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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ THRILLER

California Noir

Howard Lakin
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Howard Lakin's *California Noir* follows a group of restless, edgy, unmarried friends as they enter middle age. Lakin has decades of Hollywood experience, writing and producing shows like *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*. His experience shows in the skilled writing and the cinematic style of the book, which features a fast-paced, comedic, full-cast storyline.

The story is set, as one would guess from the title, in California. A group of seven love-starved, slightly sex-crazed "commitaphobes" meets together every year to celebrate their birthdays, which all happen within a month of each other. Each year the members of the group laugh, dine, and play games of daring and brutal honesty. The action of the story begins the year they all turn forty and are dining in an East German-themed restaurant. This year's game master, Gary, proposes a marriage game, prophesying that each of the seven will be married within a year. At first they all resist. "But we love being hopelessly single! It's what we do best," one woman says. Eventually they all agree, and the story follows them as the playful game turns real and dangerous. When the game turns ugly, it reveals the true friendships within the group and exposes the traitors who sought to destroy them.

The story mainly focuses on Rick Lang, a late-night radio personality called Midnight Rider, who began his career at age thirty, the same night his wife, daughters, and parents were killed in a plane crash. Lang, who will be the first to marry that year, is a well-liked man who is a calm spot among the dramatics of his friends. Readers will sympathize with Lang and root for him as he tries to move through grief and pursue happiness once again.

The writing is sharp and witty. Readers will see bits of themselves in the sometimes hyperbolic exploits of the varied cast. The fear and uncertainty that drives them will resonate with readers whose own lives aren't quite what they thought they'd be. While the specific ghost that haunts each character is unique, readers can relate to the need to mask failure with humor. Lakin's own humor smooths the raw realities of pain, insecurity, and hopelessness, enabling readers to thoroughly enjoy and appreciate the journeys of the characters.

Lakin crafts an entertaining novel with a cast of intriguing characters and a strong protagonist. The novel is well paced and full of suspense and humor. The ending gives readers the resolution they need without glossing over the complications that give the story its true depth.

MELISSA WUSKE (December 4, 2012)

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