

Deep Zero

V. S. Kemanis

Opus Nine Books (Jan 25, 2018)

Softcover \$14.99 (350pp)

978-0-9997850-0-3

Deep Zero distinguishes itself thanks to a powerful blend of vivid writing and legal insight.

Facing situations from cyberbullying to murder, District Attorney Dana Hargrove has her work cut out for her in V. S. Kemanis's compelling legal thriller *Deep Zero*.

At once a mom, wife, and DA, Dana Hargrove is thrown into uncharted and heart-wrenching legal territory after a teenager, Naomi Steuben, leaps to her death from a bridge during a frigid White Plains, New York, winter. Naomi is the apparent victim of social media harassment from two girls in her high school.

Are those girls responsible for Naomi's death? As Hargrove and her team race to find answers, their job is complicated by new cases—one of teen misbehavior, and one a grisly domestic murder case. A wild party results in charges of assault and driving under the influence that involve Hargrove's husband and children.

The narrative skillfully weaves its multiple cases together. Hargrove's attorney husband litigates a case against an opposing attorney whose daughter is charged in the DUI case; that girl has a romantic attachment to Hargrove's son. Hargrove's daughter also becomes a material witness in the assault case.

Throughout, the story reveals the fascinating tactics and strategies used in litigation. Attorneys on every side investigate, discuss, and proceed while the judges rule. The book's legal maneuvering rings true and makes for riveting reading, all the more so because of the emotional elements that are included. The narrative never forgets that there is a human cost to misbehavior and poor judgment, even when its characters do.

Characters are clearly, consistently, and compassionately written. Physical descriptions, actions, and dialogue bring even secondary characters into sharp focus. Characters' own perspectives round them out: suicidal Naomi sees herself as a "sad lump of a girl"; Hargrove believes that a promise is a promise and that action is the proof of integrity.

Active, verbal, and descriptive writing makes for consumable reading. Plot twists come along smoothly and credibly, fostered by clear character motivations. Still, the story strays from the initial focus, a compelling exploration of the legal ramifications of cyberbullying, with character actions hijacking that story line and pushing a subplot about teen partying into primary focus.

The book's title and early developments suggest that subzero winter weather might be a factor in the perilous events, a thread most clearly developed when Naomi's body is found frozen in the ice of the Hudson River and that factors in less dramatically after.

Deep Zero distinguishes itself with its powerful blend of vivid writing, legal expertise and insight, and finely and compassionately drawn characters.

GARY HENRY (February 15, 2018)

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