ForeWord Reviews

MYSTERY

Cold Tuscan Stone
David P. Wagner
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The constant presence of the past adds intrigue to this part travelogue, part detective novel, set in Italy.

Posing as an American buyer of antiquities to help the Italian police bust a ring of thieves, translator Rick Montoya finds adventure, history, and fabulous food in the charming village of Volterra.

Part travelogue, part detective story, *Cold Tuscan Stone* gives fans of Italian detective novels a new take on the genre. Protagonist Rick Montoya is not a detective and not completely Italian. Half American, he sports cowboy boots with his classy Italian duds and grew up mesmerized by his Italian Uncle Piero's stories of life as a police officer. Thus, Rick is intrigued when a former schoolmate in the Ministry of Culture asks him to help crack a ring of thieves dealing in stolen Etruscan art. Even better, the top three suspects are located in the Tuscan village of Volterra, which Montoya has always wanted to visit. Author David P. Wagner's characters are engaging, and his descriptions of Italian culture and history add spice to the plot, although avid mystery lovers may wish for a little more suspense.

As he first approaches Volterra, Rick notes that it "likely looked the same as it had five hundred or even a thousand years earlier." Driving to the top of the hill, along the ancient city walls, he observes that the stones "at this lowest level were the original Etruscan … [he] knew there would be a higher part of the wall with stone added by the Romans, and on top of that the Medieval. Italy: always layers upon layers." This sense of the constant presence of the past permeates the book. In particular, as Rick brushes up on the Etruscans to legitimize his cover, the reader learns more about this ancient civilization; for example, Etruscan "fulguriators" told the future "from the shape and size of lightning bolts."

Commissario Conti, Rick's contact in the local police, is naturally not happy to have this outsider treading on his turf but is a likable sort who fantasizes about a retirement filled with grandchildren and bocce ball. The action intensifies when Rick's girlfriend, Erica, arrives, and

renews her acquaintance with one of the suspects.

Well-written and enjoyable to read both as a mystery and a travelogue, this is a book that will send the reader online to their favorite travel site to book a trip to Italy. It is billed on the cover as “A Rick Montoya Italian Mystery,” suggesting that a series is planned; one looks forward to the next adventure travelogue of Montoya. With more experience, it is hoped that Wagner will cut back on some of Montoya’s internal monologues summarizing the plot. Contemporary readers of detective fiction like to speculate for themselves and won’t have any trouble keeping the characters and their potential motives at hand.

David P. Wagner spent nine years living in Italy as a Foreign Service Officer, served in the Peace Corps, and taught high school English.

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