Ashes to Ashes Short Guide

Ashes to Ashes by Tami Hoag

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Contents

Characters

Hoag's characters are often somewhat stock cliches, yet one must keep in mind the fact that the genre itself depends on certain stereotypes in order to attain its desired effects. As is often the case with stock characters, Hoag's characters are usually either good or bad. The good characters serve as sites for identification and mouthpieces for the novel's ideas, while the bad characters serve as objects of scorn and critique.

As the novel's main character, Kate Conlan is the major position for reader identification. Novels of this genre often have females as main characters, and one senses that Kate's character owes at least a little bit to Thomas Harris's Clarice Starling and Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta. As the novel opens, Kate is trying to start a new life in Minneapolis after losing her child, her husband, and her job with the FBI. Her travails make her an immediately sympathetic character, for although most readers cannot identify with an FBI agent, they can identify with a divorced, grieving mother.

Once they have identified with Kate, readers are able to gain a certain amount of pleasure from her ability to "read" the world.

As a former FBI agent she clearly has the ability to interpret both clues and people, and much of Hoag's prose is devoted to articulating Kate's precise insights. This ability to "read" things is shared by the novel's "good" cops: John Quinn, Sam Kovac, and Nikki Liska.

To Kate's remarkable interpretive abilities, Quinn adds an impressive array of "people skills." In fact, he is so capable of adjusting his behavior to suit a given situation that he loses touch with his own identity: "Midwesterners tended to be reserved and didn't quite trust people who weren't.

In the Northeast he would have given more of the steel. On the West Coast he would have turned up the charm, would have been Mr. Affable, Mr. Spirit of Cooperation.

Different horses for different courses, his old man used to say. And which one was the real John Quinn—even he didn't know anymore." If Kate is searching for a new family to replace the one she lost, Quinn is searching for a domestic space that will guarantee a stable identity. He is haunted by memories of past death, and compassion and reassurance are "emotions he had stopped giving out in full measure long ago because it took too much from him and there was no one around to help him refill the well." If Kate finds her "home" with Quinn (as she says on the novel's last page), Quinn uses Kate to "refill the well."

Sam Kovac shares much with Quinn.

Like Quinn, he has an "emotionally dead" quality that recalls the stereotypical "hardboiled" detective that one would find in a Raymond Chandler novel. Like Quinn, he loves the job but does not enjoy the politics.

Unlike Quinn, he is completely incapable of being diplomatic. Between the two of them, Quinn and Kovac represent the two possible ways of dealing with the "inhumanity of the system."

If Kovac provides a foil for Quinn, Nikki Liska provides a foil for Kate. Liska is a peculiarly masculine woman. Described as "Tinkerbell on steroids," she often seems to be "one of the guys." She "talks tough," she too has no time for the job's politics, and she takes a self-assured, almost brazen attitude toward sexual matters. Her sexual openness allows her to say things about Quinn's appearance, for instance, that the reader is supposed to know, but that Kate does not say because she is too restrained.

One of the novel's key relationships clearly arrives with the uncomfortable pairing of the independent, strong-willed Kate and the witness whose case she takes. Angie DiMarco is a homeless teenaged runaway forced into prostitution for mysterious reasons. One of Hoag's subplots involves Kate's attempts to understand her enigmatic charge.

Angie is one of the novel's key "victims," and the major question is whether or not she will be able to overcome that status.

Ted Sabin and Rob Marshall embody the incompetent, demanding authority figures that the novel wants to critique. Sabin demands results without knowing how to get them, and he further offends the reader by making sexual advances toward Kate. Marshall is awkward, ugly, and ineffective, and the fact that he is simultaneously Kate's boss and the serial killer is surely evidence of narrative wish-fulfillment. As the serial killer, Marshall constantly is seeking power and control; clearly Hoag wants us to view this as merely an extension of the petty power-hungriness of low-level managerial staff everywhere.

Peter Bondurant, Jillian Bondurant, Grace Noble, Edwyn Noble, and Dr. Lucas Brandt should be dealt with as a group, because the primary point Hoag is making with this collection of characters involves the sort of incestuous networking that constitutes political and economic power. As a wealthy businessman, Bondurant obviously has a great deal of power in Minneapolis, but this economic power becomes political power through his ties to the mayor. Bondurant's lawyer is Edwyn Noble, Mayor Grace Noble's husband. Not only does the novel explicitly tie political networking to criminal networking, but it also literalizes the incestuous nature of this network by hinting at a possible sexual relationship between Jillian Bondurant, the murder victim at the center of the novel, and her father. To make matters worse, the presence or absence of the literal incest is hidden by Dr.

