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Gregor Demarkian - a former F.B.I. agent attached to the Behavioral Sciences Unit - is brought in to consult on his latest case, a confusing mess of school boards, seething conflict in small town, and creation science all boiling over into savage violence. Author: Jane Haddam Publisher: St. Martin s Press Format: Hardcover, 400 pages ISBN: 9780312380861

Living Witness Details

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From Reader Review Living Witness for online ebook

Nancy says

I read close to half this book thinking it would get better, but I finally gave up. The characters in this book don't ring true. It is hard to believe that even stupid people in a small town who follow a fundamentalist religion would think much about what college a woman in her 90's attended and obsess on how "she thinks she'd better than us." Even if a latter day Scopes Trial is the biggest news in town, people think and talk about other things. In my experience very religious people in small towns in have no thought about what college I attended. To the extent they think about me at all, they believe I am ignorant in the Ways of the Lord and its too bad that I'm going to hell.

I also read the last two chapters so can say there appear to be the usual twists and surprises that help make a good mystery.

Carol says

I like Jane Haddam a lot, mainly because of her series characters, Gregor Demarkian and Bennis Hannaford. This one is a good mystery with an interesting twist or two at the end, and with many long discussions of the evolution/intelligent design debate in the middle. She is pretty fair in presenting the different sides - some of the evolutionists are jerks, some are reasonable and earnest people. And there are both varieties among the Christians as well. In the end, though, there was a bit more information-dumping than necessary, to make sure all the points were discussed.

Laura Zlogar says

I like the protagonist Gregor Demarkian a good deal. He's an interesting former FBI agent who came up from his blue collar Philadelphia Armenian roots to become a police consultant called in by local police departments to help on difficult cases. The setting of the book is interesting--Appalachian Pennsylvania--and the context one I haven't seen in a police procedural: a crime centered on evolution and intelligent design and a local school board. However, Haddam's dialogue at times is repetitious and awkward. I don't think people would be discussing the details of intelligent design in the midst of murders. The local state police detective is a caricature--small man, bully, know-it-all, prejudiced (against "hillbillies" in this instance).

The book has some interest and is fairly well written. I may read more Haddam, though her style is a little clunky, though I must say that I enjoyed this book a lot more than my previous experience with Kathy Reichs. Haddam surpasses Reichs but cannot touch Ian Rankin.

Ricki says

Either you believe in God, or you believe in evolution seems to be the premise of this Gregor Demarkian. At least that is what the "monkey trial" between the Snow Hill Board Of Education and the State of

Pennsylvania, Or could the motive behind the lawsuit be something else? Trust Gregor Demarkian to solve the case and get to the true reason...Interesting read!

Susanne says

This was the first book I read by this author, and I very much respect her for choosing such an interesting setting for a mystery. The plot revolves around an attempted murder of an iconoclastic older woman who lives in a rural American community dominated by born-again Christians who are deeply divided about whether to include creationism/scientific design in the local high school curricula. Haddam provides a very nuanced portrayal of the different faith issues involved. I have since read one or two of her other books and didn't enjoy them as much. I think this may be by far her most cerebral book.

Kathy says

Jane Haddam's stories featuring Gregor Demarkian add to their plots serious political and cultural issues. Living Witness brings out different opinions on the "right" road relative to these topics. Living Witness focuses on religion, and religion in a small and insular town having to face change from all sides. What is that saying about never discuss politics or religion if you don't want the conversation to tank? Oh Well....

No matter what the topic each person is entitled to their own viewpoint. As long as no one is injured and no crimes are committed. It is true that I am entitled to my opinion, but I am not entitled to dictate what yours should be.

This book zooms in on the perception that anyone disagreeing with what one group of people consider to be Christian beliefs and practices is going to rot in Hell. And of course they are not good Christians, but automatically "Secular Humanists." Which in this story seems to refer to atheists.

Adding or subtracting curriculum that deals with evolution and what some say are Christian beliefs causes anger and violence. Jane Haddam is putting real life forward into her novel. Especially at the time she wrote this, the topic of what to allow to be taught in schools, and also what books could be in schools and libraries, was right on the forefront. In fact this small town is in such bad shape they don't even have a library or access to one. Those children who want to read need to be dogged in their pursuit, or they are out of luck.

What is unfortunate is the portrayal of those that have more right leaning Christian beliefs as ignorant and uneducated "hillbillies." Individuals have different beliefs. Education may shape these beliefs, but many are based on faith. But no matter, each person is entitled (and so on).

