



The Actress: A Christian Murder Mystery

Michael Hicks Thompson

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A subtle faith-based perspective and an uncommon heroine make this mystery one very worth investigating.

Michael Hicks Thompson's charming and compelling whodunit, *The Actress*, falls between a hard-boiled detective novel and a cozy mystery—like a shot of bracing brandy in hot chocolate. In its gentle intrigue, filled with twists and turns that captivate, the question isn't if she did it, but why. The novel highlights the lasting impact of mistreatment and abuse and warns about repercussions when healing doesn't occur. Perhaps as importantly, the necessity of forgiveness shines through.

Hollywood film siren Tully Ivey shoots Andrew Dawkins dead in Solo, Mississippi. The act is one of apparent self-defense, but Martha McRae, the local newspaper publisher, suspects that someone is lying about what happened that night, and she's determined to find out who. She finagles a deputy badge from the sheriff and starts her search.

With an entire film crew in town, Martha must sift through a dizzying array of suspects. From film sets to the statehouse, her path includes gripping twists and turns, with someone blocking her every step. As dangers and threats get personal, friends, neighbors, and her boarders step in to help. The risk is that an innocent person may be convicted, or a murderer set free; Martha prays it will be neither.

As a character, Martha is simply drawn but shows clear growth, even within this plot-driven, rather than character-driven, story. She is not the ultrafeminine character that cozy mysteries often favor; she chooses to wear a police uniform rather than a formal dress to a dinner at the Mississippi statehouse, and she focuses more on factual events than emotional concerns. Hers is a refreshing voice that skews toward that of a hard-boiled detective. Yet the setting, plot, and characters' traits suit a cozy mystery: a small town filled with friends, a boardinghouse owner, and little gore or violence.

Along the way, the story challenges the stereotype of the small Southern town by dropping the cultural elite at Solo's doorstep. While many of the town's citizens and the Hollywood moguls they meet fit classic stereotypes, several serve as reminders to look beyond the boxes that we put people in: Martha, for example, is far from naïve or backward, and the Hollywood star's motivations come from a painful, if sometimes seemingly contrived, backstory.

The plot comes together seamlessly. Clues come regularly and ensure minimal downtime from the mystery; they sometimes get twisted after their discovery. Little can be assumed, as red herrings abound in the case. Only one plot point causes a minor stumble—the question of why the victim was where he was when he was killed. While this is ultimately explained, the answer is swamped by the surrounding story and could easily be missed.

The Actress, with its subtle faith-based perspective, contains fewer spiritual undertones, symbols, and references than the first book in this series, *The Rector*. The difference is noticeable, though this book still stands on its own merits and is a read well worth investigating.

DIANE GARDNER (November 29, 2016)

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