

14 September, 2012 - Murder on Fifth Avenue by Victoria Thompson - B+

Murder on Fifth Avenue is the 14th book in a mystery series by Victoria Thompson. The series takes place in 1890s NYC and features NYPD Detective Frank Malloy and midwife Sarah Brandt. The first installment set the opposites attract plot line of each book. Frank and Sarah meet in a tenement. She's delivering a baby and he's investigating a murder. Neither character is impressed with the other.

Frank lost his wife giving birth to his son due to an incompetent midwife and Sarah dislikes the NYPD because they were unable to solve the murder of her physician husband.

Frank is a tough "I will beat a confession out of you if I have to" Irish cop and Sarah is the daughter of one New York City's wealthy old Dutch families so you know eventually they will up together. This is an ongoing series so the author will drag it out as long as her fans will permit it.

Each novel takes place in a specific ethnic neighborhood of New York City so that the reader can learn about the culture and prejudices towards each ethnic group. I enjoy this series mostly because I like how Frank and Sarah interact with one another. Past books were more fun when Sarah and Frank did not get along very well.

Murder on Fifth Avenue has Frank summoned to the exclusive men's club of Sarah's father Felix Decker. Decker does not really like the police or the Irish but he tolerates Frank because Frank is a (fairly) honest cop and uses his brains more often than his fists to solve a crime. Frank doesn't like the super wealthy like Decker because they think they are above the law and are seldom punished for any crimes.

Apparently Chilton Devries, an old friend of Decker, has died at the club. Initially the club staff thought he'd died of a heart attack but the undertaker found a very small stab wound on Devries. Time to call the discreet Detective Malloy.

This book was a lot more fun than the last few because it has more interaction with Sarah and her mother Elizabeth. Elizabeth is mending fences with Sarah because she feels guilty about the way she and Felix reacted to their adult daughter's choice of husbands. Sarah's sister Maggie ran away to marry a poor man for love and Felix cut her off. Penniless and pregnant, Maggie died in labour. Sarah, upset at her parent's disinheritance of Maggie, rejected their lavish lifestyle and studied nursing. Sarah married a respectable, but not wealthy, doctor Tom Brandt. After his

death, she studied to be a midwife so that she would have a way to earn a living and to ensure that other woman like Maggie would not die in childbirth because they lacked access to a reliable midwife. Sarah and her parents have reconciled but Sarah's independent and self-reliant lifestyle has created conflict with her wealthy family.

Sarah inherited her curious mind from Elizabeth so the two often become involved in the mysteries. In this book, Frank needs their help navigating the exclusive world of the uber rich so he asks Elizabeth and Sarah to question the female suspects. Elizabeth is always eager to help even though she often finds herself completely out of her element. Frank and Sarah have teach her about some of the many rougher and different sides of life in New York City. There is an awkward scene where Frank and Sarah try to tactfully explain homosexuality to Elizabeth.

Frank: Maybe you already know this, but some men prefer the company of other men.

Elizabeth: Of course they do, that's why they have all those clubs where no women are allowed.

Sarah: Mother, some men are attached to other men in the same way men are attached to women.

Elizabeth: You mean romantically? But that's ridiculous. It's. It's not even possible. So you think Paul is one of these men?

Frank: I suspect it, yes.

Elizabeth: If he prefers men, why would he get married at all?

Sarah: To conceal it, Mother. Men like that usually find themselves the subject to ridicule or worse. Paul would probably be ostracized by society if people suspected.

Elizabeth: Oh, my, now that you say it, is that why Harold Lake went off to Europe and never came home?

Sarah: Yes it is.

So much for the gay 90s.

The author follows a bit of a cookie cutter design on her mysteries. She usually floods the reader with many many suspects and with holds a critical piece of evidence until the last 20 pages. What the reader has to do is remember the three elements to solving any crime - motive, means and opportunity. Eventually Sarah and Frank follow the same advice but not after a lot of running around following dead end clues. This is all to confuse the reader. Or perhaps just me.

The reason this series is popular is because the author always leaves the reader wanting more. Will Frank and Sarah, who clearly like each other, get together in this installment? In this book they don't but the ending has Felix Decker ordering Frank to his office to speak to him. Perhaps

he will grant permission for Frank to court Sarah. I find it funny because these characters have been defying the rules of society for 14 books but they would actually seek permission from the old man to date.

I guess I will find out with #15.