



When the Sacred Ginmill Closes

Lawrence Block

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Downing a bourbon or two with a couple of cronies, Scudder witnesses a heist. The Morrissey brothers who run the joint are strangely submissive during the raid, but eager to see Scudder track down the thieves without involving the regular forces of law and order.

When the Sacred Ginmill Closes Details

Date : Published 2000 by Orion (first published 1986)

ISBN : 9780752836997

Author : Lawrence Block

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Detective

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From Reader Review When the Sacred Ginmill Closes for online ebook

Mara says

Skip Devoe and Tommy Tillary. Theirs are the faces I see when I think of the summer of '75. Between them, they were the season. Were they friends of mine? They were, but with a qualification. They were saloon friends. I rarely saw them- or anyone else, in those days- other than in a room where strangers gathered to drink liquor.

I don't know why I underestimate Lawrence Block. After the joyride that was reading Eight Million Ways to Die, I thought that surely Matthew Scudder's next adventure would fall into the shadow of its predecessor. I certainly never would have expected Block to take my love of Scudder forward by flashback, and yet he does.

There's a whole cadre of characters we meet amid Matt's barroom crowd. We've got a phone sales Wall Street type, Irish pub owners who leave a NORAD jar out for collections, a guy tending bar as he tries to break into acting, and a few fellows who just happen to share Scudder's affinity for Wild Turkey and the like.

With a pub stick 'em up, a murdered wife (not Scudder's- Anita's fine), missing books that the IRS would be all too happy to find, and Matt's self-effacing reticence to take problems on in any official capacity, it's not immediately clear what the "case" will be this time around. Not that anyone should mind, because the writing is just so damn good with an ineffable quality that just left me *feeling* the characters in all the right ways.

The cases and pieces close in ways that are elegant without feeling contrived. Block has an ability to give his readers satisfying ambiguity that I never even knew I craved.

You'll get no glib comments from me on this one, but I can never resist confessing to at least one of my moments of pop culture infusion and, being born in '84, my understanding of the criminal mind was largely shaped by my well-worn VHS copy of *Home Alone*.

Jason Koivu says

I absolutely LOVED this! I thought the last book I read in the series was excellent and yet some how this one feels like it surpassed it!

When the Sacred Ginmill Closes is a line from a song by Dave Van Ronk, an old folkie from the 60s Village era. It's a slice of desperation and so is this awesome book!

Our sort-of hero ex-cop turned kinda detective Matt Scudder has his plate full in this one, running around

New York City for his friends and acquaintances trying to solve robberies and murders for them.

When he's not busy doing that, he's busy getting his drunk on. Scudder has demons and on his downtime he tries to drown them. Much of the first half of this book is just descriptions of his favorite bars. It's sad as fuck, but also honest to the drunkard's point of view. It's also a great look at NYC back in the days before it was sanitized.

Drinking may be his demanding hobby, but when it's game time, Matt gets his shit together for his friends/clients to "do them a favor" for a few bucks in an effort to solve a crime for them. In *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes* he's trying to solve three of them at once. That's a lot to ask of a character and a writer, but Lawrence Block proves once again why -if you like detective fiction or mysteries or hell even just reading about NYC in the 70s- you ought to be reading Block's very well written Scudder series! Get on it!

Dan Schwent says

An after hours bar is robbed by two masked men. A bar buddy's wife is murdered and he's the prime suspect. The clean set of books from another friend's bar is stolen. What, if anything, do Matthew Scudder's three cases have to do with one another?

After *Eight Million Ways to Die*, I wasn't that impressed with this one in the first few chapters but it really picked up. It takes place while Scudder is still drinking, back in 1975. Once again, Block had me guessing right up until the end. It never ceases to amaze me how old Lawrence manages to tie everything together at the end in a believable fashion. It took me forever to catch on to which of the cases were related and I loved how Scudder didn't let the bad guy get away at the end after it was clear the law couldn't touch him. While it wasn't my favorite Scudder book, it was still really good.

Richard says

8/10

Scudder oozes class. Yeah he might like to overindulge in a drink or ten and some of his actions may be morally corrupt to the untrained eye but he's one smooth customer. This tale is a flashback of sorts looking back at a time before Scudder tried to give up the booze and was hanging around in many a watering hole.

