

They All Ran After the President's Wife Short Guide

They All Ran After the President's Wife by Mary Higgins Clark

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Contents

They All Ran After the President's Wife Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

From the publication of *Where Are the Children?* (1975; see separate entry), Clark has been notable for drawing characters in quick, incisive strokes; her skills in characterization seem to improve with each new publication, and in *They All Ran After the President's Wife* she peoples her plot with many characters who need to be drawn quickly but clearly. The pace of the plot does not allow for long character descriptions that would slow it down.

Thus there are missteps such as declaring that the ex-president is "a master pilot and checked out in the SST," stretching one's credulity way too far (the SST in question is an experimental aircraft never before flown); even so, most characterizations work well. For instance, Clark presents "Desmond Ogilvey, that monument of patience, the president most often compared to 'Cool' Calvin Coolidge," telling us what we most need to know about Ogilvey. Her brief description gives her characterization a strong foundation on which she can build as the plot advances and Ogilvey's role in it becomes more complex. The presentation of Claudus Jovunet is particularly deft: "Dressed today in a drab prison uniform, a far cry from the dandy attire he had affected while still free, and manacled at the waist, hands, and feet, Jovunet nevertheless somehow managed to convey the effect of being at ease and totally comfortable. In an odd way, he also seemed to be totally in control." This description succeeds on two levels. First, it gives a coherent impression of the chief suspect in Sandra's kidnaping, and he seems to be a worthy, menacing adversary for Henry. Second, it fulfills its role in the misdirection Clark is creating because Jovunet is an interesting, even arresting figure, entirely suited to the sophisticated kidnaping scheme that has been unfolding; he seems to be exactly the right person to look to for answers to the mystery.

Wexler Klint is built through the observations of Sandra. His ordinariness is emphasized by pointing out his strong but unremarkable teeth; his malevolence is pointed out through his "dark gray eyes, narrow and sunken . . . the more frightening because they burned with intelligence"; his menace is established by: "There was something decidedly alien about her captor. He seemed almost like a robot, programmed to carry out precise, inexorable instructions. A robot but self-programmed. He doesn't take orders from anyone." The description of the eyes does its job but is unextraordinary; villains often have sunken, dark eyes that burn with intelligence. But the teeth are a nice touch, using a straightforward image to capture something important about the villain—his commonness. Sandra's observation of his behavior explains even more, giving his menacing figure personality and opening the way for further character exposition that follows when Sandra makes the connection between him and her client Sneakers Klint.

Central to the tale is the outsized love between Henry and Sandra. It is an uncommon love full of fire and excitement; it is a love worth more than empires, more than wealth. Indeed, Sandra does not much care one way or another about her husband's immense family wealth.



When Wexler Klint took off her jewelry, only her wedding ring seemed of significant value; the fabulous jewels of the Britland family mean little to her, and she does not wear them. Sandra is a strongminded woman from a lower-class family who has through pluck and hard work become a member of the House of Representatives. When Henry first asked her to dinner, while he was still president, she refused because she had a date with her parents. This drew Henry to her; other women he knew would drop everything to dine with the President of the United States—especially an incredibly handsome one. In *They All Ran After the President's Wife*, her fortitude and her grace under fire are revealed: "beyond cramped limbs and the heartsick worry over Henry and what he must be going through, her temper was steadily rising." While trapped in a basement, with a hood over her head much of the time, and in pain from a probably broken arm, she manages to worry about how Henry feels! Not only that, but she is angry! That makes her a strong woman, indeed! Is this overdoing her characterization? Probably it is; one wishes that she had a weakness, perhaps absentmindedness and a tendency to bump into doors when distracted. That Sandra is too good to be true does not matter much to Clark's audience; She is an outsized heroic figure whose courage is meant to capture a readership who will root for her to survive and emerge victorious over all opposition.

Henry, too, could do with some telling weaknesses. He is utterly handsome; he is one of America's best-loved presidents; he is tall; he is suave; he is sensitive to his wife's needs; he is courageous; he is brilliant; and he can even fly experimental supersonic passenger aircraft. Although in prior stories Henry and Sandra are fairly equal in importance, in *They All Ran After the President's Wife* he is secondary to Sandra, who does all the truly heroic stuff. He frets and worries and tirelessly tracks down clues, but the most important clues are ones she gives him, cleverly finding a way to insert coded remarks into a tape of her begging for help. Henry knows that his wife does not whine about anything, meaning that the tape of her whining must have some special importance, and being brilliant, he figures out what she means. Used to wielding great power, he tells people what they need to do to track down the truth behind Sandra's abduction, and even cool President Ogilvey has to go along with what Henry wants. The ending of the novel can be somewhat misleading on its surface because of Henry's commanding presence.

