacBride and Sam Tanner; she is four years old when she awakes one terrible night to discover her mother murdered and her father drunk and drugged with the murder weapon, the silver scissors, in his bloody hands. Taken to her grandparents' home at River's End in Washington State, she grows up strong, beautiful, well trained by her grandfather in tracking, camping, hunting, fishing, indeed, all of the outdoor arts, and by her grandmother in the art of dealing with people. She recovers physically from the trauma of her mother's murder and her father's incarceration for the crime, but her pain and fear as well as her incomprehension are buried deep within her. She has been psychologically traumatized, and the fear that the monster will return, although deeply repressed, is always within her. She is smitten by Noah Brady's sudden appearance at River's End, swept off her feet by his seductive charm, sexiness, and confidence. But when she discovers that he is working on a book about her mother's murder, she is furious, certain that Noah has used his seductive charm and her sexual attraction to him as a means to get what he wants for the book. Her resentment of him at this point is deep and intense and creates a huge obstacle that Noah must overcome.



The other important characters include, Frank Brady, a cop, now retired, the strong and wise father of Noah. He was also the policeman on the scene of Julie's murder, the one who found Olivia cowering in a closet, hiding from the monster who had her daddy's voice and features. Frank is married to Celia, a vegan, and a strong and witty woman who loves her son and her husband, and like most mothers, she desires her son to find happiness in marriage to a good woman. Celia provides strong support for both of the men in her life and welcomes Olivia warmly, finding in her a compatible soul.

Two other important supporting characters, functionally at least, are Julie MacBride and Jamie MacBride, who are twins, fraternal not identical. They are the children of Valerie and Rob MacBride, a strong and compassionate couple whose principal role in the novel is to protect Olivia as much as possible from the intrusiveness of the press, the court, and most of all from any "monster" who might attempt to harm Olivia.

Valerie MacBride is a very strong grandmother who, with her husband, hides Olivia from the world by taking her to their River's End lodge in Washington where she grows up. Interestingly, Julia functions only as the beautiful victim of a heinous crime and the lost, lamented mother of Olivia. And Jamie appears hardly at all, except as the business manager of her sister's career and wife of David Melbourne. Totally besotted with Julie twenty years earlier, Melbourne had entered Julie's house and confronted her with his feelings, but she spurned him, promising to expose him to his wife and everyone else. It was at this point that he picked up the scissors, killed Julie, and hid his guilt successfully for over twenty years.

In a climactic scene in the forest, however, he finally reveals himself as the real "monster" in the family and attempts to kill not only his brother-in-law, Sam Tanner, but also Olivia herself and any others who get in his way. Finally, Sam Tanner himself, the posterboy for the terrible consequences of drug-and-alcohol addiction, suffers for his sins of omission and commission by losing his wife, his daughter, and indeed his life, first from being incarcerated for twenty years in San Quentin and then in protecting Olivia from his brother-in-law's efforts to kill her and any other members of the family who would expose his true nature.



## Social Concerns

An extraordinarily prolific and popular writer of romance and mystery novels (over 131 published as of this writing), Nora Roberts (a pseudonym of Eleanor Wilder) is often dismissed as a writer of mere escapism successfully aimed at bored women who read her books on the Metro while going to work. However, some qualities stronger than merely escapist themes are present in her fiction and help to account for her enormous popularity. In *River's End*, her characters are strongly drawn, her heroes sexy, her heroines strong and beautiful, their emotions and sentiments presented with little or no ambiguity or subtlety. These qualities certainly contribute to her popularity. However, examining *River's End* carefully suggests that the strong connection between her themes and issues of general societal concern, indeed, those that speak to the darker fears of society, especially fears that center in threats to the security and sanctity of the family and its children, offer a clearer explanation of her phenomenal popularity. Whether *River's End* may be viewed as a typical example of her work in the romance sub-genre would depend, of course, on a careful reading of her oeuvre, and an examination of that question is beyond the scope of this essay. However, a significant number of strong social issues and thematic concerns offer a starting point, at least, for such an analysis.

The predominant social issue in this novel concerns the danger to which a family is exposed by the normal and everyday process of bringing new people into its bosom through marriage. The spouse, either the bride or the groom, is of necessity a "stranger" to the blood kin of the "other" family, and he or she may indeed turn out to be a "monster" who creates the most dangerous challenges to its sanctity and to the security of the rest of the family including, most appallingly, the children. The seriousness of the threat, the consequences of the unexpected emergence of the "monster" range from slight domestic disturbances to messy divorces to spousal and child abuse to—most extreme—murder. In any case the remaining members of the family may come together to defend and protect those of its members who are directly endangered, but all are affected; all suffer. These conditions and their consequences comprise a complex of terrifying themes and social issues that are at the heart of *River's End*.

