

“A SICKNESS IN THE FAMILY” (Graphic Novel Review)

Written by Jorge Solis

Saturday, 23 October 2010 07:49



Crime novelist Denise Mina’s graphic novel *A SICKNESS IN THE FAMILY* (Vertigo) is a haunting tale of a dysfunctional family, struggling during harsh economic times. Each member gradually turns on the other as bitter secrets and vindictive jealousy creep into their haunted house.

In the opening pages, white snow falls from the night sky as the Christmas holidays have arrived. While most folks are enjoying themselves, the Usher family cannot bear to be in the same room together. They constantly argue with each other even while eating their Christmas dinner. Each of the six have reasons of their own as to why they’re so coldly detached.



William never told his parents why he really dropped out of his university; his sister Amy has secretly learned he was kicked off campus because of his heroin addiction. Bidy, the matriarch of the clan, has been having an affair with another man, and her husband Ted knows about the affair. He keeps his rage hidden inside even as he still wants to lash out at her—especially when he suspects that the man she has been seeing is their marriage counselor. The Ushers’ adopted son Sam wants to belong with this group, having never had a family to call his own. Yet while he shares their last name, he will never completely be one of them. Sam wonders why he’s the only person willing to take care of their elderly grandmother, who can barely get up from her rocking chair. As the old woman sits still, her eyes vacant, Sam recognizes her as the only human being he can actually talk to.

When the family suddenly hears a loud cashing noise, Sam rushes over to the house next door, stumbling onto a gory murder scene. His neighbors lie dead on the floor, soaked in a large pool of blood. A puzzling message is written on the wall for everyone to see, and Sam reads aloud their last words—“This Place”—wondering what they could possibly mean. Like an amateur

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detective, Sam obsessively investigates the house’s history of violence. 100 years ago, Esme Lawrence, suspected of being a witch, was strangled and burned at the stake. Sam wonders if their property is somehow cursed. Is there a ghost haunting the walls of the Usher household? Or has their bitter resentment towards each other given them a motive for killing?

The stunning black-and-white artwork by artist Antonio Fuso creates an eerie atmosphere inside the Usher household. A sense of dread and claustrophobia lurks in every tightly drawn panel. The architecture, with its compact rooms and shadowy hallways, resembles the classic Robert Wise scarefest, *THE HAUNTING*.

In *A SICKNESS IN THE FAMILY*, Mina plays with the conventions of haunted-house yarns and cleverly messes with your head, right up to the shocking conclusion. This graphic novel absolutely delivers the goods.



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