Book Review: Harry Potter Revisited and Reconstituted

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Instead, Rowling’s first attempt at moving away from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is to follow her detective protagonist Cormoran Strike as he investigates what appears to be a suicide of one of England’s most celebrated fashion models, Lula Landry. Cormoran Strike is a battered and disheveled veteran of the Afghanistan war who has a near bankrupt private eye agency in London. Cormoran’s main identifying characteristic is his prosthetic leg that came as a result of a landmine explosion during his tour of duty.

While being hunted by creditors and barely able to keep up his office or himself, Strike is approached by John Bristow, the grieving brother of the departed Lula Landry. Lula is an African-British orphan adopted by the Bristow family, a moderately affluent family in which most members have come to terms with the police conclusion of suicide. John Bristow does not believe the report and shows up at Strike’s office to enlist his services to find out the truth of Lula’s demise. As the story unfolds, Rowling moves through a litany of characters/suspects as Strike begins to piece together the puzzle of just how Lula Landry died. As is the case with all Rowling’s Harry Potter books, the author is the master of precise detail and vivid description, and she uses these talents to create clever dialogue as Strike interrogates, usually in a quiet but always astute manner, something akin to American actor Peter Falk who popularized the 1980s television detective series Columbo. Like the grimy and sartorially deficient Colombo, Strike is a bear of a man and a mess, but he is no fool as he often catches his subject off guard and then uses the information from the interview to piece together the life and death of Lula Landry.

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Robert Galbraith may not be a household name as an author of murder mysteries, but J.K. Rowling is certainly a highly recognizable name as the immensely popular and wealthy writer of the Harry Potter series. Well, as it turns out, Robert Galbraith is J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter author has morphed into an adult novelist who has published her first work, The Cuckoo’s Calling. The Cuckoo’s Calling is best described as a mystery novel in the mold of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane, with a little bit of Agatha Christie mixed in. This means a mystery in which there are a whole host of possible murder suspects, a slow but deliberate route toward the naming of the villain, and little in the way of slam-bam violence. If you are looking for a novel that keeps you at the edge of your seat with daring escapes and unexpected twists and turn, The Cuckoo’s Calling is not for you.

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As Cormoran Strike moves ever slowly toward his villain, he becomes immersed in the world of high fashion and high-fashion models, not a bad gig for a guy who sleeps in his office and showers in a community center. What Rowling has done masterfully is juxtapose the grungy world of the private eye on the verge of insolvency with the over-the-top lifestyle of the rich and famous. It becomes fairly obvious early on in the mystery that Rowling is intent on portraying the fashion industry with its hangers on and its wealthy patrons in a dismal light as they party all night in the most fashionable night spots and then crash in a friend’s apartment with barely enough money to buy breakfast the next morning. Strike may have his financial problems, but most of the high-enders are portrayed as either despicable louts or semi-permanent members of a fashion entourage.

Although the Harry Potter series of J.K. Rowling has been highly praised for its intricate plot lines and memorable characters, *The Cuckoo’s Calling* has run into what can best be described as lukewarm praise. Rowling’s first attempt at adult mystery writing gets bogged down in “over characterisation” – the pacing is far too slow, the descriptions of the suspects suffer from unnecessary complexity, and the conclusion, once everything is revealed, ends much too abruptly with the reader seeking more precision on how Strike came to solve this tragic mystery. The villain and Strike duke it out in the final pages but the presentation of the minute details of Lula Landry’s death, not her suicide, is unconvincing and strains credibility. Strike may be a genius investigator but the clues that come together at the end leave the reader with the impression that Strike figured out a puzzle that wasn’t much of a puzzle.

There is certainly going to be a second Cormoran Strike mystery novel since *The Cuckoo’s Calling* is selling well and the name of J.K. Rowling will continue to bring out interested readers. As developed by Rowling, private detective Strike is such an interesting “bloke” who knows how to get to the core of a murder that readers will be drawn to his character and relish the complicated trail that he follows to find the truth. Rowling will have to bring more excitement and page-turning action to the next Cormoran Strike mystery and reduce the lengthy descriptions of the suspects and the details of the deadly deed so as to get to the heart of the crime. Rowling’s rival in these one-man mystery novels, Dan Brown, (with his symbologist detective, Philip Langdon), has the paradigm down pat and guaranteed movie rights. Rowling might just have to convince readers that Cormoran Strike is far more a “man-of-action” detective than Dan Brown’s protagonist if this mystery series is to flourish and yield multiple imprints.

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