Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry Short Guide

Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry by Harry Kemelman

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Rabbi David Small is spiritual leader of the Conservative Jewish synagogue in Barnard's Crossing, Massachusetts.

He is married and is soon to become a father for the first time. Small is physically unimposing, a pale, thin man of medium height who walks with a scholarly stoop. He is inattentive to details of dress, often appearing in public in clothes so wrinkled they look as if they have been slept in. In spite of his wife's attentive care, Small remains unconcerned about grooming and appearance. But his cluttered and disordered exterior belies a sharp, perceptive, and active mind. In each adventure, he becomes aware of a crime because it involves his temple or someone associated with it, and once it has come to his attention he seeks a solution in a cool, detached, intellectual manner. He sets about solving a crime as if he were disputing some minor point in Talmudic law or playing a game of chess.

The other major recurring character in the series also appears in Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry — Barnard's Crossing Police Chief Hugh Lanigan is the Rabbi's only non-Jewish friend in the community. The Irish Catholic Chief and the Rabbi would seemingly have little in common, but their mutual respect overcomes other differences.

The Chief recognizes the Rabbi's uncanny ability at deduction and soon comes to trust him. In later novels, the two become sufficiently intimate that the Chief usually knows when the Rabbi is in trouble with his Board.

Conversely, the Rabbi is drawn to the warm and friendly manner in which Lanigan and his wife first greeted him.

As the relationship grows, the Rabbi is on more than one occasion able to help a member of his congregation avoid trouble with the law by using his personal influence with the Chief.

Although she is infrequently involved in the detective plot, Small's wife, Miriam, is an important character in terms of the subplot of temple politics. As the family pragmatist and friendly critic, she plays an interesting foil to the scrupulous Rabbi. Every time she begins to feel comfortable and secure, Small encounters another crisis — the only resolution to which seems to be for him to resign as a matter of principle. Miriam takes these disturbances in stride, usually pointing out to David his responsibility to himself and his family. Although she chides him and disagrees with him, she knows the ultimate decision is his and she stands solidly behind him once he makes that decision.

Kemelman's works are populated with a number of minor characters, usually members of the RaWi's congregation, especially those members who serve on the Board of Directors. The nondetection conflict in this novel is between Small and his current board president, Mortimer Schwarz, an architect eager to expand the temple building. Previous board presidents Jacob Wasserman and Al Becker appear here and

elsewhere in the series. In most instances, the political conflict between religious leader and his board is resolved with the board president gaining a new respect for Small, perhaps even establishing a friendship with him. Ben Goralsky is typical of the minor characters that populate the Rabbi series. The irascible Goralsky, a rich, elderly Jew provides continuity with both the inner city Hebraic community and with the Old World Shetls.

Social Concerns/Themes

Kemelman's second novel in the Rabbi Small series, Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry, is an obvious extension of "The Building of a Temple" — the manuscript on Jewish suburban life from which the whole series germinated. With its subplot focusing on efforts to build an addition to the temple, this novel readily articulates Kemelman's ubiquitous and singular social concern and theme: consequences for Jewish culture and religion during postwar migration of Jews from inner city to suburb. Kemelman sees the movement of Jewish families from the city core to the suburb as a threat to their ethnic continuity. He believes these families will lose their sense of history, surrender their culture and religion, and become assimilated by the secular, Gentile culture around them.

Such assimilation Rabbi Small resists by continually reminding his congregation that they are a chosen people and that their religion differs significantly from Christianity. He does so through the interpretation of the law often applying Talmudic reasoning so refined that his congregants fail to follow his logic. His moral hairsplittings — or Pilpuls, as he calls them in Talmudic talk — emphasize small but important differences between these suburban Jews and their Gentile neighbors. These moral quiddities also disclose the Rabbi's disciplined mind which can draw accurate conclusions from minimal and often contradictory data, thus his success as both Talmudist and detective.

Rabbi Small's punctillios seldom endear him with the members of the temple. These people — self-made businessmen, merchants, and middle class professionals — lack the intellect and erudition to appreciate Small's view of life and religion. They want the Rabbi to be a public relations man; he wants to emphasize the differences, not the similarities, between Judaism and other religions. They want a compromiser who will smooth over conflicts between their beliefs and their behavior; he wants to confront their behavior with their beliefs.

In Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry, Small fights with his congregation, especially its president and board of directors, in an effort to dissuade them from imitating the dominant culture.

The president of the board — an architect — wants to build an addition to the temple, an addition which Small sees as unneeded and as an inappropriate expression of their religion. Another influential board member wants to alter the design of the congregational cemetery to placate the potential donor of the temple addition, an alteration that Small sees as motivated by misguided religious belief. To further complicate the plot, Small must stand on principle against the boosterism of the board at the very time when his contract is up for renewal and the birth of his first child is imminent.

