

Breakage

David-Michael Harding

Black Rose Writing

(315pp)

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In the thriller Breakage, a gambler with waning cognition faces an unexpected web of challenges.

In David-Michael Harding's complex mystery novel *Breakage* a man with a talent for numbers gets involved with gambling on horses.

Donnie is a man with many secrets. Though his mind is special (he has a unique ability to see numbers), giving him an edge at gambling, he has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His daughter avoids speaking to him, refuses to assist him with his gambling activities, and is bothered by his house, which triggers negative memories in her.

Then Donnie's granddaughter is kidnapped. There are multiple suspects, each with their own motive. Donnie is used to being thought of as strong and powerful; the kidnapping challenges that. As he contends with his illness, his enemies, his family, and his employer, he wonders how his life's work will turn out—and what lengths he should go to in order to save his gambling empire. As events and circumstances unfold around Donnie, it feels like he is trapped in a vise that's tightening around him.

Though it represents a web of twists and developments that pack serious tension, the story is too heavy with dialogue, and its limited use of dialogue tags sometimes confuses who is speaking. The sparse narration means that there are also limited descriptive details, including in relation to the setting. Some sounds are incorporated, but the book is otherwise light on sensory touch points. And some of the details strain credulity, as when hired muscles fail to recognize that a vehicle's trunk is not airtight and that bullet holes are not required for breathing. A love story is included in the book, but it is underdeveloped as well.

Donnie is referred to by multiple names in the course of the story, including the Book, Chariot, and Mr. Chariot. This is also true of at least two other characters. At times, these different names are also employed in a short space, leading to jumbled scenes. The shifting names are an unnecessary hurdle, and they lead to some stalls in the story's flow. Some people seem unsure of what to call one another, too, undermining strong senses of their relationships. Nonetheless, Donnie's immediate challenges, coupled with his declining health, lead him toward a climactic and surprising ending.

Breakage is an involving thriller in which a lifelong gambler faces new, dark challenges and turbulence in his relationships.

SHARI MARSHALL (June 21, 2023)

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