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The Westing Game

by

Ellen Raskin

1978



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Ray Mescallado

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The outskirts of Westingtown, which is situated on Lake Michigan in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The two main locations are within sight of each other: the newly built Sunset Towers and the Westing house, abandoned for many years before the start of the novel.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Sam "Windy" Windkloppel a.k.a. Sam Westing / Barney Northrup / Alexander "Sandy" McSouthers / Julian R. Eastman - The mastermind of the Westing game, he fakes his death as self-made millionaire Sam Westing to unite his extended family and find a suitable heir for his estate. As realtor Barney Northrup, he convinces most of the Westing heirs to move into Sunset Towers. As Sunset.....

Flora Miller Baumbach - Tenant in 2C, a dressmaker whose daughter Rosalie died a.....

George Theodorakis - Tenant in 2D and owner of the coffee shop in the lobby, he

Catherine Theodorakis - Tenant in 2D who runs the coffee shop with her

Theo Theodorakis - Tenant in 2D and older son of George and Catherine, a high

Christos "Chris" Theodorakis - Tenant in 2D and younger son of George and....

Sydelle Pulaski - Tenant in 3C, the secretary to the president of Schultz Sausages.

Jake Wexler - Tenant in 3D and a podiatrist who keeps his office on the first floor.

Grace Windsor Wexler a.k.a. Gracie Windkloppel Wexler - Tenant in 3D, a social.....

Angela Wexler - Tenant in 3D and older daughter of Jake and Grace, she is known for.....

Tabitha-Ruth "Turtle" Wexler - Tenant in 3D and younger daughter of Jake.....

James Shin Hoo - Tenant in 4C and owner of Shin Hoo's Restaurant on the fifth floor.

Sun Lin Hoo - Tenant in 4C and James' second wife, she came from China to.....

Numerous other major and minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The sixteen Westing heirs, asked in Sam Westing's will to solve the mystery of.....

Antagonist - Sam Westing, whose will is a game to find a deserving heir for his fortune as well.....

Climax - Sandy McSouthers dies in front of the heirs, and soon after is revealed by Turtle Wexler to.....

Outcome - Turtle Wexler keeps to herself the entire truth, which is that the will asked the heirs to find "The Fourth": that is, the fourth disguise of Sam "Windy" Windkloppel, who turns out to be.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Realtor Barney Northrup rents out the apartments of the newly-constructed Sunset Towers to a select group of tenants that includes the Wexler family (podiatrist Jake, wife Grace, daughters Angela and Turtle), the Theodorakis family (coffee shop owner George, wife Catherine, sons Theo and Christos), the Hoo family (restaurant owner James Shin, second wife Sun Lin, son Douglas), Judge Josie-Jo Ford, secretary Sydelle Pulaski, and dressmaker Flora Baumbach. The building not only has spaces to accommodate the businesses of Jake Wexler, George Theodorakis, and James Hoo, but also has a cleaning woman, Berthe Erica Crow, who also lives in the Towers, a doorman, Sandy McSouthers, and a delivery boy, Otis Amber. The tenants move into their new homes in September; on Halloween, smoke is seen rising from the Westing house, on a cliff that's within view of Sunset Towers. Rumors have it that Sam Westing, the rich industrialist who owns Westing Paper Products, has either returned to his old home or has been dead on the Oriental rug for a long time. On a dare, Turtle Wexler goes up to the Westing house where she discovers what she thinks is Sam Westing's body, dressed up like Uncle Sam.

The morning after, the newspaper reports Sam Westing dead. The inhabitants and workers at Sunset Towers - minus Barney Northrup, George Theodorakis and wife Catherine - receive letters inviting them to a reading of Westing's will the next day, as does Angela Wexler's fiancé D. Denton Deere. After the heirs gather at the appointed time, attorney E.J. Plum reads the testament, where Sam Westing reveals he has not died of natural causes and that one of the heirs present is guilty. The will asks his sixteen heirs to play a game to discover who took his life. To do this, the players are assigned into pairs: Jake Wexler and Madame Hoo, both of.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The main theme of this novel is information and how people interpret it: not only in the mystery that defines the Westing game, but also in the other conflicts among the Sunset Towers residents. A related theme is identity: how people often employ masquerades to hide their true selves, and how people can change the way they perceive themselves. Related to this theme of identity is the theme of family: the large.....

Minor Themes

While games are an important motif in the novel, they actually are a minor theme: that is, the games in the novel are used primarily to help flesh out the ideas of the major themes described above but the *idea* of games is itself not developed much as a theme in its own right. The major theme of identities ties.....

