

★ **The Illusion of Simple****Charles Forrest Jones**

University of Iowa Press (May 18, 2022)

Softcover \$16.00 (272pp)

978-1-60938-831-7

In Charles Forrest Jones's mystery novel *The Illusion of Simple*, a murder exposes a struggling community's unsavory side.

No one in Stonewall, Kansas, liked Russ very much, so his murder is met with little surprise and less sorrow. But Billy, the overworked county sheriff, suspects that there is more to Russ's death than meets the eye. The truth, when he finally finds it, forces him to make an impossible decision between pursuing justice at all costs and saving Stonewall from extinction.

Delicate character profiles bring both the main players and the town of Stonewall to life. After an angry, abusive childhood, Billy has made good, but he is still haunted by the consequences of his past actions. His lifelong friend, Owen, is now a consummate politician with multiple secrets. And there are Ayesha, a tough but fair-minded woman who's not entirely comfortable in her own skin; Eli, a jaded priest who is relearning to enjoy life, but who is pulled into the town's latest dramas; and Russ, the victim, who failed at everything, up to and including terrorism.

The murder mystery is just one component of a larger, more complicated story—the quiet, desperate saga of a dying town whose past prosperity gave way to increasing poverty, making it a breeding ground for white supremacy and other forms of violence. Short sentences and sentence fragments reflect the starkness of the setting.

In a place like Stonewall, happy endings are hard to come by. Billy knows he made the right decision, but living with that decision is another matter. It is clear that nothing will ever be the same; whether or not things get better is now up to him.

*The Illusion of Simple* is a sharp mystery novel about the grudges, gossip, and politics that define life in rural America.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2022)

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