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Eve Missing

Ralph Pezzullo
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And now for something completely different … an in-your-face début roman noir (très noir). This multitalented author's novel The Resurrection of Thomas Lear was a Faulkner Prize for Fiction semi-finalist; his Life and Times of the Swamp Fox, a series of NEH-funded radio dramas played on PBS and the BBC, was nominated for a Peabody Award; and his stage plays are produced in New York, L.A., and London. Other work fueled Miami Vice or feeds national publications from The Washington Post on down.

This novel is missing absolutely nothing: plot, pace, characterization, and denouement are technically masterful. But a good thriller, like good sex, needs more than technique-and atmosphere abounds here, in the powerful, sometimes gritty renderings of the New York scene and lush and leafy California.

Not too many of New York's teen-age prostitutes run into a mentor who cleans up their act and propels them into the world of high fashion. And it's not too cool for Eve to go missing thereafter, especially as some high-powered locals have a hot and heavy personal interest her.

Enter Smokey Annicelli, an ex-New York cop-"ex" because he got shot up by a naked lady he would have shot down first had he been concentrating on his safety instead of her sex. A rough diamond to any new acquaintance, he has of course a heart of gold and might just have read Raymond Chandler between long hours of drinking, schmoozing, and considering women's (and the system's) ingratitude to a decent cop. Or maybe there's some residual old Italian Catholicism and the hope of redemption. He takes the case and finds the road to Eve and redemption is via hell, though the California scenes suggest the hope of heaven, if it's only imagined sexual ambience.

Whether or not he'll find Eve remains the nerve-wracking question until the end. Annicelli doesn't neglect near-term rewards in embarking on an anguished affair with Eve's significant other, a femme who verges on fatale and may or may not be Eve's kidnapper-or worse.

The story is a great trip; all four horsemen-sex, jealousy, blackmail, and murder-are along for the full gallop. It's a ride that explores power, corruption, and fear among people who slipped into quick-cash worlds and can't pull out. The finale is best described as climactic verging on outré, but today's readers expect a heightened experience.

This is not a book to leave on a Quaker grandmother's breakfast table or a colleague's desk: in either case, Eve will go missing in ten seconds flat.

PETER SKINNER (October 16, 2003)

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