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Lauretta O'Connor

Hard-boiled Valentine

The Man Who Never Returned

Peter Quinn

The Overlook Press, \$24.95, 333 pp.

Not very many pages into Peter Quinn's latest mystery I began to fantasize about who might play its flawed hero, Fintan Dunne, in the movie version. Alas, William Powell is dead, and no other names came to mind. The book is a real thriller, a nicely hard-boiled valentine to New York City that would make a great movie. Quinn uses his gifts as a historian and novelist to explore the unsolved disappearance of Judge Joseph Crater in August 1930, a mystery that haunted America during the Great Depression. His name became a household word, and his disappearance continued as a frequent subject of jokes and speculation well into the 1950s. Crater, a brilliant jurist, became the poster boy for the sewer of big-city politics. He was corrupt, an insatiable lecher, and a dangerous enemy. His disappearance was variously thought to be the work of the Mafia, an enraged husband, his own wife, or nervous Tammany politicians seeking to remove a possible source of embarrassment to the presidential aspirations of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fintan Dunne made his first appearance in Quinn's novel *Hour of the Cat*. In 1955, when we meet up with him in *The Man Who Never Returned*, he has sold his private-detective agency to a huge conglomerate and is comfortably retired in Florida. Dunne is ex-NYPD, a combat veteran of WWII, and a former OSS operative. He is also bored, and ripe fruit for picking by the wrong people. When an old friend from his OSS days lures him to New York with an intriguing proposition, a trap is set. He is engaged by the obnoxious publishing czar Walter Wilkes to solve the ice-cold Crater case as publicity for the debut of a new magazine. Dunne is skeptical and he doesn't need the money,

but he loves a challenge. Then there is the clever, comely Nan Renard, Wilkes's project manager for the magazine launch. (When Quinn describes Renard's breasts as "firm, plump hemispheres cradled in a lacy white brassiere," I thought he was morphing into Mickey Spillane, but it was just a momentary lapse.)

Dunne's love for New York and his knowledge of its neighborhoods and nightlife, the tang and flavor of its politics and ethnicities, mirror Quinn's own passionate attachment to the city. Ghosts of dead icons float up from the pages: the Hotel Dixie, old Penn Station, Wanamaker's, Cavanaugh's, the Automat at Times Square, even *The Fred Allen Show*. People drink martinis for lunch at Schrafft's and take the IRT to the Bronx. Although the novel bounces briefly from Chicago to Los Angeles, from Havana to Maine, it is a New York story.

Quoting freely from Dante throughout, Quinn lets us know that this is a morality tale as well as a mystery. Joe Crater spirals from upstanding lawyer to powerful malefactor; Fin Dunne, away from home, is once again unfaithful to his wife. Quinn's characters, historical and imagined, suffer unhappy consequences from their bad choices.

As a foil for his hero's anemic moral resolve, Quinn uses the character of Capt. John F. Cronin, a straight-arrow cop who transferred to the Missing Persons Bureau because it was the least corrupt department of the NYPD during the reckless days of Prohibition. "Crow" Cronin has been reading (and spouting) Dante since his student days at Regis High School. When Dunne tracks him down in the course of his Crater re-

search, Cronin tells him that he is reading the section of the *Inferno* on the third circle of Hell—one of his favorite parts. He jokes that Dante could have gotten all of his material from the Missing Persons Bureau: "Murder, mayhem, malfeasance, the felonies and misdemeanors that people flee, bad marriages, embezzlements...broken bonds of family and friendship...concentric circles of deceit, of betrayals major and minor." Though he does not yet know it, Dunne himself is caught in one of those concentric circles.

Despite his initial skepticism, Dunne finds himself drawn into the story of Judge Crater's disappearance, and particularly into the details of the highly criticized police work that followed it. Could someone have deliberately derailed the investigation? Dunne starts to put together pieces of the puzzle, interviewing anyone still alive who has a connection to the case. In one of the book's more touching moments, he tracks down Stella Crater, the judge's widow, living in reduced circumstances in lower Manhattan. She is a frail creature, still clinging to her belief in her husband's goodness, and Dunne treats her very gently. She also unwittingly provides the final piece of the puzzle. Dunne, ever the bloodhound, follows the clue to death's door.

Peter Quinn's solution to Judge Crater's disappearance is not plucked from thin air. He builds the case quite plausibly. Moreover, instead of a mere mystery, he has written a complex morality tale rich with character. His hero, Fintan Dunne, is tough, interesting, and about ready to grow up—as his wife wishes—by the end of the book. The villains are several, and they more or less get their just desserts. My hero is Crow Cronin, whose good-cop instincts actually save a life with a phone call to the right person at a critical moment. History, murder, a little hanky-panky, some Dante and some T. S. Eliot, good guys and bad guys: this book has it all. ■

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