

The Rolex Bandits

Alan Mowbray

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In his third suspense novel, Alan Mowbray combines sex, robbery, and murder for a gritty, modern take on the traditional whodunit.

The Rolex Bandits is like a Miami-style game of Clue, where drug-laced drinks and golf clubs stand in for ropes and candlesticks, and suspects with names like Wink and Polita take the place of Mr. Green and Miss Scarlet. The setting is a new luxury hotel rather than an ancestral manor, but the setup is familiar: there was a murder in the building, but who did it and how? Something goes terribly wrong when a street-smart gang of call girls set out to rob another high-rolling businessman, and one of them is killed. It's an intriguing, if slightly impersonal, mystery.

The intrigue starts on page one, with entrepreneur Elliot Anderson lying helpless on his hotel bed while the women who drugged him into this stupor steal his money and his \$70,000 custom-made Rolex, an anniversary gift from his wife. From the start, there's not an innocent face in the room. Elliot's guilty conscience surfaces as he realizes his wife will soon know, by way of a horribly compromising video, that he hired the prostitutes. And the women are clearly depraved; the thieves move with cool efficiency and seem to enjoy humiliating and toying with their victim. There are no good guys here.

When one of the women is found dead the next day, Elliot may be a suspect, but hardly the only one. Mowbray swiftly introduces a large cast of characters, each with his or her own motive and opportunity for killing the seductive and manipulative Carmen. Could it be Wink, a fast talker who introduced Carmen to Elliot the night before? What about Polita, who worked with Carmen at the nearby strip club, Café Sensations? Is it the moody bellhop, or maybe the mysterious woman who seems to be following Elliot around the hotel in disguise?

Nobody escapes suspicion, which showcases Mowbray's strength as a writer, and also his Achilles' heel. It's no mean feat to introduce nearly a dozen suspects, plot their movements, and still leave the reader wondering who the murderer is. In each chapter, Mowbray casts new aspersions on the initial suspects and introduces more shady characters. In this way, he successfully creates a puzzle that readers won't solve until the final pages. All of the finger-pointing makes for a briskly moving story, although it is difficult to connect with any particular character. Mowbray supplies the basics—solid descriptions and realistic dialogue—but his desire to keep the truth hidden prevents a deeper development of his characters.

Mowbray is more forthcoming with his descriptions of Miami and its environs. He is equally at home with the urban bar culture and alligator-infested swamps, which both carry a sense of impending danger. The final scenes in the Florida Everglades are especially suspenseful and provide a satisfying surprise ending. Mowbray puts the solution off until the end, and readers who have stuck with him will be glad they did.

SHEILA M. TRASK (June 17, 2013)

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