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Clarion Review ★★★★★ MYSTERY

A Woman to Blame

Vincent Panettiere
AuthorHouse (Jun 20, 2014)
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This truly enjoyable mystery features well-written characters in addition to a puzzling plot and multiple story lines.

A Woman to Blame is a mystery that engages from the start with an intriguing plot and a host of well-developed characters. Vincent Panettiere demonstrates considerable skill by revealing the mystery's ending within the first few pages, then writing a story so involved that the entire novel must be read before that ending is fully understood.

Johnny Faraci, a somewhat paranoid mobster, becomes irate when his new Russian neighbors inundate Faraci's condominium with the odor of burned fish. Later, a young female horse-trainer and a promising racehorse owned by the neighbor's business associate both die under suspicious circumstances. Chicago police detective Mike Hegan, grieving a recent death and facing early retirement after suffering a bullet wound inflicted by his ex-brother-in-law, becomes determined to solve this one last murder case and find justice for the young woman.

Panettiere grabs attention in the first four pages and does not let go. The book opens with Hegan taking a dance lesson with his fiancée in Chicago. Abruptly, the setting changes to a Caribbean airport at an undisclosed point in the future when Hegan is escorting two bodies back to Chicago. There, he contemplates seven deaths that resulted when Faraci became infuriated over the burned fish smell.

Panettiere skillfully weaves multiple story lines: Hegan's sister and her abusive ex-husband, turf wars between underworld criminals from various immigrant backgrounds, a professor with a gambling problem, two sisters attempting to make lives for themselves despite a horrific shared past, and an assistant trainer who is an overweight bruiser intent on settling scores. The author paces the novel well, allowing the connections between these characters to remain mysterious before bringing them together to complete the picture sketched in the first few pages.

The author has a gift for giving depth to his characters. Faraci isn't just a little obsessed about odors. Instead, he remembers the horrible odors emanating from his grandmother's cooking that so offended his mother when he was a child. The murdered woman's sister, Portia, is not simply a victim of childhood abuse. She is consumed by hatred of men and does not hesitate to use martial arts if touched. She is also an artist whose personality is as hardened as the repurposed weaponry from which she welds her sculptures. Frankie, the assistant trainer, isn't merely an oaf who foolishly thinks he is capable of outsmarting his bosses. Rather, Frankie relives the childhood taunting about his weight that made him mean and intent on seeking revenge on anyone who looks down on him.

Panettiere has written a truly enjoyable mystery for those who appreciate well-written characters in addition to a puzzling plot.

ANNIE PETERS (September 2, 2014)

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