Brandt, who is both Jillian's therapist and her father's lackey.

Finally, any discussion of the novel's characters would be incomplete without a reference to Toni Urskine, the woman who runs the halfway house for prostitutes. We learn that Kate (and thus the implied reader) does not like Urskine. "Urskine worked around the clock to keep her indignation cooking at a slow burn. If she or her ideals or 'her victims,' as she called the women at the Phoenix, hadn't been slighted outright, she

would find some way of perceiving an insult so she could climb up on her soapbox and shriek at anyone within hearing distance." Urskine's sixties-style political activism rubs Kate the wrong way, and because of this, Kate thinks that Urskine is one of the "bleeding-heart liberals who spent too much time bad-mouthing the police."

Thus, though Urskine would seem to be the sort of empowered woman that a person in Kate's position would admire, Hoag makes her an object of criticism.

Social Concerns

Tami Hoag begins to voice her novel's most explicit—though not necessarily most significant—social concern as early as the acknowledgments. By thanking a series of FBI agents, members of the CASKU (Child Abduction Serial Killer Unit), officers of various victim services groups, and, of course, members of the police department, Hoag signals the central importance of law enforcement for this crime fiction mystery in which a serial killer is preying upon prostitutes.

Hoag's research into the practices of the police and FBI have given her special insight into the problems faced by law enforcement officers. These problems include both those of a personal nature and those more strictly related to fighting crime.

The unwritten presumption of Hoag's novel is that the "cops" and FBI agents themselves (as opposed to their various superiors) are the only ones who really care about solving crimes, cleaning up the streets, and protecting civilians. Certain characters in the novel (Kovac, Quinn, Kate Conlan) represent "the good ones," to use Kate's own words: "They did a hard job for little credit and not enough pay for the plain oldfashioned reason that they believed in the necessity of it." Kovac in particular represents the novel's ideal of the good cop: "he was the best investigator in the PD, a straight-up good guy who lived the job and hated the politics of it." The "politics" of the job involve coping with superiors (the mayor, the county attorney, the chief of police), who are simultaneously incompetent and demanding. They require immediate results for their own political reasons (i.e., achieving re-election), but in their push to get these results they inevitably sabotage the investigation, creating the very failure for which they blame the "good cops."

According to the novel's core group of officers, the entire justice system is compromised by corruption at nearly every level.

Not only are their immediate superiors in thrall to political power, but the court system itself depends on lawyers and "expert witnesses" who supposedly care more about money and prestige than punishing criminals. The cops routinely complain about the "scum lawyers," even referring to the public defender as "Worm Boy."

Perhaps the most telling vignette occurs late in the novel when the reader encounters Dr. Lucas Brandt, a psychotherapist who knows something about the case but refuses to give any information because it would be a breach of his professional eth ics. Kovac suspects that Brandt is withholding the information for personal reasons, because, as it turns out, Kovac has a "history" with Brandt. Kovac had worked on a case involving a man who had killed his girlfriend. Brandt was the expert witness at the trial and argued that the killer was abused as a child, was temporarily insane at the time of the killing, and was, thus, not a danger to society. The killer is charged with manslaughter rather than murder. He serves very little time in prison, and, once released, he rapes a woman in his neighborhood and "beats her head in with a claw hammer." This scenario is, of course, one of the great cliches of contemporary crime fiction. Nevertheless, it is a

moment that cannot be ignored, because it is the fantasy of "wronged-ness" that constitutes the foundation of the novel's politics. The key issue at stake here is the power held by a sophisticated, wealthy, educated elite—and the way in which this elite sector of the population is out of touch with the "reality" that the cops "face on the streets" every day.

