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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ MYSTERY

Victim: A Pete Thorsen Novel

Robert Wangard
Ampersand (May 19, 2017)
Softcover $17.95 (336pp)
978-0-9985222-1-0

Chapters flow naturally and suspense is conjured masterfully in this Lake Michigan thriller.

Robert Wangard's *Victim* slowly unfurls the truth behind the mysterious events surrounding a murder. Courage, lies, and deceit permeate this tale, and nobody escapes unscathed.

A wealthy man is shot and killed while riding a Jet Ski. Pete Thorsen, a semiretired lawyer who is both resourceful and intuitive, was a friend of the victim's. The sheriff's department concocts a conspiracy theory that connects Pete to the murder and puts his reputation in jeopardy.

Pete must work against the clock to clear his name, while at the same time consoling his eighteen-year-old daughter, Julie, who witnessed the murder. Matters get even more perplexing when Pete begins to suspect that the man in custody for the crime is being framed. The deeper he digs, the more unclear everything becomes.

Tensions build from the opening page, which finds a man crouched in the brush alongside a lake, aiming his gun at a Jet Skier out on the water. The novel creeps forward through the scenes leading up to the murder, then accelerates in its aftermath.

Friendship and family values are prevalent throughout the narrative. Pete's tumultuous relationship with his daughter is central and feels authentic. Julie's moody behavior undergoes a dramatic shift when she begins to assist her dad with the investigation.

As the mystery slowly unravels, minor characters are introduced at a leisurely pace. The people Pete tracks down are searing and vivid, as with a woman, Miss Brill, whose personality pops when she comes on to Pete. Art Lehr, another person of interest, is the owner of a dilapidated farm; he is painted with a blaring temperament and a multitude of motives, and seems like he's hiding something.

Detective Joe Tessler is a longtime friend of Pete's; they meet to talk things out at a bluff above Lake Michigan, and such moments are filled with calming scenic images. These sections provide a dazzling view of the landscape and a poignant contrast to the violent crime committed there.

Wangard's prose is polished and achieves a perfect balance between dialogue and exposition. Chapters flow naturally, and suspense is conjured masterfully.

The plot is complicated and at times feels contrived. The identity of Leslie Lehr, a young woman who is peripherally connected to the murder investigation, is outlined but not fleshed out well enough to draw satisfying conclusions about her place in the story. This character initially seems to be a focal player, but she is referenced through hearsay only and never truly becomes part of the narrative. The ending leaves some questions unanswered and is not fully gratifying.

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Victim is a smart detective novel where fortunes are squandered, friendships lack candor, and reputations are ruined.

BRITTNEY DECKER (July 14, 2017)

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