

Death of a Bronx Cop

Tom Walker

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In Tom Walker's second novel, the cop's nightstick, a club for self-defense and keeping the peace, becomes a metaphor for one law enforcement family's service and, ultimately, a symbol of tragedy. As the nightstick is passed from one generation of police officer to the next, it becomes an object of family pride, but it also foreshadows what can happen to the honest cops who carry it in the Ryan family.

Walker is a fourth-generation police officer, and he draws on his own family's experience in the New York City area, portraying a police department as corrupt as the criminals. He offers a chilling look at institutionally tolerated rogue supervisors and inspectors in the mid-1950s who will do anything to protect their backs. Honest officers who step on toes or speak out for what is right are targeted for "organizational kills." This revenge takes a number of forms, including framings, dismissals, and even murder.

The story follows Hugh Ryan, a third-generation cop; his son Bill, a rookie; and Grampa, who at age seventy-five, shows he hasn't lost his ability to work on a case, particularly if his son's life is at stake. Grampa knows how the corrupt system works. He even calls on an acquaintance in the mob to help protect his son after Hugh is targeted by his irrational and vengeful supervisor, McGlick. Ironically, although Hugh tells Billy at the book's outset that the nightstick is never to be used for revenge, McGlick grabs Hugh's club and uses it to pummel a prisoner.

Action fills every page, but characters are developed through quick explanations rather than being fully fleshed out. Background is provided in the same dropped-in manner. For example, Walker writes, "Hirschel had been an honest cop but had fallen into bad company when he made detective." Puzzling scenes and relationships also confound. There is a brief mention of Grampa falling asleep on a bench and having a stroke, but he quickly recovers and the incident seems to have no relevance to the unfolding story. More surprising is the author's strange revelation near the end that Bill has had a love-hate relationship with his father, when throughout the book they seem to have a warm connection. The final wrap-up offers a simplistic list of what happens to the characters that detracts from the strong ending.

There are nice touches, however, including Grampa and the mob family's recollections of the past, and the descriptions of Irish wakes and celebrations as rooms "rocked with raucous laughter and sonorous harmonic harmonica music."

Those who love cop thrillers will wonder how much is based on the author's personal "files." Readers will hope that just as the "family nightstick was to be buried forever," so is rampant organizational corruption in the city's police department.

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