

A Ticket to the Boneyard Short Guide

A Ticket to the Boneyard by Lawrence Block

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Characters

James Leo Motley comes from nowhere to try to take over the prostitute Elaine Mardell's life. He is muscular and wiry, with eyes that display his hatred for women, and with a knowledge of pressure points by which to inflict pain on a human body. He preys on people because he can. Elaine Mardell tries not to let a life of prostitution grind her down, and she saves her money to buy real estate for a secure financial future. Matt Scudder considers her a friend although he has not seen her for years and at first fails to recognize her code name, Cousin Frances. None of Motley's other victims are close to Scudder and the reader gets to know none of them as individual beings: They exist in the novel to be killed. Scudder sends the women he feels close to out of town. He feels some closeness to Elaine only after she has been attacked by Motley. Mick Ballou reappears to supply Matt with a gun. At the end of the story Matt says that he feels the most kinship with a career criminal and a prostitute, Mick and Elaine.



Social Concerns/Themes

Social concerns seem to be minimal in the latest Matt Scudder novel, *A Ticket to the Boneyard*. Although prostitution (including transsexual prostitution) is part of the story, it is presented only as another way to make a living, one which has its own peculiar job-related problems. The theme of the insecurity of urban life — with the attendant need for locks and "security systems" — is less a social concern than a matter of individual terror. Matt lives out the law of the jungle — eat or be eaten; kill or be killed — mostly uncritically, and no separate narrative voice puts this extreme behavior into any social context.

The themes are mainly put forward in a negative form: actions subvert the stated moral positions. Matt says that one shouldn't play God after remembering how he framed James Leo Motley for assaulting a police officer. Motley was trying to take over as Elaine Mardell's pimp, hurting her physically during and after sex. But Matt then plays God in the ultimate act of killing someone, deliberately taking what cannot be restored — life. The theme of fatalism is introduced with Matt's reading and thinking about Marcus Aurelius, a Roman Stoic, who counsels that everything happens the way it is supposed to, so human worry (and presumably effort) are unnecessary. But Matt continues to try to track down Motley and to eliminate him. At the end of the novel, Scudder says that it is a cold winter but that he just dresses warmly and walks through it. He refuses to admit that he does not walk through untouched.

Techniques

Block's narrative techniques in this novel constitute almost a change of genre. He is no longer writing the traditional hard-boiled detective novel in which the detective preserves some integrity and humanity in the midst of a savage world. The novel is closer to a revenge fantasy. If it were set in the future, it would be a dystopia; as it is, it is a vision of a nightmare world, in which everyone is a killer or a potential killer.

The novel returns to a character from the first Matt Scudder mystery, *In the Midst of Death* (1976): Elaine Mardell, a prostitute whom Matt patronized, protected, and treated as an informant. In the earlier mystery, Matt concluded that everyone is a little on the take, but that murdering someone is crossing the line into evil. *A Ticket to the Boneyard* erases that line. Matt tells a police lieutenant in Ohio that he does not have a client, and so presumably he is no longer a detective. The novel also includes graphic depictions of sadistic violence against women, and makes James Leo Motley into a monster who must be destroyed by the antihero Scudder.

Literary Precedents

The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748) by Tobias Smollett is a picaresque adventure in which the protagonist recounts his resentment of his enemies and his thirst for revenge, which is sometimes satisfied. However, closer to the methods of A Ticket to the Boneyard are modern crime novels that put the reader into the mind of the murderer and let him act out the murderer's crimes.

The seductive woman who tempts the detective to relinquish his integrity has been a staple of hard-boiled detective fiction. In Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Sam Spade is sexually tempted by the murderous Brigit O'Shaunnessy, but instead turns her in to the police. Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer practiced the ultimate rejection of the sexual temptress by cold-bloodedly shooting her. Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929) is an example of a hard-boiled detective novel in which corruption seems endemic and the integrity of the detective is shaken. Tales of murderous innkeepers are part of Gothic fiction. Albert Camus wrote *The Stranger* (1942), in which the rich stranger who was killed was the family's long lost son.



Related Titles

In *Out on the Cutting Edge* (1989), characters besides the grimy, harddrinking ex-cop private eye Matt Scudder, include Mickey Ballou, who wears his father's bloody butcher's smock when he wants to intimidate his criminal associates, and Eddie Dunphy, an ex-convict who does odd jobs and sometimes attends the same Alcoholics Anonymous meetings as Matt. Willa Rossiter, who identifies herself as the superintendent of Eddie's building and a former member of the Progressive Communist Party, becomes Matt's lover. Paula Hoeldtke, a would-be actress and waitress who steals for thrills, and her boyfriend Neil, one of Mickey's bartenders, are less well developed. Other characters include Paula's father, who hires Matt to find her, and some of Matt's AA associates.

In this novel Block focuses on the problems of the urban real estate market in which rent-controlled apartments coexist with high-rent uncontrolled apartments. Unable to find shelter, homeless people beg on the streets. Money-hungry landlords have more than a casual interest in their tenants dying, since that will make valuable living space available at much higher rents. Such owners keep apartments empty so that they can cast ballots for the building being converted to a co-operative — a process that can bring the owner millions of dollars in profit.

A recurring theme in Block's series is the brutality of the city, a savagery that contrasts with the ideal of the city as the jewel of a civilization. A traditional mark of a civilized people is hospitality — the welcome and safe passage accorded to travelers and strangers as well as neighbors and kin. In Greek and biblical cultures, the killing of strangers signals a savage and ignorant people, and the city is almost totally comprised of strangers, who need to turn to the good will of unknown people for shelter. Block also explores the theme of corruption and guilt and pictures the victims and bystanders as sharing the guilt with the criminals.

Eddie Dunphy, whose death Matt investigates, was a small-time criminal, and Paula Hoeldtke, the subject of another of Matt's cases, is morally corrupt. Matt identifies subconsciously with the "Butcher Boy," Mickey Ballou, a criminal enforcer, more than he does with his former police friends. The only victims who are not lawbreakers are the elderly who are ready to die.

In the character of Willa, Matt's lover, Block creates a complex web of human traits influenced by alcohol, death, and seduction. The strong subconscious pull of this web is indicated by the fact that Matt has drinking dreams while he is sleeping with Willa.

An awareness of the dangerous combination is doubled when Jan, a recovering alcoholic whom Matt dated previously, tells the story of Paul who was sober for many years until a pretty French woman in Paris asked him to have a glass of wine with her. Now, Jan says, Paul combines uncontrollable drinking bouts with hospital detoxification stays. His friends worry that this pattern will soon kill him. It is as if the seductive, but deadly alcohol is personified in Willa. Another element that underscores the play of



irrational forces is Matt's developing friendship with the Butcher Boy, Mickey Ballou, in an association similar, Matt says, to what often happens with drinking buddies. They feel emotionally close to each other, telling each other stories, without developing any deep ties.

Another dangerous Mickey is a Mickey Finn, the chloral hydrate that Willa gives to her victims to put them out before they are killed.



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