

The Agent

Marsha Roberts

Easy River Press (Mar 24, 2020)

Softcover \$15.95 (290pp)

978-1-73277-477-3

The Agent is an understated mystery about a scam whose perpetrators are motivated by much more than greed.

A trio of con artists converges on their latest mark in Marsha Roberts's mystery novel, *The Agent*.

Victoria's business colleagues know her as an attractive, talented real estate agent. To her actor brother Theo and her psychic aunt Vera, she is also a con artist of the highest caliber. The trio has made an art of targeting wealthy divorcees and building up their confidence, only to bilk them out of millions. But now, in the midst of what began as just another job, Victoria's insecurities, Vera's reluctance, and unexpected developments threaten to topple their operation.

Set in the affluent neighborhoods of northern California, the story makes excellent use of its location. Victoria and Theo entice their victim with trips to exclusive spas, high-end clothing boutiques, and lavish restaurants. The plot builds slowly, introducing the characters and teasing at what their scheme may entail. The exact nature of their plan unfolds bit by bit, and they are presented with new complications that aren't always what they seem. The depths of the characters' cleverness—and ruthlessness—seem to have no limits, except those imposed by their own shortcomings. They confront every challenge with practiced aplomb, and yet there is always the sense that their operation is teetering on the edge of disaster. This makes for tense reading as the other shoe dangles overhead.

The characters and family dynamics are rich and complex. Victoria, despite all of her successes, is scarred by her abusive childhood, struggling with self-destructive behavior and judging herself and others with undue harshness. Theo relishes the self-confidence—and the money—that his role in Victoria's scams brings him. Vera participates only out of family obligation and urges them to stop before it's too late, while at the same time running a scam of her own. Minor characters are not as developed; some build on stereotypes.

Theo experiences some guilt late in the game, but this does not affect his actions. He and Victoria remain the same vengeful people to the end. They are so determined to get symbolic revenge on the people who wronged them in the past that they may end up losing their futures. Victoria and Theo may not be likable, but they are always fascinating.

True details make scenes related to real estate and law enforcement dealings crackle with realism. The book's ending is as riveting as it is fitting. One crucial twist is so neat that it sparks the urge to reread the book and flush out all of the clues hiding in plain sight.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (July 1, 2020)

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