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When Clare College's resident eccentric Patrice Umphelby is found drowned in the campus lake, it's called a suicide. But the college president grows suspicious and calls in noted professor/detective Kate Fansler to research the matter. Ingratiating herself with her academic colleagues to learn more about Patrice's life, Kate digs up the evidence she needs to understand her death....

Sweet Death, Kind Death Details

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Alison says

The story begins with Professor Kate Fansler attending a memorial service for Patrice Umphelby, a writer and professor from Clare College. Shortly after she is contacted by Patrice's official biographers, who want to pick her brain about her one and only encounter with Patrice.

Arthur and Herbert, the biographers, share that they are concerned that Patrice was murdered and did not commit suicide. The President of Clare College calls, with the urging of the biographers, to request that Kate investigate what happened so that they can put this to bed once and for all. Kate's cover story is the Women's Study review committee.

There is A LOT of conversation and literary references which, quite frankly, had me lost at several points in time during the book. I didn't feel like there was much actual detecting/problem solving. Clues were very few and far between, but the mystery is finally solved.

Overall, this was a good book, but it wasn't as quite of a read as I would have tough for a book under 200 pages. I frequently had to go back and reread passages as I hadn't quite understood what was being said.

Kel says

A celebration of middle age. I don't always agree with Ms. Cross' world-view, but I like her thoughts about middle age. Additionally, she is an excellent writer, and her character, Kate Fansler, is erudite and witty. Good writing makes up for a multitude of philosophical differences.

Diane says

Although I don't like Kate Fansler, the amateur detective star of this series, I love the literary references peppering Cross's books. They have led me to other books and to other authors who I have missed or not delved into deeply enough. In this book, the issue is middle aged women, with quotes from Virginia Woolf, Stevie Smith, and many others. As I have been pondering this subject this year, I find these quotes affirming. The mysteries are not solved fairly; indeed, the characters hold secret conferences that the readers are not privvy to, which I hold as cheating.

Particle_Person says

I don't know what to think of this book now. I enjoyed it at the time, even if I didn't always agree with it, but after the author committed suicide in a manner consistent with some of the views expressed here, I haven't been able to look at this book.

Cassandra says

What to say?

I liked the ideas of it, very much, the thoughts about middle age and death and women's lives were fascinating and strong and spoke to me, a woman in her late 30s, very much. And I found the mystery a decent one, the suicide which may or may not be one, and trying to figure it out.

But the weight of the story was off; things were treated as shocking revelations which seemed just a normal shifting of evidence, and the conversations felt very, very strange, often the call and response was broken, and while this might make for a fine effect, I could never tell if it was supposed to be fragmented (and the characters knew it and were swallowing it, or did not know it because they were upset) or if Cross herself saw some thread in the dialogue I could not follow. So it did not work well, it felt poorly written here and there, never enough that I stopped but it was upon the edge, and I am disappointed. I think I will do the next one but I may take a longer break before it.

Writerlibrarian says

This was somewhat depressing. For many reasons, Kate is investigating the suicide of a professor known for her vocal belief that she would not suffer old age or debilitating sickness and would take her life instead.

Is it really a suicide or a cleverly disguised murder? Kate takes the task of finding out for the duo of biographers and the family of the professor.

As always in Heilbrunn's aka Cross mystery novel, the mystery is somewhat an accessory to the ideas and the philosophy. Here you have Kate stuck on a committee for gender studies and her beloved husband in a mid-life crisis. This is more about how one faces mid-life, adulthood, old age and what it means to be a woman than about catching a murderer.

Depressing but well written. Also knowing that the author took her own life does make the whole philosophy displayed here a bit unnerving.

Eliz says

What a pleasure to pick up a book last read 20+ years ago and enjoy it all over again! Very different to read it as a middle-aged contemporary of the characters, rather than a 20-something in the first blush of family life.

Paired with the New York Magazine article "A Death of One's Own" about the author's suicide, this book is an interesting exploration on finding meaning in life.

Tiina says

Kate Fansler agrees to look at a death of a college professor. She has committed suicide a year ago or thereabouts, but murder is now suspected. But how could one have murdered someone who seems to have walked into a lake, pockets full of stones?

Everyone in the book is clever and articulate, well except some minor characters who are just articulate. This is therefore an enjoyable read. Not terribly exciting, but solid.

Ross Emmett says

Read this first back when it was released in the mid-1980s. Found a copy amongst the books in my office, and thought I'd read it again before giving it away.

A fun read, although in this one Carolyn Heilbrun (aka Amanda Cross) got a little too carried away with literary quotations about death. But I enjoyed all the Amanda Cross novels and this is certainly to be recommended.

