

Pool of Life

Pete Trewin

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Pete Trewin's British crime novel *Pool of Life* dives below people's influential veneers to expose the truth of their sins.

PI Jack Gordon's business is on the downturn when two cases promise an uptick: Sarah, an aristocrat from the controversial Gladwyn line, is receiving anarchist threats. Her husband, Oliver, plans to build a barrage over an estuary, which proves divisive because Mersey Estates stands to profit from the resultant land development. The supposed suicide by drowning of Sarah's sister, Helen, further fuels the threats, though it happened thirty-five years ago. At the same time, the National Crime Agency wants Jack to probe an Islamic terrorist plot to contaminate Liverpool's water supply.

Both cases hint at wide-ranging damage and conspiracy, but they are treated unevenly, with greater emphasis placed on the Gladwyn family's secrets and the barrage's environmental issues. As Jack and his employees, Mel and Roy, ferret information through a combination of classic surveillance and online searches, they reconvene at their office to update each other. This steers the novel closer to a workplace drama, in which the trio's dynamics matter more than the specific cases. The result is patchy though warm, particularly when it comes to the candor between Jack and Mel, who bond over their difficult, failed marriages.

Sections from the perspective of a terrorist minder and his accomplice give away information, such that Roy's work is minimal. His character recedes for lengthy stretches, and the terrorist case dwindles into a distraction. Meanwhile, thugs threaten Mel and Jack for digging into the Mersey Estates' owner's past, which teases at a complex underworld, its link to Oliver, and police corruption.

Interludes that feature Jack's sessions with a Jungian analyst reveal character-defining incidents, including an old drug case that involved the drowning of an informant, which Jack always suspected was a police cover-up. These sections take a fanciful turn in their probing and dream analysis. They disrupt the flow of the ongoing investigations, though Jack's lingering doubts fold into the present.

The plot crystallizes around what happened to Helen and the informant. The resolution for hidden crimes is a dramatic form of poetic justice. Throughout, water and rivers churn as ominous, presaging images that ably fit the dark currents running through metropolitan Liverpool.

Sharpest at inhabiting Jack's PI persona, the novel relies on too-convenient information in its final third. But it's also laced with music, film references, and palpable settings that ground Jack in his time and place.

Pool of Life is a moody, character-driven PI novel that simmers with danger and is appealing because of its lifelike environment.

KAREN RIGBY (April 21, 2020)

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