His helicopters help to save Sandra just at the moment she is about to be drowned by Wexler Klint, seemingly in a routine romantic conclusion in which the hero saves the helpless heroine from a horrible fate, but Sandra was no helpless heroine.

She gave investigators the clues they needed to figure out what had happened to her; their appearance to save her is merely the logical result of what she had done. Thus, she actually has saved herself.



Social Concerns

At first *They All Ran After the President's Wife* looks like an account of modern-day terrorism, but it eventually turns out to be a melodrama in which social issues are of slight significance.

Wexler Klint misleads investigators by making the kidnaping of Sandra look like the efforts of international terrorists to force the United States to free an assassin so utterly despicable that even Saddam Hussein of Iraq, unhappy though he may be with the United States, says that he would execute him. The social significance of this is its plausibility. If this plot element does not strike one as believable, none of the rest of the story will succeed in holding one's interest. Yet, this plot twist is likely to strike modern readers as so believable that it will not even give them pause; such is the status of terrorism in the public mind that any vile act seems possible.

Underlying the novella's plot and better developed as a theme than the motif of terrorism is America's policy toward its prisoners. Why is it that Jovunet receives all the goodies he demands while Sneakers Klint, who actually is helpful in a small way, whereas Jovunet is not, receives nothing? What is it about a notorious international murderer that earns him careful treatment that other prisoners would not receive, and why might it seem to many readers natural that he should?

In *They All Ran After the President's Wife*, Clark uses common perceptions of the hierarchy of prisoners not only to mislead readers as they sort out the mystery but to comment gently on the very idea that the dapper, pretentious Jovunet is anything other than a creep, somewhat lower in morality than the commonplace thug Sneakers Klint. Yet Jovunet is famous, and Sneakers Klint is not, and fame, *They All Ran After the President's Wife* implies, allows even the lowest of criminals to manipulate his captors; his very notoriety makes Jovunet important to even the President of the United States and his advisors, who find the kidnaping of an ex-president's wife much more conceivable to them if the object is to free an infamous terrorist rather than to exact revenge for an unknown thug serving out his time in an ordinary prison. Wexler Klint is counting on Jovunet's hold as a terrorist on the imagination of government officials to cover his real motives and to distract investigators from clues that would lead them to him. It seems likely that Clark makes a similar calculation, figuring that her audience would also view Jovunet as special, distracting it from the clues she leaves that point away from him.

Techniques

They All Ran After the President's Wife is a thriller—that is, it is meant to take its audience on an emotional roller coaster as clues seem to point to one solution, then shift to another direction, all while Sandra's predicament worsens and grows ever more ominous. Therefore, suspense comes before the mystery elements, and it is for this reason that Clark's revealing the kidnapper well before the novella's end does not much matter to the success of the plot. Instead, suspense is maintained by the manner in which Wexler Klint manipulates the clues so that they point away from him and by Clark's skillful tying together two narrative strands, that of Henry and the investigaThey All RanAfter the President's Wife tors and that of Sandra and her kidnapper, so that both are resolved only in the nick-of-time, when Sandra begins to believe she really is about to die in the ocean.

Throughout this analysis, They All Ran After the President's Wife is referred to as a novella. This is a term that means a short novel, as opposed to a long short story.

At about a hundred pages, They All Ran After the President's Wife is very long for a short story, but its length is not the only consideration. Note how the work has multiple plot strands, with two strong narratives having subplots. The main plot is that of Sandra trying to outwit her kidnapper; of nearly equal importance is the plot of Henry trying to sort through clues and deal with government idiots in an effort to find his wife. In addition, there are the subplots of Sandra's past as a public defender and the results of her case defending Sneakers Klint and of Jovunet's nonexistent hopes for freedom.

In general, multiple plots, especially with subplots, distinguish the novel genre from that of the short story, making They All Ran After thePresident's Wife more akin to novels than short stories and hence a short novel or novella.



Themes

does not have many themes; it is in essence a tale of suspense and heroic perseverance. The principal theme is that of romantic love. The love between Henry and Sandra holds the novella together and much of the novella would not make sense without it. The love of Henry and Sandra is a grand one, an epic love like that of Odysseus and Penelope, or in more recent times, like that which popular legend claims for John and Jackie Kennedy. It is her love for her husband that keeps Sandra distracted enough from her terrible predicament to think about how to save herself; she thinks of how Henry must be suffering while trying to find her, and she overcomes her pain and fear to think of ways to help him. Henry is single-mindedly devoted to Sandra, and his love for her presses him to think beyond the obvious answers that the kidnaping presents to find the truth. His love motivates him to be certain that the answers before him are correct, and his effort to be certain breaks down the deception the kidnapper has created.

