

The Second Letter

Robert Lane

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Robert Lane sets the stage for his cross-generational government/dirty-business suspense story, *The Second Letter*, by introducing readers to Dorothy Harrison and early-1960s St. Petersburg Beach, Florida, with an economy of just-right description—one can see her '59 Buick Electra gleaming. Thanks to Lane's knack for logically interweaving passages, the necessary exposition emerges as complete as it needs to be without anchoring the story in a dry past.

Dorothy's husband, Jim, worked for the then newly formed CIA. The couple fled Washington, DC, for coastal reclusiveness, but Jim soon died; precious few details surround his death. Dorothy's afternoon visitor, a CIA man himself, comes bearing a letter the organization needs stowed away somewhere secure. With the assistance of her loyal gardener Angelo, Dorothy hides the unopened letter in her home. In what will become an unobtrusive pattern throughout the book, lightweight conversation segues into observations on the larger and potentially harmful designs of government operations—in this case, a growing sense of aggressive internationalism.

When next readers hear of Dorothy, Jake Travis has been contracted to investigate the letter's whereabouts after the Gulf Beaches Historical Museum—once Dorothy's house—is tampered with. The transition goes smoothly from one time period to the next and from Dorothy's gentle voice to Jake's more staccato, humorous one—"I locked the door behind me. Not everyone in the world is as fond of me as I am."

Raydel Escobar claims to have the government's letter but wants his name cleared of seven million dollars in back taxes before he'll turn it over. When afforded a personal introduction to Escobar, readers meet a man who could easily become buried under his cliché mobsteresque proclivities—he is a cigar-smoking, womanizing hustler out to prove himself—but is distinguished in his finer details, not to mention his salty tone. The Patriot Act, according to his musings, has "corralled All-American criminals into the same corner as Arab fruitcakes, and that just wasn't right."

Characterization, for that matter, proves to be the most powerful of Lane's multiple storytelling strengths, which also include timing—both within scenes and between them—and a keen sense for balancing serious moments with the more comedic. Even side characters, such as homeschooler prodigy and outdoorsy gentleman Morgan, who helps Jake survey Escobar, are not shortchanged when it comes to personality. The quick and witty though nuanced exchanges that take place among essentially all of the characters may not be the height of realism, but they are genuinely enjoyable; the dialogue introduces an appropriate sort of James Bond slickness to the South Florida crime caper.

From mentions of Justin Bieber to the ubiquitous slogan YOLO (You Only Live Once), the cultural references do help bring the modern-day action into clear view, but they also threaten to quickly date a book whose high-stakes action, mystery, and sparkling characters could easily remain relevant for years to come. With its solid structure and fast pace, along with a standout sleuth, Lane's story makes a worthy new entry into the suspense genre.

HANNAH EASON (January 13, 2014)

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