We'll Meet Again Short Guide

We'll Meet Again by Mary Higgins Clark

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Characters

Clark's heroine, Molly Carpenter Lasch, is a tall, slender, twenty-six-year-old, noted for her regal beauty, dark blond hair, and long eyelashes. To all appearances, she has been the dream wife, working for Vogue and bringing class, wealth, and beauty to her marriage, but her husband's murder shatters this image. In the media, she becomes an emblem of the very rich who think themselves above the law, and even those nearest to her are convinced of her guilt. Her husband's skull has been smashed in with a heavy bronze sculpture, and the court finds Molly guilty of his murder. Shy and tentative to begin with, Molly cannot defend herself because she has closed her mind on those moments and has thus left herself vulnerable to the envious, who assume her amnesia is a ploy. Nonetheless, despite the lethargy and passivity that result from her psychological state, at her core she feels innocent and is committed, even at the cost of her own life, to finding out the truth. The moment she walks out the prison door she sets herself up as a decoy, announcing her intentions in a press conference and thereby awakening the fears of the real killer and the ire of those convinced of her guilt.

Because Molly cannot effectively defend herself, she needs an active and honest stand-in. At first, readers expect her lawyer, Philip Matthews, to serve that role, but despite his growing attachment to her, he simply wants Molly to put the past behind her and get on with her life. Thus, Fran, her former schoolmate and now a keen reporter, becomes Molly's righteous champion and Clark's second heroine. When the suicide of Fran's father made Fran an outcast at school, Molly stood by her and publicly made Fran her friend. Now Fran, though initially skeptical, stands by Molly. By asking questions and conducting interviews, she discovers what the police should have learned long before. Fran is sensitive about her father and therefore can appreciate Molly's sensitivity, but she is a competent, intelligent, driven reporter with an instinct for detecting lies.

The male villains are of a type. Peter Black's friendly demeanor hides a large ego and a mean streak. He craves fine cuisine and an expensive lifestyle—no matter the cost to others—but chooses suicide over confession when his activities become public knowledge. The dead Gary Lasch was equally amoral, carrying on numerous affairs—including one with Jenna Whitehall— and exploiting others to further his own ambition. Behind both these shallow men is Calvin Whitehall, a self-made evil genius with a will to power. Clark describes him as formidable, with broad shoulders, a broad chest, cold blue eyes, and heavy features. In his midforties, he has left his hardscrabble origins far behind, getting an MBA at age twenty-four, taking control of a struggling commuter company at age thirty, and playing cat-and-mouse in the business world while climbing the social ladder. Part of that climb was his marriage to Jenna, a woman of good family but limited means.

They are indeed a matched pair, despite Molly's innocent interpretation of Jenna.

Cal takes pleasure in toying with people and in always getting what he wants—by whatever means it takes.

Jenna's marriage to Cal should be a clue to readers of her secret, hidden self. In fact, since it was she who first introduced Molly to Gary, one might suspect that she arranged the marriage to further her husband's goals and has been manipulating Molly for her private ends throughout their years of supposed friendship. Molly says of both her husband and Jenna that she trusted them absolutely, yet neither was worthy of trust, and their secret affair was just one of the many ways in which they betrayed her love and friendship.

Social Concerns

New Yorker Mary Higgins Clark has made the mystery/suspense novel an effective purveyor of social questions about women in society. In past novels she has explored family matters—kidnapped children whose lives are threatened by those close to them; a wife's recognition that her husband is a stranger; and, in general, women who discover that their world is not as secure as they thought, that events forgotten from childhood haunt them, and that nothing is as it seems. In We'll Meet Again, the central figure is the wealthy wife of a prominent doctor, a woman seemingly above the reach of the law. She is from Greenwich, Connecticut, a town famous for its privilege, privacy, and aristocratic snobbery. Yet beneath the placid surface of health and wealth lies a malignancy that is killing off patients, and not just the terminally ill or the elderly—a case of medical fraud in which hospitals experiment on patients with dire results.