Scudder gets caught up in a robbery and is asked to investigate so off he goes. He detects and even with the hindrance of booze he detects with class. Nothing fancy other than working the case. There are multiple story lines here weaving around one main one and they all tie together at the end and they're all tied off nicely too.

This was the first Scudder I've read rather than listened to due to some weird lack of this being on audible. The narrators have been chopped and changed and this read really well so I'd be tempted to leave the audio on this series and pick up actual copies going forward.

This is smoother than the whiskey Scudder and his cohorts drink and I'm glad of many more to come.

Trudi says

First of all, Carol knows what she's talking about. This is another great installment in the Scudder series and I really wavered over whether to give it five stars or not. It's a flashback novel, back to Scudder's hard drinking, bar crawling days of wee morning hours and head splitting hangovers. This is Scudder in all his glorious dysfunction, surrounded by the other barflies that make up his small cadre of "friends". It's 1970's New York, where Irish bars have Republican Army connections.

Because this is the most intricately plotted of the series thus far, I feel like I didn't get as much Scudder this time around. There's *so much* going on in this book that Scudder is nearly lost in the details and dialogue required to drive the action forward. Don't get me wrong; he's there, just not *as there* when it comes to his private ruminations and general observations about life. Turns out that's what I really love even more than a richly constructed plot. My favorite thing about this one is that ending. Holy moses. Betrayal and backstabbing, revenge and a couple of suicides.

(view spoiler)

The last few pages of the novel are the best. Scudder's voice is so strong, the bittersweet nostalgia acute as he recounts all the landmarks that have crumbled and disappeared, all the lost souls lost for good to the hereafter: "So many changes, eating away at the world like water dripping on a rock." It's a strong man looking back from a better place in his life, yet it's a man who still finds himself longing, just a little bit, for "the good old days" of bourbon and coffee, and nights spent drinking til the sacred ginmill closes.

And so we'll drink the final drink
That cuts the brain in sections
Where answers do not signify
And there aren't any questions.

I broke my heart the other day.
It will mend again tomorrow.
If I'd been drunk when I was born
I'd be ignorant of sorrow.

And so we've had another night
Of poetry and poses,
And each man knows he'll be alone
When the sacred ginmill closes.

(*Last Call*, Dave Van Ronk)

James Thane says

This is among the best of Lawrence Block's Matthew Scudder series, which is saying quite a lot. Set in the mid-1970s, it finds Scudder divorced, working as an unlicensed P.I. in New York City and essentially living in the bars that dot the neighborhood around his small hotel room.

The book opens with the brazen robbery of an after-hours saloon that happens to be owned by some scary Irish brothers that no smart person would ever think to screw around with. Matt is present at the time of the robbery and the owners ask him to look into it, offering a \$10,000.00 reward for info leading to the robbers. At virtually the same time, the wife of a casual barroom acquaintance, Tommy Tillary, is murdered. Tillary becomes a suspect and asks Matt to help clear him. If all that weren't bad enough, another of Scudder's friends is being blackmailed and wants Matt to help arrange the payoff.

As the book progresses, Scudder works on each of the three problems with varying degrees of commitment and interest. Each of the three cases is interesting in and of itself, but as always in these books, it's the setting and the characters, especially Scudder himself, that keep you coming back and that make you regret it every time you come to the last page. Lawrence Block has created in these novels a world and a cast unlike any other--for my money easily the best, the most vivid and most interesting of any in crime fiction. I've read this book at least three or four times by now, and I'll be anxiously waiting for it again the next time I make my way through this series.

Greg says

A few years ago it became somewhat fashionable for like a month or two to talk about how Stephen King deserved to win literary awards. Because I'm lazy I'm not going to look it up, but I think he was even given some kind of lifetime achievement award from the folks who provide us with the National Book Award. It was around the same time that McSweeney's and Michael Chabon were flaunting their genre fiction cred and releasing the pretty much unreadable anthology of adventure stories.

