



Love is the Law

Nick Mamatas

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In 1989, punk-rock girl "Golden" Dawn has crafted an outsider's life combining the philosophies of Communism and Aleister Crowley's black magic. One fateful day she finds the dead body of her mentor in both politics and magick shot in the head, seemingly a suicide. But Dawn knows there's more going on than the Long Island cops could ever hope to uncover. In setting out to find the murderer herself, she will encounter dark and twisted truths for which no book, study, or basement show could have prepared her. Award-winning prose author Nick Mamatas crafts a raw, hilarious, original mystery!

Love is the Law Details

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From Reader Review Love is the Law for online ebook

Harry Connolly says

I've been reading epic fantasy because I'm writing it, and Christ have I been bogged down. I don't know what it is about EF, but so many authors are so fucking slack. Do I want to read two pages of a description of a valley the characters will never revisit? Do I want to read 50 pages of the protagonist doing exactly what he's told without any agency at all?

I do not. What's more, I'm not reading casual or bottom level books; these are epic fantasies that people rave about here and elsewhere. Popular and critical hits. Me, I just get bogged down and bored.

So I was in the mood for a short, blistering noir mystery, and that's just what Mamatas delivers (bonus, there's even some magic(k) involved).

"Golden" Dawn Seliger is a lonely punk in 1989 Long Island; her only friend is also her lover and mentor, and when he's found dead in his home of apparent suicide, only Dawn seems to realize he was holding the gun in his off hand.

As Dawn says several times, she is a fucking genius, but she's utterly lost in the secret tangled history of her suburban neighborhood. She's too much of an outsider to see how everything connects, telling herself "There are no coincidences" so many times that it becomes almost an incantation against her own ignorance. She's brilliant but there's too much she doesn't know. There's also a sense of burgeoning adulthood about her, as though she knows without admitting it that she can't keep living a teenager's life much longer.

She's also vicious when she needs to be, and sometimes when she doesn't. As much as she wants to find out who killed her friend, she's determined not to think of it as a search for justice, and justice is absolutely what she does not get.

The narrative pulls you in (like in scenes where Dawn struggles to pry information into her deteriorating grandmother) then pushes out away. Every time Bernstein or Dawn predict the direction the country is going, they get it right. Of course they do. The author has written them that way. Mamatas's penchant to end a story with didacticism is less jarring here than in previous works because you expect the characters at the end of a mystery to Explain It All To You. Here, you get the added benefit of having the moral aspects of the story spelled out as well.

Still, this was exactly what I was looking for: a fast-paced drama with an unusual setting and a driven, courageous protagonist. Recommended.

John says

One of the most abrasive, engaging modern fantasy novels I've ever read. Dawn Seliger challenges your notion of "likeable" protagonists by sinking her teeth into you in the first chapter and then dragging you on a gutter-level tour of late 80s Long Island.

The plot advances through a lot of coincidences, which would sink a lesser novel. But Mamatas embroils the

narrator and her POV in such a dense haze of Aleister Crowley and arch occultism that it works. If you truly believe that there are no coincidences, that every gesture or symbol is rich with meaning, then of course you can blow a murder mystery wide open by going to a comic book shop. That's the kind of world this is.

A minor quibble: the plot advances so much by coincidence, accident, and the petty violence of screwed-up people that the reveal of the True Villain and the Master Plan in the climax feels a bit ... flat? Tawdry? Anti-climactic? But it's the 'burbs, man, and by that point Mamatas has you by the scruff of the neck.

Reese Lightning says

In a word: Bullshit. Painfully obvious from the very first line that this supposedly strong female character is in fact being written from the mind of a man. I got eleven pages in before quitting in disgust.

Steven says

Really hate to bag on a book that has so many great reviews but I am not feeling it and had to force myself to read through to the end. First offense is that I wasn't buying that this narrator was a woman and no details in her biography would make me believe in the voice. Still, aside from that detail, the voice had power. The plot, however, was pretty ridiculous, and just having the narrator intimate that there are no coincidences doesn't let Mamatas off the hook. At the sentence level the writing's really good, but I think this is deeply flawed as a novel.

David Rossetti says

Nick Mamatas is smarter than you. So is his main character in "Love is the Law"

How you feel about that is your problem, for both of them really. Nick as a writer isn't one to hold your hand or make you feel comfortable. He's there to take you to the places he wants to explore and you keep up or you get left behind. His protagonist Dawn is very similar. She makes no effort to make herself sympathetic or likable or, in the end even in the service of the story. She's entirely self-directed and you follow her chaotic journey through 1980s Long Island noir as much for the choices you can't understand or accept as the ones you do. She's not a fun companion for even the relatively short span of the novel. That's okay; nobody, least of all Mamatas, promised you fun when you paid the price of admission.

