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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆

Frank Corrigan's Dominoes

Anthony A. Kegode
BookSurge (January 2009)
Softcover $15.00 (488pp)
978-1-4392-5623-7

Part crime investigation, part snuff film, Frank Corrigan's Dominoes borrows from the monolithic themes of great detective novels. Broken homes, abuse of all kinds, tough cops, heartless murderers, Irish roughnecks, and wisecracking detectives—it's all here. What sets Dominoes apart from a run-of-the-mill thriller, though, is Kegode's careful attention to detail. His choices, even the goriest, show a real talent for finding evidence of humanity. In a black-and-white landscape of killers and victims, where good and evil are clearly marked, Kegode tries to find common ground and make sense of meaningless violence.

Dominoes is a bloody story of two brothers, both damaged by their vicious upbringing and both haunted and controlled by their absent father. One brother, Richard, is truly savage—a rapist, he enjoys preying on young women who visit the garage where he works. The other, James, is more fractured. He kills men only, using a gun to seize power over others. These two cut a wide, bloody swath through Massachusetts, dogged by state troopers. The body count in this novel is high, and it seems like every other chapter adds another handful of victims to the stack. The murders are sandwiched between flashbacks—from both the Corrigans and the police who are hunting them. Every character is completely guided by his or her background; the blood spots on their past form fateful constellations. The pattern is obvious from the first chapter, and as each character's back story unfolds, the reader learns how heavily the present moment depends on the past.

Stereotypes and well-trodden themes aside, Frank Corrigan's Dominoes is strongest when it wanders off the beaten path of the crime genre. Much of the novel reads like James Ellroy's Hollywood Nocturnes, or parts of Desolation by Steven King. But Dominoes has a few truly beautiful asides where Kegode lets metaphor take over and really explores the inner lives of the peripheral characters. There is a great moment at a roadblock, when in the car next to James Corrigan a fleet of limos are "beeping like the piping of a demented wedding march." The cars move closer to the barricade. "Felix's father honked again while Felix's mother warned him about his bad heart," Kegode writes. "He leaned out the window, his balding head placed directly in James' line of fire." The moment intensifies as Kegode lets readers know the characters; suddenly a life is at stake, and readers worry over what James will do. In another chapter, James confronts a gas station owner, and we learn that the man writes poetry while he works the night shift. These moments really shine, and Kegode has a deft touch with the smaller scenes.

Frank Corrigan's Dominoes delivers a serious slice of pulp fiction. It spares the reader nothing: every rape, every moment of suffering is on the page. In many ways it is faithful to its genre, sparing no one and letting hard-hitting men duke it out over the spoils. But when the focus shifts, even momentarily, to the people on the fringe of the action, Kegode's talent starts to shine. For a debut novel, Dominoes is ripe with promise.
CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (May 18, 2010)

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