It's been longer than some of the people I'm 'friends' with here on goodreads have been alive since I've read a Stephen King novel (that wasn't the fairly unimpressive *Colorado Kid*), so I don't really know what the literary merits of his novels are (and I don't trust my teenage self to have any opinion worth having, since this same person thought that Motley Crue was the height of musical excellence), but I don't have the feeling that his novels were that good, I could be wrong though.

If I were going to lead a campaign for a popular genre writer deserving of mainstream literary accolades I don't think I'd use the mega-best-selling Stephen King as the person to rally around. Personally, I'd go for someone like Lawrence Block or James Ellroy.

Lawrence Block is surprisingly pretty amazing.

This is the sixth novel in his Matthew Scudder series of novels.

Who likes the sixth of anything in a series? By that point the author should just be phoning in stories,

working the tried and true formulas and selling his books to the ever diminishing group of readers who are still along for the ride. Generally no one is going to pick up a sixth book in a series and start reading from there. Right?

Who would think that the sixth book in a series would rival the first one for being up there with the series best? The first one is like a first date with someone that you are trying to impress, you know where you do whatever it is that people who date do to impress someone. By the sixth you're in a routine, maybe falling asleep in front of the TV at some point.

This one doesn't start off all that strong. It kind of feels like other Scudder novels. There's a problem or two, some people need some help so they get a favor out of Scudder in exchange for some money that he gives a tenth of to some church that he passes by. He works on the problems, eventually figures out to some degree a solution and the book wraps up.

This one starts like that, but slowly turns into a bitter melancholy love story of the past.

Scudder doesn't really give a shit about the cases he's working. He drinks a lot and spends days wandering through parts of New York that no longer existed in the late Mayor Koch era that the novel was written in, and are now like ancient history to the present cartography of New York City.

The novel takes place in the mid-70's, when New York was a much shittier place than it is now (or better depending on your outlook, but shittier in terms of seedier, poorer, more dangerous). You can't really walk the streets that Scudder moves about in and feel like you are walking in the same world. Hell's Kitchen today is not exactly a place where dive bars and drunks make up the dominant landscape.

The novel comes in between (what I'm guessing, I haven't read the next book in the series yet) the moment when Scudder decides that he has to quit drinking and the first present day novel where he makes his way through his day to day activities without many cups of coffee with a liberal shot of bourbon in it. It's a flashback to ten years earlier, a time when he was drinking too much, not caring about much at all, and most likely on the verge of drinking even more after the events that take place in this book.

Like the first novel in the series, the book doesn't start to shine until the last third or so, and as it moves towards the last pages it just gets darker and better with each chapter.

Most of the city portrayed in this novel no longer exists. The neighborhoods are cleaner. Certain big buildings have collapsed, even smaller insignificant scenes, like the place in Sunnyside where Scudder and some friends go to see a few fights on a Thursday night is only remembered by a small plaque in front of a Wendy's fast food restaurant now. Like other Scudder novels, Woodside is home to a seedier element than I can imagine being here when I walk around doing my day to day chores.

The book is partly a melancholy send off of the good old days, which maybe weren't so good, or good at all, and which maybe it's for all the best that they are gone, but which still sometimes hurt to see gone.

I'm not sure why I did, but I jotted this passage down while I was reading the book, so I'll share it:

She extended a painted nail, touched my chin. "You don't want a man that's too cute, you know?"

It was an overture, and one I somehow knew I didn't want to follow up on. The realization brought a wave of sadness rolling in on me out of nowhere. I had nothing for this woman and she had nothing for me. I didn't

even know her name; if we'd introduced ourselves I couldn't remember it. And I didn't think we had. The only names mentioned had been Miguelito Cruz and Mickey Mouse.

I mentioned another, Angel Herrera's. She didn't want to talk about Herrera. He was nice, she said. He was not so cute and maybe not so smart, but maybe that was better. But she didn't want to talk about Herrera.

I told her I had to go. I put a bill on the bar and instructed the bartender to keep her glass full. She laughed, either mocking me or enjoying the humor of the situation, I don't know which. Her laughter sounded like someone pouring a sack of broken glass down a staircase. It followed me to the door and out.