Though the issues faced by police officers and FBI agents may seem restricted in their possible appeal, it quickly becomes clear that the problems faced by these characters are particular instances of more general problems faced by members of many other sectors of society. By making her good cops resentful of authority and elitism, Hoag is tapping into a growing populist movement in contemporary American political life. It is sometimes difficult to locate this movement on the traditional political spectrum because it does not seem tied to the left or right as they currently are constituted (by the Democrats and Republicans, respectively). For instance, there is strong anti-corporate sentiment (traditionally a position held by the left), but also strong antiliberal sentiment (clearly a right-wing position). In the novel, the wealthy businessman, Peter Bondurant, is attacked for being detached from normal human emotions, for being enclosed in his own unfeeling corporate empire. Yet, at the same time, the novel's feminist activist, Toni Urskine, is criticized for being a "bleeding heart liberal," out of touch with the real-life experiences of the prostitutes she wants to help.

The anti-elitist strand runs throughout the novel, although it sometimes appears in subtler ways. When female officer Nikki Liska interviews a possible suspect in a coffeehouse, we are treated to an implicit critique of coffeehouse culture from the populist position outlined above: "Two older men—one tall and slender with a silver goatee, one shorter and wider with a black beret—sipped their espressos and argued the merits of the National Endowment for the Arts. A younger blond man with bugeye gargoyle sunglasses and a black turtleneck nursed a 'grande' something-or-other."

This "something-or-other" lets us know that these fashionable, European coffees are alien to Liska's experience, and furthermore, she probably does not care. This passage provides a catalogue of things (the university set, the arts, lattes and cappuccinos) that are opposed to the novel's model of authenticity—the good cop. Another example which should not be ignored is the Mapplethorpe book that Kovac accidentally (or purposefully, we are not told) flips off the end of Dr. Lucas Brandt's coffee table. Again, this is a moment that is liable to slip by unnoticed, but it is absolutely crucial as a sign of what the novel wants us to see as elitist moral decadence.

Mapplethorpe's nude men represent not only the world of art, but also the possibility of gay desire—a possibility that most cop novels are anxious to disavow (serial killing itself has, notoriously, been aligned with sexual deviance in popular culture— see Psycho, The Silence of the Lambs, etc.).

The novel's many moments of social commentary serve as much to provide a comfortable site for reader identification as they do to provide politically committed social critique. In fact, committed social critique is itself criticized in this novel under many headings: the "bleeding heart liberals," the "PC Nazis," the "Worm Boy" public

defender, and so on. Thus, when we hear that Quinn, Conlan, Liska, and Kovac "live the job and hate the politics of it," we must understand this formulation as a reference to a political position that wants to be outside of politics as defined by "PC Nazis" and inept, meddling public officials. This anti-authoritarian, anti-elite strain has been a factor in American politics since before the United States of America actually existed; indeed, the contemporary populist movement often sees itself as more in touch with the founding fathers of the constitution than either of the current political parties. And though the political efficacy of such an apolitical movement must itself be questioned, what cannot be questioned is the movement's marketability in popular culture—particularly in contemporary fiction and contemporary radio (innumerable political talk shows adopt these political views because they seem to appeal to the widest variety of listeners).

It is thus both ironic and fitting that the novel is set in Minneapolis, the largest city in the state that first elected one of the neopopulists (former wrestler Jesse Ventura).

But the importance of the Midwestern setting surely exceeds this coincidence.

The threat posed by this wealthy, sophisticated, amoral elite supposedly is aimed squarely at the family. Nearly every one of the police officers is divorced; in their eyes it simply "comes with the job." Again, we cannot interpret this as exclusively pertaining to real-world officers; it clearly is meant to resonate with all readers who feel their marriages/families threatened by workplace stress, government regulations (i.e. the current uproar over the marriage tax), and a perceived decay in public moral standards.

The novel casts the serial killer himself— along with the runaways, drug addicts, and prostitutes of the novel—as a symptom of this decay of the family and family values, of the general fragmentation of the purity of domesticity.

Given that the main character of Ashes to Ashes is a female in a predominantly male world, and given that she works with teenaged girls driven to prostitution, one would expect the problems faced by women in contemporary society to be a major concern of the novel. When faced with problems such as prostitution and self-mutilation (Angie DiMarco, like an increasing number of young American girls, cuts herself with razors in an attempt to relieve anxiety), the novel cannot help but present us with implicitly feminist positions. However, the novel's feminist moments are, interestingly, rather intermittent to say the least. The reasons for this are complex. As is the case with most popular novels about crime and punishment, this text wants to hold the villain absolutely responsible for his actions. Thus the importance of his childhood abuse, for instance, must be played down. By denying the causal importance of "victimization," the novel forecloses many possible feminist arguments. Women like characters Toni Urskine (who runs a shelter for prostitutes) and Michelle Fine (who writes feminist folk songs with a friend), and even Alanis Morissette (satirized on at least two occasions in this novel) are criticized for "whining" about their problems.

