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Old Wounds

Nora Kelly
Poisoned Pen Press (March 2000)
Unknown $12.95 (300pp)
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The setup may seem like typical mystery fare: Gillian is home on sabbatical to take care of her aging mother; Gillian's boyfriend works for Scotland yard; a girl is found murdered in the town; the town outcast is accused; and Gillian alone suspects he's innocent. To say that the unraveling of this mystery is not compelling is to neglect the skill with which Kelly constructs this story. As with all good mysteries, the villain remains concealed until the end though, in hindsight, the necessary clues have been provided. While the mystery, however, lends tension and direction to the actions of the characters, it is not what keeps one reading. It is the gradual revelations of character, not of plot, that gives life to Old Wounds.

Much of the novel is taken up with Gillian's concern for her mother, Estelle, and it is through this relationship, rather than through the murder, that the author confronts issues of mortality. With Estelle, Kelly has created a masterful portrait of a strong, intelligent woman who is beginning to lose her grip on the world—a grip that to her daughter once seemed unshakable. From the beginning of the novel, we see Gillian's attempt to shelter her mother from these tragic events. At the same time, Estelle is struggling to understand, and contribute to, the investigation. For Estelle, solving the murder becomes a way of outwitting her own death. For Gillian, the murder is a reminder of mortality, both her mother's and her own.

As the story progresses, the mystery itself becomes merely a vehicle for this exploration of character. The skill with which Kelly creates not
just Estelle and Gillian, but also the supporting characters, yields questions far more interesting and complex than who-dunnit.

Old Wounds is Kelly's fourth crime novel featuring Gillian, and one wonders if it is not time for Gillian, and her creator, to leave the mysteries of murder for the time being and concentrate instead on unraveling the mysteries of life.
DAVID J. WOMACK (November / December 1999)

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