# Straight Short Guide

## Straight by Dick Francis

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

When asked by an interviewer to define the strong sense of morality underlying his books, Francis replied: "What it comes to, is that I never ask my main character to do anything I wouldn't do myself." Derek Franklin, who shares the initials of his name with the author, is a thirty-four year old loner who has suffered many emotional and physical injuries. Children of divorced parents, Derek and Greville had little contact over the years and scarcely knew each other, but a strong fraternal bond nevertheless existed. When Greville suddenly dies, Derek inherits "his business, his gadgets, his enemies, his horses and his mistress," a legacy, he says, that "nearly killed me." Through the course of the novel, Derek experiences a series of initiations. By the end, he has proved to be a quick learner of business and managerial skills; but however wiser he may be, he has not materially changed, remaining an upright and steady presence who moves easily between his worlds of racing and gem dealing.

As protagonist and narrator, Derek is the major figure of Straight with the other characters distinctly minor and functioning only in terms of how they interact with or affect him. The Saxony Franklin staff, on whom Derek — knowing nothing about gemstones — is completely dependent, is stereotypical.

The main ones are Annette, Greville's fortyish personal assistant, who is loyal, hard-working, knowledgeable, but also timid and unimaginative; younger June, an alert blonde whose ability and initiative quickly lead Derek to realize "that without her the save-the-firm enterprise would be a non-starter"; and Jason, stockroom worker, all-around muscles of the firm, a sullen young fellow with spiky orange hair who proves to be disloyal.

The characters from the racing world similarly are predictable types, not unlike their counterparts in previous Francis novels. Trainer Milo Shandy is honest, frank, and "a perpetual optimist in the face of world evidence of corruption, greed, and lies." Nicholas Loder is another trainer, whose successes "attracted as owners serious gamblers whose satisfaction was more in winning money than in winning races," and his drug addiction leads him to betray his sport. Harley and Martha Ostermeyer, American horse owners, are as naive as they are wealthy. Finally, Thomas Rollway, also a racehorse owner, is a drug baron who feeds cocaine to horses as well as to people.

Two other members of the supporting cast stand above the rest as psychologically complex and ethically ambiguous figures. One is Prospero Jenks, an amoral Knightsbridge jeweller with a "young-old Peter Pan face." He specializes in one-of-a-kind display pieces emblazoned with gems and is a prime customer and friend of Greville, but nevertheless deceives him by switching part of a diamond consignment for cubic zirconia. Thanks to Greville's electronic Wizard, Derek learns of the theft and confronts Jenks, who admits to it, but says that his ethic is staying "ahead of the game" and that everyone steals. "Sure," he says, "I get a buzz when what I've made is brilliant, but I wouldn't starve in a garret for art's sake." Although he regrets the theft now that

Greville is dead, his remorse is only skin deep, and, Derek thinks, "nowhere had it altered his soul."

Equally complex is Greville's lover, Clarissa Williams, forty-year-old wife of seventy-year-old Lord Knightwood.

Not at all delicate, she is decisive and powerful, but also troubled: "It hasn't been a bad life, but before Greville, incomplete." After a brief romantic interlude with Derek, she decides that what she "had with Greville was unforgettable and unrepeatable," but before returning home to "do [her] best there," she saves Derek from likely death in the climactic episode of the novel.

# Social Concerns

Francis portrays a materialistic society in the wide-ranging milieus of this novel, with a cast of characters that includes racehorse owners and trainers, drug dealers, gamblers, and diamond merchants. Pitted against them is narrator-hero Derek Franklin, a steeplechase jockey recovering from his latest injury and a man of self-effacing honesty. When he unexpectedly inherits Saxony Franklin, the gemstone business of his elder brother Greville, who was accidentally killed, Derek is thrust into an unfamiliar world of international trade. He also finds himself the putative victim of unknown enemies, for he unwittingly threatens their pursuit of profit and wealth.

