



Playing the Fools

M. W. Carey

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Visceral imagery of fights among criminals adds emotion to this thriller.

This debut novel from M. W. Carey is a slick, meaty crime mystery purported to recreate harrowing events from the author's own life. Focusing on the tribulations of a once-honest lawyer gone bad, *Playing the Fools* traverses a high-octane route through the morally gray process of breaking free from organized crime.

As the novel begins, its chief protagonist, Dan, is at an ethical crossroads. Stuck in Panama, he faces the consequences of a money-laundering scheme gone wrong. His callous employer, Stracht, doesn't accept his declaration that he's out, and Dan finds himself bound to one final over-the-border money transfer. But Stracht's threats in the direction of Dan's nubile wife, Barbara, have had the opposite of their intended effect; Dan is determined to defect to the authorities as soon as his plane lands in Geneva.

The story does not reveal the ethical compromises leading up to Dan's servile interactions with Stracht, but once he makes the decision to break ties, he proves formidable and consistent, determined to regain his honor and protect his family. Defect he does, turning over Stracht's eight million dollars in cash to the Swiss authorities and demanding extradition. Dan's traits and decisions are written sympathetically, though he remains a felon throughout.

His brave act sets in motion a chain of events that has criminals turning on each other whenever opportunities arise, often violently. The phrase "oozing corpse" is repeated with chilling effect, and descriptions of fights and murders are written with visceral attention to detail. Dan's wife becomes a complex character, skillfully navigating her burgeoning life situation, no longer a society darling but a conniver in her own right. Pages turn quickly as the novel reaches its disturbing, salacious conclusion, offering its share of consumable surprises.

Carey deftly weaves a number of subplots, including a romance between Vietnam veteran Mike and the mother of his children, who is half Vietnamese, that engross without distracting from the suspenseful game of cat and mouse that runs throughout the book. Carey trades skillfully among individual narrations, capturing internal ethical struggles and dealing with raw temptation.

Some textual decisions do prove disruptive, however. To set thoughts and foreign terminology apart, Carey underlines large sections of text, tending to lead the eye astray. Many internal transitions are no more easy to swallow, as with Carey's tendency to name characters multiple times within a line: "Cotton told him about how Cotton's attempt to help a brother in trouble got Cotton in trouble." Such moments muddy otherwise clearly delivered thoughts. The heavy sexualization of female characters fits with the genre but does not always feel authentic, particularly in the case of Dan's otherwise devout wife. Descriptions of sexual encounters afford lascivious, near exclusive, and voyeuristic focus on Barbara's body and its reactions; this can be discomfiting, particularly given the novel's basis in real events.

A dynamic thriller with a series of satisfying surprises, *Playing the Fools* ought to earn an appreciative readership within its genre.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May 8, 2014)

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