'Pacific Heights' review: A hard-boiled detective and heights of suspense

By Special to The Oregonian

PACIFIC HEIGHTS
Paul Harper
Holt
$25, 349 pages

Set in San Francisco, "Pacific Heights," the latest thriller by Paul Harper, the pseudonym of novelist David Lindsey, reminds us of the fragility of the human mind. Realizing that psychoanalysis, a tool for healing, can just as readily turn the mind against itself, the diabolical Ryan Kroll breaks into the files of therapist Vera List, begins illicit affairs with two of her clients, the wives of prominent businessmen, and brings them to the brink of suicide. Hired to crack the case, Martin Fane wonders whether Kroll's aim is blackmail or something more sinister.

"Pacific Heights" is formula fiction. A composite of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Fane is your typical hard-boiled detective. Dismissed, unjustly, from the police force because he fingered a cop who was working both sides of the street, he is a loner with demons of his own who operates, when necessary, outside of the law. And he can call on associates, like those we see on "CSI," to produce, instantaneously, all the information -- and the muscle -- he needs.

You can drive an 18-wheeler through the holes in the plot of "Pacific Heights." The knowledge that the suspect uses "R" and "K" as the initials of his aliases, for example, is sufficient for Fane's techies to identify Ryan Kroll.

Nonetheless, Harper knows how to build suspense. He makes you want to know -- and need to know -- why Kroll is doing what he's doing, even if you're pretty sure that Fane won't let him get away with it.

"Pacific Heights" keeps you on edge. Everyone has secrets, Harper reminds us. No matter what they are, or who keeps them, these secrets can generate vulnerability, volatility, and violence. That is why in the 21st century, information is power, "psy-ops" are so pervasive, and "paranoia, like a low-grade fever, always lingers just below the surface."

It's also why, when all is said and done, Fane is still not quite able to coax clarity from the shadows. He knows that he has gotten involved "in something much larger than anything that had surfaced so far." Something involving Vector Strategies, the $10 billion a year espionage enterprise, which is willing to do things, dark and dirty things, here and abroad, that the government wants done, but cannot risk doing for itself. A company, with its tentacles everywhere, that now wants to know what Fane knows about them.

Expecting answers to come when they are least expected, Martin Fane seems ready -- as many readers of "Pacific Heights" will be -- for the sequel that is sure to come.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler
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