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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆

Strawberries and Diamonds: An Ellis Island Mystery

stephen Sparacio se.
Stephen Sparacio Sr.
anthony Alexander, Illustrator
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In 1913 an upscale jewelry store in Rome Italy is robbed of jewels and diamonds worth millions of dollars. The robbers Gaetano and Guido attempt to smuggle the loot aboard a ship carrying immigrants to America. Fast-forward a hundred years or so to the present day and Donna Martini the great-great-great niece of Gaetano enlists the aid of Private Detective Steve Stanlee to help her find the diamonds and jewels. The location she believes can be gleaned from hidden clues in a letter written by Gaetano that has been passed down from generation to generation. Also interested in the jewels is the assassin Chen and his employer the underworld boss Big Tan. The lives of these four characters become inextricably interconnected and convoluted in the search for the priceless jewels.

Author Stephen Sparacio has taught English journalism and creative writing at the college level. He has worked as a journalist feature writer editor and proofreader. The responsibility of an editor proofreader and teacher is to provide an informed opinion and explain to the artist the problems in a piece and how to fix them. Unfortunately the skills required of a critic don't necessarily qualify one to be a creator. Sparacio's debut novel (which is barely longer than a novella) contains many elements of a successful story. It is well researched and painstakingly plotted but overall it is disappointing.

There is actually no mystery for the reader to solve because Sparacio reveals everything with beautifully written flashbacks that involve Gaetano and Guido's adventures on the ship and on Ellis Island. He provides rich details and descriptions of the conditions that poverty-stricken immigrants were subjected to on the two-week voyage across the Atlantic: "No ventilation produced stagnant and almost un-breathable air….what offended Gaetano the most was the disgusting mess usually urine and feces…" Such vivid descriptions put the reader into the story.

Unfortunately the story is hampered by unbelievable dialogue and extraneous expositional material. The author has created some memorable characters but they lose their greatness and validation since much of their dialogue consists of drivel especially the love play and small talk between Donna and Steve.

Hopefully Sparacio will consider revising *Strawberries and Diamonds* using the skills he has taught his students and clients allowing the book to reach its full potential.

LEE GOODEN (June 10, 2009)

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