

Review of David Orsini's Novel *Schemes, Disguises, & Traps*

Review by Ben W. McClelland, The University of Mississippi

As the title hints, David Orsini's novel SCHEMES, DISGUISES, & TRAPS is an exemplar of contemporary noir fiction. And he doesn't disappoint. Set in Manhattan—and other posh spots around the globe—Orsini's brand of noir doesn't take place in the grunge of the urban underworld as earlier avatars of the hard-boiled school. Nor are his characters sleazy criminals, hookers, or cops from a lower class (except for Bryce Thompson, the tormented and tormenting, antagonistic perpetrator). Orsini's story inhabits the mid-to-late twentieth century world of the urbane, super rich. The settings are fashionable Manhattan restaurants, elegant city apartments, New England compounds of the equestrian class, ornate European estates, and mountaintop or beachside resorts—all keenly rendered in fine literary wordsmithery. Orsini's eye catches the smallest details of interiors and the grandest sweeps of the natural world, offering the reader vicariously a luxurious presence in the tense and fast-moving drama of sexual transgression, competitive gamesmanship, and destructive family intrigues, some promulgated between the sheets, others in the board room, or in wills and their controlling codicils.

David Orsini's characters are the movers and shakers of society, the influential scions, such as 30-year-old Aaron Dowling, the privileged, arrogant, and self-assured corporate executive. Dowling is the target of protagonist Lauren Winters, a troubled beauty and an immature and rebellious daughter, whose family has rescued her from a lascivious scandal and hung her out to dry—dangling a fortune in front of her if she will marry a man from a well-to-do family. Lauren's accomplice in her felonious plan to marry and then to murder Aaron Dowling is Bryce Thompson, her brutish and bullying, low-class lover, whose hatred and mistrust of Lauren vies with his insatiable sexual appetite for her. In their plot against Dowling, Lauren will woo and wed him (in order to receive her inheritance from her brother, the executor of their parents' estate), whereupon Bryce will murder Dowling and they will abscond with his massive fortune, as well. Orsini situates the reader inside the psychological flux and flow of these characters' destructive and self-

destructive urges with exceptional intensity. Just a few pages into the story the reader feels engaged in the intrigue of an evil, but simple, love triangle.

However, Orsini has just begun to craft his complex thriller. The reader becomes embroiled in multiple sub-plots that parallel and intersect the original love triangle—including a doppelgänger of Aaron Dowling and a second love triangle, involving more characters (Gavin Dowling; his father; and his father's much younger, second wife) with their own sets of psychological instabilities and controlling or destructive behaviors. Skillfully, Orsini weaves character backstory and setting shifts within the flow of the story's complex action, bringing new players onboard and compelling the reader to follow the plot twists and turns with white-knuckle attentiveness. The reader careens through the action of lies, deceptions, double-crosses, and—yes—a killing, as if propelled from a dizzying high mountaintop down a narrow, switchback road into the depths of the characters' psychological dysfunction and social anomie.

Noir stories rarely have uplifting endings and Orsini holds to that tradition. However, the reader has a sense of justice being served and an awareness of the tragic dimensions of the anti-hero, Bryce Thompson.

Orsini's debut in noir fiction is auspicious, owing to his shrewd plot structures, his rich characterizations, his descriptive evocation of story, and the extraordinary range of his perception. With this novel Orsini has earned a place in the pantheon of contemporary noir fiction writers.

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