In this novel they are gilded and distanced from the lives and fears of Roberts' readers by the glittering surface of beauty, talent, money, and drugs—the life style of Hollywood, which Roberts sets in stark contrast with a picture of stability and the security afforded by "a house in the woods," a kind of Eden far away from the sinfulness and outrage of Los Angeles; in this case Eden or a version of it is the MacBride family home, a forested resort named *River's End*, in the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. The MacBride family emerges therefore as a contested site of supportive, nurturing, and passionate love on the one hand and murderous sexually induced rage and jealousy on the other. The ancient and inescapable conflict between the forces of good and evil are thus enacted in two strongly symbolic settings that are resonate with long-practiced traditions in western literature of the garden as goodness and innocence and the city as the source and site of evil.



This set of issues relates closely to another complex and vexing social issue, that of guilt and innocence, here embodied in the character of Sam Tanner, the husband of Julia MacBride. He is arrested and convicted, principally on the testimony of his four-year-old daughter Olivia, for the brutal and bloody murder of his wife. Tanner, while clearly guilty of treating his wife badly at times and of being a drug and alcohol abuser to the point where he cannot testify to his own guilt or innocence, emerges as a character in whom the ambiguity of society's determination of guilt and innocence is questioned. Indeed, for ninety-five percent of the novel, he is clearly the monster, the man guilty of a terrible crime, and readers wonder how and why the law permits such a one to escape the death penalty.

The circumstantial evidence of the most horrific and seemingly incontrovertible sort plus the accused's witnessing against himself, in fact providing a confession, is sufficient for the jury to convict Tanner and the judge to sentence him to a lesser sentence based on a successful diminished capacity defense. That a high powered attorney is able to save the life of his famous, prominent and well-to-do client raises another issue for the novel's readers, most of whom will be gnashing their teeth at this point and lamenting the sorry state of the law as it inadequately deals with this domestic murder induced by jealous rage. The judgment of the entire community is that he is guilty as charged and that he should be executed.

Yet, Roberts argues, the possibility of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and in a drugged-and-inebriated state, while it may save the accused's life, will not likely win his freedom. Roberts cleverly taps into society's conflicting fears of allowing the guilty to go unpunished on the one hand and of convicting and perhaps executing or wrongfully imprisoning a person innocent of murder on the other. She addresses the issue of how a community deals with the criminal as a danger to itself, how it may reasonably and passionately believe a person guilty of a heinous crime, and act accordingly. Yet, counterbalancing that social action is the fear that later, perhaps much later, evidence will emerge proving another guilty of the crime and that the person who served time or who perhaps was even executed for it was, in fact, not guilty.

Roberts' success may therefore reasonably be located in her ability to address such vexing social issues in plots within which fundamental human desires, passions, and fears are enacted. For instance, obsessive sexual jealousy is the evil twin of strong sexual passion and desire, an exciting and powerful complex of emotions, useful for propagating the species and thrilling to experience. Yet sexual passion turned obsessive is widely accepted as a common and terrible explanation for much domestic violence. Nevertheless, its presence may not always be correctly discerned and attributed even by the most careful forensic work. Ambiguity in correctly reconstructing the crime scene from available evidence and testimony and the difficulty of creating a correct and irreversible chain of evidence always present forensic challenges. Roberts' plot examines to some extent the nature of police work, the work of the courts, and the function of the prison system in a high profile sensational crime that becomes a site of society's desire for vengeance dressed as justice. The difficulty of determining guilt beyond a reasonable doubt was amply demonstrated in the 1990's O. J. Simpson trial. Even the most conscientious members of the police department and the most objective



and careful judges may be swayed by what they think the evidence supports, a belief that will be overturned only by the sensational revelation of a radically different truth emerging later.

Another social issue closely related to all of the above is that of female sexuality, which receives a great deal of attention in romance novels. This is also true in *River's End*. Julie MacBride is beautiful, the object of the strongly sexual male gaze as a movie star and as the object of desire by a number of men close to her. Consequently, her husband and those other men are jealous, perhaps murderously so, of any attention she might pay or be thought to be paying to another man. As a consequence, she is murdered in a brutal, slashing manner with a pair of scissors, an instrument that has two cutting blades, symbolic perhaps of the double-edged quality of being sexually desirable. Although women are assumed generally to want to be sexually desirable in order to find a suitable mate, the results of being such, especially of being one who stimulates and receives the lustful gaze of the public as a movie star, may be ambiguous, often, in the opinion of society, tragically so. On the other hand, Julia MacBride Tanner is a loving mother to her daughter, at least so long as she is alive.