MOOD

The mood of the novel is often light, not willing to take the events seriously even as it adeptly describes the behavior and motivation of its large cast of characters. This is in keeping with the tradition of.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Raskin was born on March 13, 1928, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A good student, she entered the University of Wisconsin at Madison with the intention of being a journalist but instead discovered an interest in fine art. Raskin married and had a daughter; after moving to New York, she obtained a divorce and began working at a commercial art studio. She then moved on to freelance illustration and design: among other things, she contributed to *The Saturday Evening Post* and designed book covers, including the original cover for Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. She won various awards for her art and held exhibitions of her work.

In 1960, Raskin married Dennis Flanagan, editor of the well-known periodical *Scientific American*. Wanting to work with her own ideas on her own terms, Raskin's wrote and illustrated her first.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Westing Game is a young adult novel in the tradition of the cozy mystery. The cozy mystery earns its name by being a safe kind of story: likeable, often quirky, characters are placed into jeopardy but ultimately remain well as the mystery is solved. The stories often focus on the solving of elaborate puzzles by amateur detectives. In stark contrast, the hard boiled or noir mystery is much more sinister, with characters that.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

1. Sunset Towers

Summary

The sun sets in the west but the newly-built Sunset Towers faces east. On the Fourth of July, delivery boy Barney Northrup delivers letters to the chosen tenants-to-be of Sunset Towers: the six letter extol the virtues of the building's apartments and mentions the availability of spaces for a doctor's office, coffee shop, and restaurant on the premises. The first appointment is with Jake and Grace Wexler, as Barney dazzles Grace with the apartment specially selected for their family. Barney points out the rent is even cheaper than the cost of the house where they currently live; Jake wonders how he would know that. Grace is impressed by the view of Lake Michigan, imagining the envy of her friends. Later that afternoon, Sydelle Pulaski is less thrilled by the smaller apartment she's shown: it doesn't have a view of Lake Michigan but Barney points out that this apartment better fits her secretary's salary with all the same luxuries. Sydelle notices a mansion on the north cliff, which Barney says is the old Westing house. She says she'll think about it but Barney lies and says twenty other people want the apartment, prompting her to accept. In one day Barney rents out all the apartments and other premises, the names already printed on the mailboxes. However, Barney had rented one apartment to the wrong person.

Notes

From the beginning, the themes of the novel are set into motion: we get a sense of something not being right with Sunset Towers, the significant date of the delivery of the letters to the building's future tenants, a sense of familial dysfunction with Grace Wexler's social climbing anxieties, the sense of control and gamesmanship in convincing these predetermined tenants to accept, and finally the unexpected directions life can take when it's revealed Barney Northrup made a huge mistake.

2. Ghosts or Worse

Summary

On September 1, the new tenants move in. The next day, Shin Hoo's Restaurant opens on the fifth floor, but the exclusive neighborhood means only three people come. In contrast, the Theodorakis Coffee Shop in the lobby enjoys brisk business from tenants and workers from nearby Westingtown.

The afternoon of Halloween, four people are standing outside the Sunset Towers driveway: the doorman Sandy McSouthers, high school seniors Theo Theodorakis and Doug Hoo, and delivery boy Otis Amber. Junior high student Turtle Wexler bicycles up to them with news of smoke coming out of the chimney of the Westing house. Otis assures everyone that old man Westing is most likely dead, that rumor has it his corpse is on a fancy Oriental rug being eaten by maggots. Sandy thinks this is just, as the cheerful doorman is still bitter about losing his job at the Westing paper mill twenty years earlier.

As for the smoke, it may be kids again, Sandy opines, like the two from Westingtown who visited the house exactly a year ago. Otis tells the story of a one dollar bet that the two couldn't stay in the house for five minutes. They barely got inside when they were chased out by a ghost - or worse. One fell over the cliff, the other emerged with bloody hands and has only repeated two words since then: "Purple waves." Sandy laments such suffering over one dollar; Turtle responds that for two dollars per minute, she'll also go to that house. From the front window of 2D, Chris Theodorakis watches his brother and the others accept Turtle's bet; in two hours he

will tell Theo about the person with a limp that he saw enter the Westing house. Chris is confined to a wheelchair and prone to violent spasms, but likes to watch birds.

