

## The Detective's Garden: A Love Story and Meditation on Murder

**Janyce Stefan-Cole**

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*The Detective's Garden is an engrossing journey into one man's heart.*

*The Detective's Garden* is the story of Emil Milosec, an immigrant living in Brooklyn and grieving for his wife, Elena. He maintains her garden because it brings him good memories and seems to embody Elena's presence.

After World War II, Emil met Elena in Slovenia, where he was searching for any surviving family members. Elena returned with him to New York, where they established a home, with a garden that Elena treasured, and that Emil came to love.

But Emil's reminiscing is interrupted after he fires two rounds from his service pistol in a fit of jealous rage, following his neighbor's shared memories of chatting with Elena. Digging up the fired shells, he finds a finger, wearing a ring that looks very much like one that belonged to Elena, in his pepper patch. Elena, Emil knows, wasn't missing any fingers when she was buried.

Into a story with themes of death, grief, retirement, and bottled-up emotions, Stefan-Cole weaves interesting elements, like Emil's atheism and his obsession with the Garden of Eden story, which contributes both to his lack of belief and to his love of gardening.

Emil discovers that Elena was hiding a family secret, one that poses a threat to him even after her death, and this becomes a potent vehicle for propelling the story forward. The novel has a brilliantly executed structure that ties its beginning to its conclusion, with evident connections throughout, though the final pieces are well hidden until the end.

The novel fulfills its role as a love story with elements of murder. The love that Emil and Elena had for each other is palpable, and Emil's reactions to discovering the lone finger are infused with affection. The question of whether Emil will bend the law to fit his grief is answered with subtlety, logic, and great compassion for the character.

*The Detective's Garden* is an engrossing journey into one man's heart, making it an unusual and charming mystery novel.

J. G. STINSON (Fall 2016)

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