The story makes clear what can happen when people feel they can and should impose their beliefs and viewpoints on others. And in this book at least, what can happen when parents fail to comprehend and to teach their children the importance of education. Education is key to our future and the future of our children. The danger is that many of these small town people have struggled in school and are angry with those who do well and have or intend to extend their education. They are not Christians and are uppity.

For this particular area, add to the mix that their lives are in upheaval. They battle with "outsiders" who have taken high-tech jobs and want changes to be made, and their comfort zone (no changes).

Of course Gregor Demarkian shakes things up as usual. And he is also undergoing some shaking up as he is finally marrying Bennis. The parallel is made between this small town and their demand for conformance to specific religious beliefs and the often endearing (and sometimes annoying and intrusive) women in his neighborhood and their demands on himself and Bennis.

Jane Haddam's books tell a story, but always bring up topics that require thought and focus.

Birdeena says

The various viewpoints on evolution and of religion in schools seemed to be realistic. I think I really liked Nick Frapp's veiws the best, probably because I believe you need to see all sides, whether it is religion or evolution, for the truth of the subject to become evident to you. Each person will have their own truth, but it would be based on a variety of information and views on the subject. I disliked the characters of Henry Wackford (atheist), and Alice McGruffie (Fundamentalist)...not so much in what their personal beliefs, but in their total dislike of anyone who didn't share their beliefs...both were very short sighted.

Larry Zieminski says

This was the fist (and only) book of Jane Haddam's that I've read. I generally don't jump into the middle of a series, but the subject matter (teaching of evolution vs. creationism) interested me so I read it. Unfortunately I didn't get much from the book. The characters seem to trot out the same tired arguments we hear on the subjects, without adding anything new to the equation. The mystery itself was interesting, but felt like it was wrapped up almost as an afterthought. I don't expect to continue reading this series of books.

Susan says

When Annie-Vic Hadley, the 90 + member of the Snow Hill, PA school board, is attacked and left for dead, the local police chief, also on the school board, is afraid that he and the other members who opposed Annie-Vic on the creationism-evolution controversy will be suspects. He gets Gregor Demarkian to help-- Demarkian, who is to be married in a few weeks, is glad to flee the wedding preparations. Both sides in the controversy are sure that the other is at fault. Only a few people, like a fundamentalist local minister and the high school principal, are looking at things rationally. Demarkian hates small-town life and has little sympathy with many of the people, but he's able to cut through the controversy and find a motive for what's turned into more than one murder.

Lisa says

This was the first book I'd read by this author; it might be the last. The first half of the book, or more, includes a lot of descriptions of characters' thoughts, but not a lot of physical description, making it difficult to keep the characters straight. Worse, the book was riddled with typos and other errors. That makes me crazy.

I haven't read any of the other reviews yet, but I'm sure some people will be up in arms about how most of the believers in evolution were intelligent and most of the Christians were stupid.

Joy says

Snow Hill is the kind of town where a member of the School Board can follow someone down the street yelling, "You're going to Hell!" What's more, still be considered a good Christian. So when the person who was being yelled at gets home to her supposedly-empty house and is battered into a coma, the lines are drawn. On one side are the Fundamentalists, and on the other side are the "atheists," meaning any non-Fundamentalist. There are a few nice people in the town, and because of them - and to escape the preparations for his wedding - Gregor Demarkian is drawn into the war zone.

In Haddam's books that center around fundamentalist Christianity, her satire turns bitter. The mystery and the depth of viewpoint that she gives each of his characters remain good. Still, because of the bitterness, I think one reading of LIVING WITNESS will be enough for me.

Jackson Matthews says

This is one of my favorite Demarkians, but I *still* could not figure out who the 'bad guy' could be [although as people killed off, I knew who it would NOT be]

Lbaker says

I've not gotten into this book too far, and I'm worried that so far the town seems too polarized. The book begins with a woman in her 90's and everyone hates her - is there no one that admires her, respects her, loves her?

The other characterization that I don't like was the same in a previous Jane Haddam book - why are all characters that are religious also nuts? You can be a religious person without being a fanatic, yet when these books are set in small towns, everyone seems fanatical.

I sure hope this book proceeds to be enjoyable, intelligent and similar in tone to the earlier books in this series.

IT IMPROVED!

Although I found most characters that were portrayed as "nuts" were also religious, it wasn't true with all, and I enjoyed the tall character that ended up invited to the big event!