Bill Tarlin says

It seemed like Mamatas didn't like any of his characters and was prolonging their discomfort toward no particular end. On the plus side there is an interesting mix of leftist and occult subcultures and a dreary sense of place that feels authentic. I had high expectations but just, bleh.

Lauredhel says

"His accent, all lispy and nasal as though mixing Brooklyn, Long Island, and the sounds of mental retardation, gave it away."

Fuck this book. Terminated. With prejudice.

Steve says

This book shouldn't have been something I enjoyed, full of things I know little about: Aleister Crowley, punk culture, late 80s suburban ennui... I do like a good mystery, some noir, and I was a teenager at one point. (Not a girl and certainly not at all like Dawn, the protagonist of "Love Is the Law.")

But this was a great read. Dawn was complex -- a "fucking genius" outsider who needs to reason out the connections between insiders and the people she has tried so hard to be invisible to. She's got issues and problems, but you still root for her as she tries to solve the mystery that drives the plot.

It has some mystical stuff that I am just not equipped to appreciate in depth, but it is mostly beside the point. You want to find out what happened and what happens to Dawn. "Love Is the Law" is worth the effort.

Helen says

This book would have to be described as a cheap, tawdry, pulp crime novel set on the fringes, literally and figuratively, of a picturesque North Shore Long Island town. To me, there was too much violence, sex portrayed as analogous to a handshake, according to the protagonist, the punk Dawn - not everything needs to be shown/described. I suppose this is the sort of fiction that is turned into hit movies, like the Tarantino films. I never liked the Tarantino films, though, so it's unsurprising that I found this novel creepy and distasteful.

Most of the characters were unlikable. There were a handful, such as Chrysoula, or Raymundo, who were given positive characterizations, but the vast majority of characters had mostly negative qualities. Dawn finds peace in memories of her childhood, when she would go on walks with her mom in the woods; but although the woods continue to be a source of solace, as Dawn takes shortcuts through them rather than walk down highways running though the ticky-tack of suburbia, the world of her childhood was a different, more innocent era. Socio-economic change has reduced Dawn's world to a zone of misery, relieved only by her attachment to Bernstein.

The mystery Dawn is trying to solve is who killed her mentor/lover/initiator into occult knowledge, Bernstein. In the course of hunting down seemingly innumerable leads in the quaint little town, she pieces together a web with a developer (of course) at its center. The developer is revealed as the killer, but he gets away with the crime (and no doubt many other transactions of dubious morality, such as buying Dawn's family home when it was foreclosed after her dad had been laid off for the last time from a defense industry engineering job). Yet, there are many others who want Dawn out of the way, and the denouement is a

terrifying scene of the planned ritualistic murder of Dawn, thwarted only by Dawn's superhuman effort to escape her fate, which inadvertently leads to the death of three of her would-be murderers.

Even with its gratuitous violence and prurience, and general "political incorrectness" - which may after all represent the author's intention to shock the reader - the book does hold the reader's attention, as you wonder what Dawn is going to do next, what is she going to find out, how will the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

The occult/Marxist angle is supposed to make the book unique - and some characterizations are instantly recognizable (the campus Marxist, the proselytizers of various Eastern religions clamoring for attention at tables at the campus Student Union building) - but not much is made of the character's insight into the commonalities between Marxism and occultism. The book is set in the late 80s as the USSR & Eastern bloc was crumbling - a central "clue" in the 2013 book is a painting of a tower engulfed in flames, no doubt foreshadowing 911, which was not on the horizon in the late 80s.

Dawn nevertheless, despite her misery (mom died of cancer, dad is a crackhead, boyfriend just committed suicide, supposedly, although he was no doubt murdered) is refreshingly powerful as a female protagonist; holding her own physically - even to the extent of being overly aggressive - and verbally. She is all attitude and spikiness, unfortunately also cuts herself on occasion.

If the objective of this book was to revolt or disturb the reader, it accomplished its mission as I was left with an impression of creepiness once I finished reading the book. Dawn winds up in jail for manslaughter - inadvertently causing the deaths of three who were about to ritualistically kill her, while the developer (for the time being at least) gets away with the crime of having murdered Bernstein. That the developer did not get his comeuppance, or wasn't somehow revealed as Bernstein's murderer in the course of Dawn's trial, is obviously an unsatisfying loose end. Maybe that is the "message" of the book, though: The system is so rigged that the rich can literally get away with murder, while those who are outsiders, or otherwise struggling, or who will never fit into a suburban lifestyle, such as Dawn, barely make it out of life alive.

