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TITLE INFORMATION

THE DEAD BELL

Reid Winslow

Quid Mirum Press (442 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A widely disliked, wealthy old woman is found murdered on the grounds of her manicured estate in a crime novel steeped in drama, trauma, and secrets.

In Winslow's auspicious debut mystery, Faith Wesley, a prominent resident of affluent Lake Forest, Illinois, must have been killed in her garden early in the day; the ground beneath her corpse feels moist from morning dew but not soaked from sprinklers that fire up at 6:45 a.m. Veteran investigating detective Tom Edison notes a "gash the color of crushed pomegranates" on Faith's pale neck. The estate's security cameras weren't working at the time of the murder, and the groundskeeper hasn't shown up for work yet. Faith's 40-something daughter, Linda Edwards, treats Tom icily, saying she has to get her 10-year-old daughter to soccer. Faith and Linda had a turbulent relationship, but Linda's been living at the estate since her messy divorce from a well-known Chicago attorney, who, it's later revealed, has a reason to want Faith dead. Tom, divorced and recently separated from his live-in partner—they broke up fighting over a cat, as she was pro-feline and he wasn't—wastes no time sleeping with Linda's best friend, Nora, who lived with the Wesleys decades ago after her parents died after driving their car into a lagoon—the cause of which has never been established. A lagoon-related mishap looms large in Tom's life; when he was 13, a speedboat's collision with a wooden raft in another lagoon caused his friend to nearly drown, and a secret about the crash continues to haunt him. This complex mystery offers much to keep the reader engaged, including compelling, flawed characters; a complicated yet believable plot touching on themes of corruption and class; strong dialogue; and a satisfying ending. The author excels at accurate details, as well—even supplying the correct number of racquetball courts in a well-known Chicago North Shore sports center. Winslow's use of language throughout also deserves special recognition, as it's smart, flowing, and often poetic, as when Tom, sharing his past with Nora, notes that "Dark Knowledge had to be guarded, protected like a cracked rib, shielded like an abscess."

A fabulous, well-researched whodunit.

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