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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ GENERAL FICTION

Gold Fish: A John Austin Adventure

John Michael McDermott
iUniverse (April 2009)
Softcover $18.95 (271pp)
978-0-595-45925-4

Gold Fish is the gripping first novel in a projected series of action-adventure mysteries featuring John “Auty” Austin. A successful lawyer on a self-imposed sabbatical Auty is seeking a new direction for his life and career. He has left behind his law practice and a would-be girlfriend Britney Bonner and is on his way from Madison to Sarasota to tell his plans to his eighty-three-year-old mentor and former law partner Ed Fielding. Given the uncertainty of his relationship to Britney he feels free to begin a new one with Rosie Rutledge the airline attendant who treated him so discourteously on his flight to Tampa.

Shortly after Auty’s re-acquaintance with Ed and an introduction to his seveneen-year-old caregiver Maggie the old man dies of a heart attack and the plot begins to boil. Auty learns that he and Maggie share the proceeds of Fielding’s will provided they live for the next 180 days. He also learns of Ed’s involvement with his own deceased parents and other secret family relationships. Ed’s two long-estranged sons show up and attempt to claim the estate and its assets. Threats are made deadly snakes turn up in Auty’s dresser drawers Maggie is run off the road and a friend driving her car is killed. Auty and Rosie experience multiple dangers as they develop a romantic relationship. Britney arrives uninvited to share a Thanksgiving weekend with them in one very funny scene.

Amid the intense scenes of violence including a bombing of a beach house and a vicious kidnapping there are well-hidden surprises too such as the connection between the “gold” and the “fish” of the book’s title. Finding the cause of Ed’s death becomes more grist for McDermott’s fine grinding mystery mill.

The characters are well developed and ones readers would like to know better—even Auty in his several disguises—or quickly avoid if they saw them on the street. The settings with their references to local icons landmarks and the history of events like Tampa Bay’s Gasparilla Pirate Festival pique the reader’s interest as well. The pacing for the novel is excellent and the story is enhanced by intercuts and flashbacks. An evocative tightly-written prologue initiates the tension that culminates in the first-class action-packed brawl of a climax worthy of the best of the genre and a two-fisted hero and his girl.

John McDermott’s overall competency and the all-around quality of Auty Austin’s first adventure bode well for the future of the series.
(August 21, 2009)

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