Michael says

Nick's done an excellent job of feeding you the bits you need, when you need them. Dawn is a communist punk rock occultist investigating the murder of her mentor-cum-cummer, and the more this "fucking genius" (her words, not mine) digs, the more intertwined the murder's whole backstory gets. Most of the characters are very well put together, but there's a couple that feel inserted in a *deus ex machina* fashion. The magick is dealt with in a fashion I dug and the complexity of his protagonist is engrossing - I think I love her. The layering of communist propaganda feels both necessary and, at times, forced. Don't know what to think about that, other than I should thank Nick for giving me more insight on a political spectrum I know almost nothing about (I was in the military for all of Reagan's years, plus some, you know). The ending was very satisfying in a way which usually escapes authors.

K.D. Rose says

No. Just no. If he doesn't have it right, he doesn't get to write about it as if he knows what he's talking about. The rest comes across as pseudo-hipster to me. I know this book is getting higher stars from others but this is just a huckster.

Toby says

A little bit noir, a little bit fantasy, Love is the Law is a hot little book about Harriet the Spy turned punk in late 80s Long Island, investigating the death of her Socialist lover/mentor with a magick edge to proceedings.

Put out by Dark Horse in the throwback format of the classic pulps - small, cheap and with cool cover art - it immediately appealed to me from the shelves of one the more interesting local indie book shops, in a sea of homogeneous bland books for the masses produced in as large a format as possible to fool them in to thinking their money is paying for something solid. I'd not heard of Nick Mamatas previously and I was unaware that Dark Horse published straight fiction as well as graphic novels but a synopsis that features a punk rock girl in to Trotsky and Crowley investigating murder was enough to make me look closer. You're then treated to none other than Duane Swierczynski offering a pull quote that any author would die to have written about them "*makes The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo seem as edgy as Murder, She Wrote. Easily the most original mystery of the year, full of big ideas, serious menace, and raw attitude.*" Pretty much everything I write from this point on can only be a rehash of those words, so perfect a summation of my own reaction they are. Of course there's also Warren Ellis himself claiming the book to be "*absolutely, perversely brilliant...a fucked up piece of work,*" which just goes to show that great minds think alike.

Love is the Law is a fucked up piece of work, Dawn Seliger is a recent high school graduate who spends her time practising yoga, studying socialist manifestos, learning ancient magick and sucking the cock of a high school friend of her father. She hates the world and the world hates her and now she has to solve a murder because the police just don't seem to give a damn that some old Communist has been found in his hurricane damaged house with a bullet in his head.

Dawn is not some middle aged man's wet dream of what a sexually free teenage girl might be, she's a scary, angry genius struggling to have a conversation with another female about anything other than a man, which makes investigating the murder of a man quite difficult for her.

Taking in dodgy basement punk rock gigs, voyeurism, crack addiction, incest, comic books, dementia, poverty, the Cold War, the films of Maya Derin, Capitalism gone wrong, the death of Communism and of course the work of Aleister Crowley, it's a raw, convoluted noir tale with a very self aware female protagonist who thinks that playing hard to get is just Victorian morality and a market based sexual political economy. This should be read by anybody with even a passing interest in modern noir tales and want to celebrate an author who turned down the opportunity to write a "boy book for the young adult market."

Scott R Jones says

There's a lot of Thelemic hoo-ha in Nick Mamatas' new noir novel Love Is The Law, and I am fine with that, since for a good portion of the '00s I ran with as gnarly a pack of wannabe Crowley-ites and ritual occultists as you could ask for. I've had about as much of that as a person can stand, which is to say I get the stuff, and the fastbreeding esoteric patter of narrator "Golden" Dawn Seliger is tone-perfect in this book. You don't have to get Thelema or understand where Dawn is coming from to enjoy it, which, considering how twisty the ouvre of the Great Beast can be is a real achievement.

Now, Trotsky and Communism and worker's revolutions I don't get as much, mostly due to my being Canadian (socialist utopia, I'm told!) and a woeful lack of education in these matters (as well as the disinterest bred into me by capitalist fear-mongering? Mmm possibly...) but I am fine with that, too, because Love Is The Law is a not a book about Thelema or Communism per se; I'll borrow from the alchemy here and say it's a crucible into which Mamatas has tossed those things along with 80s punk aesthetic, family disintegration, drug addiction, murder, conspiracy, a grimoire's worth of black humour and just a smidge of redemption.

