

Something in the Air Short Guide

Something in the Air by Emma Lathen

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Characters

As always, John Putnam Thatcher, vice president of Sloan Guaranty Trust, is wise, urbane, and tolerant. Over the years he has become somewhat more removed from the concerns and ways of the young; a visit with his daughter and her extended family leaves him happy to return to his quiet widower's life, and he clearly appreciates the mature personality of Eleanor Gough more than the dynamic youth of Phoebe Fournier. For the first time in the series, an important part of the detective work is actually done by one of the other characters.

Of the Sloan staff, only Everett Gabler plays as large a role as usual, traveling to Boston to use his formidable accounting skills to ferret out secrets in the victim's financial records. The other Sloan characters put in only cameo appearances when Thatcher checks in at his home office, and they play no part in the action, probably because so much of the action takes place in Boston or at various airports.

Within Sparrow Flyways itself, flamboyant characters abound. Mitch Scovil, founder of Sparrow, is a typical boy wonder with little patience for the day-to-day operations which he leaves to his less colorful partners, Clay Batchelder and Eleanor Gough. The victim, Alan Whetmore, embodies the image of the egotistical, high-living commercial pilot, while Phoebe Fournier represents a combination of an idealistic approach with sound common sense and (perhaps most important) fiscal conservatism.



Social Concerns

Like previous Thatcher stories, *Something in the Air* deals with a single financial enterprise—in this case, a no-frills commuter airline. While clearly accepting the capitalist system with all its implications, the novel raises questions about the relationship of labor and management that go beyond the treatment of this topic in Lathen's earlier books. Sparrow Flyways has an innovative profit sharing system and horizontal management, both of which become inconvenient for its founder during a period of proposed expansion.

He then seeks to replace the system with a more conventional top-down management scheme. In the ensuing power struggle no faction is free of self-interest. The potential role of women also comes in for a greater share of attention than before, since one of the founding partners of Sparrow and the fiery leader of the workers' group are both female. By the end of the novel, Thatcher is wondering what will happen if and when his grown daughter—or his invaluable secretary, Miss Corsa—awakens to the kind of power which he sees wielded so ably by Eleanor Gough. Strong women have appeared in earlier Thatcher novels, but it is rare for Thatcher himself to think about what their strength may imply. The reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*, not a habitual reader of mysteries, focused on this aspect throughout much of her review and concluded, "This no-frills mystery is quite a feminist tale."



Techniques

Once again, Lathen cleverly uses a single financial body, this time a small commuter airline, to make the "closed society" of the classic detective story plausible. The death of the victim, a rather unpopular bachelor pilot, has no possible benefit for anyone outside of Sparrow Airways—but could be enormously useful to many within the company. Unlike most earlier novels in the series, however, *Something in the Air* has a variety of settings. Locale is not restricted to company headquarters and the Sloan, but includes two stunning airport scenes and a memorable boat excursion. This opening-up gives the action of the book a less contrived, more varied effect. Lathen had experimented with varying the scene with *When in Greece* (1969), much of which takes place on the road, but *Something in the Air* is a more successful effort. A comparison with Agatha Christie's classic *Death in the Air* (1935), in which all the important action takes place inside a plane in flight, shows how far Lathen has departed from the usual limitations of a closed-world setting.

Even though she varies the usual cast of characters by removing most of the Sloan staff, and departs from the closed aspect by focusing on travel, Lathen nevertheless retains most of the essentials of the classic mystery. As in all the previous Thatcher books, Lathen draws attention to the formal structure of the work, and to the ironic, gamelike quality of the classic puzzle-mystery, by a series of humorous chapter titles. This time, they are drawn from the language of bird watchers: "Labored Flapping" for negotiations gone wrong, "Helpless on Land" for airport closures after a walkout, "Sighted in Louisiana" for a misleading journey by one suspect, and so on. The minor false suspect (introduced early) and then the major false suspect (near the end), the exciting climax in the next to last chapter, and the concluding explanation by Thatcher, all satisfy the reader's expectations for the classic genre.

Themes

As always, John Putnam Thatcher lives, works, and detects in a world motivated primarily by greed. Though the characters of *Something in the Air* pursue money just as eagerly as their counterparts in the earlier books, Lathen makes an explicit connection here between money and power that in the past was more often implicit, or sometimes not mentioned at all. Thus the murderer acts out of fear that something he did many years ago will be revealed, and in the belief that by removing his blackmailer he can continue to suppress the past. The fact that his old crime was itself based on greed is entirely secondary, and no financial benefit can come from the murder.