The novel argues that the "correct" response to "victimization" involves moving on with one's life.

Techniques

Hoag offers more than the standard "who-done-it" mystery in Ashes to Ashes.

There are a number of subplots that constitute mysteries-within-the-mystery. Readers are forced to ask a number of questions.

Who is Angie? Who is the body? What do Quinn and Kate have to do with one another? Was there an incestuous relationship? By weaving these multiple mysteries together, Hoag attempts to create a richer text.

Like other authors writing in the crime genre, Hoag puts a great deal of emphasis on precision and detail when it comes to describing life in law enforcement. Readers who are devoted to crime fiction derive pleasure from these details; the ability to interpret clues along with the investigators offers the reader a chance to be an "insider."

Hoag's major technique for bringing readers into the minds of "insiders" is what narratologists refer to as "free indirect discourse," in which a character's thoughts or utterances are presented without "tag clauses" like "she thought" or "he said." When Hoag writes "Kate waited patiently, keenly aware of the girl's rising tension. Even to a streetwise kid like Angie, seeing what she had seen had to be an unimaginable shock," the second sentence actually represents Kate's thoughts, in spite of the omission of a tag clause (i.e., "Kate thought"). There are six characters whose thoughts we "see" in this way: the four "good" cops (Kate, Quinn, Kovac, and Liska), Angie, and the killer.

Thus, while the novel seems to be narrated in the third person by an "omniscient narrator," this does not tell us all we need to know about the style of the narration. Hoag takes us into the minds of selected characters for important reasons: to allow us to participate in the intellectual feats of the officers, to help us identify with a character's emotions, or even to scare us by bringing us a little too close to the perverse thoughts of a killer.

However, it would be difficult to argue that Hoag's—or, for that matter, the reader's interest—in the serial killer comes from a pervasive desire to offer a complete etiology of this particular form of illness. The immense detail with which Hoag describes the killing scenes is a good indication that the serial killer is most appealing as an object for the reader's voyeurism. Indeed, some of Hoag's most baroque prose is lavished on the killing scenes themselves: He recalls the tremor in her voice as she pleaded for her life, the unique pitch and quality of each cry as he tortured her. The exquisite music of life and death. For one fine moment he allows himself to admire the drama of the tableau. He allows himself to feel the heat of the flames caress his face like tongues of desire. He closes his eyes and listens to the sizzle and hiss, breathes deep the smell of roasting flesh.

As is the case with any psychosexual thriller, many of this novel's aesthetic effects are gained through representations of intense—often misogynistic—violence. And it is an

open question whether or not the supposed critique of this violence makes up for the apparent thrills the author and implied reader take in the nearly gratuitous description.

Finally, one tendency in Hoag's writing which may seem out of place is the prevalence of "romance novel" language. When Kate and Quinn finally kiss, make love and so on, the reader is likely to feel as though he has been thrown into a Harlequin romance: "Her hands traveled over his body.

Ridges and planes of muscle and bone.

Smooth, hot skin. The valley of his spine.

His erection straining against her, as hard as marble, as soft as velvet." While romantic suspense is, indeed, a popular genre in its own right, the serial killer genre does not seem well suited to romance.

Themes

As with any novel about manifestly social issues, the themes of Ashes to Ashes are not at all separate from its social concerns.

Thus, the primary importance of "family, marriage, and motherhood" in this novel is not at all separate from the issues discussed above.

The very fact that the reader is invited to empathize with Kate Conlan over her divorce and the loss of her child indicates that the novel's implicit world view values marriage and motherhood while at the same time experiencing anxiety over their tenuousness. Kate's past complicates her relationship with Angie DiMarco, the teenaged prostitute for whom she is an advocate.

Although Angie is not Kate's own daughter, their interactions take on many of the qualities of mother-daughter relations.

Implicitly, Angie becomes a surrogate daughter for Kate. Kate remarks that Angie is the same age that her own daughter would have been had she lived, and when Angie disappears, Kate feels exactly the same guilt and anxiety she experienced when her own daughter died. She blames herself for both her daughter's death and Angie's disappearance; these parallel traumas constitute the emotional problem that the novel must ultimately resolve to achieve its "happy ending."

