

() 07 Aug 08 Dead Heat by Dick Francis

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Another cozy light suspense novel by the tireless Dick Francis, that rather disconcerts the reader at first, partly because this time the hero is less than the stalwart fearless character expected from Francis, and partly because this book has the English racing world only at the periphery of the plot. An easy, well-paced tale, nonetheless, that entertains the reader in spite of the lack of racing scenes that are so much a feature of a typical Dick Francis book.

SPOILER ALERT

The novel opens with Max Moreton, a self-proclaimed star chef and owner of a high-end restaurant called The Hay Net, being accused of having poisoned most of his guests and a few of his staff members as well as himself, while cooking for a special party at the 2,000 Guineas race in Newmarket. The next day Moreton provides another lunch, again at Newmarket, and this time a bomb blast tears through the party's box, damaging and destroying lives. Moreton escapes with little more than a scratch. Soon after, he starts asking questions about the alleged food poisoning, and whether it was related to the subsequent bomb blast, since there were many people who had been invited to both events, and had been unable to attend the latter due to the illness caused by the former.

Caroline Aston, one of the string quartet performers at the 2,000 Guineas event, sues Moreton for loss of earnings due to food poisoning. Moreton meets her to try to talk her into dropping the lawsuit. Without much fuss they proceed to fall in love and embark on a saccharine sweet romance.

A somewhat shaky trail of clues lead the couple from London to America and back in search of the 2,000 Guineas sabotage. A sinister Russian, Peter Komarov, appears on the scene, and Moreton chases after him on very slim grounds of suspicion. At the same time, Carl, the sous chef at The Hay Net with a curiously temperamental and rude disposition, and a mysterious European, Yacek, along with most of the other staff, could have been in a position to poison the 2,000 Guineas food.

During his discreet, if not downright timid, investigation of the circumstances, Maxton's car is sabotaged, his house is burnt down, and he is satisfyingly beaten up by a pair of hoodlums before the actual villain makes his belated entrance, complete with a gun and a pair of accomplices. There's a one-sided gunfight, a little head bashing and a bit of getting locked up in freezers, and then the police happily arrive at the climax to take charge.

Shockingly, there are more than a few grammatical errors in the beginning of the book, and sometimes Moreton's character comes across as rather cold and dull. Also, there is far too much emphasis on his romance with Aston, with the effect that Francis spends too little time in fleshing out all the other characters such as Carl, Moreton's bother Toby, and Mark Winsome, Moreton's startlingly benevolent silent partner. The plot is a bit far-fetched, but then, that is a rather endearing feature of most of Francis novels. All in all, a nice, comfortable way to spend a lazy afternoon or two.

Book Reviews

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