

Takedown

Andrew Hudak

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In the urban thriller Takedown, a tough woman works to overcome the tragedy and violence that's steeped in her city's history.

Andrew Hudak's thriller *Takedown* tackles the challenges of police work, the relation between sex and violence, and the cycle of revenge in an American city.

Sarah is a policewoman in River City, a place rife with crimes, large and small. She is assigned to apprehend a rapist, Vinny, but soon realizes that Vinny's criminal involvement runs deeper than his sexual offenses. He's linked to the murders of three young women and the widespread distribution of illegal drugs.

To secure incriminating evidence against the organization that Vinny works for, Sarah goes undercover as a prospective fighter in the organization's MMA gambling scheme, set to face off against the deadliest fighter, Claudia. Testing her own limits and longing for her fiancé, Sarah summons the strength to triumph against River City's most powerful crime syndicate, lest she suffer the personal—and physical—consequences.

Flashbacks are used to build the characters up, and to reveal their motivations and personal connections: Vinny's relationship to a pizzeria links him to the three murders, and is learned about as a result of his unemployment; Claudia's passionate relationship with her MMA benefactor, Leo, is intensified by her experiences being bullied as a poor Slovakian immigrant, as well as by her fascination with Leo's sexual liberation, given her own sexual innocence. There are compelling interpersonal dramas, as when Sarah's disillusionment with romance is challenged by her parents' beautiful connection.

As characters' backstories intercede in the present-day story line, they help to tie together the illegal activities and to provide precise insights. Still, there's a fair amount of exposition that merely impedes forward movement, too, and some of the backstory is too matter-of-fact in tone. The story ends up being light on surprises because of its easy characterizations and rote descriptions: Sarah and Claudia are defined in terms of their rivalry, which is rooted in their desires to save their loved ones; the book's villains are spurred by their traumatic pasts. Elsewhere, kidnappings and murders are described without emotion, and are used to push the story onward. Frequent perspective changes muddle the story further, sometimes resulting in thrilling reveals, but sometimes making the outcomes too obvious in advance.

More compelling is the history of immigration in River City—and of Italian and Slavic populations in particular, whose cultures are explored partially through food. People's community identities are shown to be determining factors in shaping their experiences, and a sense of classism separates the police and crime worlds, fueling an intriguing cycle of misfortune and revenge. It's an ambitious underpinning for the tale.

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ALI ORTIZ (November 3, 2021)

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