

The Sixth Commandment Short Guide

The Sixth Commandment by Lawrence Sanders

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Characters

Sam is as hard-drinking and hardboiled as they come, even though he is not a traditional detective, but a grant application investigator. Todd's role places him midway between a private eye and an amateur sleuth, enabling him to slip easily from one level of society to another. He stumbles onto a web of murder and cover-up where he was searching only for professional or economic irresponsibility, but once on the trail he will stop at nothing to solve the case, despite its lack of relevance to his job description.

In addition to the main character, Sanders gives us Sam the custodian, who functions as informant, confidant, and occasional mentor to our hero. Like Jamie Olsen in Sanders' later McNally novels, he knows something about everyone and everything in town but is a wise and quiet man of few words.

Julie Thorndecker likewise presages the beautiful but treacherous and somewhat unstable women who appear in Sanders' later books. Like them, she is portrayed not so much as a villain as an unfortunate force of nature, and her motives are never quite clear. But her husband, her stepson, and the local constable are drawn to her like moths to a flame.

Social Concerns

The Sixth Commandment takes place in T Coburn, a fictitious small town in upstate New York that is hemorrhaging jobs, money, and young people to other locales with more interesting or rewarding prospects. The continued, if marginal, survival of the town, and everyone in it, hangs on the fate of Crittendon Hall and its scientific laboratories, owned and operated by the gifted and driven Dr.

Telford Thorndecker. The fate of Crittendon Hall depends on the successful receipt of a grant from the Bingham Foundation, for which the protagonist, Samuel Todd, is an investigator. Thorndecker, a Nobel Prize winner, believes he is close to unlocking and controlling the secrets of the aging process.

Arriving in Coburn on a desolate, grey day (there do not seem to be any other kind in Coburn), Sam Todd finds a message waiting for him: "Thorndecker kills."

He takes this message with a grain of salt, suspecting it to be the work of someone jealous of Thorndecker, or an animal rights zealot speaking of the deaths of research animals. He proceeds to interview various members of the town, finding despair and desperation at every turn, and more signs that something is amiss at Crittendon Hall. But while plenty of people seem to be aware that something shady is going on, no one is willing to tell him what, apparently as much because their own fate is tied up with that of Thorndecker and Crittendon Hall as for fear of reprisal.

Sanders paints a portrait of a fictional town with much in common with too many real ones: in dire straits, economically, environmentally, and socially. Those at the economic bottom have nothing to lose, and those who have something, no matter how little, are even more dangerous, because they will do anything to keep it. Bad times bring out the worst in people, Sanders tells us in no uncertain terms. Integrity is no doubt one of the finer things in life, but like other fine things, it is a luxury, not a certainty.



Techniques

Sanders solves the always thorny problem of exposition by having a first-person narrator who lays things out and puts them together for us, and by having him talk to people who have just the bit of information he needs. Everyone contributes something to the solving of the mystery, but more than once, Todd misses the mark with his hypotheses, which makes situations a little more believable and unpredictable. A reader may well guess at Thorndecker's secret early on, but the ending is likely to be a surprise, anyway.

Todd may not be totally ethical, but he is totally frank. By letting us inside his head he lets us see and understand what he is doing without judging him, almost as we see ourselves. And at the end, when he is able to reconcile his actions and desires at last, his victory is more meaningful because even his weaker characteristics have been revealed.

Themes

Desperate times make for desperate people. Almost everyone in the book does something under pressure that he or she never would have imagined doing otherwise, and there is almost no limit to what characters will do for love, or the possibility of it. We come to discover that even the custodian at Todd's hotel (also named Sam, and perhaps the most upstanding character in the novel) killed a man many years ago, over a woman. Both Sams agree that some women can make a man lose his senses.

Fear of aging is one unifying theme in the novel. Sam Todd breaks up with his older girlfriend just before coming to Coburn, although she is vital and attractive, and he is crazy about her. The difference in their ages simply spooks him, and he essentially fears that her age is cutting years off his life by association. He notes that Telford Thorndecker, like so many older men, has taken a younger second wife as a hedge against mortality, and, at least for a time, it seems to be working for him. Thorndecker is obsessed with defeating the aging process, and as his psychosis is uncovered, Todd comes to realize how the fear of aging and death cause us all to do foolish, hateful things, and to sacrifice our own happiness to the idol of youth. Al Coburn, Ernie Scoggins, and the old man in front of Mary's Church all show some of the desperation of age, with wildly varying degrees of acceptance and wisdom about it, and Sam dreads coming to it himself.

Adaptations

The Sixth Commandment is available on audio cassette from Simon & Schuster.



Key Questions

Readers of Sanders' later novels may find it interesting to reflect on the seeds of future characters here. It's easy to see the trademarks of Archie McNally, protagonist of the later McNally novels, taking shape; his beloved vodka gimlets already much in evidence. How many other such details can you spot?

Telford Thorndecker's morality or lack thereof should provide fertile ground for discussions of medical ethics, animal and human research, and when and whether noble ends justify ignoble means.

1. How believable is it that a whole town would cover up something like this?
2. What if Thorndecker had discovered the secret of immortality for all humankind by doing what he did? Would he have been wrong to do it?
3. How would you describe Julie Thorndecker's morality? Was she lying when she said she loved her husband?

And if Todd was right, and she knew he was dying, why did she not wait until after he died to take off with Goodfellow? Surely she would have stood a better chance of inheriting from her husband that way?

4. Why did Thorndecker not seem angry or dejected when he saw his wife in the car with Officer Goodfellow? Why did they not care if he saw them?
5. Did Thorndecker mean to kill his father? If so, how did he justify this to himself?
6. Is Sam Todd an alcoholic? Why does he drink so much? Is it realistic that he is able to function as well as he does considering his intake?
7. What was Ernie Scoggins' mistake?
8. The old man outside Mary's Church tells Todd the best advice he can give him, from all his years of experience is to "do what you want to do." Is this good advice?
9. The Sixth Commandment was written in 1978. Would Millie, Mary, Ernie, or Sam the custodian have better chances of making a new life outside of Coburn today? Would Sanders be likely to refer to Goodfellow as "the Indian" and the bartender as "the black bartender"? Is this a good thing?

Literary Precedents

The detective story, originated by Edgar Allen Poe, is over one hundred and fifty years old, so *The Sixth Commandment* has a lengthy pedigree. Hard-drinking Sam Todd is one of a long line of hard-boiled detectives that began in the 1930s and 1940s with Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Since then the crime novel, in which the process of detection is less important than the depiction of violence, has exceeded in popularity the traditional detective novel. *The Sixth Commandment* is something of a throwback, for while the milieu in which Sam Todd works is grittier than that of, say, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, the novel remains focused on finding a solution to an old-fashioned mystery.

Of more recent novelists Sanders probably has the greatest affinity with Dick Francis. Although Francis restricts his mysteries to the insular world of horse racing, both writers prefer elegant or exotic settings to the more oppressive surroundings of many crime novels. In addition, Sanders shares Francis's preference for the game of mystery solving over the representation of violence and death.

Related Titles

Sanders has written a great number of mystery novels. While many are similar in style, they do not necessarily share the same characters or settings. In addition to *The Sixth Commandment*, Sanders has written *The Tenth Commandment* (1980), *The Eighth Commandment* (1986), and *The Seventh Commandment*, (1991). Contrary to what one might assume, these novels do not constitute a series. What they share, apart from the brand name, is a similarity of style and narrative invention.



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