

An Army of Noses

Holly L. Lewitas

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This charming mystery boasts an endearing dog who helps her human snuff out crime.

An Army of Noses is the third Spunky Murder Mystery penned by Holly L. Lewitas. Spunky is an older terrier mix who lives with her owner, clinical psychologist Dr. Hannah Richards, and a variety of cats. The book is told from Spunky's point of view, so there is plenty of enthusiasm for naps, treats, walks, and visits around her local Wisconsin college town. These frequent trips out with Richards allow her to team up with her feline friends and the other members of the "army of noses" (including neighborhood dogs and a sharp-eyed owl) that ultimately solves the mystery of who murdered Richard, a local gay man and lover of one of Richards's patients.

Spunky's animal army is aided by members of her owner's therapy group, one of whom is jailed erroneously for the crime. These human sleuths are much less on the ball than the observant feral cats, or "free spirits" as Spunky calls them, who hang out at the local laundromat and, of course, the furry heroine herself. There are some unrelated side plots about other psychology clients that lend interest to the story line and help flesh out Richards's personality.

Lewitas is adept at dialogue, both inner and outer, and this gives her characters lots of distinguishing characteristics. From the frequently out-of-breath cat Fearless to the romantic banter between Richards and her police detective boyfriend, there are strong portraits of the many characters in this well-populated mystery. Spunky is a particularly endearing character with strong opinions about the feline and human species. She doesn't lack for self-esteem ("Luckily for everyone, I'm as patient as I am cute"), and the book is shot through with her clever commentaries ("Every critter knows the likelihood of getting extra tidbits greatly increases if you swap humans. People are much less rigid when it's someone else's dog").

Some suspension of disbelief is required to go along with the idea that Spunky can stare at humans and get them to clear their minds for transmission of some of her clues, but that is a minor point. Usually, Spunky's barking, growling, or other uncharacteristic behavior gets the message across to a two-legged character, and this acceptance of Spunky's psychic abilities doesn't interfere with the well-plotted story line. Tighter editing would eliminate some distracting misspellings.

This book will appeal to lovers of cozy mysteries, though there are several instances of profanity and some scenes at a private sex club that may deter some who prefer less edgy reading material. Spunky's character appears to be based on the large-eared cutie sharing the author photo on the rear cover, which explains the many lighthearted and knowledgeable insights into pet behavior. Lewitas's third installment in this charming mystery series should win even more animal lovers into her circle of readers.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (August 20, 2014)

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