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LLC's Sweet Thursday Features Bestselling Author John Lescroart

By Lou Fancher

New York Times bestselling author John Lescroart brings his 24th book, "The Ophelia Cut," his guitar, and the ups and downs of espionage (to paraphrase his "Son of Holmes") to Lafayette Library and Learning Center on May 23. But it's not so much what is new - the book, the novelty of a song-singing spy novelist, even Atria, in a jump from long-time publisher Dutton - that promises to attract a solid audience. Instead, it is something old: riveting and somewhat damaged characters, crimes of passion as old as Christ on a cross, and courtroom wrangling between sparring lawyers and judges.

It's a formula he's used before and his fans, who number in the millions and span the globe in 75 countries, will fall into the embrace of the plot's complicated literary snarl.

Returning as the featured protagonist, San Francisco District Attorney Dismas Hardy is thrown into a vortex of crimes and cover-ups when his "distractingly beautiful" niece, Brittany McGuire, is date-drugged and raped. Within 24 hours, her attacker, Rick Jessup, an ambitious chief of staff to the city supervisor, is dead. It's a simple who-done-it; except, in the case of Lescroart, it's not.

Never content to skim along the surface of moral and ethical dilemmas in his courtroom dramas, the author piles on a load of trouble.

First, there's Liam Goodman, the rapist's boss, angling for political ascension and targeting teenage drinking as a stepping stone. But he's "in bed" with Jon Lo, whose sex-trafficking ring could bring Goodman to a career-crashing halt. Making a move to redirect voter attention, a sting operation Goodman orders nets (and threatens the safety of) Tony Solaia, an undercover cop in the witness protection program.

Then, there's Brittany's father, an alcoholic teetering on full-time return to the bottle, who's pinpointed as Jessup's killer and arrested. In a swift swing of justice, Hardy leaps to take his place as his brother-in-law's attorney.

Not enough angles? Lescroart throws on more: a secret from the past that if revealed, would sink the entire ship.

Six years before, Hardy, his law partner, Gina Roake, homicide lieutenant Abe Glitsky and McGuire were part of "The Dockside Massacre," a gun war that left five people dead. McGuire's tongue wags wild and his guilt over the incident rises when under alcohol's influence and the friends-can-become-enemies potential adds palpable energy.

Churning under all of the implications, the soap opera of the characters' everyday lives is red hot. Brittany is attracted to Solaia, Glitsky is accused of questionable investigation of the crime and forced to retire, and everybody drinks too much. Although there are heroic figures - Wes Farrell and his girlfriend Sam, a DA and rape counselor respectively, and Hardy's wife Frannie, who holds out forgiveness to her troubled brother - they too grapple with the book's central themes of betrayal, familial loss, and vigilantism.

Perhaps too thick at the beginning, "Ophelia's Cut" gets off to a sluggish start. Still, it's to Lescroart's credit that he holds up the tent, despite the cloud of characters atop it. Midway, the story gains momentum and readers who stick with it will reap the reward of a flashy, I-saw-it-coming-but-it-still-surprises ending. A minor complaint are the number of blindingly beautiful female characters; every one of them arriving with "voluptuous figures" and perfect, "Venetian marble" skin. Couldn't one of them have been smart and unremarkable in appearance? And the 12-step men appearing en masse as a group recovering (or not) from some form of addiction becomes wearisome.

Fortunately, Hardy's particular obsession is to scrutinize the moral no-man's land between the law and real life justice. His sophistication and complex character make up for the more two-dimensional profiles surrounding him.

A most interesting footnote is found in the author's acknowledgement: several people purchased the rights to name a character in the book. Proceeds derived will go to charitable organizations they selected.

Lescroart will be interviewed by moderator and Friends of the LLC President Ruth Thornburg as part of the group's free "Sweet Thursdays" author series beginning at 7:30 p.m. May 23. Along with other Friends programs, sales of gently used books support the program and the library's Sunday hours. Audience Q&A is always a part of the "Sweet Thursday" presentations.

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