ForeWord Reviews

Grave Undertaking
Mark de Castrique
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Readers are familiar with private eyes, retired police, and charming old ladies who knit as detectives, but an undertaker as detective opens up new possibilities for crime solving. A native of North Carolina, the author brings to this novel both his small-town experience and his technical storytelling skills as an award-winning producer (Emmy, Clio, and Telly) of television and film to give a new twist to detecting.

Barry Clayton, policeman turned undertaker, is serving as witness and supervisor to the digging up and relocation of a coffin when another corpse is discovered lying atop the coffin with a bullet hole in the skull. After calling in the county sheriff, Clayton discovers a photo of the woman he is dating, Dr. Susan Miller, in the corpse's wallet, and he is drawn in to the investigation to clear his girlfriend and himself of any suspicion. He must also keep himself alive while he probes into secrets from the past.

Woven through the typical tale of lust, greed, and power is the novel's theme of the importance of relationships and the choices made around those relationships. In this second mystery (the first was *Dangerous Undertaking*), Clayton's ability to solve the crime is enhanced because of friendships and bonds within this small community rather than high-powered connections or technology. With help from his long-time friend, Sheriff Tommy Lee Wadkins, as well as the local pastor and others, Clayton avoids becoming one of his own customers and solves the murder.

Meanwhile, Clayton's choice to sacrifice career for the welfare of his parents and the family business is now tested—he receives an offer to sell to a funeral home chain (Hoffman Enterprises) for a fantastic profit. As he investigates the possibilities for a different future, two boys are killed in a car crash and Clayton arranges for the mother to see her sons one last time. He discovers the unique gifts—as undertaker as well as detective—that he has to offer, and thus solves the mystery of his future as well.

> *"You were so kind," Libby said. She took the ornament from my hands and let her fingers caress the protective glass. "They*

> *warned me at the hospital that I shouldn't try to see them again. That the damage had been too great. You proved them wrong."*
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> *"I saw in her features all the Appalachian women who pioneered these mountains … Theirs was a heritage that would not show up on a Hoffman Enterprises balance sheet. Who would a grieving mother be looking at three years from now?"*

It is this sense of heritage and lineage, of the responsibility to family and community, set in the hills of North Carolina, that give the book its unique voice. Clayton, happily, makes his choice to keep the family business, reassuring readers that there will yet be more mountain mysteries with unusual undertakings to come.

Paula Scardamalia