

Detroit Breakdown

D. E. Johnson

Minotaur Books (Sep 4, 2012)

Hardcover \$25.99 (336pp)

978-1-250-00662-2

Detroit, 1912. Will Anderson, a key figure in D.E. Johnson's previous two novels, *The Detroit Electric Schemes* and *Motor City Breakdown*, seeks to help Elizabeth Hume uncover the truth about her cousin Robert, a patient in Eloise Insane Asylum accused of murder. Robert claims the killing, and others like it inside the asylum, are the work of a serial killer mimicking the horrific murders committed by the Phantom of the Opera. Elizabeth steadfastly believes in her cousin's innocence but there's no way to prove it, until Will volunteers to feign amnesia in order to investigate from within.

Once inside the madhouse, he's subjected to horrors unimaginable to the ordinary citizens of Detroit, including immersion in freezing cold water and blistering hot baths, as well as exposure to radiation. The hunt for the real killer (Will is aided on the outside by another past acquaintance, Detective Thomas Riordan, while Elizabeth poses as a volunteer) takes multiple twists and turns, with a steadily mounting body count. If readers think they know the true identity of the Phantom killer, the surprising climax may prove them wrong.

Johnson is fast becoming a stand-out author in the realm of "historical noir." As with the other novels in his Detroit series, the attention to detail is impressive and the narrative's headlong momentum makes it hard to put the story down. Occasionally, however, his prose falls victim to that same reckless pace with less-than-original results. A phone call "had shaken her to the core." Getting something done "seemed a tall order." After Will gets himself incarcerated and begins witnessing first-hand the dreadful conditions endured by the inmates, he has second thoughts about the wisdom of his plan: "When I thought about what I was doing, a chill ran up my spine."

Fortunately, such clichéd lapses are few. Will and Elizabeth are earnest and appealing characters who must battle both institutionalized indifference and cold-blooded evil to see justice prevail. Will's ordeal behind bars is particularly well-drawn, down to the food served to inmates: "The meat clearly had never been acquainted with salt or pepper. It was a boiled, tough, gristle-filled lump of inedible garbage."

Johnson's story wears its research lightly while reminding us about the brutal treatment of mentally disturbed patients in the not-so-distant past. *Detroit Breakdown* works as a stand-alone novel, though readers in search of a well-crafted historical mystery series will likely want to read the first two entries as well.

LEE POLEVOI (November 20, 2012)

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