ForeWord Reviews

What Did You Do Before Dying?
Patricia K. Batta
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Coping with grief and the sudden and unforeseen burden of having to earn a living are not conditions that tend to sharpen one's investigative skills. That, however, is what Marge Christensen must deal with as she sets out to discover who murdered her accountant husband, Gene.

Marge finds Gene dead in their garage, slumped over the steering wheel of his ritzy BMW with the motor still running. The police rule it suicide, a conclusion supported by the fact that Gene seems to have recently lost the family's life savings in shady investments. Marge believes none of this, however. She's sure it wasn't in Gene's character to deliberately cause her such pain. Adding to her emotional turmoil is the guilt she feels from having been on the verge of an affair.

Marge is not alone in this new and frightening world. She has a son living nearby who has his own marital problems, a daughter away at college, and a daughter-in-law who's publicly contemptuous of her. Then, there are her hovering, obsessively attentive neighbors, Willy and Wilma Watson, both of whom treat her like she's a basket case. Her would-be lover remains ardent, but she no longer reciprocates. Ultimately, Marge realizes that she's on her own when it comes to finding the truth behind her husband's death.

Batta, a teacher by trade and author of two mysteries, does a first-rate job depicting the leaden weight of Marge's loss—pain unrelieved by sleep, self-recrimination, scary personal appearance, and the duties that once enlivened her. Although there are flashes of grim humor in the book, there is no lightheartedness

The story is set in the Washington suburb of Newport Hills, but location plays little part in the narrative. It's an understandable omission, however, since the story, while relayed in third person, is still seen through Marge's eyes—eyes that are initially fixed inward. "Detachment enveloped her like a screen," Batta writes, "filtering the awakening colors of spring. Marge felt as if she were moving in a different, gray dimension, one filled with emptiness and guilt."

This book is labeled “A Marge Christensen Mystery,” which suggests future appearances by the somber but resolute widow. It will be interesting to see how she tackles crime-solving in which she has no personal involvement.

Edward Morris