

There Was a Little Girl Short Guide

There Was a Little Girl by Evan Hunter

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Characters

Matthew Hope is the focus of this series and the novels revolve largely around his activities and are filtered largely through his consciousness. Matthew is a divorced, middle-aged lawyer who lives alone in the middle-sized city of Calusa, Florida.

His daughter, with whom he tries valiantly to maintain a close relationship, is now attending boarding school in Connecticut. The distance between father and daughter frustrates Matthew to no end. Susan, Matthew's former wife, with whom he briefly entertained a renewed relationship and currently is on friendly speaking terms, lives nearby.

Matthew's professional life revolves around his law practice, which has undergone something of a change as he gradually has shifted over his emphasis from real estate to criminal law. In the process he has become involved, often unwillingly, in a number of criminal investigations which he has solved or helped to solve. Currently he has two private operatives working for him: Warren Chambers, a black man who as a character allows McBain to raise questions about racism, and the tough but sexy Toots Kiley, whose presence in the novels introduces much of the gender material. Also present in the novels is the overly weary local cop, Morris Bloom, who provides Matthew with whatever official backup he needs. Morris also supplies a bit of avuncular advice now and then when Matthew extends himself a bit too far out into the dangerous world of crime.

In the past he has also quite unsuccessfully tried to get Matthew into some sort of physical shape. Now he seems to have given up.

Currently, Patricia is the woman in Matthew Hope's life, and although there have been lots of women in Matthew's life in the past, he seems to be having the most serious relationship with her than any woman since his wife. In this novel McBain seems to enjoy playing Patricia and Susan off against one another as they jockey for position at the hospital while waiting for Hope to come out of his coma.

There Was a Little Girl also features a rather large cast of characters, both living and dead, who are developed along with the circus material in the plot. Unlike most of the secondary figures in the Matthew Hope novels, this circus lot is rather strange and includes an alluring female midget, a narcissistic lion tamer, a sexually strange juvenile trapeze artist, and a couple of old-time circus entrepreneurs. McBain weaves the generations together and traces the sins of the parents which are most certainly visited upon their children.



Social Concerns

Evan Hunter, once again writing under the Ed McBain pen name, began a second series in 1978 with the publication of *Goldilocks*. Unlike the 87th Precinct novels the new series was set in Florida and featured a local real estate attorney, Matthew Hope, who gradually converts his practice to criminal law, and as the series has progressed, he has spent more time solving crimes than litigating them. Each title in the series is taken from a fairy tale or nursery rhyme.

The Matthew Hope novels have allowed McBain to branch out in his crime fiction. As he readily admits, Matthew is more upscale than the characters in the 87th Precinct series and the narratives tend to be more graphically violent and sexual. Strange as it may seem McBain has kept the violence and sex fairly muted in the police novels in spite of the urban realism and grittiness of their milieu. The Florida setting figures prominently in these mysteries but it is not as important as the city in the 87th Precinct series.

Unlike John D. MacDonald or Carl Hiaasan, McBain does not push environmental issues very hard, although he does mention the gradual decay of this once Edenic natural world, a motif which everyone who writes about Florida seems to use.

As with his previous series the personal details about Matthew Hope's failed marriage, his daughter and former wife, and his ongoing search for another woman to love, provide leavening to the murder and greed that make up the crime plots. These novels focus more closely and at greater depth on single crimes and criminals. And while there are a couple of private detectives and secretary who work for Hope, there is not the ensemble of characters as in the 87th Precinct.



Techniques

McBain uses the Matthew Hope novels to extend his fictional range, both thematically and stylistically. He has done this with many of his other non-87th Precinct McBain novels as well, but not in such an extended fashion.

The narrative task McBain sets for himself in *There Was a Little Girl* is to construct a story told through the consciousness of a man in a coma. The plot unfolds piecemeal as Matthew mentally wanders back and forth from the past to the present in a kind of literary collage of images, vignettes, and backstories. It is a very interesting literary experiment, and the technique works especially well in this novel, which deals so heavily with the past. The concentration on Matthew's consciousness and mental shifting it goes through allows McBain to run the stories of Matthew's past parallel with the history of the characters he is investigating. Interspersed among Matthew's foggy recollections is the present time story of the investigation into his shooting which Bloom, officially, and Toots Kiley and Warren Chambers, unofficially, are conducting. The narrative shifts McBain achieves make for fascinating reading.

As with his other crime novels, McBain's prose flows smoothly and economically. It is precise in its rendering of the details of place and the nuances of character. As in all of his fiction, McBain/Hunter's writing in this novel proves him once again a consummate professional.

