ForeWord Reviews

MYSTERY

The Dead Women of Juárez
Sam Hawken
Serpent's Tail
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Modern English-language mysteries seem to rely on two elements to satisfy readers again and again: a plotline wavering between original and predictable, and a dependably similar cast of characters: the jaded cop, the misunderstood tough-guy, the mostly self-reliant woman, the rich and despicable villain, and at least someone formidably attractive—each of whom invariably wear one another's hats.

To reveal this formula does not suggest that Sam Hawken's debut novel is an exception; but even with those conventions in place, the stakes here—and therefore our ability to care about his characters—seem so much higher. As the title announces to anyone with a television or newspaper, this story is only partly fiction: young female workers in the large Mexican city's notorious *machiladoras* (low-paying, American-owned factories) are being murdered in droves—between 500 and 5,000 over the last ten years, depending on who's counting. And who's counting matters a great deal in our ability to sympathize with the situation: law officers who are either implicated or trying to save face versus the grieving mothers of the victims. As much as he can, Hawken gives us the stories of the victims' families.

Offering smart analyses of the eccentrics populating this dismal landscape, the author makes each of his four or five mainstays a self-proclaimed loser. Front and center is burned-out and severely battered Texan boxer Kelly Courter, who lives in Ciudad Juarez in order to exercise some lifestyle freedoms—like choosing to slowly kill himself with drugs and regularly get beat to a pulp for money to support his habit. It's his life that focuses the others in the book, and Hawken doesn't sugarcoat anything about it. Even though Courter doesn't care about his own welfare, he becomes courageous in the defense of those he loves after the disappearance of his feminist girlfriend. "Convincing" was the verdict in *The Times* of London, delivered with the lack of adornment that typifies everything about this assured book.

Hawken was a historian before turning to fiction, and it shows. Here's to more mysteries that illuminate readers without beating us silly.

Julie Eakin