

Death on the Night Watch: A Reverend Rob Vander Laan Mystery

Terry Hager

BookSurge

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Death on the Night Watch follows the exploits of Reverend Bob Vander Laan as his ministry among the street people of Grand Rapids, Michigan, pulls him into the murky world of underground pornography and the murders of three young people.

With the story unfolding during the turbulent year of 1969, Reverend Rob assumes the role of the unorthodox minister catering to the needs of people who join street gangs, smoke dope, and groove to the lyrics of Bob Dylan. Reverend Rob's parents disapprove of his ministry, which consists mainly of visiting local bars and gathering the younger crowd together for nightly rap sessions. Reverend Rob's wife is none too happy with the work situation, either. As the heat turns up on the investigation into the murders, Reverend Rob is assaulted and shot at, his house is set on fire, and just to make things interesting, he falls in with a pretty bar hop named Samantha. This causes some friction for Reverend Rob at home, and it's not long before his wife starts mentioning divorce.

Reverend Rob has a lot on his plate. And, at first, one sees here all the elements that might make for an enjoyable read. With all this action taking place in the heyday of the late sixties, one anticipates a crime novel that is both gritty and compelling, with perhaps a dash of ironic humor thrown in to reflect the surreal nature of the times. Unfortunately, *Death on the Night Watch* never quite rises to fulfill those expectations.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly why a book of fiction falls short of its potential. Hager is a competent writer; the mechanics of grammar and plot development are not beyond his abilities. He has pulled together a cast of quirky characters and set them free in a time and a place that ought to infuse the book with the warmth of authenticity.

Yet it is exactly in these two areas that the work falls especially flat. Hager's attempt to recreate the late sixties begins and ends with the insertion of song and film titles into the text, plus a few allusions to political assassinations and Neal Armstrong walking on the moon. Far from rooting one firmly in the recent past, however, these scattered details rather have the effect of someone memorizing a vocabulary list for a grade-school civics exam.

Meanwhile, Hager's prose is sapped from the sheer weight of nonessential details. Every time someone opens a door, Hager records it. Characters scowl, cough, slump their shoulders, push back chairs, and shake their heads with equal frequency. In the end, these faithfully recorded tics clutter virtually every page and effectively keep Hager's prose mired in unoriginality.

A modestly entertaining crime novel, *Death on the Night Watch* is quick and easy to read, but never quite achieves the level of wholly satisfying.

DIANE TAYLOR (June 27, 2011)

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