

The Tunnel

S. D. Tooley

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Tooley entices through nuanced characterizations, intricate plotting, and detail-laden prose.

Although a dark tunnel is central to the seventh installment of S. D. Tooley's award-winning Sam Casey series, its title could as easily be referring to the emotional, physical, and spiritual journey each character populating these pages undergoes during this entertaining, harrowing paranormal mystery. None will remain unaltered by tale's end, and not all of them will emerge unscathed ... or with their lives.

For Tooley's heroine, a psychically gifted investigative consultant with familial roots in Native American culture, the journey has already proven to be especially taxing—the tolls exacted, extreme. Little wonder, given that she's haunted by the terrible events which concluded the previous volume in the series and have left her but a shade of herself.

It's here, in capturing her lead's exhausted state with but a passing sigh, a telling inflection or habitual tic, that one of Tooley's strongest attributes—crafting finely tuned characterizations—comes to the fore. Dozens of fleeting, yet telling, observations are secreted through the text, each revealing another facet of Sam's personality, parsing her inner turmoil even while pushing the narrative forward.

The same is true of all Tooley's characters, be they inconsequential or vital to Sam's tortured passage. Mother, child, or grizzled indigent, each gets the precise amount of detail and contrast necessary to endow them with an almost palpable heft. Nowhere is that more evident than in Tooley's depiction of Nemo, the preternaturally precocious six-year-old living in an abandoned building with his long-ailing mother. Nemo comes to the notice of a close friend of Sam's family after the theft of some fruit. In many important ways, the author's layered portrayal of this eerily street-smart urchin—who enjoys exploring the long-forgotten tunnel beneath his temporary home—serves as the book's emotional and thematic heart.

It is Nemo's choice to risk his life by entering the hellish prison at the end of his tunnel, all for the sake of another soul more desperate and forsaken than he, which proves to be the pivotal if not defining moment of this tale. When three seemingly unconnected story lines intersect, the resulting revelations and repercussions deliver a dramatic, undeniable impact with real emotional resonance—and ramifications, which the author will explore in Sam's subsequent adventures.

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