Clark builds the story of medical fraud slowly, case by case, so that readers do not tie the private tales of woe to the central murder until the novel is well past its midpoint. As some grieving family members attribute the deaths of loved ones to God's will, others blame their HMO, asking why, despite the urgent recommendations of her primary care physician that further tests be done, their mother wasn't sent to a specialist in time to ensure her another twenty years of family life, or why their daughter entered the hospital for a jogging injury and ended up in cardiac arrest, an irreversible coma, and, after six expensive years hooked up to the latest medical equipment, a coffin. The sportswriter Tim Mason's grandmother died at Lasch Hospital only weeks before her dedicated physician died in what was presumed to be a robbery. The special-duty nurse Annamarie Scalli, who had frequently attended to her needs, wept at her death; the memory makes Mason sympathetic to both the hospital and the nurse, but later this death too proves part of a pattern of deaths, all tied to the murder of Dr. Gary Lasch.

One physician, at the end of his career and beyond threats, describes the power that HMOs wield over new young doctors who are deeply in debt, owing as much as $100,000 for their medical education and even more to equip an office and set up a practice. Their financial vulnerability forces them to either work directly for a health maintenance organization or, as the doctor points out, enroll up to 90 percent of their patients in one. With this commitment, they are under the thumb of the HMO, which tells them how many patients to see and sometimes even how long to spend with each patient. Clark's spokesperson points out that some HMOs require doctors to keep a time chart and work a fifty-five-hour week; he suggests nonprofit HMOs run by doctors with their own unions as the answer to such dominance—or even a national health care system. Gus Brandt, executive producer for the NAF Cable Network, calls many HMOs "cockamamie" and asserts that they are going bankrupt right and left and "leaving patients and doctors high and dry." Over and over again in We'll Meet Again new procedures, new medicines, and advanced technological services are arbitrarily denied by the Remington HMO and doctors and patients are left with no recourse except to suffer and die in silence.

However, Clark carries her attack one step further, to expose doctors experimenting on patients and covering up irreversible errors, nurses being blackmailed into silence, and those who would expose malpractice and fraud being murdered. The medical researcher behind a number of Remington HMO deaths, Dr. Adrian Lowe (alias Dr. Logue), believes that experimentation on the old and the poor is perfectly justified for the betterment of all. He argues that the concept of managed care should be redefined to stop fighting the inevitable; that is, an objective authority should make a "scientific decision" to stop patient treatment if, for example, a person has had a third heart attack or is past seventy or experiences transplant failure—without consulting patient or family. Furthermore, he asserts that the handicapped should be unknowing guinea pigs for experiments to further medical knowledge, a practice he has been carrying on with the blessing of the three top officials from the Remington HMO. In particular, he has toyed with a drug to reverse deep comas, but he admits that the drug he had intended to test on an elderly patient was administered by mistake to a young patient and plunged her into a coma. Later he uses the same drug to bring the young woman out of the coma briefly, before the side effects kill her, though his associates pretend that no such inexplicable momentary resuscitation has occurred.

Clark conveys her disgust for such attitudes and practices in part through the eyes of Fran Simmons, a crime reporter who interviews Dr. Lowe. To her question about how he can reconcile the destruction of lives whose quality he deems less than acceptable with his medical oath to preserve life, he replies that most medical authorities share his outlook. Dr. Lowe has instilled this indifference toward life in his students, Dr. Gary Lasch and Dr. Peter Black, and it is an attitude that Cal Whitehall shares. These three are the triumvirate who founded Lasch Hospital and the Remington HMO and whose principles guide its treatment of patients. Cal Whitehall brings to medicine the cutthroat practices of business. He tries to slash outlays to a minimum, increase profits enormously, and sink the competition, and he doesn't care how he increases profitability as long as the increases come. Darwinian principles of the survival and prosperity of the fittest govern his business decisions and affect every doctor, nurse, and patient under his control.

We'll Meet Again also examines the justice system. The heroine, Molly Carpenter Lasch, is convicted on circumstantial evidence, and no one seriously believes that her amnesia is a reaction to trauma. Instead, her memory loss is taken as either a pretense or an unwillingness to deal with guilt.

