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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ MYSTERY

Slice

Steve Williams
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With multidimensional characters and effective dialogue, this murder-mystery sequel keeps us enthralled to the end.

This clever, modern thriller is a study in contrasts. Gruesome images such as a human head impaled on a public park fence may threaten to turn your stomach, but before you get truly traumatized, experienced author Steve Williams will get you laughing at—and with—the folks faced with solving this hideous crime. In *Slice*, a sequel to his 2011 novel, *Grass*, Williams returns to the Eighth Precinct of the fictional city of Salento, where police partners Sal Mitchell and Eddie Sandovan approach their serious crime-fighting missions with the help of gallows humor and the clever banter of longtime colleagues.

The order of events will be familiar to readers of *Grass*—a murder investigation proceeds alongside some cutthroat business dealings. It's not clear how, or if, the two are related, except through Mya Laing, Mitchell's girlfriend and a high-powered advertising executive involved in a high-stakes international campaign. This time, it's a new razor coming to market instead of the designer jeans featured in *Grass*, but the device serves a similar purpose: to distract from the unfolding mystery and add a layer of intrigue. Williams, a longtime ad executive himself, paints a convincing picture of just how far a company will go to win a lucrative contract, including last-minute, in-the-boardroom wardrobe changes made in order to abide by the customs of Japanese clients.

With fast-paced scene changes, Williams's story follows the police squad, the ad team, and, occasionally, the assailants themselves. These tantalizing moments reveal surprising facts about the perpetrators early on, which piques interest without giving away the whole story. Some of the devious plans on tap for this band of criminals are so clever that readers may sometimes forget whose team they are supposed to be on. Likewise, it's hard to feel sorry for some of the more unsavory victims.

All of the characters in *Slice* are convincingly multidimensional, a trick Williams manages without relying on exposition. Dialogue does the job for him, sketching characters and scenes in a few quips. For example, consider this conversation between Sandovan and Mitchell at the scene of the crime: "'I think people have been inured to violence and gore,' Sandovan mused, scarfing back half a maple-glazed. 'Inured, huh,' said Mitchell. 'I see you've been using the word-a-day calendar Claire bought you for Christmas.' 'It's enthralling,' Sandovan replied."

Right away, we know the cops are experienced, smart, observant, and sarcastic. Williams maintains this tone throughout *Slice*, which makes it a delight to follow these officers into even the darkest of alleys. One suspects Williams of sharing many of his characters' preoccupations, including a bloodthirsty game of golf alluded to on the cover, although he doesn't let them get in the way of the storytelling. The pages turn quickly, and Williams holds off the resolution until the satisfying final pages. Fortunately, readers can expect more from the team of Sandovan and Mitchell in the future.

SHEILA M. TRASK (August 6, 2013)

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