

Vast Midnight

Helena White

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Vast Midnight is a mystery with a timeless feel, with unique literary stylings, a strong woman protagonist, and surprise revelations.

Helena White's *Vast Midnight* is an engaging and dramatic story about a young doctor accused of murdering her husband. Focusing variously on class distinctions, love, betrayal, honor, and conviction, this is an emotionally wrought work.

When Maddy Schartz first meets Liam, she is unaware of his connection to the affluent Akerman Publishing family. The contrast of Maddy's unconventional, "kooky" middle-class upbringing with Liam's grand, Gatsbyesque lifestyle leads to a storybook romance, though their happiness is short-lived.

Liam dies in a suspicious car accident, and devastated Maddy becomes the prime suspect. From the metallic clang of doors in the Manhattan Tombs to the harrowing halls of Rikers, Maddy faces the harsh realities of the prison environment. From guards' sexual demands to the value of an oatmeal cookie behind bars, White artfully details Maddy's entrapment, both in body and mind. With the help of a lawyer friend, unsettling evidence, coerced infidelities, and troubling family secrets are unveiled.

White sets a modern tone with contemporary references to Boca burgers and *Law and Order*, though formal language also lends the book an old-world feel. The complex narrative unfolds through a series of letters, journal entries, and fictional stories composed by Maddy that include "Aphrodite's Apple," which offers an imaginative transference of Maddy's present-day turmoil.

Maddy's correspondence is efficiently used to reveal both past and present events and as means of fleshing out themes and characters. Vivid details help capture her memories. Recalling a problematic, autistic patient, she potently conjures, "The air is congested with the combined smell of aged diarrhea and orange blossoms."

In a creative showcase, White captures Maddy's love of Sondheim music by cleverly incorporating choice lyrics that help solidify Maddy's thought. From the murderous antics of Sweeney Todd to the ironies and disappointments reflected in the words of the renowned "Send in the Clowns," the lines express the fears and frustrations of individuals trapped in their circumstances. When pondering the intertwining fairy tales of the award-winning *Into the Woods*, Maddy envisions herself a fatalistic Cinderella who didn't have the sense to leave the castle and its trappings.

Beneath the angst of Maddy's orange jumpsuit, there is pointed feminist commentary. In a letter addressed to her unborn "angels," Maddy advises that having their own money will give them independence. Likewise, a friend's nod to the popular seventies dictum about women needing men like fish need bicycles seems a valid response to a deceptive, crumbling marriage.

While there are some predictable moments in this story, from sexual transgressions to game-changing courtroom testimonies, White adds an interesting new dimension in the book's final pages, when correspondence from Maddy's

now grown daughter suddenly offers a provocative glimpse into the characters' futures.

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CAROL DAVALA (January 25, 2017)

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