Clark exposes as faulty the police pattern of suspecting that it was the closest relative who had personal motives to commit a murder that takes place in a home with no clear signs of burglary. In this case the guilt lies behind her husband's respectable facade and the facade of the HMO he cofounded. Yet such institutions are often taken as above reproach; their wealth, the income they bring into the community, and the services they provide shield them from serious scrutiny. Furthermore, the case is partly tried in the newspapers, with the most sensational explanation accepted as fact. Molly Lasch spends five and a half years in prison for a crime she did not commit. She is the victim of a devious murderer, but she is also the victim of society, for the justice system brought her no justice, and as the plot proceeds, it seems highly possible that she may

be unjustly convicted a second time. Clark makes it clear early in the plot that if the police had more carefully examined their strongest witness against her, her housekeeper Edna Barry, they would have discovered her retarded son and her missing key, and as readers learn later, these discoveries would in turn have led to an interview with the son that would inevitably have placed the guilt where it rightfully belonged from the very start. Barry is a mother fighting to protect her son and willing to let her employer take the blame for murder if need be, and the police do not look deep enough to even suspect her motives. Later the police fail to conduct a thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding the death of Annamarie Scalli, latching on to Molly as the easiest suspect when well-conducted interviews would have led to two eyewitnesses attesting to Molly's innocence.

Clark reinforces this argument about the dangers of circumstantial evidence and of preconceptions with the background story of the suicide of Fran Simmons's father. The family went to dinner one night, as if in celebration, and then the father went to his car and put a bullet through his head. The subsequent charges against him of embezzlement so embarrassed Fran's mother that she fled with Fran to California. Just as everyone (even the lawyer who is in love with her) is convinced that Molly Lasch killed her husband, at that same time everyone was convinced that Fran's father stole $400,000 from the Greenwich Library Building Fund drive. Now, eighteen years later, Fran is back, moving through her old haunts, confronting people who remember her father's transgressions, and beginning to question old assumptions. Her father, postmortem, was accused of stealing in order to gamble on the stock market, but the money never showed up; no one stepped forward to admit having it. Eventually Fran's investigation of Molly's case dovetails with the events that ruined her father's reputation and she discovers related villains behind both frame-ups. Her father had intentionally been given a hot tip on the stock market and encouraged to "borrow" from the fund, make a quick killing on the market, and then repay it, but the tip came from the real thief and his associate, who helped themselves to the much larger amount and left Fran's father as the fall guy, with no way to prove his innocence. That money then became the investment outlay to establish the hospital and HMO. Although the courts were not involved in this pronouncement of guilt, the community at large functioned in exactly the same way as the courts— judging superficially on the basis of hearsay and innuendo, with no in-depth investigation to track the missing funds.

Related to the heroine's experiences in the court system is Clark's interest in class conflicts. Her argument is that the very rich, because of their status, are the targets of jealousy and class hatred. Assistant State Attorney Tom Serrazzano, convinced of Molly's guilt in two murders and angry that her wealth shielded her from execution and brought her an early release in a "sweetheart" deal, sees the Scalli case as "openand-shut" and vows there will be no pleabargain the second time around. He makes up his mind before examining the evidence and therefore does not search hard for wit nesses who might reveal other possibilities.

Cal Whitehall is also afflicted by class hatreds. From a poor family himself, he was a scholarship boy who worked hard to escape his roots. The result is contempt for those around him who were born into money and who do not appreciate his struggle to get to

the top. This is one reason for his disdain for Molly Lasch: she has always been a part of the moneyed country club set. What he had to fight for came to her easily, by right of birth, from rich, respected parents, part of Greenwich's old society.

Even a local waitress with her eye on publicity testifies against Molly out of the wish to pull down those above her in class and education.

Thus, Clark's attack on social injustice is twofold: she explores the dehumanization of both the American medical system and a justice system undermined by preconceptions and class distinctions. Clark distrusts institutions and finds them as weak as their weakest unit—fallible human beings, sometimes greedy, arrogant, and jealous, corrupting processes behind the scenes.