Brandon says

I'm very happy for this novel's existence. Apparently, Block had originally planned on ending Scudder's adventures after finishing up *Eight Million Ways to Die*. However, after writing what was originally intended to be a short story, Block expanded it to what we now know as *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes*.

Taking place sometime between novels 1 and 5; Scudder is still heavily boozing it up. If I didn't know that this was a "flashback" novel, I would have been completely shocked that Scudder fell off the wagon that quickly and that severely. It's amazing the man can even function with the sheer amount of alcohol he intakes.

While not as deep as *Eight Million Ways to Die* in terms of Scudder's personal life, it's certainly not an inferior novel. I mean, the book is so thick with plot; I'm surprised I could lift it. You've got Scudder trying to work out 3 separate crimes, all of which never seem to overwhelm him at any point. Granted, they're all interconnected in some way.

His personal problems take a backseat in this novel and the cases are in the fore front. Rarely does he talk about his ex-wife and children, nor his past police work and what caused him to leave the force. I will say this; in the end, after the cases are closed, we return to Scudder as he finishes telling us this story. Without spoiling anything, he does reveal some events that have come and gone since this chapter in his life. I found that pretty interesting as I have no idea where he is in regards to timeline when Book 7 picks up. Looking forward to that.

Bill Kerwin says

This is a fine entry in the Matt Scudder series, but fans of conventional mystery novels may be somewhat disappointed, for it involves not one particular case, but three: the armed robbery of an after-hours joint, the extortion of a tavern for the return of its cooked books, and the murder of the wife of a patron of one of Matt's usual haunts. Scudder does eventually connect two cases and solve them, and he sort of solves the other case too, but there is a lot of conversation not germane to the detective work, and their connection and solution are almost beside the point.

Well, just what then *is* the point? These three cases are a decade in the past, narrated by what is a now sober Matt in a meditative farewell to drink: to its taste, to its effects on the drinker, to the world where it is served

and the colorful people found there, but, most of all, to the bond between drinker and world, a bond which the determinedly sober man may never experience again.

As Scudder tells us, during the summing up:

...when I look ten years into the past I can say that I would very likely have handled things differently now. Everything. All changed, changed utterly. I live in the same hotel, I walk the same streets, I go to a fight or a ball game the same as ever, but ten years ago I was always drinking and now I don't drink at all. I don't regret a single one of the drinks I took, and I hope to God I never take another.

Carol. says

Oh Scudder novels, how do I love thee? Let me count the ways:

1) Period New York. This time it's a walk down memory lane to 1975. While Scudder remembers more about the sports scene than national politics, he also recalls that it was a big year for Black Russians and tequila sunrises. It's also a time of Irish dominance in Hell's Kitchen (anecdotal origin quote: "Hell's a mild climate. This is Hell's Kitchen"), a small rough, industrial down-and-out section of New York. Irish toughs with connections to the IRA have a strong influence in the area, not the least of which are the owners of Morrissey's after-hours club. Then there are the timeless city people: "I generally bought the paper there, unless I bought it from the shopping-bag lady who hawked them on the sidewalk in from of the 400 Deli. She bought them for a quarter each from the newsstand--and she sold them for the same price, which is a tough way to make a living."

2) Characterization that makes me feel like I was there. These are Scudder's bar-crawling days, and he has some good-time relationships with his bar tenders and fellow drinkers. There's Buddy, the actor; Skip, bartender and co-owner of Miss Kitty's; Billie Keegan, who tends bar at Armstrong's; Telephone Tommy, the salesman with the small, calculating eyes; Caroline, "with a soft you-all accent that, like certain culinary herbs, became stronger when you steeped it in alcohol." Dialogue is spot-on, that clever good-time mix of stories, social commentary, and good-natured mocking that a group of congenials have.

3) The emotional punch of a likeable lead struggling with alcohol and past demons. Scudder's a little edgier in this one, walking a thin line between anger and depression. Alcohol threads through all the scenes, the backdrop and motivation to most of his routine, the siren that draws him from bar to bar. There is one very ironic scene where Skip tells Scudder that "But even so [alcohol's] a choice for us. That's the difference between you and me and a guy like Billie Keegan." Though Scudder of the past sounds skeptical, the discussion impacts even more strongly knowing the Scudder ten years forward and the extent to which he was deluding himself.

