

## Love and Crime

**V.S. Kemanis**

Opus Nine Books (May 1, 2017)

Softcover \$13.99 (302pp)

978-0-9965909-8-3

*Anyone who appreciates supple writing and fine storytelling will enjoy every minute spent reading these stories.*

Eleven compulsively readable short stories reach beyond the collection's title in V. S. Kemanis's *Love and Crime*.

The pieces are arranged in three categories—Love, Crime, and Love and Crime—yet their themes are varied and their plots refreshingly unpredictable. Love, crime, or both may set events in motion, but the true subject matter is always the complicated and often contradictory nature of being human.

In the lead story, "Rosemary and Reuben," a gourmand can taste every ingredient in a dish but is oblivious to what's really missing in his life. In "Collector's Find," a streetwise defense attorney finds herself romantically—and possibly criminally—entangled with an organized crime figure.

Characters throughout the collection are consistently well drawn, with enough quirks and characteristics to emerge as fully rounded and credible people. They do not always act admirably or even rationally, and their foibles are often self-defeating, yet they are sympathetic and likely to garner empathy rather than puzzlement or derision.

"The Zephyr" depicts the awkwardness of a newly blended family, capturing the perspective of a young girl whose well-meaning parents struggle to establish a new normal. Half wisecracking and half sullen in responding to the adult world around her, the narrator's observations crackle with the pain and feverish anxiety of early adolescence.

A good deal of the pleasure in the collection comes from the writing itself. Kemanis knows how to build a story and keep it going. Many pieces begin with opening lines that raise questions that the reader wants immediate answers to.

The first line of "Weeping Willow"—"An autumn morning in my fortieth year marked the delayed start to my life"—triggers a desire to know why the character is just getting around to the business of living. A few stories end on hauntingly ambiguous notes. Despite its hopeful title, "Cactus Flower" ends inconclusively, with a sense of foreboding as to what may lie ahead.

In one of the collection's richest pieces, "Journal Entry, Franklin DeWitt," the narrator sets out to tell the truth about an infamous crime in the insular world of ballet—yet skeptical readers may wonder if the narrator himself knows the full truth of the story.

In each story, details are revealed little by little, and few but well-chosen descriptors are a delight to read, as when the adequate but unspectacular partner of a truly brilliant prima ballerina is dismissed as "the handsome coatrack."

Three brief pieces are included in an epilogue. They read as a mash-up of a blog and autobiography, and seem out of place within the collection.

Readers expecting the technicolor gore and murderous passion implied by the collection's title may be disappointed,

but anyone who appreciates supple writing and fine storytelling will enjoy every minute spent reading the stories in *Love and Crime*.

SUSAN WAGGONER (April 9, 2017)

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