*Half-Built Houses*

Eric Keller

5 stars

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Reviewed by Nancy A. Dafoe

In the vein of the pulsing arterial found in John Grisham’s crime/legal thrillers, Eric Keller’s *Half-Built Houses* is fast paced, meticulously developed, filled with plot twists, and the kind of complicated characters that keep you thinking about them long after you close the pages. Sex, drugs, and alcohol may lead to the predictable crime, but little else about Keller’s novel is predictable.

Keller’s familiarity with the law and court cases is apparent and the plot moves seamlessly through to an unexpected conclusion. More than a riveting, criminal procedural taking place in Calgary, however, *Half-Built Houses* offers subtle but significant social commentary on the issues of homelessness, the long-lasting damages of bullying, and the inequalities in class and social structures.

Charley Ewanuschuk, a homeless character accused of the murder of a young woman, stands at the center of the story, but *Half-Built Houses* is as much the story of Brian Cox, the charming but struggling young lawyer trying his first major criminal case. We know the crime in the opening pages as victim, Natalie Peterson, lies dying in the white snow, but Keller allows the reader to see into the characters’ heads and actions, shifting perspectives from the murdered woman to the suspected killer, to the defense lawyer to the Crown Prosecutor Clay Matthews, and the hardened detective Randall Jenkins on the trail of something that stinks. Lurking in the shadows, Charley is not as alone as he believes. Hugh Young and his son Jason may have wealth and power, but they, too, operate in the shadows. We come to know these characters’ backstories and circumstances leading up to their devastating encounter.

Highly visual, readers will feel as if they are watching this drama play out. With no false notes, Keller’s novel feels right even when everything is going wrong, down to the lurking ambiguity.