Notes

The story of Sam Westing dead on an Oriental rug is an image that repeats itself significantly at the climax of the novel, precisely as Westing planned. Readers immediately get a sense of how unusual Turtle Wexler is with her desire to earn enough money for a subscription to the *Wall Street Journal*, a foreshadowing of her future greatness as a businesswoman. The story used to dare Turtle into visiting the Westing house that night is of course part of the plan that Westing - present as Sandy McSouthers - has set into motion. We later learn that the person Chris sees entering the Westing house is Doctor Sikes, a friend of Sam Westing's who was injured in the same car accident that disfigured Westing's face. It should also be noted that "Westing house" may be a reference to the company Westinghouse Electric, once known for its lights and light bulbs. Light bulbs are often used as symbols for inspiration or insight, just as inspiration and insight is required to win this game.

3. Tenants In and Out

Summary

In 3D Angela Wexler is being fitted for her wedding dress by Flora Baumbach, the dressmaker who lived on the second floor. Grace Wexler watches on, cautioning Flora about her daughter's delicate skin. Angela tells her mother she wasn't pricked but saw smoke coming from the Westing house, news that Turtle brings upon her arrival. Turtle asks Flora to hem her witch's costume but Mrs. Wexler says that Flora's too busy with Angela's wedding dress to have time for a silly costume. Turtle snaps back that a wedding dress is just as silly and who'd want to marry a stuck-up doctor such as Denton Deere. Mrs. Wexler restrains herself from hitting Turtle and Angela offers to hem Turtle's costume. In Doctor Wexler's office, Mrs. Crow also sees the smoke from the Westing House as Jake Wexler is cutting out a corn. Jake notes that she's hurt her shin, and Crow points out that Turtle kicked her, which is what happens when there's no religion in a home.

At Hoo's restaurant, Mr. Hoo is skeptical of the story Doug tells of Westing's corpse rotting on some kind of Oriental rug. He tells Doug to go study, and the son acquiesces. There are only reservations for two customers that evening. Hoo thinks that if Westing is home again, he won't get off so easy this time. Meanwhile, Hoo's wife stares out the restaurant's east window, as if looking past Lake Michigan all the way to China.

Sandy salutes Judge J.J. Ford as she drives up in her Mercedes and points out the smoke from the Westing house and the rumor of the Westing corpse on the rug. He says he's repeating what Otis Amber said, and Judge Ford opines that Otis is stupid if not mad. She considers how to gather money if Sam Westing has indeed returned, and asks Sandy not to repeat what she said about Otis. The doorman assures her he won't, as she's the biggest tipper in Sunset Towers.

Chris Theodorakis tries to tell Theo about the limping man but his stuttering overwhelms him. Instead, Theo describes a spooky scene of Westing dead and rotting on the Oriental rug, much to Chris' delight.

Sydelle Pulaski gets out of her taxi, receiving no help from the driver and Sandy nowhere to be seen. Even though she is limping now, Sydelle is never noticed by anyone, though she moved to Sunset Towers with the hope of meeting elegant people. The only person who pays attention to her is crippled Chris Theodorakis, who she pities. However, her purchases today - painting utensils and crutches - will get her noticed. She does not pay attention to the smoke rising from the Westing house.

Notes

Most of the major traits and interpersonal dynamics of the large cast of the novel are captured in a shared moment of watching the smoke rise from the Westing house - which is symbolically the signal for the beginning of the game proper. In the Wexler family, readers see beautiful Angela as being favored by Grace over the more

difficult Turtle, as well as Angela's bovine willingness to do whatever her mother wants. Turtle asks Flora for help, something which becomes more common as the novel progresses. Doctor Jake Wexler is away from his family, indicating his emotional distance as well. Crow's religious fervor is also displayed, as well as its irrational use to blame people she doesn't like for non-religious reasons. With the Hoo family, readers see James' anger and Madame Hoo's longing for China. Chris Theodorakis is portrayed as pitied and rarely heeded, despite the valuable knowledge he wishes to share. Sydelle Pulaski's desire for attention blinds her to the smoke that starts the Westing game - which is fair, since she's the mistake in Northrup's choosing of tenants and doesn't have the same initial stake in the game as the others.

While all this is obvious enough, the subtle dynamic that becomes more obvious from a second reading is between Judge Josie-Jo Ford and doorman Sandy McSouthers. The trust Judge Ford establishes with Sandy McSouthers is assumed by the judge to be about money: first the large tips she gives and later the way she gives Sandy her half of the ten thousand dollar checks during the Westing game. Thus, she simplifies both Sandy's motives and feels no need to question his identity. This trust is also part of Sam Westing's plan, as it makes it easier to manipulate Judge Ford throughout the game.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The character development in the novel can be broken down into two parts: during the timeframe of the Westing game, and the sudden leaps forward in the final chapters.

