



A Touch of Death (Hard Case Crime #17)

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While searching for \$120,000 in stolen money, Lee Scarborough falls in with a ruthless femme fatale whose schemes threaten to destroy his life in this long-out-of-print classic by the author of Dead Calm. Original.

A Touch of Death (Hard Case Crime #17) Details

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Author : Charles Williams

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Suvi says

Noir. I can always trust it when I feel like reading something where it's guaranteed that things go horribly wrong or someone goes apeshit. Williams has been an unknown to me until now, but if this really isn't his strongest novels, I'm going to be in paradise later.

A Touch of Death smells like fear, sweat, powder, lipstick, and sex, and it's the colour of sharp scissors in the evening light. Williams's prose is to the point, yet a sizzling atmosphere of passion and suppressed rage are looming somewhere beneath. The plot is unarguably drawn out and as a mere framework not that interesting. However, it sticks with you regardless like a piece of chewing gum. Scarborough seems like a sleepwalker at times, and although he understands the woman in the bikini is trouble, he's unable to turn away. Just like in a nightmare. The final scene in the car is the hottest thing I've read in a while, and the ending is like a slap in the face, although you always knew what would happen. How can anything be ice cold and burning hot at the same time?

Andy says

Reminiscent of Edgar Ulmer's "Detour" in that it maintains a claustrophobic tension between a man and woman running from the law and not trusting each other. The leading man is an overbearing bully so he's got what's coming to him by the "femme fatale" of the story. In fact the lead guy is such a creep you'll find yourself rooting for Susie Mumble all through the book.

Noir should have loads of death AND sex, and Williams never disappoints.

Carla Remy says

This fiction does not have the most likable of characters, but at least it's not obvious. The extreme readability of Charles Williams books is met by the phenomenal plotting.

Cbj says

My fourth book by Charles Williams - my favorite crime fiction writer after Charles Willeford.

You have the tortured hero (just like in *The Hot Spot* and *River Girl*) who falls in with not one but two beautiful and devious women in a plot to recover some stolen money.

One of the things that separates Williams from other crime fiction writers is his attention to detail. Williams is quite knowledgeable about boats, fishing, sailing and water bodies in general (he used this knowledge to create authentic characters and settings in both *River Girl* and *Dead Calm*). Most other crime fiction writers that I have read (like Gil Brewer, Jim Thompson and Day Keene) don't seem to know much about anything

and their characters and plots come across as artificial. Unfortunately, *A Touch of Death* belongs in the latter category of crime fiction novels.

The characters are always pouring a drink or lighting a cigarette. Nothing wrong with that. But the two major plot points are wasted by Williams. The second one where Lee Scarborough and Madelon Butler are cooped up in a flat could have been used to create some great scenes that provide revealing insights into the characters motivations. Lee Scarborough seems to be a straight laced type at the beginning of the novel but then we don't really know why he becomes so desperate. Also, Madelin Butler's character is a complete mystery.

However, the book does have some great twists. Madeline Butler is an impressive creation. There are some loose ends and parts which are hard to digest, but Charles Williams ties it all up quite well in the end.

Erin *Proud Book Hoarder* says

A hard case I truly enjoyed....even though he was trying to get money an easy way, I dug the main character. The back of the book is right in describing the woman as one of the coldest out there. The ending reminds of me a surreal ending to a movie in the older days. A bizarre turnout but you couldn't help but be enthralled during the whole ride. Most of the time there was plenty of action going on, but during the moments when there wasn't - it felt like there was still much going on, primarily from Williams' awesome writing style. Highly recommended and fun for hard case crime noir buffs out there.

Chris says

A thrilling *noir*, where neither the hero (if such a term meaningfully can be applied to the protagonist) nor the reader has a clue what's *really* going on until the end. While not quite "literature," precisely, it's nevertheless a fantastic distillation of the style of crime novels from the 1930-1955 period -- the kind of story where all the women are *femme fatales*, all the lights are neon, and all the lines are punchlines. This is the type of novel so absorbing that it makes one (literally, in my case) miss Metro stops.

David says

As with many noir novels, the less you know about the plot going in, the better. So let me describe my reading experience in abstract: This was my first Charles Williams novel, and when I first read it, I did not know anything about him or his work. To me, this was just another Hard Case Crime reprint. When I started the book, it did not seem like anything special. But then Williams got his claws into me, and the further I read, the deeper they sank. By the time I was done with the book, Williams had me shuddering . . . and then applauding. A perfect book of its type.

First reading: circa January 2006.

Second reading: 2 March 2009.

Sam Reaves says

Charles Williams was a prolific pulp/noir writer in the 50's and 60's. With a background as a merchant sailor, he produced a number of sailing thrillers, of which *Dead Calm* is the best known, but he also wrote a number of tales set in hot, dusty nowhere towns in the South, in which alienated loners grab a chance for a score that will allow them to escape.

In this one, a washed-up former football star is ensnared by not one but two femmes fatales, who are contending over a hundred and twenty grand in cash embezzled by the recently and mysteriously deceased husband of one of them. The complicated plot leads inexorably to the elimination of one rival and a standoff in which our hero and the surviving siren need each other in order to access the cash, which is stored in three separate safety deposit boxes. The failed fullback, needless to say, is the intellectual inferior in this game of wits.

In true noir fashion, there's nobody to admire and it all ends badly, but you keep turning pages and congratulating yourself on being too sensible to get involved in anything so sordid. But you root for the poor bastard all the same.

Joe Santoro says

I definitely need to stick with *Hard Case Crime* doing reprints, not new novels. Here we have a peaked-in-high-school ex-football player who is down to selling his car to pay the bills when he stumbles on the potential for a heist... the wife of a banker turned embezzler has a fortune in her house, and since she's the prime suspect in his murder, she can't really complain if it's stolen.