But the issue of female sexuality does not die with Julia. After her murder, her daughter Olivia grows up (in the care of her grandparents) to become a healthy "modern woman" who would like to think that she is in charge of her sexuality. For example, she shows up at Noah's apartment condoms in hand. And six years later she frequently asserts that she has no particular objection to sex, but it will be on her own terms. She is neither immune to being overwhelmed by the tides of sexual passion nor incapable of a colder capacity for being responsible for her own sexual satisfaction and a sex life without guilt or recrimination. She is a thoroughly modern woman, enabled by the technology of modern birth control, to control her sexual access. In fact, it is control that Olivia feels she must have above all else—until she falls in love with Noah Brady. Roberts thus appears to be arguing that women should live their own lives, sexual as well as professional, at least until they meet the "right man." And love, true love, is still, despite its occasional disasters, desired and relied upon as a social and individual need and good. Thus, social issues merge in this novel with thematic concerns in the interaction of characters on several levels, especially professional and sexual.

Finally Roberts brings in the great social issue of ecology, the environment, connecting it with the healing and quite literally erotic power of nature. Here it is represented by the Olympic Rain Forest, which has enough of the primitive and primeval about it as a nature preserve that suggests an Edenic innocence. This innocence is violated, however, by the intrusion of evil in the form of Sam Tanner, released after serving his sentence in San Quentin. Diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, he desires to see and be acknowledged by his daughter, now a grown woman. Can Eden be restored?

Can innocence and trust be restored? And can truth and justice, long delayed, return triumphant, emerging in the security of this wilderness preserve? Only if the Evil One can be correctly identified and expelled. As we know from many sacred texts, Satan, the Adversary, the Evil One has the capacity to appear in many guises. Roberts cannily

draws upon this cultural knowledge to construct her plot with the materials of social issues and human passions.





# Techniques

River's End is a romance novel with all the accouterments of that genre: graphically written sex scenes, characters who are brilliant, physically handsome, sensitive yet assertive. The male lover is strong, right thinking, and a loving member of a strong family. The heroine is beautiful and brilliant but terribly scarred by the horrific childhood experience of discovering her murdered mother and her blood-stained father on that terrible night in their huge Malibu house. Nevertheless, she has grown to be a woman in charge of her sexuality, and somewhat experienced but certainly not promiscuous. She is immensely capable of such wilderness skills as facing down a cougar, hiking the steepest trails with ease and skill, identifying any tree, plant, or critter in her forest, pitching a tent, and catching and cooking a splendid dinner of fish. She is Eve, firmly and capably in charge of her part of the Garden.

Roberts plots her story in such a way that it entices the reader into the novel from the very first page and to holds our attention throughout. She has learned the art of crafting a "page turner," creating swiftly moving scenes that explore conflicts through action and dialogue punctuated by movement, trials, and sex. She reveals actions, motives, and movements of her characters by manipulating a fully omniscient narrative point of view, the narrator who knows all and tells all about nearly everything yet withholding the identity of the killer until a final scene near the end that may strike analytical readers as somewhat contrived and lacking in artistic sensitivity.

However, Roberts is quite adept at keeping the action moving briskly along, managing the movements of her characters between the plot's principal venues, the MacBride naturalists' lodge, River's End, in the Olympic Forest in northwest Washington, and the Los Angeles-Hollywood-Malibu scenes of Julie MacBride Tanner's brutal murder and the home of the Bradys, Frank, Celia, and Noah. This geographical movement is balanced by the psychological diastolic-systolic movement of the relationship between Noah and Olivia. Furthermore, Roberts selects and foregrounds details of setting both interiors and exteriors to give a convincing and grounded sense of location, an effect that may make up for some of the less credible elements of the plot.

The title itself, River's End, refers not only to the Edenic setting in which Olivia grows up, a place of primeval nature far from the corrupt worlds of sin and vice exemplified by the city, and a place of healing, but also to the end of a stream of misunderstandings, misidentifications, and mistakes. A river is a powerful natural force, symbolizing the torrent of passions that may govern the human heart and suggesting the nature and passage of time and, indeed, of the human presence within the stream of time.

While a fixed place, River's End itself is the dynamic setting for resolution and restoration, for new growth coming forth from the fallen limbs and trunks of trees within its rain forest.

