

Tainted Love

Kevin P. Martin

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Family man Kevin P. Martin loves 1980s music—and The Beatles and The Doors, too, it appears. In his clever, if gimmicky, new novel, *Tainted Love*, Martin introduces an unlikely cast of characters whose dialogue consists of nothing but lyrics from popular songs. The result is funny, occasionally cringe-worthy, but altogether crafty in its execution. Like strained rhymes in bad poetry, Martin's "dialogue" does not always succeed, but his efforts to create something out of the ordinary are certainly evident. Martin is a master of plays on words and double entendres, and even those who miss some of the puns and symbolism will nonetheless find themselves chuckling.

The story line of *Tainted Love* is an odd one. The tale unfolds in the Kingdom of Love with a tributary of the River Styx running through it. There is a manor house carrying the name of a famous English Midlands estate of the twelfth through the sixteenth century, and a king who goes by the same name as a famous fourteenth-century Scot. Set in an unspecified time of crossbows and armor, donkey carts, public hangings, castles, and wandering priests and wizards, the story demands a willing suspension of disbelief, not only from its readers but also from its characters, who must spout some truly insane lines. "No sentient person could believe such lines would work," thinks one person in the story, and she is not alone in that opinion.

When characters with names like Major Tom, Doctor Feelgood, and Eileen live in a village called Heaven, run down Electric Avenue in a section of town called the Jungle, and patronize pubs with names like Love Shack and Red Corvette, it is often easier to simply settle in and enjoy the silliness of the book than to try to analyze its every nuance. Tongue in cheek, Martin often states the obvious in lines like, "The conversation reached its nadir when Michael pointed to a dessert ... and stated, 'You got the peaches, I got the cream.'"

The plotline itself is not particularly original, but the devices the author uses certainly are. Opposing armies yell their respective battle cries of "Chaka khan!" and "Wang chung!" as they clash in the streets. A magical demon speaks exclusively in lines from Beatles songs, and when wounded makes a noise described as "what it sounds like when doves cry." Parts of U2's "Rattle and Hum" crop up often, and seemingly half the lines from "Total Eclipse of the Heart" appear in one place or another. A priest casts an invisibility spell with words from Culture Club's "Miss Me Blind," and later a wizard attempts a spell for everlasting life with lyrics from the Doors' "The End."

Perhaps the best part of reading *Tainted Love* is the challenge of recognizing once-popular lyrics, trying to recall who performed them, and putting them into a personal-life perspective. Knowing that someone in the book will inevitably say, "Come on, Eileen" is a given, but when "the brave Frenchman" speaks mainly lines from the Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer," it may take a moment to identify the song. When the priest overhears a boy saying that something "smells like teen spirit" and thinks, "that [makes] no sense at all," he sounds exactly like a parent encountering Nirvana for the first time. Speaking not only on behalf of the priest, but for himself, as well, the author adds, "But then, every generation has a language of its own." Martin incorporates more than enough evidence in *Tainted Love* to prove that music is his language.

CHERYL HIBBARD (September 24, 2012)

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