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The Unkindness of Strangers: The Hollywood Murder Mysteries Book Five

Peter S. Fischer
The Grove Point Press (Mar 6, 2012)
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The Red Scare, homophobia and, of course, murder, highlight Peter S. Fischer's wonderfully crafted fifth noir-style detective mystery set in Hollywood's Golden Age.

The Unkindness of Strangers is the fifth installment in Peter S. Fischer's The Hollywood Murder Mysteries series. Taking place in 1951, the communist suspicions that took root after World War II play a prominent role. As in the series' earlier books, cinema publicist Joe Bernardi is a seemingly normal guy caught in the middle of high stakes crime.

Alleged communist Elia Kazan is set to direct *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The film is already beset with complications—the story is too violent and racy for the time. Then newspaper columnist Bryce Tremayne plans to publish a tell-all attack on Kazan's political leanings in papers across the country. When Tremayne is found with a bullet between his eyes, the suspect list explodes, as it seems almost everyone from his wife to a Hollywood makeup artist have reason to want him dead.

The plot moves quickly, like a good whodunit should, and Fischer livens up slower parts (like conversations recapping the facts of the case) with humorous dialogue that highlights the characters' personalities. At the end readers will be satisfied with their understanding of the mystery and closure of the plot.

The Unkindness of Strangers, like others in the series, adeptly reflects the time in which it is set. This installment highlights the hidden infidelity, homophobia, and political paranoia that were rampant. As before, Fischer is not heavy handed in his social commentaries, and he doesn't make readers feel like outsiders to the nuances of Hollywood. Fischer filters lessons on Hollywood through Joe's voice to avoid an instructional or belittling tone. The author's knowledge builds a foundation for the setting, but lets the plot and characters take center stage.

As before, Bernardi's first-person voice has the clipped cadence and dry humor of a film noir detective. He's a trustworthy narrator and readers who come to rely on him to get to the bottom of things won't be disappointed. This book is brimming with secondary characters, like many murder mysteries. Although these easy-to-categorize characters meet expectations for the genre, Fischer bends those expectations creatively enough to make the book an enjoyable, exciting read—and show his prowess as a writer.

Fischer's passion for classic Hollywood is clear. His research and excellent fictional craft bring the fruits of that love to the pages. Fischer was the co-creator of *Murder, She Wrote* and wrote for *Columbo*, and he seems to relish writing this series. His skill and delight in the craft of writing make this a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

The books maintain consistency of writing quality and plot intensity throughout the series. Mystery aficionados and vintage Hollywood devotees will enjoy this book on its own or as part of the series.
MELISSA WUSKE (August 13, 2013)

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