4) Oh-so-subtle foreshadowing and the resolution of three clever little mysteries: a hold-up at Morrissey's, Tommy's marital troubles and Skip's financial troubles. There are hints of trouble from the start, but it isn't until the end that you realize how nicely they all blended in. Nothing is wasted here. The book comes full circle, making the ending even more poignant.

5) The bitter flavor of justice. I read the book again just so I could re-read the ending. Stunning.

I had to request this one from my library's "lower stacks." I wonder if they would notice if I never returned it?

Dave says

The sixth Matthew Scudder novel, "When The Sacred Ginmill Closes," is a tightly written journey into the gritty realism of bars and after hours clubs of New York City. Scudder, here, is practically drowning in booze and even notes at one point that, when he sets out for home, he ends up in a bar. Most days, he doesn't even know how he got home. Much of the action in this book takes place in a couple of nearby bars and, if it is not taking place in the bars, it is taking place with the guys

Scudder is hanging out with in the bars. In one bar, a pair of masked men with guns enter, holding up the place. In another, the books are stolen, meaning the real books, not the one that the IRS sees, the one that shows the take before the skim. Pretty much all the action takes place at night as Scudder deals with blackmailers and others. Even when he is checking out a client's home to see where the burglars went and what they did, he can't keep his hands off the client's booze.

This may be one of the darkest and gloomiest of the Scudder novels. It is also one of the tightest, focusing on a few days in Scudder's life as he deals with a few odd cases that are thrown his way from murder to blackmail to masked robbers. What sets this book apart from many other books out there is how realistic the dialogue and action is. Nothing in it is over the top. Nothing in it is purely something that only happens in books or movies. When the guys gather to figure out how to deal with the blackmailers, their reactions are authentic. They are truly a bunch of amateurs.

All in all, it is, without any question, a five-star read, but all of the Scudder series is fine work. It is detective fiction, but involving a most unusual detective. One without an office, without a secretary, without a license. One who doesn't really know what fee to set when doing favors for friends or friends of friends. Scudder was once a cop, but lost the taste for it after an innocent girl got shot in a shoot-out with the bad guys. One could say he's drowning in guilt. After he was cleared of wrongdoing in the shooting, he left the force, left his wife, left his suburban home, and makes it one day at a time, one drink at a time. There are probably few, if any, detectives in literary history who are as carefully and as deeply developed as Block's Scudder is. He is as real as they come, warts and all.

A terrific read.

Toby says

Whilst reading about Jack Taylor fighting the good fight to stay on the wagon in Ken Bruen's Priest recently I figured it was probably inspired by Lawrence Block and Matt Scudder; the last time we met Matt was ready to turn his life around one meeting at a time, so in I jumped to this sixth in the series of books about alcoholic former cop turned professional favours for friends provider Matt Scudder.

Turns out this wasn't the moment I was looking for, When The Sacred Ginmill throws everything you expect

from a sequel on its head and instead is Matt's memoirs from a time when he was still trying to drink New York dry. Looking back at the summer of 1975 and how he came to investigate a blackmail, a murder and an armed robbery, all involving his drinking pals, in quick succession.

It has been remarked by almost everybody that has read this series that this book starts off slowly, they're right, it is widely accepted that the completely different approach to the telling of the stories is responsible for this. Block adopts not only a Wonder Years style "it wasn't the same after that summer" reminiscing tone complete with a fantastically well incorporated nostalgia but introduces you to all the players much earlier than usual too. He allows himself the luxury of establishing personal relationships within the narrative, the world that Scudder inhabits and that most difficult thing for a series writer - repeating all the basic facts about your protagonist in a new and interesting way so that your existing fans gain something from the process too. There are few crime writers in any sub-genre who feel comfortable enough with their craft and the attention span of their readers to attempt this kind of reinvention and even fewer who achieve such impressive results. I've said it so many times about Lawrence Block but it deserves repetition, he IS THE crime writer all pretenders should aspire to.