Techniques

Clark draws on a Shakespearean stage strategy, the use of foils, characters who reflect facets of the same theme in different ways. For example, Fran Simmons is a foil to Molly Lasch. Fran's knowledge of Molly's youth and Molly's knowledge of Fran's enable them to provide readers with positive information about each other. Both have experienced trauma, Molly in the present, Fran in the past. Molly has been falsely accused and suffered the consequences; Fran's father has been, to some degree, falsely accused, and he and his family have suffered the consequences. The two women are both vulnerable in many ways yet strong in others, particularly in their sense of right.

Both have experienced the negative effects of rumor and gossip and the notoriety of being associated with a crime. Molly sees Jenna with all the blindness of a longtime friend, but Fran, though also a former school chum of both women, can see Jenna more cynically and realistically. The situation of one sheds light on the situation of the other.

Where Fran and Molly are shy, Jenna is outgoing, gregarious, and, in some ways, pushy. Molly seems to have no ambitions except to find the truth; Fran is careeroriented and determined to excel, but her ambition is tempered by a desire for the truth. Jenna, in contrast, is ambitious for both herself and her husband, and truth plays no part in her outlook on life. The true friendship of Fran (which looks initially false) is played off against the false friendship of Jenna (which seems true until the very end). Likewise, the three men, Gary Lasch, Peter Black, and Calvin Whitehall, are foils to each other, revealing the effects of ambition in different ways. As in Shakespeare, the themes are also explored through different class levels: Lou Knox serves as a working-class foil to Calvin Whitehall, and Edna Barry as a working-class foil to Fran and Molly.

The structure, already discussed to some degree earlier, is also a vital technique for maintaining suspense and involving readers in the plight of the heroine and the social ramifications of her situation. By beginning with the trial and imprisonment, then Molly's vow five and a half years later to find the truth, no matter what it is, Clark captures Molly's point of view. Molly does not remember the crime and must slowly discover what happened. Her memory returns piecemeal—a sound here, a shadow there.

Clark takes readers along on Molly's gradual discovery of the truth and thus does not describe the crime until the revelations at the very end. At the same time, Molly's and Fran's search for the truth leads to new threats: Fran follows the line of inquiry in one direction and ends up almost being blown apart, and Molly muddles on in her own way and is almost murdered because her memories are coming back.

Themes

Clark's social concerns reflect concrete themes: the potential failures and abuses of the HMO medical care system and the justice system. However, her more abstract themes concern what lies behind them.

Clark's recurring theme throughout her canon is the deceptive nature of appearances. In particular, Clark is concerned with questions of trust and betrayal involving those nearest and dearest to her central characters: a seemingly loving spouse who had dark secrets and conducted hidden affairs; childhood friends and parents whose affection has always been taken for granted but who prove unreliable; employers or employees with whom longtime personal and professional ties are broken.

Molly Lasch has experienced all of these breakdowns of trust. Her husband had numerous affairs behind her back but flaunted his relationship with Annamarie Scalli, a nurse at his hospital who became pregnant by him. Molly's statement that she could kill him for such a betrayal comes back to haunt her in testimony after the nurse's death. Later, however, she learns that his betrayals go deeper than extramarital liaisons. He lied about his essential nature, about how he made his money, and about how far he was willing to go to further his ambitions. When Molly is accused of murdering her husband, her parents are among the first to abandon her. They believe her to be guilty, and even after she is released from prison they find excuses not to come when she needs them. Instrumental in Molly's conviction is her plump, sixty-year-old, part-time housekeeper, a woman who had worked for Molly's mother ever since Molly was a little girl and who worked for Molly herself for over four years. The housekeeper tells investigators what she saw, clearly with sympathy, but her fears for her retarded boy, whom she realizes was present at the murder scene, make her withhold details in Molly's favor, details that could have provided the jury with a more sympathetic image of the heroine. Even near the novel's end, her fear that her son committed the murder keeps her from asking him what he saw on the night of the murder, for she would rather have Molly go to jail than betray her child. As it turns out, her son could have transformed the jury's understanding of the crime—if he had only been allowed to speak.

