



Death's Little Helpers

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In this masterful follow-up to Peter Spiegelman's stunning debut *Black Maps*, private investigator John March finds himself drawn into a web of corruption that extends from the halls of high finance to the dark underworld of organized crime.

Gregory Danes, a Wall Street analyst has gone missing, and his ex-wife, a fashionable painter, calls March to track him down. She just wants him to sign her alimony checks, but as March soon discovers, she's not the only one looking for him. Danes was once an industry hot shot, but has lost his touch. His biggest gains lately, it seems, had been in enemies—including a few members of the Russian mob. When March receives a threat upon his own family, he realizes Danes had been involved in something far more dangerous than insider trading.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Death's Little Helpers Details

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Maddy says

When super-star Wall Street analyst Greg Danes disappears, he leaves behind an angry ex-wife, a lonely son and a group of co-workers who mostly didn't much care for him. The ex-wife, Nina Sachs, hires PI John March to find Danes. She's dependent on the generous alimony and child support that Danes pays her faithfully. Dealing with her should triple March's fee; she's one of the most difficult people to deal with that he's ever faced.

So what did happen to Danes? Did he run away from home, something which he has done before? Or has something bad happened to him? As March peels back the layers of Danes' life, he finds that Danes was pretty much disliked by everyone that he interacted with. Admittedly, he was great at his job, but recently he had a bad series of opinions that were causing his star to dull.

As it turns out, there are others looking for Danes for their own reasons; and March keeps stumbling into their path. Not only are some of the titans of the business world interested in finding Danes, so are a group of Russian mob types with whom March forms a surprising association.

I was totally caught up in the first two-thirds of the book. Spiegelman did a great job of detailing exactly how a typical investigation proceeds, with the PI having to research innumerable arcane details and try to make sense of mostly meaningless information. March was a fastidious researcher, and that was fascinating. However, as the book progressed, the protagonist morphed into someone who turned from a cerebral to a physical approach, and that's when the book lost its luster for me. March angrily facing suspects and beating them up just didn't feel right to me. But perhaps I missed a telling event in the narrative, as he also gave up on a very promising relationship with a woman who really meant a lot to him and just generally seemed to be moving into permanent anger mode. Those two aspects of the book ended up making it less than satisfactory for me, in spite of some fine writing.

Ali says

A very good follow-up to "Black Maps." I enjoyed this one a bit more -- the plot wasn't as tied in to the world of finance (although it did involve it), and Spiegelman's writing has gotten smoother (the descriptive passages aren't as clunky and unintegrated).

The ending was surprising, but not totally out of nowhere, and the dramatic tension was perfect -- I stayed up until I am finishing the book.

Greg Bascom says

John March has a trust fund from Klein & Sons, the financial institution in New York City that is owned and managed by his uncles and siblings. John is the family disappointment. Instead of being a banker, he went upstate to be a deputy sheriff for several years and then returned to the city to be a one-man PI agency.

John's only client in this story is Nina Sachs, who lives in a NYC loft with her twelve year old son Ines, her lesbian partner of Spanish origin. Ines owns three art galleries and Nina is a rather successful painter. Nevertheless, Nina depends on alimony and child support payments from her ex, Gregory Danes, and Greg has gone missing.

Danes is a wealthy security analyst who was a hot shot in the nineties before his ego got him in trouble. Although he is struggling to recoup his reputation, he suddenly takes a three week vacation from which he has not returned. Nina hires John to find him.

John soon learns that Danes, with his abrasive personality, has few friends, not even a current girlfriend, but there are many disgruntled investors and associates. Some are anxious to contact Danes while others hope he never returns. After a couple days on the case, John discovers someone else is intently looking for Danes and they seem to be several steps ahead of him.

Before becoming an author, Peter Spiegelman worked for over twenty years in financial services in New York City. He deftly sketches the changing dynamics of the dot.com securities boom and bust and then draws recognizable character types in a clear and reasonable plot. John March's rational and methodical sleuthing, and his reliance on subcontracted investigators, also helps to make the story believable.

The Amazon.com review mentions that the author "occasionally over-describes his scenes." I'd say he ALWAYS over-describes them. I learned to speed read through settings until the story resumed. Otherwise, it is well written. There is not much blood and violence or abrupt plot twists and turns, even at the end. This is not a thriller. DEATH'S LITTLE HELPERS is mystery suspense at its best.

LJ says

DEATH'S LITTLE HELPERS – (Private Investigator-NYC-Cont) – Ok

Spiegelman, Peter – 2nd in series

Knopf, 2005- Hardcover

PI John Marsh has been hired to find Gregory Danes, the ex-husband of artist Nina Sachs. Gregory had been one of Wall Street's hottest analysts, but his reputation and career plummeted, he left his office saying he was taking a vacation, but now his alimony and child support checks have stopped and no one has heard from him.

*** Spiegelman's first book "Black Maps," was one I very much enjoyed. I wish I could say the same for this. It wasn't bad, but it seemed to plod along, without much happening, never being terribly involving or suspenseful. For me, part of the problem was that I never really cared about any of the characters except Jane, Marsh's girlfriend, who was the most interesting one of the group and received a bad deal in her relationship with Marsh. Maybe I'm tired of perpetually angst driven, commitment phobic protagonists. So while it wasn't terrible, it was definitely a disappointment. Read "Black Maps" and, if you do read this, wait for it in paperback.

