Clarion Review

Mystery

Deadly Encounter
Maria Johs
Maria Jones
978-1-4389-6736-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

Despite its inauspicious, Bulwer-Lytton-esque opening line ("It was a stormy night when Emma MacDonald found herself walking home alone on a deserted footpath"), *Deadly Encounter* is a lively and entertaining murder mystery, and a solid debut by Maria Johs.

Johs' book is set in the rugged Scottish village of Peartree. Police detectives MacLanahan and Nicholson begin investigating the death of a young hospital administrator with environmentalist leanings. An interesting cast of suspects emerges: the high-strung, cryptic-speaking Emma, who found the body; the lecherous minister of a clannish local church; a prim, betrayed wife; and the sharp-tongued real-estate developer whose latest project was blocked by the victim's public activism. The suspects are all fairly well-developed, but the policemen are indistinguishable and it can be confusing to remember which investigator is which. The author is more successful at fleshing out Nicholson's snoopy aunt Edna, who parries village and church lady gossip with dexterity in her efforts to help solve the murder.

Cozy mystery fans will enjoy Johs' descriptions of the mountainous scenery and tea shops, and scenes in which the detectives share glasses of whiskey on the job with witnesses. Johs also does a good job of plotting the motives behind various characters' actions, and she presents a fast-paced denouement with lots of action and drama. There are deft and witty touches throughout the book, from humorous characters' names (a hapless solicitor is named Glendon MacGlum and a town busybody is named Merle Bullfinch) to the unspoken sarcasm ladled out by Aunt Edna.

Johs is less successful with her dialogue, particularly toward the end of the book when the detectives explain why the murderer did what s/he did. The dialogue often sounds unnatural and overly formalized, more like written speech than the spoken word. There are also some situations in the novel which seem unrealistic. Readers are told, for example, that Emma became

mentally unhinged and didn’t speak for years after finding out that her fiancé was cheating on her, which seems like a bit of an overreaction. In another scene the lascivious minister ham-handedly flirts with a hospital receptionist at her desk, complete with wolf whistle and declarations that, as a Man of God, he deserves special treatment.

Sloppy editing mars the text, especially inconsistent placement of quotation marks that often makes it unclear which character is speaking. Some lines in the book are broken off in mid-sentence and jump to the next line, while at other times there are extra spaces between words; these hiccups break the rhythm of the plot.

Looking past the editing flaws and some stilted dialogue, *Deadly Encounter* is the sort of book that makes readers long for a rainy day and a full pot of steaming tea—and perhaps a stout lock on the front door.