

Red Mass: An Ellis Portal Mystery

Rosemary Aubert

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As this novel begins, the protagonist, a sixty-year-old lawyer and judge in Toronto, is reinstated to the bar and attends the Red Mass, a traditional ceremony that is “the archaic opening [of] the courts with a church service.” The Red Mass exists as a spiritual celebration for Catholic lawyers, honoring the value of ethics in legal professions. Like the ceremony, the book tackles several ethical questions, both legal and personal.

Portal's first case in half a decade deals with defending a colleague and sometime friend, Supreme Court Justice John Stoughton Melville (known as Stow), who may have murdered his wife in her hospital bed (she was in final stages of Alzheimer's). If that isn't complicated enough, the prosecutor is Portal's daughter. “Ellen was the child of my blood,” muses Portal, “the person most like me in the world.”

This is the fifth and final novel in the author's mystery series featuring Ellis Portal as judge and sometime sleuth. The first four books introduced the reader to Portal as a young and middle-aged lawyer and judge, and detailed the way he lost his professional status for five years. He had a brush with the law, faced mental illness, lived on the streets and got divorced. In this new book, he makes an amazing comeback, and turns his life around quite completely. He's nominated for a prestigious judgeship, and his love life flourishes. Instead of living in homeless encampments, Portal now owns property and wears Armani suits.

This is an unconventional mystery in many ways. The whodunit piece is perhaps the least engaging. Aubert, a criminologist working in the Toronto court system and author of eleven books, has created an empathetic male protagonist; most mysteries authored by women feature female sleuths. Portal is a good man. His primary avocation is working for the homeless, as he has lived in their ranks. In fact, he spends as much time with them, and with their advocate, Queenie, a native Cree, as he does with his natural family. A large portion of the book involves his life beyond the office and courtroom. The cosmopolitan city of Toronto (not the setting of many mysteries) comes across as humane, beautiful, and ultimately accepting. Its architecture, lifestyle, and kind social services are appealing.

Although it might be wise to read the first four mysteries in this series before tackling this one, such research is not essential. Clues to Portal's previous lives are interspersed, as are clues to Queenie's background. The novice reader does not find out what Portal's crime had been, however, and a few relationships may seem puzzling, especially those of Stow and Portal with each others' wives.

These points notwithstanding*, Red Mass* is highly recommended for its rich setting and complex characters and situations.

DEBORAH STRAW (August 18, 2009)

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