ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

My Father's Son
Stephen W. Trout
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Parents and educators know that teenagers behave differently than other human beings. Their newly mature bodies combined with emotional immaturity create situations that can become volatile. Sometimes hasty decisions get them into perilous circumstances that continue to haunt them into adulthood.

Four teenage boys set in motion just such a scenario in *My Father's Son*, Stephen Trout's first novel. The story begins at the funeral of Christian's beloved wife as he ponders an incident that occurred twenty-six years before, when he was fourteen. What happened that fateful night has remained a secret known only to him and his three friends, Billy, Jimmy, and Nick. At least he believed they had kept the secret as promised, but when Nick, Jimmy, and both Billy and Christian's wives all die unexpectedly, he realizes something sinister is at work. The two surviving men, haunted by guilt and suspecting the worst, begin to uncover clues about why their successful adult lives unraveled so quickly.

The friendship Christian forges with Billy, two years his senior, seems unlikely given their different backgrounds. But Billy's braggadocio compensates for Christian's low self-esteem, caused by an unloving father. The two frightened boys fought that long-ago night, then pledged to support each other, giving Christian confidence. The author writes, "Christian thought to himself, this is all I ever wanted from my dad, to feel something, anything—to be loved."

Following the fateful incident, Billy shows a different side to his macho personality. When his mother is away at work, she depends on him to supervise his younger sister and care for a stroke-paralyzed father. "Tears started to well up in his eyes," Trout says of Billy, "not only because he felt bad for his dad…but he was also crying for himself."

Timid Jimmy had been invited along that night to cover for Christian, whose mother forbade him to associate with Billy. Jimmy lives with his widowed father, Gene. The day after the boys' night out, Gene orders Jimmy to stay in his room while he works feverishly at tasks he

hopes will protect his son. Jimmy finally summons the courage to ask his father what he'd been doing and Gene replies: "Son, there is no reason I can think of for me to tell you. You have no need to know."

Trout's former profession as a lawyer in Pennsylvania informs his writing about the legal system of that state, where this mystery unfolds. He has constructed a complex plot that, unfortunately, also includes some implausible twists. The largely summarized narrative fails to engross readers as thoroughly as more active scenes would accomplish. Trout's use of dialogue effectively captures characters' personalities, but clichés, such as characters repeatedly saying variations of "I won't go there," miss opportunities to reveal more.

Despite these shortcomings, those interested in mysteries showcasing the psychological motives of characters will enjoy this book. It should be avoided by readers sensitive to explicit sexual detail.

Margaret Cullison