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A Prayer For The Night: An Ohio Amish Mystery
P. L. Gaus
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In his fifth Ohio Amish mystery (following *Clouds Without Rain* and *Cast Blue Shadow*), the author probes the mechanics and fallout of *rumschpringe*, that indefinite period during which Amish teenagers are permitted to immerse themselves in the wild and sinful ways of "the English" (the modern world) while they decide if they want to embrace the traditional beliefs and ways of their ancestors.

The action—most of which takes place in rural Holmes County—begins with the murder of an Amish gang leader and the abduction of one of his female followers. These calamities quickly engage the attention of the area's most eminent crime solvers: history Professor Michael Branden and his closest friends, Pastor Cal Troyer and Sheriff Bruce Robertson. Troyer provides the insider's perspective, Robertson the law-enforcement muscle and machinery, and Branden the unifying intellect.

Besides confronting the question of who specifically committed the crimes, the three investigators must also address the tragic clash of cultures that brought the troubles about. At one moment, the teen rebels are wearing plain clothes and driving horse-drawn buggies and the next they're roaring through the narrow country roads in fast cars and arranging assignations via cell phones and GPS units.

It soon becomes apparent that the murdered youth has been involved in drug dealing and may have incited the wrath of a major supplier. This element brings in yet another sleuth, Tony Arnetto of the Drug Enforcement Administration. He complicates matters by being more concerned with breaking up the drug ring than with rescuing the girl who's been kidnapped and who may by now have had enough *rumschpringe* to last her for life.

An engaging twist in this novel is that, unlike most mystery writers, Gaus spends relatively little time on the motives and personality of the chief "villain." Instead, he focuses on the reactions of the direct and indirect victims of the crime—the kids, their parents and extended family, and their developing view of the way the world should work.

Mystery fans who've become addicted to the terse, rapid-fire crime-solving scenarios

now infesting television may grow impatient with Gaus's more casual and contemplative style, which is threaded through with professorial musings about choice and circumstances. But he makes up for any pacing deficiency with clearly defined characters and a vivid sense of place. Moreover, by taking the readers into the farms, homes, and front porches of the understandably suspicious Amish, he brings alive a complex society that is generally portrayed in picture-book stereotypes.

Edward Morris