

Death's Way: A John Santana Novel

Christopher Valen

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Terse yet evocative descriptions portray characters deeply with a minimal number of words.

Life, death, and the right path to take while alive are some of the themes poignantly explored in *Death's Way*, the fifth book featuring Colombian-born homicide detective John Santana as he works with police departments in Minnesota. This time around, what appears to be a case of sexual pleasure turned lethal ends up thrusting the hero into a steamy underworld of drug cartels, call girls, and reincarnation.

The tightly-wound story moves at a fast pace, with each chapter ending on a cliffhanger so that the audience will want to keep reading.

Christopher Valen deftly sketches characters with terse yet evocative descriptions so that one gets to know them well through a minimal number of words. For example, Santana's female partner, Kacie Hawkins, "acquired the nickname 'Designer' because of her shapely backside. She worked out regularly and kept her lean ebony frame in excellent shape." Additionally, Valen has mastered the art of writing choice descriptions to create atmosphere. A rainy day (after Santana and his partner discover their first body) is filled with "raindrops that slid like heavy tears down the windshield. Another cold front had rolled in from the north killing any promise of spring." This portrait of the weather reiterates the story's violence. The novel is full of descriptions like these that keep the plot tight and the action flowing.

For Latino Santana and his African American partner Hawkins, the author does not let their skin color define them. This matter-of-fact treatment of race is refreshing.

Reincarnation is an integral facet of the novel. However, Valen ingenuously leaves it up to the audience to decide if the supposed reincarnation took place. The eerie cover, with its depiction of votive candles and a skeleton holding a scythe, all illuminated in shades of red, immediately evokes the disquieting atmosphere Valen excels at creating.

John Santana fans and mystery aficionados will gravitate toward *Death's Way*. The novel's hiccups are minor. The book's failure to translate all Spanish into English can be confusing. Moreover, although Santana's history with drug gangs is well integrated into the plot, a drug syndicate's involvement in this story seems superfluous. All in all, this novel represents a gripping offering from an award-winning author.

JILL ALLEN (Spring 2014)

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