ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

A Shade of Gray
R.J. Hall
Trafford Publishing
978-1-4269-5283-8
Three Stars (out of Five)

A debut mystery that morphs into a thriller, R.J. Hall's *A Shade of Gray* opens with the shooting of a black teenaged robber and ends with the assassination of a drug warlord in Colombia. In between, there's a glut of old-fashioned police work, modern day detection, and a riveting back story about an anti-hero, Joe Walker, an enigma wrapped up in a riddle until the web he's woven around himself begins unravelling, one ragged edge at a time.

Despite having some of his characters fit the television stereotypes of hard-bitten, soft-hearted cops, manipulative politicians, and fraudsters out to line their own pockets, it's a tribute to Hall that he's woven them so well into his fast-moving, action-packed novel. Marred at times by awkward language and typographical errors, his narrative is generally well-paced between episodes of reflection and action, especially as more and more of Joe's past gets peeled away and the details of an incident in Miami ten years ago become known.

At the outset, Joe is a hardworking married man with a child, but when his eight-year-old daughter is grabbed in a botched robbery outside the Party Time Pizza Parlor at the Cedar View Shopping Center in San Mercury, California, Joe's instincts kick in from a time when "He [Joe] used to do this for a living." From now on it's a question of whether he has shot a teenager to protect his daughter or acted out of prejudice against blacks. This becomes the focal point for two visiting black activists with grist of their own to grind. Even the girl's godparents are split over Joe's innocence, with the husband on Joe's side, and the wife opposed for ulterior motives revealed later on. And when Joe calls in a favor from a black Washington DC lawyer he knew in Miami years ago, the roller coaster ride gets going in earnest. The call, and Joe's subsequent photograph in the national press, unleash vengeful dogs of war from as far away as Colombia. The notoriety also earns the attention of a secretive agency in Washington, headed by another of Joe's former "friends." And while the warring factions rally their forces, Joe readies his homemade arsenal as two friends and the two cops who have been investigating his case arrive for a front lawn pitched battle that still leaves a final score for Joe to settle and an uncertain

future for his family to face.

Hall's novel is a bit slow starting. But once it picks up, it moves at a page-turning pace as secrets get revealed and characters show their true colors. Mystery fans will delight in the surprises in the plot, the macho justice of a jailhouse fight, and the action of the final battles in the book. The gray tones of the cover and its blurred images are ideal for the story of *A Shade of Gray*.

M. Wayne Cunningham