In addition to the murderer, other characters in *Something in the Air* seek out and use power as an end in itself.

Phoebe Fournier, the outspoken representative of the Sparrow workers, uses her ten thousand shares of Sparrow stock as political leverage and urges the Sloan Guaranty Trust as trustee to do the same; money is useful in buying power, whereas in many earlier Thatcher books the power was the means and the money the end.

Critics have mentioned Thatcher's (and evidently Lathen's) admiration for work, implying a value system in which hard work is a virtue in itself.

Something in the Air continues this idea, often playing off superficial, imageconscious characters against solid workers. Intelligence, charm, and even success are lower in Lathen's world of values than work.

Key Questions

Once again, Lathen takes her ideas from the headlines of the financial pages — here, they are airline deregulation and employee-run corporations.

One need only recall the brief career of People Express airlines in the mid 1980s to see how "realistic" Lathen's portrait of Sparrow Flyways is. In fact, these issues still remain in the world of business, and small airlines constantly appear, endanger the giants, then disappear, and one of the major U.S. carriers was recently bought out by its employees. The issue of drug money financing also recurs with regularity.

1. Discuss the characters of Eleanor Gough and Phoebe Fournier as representatives of women in the modern work force. Do they differ significantly from the male characters in terms of how and why they operate? How do the male characters below and above them in the hierarchy of power deal with them?
2. Examine Mitch Scovil as representative of the modern entrepreneur and Fritz Diehl as representative of the modern corporate officer. Are they positive or negative characters? Are there other ambiguous characters in the novel? What is the purpose behind the ambiguity in terms of the plot? In terms of the portrait Lathen is painting of the business world?
3. Examine Lathen's ability to create a memorable scene, as in the Thanksgiving Day crisis at the Pittsburgh airport. What are the tools Lathen uses here? Look, for example, at her use of humor, her introduction of minor characters, and her switching of perspective.



Related Titles

A popular author with a winning formula tends to repeat it, and Emma Lathen is no exception. Every Thatcher novel starts at the Sloan and ends with Thatcher's exposition of the crime in the last or next to last chapter; every Thatcher novel has comic relief by the supporting cast at the Sloan; and every Thatcher novel has as its unsung heroine Rose Theresa Corsa, secretary par excellence.

For the most part, the novels concern themselves with management and owners more than with workers (except in very special kinds of businesses, for example, the hockey players in *Murder Without Icing*, 1972). Only one previous novel has explored the nature of management-employee relations in any detail: *The Longer the Thread* (1971). In this book, set in Puerto Rico in politically troubled times, it is clear that the reader, and Thatcher, should support management and oppose a radical power base at the factory; indeed, a funny but wholly admirable ILGWU negotiator, Annie Galiano, is brought in: she is one of Lathen's ultra-competent, middle-aged female characters. In *Something in the Air*, however, the wants and needs of management and workers are more evenly balanced and the reader's sympathies are divided with excellent effect.

Another previous book with close ties to *Something in the Air* is its immediate predecessor, *Green Grow the Dollars* (1982). Here too, money is more than an end in itself; the murderer is motivated as much by his need for fame and continuing reputation as he is by simple greed. As a research scientist who has not had a breakthrough in ten years, he must produce or retire—a prospect which he clearly cannot face.

His brilliant past controls his mediocre present just as much as the criminal past of the murderer of *Something in the Air* controls his.

In the only previous Lathen title involving the murder of a blackmailer, *By Hook or By Crook* (1975), the motive differs greatly. The murderer's initial "crime" falls under the heading of illegality but not, in any ordinary sense, of wrongdoing; he is forced to kill only because, with his grasp on his company and on his fortune threatened already by family feuding, his position both in his company and in his family depends on maintaining his false identity.

Finally, Thatcher's admiration for the formidable Eleanor Gough resembles Congressman Benton Safford's longstanding alliance with Congresswoman Elsie Hollenback, "the scourge of the Department of Defense," in the R. B. Dominic series by the same authors.

For the first time in the Thatcher series, another character—and a female character, at that—appears who, though less central in the novel, is fully Thatcher's equal.



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