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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Back to Newark

Len Serafino
CreateSpace
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
978-1-4528-4526-5

When Phil Falco returns to his hometown of Newark to finalize the sale of his parents' vacation home, it is with a sense of relief. His recent divorce has left him with little money and an unstable job, and the $500,000 inheritance is needed for his retirement. He concludes the sale and he and his best friend Carmine head to Atlantic City so that Carmine can play some roulette. They encounter Dennis Florio, a childhood friend who has become a Mafia boss. Phil learns that Carmine owes Florio nearly $50,000 and is behind on payments. Florio agrees to allow Phil and Carmine to make a delivery for him in exchange for half of this money, and Phil agrees to pay the other half.

The two men take possession of the package and head for New York, but Carmine does not want Phil involved and drops him at the airport. The next day, Phil gets a phone call from Florio asking for a meeting and he finds out that Carmine died in a car accident early in the morning. Now Florio believes that Phil has the package, which contained $450,000, and he wants it back. To appease the mob boss, Phil turns over the money he made on the house sale and moves back to New Jersey to try and discover what really happened to the lost package. In the process of searching for the money and trying to rebuild his life, Phil learns a lot about himself and what he really wants for his future.

In his first novel, Len Serafino writes with a clear and crisp style. The story is engaging from start to finish. The problems that Phil experiences, not only with money, but also with both of his ex-wives and his daughter, will evoke sympathy in the reader and a desire to learn how Phil will rebuild his life. Phil undergoes a great deal of personal growth, and the ending is very satisfying without being overdone.

The one problem that stands out in Back to Newark is inconsistent characterization. Phil is a contradiction who is described in two very different ways. Initially, it is explained that Phil "was a man that liked to plan and scheme. He was constantly preparing and updating the household budget." Later in the story, the author writes that Phil "lived in the moment mostly, saying and doing what felt good at the time. The bigger picture, whatever that was, didn't enter into his thinking." It is hard to imagine these two statements describing the same person.

Nevertheless, with its intriguing plot and quick pace, readers of mystery and suspense will enjoy this book and will want to watch for more books by this promising author.

CATHERINE THURESON (July 1, 2010)

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