

Mud Blood

Joan Del Monte

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The phrase “life imitates art” takes on new meaning for mystery novelist Vera Moonachie in Joan Del Monte’s *Mud Blood*. Vera’s collaborator Fulton Yee goes missing taking with him the identity of the fictional murderer which Vera needs in order to finish their novel and satisfy her pushy self-centered agent. Vera’s inquiry into Fulton’s disappearance acquaints her with a cast of characters that includes a tough-talking but charming private investigator Fulton’s unhappy trio of exes and a world of competitive hack authors in which a chef is pitted against a former underwear model. Meanwhile Fulton’s disappearance is somehow connected to a decades-old land dispute between Chinese immigrants and duplicitous landlords as well as a separate string of bombings used as inspiration for Vera and Fulton’s book. When Fulton turns up murdered Vera has to keep her wits about her and protect her mother whose progressive dementia makes her a trying companion.

Del Monte who has taught a college course in mystery writing and is the author of two other books lives in Venice California the location of her latest novel’s land dispute. To create a convincing backdrop for her story she traveled to the resorts and cottages where some of the fictional events take place; she also interviewed Chinese-Americans who lived there. Del Monte weaves this research into one of her most interesting plot strands sympathetically portraying the Chinese immigrants as resourceful entrepreneurs who despite discrimination created a thriving shanty town. The conflicts between the Americans and Chinese—and their effects on their descendants such as Fulton—form the strongest part of *Mud Blood*.

Vera narrates from an almost crotchety first-person perspective. Here she cuts through a superficial secretary’s stalling maneuvers: “Obviously your job is to make her time more valuable. Keeping people waiting is a psychological ploy to enhance the value of the person people are waiting to see.” She then baffles the secretary with a reference to Godot. Del Monte’s combination of quick-witted intelligent writing and a tart stubborn main character makes *Mud Blood* energetic and engaging.

Del Monte handles historical background character development and the pacing of the actual mystery with ease but the novel still bogs down in places. There are so many parallel plots that several particularly the relationship between Vera and Fred and the bit about the bombings remain underdeveloped. The fleshed-out stories struggle for primacy requiring lists and diagrams to keep their interlocking casts straight. The best threads could each easily support a fascinating book without the background chaos of ex-lovers aging parents and everything else.

Overall this mystery has more than enough draw for lovers of suspense stories and whodunits who enjoy a historical *mise-en-scene* and crisp writing.

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