

The Esmeralda Goodbye

Corey Lynn Fayman

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Delighting in the excess of 1950s Southern California atmospheres, The Esmeralda Goodbye is a winking noir novel with a winsome hero.

Featuring American celebrities and cultural icons, Corey Lynn Fayman's crime novel *The Esmeralda Goodbye* follows a police officer who unearths crookedness among powerful men.

In the 1950s in Southern California, Jake is a rookie patrolman who is committed to playing by the rules. He looks after his siblings and his mother; his father, a once-respected policeman, disappeared after his last case sparked significant ire. One of Jake's first calls is to prevent Raymond Chandler from committing suicide, but it's excitement not indicative of his work in general. A year later, he's still following his hometown beat and hoping for a transfer.

As a hero, Jake is naïve and unjaded. Even his surname, "Stirling," is an overt nod to his upstanding nature. His manners exist in winsome contrast to the shadowy dealings that surround him. But when Zsa Zsa Gabor's diamond necklace is stolen at a hotel whose guests include J. Edgar Hoover and Meyer Lansky, Jake's practical approach is challenged by the era's glitz and excess. Though he believes that he's just writing up a report before the senior detectives step in, he grows more involved in the case (even as his sharp interactions with his captain are a reminder that he plays a subordinate role). He also faces personal challenges and mentors his brother's friend.

The early Chandler reference lays the groundwork for the book's own noir twists. Indeed, this is a self-aware genre novel throughout. Its hero has a complicated past and seems certain to discover unsettling truths. And the glittering oceanside setting belies seamy realities: through the people who are connected to him, including his brother (a smart high school student who sees himself as a rebel), Jake encounters simmering racial tensions, antisemitism, and fears related to communists; he himself has little patience for prejudice. Scheming Texas oilmen further complicate Jake's work; he has to confront the fact that some people have exploitative tendencies.

As Jake faces various challenges, his disenchantment comes to feel inevitable. He learns new terms, including *gigolo*, from his worldlier brother and engages in dogged questioning. Still, little tension is generated regarding the diamond theft itself. Instead, the conspiracies in proximity to the theft hold attention. There's also an entertaining interpretation of the Chekhov's gun trope that adds lighthearted suspense, in addition to Chandler's prickly but appealing guidance of Jake. Though additional murders occur, the book's conclusion remains open-ended, setting up further series entries.

The Esmeralda Goodbye is a captivating historical novel in which a police officer's personal history fuels his determination to seek justice.

KAREN RIGBY (February 14, 2024)

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