Elaine says

another reread; unfortunately I remember liking it quite a bit more, many years ago. Likely it's my tastes that have changed.

Stuart says

I found this a good read, for the style and atmosphere, less for the story. The story begins with Professor Kate Fansler attending a memorial service for Patrice Umphelby, a writer and teacher from a New England women's college (Clare College) she had met only once. Soon after, she is contacted by Patrice's official biographers, who initially want to pick Kate's brains about that meeting, which took place in an airport in Scotland (presumably Prestwick) where they drank Laphroaig, and discussed the existence of God (they agreed on his non-existence), with quotations from Virginia Woolf. Coincidentally (or not) Patrice had committed suicide in the same method used by Woolf.

The biographers later come clean with Kate and admit that they are concerned that Patrice was actually murdered or induced to commit suicide. Then the President of the College calls and asks Kate to investigate the same thing. And so the story really starts. Kate, as cover, accepts a place on the college's Women's Issues Committee, using the time there to investigate, getting to know Patrice's ex-colleagues and the mood and geography of the college. The Women's Issues Committee allows the author to share her opinions on the subject, which seem not unreasonable. (Perhaps they were radical in 1984?) Unlike some Kate Fansler books, the crime (if there is one) has taken place before the book starts.

Like other Kate Fansler books, there is a lot of conversation, literary reference, and not much actual detecting. The night on which the death took place is compared to the Gaudy Night of DL Sayers, and the work that Patrice was involved in at her death is compared to Dickens' Edwin Drood. Many quotations are taken from Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, and her diaries, especially musing on the subject of how best to enjoy middle age, without continually rhapsodizing back to one's youth. (This in fact turns out to be a prime clue in the book). I'm guessing Amada Cross was musing about middle age at the time too. There is a lot of reference to a poet called Stevie Smith, who was apparently in love with death.

Clues are few and far between, but the mystery is finally solved. Reed, Kate's husband, features more prominently in this book, as he pursues and accepts a new job, occasioning more social commentary. I liked the book, which is a short 200 pages, for the literary style, the continual literary references, and the witty conversations. I didn't find as much humor in this book as in others, though some of the descriptions, such as Kate's flu sufferings, or her thoughts on fortune cookies, are pretty amusing. But it's a good read, for the style and atmosphere.

Beth says

I used to love Cross's mysteries but this time through found the academic dialog somewhat cumbersome --- especially because everyone speaks as if they were in a Henry James novel. Kate Fansler comes by her erudition honestly (she's an English professor) but it gets a bit much when ALL the characters talk in convoluted sentences.

mark monday says

murder mystery set within the confines of an all-women's college. a thoughtful and calm narrative with a pleasingly grouchy and erudite heroine, a professor herself. unfortunately the mystery is thin and shallow; the whodunit may be driving the story but the answers supplied felt like an afterthought. Cross seems rather disinterested in the mechanics and motivations of who killed who and why.

but no matter; the book's appeal is elsewhere. there are two layers of interest. topmost: a fitfully absorbing study of internecine warfare between faculty members on whether or not it is important to acknowledge the particular challenges and strengths of women via gender studies classes (with women, regrettably, on both sides of this division). beneath that - and of much more interest to this reader - a melancholy yet hopeful contemplation of middle age. I suppose at 45 I am solidly within my own middle age; the book gave me much food for thought. the murder victim's perspective, eventually shared by several characters, is that middle age is a time of letting go and of renewal. one opens the door to the other. it is also a time to welcome the idea of death as the inevitable final chapter in a book you are creating - but a book only partially written. death is nothing to fear! a refreshing idea.

Terry says

The story moved along, albeit slowly. The author kept the reader involved - the questions (who, what, where, how, why - was it a murder, was it suicide), the theories of what might have happened, etc. - as it should be. However, once the 'sleuth' had figured out what had happened, the reader was left out - just left there going

'What? Why is she asking for this and why does she want that? (she being Kate Fansler). Then, at the end, we, the readers, find out who and what and how through a conversation - everything all nicely wrapped up. That style of writing is crap. I don't want to be following along, only to be sidelined at the end. Tossed away as if I didn't matter. Lovely, I get to read how smart the author is, how knowledgeable about literature, et al. But, and that's a big but, if you - Amanda Cross - are not really interested in writing a mystery novel, then don't write one. Not many books get me this angry, but I feel cheated by the author. The only reason I gave it 2 stars is because it was interesting to read, decent sentence structure, etc.

Andrew says

I laughed out at a lot of the characters' lines. Really heavy on the dialogue but still enjoyable. The ending was a bit of a let down but the sarcastic humor made up for it. I had to resist the urge to make a martini at several points given the characters are usually drinking while discussing the case at hand.
