

Upon Some Midnights Clear Short Guide

Upon Some Midnights Clear by Carl Kosak

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Upon Some Midnights Clear Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

All of Constantine's characters are realistically presented, and nearly all may be related to the theme of authority. Readers learn something about the characters Balzic deals with through his reflections, but characters are primarily revealed, as in drama, through their speech and actions.

The characters may be divided between those who recur throughout the series, and those who are unique to a particular book. The latter group consists mainly of those essential to the plot, but a few minor characters are introduced for thematic reasons.

Of course, the central character in all the books, and a major source of their appeal, is the Serbian-Italian police chief, Mario Balzic. As with any effective series, part of the reader's motivation to follow the whole series is interest in following the development of the protagonist. In *Upon Some Midnights Clear* two particular aspects of Balzic's character are introduced. One is his friendship with the newspaper editor Tom Murray, which in turn, as they are both veterans of World War II, leads to a revelation of the chief's feelings about his war service, and relates to the subplot of the trouble that the police have with some Vietnam veterans. The other bit of Balzic's background especially worth noticing is his memory of failing high school chemistry because of the teacher's misuse of authority.

Along with Balzic himself, each book includes something about his family, co-workers, and friends. His wife, Ruth, his two daughters, and his mother, who lives with them, provide a constant test of Balzic's struggle to be responsible in his actions as a husband, father and son. In his relations with the policemen working for him, readers see another side of his use of responsibility and authority; sometimes he is arbitrary or forced to be harsh, most often he is manipulative yet understanding.

But the most interesting characterization, apart from Balzic himself, is that of three of his associates: the priest, Father Marrazo; the syndicate leader and tavern owner, Dom Muscotti; and the Greek lawyer, Mo Valcanas. These three, each representing a different institution of authority, rather than being mere instruments of institutional power, are able to "work within the system." The bar owner is able to keep crime under reasonable control, and the priest and the lawyer are able to express their maverick humanity. *Upon Some Midnights Clear* mentions Father Marrazo only in passing, but Balzic learns important information while drinking with Muscotti and Valcanas.

The cynical, philosophical attorney, drinking heavily as usual, is important to the kind of poetic justice obtained in the book's denouement.

As for the characters unique to this particular book, representatives of life's losers are central. Mr. and Mrs. Garbin, contrasted in their response to their poverty, are especially well presented, through both the details of their home, and their speech. One should also notice how Constantine presents some characters who have no direct relationship to the plot, such as the old lady who irrationally assaults Balzic near the Garbins' house.

It is a measure of Constantine's skill in characterization that readers do not resent her seemingly pointless appearance in the story, and actually her indirect contribution to the theme, setting, and especially the tone of the book makes her not so pointless after all.

Social Concerns

Constantine's central thematic concern is the use and misuse of authority. The dramatization of this concern produces books with a significant, although seldom obtrusive, social message. As his books are rooted in the contemporary reality of their settings, the conflicts — of class, race, generations, politics and family — of that reality inevitably expose serious social issues. As Constantine's protagonist, Mario Balzic, attempts to use his own authority as police chief, he is constrained by a wide range of institutions, each embodying its own, frequently conflicting, authority. Balzic must deal with such forces as the church, family ties, and ethnic loyalties. However, these institutions are made up of people, and it is Balzic's ability to understand the very real people he deals with, and, using that understanding, to manipulate them (especially through his effective use of language) that makes possible his exercise of his own limited authority. He makes mistakes, but he solves his cases and does his job. As with the best of "serious" fiction, theme, social concerns, plot and character are thus interconnected, and in the microcosm of a particular environment (here, Rocksburg, Pennsylvania) one sees not only the microcosm of a larger society, but ultimately the author's views of human nature.

Although all of the Balzic novels proceed from the same thematic base and treat similar social concerns, each varies in the emphasis given particular issues. In the most recent, *Upon Some Midnights Clear*, the main plot line involves the misuse of charitable funds, but this is intertwined with the issues of racism, and the power and corruption of the press. Additionally, Constantine touches, secondarily, upon a wide range of social issues: problems of Vietnam veterans, municipal politics, the power of doctors and nurses, and "rust belt" unemployment. Constantine's sympathetic protagonist, Mario Balzic, faces these issues with a general attitude that could be described as "pragmatic liberalism," but just as he has little time for either introspective generalization or preaching, so too does the reader feel no strong sense of the didactic. Maintaining, perhaps, vestiges of the attitude that he learned as a marine in combat in World War II — that his purpose is to survive, "not to reason why" — Balzic takes on life as it confronts him, from the petty-minded martinet of a supervising nurse who temporarily interferes with his work when she misuses her authority, to the young doctor, a former Vietnam medic, with whom Balzic quickly establishes rapport.

Ultimately, the balance of Constantine's presentation of the force of institutions and authority makes his message the more effective. In this book, set at Christmas time, that message may be seen to be, in its own offbeat way, "on earth peace, good will toward men." Constantine seems to be telling readers that as long as there are men of good will such as Mario Balzic, at least some peace may be obtained.



