

Something Tricky Bad

Freya Smallwood

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Something Tricky Bad is a heartwarming mystery novel in which a small town is reshaped by love, devotion, and tragedy.

In Freya Smallwood's endearing mystery novel *Something Tricky Bad*, the residents of a vibrant California community wrestle with a series of disturbing events.

In Santa Christina, a surprise offer to house-sit for a stranger launches Angel, an undocumented Mexican gardener, into the center of a series of home invasions. Tor, a surfer turned detective, is occupied with the brutal murder of a college student, and when an aging archaeologist discovers a fresh burial site in a park, he brushes off her concern. And a friendly neuroscientist, O.G., attempts to hold the pieces of this expansive puzzle together while worrying over the health of his successful daughter.

This fresh series installment breaks away from its predecessors with its more ambitious scope. It retains the charm of O.G. and Tor's circle of friends while introducing the complex new personalities of Angel, his brother Ruben, and a Catholic priest, Tomás. Angel is honest and well-intentioned to a fault as he looks after the stranger's apartment. After experiencing numerous break-ins, he begins driving the stranger's fish to work and cooling their tank with ice cubes to keep them safe from the hot California summer. Tomás, who is confounded by the miraculous blooming of a barren part of his church's cemetery, soon becomes one of O.G.'s essential interlocutors. These and other people add contemporary politics and cunning international dimensions to the folksy, self-enclosed atmosphere of Santa Christina.

This elastic narrative, which is well attuned to the happiness and sensibilities of its cast, is peppered with twists and playful scenes, including interviews with an assortment of elderly conservative drinkers. It encompasses deep relationships, confounding crimes, and thoughtful explorations of social questions. Herein, people's motives and identities shift often. But when they're in conversation with one another, Santa Christina's denizens still resolve their tensions with humor. Between the friendly conversations of O.G. and Tor, Linda and Tor's wholesome romance, and the seriousness of the murders that haunt its pages, there is much to enjoy and appreciate in this cozy detective tale.

But even as Santa Christina's landscapes and relationships receive lush attention, it's sometimes at the expense of the book's pacing and clarity. The narrative dwells on minor events, and it indulges in too-long sentences that make otherwise fast and serious scenes feel casual. Still, much of the novel's charm is derived from the cultivation of the secondary interactions. Mrs. Park, O.G.'s cleaning dominatrix, is a prime example: even though her conversations with O.G. sidetrack the story, they prove indispensable to the overall sense of comfort and familiarity that permeates the book.

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WILLEM MARX (August 17, 2023)

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