It is Roberts' handling, however, of what is perhaps the most fundamental quality of the romance novel as a genre that she is especially strong. That, of course, is its total plot



structure. The basic focus of movement is on the all-important human task of finding a suitable mate, of getting the hero and the heroine together for that most basic of all human connections, sex. In most cases the goal is marriage. Even when that move is interdicted in some way, e.g., death, disorder, disaster, distaste, the motif is still the foundation, the move is still understood, and whatever the novelist does with it is done as a variation on the norm. In *River's End*, the dating games and sexual adventures of Noah and Olivia are rendered as preliminary to establishing a new family unit and of healing the terrible disruption in the continuity of marriage and family caused by Julie's murder. Thus, order must be and is restored; otherwise, the family and the community die. It would seem the principal business of romance writers to explore the myriad ways in which that union can be initiated, delayed, disturbed, yet finally fulfilled. And when it is fulfilled, then, as in *River's End*, order is restored to the universe. The Queen is on her throne and all's right with the world.



# Themes

In addition the themes discussed so far, *River's End* has much to say about the battle of the sexes, the nature of marriage, sexual obsession, and the fine line between nurturing and protective genuine love on the one hand and the obsessive, possessive passion that drives men to jealous excess, violence, and even murder on the other. These highly impassioned themes may be the stuff of much melodrama, but we should remember that they are also the stuff of much classical literature including such Greek tragedies as *Oedipus* and much of Elizabethan drama. The misapprehensions and ignorance of *Oedipus* and *King Lear* bring great suffering to the principals, but also bring wisdom to their witnesses. In the case of *River's End*, the power of the romance genre asserts itself in the form of the healing and transforming power of genuine love and creates a hopeful and redemptive conclusion. The power of family, both for good and for ill, is always worth considering. After all, the family is as Roberts asserts, a "puzzle made up of pieces of protection and defense." She uses the Greek idea of family as a complex entity, whose power and (literally) murderous rages are brought to risk through the agency of the outsider, a risk that every family must run because it is obviously the nature of marriage. That is, just who will one's child bring home as potential spouse? Most families contain and repress their concern, if not paranoia, over this condition. Some do not.

In either case, judgments must be made and the capacity of the children to make them is crucial and tends in our culture at least to be decisive. Thus, parents are left with little choice but to accept, love, and nurture the interloper and hope that he or she is a good addition to the family, not a tragic mistake.

But the matter is fraught with danger and uncertainty and thus grist for the writer's mill.

Writing is a way to discover the truth and to exorcise mistakes in judgment—and in *River's End* it is a strong and compelling theme as it is used to exorcise psychological monsters. Writing creates, discovers, records, and reveals truth. It is the hope and belief of the culture and thus of the writer that the truth will set one free of ignorance, guilt, and fear. This theme emerges most strongly in the character of Noah Brady, a writer who is working on a book about the murder of Julie MacBride. This is not Noah's first true crime book. He is now a seasoned and competent investigator and writer. And he has a connection with the MacBride murder. It was investigated first by his own father, a career policeman, and Noah is now re-investigating it, especially its effects on everyone who was involved or touched by it. He has been given the opportunity by Sam Tanner's desire to tell his side of the story; he invites Noah to come to San Quentin to hear it. Thus, another major theme of the novel emerges in Noah's search for the truth about the murder and its effects. In his investigation, it becomes clearly necessary that everyone affected by the murder must face the monsters who live at the limits of one's perception and knowledge and who feed on ignorance and misapprehension. Only by doing so can those fears be overcome and healing and reconciliation occur. Understanding is key in Noah Brady's view of his profession. While Roberts never articulates as such the Aristotelian concept of catharsis to explain Brady's motives for

writing the books he does and for wanting to write this one in particular, it clearly lies at the heart of the argument that Brady makes to each member of the MacBride family and to his own family as he tries to win their necessary cooperation with his project. Healing and reconciliation will occur only when the truth is revealed.

## Key Questions

With well over 100 novels to her credit, Roberts has established herself convincingly not only as a prolific but an award-winning author of romance novels.

1. Research and discuss the terms "romance novel" and "category fiction" and identify the characteristics of each that you find in *River's End*.

2. Research and discuss the history of the Romance Novel, considering especially the contributions of the publishers Harlequin, Silhouette, Berkley, Jove, and Bantam Books to the rise and success of such writers as Nora Roberts.

3. Who is the principal victim in the story, Sam Tanner or Olivia MacBride? Is Tanner ultimately responsible for his fate?

Why or why not? Support your answers with analysis of relevant portions of the text.

4. How would you characterize the nature, purpose, and function of the sexual passages in *River's End* and where would you place them on the spectrum of fantasy to realistic?