Francis's plot also focuses upon the dubious tendency of people to rely increasingly upon gadgets, electronic and otherwise. Intended to simplify personal and professional lives, these mechanical wizards, Francis demonstrates, often become gimmickry obsessions that clutter and distort normal activities. Derek, his taciturn driver Brad, most of the employees of Saxony Franklin, and a wealthy American couple are the innocents: not only personally honest, but also unaware of most of the unethical and evil activities that surround them.

# Techniques

By using the first person narrative technique, Francis makes Derek Franklin the focal point and achieves an immediacy of reader involvement with the hero's problems that would not otherwise occur. Further, there is a minimum of introductory exposition: Straight opens with Franklin caught up in a major crisis that involves not only his brother's death but also a threat to his own life. As a result of Greville's death, Derek finds himself in an unfamiliar milieu: a steeplechase jockey who has inherited a wholesale gemstone marketing business. He moves between these two worlds — old and new, familiar and unfamiliar — with ease, confidence, and courage, although he must confront physical, moral, and ethical challenges in both.

By the end of the novel, he has broadened the range of his experiences, has learned about gemstones and how to engage in international commerce, and has suffered more injuries to his already battered body. He remains fundamentally the same person he was at the start, a moral paragon and a loner, but he is not at all too good to be true, for Francis's realistic delineation of background and character assure verisimilitude.

# Themes

In the novel, greed and ambition beget evil, overshadowing people's good qualities, distorting reality, and initiating chain reactions that lead to death. Derek comes across this note by his dead brother: "The bad scorn the good, and the crooked despise the straight," an appropriate philosophical legacy to add to his material inheritance. As in earlier works, Francis here again deals with the racing scene, showing how the desire to capitalize on a horse's abilities inspires talented professionals to betray a trust that others have placed in them. An added dimension in the novel is the presence of drugs, with their destructive effects on men's morality and on animals' performances. The story lines involving the gemstone importing business and the attempts of a shady character to get a local gaming license emphasize the pervasive destructiveness of greed and evil.

Straddling these worlds of sport and commerce, admirable Derek Franklin and those like him ultimately overcome those who would destroy that which is good. Brute force may seem ready to overwhelm everything ranged against it, but by the conclusion, the meek — sustained by old-fashioned ideals and a stoic determination to endure — are triumphant, at least temporarily. Although Derek Franklin is a babe in the woods as new owner of his brother's firm, he possesses the physical and psychological wherewithal to succeed.

In British racing parlance, the finishing straight — or homestretch — is the point at which a horse finally wins or loses an event. With Derek Franklin in Straight, Francis gives a new meaning to the term.

# Literary Precedents

There may remain in later Francis novels some element of Nat Gould and Edgar Wallace, early writers of racing thrillers, but a more direct precedent may be the work of John Welcome, a friend and sometime collaborator.

Another influence may be John Buchan, author of The Thirty-Nine Steps (1915); like him, Francis creates heroes who struggle against time and have a keen ability to escape from difficult situations. Francis himself has acknowledged a debt to Ian Fleming and also has expressed his admiration for such contemporaries as Desmond Bagley and Alistair Maclean.

# Related Titles

Straight has many echoes of earlier Dick Francis novels, including the first person narrative point of view and thoroughly admirable hero-detective who is a steeplechase jockey. In addition to providing insight into the racing game (including its seamy underside), Francis continues a practice that he began many novels ago: to feature another field alongside racing, in this case gemstones; and, again, he has done his homework, displaying a remarkable degree of knowledge about the specialty. The obligatory physical testing of the hero is present, as in the past, but there is less sadistic violence in Straight than in previous books, and the novel covers a shorter time span than its immediate predecessors.

Critics for many years have commented about Francis's failure to develop substantive and distinctive female characters. Clarissa Williams is somewhat more complex than her counterparts in previous works, and although she appears in only a few scenes, in the climactic episode she saves Derek from likely death.