Themes

There do not seem to be any overriding themes, like the decline of the city in the 87th Precinct series, which threads through the Matthew Hope books. More of the focus is on the personal desires and human failures of a few characters set against the background of the palmy Florida landscape.

With the tighter focus, however, McBain is able to probe more fully the psychology of his characters and to push more heavily on motivation. Also, he is able to explore more fully such things as family connections and local history and the interconnection between the two.

There Was a Little Girl begins with Hope lying in a coma as a result of being shot by someone who had set up an appointment with him in connection with a real estate deal Matthew is working on for a small local circus. As he is examining the particulars of the transaction, he uncovers the mysterious death of a circus performer which has wide-ranging ramifications, possibly even for the deal he is about to close.

The effects of the past on the present quickly take hold of the narrative and Hope's curiosity leads him into a major investigation which has far-ranging consequences. While he lies in the hospital, he thinks about the case he has been pursuing but also about his life, his divorce and relationship with his former wife, and his daughter. It becomes a very reflective novel, one in which Matthew takes stock of his life and examines the successes and failures of his career, thus raising all sorts of issues surrounding marriage, commitment, family, and relationships between the sexes.

Before the story is finished, the reader learns that Matthew has uncovered all manner of sexual perversions, child abuse, drug trafficking, and blackmail.

The novel provides a cornucopia of crimes within a very constricted stylistic framework.

Key Questions

The Matthew Hope series provides an opportunity for discussion as both individual titles and as a group. Since McBain always writes about topical issues, there is plenty to talk about in his books. Especially relevant are various environmental issues as well as the personal concerns faced by his protagonist.

1. In what ways are the Matthew Hope books the same and different from McBain's other works? Compare and contrast such issues as environment, characters, and style.
2. How does this novel transcend the conventions of the mystery genre? In what ways is *There Was a Little Girl* more like a conventional contemporary novel?
3. Notice how cleverly McBain works the title into the story as more than merely suggestive of the nursery rhyme from which it was taken. Is there a connection of fairy tale and myth to the narrative of the novel?
4. What social issues are raised by the novel? How are they raised and what questions arise from their presence?
5. Discuss the literary style, its mixture of effects, and the ways the style shapes our reading of the story.
6. How does McBain use the circus grotesques to shape the story he is telling? How does the novel relate them to those outside the circus world?
7. What is the importance of "the past" to this novel? McBain does much to link together the actions from the past with the events of the present.

How does all of this work to develop the story?

8. Why did McBain make Matthew Hope, initially at least, a real estate lawyer? What narrative possibilities does that give him?
9. The reading group might look at another one or two of the Matthew Hope series and do some comparative readings with this one. Is the series changing over time? Does the group notice any patterns to the novels?
10. Think about how this novel, although legitimately within the crime genre, plays with the conventions of the "murder mystery," narrowly defined, and without breaking the boundaries expands them.

Literary Precedents

There are echoes of many other crime writers in the Matthew Hope books. Especially in this novel, one gets a taste of the family saga as history which Ross Macdonald perfected in his California-based novels of the 1950s with Lew Archer. No one can write crime novels about Florida without calling to mind the long-running series by John D. MacDonald or the current series of books by the Miami-based journalist Carl Hiaasen. Matthew Hope's position as the reluctant lawyer/sleuth also brings to mind William Tapply's Boston lawyer Brady Coyne.

The idea of a professional in one field straying over into the business of solving crimes has a long history, and the problems inherent in such a cross-over plague Matthew in many of the same ways they have plagued protagonists in other crime series.

However, this McBain series is not derivative. He has fashioned a world and a set of characters which owe more to his own previous novels than to any other writer working in the genre.

Related Titles

Since *There Was a Little Girl* is part of a series, the most clearly related titles are also part of the series and the ongoing story of Matthew Hope and his adventures. While each novel can be read separately there is a gradual unfolding of his life in the collective set. Like the 87th Precinct novels, this is a timeless world but one in which both the characters and the details of the locale and its history do change episode by episode.

In the current novel Matthew is left in his coma at the story's end. As with any good serial the reader is left hanging, not knowing his fate. This is complicated further by the presence of both Patricia and Susan and by Matthew's memories about the two women. Will he try to get back together with his former wife or commit to his current female friend? Tune in tomorrow.

The Matthew Hope series comprises: *Goldilocks*, 1978; *Rumpelstiltskin*, 1981; *Beauty and the Beast*, 1982; *Jack and the Beanstalk*, 1984; *Snow White and Rose Red*, 1985; *Cinderella*, 1986; *Puss in Boots*, 1987; *The House That Jack Built*, 1988; *Three Blind Mice*, 1990; *Mary, Mary*, 1993; *There Was a Little Girl*, 1994.



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