Clarion Review

Mystery

MALICE: A Pete Thorsen Mystery
Robert Wangard
Ampersand
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Five Stars (out of Five)

When a well-known real estate developer is found viciously murdered on the grounds of his own golf course, semi-retired attorney and reluctant sleuth Pete Thorsen tries to keep his distance from the intrigue surrounding the crime. Not much time has passed since he was swept up into another murder investigation and forced to prove his own innocence, and the last thing he wants is to be drawn into yet another mystery.

Malice is Robert Wangard's second novel to feature protagonist Pete Thorsen, and mystery enthusiasts are sure to be satisfied with the gripping story and expertly developed characters. Pete's experiences in *Target*, Wangard's first novel, have left him wary, haunted, and a bit concerned about a growing reliance on the comfort of a glass of Thor's Hammer vodka. The lingering animosity between him and the current sheriff is yet another reason to avoid becoming caught up in trying to solve a new crime. His disinclination toward further involvement begins to dissolve, however, when he agrees to help the victim's widow protect her financial assets. Although he initially insists on drawing the line at legal advice, his reluctance to get involved soon gives way as the pressure mounts through intimidating phone calls, arson, and threats to his stepdaughter's safety. As he says, "I ceased being a lawyer when my daughter was harassed and my house was torched. I'm a hunter now."

Malice is fast-paced and rich with intrigue, and the author deftly draws readers into the excitement of the novel's events and the life of his protagonist. The dialogue is natural and the northern Michigan lakeside setting is vividly described. Pete is an easy character to like and his idiosyncrasies, such as a fascination with the Vikings, and habits such as a proclivity to sing along with Johnny Cash and Buddy Holly songs, bring a realistic depth to his character. His struggles with both personal issues, including parenting his privately schooled daughter, add a touch of imperfection that enhances the already well-defined characterization.

The story is engaging and flows smoothly from start to finish, and it is filled with unexpected twists and surprises. The author is particularly skilled at providing his characters with depth and clarity, and his ability shines in showcasing Pete's talent as an effective and resourceful, if reluctant, investigator. Readers will be particularly impressed with Pete's rather creative approach to dealing with a dangerous mobster whose possible involvement in recent events puts the semi-retired attorney's stepdaughter at risk. Supporting characters are handled just as thoroughly, from the mobster to Pete's potential love interest.

Wangard's plot develops with suspenseful precision and his protagonist is as compelling as the mystery he endeavors to solve. Although familiarity with the previous novel is not necessary to enjoy *Malice*, readers are certain to be sufficiently inspired to both seek out the first book in the Pete Thorsen series and look forward to the third installment. *Malice* is an impressive second novel from a very talented and prolific writer.

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