Kate's inability to connect on an emotional level with Angie is a displaced manifestation of maternal anxiety concerning the difficulties presented by teenaged children. That Hoag's implied reader is a parent rather than a child is evident from the fact that most passages are focalized through a maternal gaze. The narrative voice (inflected by Kate's presence at this moment) jokes: "The girl made the snotty shrug that had driven parents of teenagers from the time of Adam to consider the pros and cons of killing their young." Later, once Kate has "lost" her second daughter, Angie returns as the killer's accomplice; this is, again, an extreme manifestation of the parents' fear that they are losing touch with their teenaged child. Ironically, when her rebellious independence causes her to turn on the killer himself, Angie's teenaged disobedient streak is what saves her.

Kate's melancholic memories of her daughter open onto the second major theme of the novel: trauma and memory. Hoag presents a number of characters who are troubled by mysterious, secret pasts. Each character's past is a mystery-within-the-mystery, and a great deal of the reader's pleasure comes from slow revelations of past events. Once their pasts are presented, the reader is faced with a number of characters who are haunted by memories. Quinn, for instance, is haunted by images of the murder victims he has seen: "There had been too many bodies in the last few years. Their names scrolled through his mind at night when he tried to sleep. Counting corpses, he called it. Not the kind of thing that inspired sweet dreams."

Kate's reflections on Angie's trauma bring us to the third key theme: victims and victimization. Kate knows that Angie, like herself, like Quinn, is also haunted by the past: "There was a story there somewhere." Kate suspects alcoholic parents, perhaps a cycle of abuse: Virtually every kid on the street had lived a variation of that story. So had every man in prison. Family was a fertile breeding ground for the kind of psychological bacteria that warped minds and devoured hope. Conversely, she knew plenty of people in law enforcement and social work who came from that same set of circumstances, people who had come to that same fork in the road and turned one way instead of the other.

As Kate suggests later, "Everyone was a victim of something." This statement, repeated a handful of times in the text, becomes a mantra of sorts. The novel's moral center surely lies here—in the assertion that what really counts (since everyone is a victim) is how you react to your own victimization. At the very conclusion of the novel, Kate comes to believe that "The test was whether a person could rise above it [being a victim], push past it, grow beyond the experience."

This brings us, finally, to the novel's key metaphor: the phoenix rising from the ashes.

Images of fire, ashes, and rebirth abound.

Clearly the title, with its reference to the killer's methods of setting fire to his victims, is one good example. Burning is the novel's symbol for negativity of all sorts: the loss of life, the loss of family, the loss of self-respect. In view of this metaphorical system, and especially in view of the obvious fact that the killer burns his victims, it would not be a stretch to suggest that burning is actually symbolically equivalent to victimization in this novel. If the novel's moral center is concerned with proper reactions to victimization, and if burning represents the novel's most consistent metaphor for victimization, we should not be surprised to find the image of the phoenix rising at the end of Ashes to Ashes. By naming the halfway house for prostitutes the Phoenix, Hoag already has hinted that the "right" way to respond to victimization involves rising from one's own ashes. In the novel's final moments, Kate looks at her burning home, looks at John Quinn, and thinks "of all things, of the phoenix rising from the ashes. The events that had brought them to this place in this time may have been devastating, but here was their chance for a new beginning. Together." This redemptive, rather maudlin conclusion creates a new domestic space for Kate, recreating the possibility of family in the face of the various threats articulated in the novel.

Key Questions

In Ashes toAshes one must read closely to discover the novel's explicit and implicit arguments, but one must also question the validity of these arguments, their ideological blind spots, and their political implications.

1. How does Hoag differentiate "good" cops from "bad" city officials, businessmen, and lawyers? What techniques does Hoag use to give certain characters authority? How do we know that Kovac and Quinn are "right" in Hoag's eyes? What sort of political stance does the novel take?

2. Why did Hoag choose Minneapolis for the novel's setting? Does the Midwest's position in America's collective consciousness explain its relevance as a setting for the novel? Does the novel's generally populist political position help us understand the choice of setting?

3. Not only is Ashes to Ashes full of victims, it is also concerned with debates over what it means to be a victim. Most members of the police and FBI in the book insist that victimization does not preclude responsibility. Does the book's narrative challenge or prove this point?

