

Innocent Spouse by Len Getz

by Esmerelda Weatherwax

I was asked if I would read this detective novel and review it if I felt so moved when finished. Len Getz is a writer and researcher for the Middle East Forum. He has written for [The New English Review](#) and other magazines. This is his first novel.

As it is an entertaining read that rattles along nicely, but with a serious and important core I was happy to do so.

Normally my book recommendations are non-fiction; this isn't just a novel it's a whodunit. Be careful with the clues Weatherwax, no spoilers.

There is a bit of a convention in the classic English Country House murder that the victims are not going to be nice people. They will have enemies. The harder boiled detective novels have no such scruples. Kay Scarpetta's serial killers are almost family. In those, moral ending notwithstanding; it's all about the forensics.

By one of those odd coincidences the last novel I read in October was *The Silkworm* by Robert Galbraith (a pen name of JK Rowling) the second book in the Cormoran Strike series. The victims in that are decidedly unpleasant. But as the dust jacket synopsis (or whatever it is called on a kindle PDF) tells us immediately who the victim is that's one spoiler I don't have to worry about.

The murder victim is Sandra Wolf, star journalist of the *Philadelphia Times* who had recently written several articles investigating a Philadelphia Mosque.

The protagonist is Ivan Samuels an agent for the Internal Revenue Service. His speciality is the so-called Innocent

Spouse cases. He investigates whether the spouse of someone charged with tax offences is involved or innocent of knowledge of the partner's fraud. So he is a bit perplexed when asked to investigate the finances of the *Philadelphia Times* and even more perplexed when it turns out that the FBI are watching what he, and his IRS partner Keisha, turn up. Then Sandra Wolf stops answering calls and his daughter Liz, one of her journalism students at the university, gets very worried and starts to look into her whereabouts. Which is in her home, very dead.

We don't meet Ivan until Chapter 2. In Chapter 1 we meet Sandra and her married lover and boss, in bed in a posh hotel. She is smoking cigarettes, he is smoking dope which he forces onto her. He has a goatee beard. I didn't like the sound of him; not a nice man at all. Knowing already that Sandra is going to die, is he our suspect?

Ivan and Keisha start to delve. The trail takes them into a powerful Philadelphia Mosque run by a very influential Iman, a former top basketball player. Their interactions at the mosque gives Mr Getz a chance to introduce some information about Islam, jihad and terror as a tool of jihad about which the casual reader might be unaware.

There is a long precedent for this. The novels of Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell informed the reader of the miseries of the poor in Victorian England. In *Animal Farm* and 1984 George Orwell warned us of the dangers of totalitarianism and Communism. In his Rabbi David Small detective novels Harry Kemelman was fascinating on the subject of Judaism and Jewish theology. Care must be taken however. I stopped reading Sara Paretsky's VI Warshawski novels after *Tunnel Vision* because I was fed up with being bashed over the head like one of her victims with the blunt instrument of feminism and anti-capitalism. But in this first novel Mr Getz is the right side of informative and interesting. Because it's a subject that too many remain ignorant of.

Ivan's partner Keisha is a convert to Islam of several years standing. But she is an Ahmadiyya Muslim. While she explains the difference between Ahmadiyya and the other branches of Islam very well there is no indication of the hatred Muslims feel for the Ahmadiyya and that in many countries they are persecuted even worse than Jews and Christians. I think Mr Getz missed an opportunity there. Also, while Keisha is directed to the 'sisters' corner' at the mosque the low status of women isn't really explored. But the danger of over-egging the pudding was avoided so this is a minor criticism.

The thing I really liked is the well-rounded genuine decency of the extended Samuels family. While alive we only see Sandra in bed, a cigarette in her lipsticked mouth, the grief of her parents and the affection she inspired in her student Liz round her out as a whole person.

I can't say how accurately the workings of the Philadelphia legal system is but it feels right. Mr Getz is a former IRS agent and his characters have the ring of truth. They feel like real Civil Servants (in English terms) the lawyers feel, well, legal. The plot twists a bit, as a good murder mystery should.

The denouement is a bit Deus ex machina but the young man does credit the will of God for putting him in the right place at the right time and stranger things have happened in real life (Narwal tusk on London Bridge has got to be the strangest). The final page is corny. But I loved it. I do like a happy ending, and something similar was always good enough for Jane Austen.

The Samuels family are worth another outing, but I don't know that the Islamic theme would work twice. I'll wait to hear what Mr Getz is planning.

He is published by the Conservatarian Press, a new publishing house launched this year with the intention of making fiction

great again. It all sounds very positive.

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