

Family Plots

Contributed by Our Reviewer, Stuart Nachbar
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Family Plots: Love, Death and Tax Evasion

by Mary Patrick Kavanaugh

This is the first time I have ever read a story by a self-published author who wants to be known as "the most successful failure possible." This author, Mary Patrick Kavanaugh even held an ersatz funeral at an Oakland, California church—a packed house that day—to celebrate the burial of her dreams of getting a publishing contract (she also buried the diploma for her master's degree!). It's not my style, but maybe it was the right idea for a quirky author who has written a quirky story.

Family Plots is what Kavanaugh calls an "autobiographical fiction." She has taken her past life as a private investigator once married to an IRS-dodging attorney and made it into a fiction novel. No doubt she had loads of material to work with; according to one newspaper interview, she began with a 600 page manuscript and took two years to whittle it down to less than half that length. (See story at http://www.eastbayexpress.com/artsculture/when_dreams_die/Content?oid=880866).

The quiriness made this story interesting, at least in the beginning. Mary's character, in this case herself as narrator in first person, reminds me of Stephanie Plum from the Janet Evanovich novels. An unwed mother who staged a fake wedding to please her family, Mary wants to become a private detective because her criminal justice courses were the only college classes she liked. She is way deep in debt with no end in sight; even counseling will not help her at this point. I like to see an underdog as hero, so I felt that the book was off to a good start. Kavanaugh did an excellent job of developing herself as a main character for this novel.

Mary becomes re-acquainted with Dan Murphy, a former employer and a lawyer who does not trust himself to manage his own financial dealings, even desiring to change his name to Dan Patric for protection. Mary and Dan's financial misadventures dominate the story, probably too much for my taste, but someone who prefers a Janet Evanovich story should find Family Plots to their liking. I also did not find the supporting characters to be strong enough to match the narrative voice and I did not see Mary grow as a professional, someone who was serious about becoming a detective. But those are my preferences for a mystery where the hero enters the story unskilled. There is also an obsession with Murphy's family plot. Mary finds herself comforted by a cemetery while Dan finds the thought of being buried alongside family members to be quite creepy. Personally, I would have felt more like Dan.

Kavanaugh boasts that Family Plots was rejected by sixteen publishers before she decided to go the print-on-demand route. I have to admire her sense of humor and the way she handled rejection. And she put on quite a funeral (see: www.mydreamisdeadbutimnot.com). But I had to wonder if this would have been better as a memoir than an "autobiographical fiction";

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