Clarion Review

General

Odd Jobs
Karl Meade
iUniverse
978-0-595-53480-7
Four Stars (out of Five)

Marty Drysdale, bumbling criminal-in-training, spends most of his time in his garage. He could settle into the perfectly adequate house on the same lot, owned by his ex-wife, but he prefers the company of his battered limousine and various props he's gathered from all the odd jobs he's worked over the years. In the garage he can sleep off hangovers on the daybed, plunk away at his typewriter, and hide from the people he loves the most: his ex-wife, Chick; his girlfriend, Frances; and Chick's daughter, Susan. He can also hide from the people he fears the most: Chick's new husband, FitZ, and Donald, the biker who invested fifty grand in Marty's non-existent screenplay about bumbling criminals.

Marty isn't a very determined writer. He'd rather smoke pot, drink beer, and daydream. When FitZ uses Donald's investment money to pay off old debts, a doubtful Marty helps him steal it back for the sake of research. FitZ pays out the loot again, and again Marty helps retrieve it in the hopes that he can return the money to Donald and go back to his quieter former existence. Unfortunately, as it goes for all bumbling criminals, things just don't work out for him.

Karl Meade, who has published in numerous literary magazines, manages to deftly navigate a complicated plot structure; the narrative jumps back in forth in time, alternating between Marty's final scramble to extricate himself from the shady deals of his partner and the twists and turns that led him to that excruciating point. Meade handles these temporal leaps with aplomb.

A few great moments rise to the surface of *Odd Jobs*. Meade is a terrific writer of physicality, and his untraditional sex scene is both hilarious and touching. Anyone prone to squeamishness may want to skip the torture scene; Meade has a knack for a visceral accounting of pain. And it is impossible to keep a straight face during Marty's encounters with crustaceans.

Marty's character, sadly, is the least well-developed in the story. FitZ, Donald, Chick, and Susan all jump off the page and garner attention, while Marty tends to dribble between the lines. By the end of the book readers may be inclined to feel less sympathy for the guy and more irritated pity; they may not care if he finds what he wants.

Despite a damp protagonist, *Odd Jobs* is good for a laugh, a cringe, a twinge, and a nod at some of the existential questions in life, like why can't we choose the people we love. In the midst of so much failure, Marty does succeed at the most important task-staying human in the face of all those mistakes.