However, the most damning betrayal is that of Jenna Whitehall, who has been Molly's best friend since school days. Jenna married Cal Whitehall, chairman of the board of Lasch Hospital and of the HMO that Gary Lasch and Peter Black founded.

To all appearances, she and her husband are highly supportive of Molly, sticking by her through the trial, her imprisonment, and her homecoming. Molly tells Jenna her secret fears and holds her close to her heart as the person most dear to her. Yet Jenna sticks close because her survival depends on Molly taking the fall for her own acts.

Molly is a tool Jenna manipulates, a pawn she willingly sacrifices in her bid for power, wealth, and a famous husband.

The theme of betrayal extends in myriad directions. Fran Simmons feels betrayed by her father, who in fact was betrayed by people who seemed to be his friends. The nurse whose weeping Tim Mason assumes reflects sympathy for his grandmother is in fact weeping for her own situation—pregnant by a doctor who doesn't love her and caught up in a dangerous conspiracy that has involved her in murder. Lou Knox collects information with which to blackmail his former classmate and employer, Cal Whitehall, while Whitehall sends Knox off to kill Whitehall's former teacher and mentor and schemes to let Knox take the blame for his own murderous acts.

Related to the theme of betrayal is another recurring Clark theme, that of vulnerability. In this novel she focuses on the vulnerability of patients who trust their doctors to diagnose their illnesses correctly, to treat them with the best medical methods available, and to look out for their general welfare; on the vulnerability of a retarded child whose vision of the world is limited; on the vulnerability of an overprotective mother who fears for her child above all else and who protects that child from the outside world at great cost to herself; and on the vulnerability of a beloved daughter and then wife who sees the protective cocoon that had enveloped her life shattered by unbearable realities. Molly Lasch is psychologically unfit to protect herself. The trauma she has suffered and her loss of memory leave her shattered, hopeless, and helpless. She does not even know if she actually killed her husband. She doubts herself and all around her, and several times she comes close to suicide in the face of unbearable accusations and unbearable possibilities. Related are questions about the causes and effects of amnesia. Is Molly Lasch faking amnesia in order to hide the horrible thing she has done? Or has her act of murder so shocked her system that her mind refuses to accept what her body has done?

Or has she been a total innocent, so traumatized by her husband's ghastly murder that she cannot cope with reality and her mind has protected her from her fears by wiping out any memory of the trauma? Fran Simmons extends the question when she wonders whether we all suffer to some degree from what Molly's psychiatrist calls retrospective memory falsification—a rewriting of our history in our minds to fit what we need to think about ourselves and others.

In Clark's novels, the past always haunts the present and must be reinterpreted in the light of new knowledge. Events that once seemed innocent begin to fall into place as part of an ongoing and diabolical strategy, and seemingly minor or unrelated incidents or bits of information suddenly loom large.

We'll Meet Again begins with the aftermath of murder and then returns again and again to the past to examine, piece by piece, what happened and why it happened, who saw what, who was where and when and why, like parts of a jigsaw puzzle that, finally constructed, reveals the true nature of events—the motive, the means, the opportunity, and the doer of the deed. What appears to the public eye to be a clear-cut case of domestic violence—a spoiled rich girl's retaliation for humiliation—proves far more complex: a large-scale cover-up of fraud, multiple murders, medical malpractice, and much, much more. Clark's genius is in weaving disparate and seemingly unrelated strands into a whole that falls neatly and clearly into place at the end and provides

readers with a sudden revelation in which all that has gone before suddenly makes unified sense in a new flash of understanding.

Key Questions

We'll Meet Again cannot be simply dismissed as a light thriller. Mary Higgins Clark combines social concerns with significant modern themes in a tightly interwoven story that turns on character. Her structure is carefully planned so that readers gradually gain the information they need to reconstruct the crime and the motive, but the particulars of the ending still come as a surprise—yet a credible one.

1. We'll Meet Again addresses questions about health care in America, specifically the high expense of private medicine but the lapses in quality care with more cost-efficient HMO care. How does Clark make theoretical and social issues come alive? Is her treatment of the issue fair? Credible? Is she addressing the real problems of all HMOs or the potential abuses of some?