On the surface of it, Love Is The Law shouldn't work: the above elements too disparate, the suburban Long Island setting too hermetic, and so on. But it's a crucible, and though the process of reading it is rough in spots -- there are some brutal characters here, Dawn's crack addict father for one, Dawn herself for another -- what comes out the other end of that process is gold.

It all hangs together beautifully, and watching it happen is as close to storytelling magic as I've seen recently.

Dawn is a bleeding edge person, ostracized from society as much for her fierce self-determination as she is for her punk lifestyle or the fact that her family has come apart in the aftermath of her mother's death. She's not introduced to magic or communism by her friend and mentor Bernstein, but he certainly confirms her in her beliefs. She is, so far as she knows, his only acolyte. So when he's discovered dead under mysterious circumstance (mysterious to Dawn, not the police, who write it off as a suicide) she determines to nail Bernstein's murderer. From the get-go we are given to understand that Dawn is not out for justice. "Justice" is a word that Dawn has freed herself from using the Liber III vel Jugorum ritual: she cuts herself across the stomach every time she uses the word. Bleeding edge. This is a straight-up revenge tale.

Only it's not that straight-up at all. Dawn's powerfully Willed path to vengeance draws her ever deeper into a suburb-and-perhaps-worldwide socio-political occult conspiracy. First they'll take Long Island, then the planet, and They in this case soon includes everyone she knows or thought she knew: Bernstein, her thoroughly nasty father, her dementia-addled grandma, comic book shop owners, metalheads, basement show punks, real estate moguls, Greek matriarchs, and a girl who may be her doppelganger. As it all comes together, Dawn the Outsider, Dawn the Invisible One, is drawn inside, to become the very visible center of a pretty horrific mandala.

It's enough to take anyone to the lip of the Abyss, and that's where Dawn goes. Thankfully, she has a friend down there.

Mamatas has done a superb job here, but it's not going to be for everyone: the sexuality is frank, the relationships (such as they are) brutal, the characters abrasive in their various delusional states. It is a very alive book for all that. And living books get read and read again.

I loved Love Is The Law. It is my Will that you purchase it sooner rather than later.

A note about format:

One of the reasons I've been an almost complete convert to ebooks in recent years is the easy accessibility and portability of the format. I carry a large-and-getting-larger library of titles on my Android device, and am continually surprised that my eyes are still functional. Going in to reading books in this format, I had detractors tell me I'd ruin my vision, something I half believed myself. Hasn't happened yet, and it's not going to, because the devices and the ereader apps keep getting better blah blah yeah I'm an ebook

booster.

But that doesn't mean I don't miss my paper books like hell. I grew up on horror and sci-fi paperbacks I bought at a musty old closet of a bookstore nestled in the wheezing heart of a strip mall and brother, I bought them by the pound.

So when my review copy of *Love Is The Law* showed up in my mailbox and it was a paperback, and what's more, a pocket sized paperback? Something I could jam in the back of my jeans, let it get all dog-eared and bent, and whip it out to read some while waiting for the gang down at the corner store? Well, colour me sold. Maybe this isn't a return to the hoary old days of pulp novels in all their lurid, transient glory, but it feels like it could be.

Sure, I'll pick up the ebook too, but this copy, just sitting there, has that physical "yeah, I'm a fucking book, what else ya gonna do with me?" imperative that ebooks just do not have. What are you gonna do? You're gonna read it.

And then you're gonna jam it back in your pocket and make all your hipster friends jealous.

Geoffrey H. Goodwin says

"Love is the Law" is Mamatas at his best, an amazing mix of noir, atmosphere, and character that I recommend for anyone who likes when everyday people become detectives but hates how those kinds of novels are often tame. This is my favorite recent book set in the 80s because it captures what it was like to be me, which is unusual for any book...

We need a time machine so Dawn Seliger can be played by Ally Sheedy in a film directed by 80s David Lynch with Kenneth Anger shooting some establishing shots, but the truth is that Mamatas is such a great writer than he can write about almost anything and make it interesting, funny, and insightful.

Even if Crowley, Trotsky, Long Island, and comic books/zines aren't your bag, this is still a great novel.

Andrew Stone says

Love is the Law is the first book by Mamatas that I've read and it certainly won't be the last. An extremely weird tale about a punk rock girl whose world gets turned upside-down when she finds her mentor dead of an apparent suicide. Now that the man who taught her the ways of Marxism, especially by means of Trotsky, and the occult is dead, and the Soviet Bloc is collapsing, she sets out to avenge her mentors (she is convinced) murder. This is the setup, and from here it only gets stranger. It's also a family drama. A smart critique of capitalism. And a murder mystery.

Highly recommended.
