



The White Angel

John MacLachlan Gray

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A Scottish nanny is shot and dies in the home of her wealthy employers, initiating the scandal that inspired John MacLachlan Gray's novel *The White Angel*. It takes a sweeping view of life in Vancouver in 1924. Labor unrest, enormous class disparities, and racial prejudice all figure into this thoughtful and entertaining novel.

Self-described "failed poet" and journalist Ed McCurdy joins forces with a local constable to ferret out the murderer of the nanny, Janet Stewart. In a sea of ineptitude and corruption, Constable Hook smells something fishy. His doubts, published by McCurdy, result in a public outcry for justice.

The plot swings quickly from kidnappings to international drug deals to violence and romance as McCurdy and Hook seek the truth despite the obstruction of the coroner, the attorney general, the Vancouver Police, and Stewart's employers.

Gray's attention to character development yields fascinating protagonists. McCurdy and his friend Sparrow make odd bedfellows. McCurdy is cynical, almost curmudgeonly. Sparrow, half his face a tin replica covering a war wound, is by contrast completely sincere about overthrowing the capitalists. Sparrow's girlfriend Mildred, a brilliant and underemployed woman, dons various costumes as if trying on new lives. Hook, though a smart policeman, is touchingly naïve where women are concerned.

Over the course of the novel, McCurdy comes to appreciate the value of journalism. He wonders if being a muckraker might actually be better than being a poet. His summary of what he thinks of as bizarre times may ring discouragingly familiar:

The police can no longer be trusted, the press no longer delivers facts, the legal system is biased in favour of power and money, and the governing of the province is nothing but a charade.

The White Angel is a particularly appealing work of historical fiction.

KAREN MULVAHILL (March/April 2018)

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