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Book Review of Caught Dead by Andrew Lanh

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Book Review

Lanh, Andrew. (2014). *Caught Dead*. Scottsdale, AZ: Poisoned Pen Press. 283 pp. \$14.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4642-0332-9.

**Reviewed by
Quan-Manh Ha**

University of Montana-Missoula

Ed Ifkovic, who wrote *Caught Dead* under the pseudonym Andrew Lanh, sets his detective novel in contemporary Hartford, Connecticut. The novel's first-person narrator, Rick Van Lam, is a former New York police officer who has relocated in Hartford, where he works as a private investigator for an insurance company. In his childhood, Rick was an orphaned Amerasian who was born during the Vietnam War and came to America at the age of thirteen, under the sponsorship of the Catholic Church. He later excelled in college and earned a degree in Criminal Justice.

Rick teaches part-time at a college, where he first met Hank, a full-blooded Vietnamese male student, who becomes Rick's close friend. *Caught Dead* focuses on the tragic deaths of the Le twin sisters, Mary and Molly, who are known for their exceptional beauty within the Vietnamese American community, Little Saigon. The twin sisters and Hank are distant cousins, and the novel opens with the death of Mary, one of the sisters, and Hank's mother's insistence that Rick investigate the death, which took place at Goodwin Square, frequented by late-night drug dealers and gangsters.

Prior to this series of events, Mary is married to Benny Vu, owner of a small Vietnamese grocery store, and they live a middle-class life with their children, Tommy and Cindy. In contrast, Molly is married to Larry Torcelli, a wealthy Italian American businessman, and they live a privileged life with their children, Jon and Kristen. Another main character is Danny, son of a Vietnamese woman named Susie, who has been working as a maid for the Torcellis for more than twenty years. It is Larry who had financially supported Tommy, Cindy, and Danny, along with his own children, as they attended the prestigious, expensive Chesterton high school. Danny later earned a degree in Finance at Harvard, and Jon is pursuing a graduate degree at Yale. In contrast, Tommy is a "punked out druggie," his sister Cindy is an antisocial "Disney cartoon character," and their cousin Kristen is a "vain and silly girl" with "wild fantasies" (pp. 126, 197, 271).

Tommy, Jon, and Danny become estranged following a scandalous incident related to drugs, referred to as the "Opium Wars," that they were involved in during their adolescent years (p. 224). This incident continues to raise suspicion from their mothers. Danny, a successful,



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Ha – Book Review of *Caught Dead*

unctuous, “[h]andsome, charming, super intelligent, slick, athletic” banker and womanizer, becomes Larry’s favorite, which evokes jealousy and animosity from Molly and Jon: “Molly was afraid of him [Danny], Larry adores him like the son he never had, Jon hates him because he can never be as good as Danny, and Kristen throws goo-goo eyes at him and moistens her panties” (p. 156). *Caught Dead* focuses attention on the complicated relationships between Danny and other characters, and in each chapter, a heartless personality is gradually revealed behind Danny’s deceptively attractive physical appearance.

With the help of his ex-wife, colleagues, and friends, and after his several interviews and confrontations with the family members of the victims, Rick finally finds out that it is Danny who caused the murders of the Le twin sisters: “both done in by a hit man he’d located in New York City” (pp. 269-70). Danny is revealed as smartly manipulative, controlling, and vicious. His ambition is to become as wealthy and powerful as Larry, and he uses the charismatic power he has over people to achieve his American Dream. Suspecting that Danny offered and sold drugs to Tommy and Kristen, the Le twin sisters planned to hire a detective to investigate Danny. Afraid that the investigation would jeopardize his career at Bank of America, he must murder Mary and Molly to protect his self-interests. He stages the murder scenes of Mary and Molly so cleverly that they confuse the police, appearing as if they were “drive-by dumb accident[s]” (p. 276).

