

Tight White Collar Short Guide

Tight White Collar by Grace Metalious

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Characters

Grace Metalious's characters usually develop along fairly predictable lines, and *Tight White Collar* offers few surprises, unlike those from *No Adam in Eden* (1963; see separate entry). Chris Pappas is virile and attracts Lisa, his wife, because of his animal sexuality. Nathaniel Cooper is gentle and patient and long suffering when his wife Margery, a displaced Southerner, sacrifices her life to their mongoloid daughter. Anthony, a distant Cooper relative, returns to his ancestral house dying of some mysterious disease. He is an artist figure but one much jaded and warped by his experience outside of Cooper's Mills among the sophisticates of New York. As in *Peyton Place* (1956; see separate entry), there is a male homosexual in *Tight White Collar*, the local music teacher, who this time commits suicide rather than admit his sexual preferences and risk exposure to the ridicule of the town.

There is also the wise doctor, the snooty woman who has risen above her station through marriage and who gets her comeuppance, and a confidante of the central female character. Although many of the figures of Metalious's fiction recur, they are not merely repetitions of previous characters however much they may resemble figures out of *Peyton Place* books. The author has changed their configurations, recombining character traits and values so that the meaning her figures carry change in this book.

Social Concerns

Tight White Collar provides another examination small town life; this time the microcosm is a small mill town in New England. Once again the book was designed to get underneath the tight white collar of respectability behind which people hide and which can choke them until they lose their humanity.

Metaliouis was always concerned with exposing hypocrisy; this time, however, her interests were less sexual and more economic and social.

As with all small, single-industry towns, Cooper's Mills is dominated by the few families who own the mills. The social hierarchy seems more rigid than in Peyton Place and the town more unforgiving. The focus is also much more on her male characters than in Peyton Place, examining their drinking habits, their jobs, their sexual preferences, and their relationships to their mothers. The novel, although better than Return to Peyton Place, is thinner and less comprehensive than Peyton Place.

Techniques

As with the Peyton Place books, Metalious uses flashbacks or capsule histories to develop her characters and to move the story along. Unlike her previous novels, however, there is very little plot line on which to hang these minibiographies. They become the story itself. It is an interesting idea and allows the past to become an increasingly important theme in the novel. The flashbacks create a drifting feeling as the reader fades back and forth between past and present. It also allows the reader to clearly see the connections between past and present and to understand the hold the past has on the everyday lives of the characters.

Themes

As with all of her novels the question of the place of women forms one of the central motifs of *White Collar* but with one major difference; there is no Allison MacKenzie, no strong female character who can escape her lot in life through her talent, ambition, and sense of purpose. The central female character, Lisa Pappas, remains trapped within her marriage and family and community; hemmed in on all sides by social pressure and economic necessity. The idea of entrapment is further developed in the other female characters. It is a far less hopeful novel than either of the *Peyton Place* volumes.

The theme of male dominance also shifts slightly in this novel. The males, as before, tend to control, some sexually, some economically. Here, too, the males dominate but the most positive male figure Nathaniel Cooper, scion of the mill-owning Coopers, does not dominate, as does Mike Rossi, through his sexual prowess but rather through his gentleness and understanding. The men who control sexually, Anthony Cooper and Chris Pappas, turn out to be negative figures, as they unknowingly conspire to control Lisa through their sexual manipulation.

Finally there is the question of economic exploitation which was only hinted at in the *Peyton Place* books but here is brought much more to the surface.

The characters seem more vulnerable to the pressures of money and much more easily swayed by economic considerations; partly because of the presence of the mills and their overwhelming economic importance but also because the characters in *Tight White Collar* appear more motivated by material considerations, more in need of goods to give their lives meaning in absence of anything else of substance. In this way this novel is far more tragic than its predecessors.

Adaptations

Although *Peyton Place* and *Return to Peyton Place* proved to be highly successful film projects and later television properties as well, *Tight White Collar* never achieved the prominence of the first two books and therefore failed to make it to the screen.



Key Questions

1. Like Metalious's other novels, *Tight White Collar* attacks conventional notions of the "American Dream." How and why does it do so?
2. Depictions of gender, especially of women, forms a central place in this novel. How are women portrayed and what does that portrayal tell us about the place of women in this culture?
3. Again, the small town atmosphere with its almost suffocating closeness permeates the novel. What is the fiction saying about the small town?
4. How does the community react to the evasions of conventional behavior by the various characters in the novel?
5. Although quite common today, the presence of a gay character, the music teacher David Strong, in *Tight White Collar* places this novel among the earliest to openly deal with this subject. How is David portrayed?
6. The very title of the novel, a tight white collar suggests a class struggle with those who wear a blue collar. What are the class issues raised by this book?
7. How does the locale help to shape and direct the narrative of this fiction?
8. What is the position of the family, marriage, children in this book, and how does it differ from others you have read?
9. What effect does the lack of explicit sex in this book have when compared with *Peyton Place*?
10. In what ways are the characters, an industrialist, an ethnic type from the wrong sides of the tracks, different and yet the same as other character types from the other novels by Metalious?

Literary Precedents

Tight White Collar, like Peyton Place before it, is in many ways a New England novel reminiscent of other small town novels set in rural northeastern communities. Since one of its primary elements is a mill, it also reminds us that there was a rich tradition in literature written by women primarily for women which focused on the plight of the poor mill workers. This novel can also fit into the traditions of the socially conscious fiction of the late nineteenth century which was designed to remedy social conditions in the mills. Many of the elements in these novels can be found in Metalious's book as well. Female mill workers who are sexually preyed upon by unscrupulous mill owners and male workers, the lack of opportunity for advancement, and the presence of immigrant labor are all present in this twentieth-century version of the mill tract.

Related Titles

Again, as a small-town expose, *Tight White Collar* can be included in the ongoing traditions of the debunking of rural and village life which has formed such an enduring part of contemporary American literature. Given the strong mythology surrounding this way of life and its central position in the formation of what it means to be American, such attacks seem especially crucial in the redefinition of our national character. All of Metalious's novels can be seen as an assault on conventional values and attitudes which is one of the main reasons for her success. The period of rapid social change which developed after the Second World War produced a number of writers bent on re-examining society. The beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, as well as Afro-American authors James Baldwin, and the rediscovery of earlier writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, did much to call into question many of the racial and gender positions in the post-war world. Metalious must be included in this company even if only because her books had such a wide readership.

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