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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Losing Amber-Lee

Leith C. MacArthur
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William Snow would be supremely interesting to chat with over a nice dinner. or perhaps to take a cruise with out on the open sea. As presented by MacArthur he's got a smart-as-a-whip mind yet hardly wears it on his sleeve. Snow is also touched with a peculiar and spectacular psychic gift that seems so pure and so unique in its manifestation that it's arguably a miracle that he puts it to such unfailing good use as a private detective for he could just as easily use it to promote evil. No he's a good guy and if you got him going he'd likely regale you with tales of his adventures some more believable than others.

The dynamic central character in *Losing Amber-Lee* however suffers from unrelenting demons; this is the personality element that distinguishes him—and this novel—from other private eyes and mystery capers. The roots of Snow's demons can be traced back 30 years to the murder of his younger sister and his inability in that moment to do anything about it. Deeply haunted and having never fully shaken off his shame this is why Snow is persistently almost fanatically devoted to solving crimes involving missing children. And it is why when his phone rings one day and a little girl named Amber-Lee tenderly asks if he can locate her real daddy Snow is quick to set out on another adventure. This time though if he solves the mystery of Amber-Lee's real father—which will probably entail having to save Amber-Lee's life—it may come at the expense of his own.

Beautifully structured and styled with startling economy MacArthur has been careful not to overload *Losing Amber-Lee* with incidental characters; everyone appearing in the story is there for a specific reason. This would include Snow's sweet but physically deformed dog Bradley and his sweet but distant lady-love Paula—who adds a veneer of humanity to the book as well as a nice breather from the clue-gathering and information-synthesizing one expects from crime fiction. Several other characters are malicious malcontents and there are several scenes of unusual violence. Yet because these are relatively rare they don't alienate the reader. Instead they earn your admiration for Snow's intensity—his willingness to do what he must to help young Amber-Lee.

One of the novel's great virtues is that each time you're convinced Snow couldn't move any further toward his goal the author deploys some hitherto unseen tactic that somehow pushes things ahead. It's a thrilling skill especially as no event ever feels shoehorned into the story. Perhaps MacArthur should be most applauded for the restraint he shows in his use of Snow's alluring psychic powers. Waiting for them to be used builds a hardy sense of suspense into the tale and it's almost always worth the payoff.

LEONARD JACOBS (June 28, 2007)

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