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General

Whispering Bodies: A Roy Belkin Disaster
Jesse Michaels
Soft Skull Press
978-1-59376-530-9
(September 1, 2013)

Jesse Michaels introduces us to the oddly endearing Roy Belkin in an offbeat mystery that, at its heart, is an in-depth character study.

Readers will quickly learn that Roy Belkin's eccentricity crosses the line into compulsive obsession. A loner who survives on the government checks his similarly eccentric father earns, Roy spends most of his time in his apartment, trolling religious message boards online and dealing with the always-increasing clutter of his surroundings. When a fire in his building appears to be a cover-up to a murder, Roy is drawn into solving the mystery. The catalyst to his uncharacteristic involvement is a chance meeting with an enigmatic, attractive neighbor named Pernice Balfour, who is eventually suspected of the crimes. In his efforts to prove her innocence, Roy finds himself drawn more to the outside world, making it necessary to overcome his agoraphobic and antisocial tendencies.

At its heart, *Whispering Bodies* is an in-depth character study, and Michaels shines in his characterization of a truly unusual and unique protagonist. Roy is not your typical "hero," and his habits and obsessions are bound to draw readers into his strange world. Roy begins most days with visits to religious websites, where he logs in and posts answers and questions designed to aggravate board members, such as "I'm thinking of crucifying somebody (a friend). Advice?" He refers to this ritual as The Service, and considers it an integral part of his daily life.

The Service is the only manner in which Roy attempts any real interaction with others—with the notable exception of derisive notes he leaves for the neighbor who habitually places bags of soiled diapers in the hallway. Whenever he has to venture out into the city, Roy needs to perform certain rituals and "protections" in order to leave the building. As he becomes drawn into the murder/arson mystery, however, he finds his old habits and beliefs challenged and, ultimately, needs to decide whether or not he will summon the courage to change his old

way of life. His journey is often humorous, usually bizarre, and sometimes poignant.

Whispering Bodies is fast-paced and Michaels writes with a spare, matter-of-fact tone tinged with humor. The storyline and the main character engage the reader from the first page. Supporting characters are well-realized, though they are usually exaggerated to stereotypes: there is a well-respected but exceedingly dumb detective, an effeminate photographer with odd sexual proclivities, and religious zealots with limitless devotion. Characterization is clearly intended to be humorous and serves to emphasize Roy's eccentricity, simultaneously giving readers an opportunity to question what "normal" really is.

Michaels, a singer, songwriter, and artist, skillfully introduces his odd protagonist in this first of a planned series. The end of the novel wraps up loose ends and leaves the door open for the next "Roy Belkin Disaster." Readers who appreciate the blend of offbeat humor and unconventional characters are sure to look forward to it.

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