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The 9th Man

Dorien Grey
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There's a detective, a mysterious client and, of course, a corpse. What starts out as a traditional noir tale of murder and revenge, however, is draped with a swag of lavender, for the hard-boiled investigator, the client, the suspects, and even the victim, are all gay.

The story follows Dick Hardesty, private eye, as he reluctantly investigates the apparent "suicide" of Bobby McDermott, a promiscuous hunk whose case the police would prefer to ignore. Almost immediately the clues trace the chalk outlines of six more gay men and Hardesty must race to find their connection before the body count climbs higher. Things keep tripping him up though. The evidence is disappearing, the case has a noticeable lack of suspects, and at every turn there seems to be a cowboy hustler or sexually enthusiastic medical examiner trying to seduce him (and they usually do).

The story starts out a little rough as the first few pages of stock characters and heavy metaphor may be hard to swallow for the modern reader. The gritty feel and plot mesh together quickly though, and by mid-way through the first chapter the author finds the right gear to drive the story through the rest of the book. The tone is consistent with the genre, keeping to the classic first person narrative that favors a stripped down, colloquial style, and featuring enough familiar noir iconography (revenge, vigilante justice, and sex) to project the book's imagery though the grainy film of late night movies. Despite this almost canonical approach to the noir tale, there is still enough mystery to keep The 9th Man from being predictable. Clues are revealed sparingly and the dialogue is crafted well enough to keep the myriad minor characters distinct. The character of Dick Hardesty, gay detective, is also solidly built, resisting as it does, the worst stereotypes of both the detective and gay genres.

Overall, The 9th Man is an enjoyable, swift reading story for anyone who is looking for a modern pulp tale with a fast moving plot and just a little bit of a lilt.
VINCENT KOVAR (July / August 2001)

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