Clarion Review

Thriller

The Court's Expert
Richard Isham
AuthorHouse
978-1-4772-4812-6
Two Stars (out of Five)

Richard Isham employs his experience as an attorney to craft a murder mystery centered on the death of a wealthy Californian.

Defense attorney Charlie Malone is often immersed in vodka when not wrestling with his latest case. On leaving a bar, he's the victim of a cowardly attack by a former client. Charlie ends up hospitalized, undergoing surgery for broken bones. During that interlude, he meets Bernadette Collins. Charlie is a charmer, and soon Bernie, as she's known, is relating the plight of her sister-in-law, Marti Barnes.

Barnes was a licensed vocational nurse, full-time caregiver to Lawrence Martorano, a wealthy farmer. Martorano suffered from a primary immune deficiency disease (PIDD), a genetic condition requiring regular immunoglobulin-G infusions, which was Marti's responsibility. Marti, however, was popular with Martorano's family and essentially had become estate manager for the old man's retirement home, as well as nurse and housekeeper.

Age eighty-six, Martorano dies of pneumonia. Marti later tells his survivors of an agreement she had with Martorano. Gruff, difficult to please, and fond of the bottle, Martorano had lost every nurse he employed. Once Marti proved her mettle, Martorano began to regard her as family. In return for her agreement to be his lifelong nurse, Martorano assured her she would receive his residence and $100,000 a year for life upon his death. But Martorano never put the agreement in writing nor informed his family. After Marti breaks this news, she soon finds herself charged with murder.

Isham isn't a professional author, and his prose reflects that with far too much exposition and somewhat unnatural dialogue. "'Going somewhere, are we?' he quizzed, closing the door once Bernie was safely back inside. 'Nowhere,' he said, answering his own question and not waiting for any other response."

Isham's plot shows promise. Sadly, the narrative doesn't offer the reader a clear trail to its denouement. Malone, primary protagonist, is less interesting than Martorano. Accused murderer Marti Barnes seems a foil for a discussion of legalities rather than a fully developed, sympathetic character.

Too much of the book is Martorano's biography, which in fact is the most interesting story line. As a middle-aged widower, he meets a young Hispanic waitress. What begins as friendly support of her ambition to earn a college degree ends with him fathering her child. A better story might have been the May-September love affair. Instead, Isham leaves readers with the young woman's family coping by having her parents assume the role as the baby's parents. Martorano sends money, but the child disappears from the narrative until she enters the civil suit related to the old man's will.

Isham also mires the narrative in too much medical information. The trial drama suffers from information overload with an overly detailed focus on the legal intricacies related to Barnes's attempt to sue the heirs into honoring her oral agreement while she simultaneously faces a murder charge.

The Court's Expert offers a promising plot that would profit from professional editing.

Gary Presley