

## A Case of Love and Squalor

**Steve Myers**

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*These two protagonists grow out of their tropes to become well-rounded, philosophical characters with big personalities.*

*A Case of Love and Squalor*, by Steve Myers, his third novel and an engrossing, fast-paced thriller, mixes action with metaphysics for an entertaining roller coaster of a read.

As with Salinger's short story "For Esmé, with Love and Squalor," the middle-aged male protagonist, Joe Andrews, finds himself attracted to a much younger Esme who is in a sordid situation. The similarities between the short story and the novel end here, however. Joe is a skirt-chasing, wise-cracking snoop in the tradition typical of hard-boiled detectives, and Esme, whom he has been hired to find, is the granddaughter of his benefactor. While best suited for those who like their private eyes macho and their women sexy, Joe and Esme manage to transcend these tropes even as they are made from them.

Esme, Diana, and Jasmina prove that their sexiness is only skin deep by having complicated, troubled backstories. In other words, their seemingly typical femme fatale traits stem from previous maltreatment by other men. Making their responses stem from mistreatment adds dimension and engenders sympathy for them. Although each of these women has been abused in some way, they all have the inner strength of survivors. Joe, thankfully, is very self-aware about his womanizing ways.

The witty repartee in the short-dialogue-heavy chapters extends to the book's themes about the nature of humanity, metaphysics, and patterns, producing thought-provoking one-liners like "Irony is also a style, an attitude, but it's a stance that can degenerate into cynicism" and "We evaluate everything in terms of what it costs."

This novel represents the perfect mix for those who like a little philosophy mixed in with their James Bondian heroes. Another treat lies in store when the hero realizes he has to team up with one unsavory antagonist to defeat the others. Recommended especially for those who like their machismo with a twist.

JILL ALLEN (Spring 2015)

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