Suburban Judaism confronts Rabbi Small with a heterogenous community of congregants, and conflict is inevitable as the uncompromising Rabbi attempts to deliver his precise interpretation of Hebraic tradition to a diverse audience. As a centrist

Conservative Rabbi, Small must distinguish his interpretations of the law from the more liberal readings of Reform Jews on the one hand and from the strict constructions of the Orthodox on the other. He must deal with elderly immigrants whose practices derive from the ghettos of the Old World, and he must respond to the young whose beliefs have been tempered by contemporary secularism. On the holy day of atonement, Yom Kippur, he must convince a sick, old man that he will not break his fast by taking medicine, and on the next day he must make burial arrangements for a younger, but nonpracticing Jew.

The least troublesome consequence of the suburbanization of the Jews for Small is his dealings with the community at large. As Rabbi of the only temple in Barnard's Crossing he is its most highly visible Jewish resident. But here, as in his dealings with the board or individual congregants, Small is his own man. He ignores any effort at public relations, for example, patiently explaining to the town selectmen that he must refuse their invitation to bless the fleet because such a rite is not a rabbinical prerogative. He does, however, make friends with non-Jewish residents, most notably the Irish Catholic Chief of Police Hugh Lanigan. But as a rule he confines his activities to his kosher home, his temple, and his congregants.

Techniques

Were it not for his interest in Judaic history and culture, perhaps Kemelman would have continued to write short stories and contribute them to the popular detective fiction press. The detection interest in Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry and in other Kemelman novels is adequate for an Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine short story, but is barely enough to flesh out a full-length novel. The technique is straightforward Golden Age "whodunit" fare. Small plays the slightly eccentric amateur detective with exceptional rational and deductive powers. Lanigan as a police official is effective and competent but fails to discover the murderer because he lacks the proper angle of vision.

The classical detective pattern is further amplified through the nature of the crime and of its victim. The murder is a crime of passion: Disguised first as a suicide the crime leads to a coverup made necessary to prevent the professional humiliation of the murderer. The victim is drawn in sufficient detail to arouse the reader's interest in the character, yet he is not humanized to the point of arousing too much sympathy.

A red herring is provided when readers learn that a young Episcopal priest seen in the area shortly before the discovery of the crime was an old friend of the victim's wife. This instance of crime is an anomaly in usually tranquil, crime-free Barnard's Crossing, and readers have every reason to believe that this disruption of civil order is probably a one time affair. Such staples of detective fiction have prevailed in the Golden Age subgenre since Poe established them in his great triumvirate, "The Purloined Letter" (1844), "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), and "The Murder of Marie Roget" (1845).

Adaptations

Although he has not made it to the movies, Rabbi Small has appeared on television as a mystery special. Unfortunately, the program was marred by the miscasting of the lead character.

Small was portrayed by Stuart Margolin who for several years had effectively played Angel Martin, James Rockford's sleazy, ex-con sidekick on The Rockford Files. Margolin's talents lay elsewhere than in the underacting required to play the low-key, meditative Rabbi.

Literary Precedents

Small is related to a distinguished line of clerical detectives who solve crime through the same intricate reasoning processes they apply to making subtle distinctions between abstract theological principles. Perhaps the most famous of these clerical sleuths is G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, like Small an armchair detective. Father Andrew Greeley and Monica Quill have also created clerical sleuths. Like Kemelman, several of these writers have academic affiliations or backgrounds. Ralph McInery, creator of detective Father Dowling, for example, holds a chair in Medieval Studies at Notre Dame. These writers and their detectives suggest that religious training provides one with cognitive skills and knowledge of human nature which can be applied to such seemingly disparate activity as the solving of crime.

Related Titles

Kemelman's diurnal series began on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath with Friday the Rabbi Slept Late (1965). Set toward the end of the first year in Small's tenure as Rabbi in Barnard's Crossing, the work establishes a pattern of detection and temple politics which is followed throughout the series. After Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry (1966) — set on Yom Kippur — comes Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home (1969) in which Small solves the murder of a young college student. Monday the Rabbi Took Off (1972), generally considered to be the weakest in the series, is set in Israel where the Rabbi is vacationing. Religious issues are again central in Tuesday the Rabbi Saw Red (1974), in which Small finds that all is not kosher with an upcoming wedding at the temple. Small again confronts the temple boosters and expansionists in Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet (1976), and in Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out (1978) he tangles with feminists bothered by traditional Jewish attitudes toward women. In Someday the Rabbi Will Leave (1985), Small fends off a multimillionaire board president who wants to apply business principles to the operation of the temple, and he averts a doomed mixed marriage by solving the murder of a small-time political hack. This work seems to achieve the best balance between the religion and detection of any of the novels. In The Day the Rabbi Left Town (1996), Rabbi Small retires from the synagogue and accepts a teaching job at nearby Windemere College. But even a career change can't keep the rabbi away from dead bodies, though this one doesn't turn up until the last third of the book. The first two thirds are filled with the descriptions of the history, customs, and practices of Judaism. When the murder finally does occur, there's not much mystery, so the appeal of the book is the rabbi's charm and wisdom, and the heartwarming picture of the Jewish community.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994