

Thirty-Seven

Peter Stenson

Dzanc Books (Feb 13, 2018)

Hardcover \$26.95 (216pp)

978-1-945814-31-0

Thirty-Seven is uncomfortable, disturbing, and impossible to put down.

The surviving member of an infamous cult finds himself drawn back into the life in the uneasy but engaging *Thirty-Seven* by Peter Stenson.

A cult known as the Survivors shocked the nation after the Day of Gifts, a single day on which several members enacted horrific murders and other acts of violence. Fast forward a year, and only one member remains alive and out of prison.

Mason Hues was the youngest member of the Survivors and hopes to live out the rest of his days in relative anonymity. Hoping to escape punishment, he makes use of several aliases—Jon Doe, Thirty-Seven, and, eventually, One. Upon wandering into a thrift shop, his plans for obscurity go awry. Mason befriends the manic Talley and both set out to reform the cult, though their choices may ultimately only lead others down dark paths.

Mason Hues is an unreliable narrator, which gives *Thirty-Seven* a compelling edge. Despite espousing a desire to be honest, Mason is clearly withholding information from Talley, his therapist, and even his audience. Further muddying the waters, he studies the cult founder's book religiously.

The narrative comes strictly through his perspective. Dialogue is incredible. Through lengthy footnotes, Mason speaks directly to the audience. Paradoxically, his footnotes seem the most honest portions of his story but also contradict his overall narrative.

Writing is extremely engaging, with clever uses of rhythm, repetition, and other musicality that give portions of the story a songlike feel. This melodic aspect functions incredibly well when paired with some of the more gruesome aspects of the story. Violent acts, disturbing allegations, and painful dialogue feel less brutal in this tone, but it doesn't detract from the uneasy atmosphere.

Thirty-Seven is uncomfortable, disturbing, and impossible to put down. Focusing on innate human desires to belong, it explores survival, escape, and darkly repeating patterns.

JOHN M. MURRAY (January/February 2018)

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