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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ MYSTERY

Lies to Die For: Max Larkin Detective Series Book Two

Todd M. Thiede
CreateSpace (Dec 4, 2013)
Softcover $12.95 (258pp)
978-1-4921-6647-4

Thiede is a solid writer, cleverly guiding us along an original plot, unfolding the mystery with realistic action.

Detective Max Larkin pursues another serial killer in Todd M. Thiede's *Lies to Die For*, a second mystery featuring Rockton Police Department's go-to guy. Larkin soon finds himself immersed in an ugly plot for revenge, a scheme that also inflicts damage on the city's police force.

A notorious college professor, Lawrence Finestein, is murdered. Larkin and his partner, Jesse Fairlane, get the assignment. It's a vicious murder, the corpse marked with an *L*, but then the situation worsens. Other murders occur in Rockton, a small city west of Chicago. Soon Larkin himself stumbles into the killer's sights.

After the Finestein murder, Larkin had to be called back to duty. He'd been suspended and in therapy because of events in *Time Killer*, the first in the series. Fairlane, a younger cop and daughter of a police officer killed on duty, is somewhat of a cliché—feisty, smart, and resented by some of her compatriots. In fact, Larkin could be described in the same way, although Fairlane is written as bisexual.

The author also uses sexual preferences as a plot thread. The professor preyed on students, sexually using and tossing away young people of both genders. The emphasis on sexual preferences appears confusing, but it becomes relevant to the narrative, and Thiede does an admirable job of handling sexual preferences casually as part of everyday life.

Thiede writes in present tense, with an omniscient viewpoint, sometimes making for stilted perspective: "Once Max enters the station, he feels the officers staring at him like he's a leper." The case plays out over a few days, but a present-tense narrative would have worked better had Thiede chosen to write in first person, giving the story more immediacy and a more personalized focus. Also, when one of the murders is discovered and investigated late in the narrative, information about—and empathy for—the victim must wait for a flashback chapter.

Thiede has a good grip on his two protagonists, but there are leaps, rather than evolution, with peripheral character development. Another police detective has a major breakdown without any foreshadowing. A suspect is discovered to have committed a crime too bizarre to fit his characterization, but it's a plot twist that does inflict punishment on an unlikable antagonist.

The narrative often both shows and tells: "Max's lips curl into a half-smile as he decides how to respond to that." The narrative also sometimes stumbles into the passive voice: "The tape gets ripped from Rebecca's eyes." Tension is ramped up nicely, as the narrative zigs and zags from one suspect to another, and there are some nice plot twists, especially when the real killer is revealed. Dialogue is solid rather than deft.

One flaw leaves a large hole in believability: when a series of murders is committed with a common signature, a city and its police would be overwhelmed with media coverage and demands for state or FBI intervention, yet Thiede doesn't mention either.

The plot is original and clever, especially in its motivations and its ultimate culprit. Thiede is a solid writer, so the mystery unfolds with realistic action shadowed with sufficient doubt to keep the story rolling quickly, logically, and entertainingly.

GARY PRESLEY (January 14, 2014)

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