

The Killer's Handbook

Robert P. Maroney

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This delightfully warped mystery is sure to thrill fans of Dexter.

A book entitled *The Killer's Handbook* should be gruesome, right? It is indeed, but it's also delightful in a very warped way. Robert P. Maroney's mystery novel is unsettling from the first dark glimpses into the racing thoughts of a brilliant but depressed teenager to the strangely satisfying ending. The second book in Maroney's Detective Nicholas Pearce series, following 2012's *55 Graves*, puts the nominally retired investigator on a peculiar new case that not only sets him on the trail of several interconnected kidnappings and killings, but also entangles him in the psychology of a killer who feels he's committing murder for all the right reasons.

While Detective Pearce, along with his partner and erstwhile girlfriend, Addie, apply traditional detective work to track down the kidnappers who are discarding girls' bodies in the river, there's someone else on the trail. It's a man known only by his secret chat room codename—Reaper—and he has written a handbook for killers. It's not only a how-to manual, but also a moral code for killers.

This complex look at a killer's thought processes is the oddly delightful part of this mystery. It's a twisted internal landscape, but it has a certain logic. Maroney lets nuance and doubt slip in slowly over the course of the novel, creating a complicated and highly engaging picture of Reaper. Much like Dexter Morgan in the popular television drama series, *Dexter*, Reaper might actually be likable.

Reaper is, after all, on the trail of some pretty despicable criminals, and Maroney paints a vivid picture of their disturbed state of mind. Sexual torture scenes in a secret hideout can be difficult to read, but they demonstrate what the truly demented are capable of, and perhaps explain why Reaper would feel compelled to compile instructions for ridding the world of such vermin.

The author explores the twists of mind that led Reaper to create his guidebook and keeps the reader guessing about the roots of his motivation and exactly how far he'll actually go to achieve them. It's an Internet age mystery, where physical forensic clues like footprints and tire tracks are convincingly supplemented by online chat transcripts and the mapping of connections between IP addresses.

Maroney is equally at home with high-stakes, hold-your-breath suspense scenes and the intricate puzzles that the detectives must solve with careful application of logic. Affectionate banter between Pearce and Addie, an authentic Louisville, Kentucky setting, and an experienced detective's inner musings, make this a well-balanced novel as well as a riveting mystery. Nicholas Pearce is clearly not ready to retire from detective work completely, and readers will look forward to his next adventure.

SHEILA M. TRASK (May 8, 2014)

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