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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ MYSTERY

The Dollmaker

John J. Crimi
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In this complex mystery, the New England tourist town of Quinset is not quite the peaceful setting it first appears to be. The real Quinset is revealed when a complicated web of secrets unravels to expose criminal activities.

When a young lobster fisherman in his midtwenties is found dead on the cliff at Lizzie's Point, locals initially view it as a tragic accident, the result of a slip and fall. But as Sheriff Ben Gibbon investigates further, he soon suspects foul play. Seasoned investigative reporter Kurt Roden, who has been vacationing at the historic Whaler's Inn for a few weeks, has his own suspicions, as well. Two longtime, year-round residents of the Whaler's Inn also become amateur sleuths, and seek to uncover the truth.

The investigations reveal illegal activities on the island along with past and present romances, secret affairs, and infidelities that lead to many potential motives. Kurt's involvement suddenly shifts from investigator to victim after he is attacked one night. The attacker leaves a wooden doll behind in Kurt's room as a type of calling card, and new clues are uncovered.

John Crimi captures an authentic seaside landscape and traditional inn lifestyle, complete with residents sharing daily meals and conversation. He then masterfully contrasts that idyllic image by showing the characters involved in much darker activities. Crimi packs a lot of action—and crime—into this multiple-murder mystery, with drug traffickers and mobsters central to the narrative. Secret romantic relationships and instances of unrequited love are just as crucial to the plot—Crimi juxtaposes light and dark themes throughout.

There are many characters in the novel, ranging in age from thirteen to over sixty. Crimi introduces each in a clear context, creating a realistic community of friends, foes, and relatives. The large number of characters ultimately adds suspense as the story unfolds.

Early in the novel, some of the suspicions about foul play are not completely explained, seeming to serve primarily to advance the plot. As a result, readers are not able to uncover the clues and reach conclusions along with the characters. If readers can overlook these conveniences, they will find a compelling story that holds many surprises. However, some readers may find the revelation of the killer implausible and possibly even disturbing. Also, with the killer revealed so late in the story, many questions are left unanswered.

While *The Dollmaker* focuses on murder, drug dealing, and mob activity, the tone of the narrative is not overly brooding and menacing, and details of the crimes are not graphic. This lighthearted approach will appeal to a wide range of ages.

MARIA SIANO (September 27, 2012)

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