

The Beijing Duck

Thomas de Kooning

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The Beijing Duck is a fast-paced, funny tale for anyone who enjoys hard-boiled detective stories with a touch of the irreverent.

Both comical and intriguing, Thomas de Kooning's *The Beijing Duck* follows the misadventures of Ramone Ramone, the intrepid—if begrudging—private investigator who keeps a half-sober watchful eye on the streets of Berkeley, California. The book's rich cast of characters and fresh take on noir fiction make it a fun and satisfying read.

Ramone just wants a nice cup of coffee and a couple of hand-rolled cigarettes, but things keep getting in the way. First a high-profile lawyer leaves him a healthy retainer to find his missing cat, then an alluring and intense painter pleads with him to find the person who has been cutting up her work. Through it all, the city is beset with a spree of suicides, and Ramone's answering machine is full of cryptic messages hinting at his impending demise.

After dutifully looking for answers at the bottom of a bottle of Scotch, Ramone calls on some friends to help him unravel an increasingly complex mystery. Does the missing cat have something to do with the rise in suicides? Are the death threats on his machine connected to the slashed paintings? With a little luck and another drink, he just may get to the bottom of something bigger than he ever imagined.

The Beijing Duck is the second in a series of whodunit novels featuring Ramone and his bizarre collection of associates. While de Kooning does well to keep this story contained within itself, some threads and previously introduced characters would be easier to identify after reading the first volume in the series, *The Corsican Dove*.

Without feeling too forced or too silly, the book manages to balance the serious side of noir fiction with humor. It has all the grittiness of classic hard-boiled noir, but with tongue held firmly in cheek. The author creates characters as unique and vivid as any straight detective story, with a healthy dose of Monty Python to bring them to life and keep things from getting too dark. Highlights include a transvestite barkeep who dreams of playing Dorothy on Broadway, a spaced-out hippy whose bumbling antics might inadvertently save the day, and a twelve-year-old aspiring gangster who helps with cases and is, as Ramone puts it, the “best sixth grader I ever hired.”

Add to that a complex and tangled plot that keeps the reader guessing at every turn, and a writing style thick with subtle humor and obscure references from Lao Tzu to *Catch 22*. The author's playful use of cliché and archetype add a knowing wink to standard crime novel tropes, even if at times the style can drift a little too close to the surreal. It is at once an homage to noir in all its trumped-up stoicism and a parody of a genre that has a habit of taking itself too seriously.

The Beijing Duck is a fast-paced, funny, and meandering tale, and is recommended for anyone who enjoys hard-boiled detective stories with a touch of the irreverent.

ERIC ANDERSON (October 6, 2014)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to

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