During the timeframe of the Westing game, the defining development of the characters comes not from changes in personality or perspective so much as the revelation of depth. Characters are often initially presented in terms of a single trait of some sort: not only do readers see them in this way, which makes it easier to tell who's who in this large cast, but other characters perceive each other in a similarly simplistic way. This ties into the theme of masquerade in the broadest sense: while some characters do indeed pose as somebody they're not, many of them hide secrets about themselves and present a false mask to those around them. The last three chapters briefly cover the next twenty years in the lives of these characters. Many continue on the path of success set down for them soon after the Westing Game, but to have them all prosper in this manner would not have been as realistic or made the ending as interesting for the reader. Thus, we have several expectations upended and turned around.

The most complex characters are the ones who dominate the story: Sam Westing in his various guises, Judge Ford, and Turtle Wexler. In this trio, we have a mentor and two protégées, strong women who he nurtures and encourages to excel, though they themselves are not completely aware of this influence - and in Judge Ford's case, misunderstand the intentions.

As the grand mastermind of the Westing game, Sam Westing is not only seeking an heir to his fortune, but also to resolve the problems he finds in his extended family. His much-lauded patriotism is tied closely to his success as a poor, uneducated immigrant who became a multimillionaire industrialist. However, this land of opportunity was seized by Sam Westing, not merely bestowed upon him: to succeed he had to be cruel at times and unfair to others, as seen by his treatment of James Shin Hoo, Josie-Jo Ford, and even his own wife Berthe Erica Crow. However, the loss of his daughter and the accident which disfigured his face showed him the emptiness of such behavior. When he re-emerges in Westingtown, he does so in disguise and to make amends as he sees fit.

However, this doesn't mean he changed who he is essentially. Outside of finding himself loved by the tenants in the role of Sandy, Sam Westing does not change his essential personality. He remains an aficionado of games and disguises, never revealing to the heirs his final role of Julian R. Eastman. To pull off the game, he must be

as controlling and as ruthless as he was in his days as a captain of industry. Westing also continues to be a proud individual, as seen by his protective attitude towards his Westing heirs and the way he takes credit for inspiring James Hoo to invent the paper innersole. If anything, readers see that the traits used to make Sam Westing a successful businessman were also used to make him a successful benefactor in the Westing game: the manipulation and deception, such as it is, were used for moral good instead of financial gain. Further, he passes along these traits to his ultimate heir, Turtle Wexler.

Josie-Jo Ford's character is defined by her sense of the past, as the child of Sam Westing's servants and as an African American. She feels trapped by her debt to Sam Westing, who paid for her education, and wishes to free herself from this obligation. She believes she has earned her position as a justice of the court and takes pride in her accomplishments. As a result, she is also sensitive to issues of race, which is

Numerous other characters and their relationship in the novel are outlined in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot is built like any other traditional mystery: it gathers together the possible suspects and detectives, gives them a puzzle to solve, and provides a regular flow of new information that keeps readers guessing about the truth. However, as a cozy mystery it also focuses on characters for whom readers quickly build empathy. Thus, the story does not end when the mystery is solved; rather, the three last chapters give readers a chance to see how these characters turn out, to find out which ones lived happily and what else happened to them in the next twenty years.

With this in mind, there are three major kinds of plot threads in the novel, all dependent on the relationship between characters albeit in different ways.

The first major plot thread is the solving of the Westing game, as various pairs of heirs do their best to find the right answer and win the inheritance. Much of it involves the interpretation of their.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

As a cozy mystery which is dependent on strong characterization and a constantly shifting plot, the themes of the novel develop in conjunction with the revelations of the Westing game. That is, the solving of the mystery ties into and defines the themes: the more we know about the secret of Sam Westing and his heirs, the deeper our appreciation for the larger ideas at work in the novel.

The theme of information and how it is interpreted is at the heart of any mystery novel, and that is no different here. However, as a game where the different mystery solvers make illogical and sometimes wacky leaps in deduction, the emphasis of the Westing game itself is as much on the interpretations as in the information it tries to unearth. Each of the pairs of Westing heirs treat their clues in a different manner and.....