Techniques

A key element in Constantine's technical effectiveness, especially noticeable in *Upon Some Midnights Clear*, is the interweaving of all the aspects of the story. As the novel progresses, the various strands of the plot become interconnected (although without any neat completeness that would seem too artificial); superficial layers are removed as character is revealed; leitmotifs, such as Balzic's going to Muscotti's bar, recur, and dominant themes help establish a certain unity. It is worth remarking that Constantine does not divide his seamless web of life into chapters, but the reader is not overwhelmed by the story's realistically avoiding obtrusive patterns. The work hangs together both through its being centered on Balzic's point of view, and through the use of an essentially straightforward chronology, with fairly minimal use of flashbacks.

As an example of the unifying effect of theme in *Upon Some Midnights Clear*, consider a key passage introduced by Balzic's having an almost Proustian remembrance of a thing past. He imagines an odor that takes him back to a high school chemistry class, where the teacher made fun of Mario's reaction to the smell of an acid. Even though he hurt himself more than the teacher, he defended himself by refusing "to learn what could have been taught because he had no other defense against the way a stink had been presented to him." "No other defense" is a key phrase in Constantine's work. Many of the victims and victimizers in the story — Mrs. Garbin, Billy Lum, Murlorsky — act out of a sense of "no other defense." Balzic, at least, has learned from the experience; he does not misuse authority as did the teacher; he does not force people into destructive defenses.

If structure is the most distinguishing technical aspect of Constantine's writing, two others deserve mention: his descriptions of setting and his dialogue. When, for example, Balzic goes to visit Mr. Garbin, readers are first given a description of the neighborhood, "Norwood Hill," that through a series of specific images relates a vivid sense of both the physical and social topography of the area in about one page. Subsequently, a few well-chosen descriptive details, such as two aluminum chairs with chipped paint on the porch and couch cushions sprung out of shape, portray the narrow limits of Garbin's world.

Constantine's use of dialogue is the most obvious of his effective and distinguishing techniques. The natural rhythms of working-class male speech, with its pauses and interruptions, its unaffected profanity, and the variations produced by differences in ethnic backgrounds, have seldom been so truly presented. Only occasionally does Constantine's ear slip a bit, especially with black dialect, as with some of the speeches of Billy Lum. Even here, however, his ability to render dialects surpasses that of most "serious" white novelists, such as John Updike. In sum, perhaps the best comment on Constantine's technique, and certainly a compliment to any realistic novelist, is that his technique is almost never obtrusive.

Literary Precedents

Because of the emphasis which *Upon Some Midnights Clear* and other works in the Balzac series place upon social setting, they may be seen to emerge from the tradition of literary naturalism. One critic calls an earlier Balzac story, *The Blank Page* (1974), "naturalism in the American mode" and refers to Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. It is true that, as in many naturalist novels, characters in the Balzac series may often be seen as victims of their environment. Mrs. Garbin, the center of the charity scam in *Upon Some Midnights Clear*, and her husband, both elderly and poor, are certainly such "victims." In other Balzac characters one could find some parallels with Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Theodore Dreiser's *Clyde Griffiths*, James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, or even some of Sherwood Anderson's "grotesques."

However, a comparison of Constantine and naturalists should not be pushed too far. Not only does Constantine's humor differentiate him from a typical naturalist writer, so too does the fact that many of his characters, especially those present throughout the series (most notably Balzac himself) are able to avoid being defeated by the difficulties of their milieu. Their free will is certainly constrained, but it is operative, and Constantine's Balzac books are really more in the tradition of Balzac's *Human Comedy* than in Zola's roman experimental.

Constantine's connection to realist/naturalist writing is one which he shares with various other mystery writers. Giving the detailed activities of a professional law enforcement officer, Constantine's books fit in the general category of the police procedural.

While Balzac does not plod along as do some of the protagonists in this type of book, such as Inspector French of *Freeman Wills Croft*, neither is he as freewheeling as some of the others, such as Carella in Ed McBain's *87th Precinct* series. The type of European police procedural written by authors such as Simenon and Freeling provides a kind of precedent for Constantine, in having pragmatic yet sensitive police heroes, and cases solved only through an understanding of the complex web of the past that leads to present violence.

However, there is a difference in emphasis; the European "procedural" typically focuses on psychology. Constantine, while certainly sensitive to abnormal psychology, is more interested in relating the psychological to the sociological.

It is through noticing this sociological quality that one best may find Constantine's closest precedents. Those mystery writers who describe a particular limited environment, and relate the solution of a case to the protagonist's understanding of the people formed by that environment may be the most similar to Constantine. For example, as Robin W. Winks points out, Harry Kemelman's *Rabbi Small* series, firmly set in the town of Barnard's Crossing, shares something of Constantine's "gift for colloquial sociology." Yet *Barnard's Crossing* is as dissimilar from *Rocksburg* as *David Small* is unlike *Mario Balzac*. The result of Constantine's unique blend of varied precedents is a strongly individual work.



