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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ MYSTERY

Obitchuary

Stephanie Hayes
Stephanie Hayes (Sep 26, 2013)
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Pitch-perfect dialogue and laugh-out-loud humor make this mystery a quick and breezy read.

When you're a famous obituary writer for the local newspaper, everyone's death is on your shoulders. Cub reporter Penny Perkins is sick of covering water board meetings and garden club soirees. When she takes on a job as an obituary writer, and exceeds everyone's expectations, she has no idea that the next death she'll report on will be one she caused. Stephanie Hayes has an ear for dialogue and a deft hand with humor in the laugh-out-loud mystery, *Obitchuary*.

Penny's life is a few notches below successful, even though she is considered to be the "good" daughter. The humor is everywhere in this book; found in Penny's relationship with her family, her relationship with her awkward coworker, even in the murder Penny commits. Hayes has a sense of humor that runs along the lines of Janet Evanovich, featuring the hapless heroine: "Groped by a bad-breath hack who pretended to care about my thoughts on progressive tax, Eastern religion and gender equality, but really only cared about the contents of my panties."

It's difficult not to root for Penny, even though her life seems to be a series of bad decisions (taking the bottle of juice wine and clonking her date on the head with it notwithstanding). Even at her absolute worst, there is something eminently likable about her, and readers will love her attitude and dry sense of humor.

Because of the humor, the story moves along, but the plot pacing drags a bit. There is a very lengthy set up to the murder, including obnoxious neighbors, a disastrous pass involving one of Penny's newspaper colleagues, and an elaborate, and very funny, wedding. The murder doesn't happen until halfway through the book, leaving one to wonder if the story is simply a series of hilarious moments. Once the murder occurs, events shift into high gear, leaving the reader with a bit of whiplash. This is not a grievous issue, however. Hayes' light touch makes the reading quick and breezy.

As a reporter for the *Tampa Bay Times*, Hayes knows both her Florida and newspaper settings. And it is from them that she draws her intriguing cast of characters. The details add punch to the story. Her cube neighbor at the newspaper starts out as a rather odd duck, a young man who collects cereal figurines and sings along to 1980s music while he writes his articles. "Every day I stared at a Prince Valiant, a My Little Pony, Shrek, Donkey from "*Shrek*'…I feared [in Mark's apartment] there might be a thousand more toys, and possibly photos of pretty women with the eyes cut out." Her downstairs neighbors antagonize Penny with early-morning sex marathons.

The whole package is appealing. The cover is eye-catching and reflects the story well, and there are very few grammatical or style errors to hamper reading.

Here's hoping there are more Penny Perkins mysteries planned. They make murder happier!

LYNN EVARTS (November 22, 2013)

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