Many other themes are completely analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

In the tradition of cozy mysteries, the style of *The Westing Game* is light in tone, jaunty, with a sharp authorial eye on the quirks of its characters. It creates a sense of suspense and thrill, but it does not make readers too anxious or threaten to upset them. Thus it is a highly accessible, reader-friendly style, and one well-suited for young readers who want a story with a fast-paced plot and memorable characterization.

Narrating in the third person voice, the author plays with the reader and is selective in what she reveals: for example, the placing of the bomb at Shin Hoo's Restaurant is described, but not the.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The Westing Game is full of puzzles waiting to be solved, including the opening paragraphs:

The sun sets in the west (just about everyone know that), but Sunset towers faced east. Strange!

Sunset Towers faced east and had no towers. This glittery, glassy apartment house stood alone on the Lake Michigan shore five stories high. Five empty stories high. (1)

Immediately, the importance of a sense of direction is reinforced by the contradiction between name and fact, a pattern that would repeat itself throughout the novel. Thus, even the building where the heirs live is a part of the overall mystery, a symbol of all that follows.

Further, the building faces away from the west - that is, Sam Westing and the past - and faces east - that is, Julian Eastman and the future of the Westing fortune.

Grace stood before the front window where, beyond the road, beyond the trees, Lake Michigan lay calm and glistening. A lake view! Just wait until those so-called friends of hers with their classy houses see this place. The furniture would have to be reupholstered; no, she'd buy new furniture - beige velvet. And she'd have stationery made - blue with deckle edge, her name and fancy address in swirling type across the top: *Grace Windsor Wexler, Sunset Towers on the Lake Shore.* (3-4)

This internal monologue shows how Grace Wexler values the opinions of her desired social peers, but also resents that her own lifestyle doesn't match theirs. These aren't friends but "so-called friends" and she relies on surface appearances and a fake maiden name to impress them, as seen by her.....

Many other quotations and their significance are completely analyzed in the complete study guide.

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

The primary motif of the novel is the game of Sam Westing's will. This can be broken down into two parts: the will itself and the game it sets in motion.

The motif of the will ties into the sense of inheritance, of being able to pass along one's legacy to others. In that sense, the Westing game succeeds: an heir is indeed chosen when Turtle Wexler solves the mystery and tracks down Julian Eastman. The will not only stands as a set of clues to the game, but also as a statement by Sam Westing to people he's wronged or neglected. In that sense, the will is an embodiment of regret, a desire to right previous wrongs and to erase the bad history from the past to pave a way for.....

Many other examples of Motifs and Symbolism are identified and analyzed in the complete study guide.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

- **Title:** *The Westing Game*.
- **Author:** Ellen Raskin.
- **Date Published:** 1978.
- **Meaning of Title:** The game that Sam Westing's heirs must play in order to win his inheritance.
- **Setting:** The outskirts of fictional Westingtown, on Lake Michigan, in Milwaukee.

- **Genre:** Mystery.
- **Protagonist:** The sixteen Westing heirs, particularly Turtle Wexler and Judge Ford.
- **Antagonist:** Sam "Windy" Windkloppel and his various guises of Sam Westing, Barney Northrup, Sandy McSouthers, and Julian Eastman.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Among the tenants of Sunset Towers, what is not true?
 - a. One of them was a thief.
 - b. One of them was a mistake.
 - c. One of them was married to Sam Westing.
 - d. One of them was a private investigator.
2. What pair goes up to the Westing house on Halloween night?
 - a. Turtle Wexler and Douglas Hoo.
 - b. Otis Amber and Berthe Erica Crow.
 - c. Sandy McSouthers and Theo Theodorakis.
 - d. Doctor Sikes and E.J. Plum.....

BOOK REPORT TOPICS - ESSAY IDEAS

- 1.) Make an extended family tree illustrating the "family" of the Westing heirs and how they relate to each other. How does this tree change over the course of the novel? What relevant facts do we learn, how is that significant? What does this tell us about the nature of family?
- 2.) Examine how this novel works as a mystery. Begin with the idea that it's supposed to be a "whodunnit" but becomes something else entirely. Is it a satisfying mystery, does it fulfill the needs of mystery readers?
- 3.) Patriotism is important to Sam Westing, so what portrait of America emerges in miniature at Sunset Towers? What observations on class, race, religion work, and family emerge by looking at the story from the perspective of the Westing game as an American experience?.....

ANSWER KEY

- 1.) d 2.) a 3.) a 4.) b 5.) c 6.) b 7.) d 8.) a 9.) b 10.) d 11.) b 12.) c 13.) a 14.) d 15.) d

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