Are even the police forced into certain forms of behavior given their relatively disadvantaged social and economic position (i.e., their economic "victimization")? As far as the novel is concerned, how should we react to victimization?

4. While Kate Conlan seems to be a relatively "empowered" woman, other strong women in the novel are criticized on multiple occasions. The mayor is too power hungry; Toni Urskine is too liberal; Michelle Fine is too bohemian— even Alanis Morissette is attacked on two separate occasions for "whining" (most would be more likely to view her as the voice of a strong, youthful feminist). Why? What possibilities does the novel leave open for women? If the novel's key crusader for women's rights (Toni Urskine—not to mention Alanis) is attacked on supposedly personal grounds, where does this leave the cause she is furthering? Is the ending of the novel—when Kate gets to be Quinn's "something beautiful and warm," resting on his chest which for her is "home"—conservative or even reactionary?

5. Why does Hoag choose to present her subplots as mysteries in themselves?

Why, for instance, does she delay revealing crucial information about Kate's relationship with Quinn? How do these various "mini-mysteries" contribute to the main narrative? Do some of them simply get in the way of the central mystery? Do some of them (such as the question concerning Jillian Bondurant's possible incestuous relations with her stepfather) actually become more interesting than the "who-done-it" puzzle?

6. Every reader will quickly notice passages depicting graphic, and often sexual, violence in this novel. What does Hoag accomplish by including such moments? Is she

just trying to shock us? Is the reader meant to derive pleasure from such passages? How? Does the "pleasure of detail" extend to scenes of violence as well?

7. Hoag began her career as a romance novelist. Thus, it is not surprising that love scenes typical of romance novels appear in this text. Do they fit with the dominant tenor of the narrative? Are they out of place? What do they add to the novel? Why did Hoag choose to include them?

8. Who is Hoag's implied reader? Does the book anticipate a male reader or a female one? What is the implied reader's age? Class? What clues do we find in Ashes to Ashes that answer these questions? Does the novel challenge the reader's expectations and beliefs?

Does it reinforce the implied reader's prejudices?

Literary Precedents

While Hoag's work inevitably is compared to that of Patricia Cornwell (Postmortem, Body of Evidence, All That Remains, and many others), the most relevant literary precedent for Ashes to Ashes is the work of Thomas Harris. Cornwell's work often involves a similar mix of romance and mystery, and her main character, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, is in some ways similar to Hoag's Kate Conlan (both are single women associated with the legal system). However, when it comes to novels about serial killers, Harris's novels have been unimaginably successful and, thus, influential.

Harris's trilogy—The Red Dragon, The Silence of the Lambs, and Hannibal—makes use of the serial killer as an awesome spectacle for the viewer. The pleasure of these books is in observing the sublime intellect of the killer—and the sublime violence of his acts. The FBI profilers are involved in a battle of wits with Lecter, who is himself fully aware of their actions. Like Lecter, Hoag's killer toys with his enemies (police, FBI, victims). Though less superhuman, he too seems to have certain intellectual capabilities that surpass those of all but the main investigator (Quinn in this case). When he shows up in an interrogation room to help question the very witness who can incriminate him, Hoag's killer performs the sort of act that indicates that he, like Lecter, takes a pleasure in the "aesthetics" of killing.

Related Titles

Some of the peculiarities of Ashes to Ashes can be understood if one takes into account Hoag's development as a novelist. Her first novels, Magic (1990), Sarah's Sin (1992), and Lucky's Lady (1992), were more typical romances—they involved a degree of suspense, but nowhere near as much death as her later work. As her career has progressed (Cry Wolf [1993], Dark Paradise [1994], Mght Sins [1995], Guilty as Sin [1996], A Thin Dark Line [1997]), Hoag's novels generally have oscillated between romance and suspense, but they also have become increasingly gory and violent. Ashes to Ashes is perhaps her most extreme novel yet, but it is interesting to note that it retains a few passages of prose that are very much in keeping with the romance genre.

Hoag has also just published a sequel to Ashes to Ashes—appropriately titled Dust to Dust—that continues to chronicle life in the Minneapolis Police Department. Two of the earlier novel's minor characters, Nikki Liska and Sam Kovac, take center stage in another psychosexual murder mystery.

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