



Citizens of Light

Sam Shelstad

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A newspaper clipping ignites a widow's search for the truth in Sam Shelstad's mystery novel *Citizens of Light*.

Colleen has been going through the motions since the death of her husband, Leonard. While on shift at the call center, she recognizes a newspaper photograph of a man who came to Leonard's funeral, and who lied to her about how he knew him. Colleen travels to a Niagara Falls casino with her ornery coworker, Patti, to track down the mystery man and learn the truth about his relationship with her husband. But Patti has her own reasons for going to Niagara Falls, and none of them include helping Colleen.

Colleen is unassuming, to the point of being a pushover, while Patti is abrasive and manipulative. Colleen, though, is observant, noticing details about Patti that Patti would rather keep hidden. Patti sees only what she wants to see, often speaking over Colleen. Though they're supportive of each other in Niagara Falls, their connection is based solely on their shared work and living spaces. When Patti invites herself on Colleen's trip, their close proximity exacerbates their differences in personality.

The narrative tends to take several steps backward for every hard-fought moment of forward movement. Patti's brashness and mean behavior are explained in a subplot, but it neither enhances nor detracts from the main story. And Colleen's refusal to engage with her past as a member of a death-obsessed cult (a past that creeps further and further into the story, solidifying in relevance) leaves her vulnerable and unable to connect the obvious dangling threads. The book's abrupt turn into darker territory forces a reckoning.

Citizens of Light is an eccentric mystery novel in which the past has lasting implications.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (September / October 2022)

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