Whip Hand In Whip Hand (1979), Sid Halley, former steeplechase jockey and a sought-after private detective, deals with four cases simultaneously: he wants to clear his former wife's name as a result of her unwitting involvement in a phony charity; he tries to uncover suspected corruption in the ranks of the Jockey Club; he agrees to see if someone is indeed fixing the way horses in a syndicate run; and he attempts to learn why crippling and fatal ailments have been afflicting a wealthy horse owner's stable. The common motivation for all of these crimes is greed, and Francis pits Halley — selfless, warm-hearted, thoroughly honorable — against the forces of corruption.

The common aim of the criminals is to enrich themselves at the expense of others, and this desire for money becomes so all-consuming that it leads to violence, thus begetting even greater crimes. In contrast, the erstwhile jockey's desire to succeed has nothing to do with financial gain or social status; rather, he simply aims to right wrongs, to purge the evils that are sullying a sport he loves and endangering the woman he has loved. As it must in a morality tale, good ultimately prevails over evil, at least temporarily.

As a result of a serious racing accident, Halley has a bionic hand and a new career as private eye. In addition to suffering continuing trauma from the physically maiming injury, he also has not recovered from the shock of his failed marriage. In this respect he is similar to most other Francis heroes, for a painful emotional shock in the past — such as the death of a loved one — haunts them as definitively as any physical wound. There thus is a pervasive sadness about Halley and the other Francis heroes, whose suffering and pain make them more sensitive and caring than most men, but rather than turning them inward, the stressful situations have led them to look beyond themselves and to become concerned with others' problems, sometimes as a means of escaping their own, but primarily to satisfy a sense of social responsibility that the suffering has spawned.

Halley is the only character in the novel who is fully realized; the others are merely types or two-dimensional, including his former wife Jenny, whose inability to make a go of marriage to a risk-taking jockey has left her bitter toward him and vulnerable to the advances of undesirable men; her father, retired Admiral Charles Roland, the one stable element in her life, who retains a brotherly relationship with Halley; Chico Barnes, a judo instructor whose brute strength (boyish and slender, he "could throw a two-hundredfifty-pound man over his shoulder with the greatest ease") complements Halley's intelligence and compensates for his lameness; Rosemary, neurotic and frightened wife of George Caspar, one of the world's top horse trainers, whose leading two-year-olds inexplicably lose their touch as three-year-olds; Commander Lucas Wainright, patrician Director of Security to the Jockey Club, who unofficially asks Halley to look into alleged wrong-doing within his operation; aristocratic Trevor Deansgate (born Trevor Shummuck in a Manchester slum), "urbane, a man of the world, seeking top company, becoming a name in the City, the sycophant of earls," who owns one of the country's major bookmaking firms; Peter Rammileese, a farmer "who's made a packet of crooked dealings in horses"; and balloonist John Viking, who gives Halley the ride of his life. These and sundry minor figures, mostly from the racing world, are mere functionaries: helping or hindering Halley's progress, advancing or complicating the action.

Sid narrates the novel and is its central consciousness, and Francis's first order of business — a common practice for him in his books — is to provide insight into the character by means of a reflective prologue. In this instance, Halley's musings are interrupted by the arrival of a visitor who offers him a job. In rapid succession three more people ask him to look into matters for them. The rest of the book is devoted largely to his alternately directing his attention to one or another of the cases, three of which involve race horses, and thus there is some overlapping of venue and characters. Halley's only distraction along the way is a romantic interlude (a recurring motif in Francis novels) with Louise Mclnnes, Jenny's roommate, who is only tangentially linked to one of the cases, but is a means by which Halley's emotional rehabilitation is fostered. Another recurring element is the physical violence, for at least once in a Francis book the hero is forced to confront danger directly and then to endure a vicious beating, in this case at the hands of men with pitchfork and chains: "I moved my head a bit. . . and simply lay where I was, feeling shapeless, feeling pulped, and stupid, and defeated . . . Jelly. A living jelly. Red.