Danny uses Larry’s frivolous daughter, Kristen, for casual sex, and he deludes her into believing that he truly loves and wants to marry her so that she “keeps quiet about things” (p. 271). Interrogated by Rick, Kristen defends Danny’s innocence because she, who possesses a “little-girl mentality” and “little-girl puppy love infatuation,” is blind to Danny’s Machiavellian schemes (p. 258). Ironically, at the conclusion of the novel, Larry admits that he knew it was Danny who murdered his wife and sister-in-law, but Larry dared not report Danny to the authorities: doing so would ruin Larry’s lucrative business, because Danny manages his large accounts and transactions at Bank of America and he illegally networks Larry with “fake investors” to earn “real money”—amounting to millions of dollars (p. 274). Finally, Larry confesses to Rick: “I made him [Danny] that way. [...] Isn’t that ironic? I made him believe he could do anything. [...] At the end I felt that Danny controlled me. I created him, and I was afraid of him” (p. 279). Danny is arrested at his workplace, but he still is a “[g]ood-looking young man,” even with his cuffed hands (p. 268).

Most of the events in *Caught Dead* are narrated chronologically, and the writing style is quite clear and straightforward: the author does not use ornate language, and the novel’s characters converse informally. Lanh italicizes Vietnamese words and phrases when he describes Vietnamese cuisine or common expressions, and he then provides their English equivalents. *Caught Dead* effectively employs such fundamental elements of detective fiction as suspense, secrecy, deception, and thriller-moments to maintain the reader’s interest. After the first half of the novel, it is hinted that Danny is the murderer: the solution presented in the end follows logically and naturally, as Rick explains how the crime was solved, and the reader reaches the same conclusion that the detective does. The murderer, Danny, is not an ordinary, simple-minded person; his intelligence, professional success, well-contrived schemes, and physical attractiveness make him a worthy opponent of Rick. Although the author is not a Vietnamese American, he understands many aspects of Vietnamese culture, and his descriptions of Vietnamese homes and Vietnamese behavior demonstrate his close observations of the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon.

Ha – Book Review of *Caught Dead*

Thematically, *Caught Dead* employs the themes of opposition common to most detective fiction: trust versus betrayal, appearance versus reality, good intentions versus malevolence. The novel treats urban gang culture, drug culture, and familial and generational conflicts. Truth versus deception in communication is another important theme, as the children camouflage their drug addiction and sexual affairs through fabrication, circumlocution, and pretense to confuse and prevent suspicion from their parents. Psychologically, Larry is caught between the various antithetical themes—he would rather conceal Danny’s crimes to protect his business than report him to the police; thus, Danny cleverly takes advantage of Larry’s moral ambivalence to exercise control over him. The heinous nature of Danny’s personality is masked under a veneer of his accomplishments as a Harvard graduate and success as a banker.

Rick, an Amerasian, feels alienated from and discriminated against by both the pure-blooded Vietnamese people and the Americans who surround him. He is derogatorily referred to in Vietnamese as a *bui boi* (dust of life)—that is, as a product of the ignominious courtship between an ignoble Vietnamese woman and an unnamed American soldier. Like the majority of Amerasians who were culturally and linguistically rootless after their arrivals in the United States, Rick often “wake[s] up feeling lost and homeless.” He says, “I am drifting in space, no rock to cling to. Helpless, screaming” (p. 26). However, he eventually comes to represent an “American success story” (p. 25).

Caught Dead debunks the myth of Asian Americans as the Model Minority, who excel in education, succeed in business, and abide by the law. Most of the Vietnamese characters in the novel do not understand the legal system in the United States, due to language barriers: “They can be a little nervous around cops” (p. 12), and “the Vietnamese don’t vote” (p. 19). Their Little Saigon, according to the Hartford police force, is a “brand new geography,” and its people are “inscrutable” (p. 19). It is Hank who navigates Rick around this ethnic enclave because Hank has the knowledge of its local people and culture. The seemingly peaceful Little Saigon, separated from the mainstream culture, is rocked by murder. Unlike the earlier Charlie Chan novels set in Honolulu that feature an Asian detective, *Caught Dead* relies much less upon stereotyped characters. It actually attempts to break stereotypes in order to reveal an essence in the “Americanness” of the characters.

About the Reviewer



Quan Manh Ha, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of English at the University of Montana. His research interests primarily focus on 20th-century and contemporary American literature, Vietnam War literature, ethnic studies, and literary translation.



Volume 10 (2015)

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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement, Vol. 10 (2015)

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