Having a perfect love, both Henry and Sandra know each other well. This aspect of their love is as important as the depth of its passion. All of Sandra's passionate efforts to survive and Henry's passionate searching for her would fail if they did not also know each other's personalities well. Sandra knows how to tip Henry off because she knows how he worries over details; Henry knows that the kidnapper's tape of his wife pleading for help must have importance beyond showing that she is probably still alive because he knows that she does not whine.

In addition, romantic love is the principal attraction of the novella and the Henry and Sandra adventures in general.

Yes, *They All Ran After the President's Wife* is a suspenseful page-turner and a thriller in which disaster seems imminent at every moment, but it is the love between Henry and Sandra that keys its success. In it, Henry and Sandra's love is explored; it is deep and full of pathos, and it is grandly heroic, and therefore uplifting to the spirit. It is a spiritually inspiring, emotionally grand tale, and that is the essence of its appeal to a wide audience.



Key Questions

employs a classic device of misdirection by making the criminal's method of operation look like that of another kind of criminal. Focusing on how well the device works would be a good way to open a discussion. Another good opening would be to discuss the nature of *They All Ran After the President's Wife*. Is it a true mystery or is it a thriller? When is a mystery story not a mystery?

1. What do you make of the former president being "a master pilot and checked out on the SST"? Is this too implausible? How does it affect your response to the plot?
2. Why does Wexler Klint take as much time as he does to murder Sandra?
3. What is the point of Wexler Klint making the crime seem to be one committed by terrorists?
4. Why is Henry disgusted when White says that "I feel that there is obviously a strong family feeling between the Klint brothers, and that an added inducement to surrender peacefully might lie in our promise that the two brothers be given visitation rights to each other's prisons"?
5. How does Sandra feel about her role in the conviction of Wallace "Sneakers" Klint? Is this in keeping with her character?
6. Why does Jovunet not at first tell Henry and the authorities that he has nothing to do with the kidnapping of Sandra? Would he have been believed if he had?
7. What is the importance of the phrase "skip the caviar"? Why would Wexler Klint put it in the note?
8. Would it be as easy to disable Secret Service agents as they are in *They All Ran After the President's Wife*?
9. How important is the romance between Henry and Sandra to the appeal of the novella?
10. What is Sneakers Klint's attitude toward his brother? How does this affect the plot?
11. What is the policy of the United States government regarding efforts to free convicted criminals by exchanging kidnap victims? Would this policy change in a case of an ex-president's wife being the kidnap victim?

Literary Precedents

At first, *They All Ran After the President's Wife* seems to belong to the brand of international thriller typified by the fiction of Ken Follet and Robert Ludlum in which incredibly heroic figures (even handsome political figures) use their wits to battle fiendish terrorists; Jovunet sounds much like international assassin-for-hire Carlos the Jackal from Ludlum's Bourne books (see the entry for *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 1990). However, Clark can be surprising; the international terrorist she creates is her kind of villain—suave, sensitive, strong minded, and evil.

One may be easily fooled into believing her plot will go the predictable direction, involving wealthy, powerful characters, high living on seemingly limitless money, and beautiful, handsome characters swept together in a tale of murder and mystery.

Yet, Clark surprises. She takes another tack and places her tale in a literary tradition other than the one of international espionage. Instead, her story is of an insignificant little man who still is part of the long-past 1960s counterculture whose motives are twisted notions of familial loyalty and of revenge. *They All Ran After the President's Wife* lands in the world of Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald, and Ed McBain; as in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930; see separate entry), the plot has the elements of high romance, but the mystery actually involves small people preoccupied by small ideas, and the locale is seamy—in *They All Ran After the President's Wife* the most important setting is a sordid basement with an old television and a battered chair.

Related Titles

The stories about Henry and Sandra tend to be love stories first, thrillers second, and mysteries third, but *They All Ran After the President's Wife* is first a thriller and then a mystery, with the love story providing the background and motivations for the thriller. In general, the stories about Henry and Sandra dazzle with their depictions of powerful people caught up in melodramatic situations, with Henry and Sandra standing out from the other characters as the handsomest, most beautiful, most loving, and most intelligent figures.

In the context of Clark's other fiction, *They All Ran After the President's Wife* resembles her damsel-in-distress plots as found in her early best seller *Where Are the Children?* (1975; see separate entry), continued in *Weep No More; My Lady* (1987), and recently exemplified by *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* (1995; see separate entry) and *Moonlight Becomes You* (1996). In these tales, a woman, usually smart, hardworking, but with tragedy in her past, is placed in great danger that she faces with fortitude. In *They All Ran After the President's Wife*, Sandra is placed in dire circumstances, tied to a chair in the basement of a madman; she does all she can to outsmart her kidnapper and bears her pain and fear admirably.

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