

The Serpent's Guile

Roy Espiritu

Outskirts Press

(255pp)

978-1-977254-86-3

*In the disturbing thriller **The Serpent's Guile**, a malicious billionaire with dark desires ensnares a naïve sex worker for whom he's made bleak plans.*

In Roy Espiritu's thriller *The Serpent's Guile*, a high-class escort falls prey to the charm of a wealthy author and his stalwart butler.

Crystal fought her way out of poverty, establishing a lucrative career as an escort with a prestigious agency. Most of her clients have odd requests, but they almost all center around loneliness. Her newest client, the billionaire novelist Bernard Scott Diamond III, offers her an arrangement: an exclusive relationship, making more money than most of her clients give her combined. But even as Crystal and Scott embark on their whirlwind affair, rumors and moments of darkness begin to mar their relationship. Crystal notices that Scott has a violent streak and secrets in his past; his flashbacks to childhood hunting expeditions are gory and discomfiting.

The book's sex scenes are shared from both Scott's and Crystal's perspectives: Crystal details the sensations and emotions she feels, while Scott focuses on the sense of power and domination that he has over her. These differences are stark, revealing Scott as a threat to Crystal. Indeed, while it's set up as an erotic romance, the novel soon switches focus. Scott outright lies to Crystal, but she finds him beguiling. Their affair becomes more tense; Crystal becomes obsessed with finding out what Scott is hiding. Through Scott's reminiscing about his past and his forthright discussions with his chauffeur, Stan, it becomes clear that Crystal is in danger.

The perspective shifts between Crystal, Scott, and Stan. Each narrator has secrets and darkness in their past. As such, the novel simmers with violence and uncomfortable truths. However, its narrative shifts are often jarring; there's little context given to establish who is speaking, and all three people are prone to storytelling habits like asking rhetorical questions and using heavy foreshadowing. Still, tension is maintained: it is clear that all three people are keeping information from one another, and the question of whether Crystal can avoid the fate that the men have planned for her remains. A lengthy consideration of Scott's newest book, whose plot mirrors his affair with Crystal, defuses this tension somewhat.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (June 28, 2023)

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