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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

The Unlikely Sleuth: A Novel

Edward J. Bertz
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What can one fifteen-year-old, girl-crazy farm boy know about mobsters, murder, and honor? Turns out, according to Edward J. Bertz in his first novel, *The Unlikely Sleuth,* quite a bit. This coming-of-age murder mystery takes place in 1940s pastoral Wisconsin. Bucky Pepin, a naïve boy on the cusp of manhood, loves a mystery, and the Labor Day holiday offers one up to his imagination.

Bucky spots a gangster, right on Main Street in his sleepy little rural hometown. The man is driving a new Cadillac, and blood is dripping from his head wound. By his side sits a lovely lady. Bucky deduces that the mobster and his moll are headed for the abandoned farm—the one with a checkered past, the one where the owner and his wife were killed.

No one believes that a gangster would hide out in a farming community in the middle of nowhere. But Bucky devotes every moment to proving the strangers are part of an organized crime syndicate. All the while he tries to be the sports jock his father wants him to be, to help his mother as she deals with unknown problems, and to pursue the girl of his dreams.

Bertz's multiple story lines converge in believable and endearing ways. As Bucky faces the challenges before him, he reveals a pure heart and an honorable character. In fact, Bucky's authenticity might lead readers to suspect the character is autobiographical, but Bertz denies it.

On the whole, *The Unlikely Sleuth* is economically written. The violence, kept to a minimum, provides just enough action to keep the novel from turning into a sweet and all too familiar coming-of-age tale. The book does explore Bucky's sexuality to some extent, but like Bucky, it doesn't go beyond first base.

There are several glitches in Bertz's writing. A story line hangs unresolved, secondary characters need more development, and the exposition requires crafting and tightening. However, Bertz does use the setting and some historical details from the era to enrich the story, and dialogue, unlike the exposition, flows well and rings true.

The plot hinges on Bucky's ability to solve the mystery of the strange couple, and the author stays on task. He weaves minor story lines into a neat tapestry of suspense, the common thread of which is a naïve but sweet sleuth. Anyone who enjoys a strong mystery plot, pure-hearted young heroes, and a historic 1940s setting will find this an entertaining read.

DAWN GOLDSMITH (March 15, 2012)

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