



The Raptor's Grasp

Freya Smallwood

TEKLA Press

Softcover \$16.95 (358pp)

979-898590120-7

In the thoughtful mystery novel The Raptor's Grasp, a university community comes together to find a murderer.

In Freya Smallwood's coastal California mystery novel *The Raptor's Grasp*, a local university community is tested by the inexplicable murder of a popular faculty member.

Neuroscientist O. G. Bradley is an aging elder statesman of the university who is grappling with grief over the death of his wife. He is estranged from his son as well. As he tries to adapt to a new stage in his life, he makes choices such as to buy a Tesla, make regular house calls on his friends and colleagues, and walk on the beach to improve his health.

Meanwhile, for one of Bradley's friends, professional-surfer-turned-police-detective Tor Abelow, the stress of police work is becoming intolerable. Abelow's acute awareness of violence has made him paranoid and irrationally protective, alienating his young family.

When a literature lecturer at Bradley's university falls off a cliff during a faculty party and her hotshot professor husband begins acting suspiciously, local panic ensues. Bradley and Abelow lead the novel's large cast of characters in methodically putting the pieces together and unraveling the crime. Using their deep ties to the community and the wisdom of their friends, they uncover corruption, rivalries, and unsavory secrets lying dormant in their small, university-dominated town.

Assiduously following the playbook of a conventional detective story, this is a satisfying, if predictable, mystery. Archetypal characters of the genre abound—with many being represented more than once in this overpopulated story. The existence of two independent protagonists in Bradley and Abelow is emblematic of this excess. Though each character has a special purpose, their shared page time dilutes the book's engagement and suspense somewhat.

A glut of minor plotlines also stymies the pace and draws attention away from the central mystery. Too much time is spent developing Bradley's and Abelow's relationships with their children, friends, and colleagues: Bradley's son is a recent congressman; Abelow teaches underprivileged children to surf. The earliest parts of the book are well paced and gripping, but when these tangential threads become more prominent in the middle of the novel, the pace falters.

As heroes, Bradley and Abelow are complex, moral men, though. There is a great pleasure in learning their backstories as they become involved in the murder investigation. Their contrasting temperaments and investigative styles balance each other out, resulting in productive friction. And their conversations and internal thoughts are exemplary. Where the regular prose is often too detailed, even long-winded, the book's conversations are flowing, insightful, and propulsive.

The novel reaches a neat resolution, though in its determination to resolve each minor question and loose end, its conclusion undermines the centrality of the murder and the climax of the investigation. The focus on Bradley, Abelow, and the local community is blurred; the book touches on larger themes, including ecology, the ocean, and the value of

life. Still, Bradley and Ablove remain at the heart of this book, and the ending leaves them primed for another story together.

In the academic mystery novel *The Raptor's Grasp*, a sudden death forces a small community to come together in order to find a murderer.

WILLEM MARX (April 26, 2023)

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