Fred Seibert says

I was short some plane reading when I saw one of the Red Cat cover in a suburban bookstore. Sixty seconds later these were on my Kindle (a post on the destruction of the bookstore business model is brewing in my noggin somewhere) and I dispatched all three of them almost as quickly. He's a good enough writer, and I liked all the characters enough while I was reading them (and I'll probably read any sequels, if there are any), but, I'm having a hard time remembering all that much about them.

Zach says

Pretty good. The author has a good, witty first person narration that keeps the story interesting through the main character's descriptions, especially of people with whom he interacts. The plot and the climax of the story are interesting and provide a somewhat original ending for a typical story line.

The book does suffer at times from feeling overly long. It seems like a good story could have been almost great, if the editor had cut more and allowed the story to move more quickly and at a more even pace. Some parts of the novel felt slow and difficult to get through while the ending bordered on feeling overly rushed as if the author was attempting to wrap up the story by a deadline.

The other problem with the novel is that it has an inconsistent tone. The main character has a witty, cynical take on things around him, but there are parts where the author wanted the story to be darker ie hints of the main character's past, problems with his family and in his other relationships. These moments seem rather jarring, sudden and at times overly forced..not enough build up, especially compared to the character's lighter description/dialogue.

Mike Harvey's Michael Kelley has a similar funny/cynical while wandering through dangerous environs, but I think it works better for Harvey as the dark side (ie corruption, Kelley's previous fall from grace) is always there in the background and so it does not take as much for the author to touch on it to bring in darker elements at key moments. Here it was much more forced as the author attempts to unearth something right when he wants to set the right tone.

Rogue Reader says

Discovered Spiegelman with Black Maps and now I want to read all of his works! Great premise, a private investigator who specializes in finance - his family doesn't understand why he doesn't take his rightful place in NY's financial aristocracy. John March is thoughtful, private and reclusive - he's controlled and protects himself from involvement with the family and with others. Then he meets Jane Lu, a corporate turnaround specialist who methodically kicks her bag, driving John crazy in the apartment below until he meets her, and wins her regard. Love the city setting, the unusual insight into corporate politics and the graphic violence of the streets.

Pamela says

[making the least suspected and least mentioned character the bad guy isn't really playing fair...and I don't like it when writers don't play fair! (hide spoiler)]

Michael says

I read this and the first book back-to-back. They're both wonderful.

Short version: It's Michael Lewis meets Michael Connelly.

Long version: So much to like here, especially if you're interested at all in Wall Street. The plots are very topical; this one is about a fallen stock analyst and the relationship between the analysts and traders in a bank.

Spiegelman has more than just the finance gimmick going for him. March is a wonderful character, reminiscent of the early Harry Bosch novels, but with a better supporting cast. He's a loner who has trouble connecting to other people, but is surrounded by a big family. March's relatives have a variety of reactions to his career as a PI, and all of them feel realistic.

There is a good bit of noir-inspired violence, i.e. short but intense outbursts. The villains are definitely scary, but March is definitely a bad-ass.

I really enjoyed both books, and can't wait to read the next. Highly recommended.

William says

I struggled with the rating and I imagine that many readers would give this book 4 instead of three stars. It is a literary caper. All you ever wanted to know about the shenanigans now being displayed on the front pages of the Wall Street debacle are contained in the book. While this is a strength it is also its weakness. I like a little more action and less minuate in my mysteries. While describing some arcane financial transaction, (the writer spent years as a stockbroker before becoming a novelist), I was wishing for a gunshot or villain to appear. But the train picks up speed after a slow start and the ending chapters are terrific.

Matthew says

Not as good as Black Maps, which is one of my all-time favorites, but still an okay read.

It was only after I'd begun reading it that I saw the blurb from Ken Bruen on the back, which should have given me a clue as to the writing style in this one. If Ken Bruen likes it, with his long, tedious navel-gazing protagonists, the same might have slipped in here.

The narrator, John March, gets a little more overly descriptive in this book, and seems... duller, somehow, in this book than the first one. Duller as if his colors were different, not in a boring sort of way.

Thankfully you can skim most of the wardrobe inventory, though the mystery is a pretty lukewarm one that

you may have guessed whodunit pretty early on.

Death's Little Helpers isn't enough to have soured me on Peter Spiegelman, but it's definitely not my favorite book of his. We'll see how the next in the series goes.

Ed says

#2 in the John March series. John March is rugged individualist who has turned his back on the family money and business and as a result is often misunderstood and underestimated. Detection process seems better realized than most.

John March has been hired to find missing Wall Street analyst Gregory Danes. Danes's star went into steep decline along with the stock market: now he's best known for his volatile temper and his obsession with restoring his reputation. His ex-wife wants to know why the alimony checks have stopped arriving. March unearths a rat's nest of family strife, business betrayals, and deceptions, and finds that Danes left a long line of enemies in his wake--some of whom are also hunting for him. March's investigation takes on urgency as it leads him through the corrupt corridors of white-collar crime.

Susan says

Another new (to me) author with multiple books out already! My favorite kind of find. John March is a private detective of private means who detects because he wants the answer - even when his client fires him. This was a snappy story with interesting characters.

Sherin Gad says

Nice story but too much description. Events going slowly throughout the book accelerating towards the last three or four chapters.

Cooper says

I was very happy with Black Maps and looking forward to reading this. It started well, but I was getting a little bored about half way through the story. Thankfully the pace picked up right after this feeling set in, and the conclusion was done very well. I look forward to reading more by Spiegelman about John March.
