Clarion Review

Mystery

The Dirty Dog Saloon
Cherokee Randolph
AuthorHouse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Many towns can boast a place like the Dirty Dog Saloon, where regulars have their own tables and everyone is connected in some way with everyone else. On the day wealthy Jasper Londsberry will die, the patrons of the saloon are all at their tables behaving as they normally do: speculating about Jasper's family, his business dealings, and his possible extramarital affairs. No one suspects that Jasper will never again take his place at his own regular table, least of all his personal secretary, Josie Vance, who spends the bulk of her time at the Dirty Dog attempting to avert gossip about her boss. Little does she know it is only just beginning.

Josie serves as narrator of *The Dirty Dog Saloon*, and may remind some readers of Jessica Fletcher in *Murder She Wrote*, or perhaps Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. However, while Josie is a more mature, single woman involved in a mysterious case, she is not actively involved in attempting to solve it. Instead, she functions as an interested observer, reporting events, offering a few opinions, and otherwise maintaining a certain distance. As other crimes follow Jasper's killing, including break-ins and arson, Josie carries readers through the narrative, gradually peeling back layers of characters and situations.

The Dirty Dog Saloon is well-structured and engrossing, drawing readers into the mystery from the very start. The editing is scrupulous and the prose and dialogue flow naturally throughout. Characterization is excellent, and readers will close the book feeling that each integral character has been explored with depth and clarity.

Interestingly, narrator Josie is the most remote, but as the story unfolds the author's choices concerning her characterization become clear. Josie has worked for the Londsberry family for more than forty years and is fiercely protective of them; her reluctance to become too involved in anything that may shed unflattering light on them suits her character. Still, there are eventually a few surprises revealed about Josie herself (and her devotion to the family) that

readers will find interesting and illuminating.

The crimes, most notably the murder of Jasper, are sparsely detailed but still maintain the less graphic yet compelling quality reminiscent of an old detective novel. *The Dirty Dog Saloon* flows smoothly and enjoyably to a satisfying dénouement, revealing a multitude of betrayals and unexpected revelations about some of the characters.

Although the first chapter is a bit too rich in introductions and there are a few unexplained decisions Josie makes regarding possible evidence, the story is primarily well-balanced and credible. Randolph has crafted a well-rounded and thoroughly pleasing first novel. A promising debut.

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