

Mystery

Noir: A Novel

Robert Coover

The Overlook Press

978-1-59020-294-4

(March 4, 2010)

“Trouble with webs. When you’re in one, you can’t see past the next knot,” laments private investigator Philip Noir, the lead character in Robert Coover’s gritty and compelling novel filled with danger, death, and dames.

In *Noir*, Coover offers a classic hard-boiled detective novel with a literary twist. The tale certainly provides the genre’s required elements: a mysterious, classy, yet unapproachable woman in trouble; a dark plot filled with traps more and more impossible to escape; and a cast of crooked characters from the police and underworld. Yet the entire story unfolds in the *second* person (“You were in the alleyway...”), which proves as intriguing as it is challenging to read.

The story unfolds as a mysterious and beautiful widow hires Noir, that is, you, to investigate her husband’s murder. Then, she turns up dead. You feel compelled to solve her murder. So you slink through the city’s dark streets and wade through underground tunnels and sewers, digging up dirt from every contact you have. You interview prostitutes and torch singers, street rats and police insiders from the docks, diners, and bars. You’re a master at this shady underworld, but the widow’s story begins to fall apart and few clues emerge. Then, as the bodies of those who help you start piling up, you are framed for murder. You get the idea.

As the mystery unfolds, it leads the reader down a fascinating series of false paths and offers a slew of potential solutions. Each character, from the street rat to the secretary to the torch-song singer reveals clues and leads that keep the reader guessing.

Robert Coover, a professor at Brown University, has authored a number of plays, short stories, and novels. And his storytelling expertise is evident in this latest offering. He has created an intriguing plot with captivating twists. A word of warning must be offered to potential readers, however. This book, packed with raw language and sexual references, is intended for adults. Also, the second-person voice, especially when coupled with flashbacks that seem to come unexpectedly from nowhere, make this a challenging, even frustrating, read. But

the final solution makes the trouble worthwhile. And the questions left unanswered at the end only make this mystery more fascinating. Mystery lovers who stick with it, adjust to the narrative voice, and are unafraid to tackle perplexing time jumps, will find this a satisfying read.