

Power Blind

V.S. Kemanis

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Power Blind is a compelling procedural novel; its story takes on the criminal justice system and the nature of power.

V.S. Kemanis's engrossing legal novel *Power Blind* follows a murder in New York City prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Dana Hargrove, an appellate judge who's held in high esteem for her sharp legal mind, seeks justice in the high-profile slaying of an off-duty police officer. She also oversees a protective custody battle between the state and a family over a terminally ill teenager who believes that chemotherapy made her mother suffer more before her death. The cases, which are intertwined because of their proximity on the judge's docket, pit Hargrove against her children, an attorney and a psychology student.

The parallel cases also raise questions of whether those in power help or hurt society, with the story charting the legal proceedings and investigations in a chronological way. Key information is withheld until Hargrove learns it, resulting in a story whose intrigue holds interest throughout. It also evinces detailed knowledge of the workings of police departments, criminal investigations, US courts, and media coverage. An "afterword for law buffs" details precedents, recent changes in state law, and other legal niceties, too.

Hargrove's work also speaks to topical issues like police accountability and public trust in institutions. Her expert observations are delivered with a dispassionate air; their contributions are organic. A sense of immediacy reigns, in part thanks to the book's precise, palpable language, both in the courtroom and in detailing the tragic events that led there: a maternity ward is described as a "room bathed in ethereal radiance," for example.

Still, the book's progression leans too much on dialogues. Some conversations stretch across several pages, doing heavy expository work. Some discussions of legal principles drift into academic territory, breaking the story's spell. More illuminating are Hargrove's deep internal monologues, in which she lays out her legal philosophy with clarity. Whether she's pouring wine at a family dinner or debating fellow appellate judges, she's vibrant. Beside her, some secondary characters are flat; for many of them, their motivations and backstories are vague until a major reveal.

Working toward a tidy resolution to both central cases, this series entry is capped with joy in Hargrove's personal life and a sense of her growth beyond the courtroom. This helps to make *Power Blind* a compelling procedural novel; its story takes on the criminal justice system and the nature of power.

JOSEPH S. PETE (December 3, 2021)

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