Related Titles

The Rocksburg Railroad Murders (1972), Constantine's first book, is an effective start to the Balzic series and establishes many of the techniques that he continues to employ. The traffic problem, caused by narrow old streets, which begins the novel is symbolic of what occurs throughout the series: Balzic is constrained by old, established difficulties in his environment, but eventually the traffic flows, and the problem is solved. Given the significance of dialogue and the effect of the past upon the present throughout the series, it is interesting to notice that the solution hinges on a turn of phrase, and that the book ends with a memory of grade school. However, in this novel some of Constantine's techniques are not yet polished. Compared to later books, there is less effective description of setting, Balzic's relationship with his family seems more extraneous, and the author's latent tendency to preach to the reader is under less control, especially in the conversations with Father Marrazo.

Considered by Constantine to be one of his better efforts, *The Man Who Liked to Look at Himself* (1973) confronts a nasty aspect of sexual experience.

Those who decry the prevalence of "sex and violence" in contemporary culture often seem to overlook how much of classical literature is based on the connection between the two. A work's worth cannot be judged by the presence or absence of sex and violence per se, but rather how these elements of human experience are treated. Obviously, sex and violence frequently appear in crime fiction; Constantine's books never sidestep this material.

However, in this work, as in his other novels, there is certainly nothing titillating or pornographic in his picture of sexual drives; the tone is much closer to Greek tragedy than Harold Robbins.

In addition to its subject matter, *The Man Who Liked to Look at Himself* is interesting in its relation to the series as a whole for its showing Balzic, as police chief, in his role as an administrator, for its relatively unified plot, and for the high proportion of dialogue to description.

The Blank Page focuses on a different segment of the Rocksburg community, the students and faculty of the local college. It is clear that the author, however well he knows somewhat shady working class bars, also understands the groves of academe, at least in their less luxuriant foliage. Social satire, always at least in the background of the novels, is used here to expose the misuse of academic authority. *The Blank Page* is one of the best in the series, especially for its moving portrayal of the pathetic victim, Janet Pisula. Compared to the other novels, a stronger emphasis on "whodunit" is present.

Additionally, readers continue to learn more about Balzic's background, including the fact that his father was a union militant, and see a more extensive characterization of Father Marrazo.



Further developed from his appearance in *The Blank Page*, Father Marrazo becomes a well-rounded figure in *A Fix Like This* (1975); he is no longer just a foil to Balzic or a chorus character.

Also, the humor that is present throughout the series is most fully developed in this fourth novel. Constantine has a certain sense of "comic relief" that operates effectively throughout his fairly grim mysteries; in *A Fix Like This* the drunkenly philosophical Iron City Steve who frequents Muscotti's bar is skillfully and humorously presented. Along with the expansion of characterization and tone, *A Fix Like This* also features an increased subtlety as the plot hinges on and reveals complexities of personal relations.

When Constantine resumed publication after a seven-year hiatus, he moved further in plotting from the traditional whodunit. *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes* (1982) only becomes a murder mystery at its end, when both the murder and the solution emerge. Before this, the book's action involves Balzic's problems with union negotiations, and a slow-paced search for a missing husband. The story is thematically unified around the issue of different generations, and in the course of his work Balzic not only teaches the young patrolman Petrolac, but also comes to terms with the memories of his own father. There is a good mixture of two of Constantine's strongest techniques — physical description and dialogue. And although Balzic does not confer in this book with either Marrazo or Valcanas, his thoughts are revealed to readers, in such interesting passages as when, watching a baseball game on television, Mario thinks of the authority of umpires and the "instant Justice" of baseball. The increased ability to present Balzic's introspection is one indication of the progress Constantine made in his literary craftsmanship during the ten years since his first book.

In *Always a Body to Trade* (1983) Constantine develops his plotting in two ways which continue in his most recent work. He introduces what seem to be different plot lines, weaving them together, for the most part, as the story unfolds. Also, at the end of the book, justice is served, but in a roughly poetic way rather than in strict accord with the legal system. While never becoming a vigilante with a badge, Balzic develops his talent to manipulate and bypass the constraints of establishment authority and relies as much on his experienced understanding of human nature as he does on the letter of the law. His problems with authority are compounded, not only by conflict with other law enforcement agencies, but also by having to work under a new mayor. Mayor Strohm, a quite naive "liberal," is a valuable addition to the series; he not only provides humor but also reinforces the thematic point, embodied in Balzic's approach to his job, that good intentions must be implemented through knowledgeable pragmatism.

In addition to introducing the mayor, Constantine depicts another dimension of the Rocksburg scene — the black community. Seemingly unafraid of being accused of racial stereotyping, Constantine demonstrates a tough-minded but not unsympathetic view of the "black experience." He is sometimes inspired in his rendering of aspects of Black English, but seems on less secure ground than in his presentation of the nuances of white ethnic backgrounds.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994