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Deadly Memories

S. D. O'Donnell
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A first-time fiction writer gives us an exciting story that mixes serious sleuthing with poignant romance.

S.D. O'Donnell's credible thriller, *Deadly Memories*, links a beautiful amnesiac to a psychopathic murderer. Written as a traditional detective story, the plot develops at a brisk pace.

Discovery of a frightened blonde woman curled up in the hollow of a tree near Saul Becker's home triggers memories he would rather forget. Retired from detective work several years before, Saul had failed to prevent the murder of a woman he loved. Similar feelings for this new woman, called Jayne by investigators, involve him the search for her identity. That search reveals his past, as well as hers.

Saul's preoccupation with Jayne causes him to disregard other events occurring around the condominium complex where he lives. However, the author lets readers understand these clues foreshadow future intrigue. When police officer Walters tells Saul that mutilated squirrels have turned up near the tree where Jayne was found, he thinks raccoons or coyotes probably killed them. "Raccoons don't slice stomachs open with a sharp instrument and then pull the guts out," Walters responds. "No blood in the area, so the lake was just a dumping spot." Even though he ignores this explanation, Saul feels the tingle of goose bumps on his arms.

O'Donnell plants backstory information unobtrusively into plot streams, as when Saul makes his first trip to the mental hospital to visit Jayne. Intent on gaining her trust, he surprises himself by revealing his own suppressed past. "I lied and told him [hospital gate keeper] I used caller ID to avoid my mom's calls. Truth is, she was a lifelong alcoholic and died of cirrhosis when she was forty-eight." Later in the novel, Jayne's kidnapper, Kennedy, allows her a short respite from his torment to talk about herself, thus identifying her fear of a rich and handsome Texan.

Kennedy is one of several complex, pivotal characters. The grandmotherly Mrs. Blackstone, Saul's neighbor, thrives on neighborhood gossip and offers cups of herbal tea whenever friends need to soothe jangled nerves. She invites Jayne to stay with her after she's been released from the hospital, but Mrs. Blackstone's surface calm turns to anger when Saul orders them to stay inside as a safety precaution. After delivering a furious rant at him, she attempts escape.

This first novel by a nonfiction writer reflects a practiced skill with words. O'Donnell connects the diverse plot elements with assured control, bringing each thread to satisfactory conclusion. Effective analogous phrases include "mind like a fastball pitching machine" and "whispers spread like germs on a playground." Several typographical and grammatical errors and clichés, such as "elephant in the room" and "scream at the top of your lungs," intrude. Some readers may find the concluding scene difficult to follow.

Those who choose to read *Deadly Memories* will discover an exciting story that mixes serious sleuthing with poignant romance. The promise of three additional books about Saul and Jayne add to this first installment's appeal.
MARGARET CULLISON (November 15, 2013)

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