LJ says

First Sentence: If Ann-Victoria Hadley had been forced to tell the truth—and she never had to be forced; she always told the truth—she would have to admit this was not the first time she had been the most hated person in Snow Hill, Pennsylvania.

An attack on elderly, yet indomitable, Ann-Victoria Hadley summons ex-FBI agent Gregor Demarkian from Philadelphia to the small town of Snow Hill, PA. Ms. Hadley, now in a coma, was part of a law suit against bringing “intelligent design” into the school’s curriculum. Because the chief of police is a Fundamentalist Christian, he doesn’t feel it would be right to lead the investigation. A second attack results in murder and increasing tension across the various factions in the town.

Any book which deals with differing religious views can be both interesting to read and challenging to review. Ms. Haddam does include characters who fall within several camps; evangelicals, fundamentalists, Christians, secular humanists and atheists. She also raises issues of snobbery, peer pressure, ignorance and education. I appreciated reading Ms. Haddam’s views on each of these topics and felt she did a very good job integrating them into the plot. For the most part, they were presented without blatant bias against the beliefs but rather against the individual character.

This was the first Haddam book I’ve read but was pleased to find, as far as knowing the primary characters, it didn’t matter. Enough back story was provided for Demarkian and his fiancée that I was very comfortable and didn’t feel anything was missing. As to the other characters, I should like to have seen a better balance.

Perhaps, however, it was only that those who are extreme in their views seem to predominate whatever environment they are in. However, there were some secondary characters I found fascinating but about whom I was left wanting to know more. I fault the author’s desire to focus on the attitudes and philosophies rather than the characters.

For all that, the basics of the plot were very good. There was a clever diversion and an unexpected motive. I was also surprised when I realized that, for the volume of text, the story encompassed only three days. However, there were times one lost the focus of the story for the viewpoints. I felt this was a shame as it diminished what could have been a very good book with stronger editing.

While I enjoyed the book, it didn’t make me want to seek out others in the series.

LIVING WITNESS (Unl. Invest-Gregor Demarkian-Pennsylvania-Cont) – G+
Haddam, Jane – 24th in series
Minotaur Books, ©2009, US Paperback – ISBN: 9780312372262

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Caitlin says

I like Jane Haddam's Gregor Demarkian series, although it's slightly different than what I typically read in the mystery/thriller genre. I tend more towards cop books & forensic books with the occasional political or legal thriller thrown in for good measure. Haddam's books are more closely related to Miss Marple - no, they're not British nor are they typically set in a small town, but in their own way they nicely fit the small village murder model. At least in my mind.

These books always make me think of the first couple of years we lived in Atlanta & our first apartment there in Virginia Highlands. There were a number of downsides to living there (too many bars right around the corner lead to drunk people in your yard at all hours of the day & night), but there were a couple of really good things. One was the gelato place right down the street & around the corner. The other was the used

bookstore, Atlanta Book Exchange, that was a bit further past the gelato shop & across the street. Atlanta Book Exchange fits my model for a good used bookstore - there are cats, the folks manning the "counter" are obviously avid readers & have worked there forever, there's a sense of organization that is transparent only to someone who works there, it smells slightly funky, & it's packed to the rafters with books. I first found Haddam's books there when I went in to trade some stuff I'd finished & find something new to read.

Her books frequently deal with some issue, but they are more wonderful in the way they deal with her main character, Gregor Demarkian, the Armenian former FBI guy & his foibles. Mr. Demarkian lives in a wonderfully real & whacky Armenian neighborhood in Philadelphia peopled by completely original & memorable characters who I absolutely fell in love with upon first reading.

& that, I think, is the problem with this particular book - it's taken Mr. Demarkian to small-town Pennsylvania & that's just not as compelling for me. I've read a number of reviews that complain about the two-dimensionality of the religious characters in this book about a fight over teaching Intelligent Design in the schools, but I'm going to have to disagree with them. Yes, many of the pro-Intelligent Design characters are pretty two-dimensional, but no more so than the pro-evolution characters. & that, I think, is another problem with this book. At some point most of these characters became straw figures in an elaborate argument & they stopped being people. Even more frustrating is the fact that there are a number of wonderful & complex characters in this book who get short shrift in favor of the argument.

Despite these shortfalls Haddam does write well & plot well & she manages to keep me wondering who did it so even a less successful book of hers is still entertaining. I'm looking forward to her next book & to getting back to the neighborhood - I want to know how everybody's doing!
