

Nouveau Noir

Drew Golden

Level Best Books (Nov 19, 2019)

Softcover \$15.95 (193pp)

978-1-947915-21-3

Nouveau Noir is an intricate murder mystery anchored by its charming rookie agent and colorful cast.

In Drew Golden's murder mystery *Nouveau Noir*, a rookie FBI agent discovers the seedy underbelly of the wine industry.

Wynn's first task with the FBI Art Crimes division is to solve a cold case: two paintings, used for their iconic labels, disappeared from a prestigious winery. When a new vintage is released in time for the holidays, the winery's owner, Florian, dies a suspicious death. Wynn is drafted to solve the murder, but with no clear connection existing between the missing artwork and Florian's death. Meanwhile, people across the country discover that the wine is tainted, but no one can guess why it was tampered with. Armed most with her own intelligence, Wynn races to solve the case, herself at risk of becoming another of its victims.

The missing painting and the tainting of the new vintage seem unrelated beyond their connections to the winery and to Wynn, who is a friend of Florian's daughter and a suspect person to be in charge of the case. Her rookie status gives her a fresh perspective, though, and her connections with varied allies and agencies make her compelling. Her backstory and transition into the FBI are fascinating plot points.

Other engaging characters include Wynn's boss, who has a tendency to be cheap; Florian's charming business partner, who struggles with the emotions of losing him; and local authorities, whose initial reactions, and processes of warming up to Wynn, are interesting as they play against archetypes.

From its catalyst, the story moves through Wynn's investigation, interviews, and sleuthing in a way that pulls interest in every direction and leaves Wynn herself at a loss. Short chapters shift their foci from Wynn to others, their perspectives wide. The culprit, who is hidden in plain sight, and their motivations are masterfully concealed.

Details ground scenes well. Many revolve around wine and the wine industry; Wynn meets with her partner, and her wine choice rubs the sommelier the wrong way, but her nose and knowledge wins out. Quieter moments paint landscapes with poetic attention to details like a conman's fake automotive decals, used to exaggerate his social status, and the intricacy of a vital painting.

Disparate and dramatic scenes run together without transitions, though, leading to confusion. Tense moments in which key pieces of evidence, like the discovery of one of the missing paintings, are revealed are themselves interrupted by mundane, unrelated details. The solutions to the cases rely on unexpected reveals, but Wynn's detective work and ample foreshadowing make the final showdown satisfying, and there's a compelling hook for future books in the series at the end.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (May 17, 2020)

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