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Lawrence Block

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LAWRENCE BLOCK

Hollywood films owe much of their sparkle to atmospheric effects, including the lighting, shading, and color lent by character-actors. Their counterparts in the genre of literary gumshoes may be found in a certain breed of character-detectives. Among them, Lawrence Block, a versatile exemplar of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction, has given readers two notable repeat offenders from New York: Matthew Scudder, the ex-cop, and Bernie Rhodenbarr, the cat burglar with scruples. Both have found their way to Hollywood. Block's work is noted especially for its realistic style, fast-paced plots, spare dialog, and flawed protagonists.

A New York native who was born in Buffalo 1938, Block became a freelance writer at the age of eighteen. While attending Antioch College worked as an editor for the Scott Meredith literary agency in New York City and had already established himself as a full-time writer before he graduated in 1959. Block is a member of Mystery Writers of America, has served as president of Private Eye Writers of America (1984), and has won several awards for his work. His marriage to Loretta Ann Kallett in 1960 produced three daughters. Since 1983 he has been married Lynne Wood.

Block's early work includes a series of Evan Tanner adventure novels and two books about Leo Haig, the second-greatest detective in the world. Then in 1976 Block introduced Matthew Scudder, an unlicensed private eye, in his In the Midst of Death (1976). Separated from his wife and children, Scudder is a former

New York City policeman who left the force after being involved in an accident that took a child's life. As the series developed, the brooding sleuth became, in Dick Lochte's words, "more withdrawn, complex, alcoholic, and, oddly, likable." In Eight Million Ways to Die (1982), Scudder, a hollow-legged drinker who is "depressed by the seeming cheapness of life," half-heartedly joins Alcoholics Anonymous while pursuing a particularly vicious killer. In A Ticket to the Boneyard (1990) Scudder nearly falls off the wagon when a demented killer he had sent to prison while on the police force reappears and begins murdering the women in his life.

By contrast, Bernie Rhodenbarr provides a light touch to Block's work. Marilyn Stasio observes that Bernie "inhabits the same mean streets of Manhattan as Matt Scudder [but] has a whimsical sense of humor that shields him from the achy-breaky *Weltschmerz* of his hard-boiled literary sibling." Block, who introduced Bernie in Burglars Can't Be Choosers (1977), describes him as "a professional burglar -- but otherwise a rather pleasant, middle class type . . . whose code is: Live on the west side; steal on the east side." By day the owner of an antiquarian bookshop, Bernie is "the Heifetz of the picklock" by night. Repeatedly slipping back into old habits the "imperfectly reformed" burglar is forced to turn detective each time after being falsely implicated in murder. In The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling (1979), Bernie is hired by a collector to lift a copy of a forgotten anti-Semitic epic poem that Rudyard Kipling had once entrusted to his friend, H. Rider Haggard. During a ten-year hiatus that began

after The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian (1983), Bernie did a star turn on the big screen in the guise of Whoopie Goldberg before returning to the printed page in The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams (1994). In addition to detective fiction, Block has written or collaborated on books about numismatics, writing, eateries, and assorted other topics.

Reviewers appear to have taken both Matt Scudder and Bernie Rhodenbarr into their hearts. Many seem particularly solicitous about Matt, the recovering alcoholic, who must repeatedly face the temptations of the bottle in his line of work. Reviewers tend to use such adjectives as charming, urbane, and affable to describe the bibliophilic Bernie, whose lapses into crime are treated as some kind of personality quirk on the order of kleptomania. Robin Winks, however, dismissed the first Bernie story as "cutesy wise" and wrote of the second that "Block apparently finds him lovable and clever, which is a serious misjudgment of character." By the third outing, Winks showed signs of warming to the character.

Block himself places his work squarely within the genre of detective writing, "hard-boiled" as opposed to "cozy," that matured during Prohibition and the Depression. "In the earliest American hard-boiled fiction, there were heroes who were virtually criminals themselves. Even Sam Spade was absolutely a cold-blooded opportunist." Unlike their genteel British counterparts, American sleuths have always taken the corruption of society for granted. For their part, both Matt Scudder and Bernie Rhodenbarr adhere to a "private" and "somewhat elastic" morality, but "not one that they would impose on others." Block concedes that

Matt is not above "manufacturing evidence or manipulating circumstances to bring about an *approximation* of justice." But it is not evident that he is thought reprehensible for doing so.

-- Steven Alan Samson