

Set the Night on Fire

Libby Fischer Hellmann

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Lila Hilliard is an ordinary person. A thirty-something financial planner with a burgeoning career and less than stellar social life, she has few friends and no known enemies. When her father and twin brother perish in a mysterious fire while she is out shopping for Christmas lights, however, she has cause to wonder if someone might be trying to kill her. She subsequently escapes a drive-by shooting only to have a grenade thrown through her window, confirming her worst fears. Beyond immediate survival, the imperative question is who would want her dead and why? An ex-convict, Dar Gantner, may provide a way of finding out, if she can trust him...

Set the Night on Fire is Hellmann's seventh full-length novel (in addition to her short-story collections), and her experience truly shines throughout. It is a brilliantly-paced historical thriller that spans a generation, transitioning seamlessly from modern-day Chicago to the "days of rage" in the late 1960s and even farther back. The characterization is first rate. It is easy to believe how well-meaning Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) idealists can become caught up in tumultuous times and take actions that have farther-reaching consequences than they could ever imagine. The author manages to impart the character's passions without becoming preachy or political, a neat trick if ever there was one. Integrity, honor, misunderstandings, and malevolence, it's all in there. And it feels real. Everyone, even the minor characters, is believably written and very well done.

Hellman, a Readers' Choice Award winner, did her research too. The people, purpose, and places are genuine, as are the little details that can mean all the difference in how readers connect with the story line. The only exception to this diligence is a technical error about firearms (.38 special is a caliber designed for revolvers, hence no safety to release or spent cartridges for crime scene investigators to find) which most readers won't notice.

Overall, *Set the Night on Fire* is a bold, complicated tale in which surprises abound, yet the plot holds together remarkably well. No trite endings here; the author's creativity assures that the characters have to work hard to resolve the mystery and find a resolution that could actually happen in real life. This is one of those stories that is best to start early in the day, as it is easy to stay up all night reading it.

LAWRENCE KANE (November / December 2010)

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