

My Face Among Strangers

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Could it be that a mild prank he and a friend pulled years ago is causing all these murders and assassination attempts? That's the question Matt Kern feels impelled to investigate in this briskly paced thriller.

Kern is a freelance writer whose specialty is medical and scientific articles. Nothing about him-historically or temperamentally-suggests that he is a Sherlock-in-waiting. But when his home is burglarized for no apparent reason, he notices something that makes him wonder if the crime is as random as the police believe. Once having sensed this sinister element, he is off on the chase, even though the pursuit sets off more tremors in his already shaky marriage.

The action takes place in eastern New Jersey and Pennsylvania, primarily along the corridor from New York to Philadelphia. In making his rounds, Kern turns up characters and locales that often are so vivid we regret leaving them behind as the plot moves on.

Throughout much of the story, Kern seems strangely detached, exhibiting neither fear nor bravado. It is only when he makes contact with the elusive and enigmatic Cara-who just might be the killer he's after-that he becomes fully engaged emotionally. One of the best parts about his dogged sleuthing is its total believability. He delves into the accumulating crimes the way anyone who writes for a living would-poring over phone books and road maps, scrutinizing newspapers, searching through libraries and interviewing dozens of potential sources. He has no buddies on the police force, no network of colorful tipsters and no pivotal strokes of pure luck. He must grub out each detail one by one.

Shubin does a masterful job of making the story just as intriguing as the protagonist who drives it along.

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