



Living Spectres: a Chesterton Holte, Gentleman Haunt, Mystery

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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Yarbro takes a light step into the world of mystery with this book, delivering no gore, just Agatha Christie charm and cerebral fun at a good clip.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Living Spectres* is a pleasurable tour through a noir labyrinth of murder, ghosts, and international intrigue.

This sequel to Yarbro's *Haunting Investigation* is set in 1924 Philadelphia and follows savvy and sassy crime reporter Poppy Thornton in her relentless pursuit of a good story. With shades of Nancy Drew, Poppy is a charming, independent woman with a proclivity for sleuthing.

Though Poppy is an inquisitive and assertive reporter, the gentlemanly Chesterton Holte, her incorporeal sidekick, makes up for what she lacks in extrasensory perception. A Canadian spy until his death, Holte uses his ghostly status to slip in and out between the land of the living and the dimension of ghosts to get information and aid Poppy in solving the matters at hand.

And there are many matters at hand. In addition to covering customs and antiques fraud and the unsolved death of elite businessman Madison Moncrief, Poppy must also contend with the search for her cousin—the nefarious Stacy Dritchner, who, in the prequel, kidnapped her and left her for dead in a warehouse.

Another matter is the mystery of missing heir GAD Pearse, Poppy's childhood friend. Using her societal clout and Holte's interdimensional talents, Poppy gathers crucial information about each case to assist in her reporting. When one customs fraud suspect escapes police custody after jumping from a bridge and onto an unidentified yacht, the questions are nearly endless.

Yarbro holds strong in her societal depiction of the early '20s—the new ways of liquor and folly rapidly encroaching on the old, formal ways of life. Poppy is working and succeeding in a man's job and every day must weather the sarcastic jealousy and watchful eyes of her male colleagues.

Poppy's flirtation with the dashing Inspector J. B. Loring is tangible, the two working side by side with the kind of reporter/cop rapport that crackles like Holte's spectral presence eavesdropping on the telephone line. Yet Poppy refuses to give into temptation, citing that her male colleagues at the *Philadelphia Clarion* will speculate that she is using her feminine wiles to climb the professional ladder.

Yarbro also explores the theme of living specters in their many incarnations: Chesterton Holte; the Armenian refugee group of the same name; the already dead wandering in the dimension of ghosts; the missing unknown. Holte pumps his fellow phantoms for information, but he also sympathizes with the sadness and confusion of coming to terms with life, death, and the afterworld.

At times, Yarbro falls prey to extravagant prose (the excessive use of Poppy's favorite expression "Ye gods!"), and the overuse of backstory sometimes deflates the tension. Yet with fluid transitions and engaging dialogue, *Living Spectres*

does well to stay with the action, the day-to-day moving ahead of solving mysteries, and the navigating of relationships.

Vampire scene queen Yarbro takes a light step into the world of mystery with this book, delivering no gore, just Agatha Christie charm and cerebral fun at a good clip.

MEREDITH HARDWICKE (June 30, 2016)

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