



Trail of Madness

Ken Stichter

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Because of its likable lead detective, Trail of Madness is an exceptionally fun murder mystery, highly addictive and with more than its fair share of memorable passages.

The Sierra Nevada and the tiny towns of Orange County, California, provide the setting for Ken Stichter's quirky mystery *Trail of Madness*, a chilling work about a cold case in the stifling heat of the sunny and often destitute inlands of the Golden State.

Investigator Van Vanarsdale is a strange bird—not a hardboiled police officer, but an intellectual with a fondness for music and literature. He exercises considerable powers of observation and deduction, working overtime to crack his cases. Here, his focus is a difficult and tragic murder—the 1972 killings of Cindy Ashae and her prom date, Carlos Fuentes. The teens' case has long since gone cold when some of Cindy's remains are found in a time capsule, drawing the Orange County sheriff's office in.

In between periods spent researching the case, Detective Vanarsdale ruminates on the nature of morality, human memory, faith, and tragedy. His approach to solving crimes is a deeply humanistic one, with journeys into the “bad boy box” (Vanarsdale's term for the diseased minds of criminals) collaborating and coexisting with in-depth study sessions of police notes, crime scene descriptions, and witness interviews.

Though its depictions of criminal investigations are not particularly realistic—indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a real-life counterpart to Vanarsdale working in the local police department—the novel does present a believable picture of how a crime, especially an unsolved one, can rend the fabric of individual lives and of communities. Vanarsdale's fellow detectives Stenzgard and Fenton are exceedingly strong personifications of such lasting impacts.

One of the novel's major elements is its loving portrayal of Southern California's disappearing wildlife. Despite the endless rows of prefabricated houses and strip malls that make up its settings, the book focuses on the scrubby grasslands, broad ocean views, and majestic mountain scenery of Orange County and its neighbors.

Stylistically, the book follows a third-person omniscient narrative, which allows for extended examinations of the inner lives of its many characters. Sometimes these moments bring out gems that help to add depth and weight to the already heady storyline. At other times, too many interior monologues drag the story out; the book could easily be a hundred pages shorter without compromising its core.

Because of its likable lead detective, *Trail of Madness* is an exceptionally fun murder mystery, highly addictive and with more than its fair share of memorable passages. Hopefully, there are more Vanarsdale novels on the Western horizon. With a character and a setting this good, it would be a crime if Vanarsdale turned in his badge and went back to his books.

BENJAMIN WELTON (April 10, 2018)

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