



The Madonna of Notre Dame

Alexis Ragougneau

Katherine Gregor, Translator

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An egregious murder in a beloved church initiates a compelling whodunit in this energetic and original crime novel.

How do you catch a killer in one of the world's most celebrated churches, particularly during the Feast of the Assumption? In playwright Alex Ragougneau's *The Madonna of Notre Dame*, an egregious murder leads to a compelling whodunit.

The morning after the Feast of the Assumption mass, an American tourist discovers that the beautiful woman kneeling beside her is not praying; in fact, she is dead. The deceased is a mixture of beauty and chastity, a provocative Mary-esque package. The church is shut down and the police are called.

Ragougneau has a keen sense for character and wastes no time introducing the locals—an eccentric older woman who comes daily to the cathedral, a wizened police detective, a damaged workaholic, and a sickly priest all figure in. Over the course of seven days, austere prose is used to delve deeper and deeper into the mystery, as well as the troubles of the characters involved.

Katherine Gregor's translation makes for a smooth read. The novel begins at a slower pace, examining each detail and possible motive. The first half of the novel is spent on a tortured young man, the first suspect; once he is disposed of, the second half moves fast to reach its verdict. The abrupt change of pace sacrifices explorations of characters' motivations, though, and results in plot conveniences. Still, Ragougneau's use of atmospheric detail and facts about Christianity, along with a healthy infusion of Parisian grit, make this believable work.

The exploitation of men's fascination with virgins and prostitutes, particularly in the Notre Dame Cathedral, is a brilliant move within the murder mystery. Yet the winner here is not just Ragougneau, but all readers in search of energetic, original crime novels. *The Madonna of Notre Dame* maintains the notion that good still conquers evil.

MONICA CARTER (Winter 2017)

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