

The Case of the Cast Pearl: An Abelow and Bradley Mystery

Freya Smallwood

Tekla

(333pp)

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A seaside murder is the focus of The Case of the Cast Pearl, a charming mystery novel in the Abelow and Bradley series.

A dead body with its leg thrust out of the sand, a medical conference on rare tropical diseases, and a once-in-a-decade archaeological dig on Native American burial land collide in Freya Smallwood's sunny California mystery novel *The Case of the Cast Pearl*.

The coastal Posada on the Strand hotel becomes the site of undercover detective work when one of its maids is discovered buried on the beach. Detective Tor Abelow, a cynical ex-surfer and pillar of his community, leads the local police department in its investigation with the help of research scientist and amateur sleuth O. G. Bradley. Rushing to interview numerous doctors and archaeological hobbyists before their twin conferences at the Posada end, Abelow's department becomes embroiled in a web of scientific rivalries and old love affairs that stretches across the border into Mexico. And in addition to this suspenseful procedural investigation, the novel dives into the friendships, family matters, and values that make Santa Christina tick.

Building on previous series installments, this book further develops its familiar community in addition to several new members of the police force. Peppery one-liners result in clear pictures, as when Abelow is told "Your face—looks like, some juggler's tossing around daggers. You scare people." And Bradley spends much of his page space planning a Thanksgiving meal and fretting over his relationship with his daughter's mother-in-law, deepening the sense of his personal motivations. Elsewhere, two beautiful detectives pose as research scientists, attempting to bait the presumed murderer. Some characters are too archetypal, though, as with a femme fatale, a jaded cop, a naïve immigrant, and a wise old man.

The book's flow is steady and logical, moving between cinematic witness interrogations and everyday scenes that impart a sense of the California culture and scenery. Endless descriptions of the local beach, digressions that explore the community's infrastructural history, and the peculiar habitats and behaviors of local sea life all receive attention. However, while the solution to the mystery is satisfying and conclusive, the novel continues for fifty pages beyond this ostensible ending, throwing off its rhythm.

In the series mystery novel *The Case of the Cast Pearl*, friendship and detective work complement a community's search for the culprit behind a brutal murder on the beach.

WILLEM MARX (January 25, 2024)

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