A couple double crosses later, our 'hero' is trying to hide out with the wife to get the money before she can get away with it herself or the cops close in.

It's hard to describe much of the book without giving it away.. it's full of great twist and turns where you can really feel Lee (the main character) suffering from setbacks and getting excited about new ideas. While there was a bit of a plot hole at the end that is nagging at my brain, it was still a gripping thriller that really got you into the minds of the characters.

Jack Tripper says

This was one of the fastest-paced and most intense novels I've ever read, and I'm a little surprised at the somewhat mixed reviews here. I was never less than fully absorbed in this tale of a former college football star who plans to steal \$120,000 in "easy money" from a vacant house, but gets a lot more than he bargained in his newly-met, ultra-conniving female partner, who, unfortunately for him, is the mastermind behind the plan.

The action here never lets up, and it's impossible to turn away as the narrator gets in way over his head, but is in too deep to ever turn back. It's got everything any fan of noir could ever want, with plenty of double crosses and twists that even someone like me, who's read his fair share of these types of stories, never saw coming, not to mention one of the best and most cunning femmes fatales this side of James M. Cain.

I'll definitely be on the lookout for more Charles Williams the next time I go on one of my too-frequent vintage paperback buying binges.

5 Stars

Adam says

Charles Williams's *A Touch of Death* is a tour de force. While none of the characters have a great deal of psychological depth, the two elements that I read noir fiction for--suspense and paranoia--are in full force here. Halfway through, once Williams has set up everything, the story moves forward like a ticking clock. The tension builds on each page, and doesn't let up until the last chapter. Readers who demand characters with detailed backstories and psychologically comprehensive motivations may find this novel a little slim, but I highly recommend it for all fans of hard-boiled and noir fiction.

Note: I read the second edition, which was published by Fawcett Gold Medal in 1963, ten years after the novel's original publication. I compared the first dozen pages or so with the newest edition published by Hard Case Crime, and the model makes of all the cars were changed for the 1963 edition. A "late model" "1953 Pontiac" became a "late model" "1962 Pontiac," and a " '53 Cadillac" became a " '63 Cadillac." That seems to be the only thing that was changed, however. All the dollar amounts are the same. There's a mention of Nikita Khrushchev on the radio that I initially thought might have been inserted to make the story more contemporaneous, but I guess Khrushchev was pretty big news in 1953, too.

Charles says

Really fine noir novel. It's difficult to write a character's internal monologue and keep the tension levels high but Charles Williams accomplishes that here. The last piece was particularly intense. Much enjoyed.

Dave Russell says

Are you a fan of Jorge Luis Borges? Because I am.

He once wrote a meditation on one of Zeno's paradoxes. Zeno set out to prove that motion is impossible. If motion were possible then Achilles, a fast runner, would have no problem catching up to a moving tortoise. Not so easy, according to Zeno. He points out Achilles would first have to reach the spot where the tortoise was, but by the time he did the tortoise would have moved forward. Achilles then would have to reach the new spot the tortoise occupied, but by the time he did...etc.

Borges often shuddered at the vertiginous aspects of this sort of scenario. The proposition--arrived at in such a seemingly rational mode of thought--is almost frightening. Rationality taken to extremes resembles the logic of a nightmare.

I was thinking about what moved me so much about *Touch of Death* and was reminded of Borges and Zeno's paradox. This book is a kind of gloss on that paradox.

The narrator, Lee Scarborough, is offered the chance to score a lot money which he desperately needs. The problem is that to get it he needs the cooperation of Madelon Butler, a very fatal femme, who unsurprisingly has an agenda of her own. Every time he moves closer to the money, she seems already one or two steps ahead of him. His considerable smarts get him closer and closer, but the golden prize always seems just out of reach, until...Well, I won't give it away.

Williams knows how to wind each scene to it's maximum tension. Every new angle, every new complication he just keeps winding and winding until the whole thing snaps and turns into a nightmare. As the final lines reveal:

"You see why I wake up that way? It's a dream I have...

Scream?

Who wouldn't?"

Dan Schwent says

When washed up football player Lee Scarborough gets hired to steal \$120,000 from a banker's widow, how can he pass it up? Little does Lee know that other people have their sights set on the money and the widow herself. And Madelon Butler, the widow, is the most deadly of them all...

A Touch of Death has many of the things I look for in a crime novel. There are multiple double crosses, gunplay, and the tension of being on the run. Madelon Butler is by far the most interesting character in the novel; beautiful, cold, calculating, and deadly. Lee had big hopes for the dough but wound up way over his head.

So why only a 3? William's writing seems really stiff compared to the other work of his that I've read, The Hotspot. It felt like he was afraid to really cut loose. There was no sex and only a little violence. The suspense was good but not as good as in the Hotspot.

The final verdict is that this isn't a bad read but is neither the best Hard Case nor the best Charles Williams book.

Toby says

It's not necessarily a bad book, especially when considered as a product of its time but I was quite disappointed by Charles Williams' A Touch of Death to the point where I'm reconsidering my slavish devotion to the Hard Case imprint.

A down on his luck ex-football player gets sucked in to a scam to steal \$120k from somebody who has already stolen it from a dead man who had stolen it from a bank. Sounds fun and convoluted but Williams lost me almost immediately as his naive protagonist immediately became an expert in shady deals, gunplay, criminal planning and house breaking amongst other things. There are innocent men who get sucked in to these kinds of shenanigans who have a past that could make you believe that they could adapt to an

undesirable lifestyle if required but a former poster boy who has most recently failed in the real estate business isn't one of them.

It was a bit of a chore to read so I stopped taking it with me whilst travelling around England and it took a concerted effort to finally get to the end today, not a great recommendation in my mind.