With this one he gets everything right once more, wonderful characterisation, evoking a real sense of place and time, emotional insight in to his protagonist without resorting to lazy techniques, an interesting crime to investigate, a manner of investigation that is true to his character, a powerful and quite unexpected denouement and most importantly for what is still despite it's many qualities genre fiction, a thoroughly entertaining read.

It must be the seventh book in which he battles his demons. Bring it on.

Richard says

This is the latest installment in my journey into Lawrence Block's stunning Matthew Scudder crime series. This one comes on the heels of the showstopping *Eight Million Ways to Die*, and I was wondering if it was possible for this book to be as good. I was pleased to see that it comes pretty damn close! Block keeps it fresh by showing us a different side of Scudder, flashing back to events from Matt's past that occurred even before the first novel. Here, Matt tells the story of when he and his hard-drinking saloon homies got in and out of trouble during a hot, eventful New York summer in '75.

This book felt totally different from the previous Scudder novels. Matt seems less of a loner here and more connected with his buddies. I felt like he was a lot less interested in his cases, more aloof, which is understandable as I was reading about a slightly younger Scudder than I was used to. Even the writing itself fits into this tone. This one is very nostalgic as well; it's a love letter to a throwback New York City that doesn't exist anymore, and to a simpler, more innocent time for Matt (who at this point hasn't even begun to consider himself an alcoholic). This book also has a first-rate, bittersweet ending where, like most of the great crime novels, the mystery is solved not in the way you expected or even wanted, but in a way that is undeniably satisfying. This ending took my expected four star rating and turned it into a solid five.

Kemper says

I wish you could add sound effects to books because it would have been cool if the flashback noise from *Lost*

would have played when I started reading this.

According to Lawrence Sanders lore, he originally planned to end the Scudder series with the last book, *Eight Million Ways to Die*, and it certainly would have made a good stopping point. But Sanders owed a Scudder story so he wrote a short version of this that he liked it so much he expanded it to a book. Then he liked the book so much he decided to write more Scudder novels, and I am very glad he changed his mind about continuing Matt's story.

The book opens with Matt having cocktails with some drinking buddies at an after hours club. Two men come in and rob the place at gunpoint. No one is hurt and Matt and his pals shrug it off as just another night in New York. But those who read the last book will find the beginning a bit jarring because Matt was struggling mightily to get sober so it's shocking to read about him casually boozing it up again.

What we learn in the second chapter is that Matt is telling us this story as something that happened years before during a summer in the mid-1970s long before he tried to quit drinking. This chapter is some of my favorite writing by Sanders because it consists of Matt reminiscing about what was going on in New York and what he was doing at the time. It's an elegant bit of stage setting that makes you feel like you're there in Manhattan circa 1975.

The robbery of the after hours joint seems to kick off a series of random crimes involving the people who were drinking with Matt. The owners of the club are two IRA connected brothers who want to find the gunmen with no cops and they offer a ten thousand dollar reward for anyone who can tell them who did it. Matt thinks he has no chance of finding them, he does put some feelers out. Then the wife of Matt's drinking buddy Tommy is murdered in what looks like a burglary gone bad, but the cops think he was involved. Tommy asks Matt to try and dig up definite proof that two men accused of the burglary also killed his wife. Another friend, Skip, calls on Matt for advice and assistance when someone steals his financial ledgers that would prove he's been cheating on his taxes and now he's being blackmailed for their return.

Matt roams around New York working on all these problems as tries to drink up all the bourbon in the city. By telling this as an episode that happened years ago, there's a sense of nostalgia to this one that reads as Matt saying goodbye to a phase of his life. I also loved the ending and how it shows Matt's unorthodox methods of helping justice along.

This is one of the best books of the Scudder series.

Lynn says

Matthew Scudder is working to help friends with problems involving blackmail, robbery and murder. The events in this story took place back when Scudder was a heavy drinker. It seems pretty grim to spend all day maintaining an alcohol numb, but he and his friends do just that. Scudder gave up being a policeman, but figuring out whodunnit was the only bright spot for him in this whole book. Sanders writes these books from Scudder's point-of-view. He is a very sad guy with no self-pity....so I cried for him.