5. Much is made the sensational aspects of the brutal murder of Olivia in the novel, much in the same way that the popular media report such crimes in the press. Is the public generally fascinated by the gory details of crime and punishment? Research violent crime reporting from the 18th century to the present day and compare it to the nature of its imaginative reporting in Roberts' fiction. Does such graphic detail and such dwelling on the psychological effects of a child's being witness to some of the particular details serve, in your opinion, a social purpose? Defend your position.

6. How would you characterize the nature of Noah Brady's research and interviewing techniques and motives? Is his work unconscionably intrusive, an invasion of privacy, or does such work serve a useful social purpose?

7. Category romance is often denigrated by some as mere escapist fiction, serving only to while away empty time.

Others defend the genre as serving useful social and psychological purposes by showing women readers in particular characters and situations that may bear some relation to their own lives, enabling them to find solutions or strength or both. Examine any of the romance chat rooms and listservs addressed to the romance readers community or interview your friends and relatives who read romance to discover their views on the nature of its appeal and its possible social and psychological functions.

8. Compare *River's End* as a work of fictional art with several of the classic British and American novels written by women writers from Aphra Behn to Joyce Carol Oates. Consider plots, characterization, dialogue, social issues, and themes in the works.



Compare, contrast, and analyze these and any other aspects of the works that interest you.

What conclusions can you make about the quality of writing, the functions that the works serve for their audiences, the characteristics of their audiences, and their place the history of the novel.

9. What, in your opinion, accounts for Roberts' extraordinary popularity as measured in the number of her books in print out of the over 130 titles she has published since 1981? Take a position regarding the relevance of readership and sales figures to the literary merit of a novel.

10. What for you was the principal reason for reading *River's End* and any of the other books written by Roberts? Would you recommend it and any others to friends? Why?



## Literary Precedents

One sees an especially engaging and familiar prototype of this plot structure in Shakespeare's comedies in which, of course, the true lovers are finally united and the stage is set for yet another round of procreation, earthly and political social order, and heavenly harmony. When that orderly progress toward union and harmony is interdicted, as it is in Hamlet for instance, then tragedy as a genre records the results.

It is also interesting to note that Roberts structures her plot with a series of strong oppositions: the city vs. the wilderness, the family "monster" vs. the family savior, passionate true love vs. passionate illicit obsession, father as nurturer vs. father as murderer, relative as source of security vs.

relative as killer, money and fame as source of security and happiness vs. money and fame as source of disaster, love as source of happiness vs. love as source of unhappiness, and so forth. These moral oppositions are of course found in much of the western world's "elite" literature and continue to engage readers. They are resolved here as an argument finally for a moral order represented by the reunion of father and daughter and the promise of a marriage between Noah (whose name must now be seen as symbolic of the new beginning) and Olivia (the name of Shakespeare's heroine from TwelfthNight) from which healing and hope for present and future happiness emerge.

Likewise, one may see such arguments represented in literary antecedents as diverse as Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, and Sir Walter Scott among other historical writers of comedy and romance, that is, a mode of writing which relies on action based on love and combat. Because the life process itself is never ending, one may reasonably conclude that the business of the romance writer, especially one who understands her craft as well as Nora Roberts does, is an enduring one.

Finally, Roberts' apprenticeship included reading a number of contemporary category romance and mystery writers whose works are widely available in book racks in every grocery, drug, and convenience store coast to coast. She is a charter member of the Romance Writers of America and a member of their Washington, D.C. chapter.

When she published her 100th novel, *Montana Sky*, she was honored with the RWA Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997 by her peers in this professional organization.

In addition, she has been honored by Waldenbooks, B. Dalton Booksellers, and the New Jersey Chapter of Romance Writers of America and BookRak Distributors.

She is also a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, The Crime League of America, and Novelists Inc.

## Related Titles

Using the pseudonym, J. D. Robb, Roberts began in 1995 to publish the Eve Dallas "In Death" detective series including *Naked in Death* (the first in the series), *Witness in Death*, and *Judgment in Death*, all set in the near future. The series allowed Roberts to create a world that continues beyond the ending of its first book. Similar to *River's End* the plot and atmosphere of *Carolina Moon* feature a suspenseful story of a woman struggling to survive in both body and spirit, a questionable father figure, and a mysterious killer whose presence haunts Tory Bodeen. *Irish Rebel* and *Irish Hearts* illustrate another aspect of her productivity, writing and publishing several books (a trilogy or an open-ended series) involving similar situations, the "Irish" series' beautiful horses, women, and men involved in romantic and emotional situations enlivened with stirring dialogue and situations.

Some readers note the similarity of certain plots and sets of characters, but her readership continues to grow. According to one Roberts web site, over twenty-five million copies of her books are currently in print.





# Copyright Information

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