

Should Have Played Poker

Debra H. Goldstein

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This charming mystery novel says those who are always around you make the truest kind of family.

Debra Goldstein's *Should Have Played Poker* is an intriguing mystery novel that doesn't take itself too seriously.

Until her mother shows up, Carrie's life in small-town Wahoo, Alabama, has consisted of nonstop work at Carleton Industries and daily visits to Sunset Village to see her father, a former minister suffering from early-onset dementia. Her mother disappeared twenty-six years before, and when she reemerges, only to be murdered, Carrie must confront her past and deal with new present-day issues.

Now she's thrown in not only with ex-boyfriend Brian, who happens to be the lead detective on the case, but also with an eligible widower and his young daughter. The plot unfolds quickly; the entire story occurs over a two-week period.

A sense of humor permeates. After admitting to Brian that she's usually either at work or with her father, Carrie chastises herself: "Great, I've just told him I am a workaholic with no social life." Another character opines: "Girls like me were a dime a dozen, but without dimes."

Information on the numerous characters is slipped in naturally and authentically, either through Carrie's meticulous observations or during the true-to-life banter and other dialogue between characters. Especially delightful is the quartet of elderly widowed mah-jongg players who insist on helping Carrie solve the mysterious goings-on.

The unique character backstories are filled in nicely with a natural rhythm—it's a soft touch when Brian refers to Carrie by a pet nickname, Red. There's also a good balance between description and dialogue, which helps move this nuanced story along at a good clip. Multiple twists and turns occur along the way, and it's really not until the last fifteen pages that readers will have finally figured out "whodunit."

This is a charming mystery novel that makes a strong case for viewing those who are always around you as the truest kind of family.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (Summer 2016)

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