2. Jack Kevorkian has made Americans aware of the right to death in a technological society in which machinery can keep the heart pumping and the lungs breathing even when there is no hope of patients ever regaining these capacities for themselves. Yet friends and relatives hope for miracles. How do Clark's villains exploit family feelings for personal ends?

3. Jenna Whitehall is not what she seems, and what she says to her supposedly best friend Molly has nothing to do with her real goals and her real acts.

Explain with specific examples.

4. What do Fran Simmons and Molly Lasch have in common? How does Clark create sympathy between them? What ultimate irony cements their friendship for the future?

5. Are Clark's villains credible? What does she do to humanize them?

6. What makes Clark's villains so destructive? Are they simply evil? Is it nurture? Environment? Class? Does Clark provide any explanations? Why or why not?

7. What is the significance of the title?

Who is it who will meet again in the story? List possibilities. What are the positive implications of the title? What are the negative possibilities?

8. What events from the first half of the novel suddenly take on new meaning from a fresh perspective in the last sections of the novel?

Literary Precedents

The doctors in early detective fiction were positive figures, men of science and reason who could be relied on for informed analyses of physical properties or applications of logic. Such men were respected associates of detectives, like Dr. Watson in Sir Ar thur Conan Doyle's nineteenth-century Sherlock Holmes stories, or were themselves medical sleuths, like Jacques Futrelle's S. F. X. "The Thinking Machine" Van Dusen (1905-8), R. Austin Freeman's Dr. John Evelyn Thorndyke (1907), or Lawrence G. Blochman's Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee (1952).

Nurses like Mignon G. Eberhardt's Sarah Keate (1930s) and Anne Perry's nineteenthcentury associate of Florence Nightingale, Hester Latterly (1980s to present), eventually became a part of this tradition, and in the 1990s and 2000s women like Patricia Cornwell's Dr. Kay Scarpetta, the chief medical examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia, have joined this illustrious group and novelists have focused more and more on the intellectual puzzles of forensic science.

However, just as Mary Shelley called attention to the arrogance of scientists like Dr. Frankenstein, whose medical science produced monsters, so too modern detective fiction has a solid tradition of medical mysteries in which the doctors themselves are villains. They poison wives and patients, intentionally bungle operations or misdiagnose afflictions, experiment on patients, and kill for body parts. Notable are Kenneth Fearing's The Hospital (1939), P. D. James's Shroud for a Nightingale (1971), set in a hospital, and The Black Tower (1975), set in an isolated nursing home, and most particularly the modern-day medical horror stories of Robin Cook, like Coma (1977), Acceptable Risk (1996), and Brain (1999). Such stories feature the downside of corporate medicine, the tug of high finance that results in not simply benign neglect but active injury.

Clark also writes in the tradition of Pat Flower, Margaret Millar, and Mignon Eberhardt, all of whom focus on vulnerable women who discover they cannot trust the men they love. These authors specialize in women who lead lives separate from the work world of their husbands, who have their worlds turned upside down by murder, and who are vulnerable and seemingly defenseless when family and friends turn against them.

Related Titles

Robin Cook's Coma, in which hospital patients are incubated for their vital organs, sounded like science fiction in 1977, but today such tales are commonplace. Typical is Tess Gerritsen's Harvest (1997), which features a thriving international black market in human hearts, livers, and kidneys. In Michael Palmer's ninth medical suspense novel, The Patient (2000), someone is killing off the world's most gifted neurosurgeons, while in Leonard S. Goldberg's Deadly Practice (1994) a serial killer with a grudge against doctors at a Los Angeles hospital imitates the medical specialty of each of his victims as he kills down hospital halls. Greg Bear's scientific thriller Darwin Radio (1999) features an unexplained series of stillbirths, and in Lincoln Child and Douglas Preston's Mount Dragon (1997) the mystery grows out of a biochemical company involved in secret genetic engineering.

None of these, however, combines the medical horror story with a credible female vulnerability story. Social injustice drives Clark's vulnerable woman stories, lending these suspenseful tales depth, power, and credibility.

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