

Death by Misadventure

Evelyn Smith

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An old-fashioned noir plot features an effective female detective protagonist.

With *Death By Misadventure*, E. E. Smith creates a throwback mystery story, set shortly after World War II, featuring a female detective in her twenties who takes on a missing-person case that involves a man from her past. The result is a breezy, straightforward detective yarn that will please audiences looking for a quick, enjoyable genre read. The mystery isn't particularly complicated or surprising, but the dialogue is fun, the settings are well rendered, and the plot points fit together well enough for a satisfying ending.

The young detective, Alexis Smith, narrates the story, starting out with the familiar dialogue style of a Chandler noir. She describes her specialty as “discreet inquiries,” and the case at hand opens with her explaining the background of her California-based business—which, as in many a noir plot, is struggling financially until one wealthy client offers to change all that.

In this case, Alexis returns to the office to unexpectedly find Kate, a friend from her teen years. She reveals to the detective that she is now married to Frank Faraday, heir to a wealthy family. As far as Alexis is concerned, Frank is also the one who got away, a boy who once asked her out years earlier and one she often thought about during her loveless marriage to a different man who died during the war. Kate reports that Frank has left her, taken their daughter and left for England, with a lone postcard her only lead. She wants Alexis to find him and kill him—a task she refuses, but she does take the job of tracking him down.

Alexis is an effective detective protagonist for this kind of story—smart enough to foreshadow the possibilities, while never getting too far ahead for the book's mainstream audience.

The story struggles a bit at the beginning, sidetracked by an extended flashback to the detective's teen years and her friendship with her potential client, which mostly sets up information already learned from their earlier meeting and covers where she was during the major events of World War II. But the story improves significantly, once the main character is established and the investigation begins in earnest.

Alexis flies to England to find Frank, and the author throws a number of interesting characters and situations at her along the way. Before long, the case comes to involve a Scotland Yard investigator who could be a love interest or could be spying on Alexis, a country inn full of quirky guests and secret passages, and even a legendary ghost who might be haunting the area.

The whole time, Alexis is also dogged by her unresolved feelings for Frank, her suspicions about Kate's true intentions, and her attempts to keep her investigation secret in a small town.

This story is billed as the first in a series, and the investigation in England provides a solid blueprint for future Alexis Smith cases.

JEFF FLEISCHER (January 6, 2014)

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