

False Images

Catherine Dunbar

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Leone Fleming, a young English art restorer, must take the stripping rag to her own life to uncover the forgeries of affection in her family. She suffers from a recurring guilty nightmare of a day when she was six and watched her mother drive off to her death. Leone lives with her doting father, Sir Richard, an opinionated barrister who has accumulated enough enemies for his daughter's life to be threatened daily. Throughout this psychological thriller, Leone is stalked by her inner demons and her father's nemesis, with only her strong will to sustain her.

Like Hitchcock in an art gallery, Dunbar has crafted a multi-dimensional mystery where variable motives for murder abound—love triangles, vengeance, forgery, and fraud. She masters the pathos of the genre: “It wasn't just the sight of her pale lifeless form which had distressed him so. It was the knowledge that she would suffer the indignity of post-mortem. That every inch of her would be turned inside out, every part measured and photographed so that the police and the experts could pick over the details like carrion crows.” The characters in Leone's peripheral world are all quirkily suspect, from Piers Carlton, the testy trader who lost his mother's fortune in the Lloyds scandal, to Vic Morenzo, the ex-con specializing in mutilation, hell bent on making Sir Richard pay for him missing his mother's funeral while in jail. All the connections, however tenuous, all the psychological motivations, have something to do with family ties—and art.

Leone traverses the high-stakes London art scene. Though her literary references tend to be too mixed, Dunbar is an adept art historian, offering insight into many prominent artists' techniques: “Gainsborough was all evanescence, the flickering light and shadow on a dress. And yet in the end, it was Gainsborough who'd been the one to take such care with his pigments, and Reynolds who'd been notorious for using fugitive colours, some of which—like the organic lake colour—had begun to fade in his paintings during his own lifetime. Hellish to restore, those. Give her a Gainsborough any day.” When the owner of a reputed gallery remarks on how Gainsborough has such a way with the English landscape, Leone notes to herself that the artist had actually painted from models he had constructed in his flat.

False images, like Gainsborough's landscape paintings, are the recurring metaphor in this mystery. Ultimately, Leone must face the false images in her own life. Her father lives by the motto: “Know your strengths and your enemy's weaknesses.” In a double plot twist, Leone comes to learn her enemy's true identity whose weakness she had never suspected.

JO-ANN GRAZIANO (July / August 2000)

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