

Tough Guys Don't Dance Short Guide

Tough Guys Don't Dance by Norman Mailer

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Characters

Tough Guys Don't Dance is narrated in the first person by Tim Madden. The use of this voice is an effective way for Mailer to pursue the theme of identity and for Madden to discover what actually happened and what he is capable of as a man. It is Madden's quest to act honorably and courageously that is most important. His role model is his father, a stoical Irishman who fought hard for what he believed. His nemesis is his wife, a hard but beautiful blonde, who has tried to use him in pursuit of wealth and power.

The characters relate to each other as in a medieval romance, and Madden even refers to his wife as "my long lost medieval lady." Lareine, after all, means "the queen," and as in the Arthurian legend, Madden discovers she has had another lover, Deputy Police Chief Alvin Luther Regency, a powerfully-built, maniacal rival. Complicating matters further for Madden is the lurking presence of his former schoolmate, Meeks Wardly Hilby III, who was also once married to Patty Lareine.

Clearly the underdog, and the one character who doubts both his probity and his sanity, Madden is meant to engage the reader's sympathies. He comes from immigrant stock, is a writer, and naturally the one to solve the mystery that threatens to engulf him. If Madden can make sense of the two murders, he can also begin to put his life back together — including his failed relationship with Madeleine Falco, his witty, tough counterpart who left him when he took up with Patty Lareine and who now finds herself mired in a bad marriage to the dangerous Regency.



Social Concerns/Themes

most of Mailer's writings, both fiction and nonfiction, he has been concerned with the role of violence in American life. In his seminal essay, "The White Negro" (1957), he contrasted individual violence to the collective violence of the state. To Mailer, the state was capable of inflicting much more damage on individuals than individuals could inflict on themselves. In fact, for Mailer, an individual act of violence might even be a defensible rebellion against the repressive nature of society. Consequently, he has tended to create fictional heroes, such as Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream* (1965), who renew themselves through violence. In *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer reverses the usual order of things in his fiction. The novel begins with its hero, Tim Madden, wondering whether the severed head he discovers in his marijuana hideaway is the gory result of a drunken evening's debauchery which turned violent. Waking up with no memory of the night before, Madden fears he has given way to the wild impulses stimulated by his estranged wife, Patty Lareine. The violent side of himself sickens Madden. In order to make himself whole again, he sets out to discover what part he played not only in his wife's death but in the decapitation of another woman who resembled her and whom Madden met on the night that has been expunged from his memory.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Mailer has clearly taken the mystery story as the model for his novel. It is his only work of fiction in which suspense plays a key part and the perpetrator of a crime must be discovered through detective work. As in a traditional mystery, each chapter thickens the atmosphere of ambiguity and at the same time provides several clues that hint at a solution to the crimes. The reader is faced with several questions: Did the same person kill both women?

What was Madden's role in these murders? What exactly is Regency's interest in the case? Several vital facts are withheld from both Madden and the reader until late in the novel — such as Regency's affair with Patty Lareine and his marriage to Madden's former flame, Madeleine Falco.

Mailer departs from the traditional constraints of the murder mystery in his narrator's digressions into character analysis and metaphysical speculation.

Madden believes, for example, that people live with two opposing souls, which make them capable of great good and great evil. The universe itself, in his opinion, is defined by a struggle between God and the Devil, and each human being, therefore, is a part of that conflict. This is why he can be his own suspect. Unlike the traditional mystery story, the detective in this case contemplates the possibility that he himself has committed the crime.

Adaptations

Mailer directed the 1987 film adaptation of the novel, which starred Ryan O'Neal and Isabella Rosselini. In the novel, Patty Lareine never actually appears; instead, she comes alive in Madden's sorrow over her departure and death. Since Mailer could not rely on a narrative voice in his screen adaptation, he introduced Lareine as a character. Initially, Mailer's plan was to rely only on dramatized action in the film, but in the end he was forced to use some voice-over narration to clarify Madden's point of view and certain plot elements. Most reviews of the film were negative, citing an uneven tone and unduly complicated plot. Reviewers wondered whether Mailer was intentionally parodying himself or taking himself too seriously.

They also panned his direction of the film, pointing to a lack of cinematic rhythm, and faulted his writing, finding some of his more foreboding lines ludicrous.

Related Titles

Tough Guys Don't Dance is a provocative variation of Mailer's earlier novels.

Like Mikey Lovett in *Barbary Shore* (1951), Madden is an amnesiac trying to reconstruct his life and to remember an important event. Like Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream* (1965), Madden is beset by an ambivalent relationship with his wife. Both are wealthy women who dominate their men; both are women who express Mailer's concern with the fragility of the masculine ego. The women seem secure in their identities whereas the men struggle to find and maintain an identity, lacking the biological tie to life that makes women superior to men in this respect.

Mailer has made this point in many interviews and in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), suggesting there is a willed, almost contrived quality to the male identity.



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