

The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair

This is a triumph of metafiction. It's a fictional book about a man writing a non-fiction book called the Harry Quebert Affair. The first book turns out to be completely wrong and so he has to write a second book appropriately titled 'The Truth About . . .'

The glory of this book is that the author creates a world and persuades us to accept it before subverting all of our beliefs and expectations. The first 500 pages are just setting up the final 100 pages in which there are half a dozen twist endings. In short, no-one is what they appeared to be and the author has played the reader like a fiddle.

The First Book

Harry Quebert is a famous writer known throughout America for his debut novel 'The Origin of Evil'. In 2008 a dead body is found in a shallow grave in his garden. The body is identified as that of a teenage girl who went missing thirty years before. Harry is arrested and charged with the murder and his student and protégé Thomas Goldman is determined to prove his innocence.

It turns out that Harry and the teenaged Nola were having a platonic affair but planned to run away together once his debut novel was finished. Goldman investigates and discovers other suspects including the richest man in Maine, his deformed chauffeur and Nola's own parents.

Goldman finds that Nola's mother is beating her, her father is covering it up, Nola is paying secret visits to Maine's wealthiest man and posing nude for his chauffeur. Goldman writes this in notes to his publisher which are then deliberately 'leaked' to the media to create publicity. Goldman writes the book, lays the blame on the chauffeur and Quebert is exonerated. Then the story really begins.

The Truth

Spoilers Ahead! Goldman then finds out that the richest man in Maine is actually a homosexual with no interest in Nola. The chauffeur was a talented artist who painted many portraits of her but never tried to harm her. Meanwhile, Nola's mother died nine years before and couldn't have been beating her. In fact, Nola was beating herself and her father was covering that up for fear she would be taken away from him.

Goldman travels to Alabama to find that Nola murdered her own mother by setting fire to the house. After that, she took on the personality of her mother and began punishing herself for her sins. The father attempted an exorcism in Alabama before moving her to Maine.

Finally, the murder weapon is recovered and linked to the father of the Nola's love rival who is also linked by fingerprints to the arson of Quebert's house. The father confessed to murdering Nola and we appear to have everything wrapped up.

Then comes the first of our twist endings. It turns out the father's confession is false. The murder was actually committed by his son-in-law and he is merely taking the blame to give his daughter and son-in-law time to escape. Goldman and the detective discover this and arrest the couple at the airport attempting to board a flight to Venezuela.

It turns out that corrupt police actually murdered the chauffeur Luther Caleb then had to murder Nola and another witness to conceal the first murder. While pretending to investigate the murders they were actually disposing of the bodies. They buried Nola at Quebert's home, 'discovered' the other witness's body in her home, and then drove Luther Caleb's black Monte Carlo off a cliff in a staged accident.

Years later, when Nola's body was discovered, the retired police chief is now terminally ill. He is ready to confess and die with a clear conscience. The new police chief who actually committed the murders has to kill him to stop him confessing and implicating him.

And then we reach the final twist ending. Having exonerated Quebert, Goldman learns that he is a fraud. He did not write the book that made him famous. It was actually written by the deformed chauffeur Luther Caleb.

Luther had been stealing Nola's letters to Quebert and replying in his name. He had been carrying on a vicarious love affair with Nola throughout the summer just like Cyrano de Bergerac. It was his letters that became the novel 'The Origin of Evil'. When Luther died, Quebert claimed the manuscript as his own and became the darling of the American literary scene.

Conclusion

Ultimately the famous author is revealed to be a fraud who stole a dead man's work. The deformed hunchback turns out to be the great artist, as beautiful on the inside as he is ugly on the outside. The richest and most respected man in Maine is a monster struggling for redemption. The beautiful innocent virgin turns out to be a psychotic killer and the upstanding police turn out to be the bad guys.

The reader is left wondering how the writer was able to set up this world and get us to accept it before pulling not just the rug but the whole world out from under us.

chris@chrisnowlan.com