

Haunting Pasts: An Absolutely Enthralling Mystery

Trevor Wiltzen

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*In the foreboding mystery novel *Haunting Pasts*, crimes against teenagers resurface in a close-knit town.*

In Trevor Wiltzen's mystery novel *Haunting Pasts*, a private investigator reopens an abduction case that went cold in her mining town.

In the 1980s, Mabel owns a diner and a motel in Blue River, among whose community she is persona non grata. Her past work as an amateur detective helped to break up a drug and sex trafficking ring but left her at odds with her neighbors. In the present, she cares for her orphaned niece—herself a kidnapping survivor—and she tries to regain her footing in Blue River. Her estranged husband Bill returns to town, hoping that they can reconcile, but Mabel is more interested in an unsolved case involving missing girls.

Mabel is an investigator who sometimes mistrusts herself but who also displays a helpful recollection of past events. Drawing on her experience, she determines that the same group of men who were responsible for previous nefarious activities (a group spearheaded by Larson, an imprisoned drug lord) warrants a closer look. She comes to the present circumstances having already combated the sexual abuse of teenage girls who were kept in a coop on a farm.

The story's dark topics are sometimes at odds with its folksy, Pacific Northwestern atmosphere. Much is put into vivifying Mabel's diner, though its staff and other characters are sometimes taken for granted in terms of their development. And Larson and his men are constructed as generic hooligans with rough demeanors. Still, there's room made for new twists, including the search for an elusive everyman and uncertainty about whether or not the victims are even alive.

Mabel's urgent concern for others propels the plot. Her personality is warm; she calls people "luv" and acts on feminist convictions. Indeed, she's a winsome cozy mystery sleuth whose practical nature directs her approach: she earns people's trust and listens to them with care during her interviews. With her family, she exhibits genuine affection, and her interactions with Bill lighten the book's mood.

While the 1980s are evoked in part through fun musical references, there are also sobering historical details present, including a reference to Ted Bundy. In Mabel's time, serial crimes still feel unusual—as evinced in her discussion with an FBI agent about serial killer profiling, a burgeoning field. The agent's budding expertise is serendipitous; Mabel is more efficient when it comes to investigating, following leads with determination. The book's suspense intensifies as the pool of victims widens and a thrilling cat-and-mouse chase ensues.

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KAREN RIGBY (May 18, 2023)

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