On fire. Burning, in a furnace."

Banker Francis has said, "My heroes ... are the sort of chaps I'd like to meet ...

do like to write about good types." Tim Ekaterin in Banker (1982) is such a man, an unheroic type who copes with the unsought and unwanted challenges — emotional, physical, and professional — that he confronts and somehow remains unstained by the corruption all around him in both business and sport.

Whereas in traditional mysteries the amateur detective's insight and perception outpace his or her accumulation of facts and proof, Ekaterin is a novice whose progress toward the resolution is even more tentative than the reader's. He is as self-effacing a character as any who has served as a whodunit protagonist, and that he succeeds is as much a surprise to himself as to the reader. For most of the novel, in fact, he is learning — about investment banking, chemical compounding, thoroughbred breeding. He also is a young man in search of himself and his place in the world, not unlike Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, albeit younger and not at all world weary.

The other characters come from the three worlds of the novel: Gordon Michaels, Tim's mentor in banking, takes Tim to the Royal Ascot, where he meets Dissdale Smith and Calder Jackson, the former a heavy better, the latter a veterinarian who apparently cures horses with odd medications and a mystical laying on of hands. Michaels's attention to Tim leads to the development of a relationship between Tim and Judith, Gordon's young wife.

Through Gordon and Judith, Tim meets Penelope Warren, a pharmacist friend of theirs, who at first seems to have been introduced as an appropriate alternative to Judith, but Francis focuses upon her pharmaceutical knowledge rather than her romantic availability, and Tim soon realizes the usefulness of that professional expertise.

When he does, the plot of Banker moves forward.

Not until the midpoint of Banker does the novel become a full-scale mystery, but the first half of the book is not merely preamble for the subsequent "whodunit"; it has a life of its own. At first the focus is upon a venerable investment banking firm in London; once a junior executive loans a stud farm owner five million pounds to purchase a thoroughbred, the action predictably shifts to the racing world.

In both venues there is a seamy underside, with a variety of people involved in unethical and illegal activities that eventually destroy them. It is Francis's modern morality tale, an imaginatively crafted portrait of social climbers.

Counterpointing them is the virtuous protagonist, apprentice investment banker Tim Ekaterin, whose insistent pursuit of truth and justice — analogous to a ritual purgation — enables him to overcome the stigma of profligate parents and to assert his own identity. He is a strong moral force working against the immorality that pervades the social strata through which he moves. Ambition and greed are the corrupting social forces in the world of this book, but according to Francis's old-fashioned verities, virtue finally prevails and always is rewarded.

The action of the novel spans three years, an unusually long period for a detective novel. In the first year, Tim (who is the narrator) moves through his apprenticeship in investment banking, which is the means by which he comes to know Sandcastle, a five-million-pound thoroughbred, and his milieu. In the next section of the book, devoted to the second year, the focus shifts more clearly to the stud farm and broodmares, stallions, and breeding sheds; but the seemingly casual and dilatory pace continues.

Such slowness is necessary to Francis's design, for enough time must elapse so that mares which Sandcastle has serviced can foal.

In the third section, set two years after the opening scenes of the novel, the stallion's first progeny are born, and the birth of these deformed foals quickens the pace of the action. But before Tim solves the puzzle, he must pass another test, the obligatory ordeal through which Francis places his heroes. Knocked unconscious, Tim regains consciousness in a horse box at a stable. The person who carried him there makes a final appearance and then leaves Tim to contemplate both his enlightenment and likely fate in the company of a horse who goes berserk.

The "rearing, bucking, kicking, rocketing nightmare" breaks one of Tim's arms, crunches an ankle, gives him "a swiping punch in the chest," and lands a "crushing thud" on a shoulder. Tim concludes: "This is death . . . dreadful, pulverizing extinction." Unprepared although he is for "the onslaught of so much pain all at once, and also not quite sure how to deal with it," Tim manages to endure and at the same time belatedly reach some firm conclusions about the case.

# 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