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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ GENERAL FICTION

Undue Influence

Shelby Yastrow
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"Within two weeks after Benjamin Stillman died, six sets of lawyers were already busily devoting themselves to the task of laying claim to his money." And so a complex tapestry of masterfully crafted plotlines is woven in *Undue Influence*, an ingenious novel by attorney Shelby Yastrow. The story offers enough dizzying and unpredictable twists and turns in the form of legal conspiracies to move events along at breakneck speed. The reader is compelled to keep guessing at what to expect on the next page. The suspense begins with a puzzling question: Why would a lowly bookkeeper who happens to be Catholic bequeath $8 million to a synagogue?

It doesn't take long before a herd of conspirators stampede the probate court bent on cashing in on the money in question; they seek to question the will's legality, or investigate possible insider trading, or other crimes that might have accounted for the millions Stillman socked away. There is little the lawyers will not concoct to assert their clients' bogus and outrageous claims to the money. Thus, the author offers social and political commentary on a justice system that permits unscrupulous lawyers to profit by taking advantage of slippery legalese.

At the center of the stampede is the team of Philip Ogden and Tom Andrews, two likable and honest lawyers who take on the seemingly insurmountable task of disproving the allegations made by one unscrupulous conspirator after another. Eventually, Ogden and Andrews uncover the secret of Stillman's fortune. But they're far from disproving the host of conspiracies who are pushing the legal system to the breaking point.

Unlike many courtroom dramas, the adeptly crafted *Undue Influence* is set in the probate arena, not criminal court. Moreover, Yastrow's story is superbly engineered right down to the tiniest detail. With a cast of devilish, curious, and charming characters, the author succeeds in weaving a complex series of subplots into a literary work guaranteed to please.

GARY KLINGA (May 17, 2012)

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