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Loren D. Estleman

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The LAPD wants to take the reels as evidence, jeopardizing the precious old film. If Valentino wants to save his find, he has only one choice: solve the murder within 72 hours with the help of his mentor, the noted film scholar Broadhead, and Fanta, a feisty if slightly flaky young law student.

Between a budding romance with a beautiful forensics investigator and visions of Von Stroheim's ghost, Valentino's madcap race to save the flick is as fast and frenetic as a classic screwball comedy. A quirky cast of characters, smart dialogue and a touch of romance make this Estleman's most engaging and accessible novel to date.

Frames Details

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Jim says

This was a fun, light mystery full of old Hollywood references as 'film detective' aka film archivist Val buys an old iconic movie palace & makes the find of his career. Unfortunately, he has an actual skeleton in the closet & that prompts an investigation that threatens the film. That's a bit of a stretch, but it made for a fun romp as Val & his quirky cohorts try to solve the murder so the film isn't threatened any more.

The best part of the book is the characters. There aren't many & each is very memorable plus there's a dash of the supernatural. I haven't read anything else by Estleman, but most of his other books are supposed to be serious & gritty, so writing this must have been a vacation for him. It certainly was an enjoyable one for me.

Tony says

10. Estleman, Loren. FRAMES. (2008). ***. This is the first novel in Estleman's new series featuring Valentino, a film archivist for UCLA. In it, we are introduced to the new cast of characters including Valentino and his co-workers, Kyle Broadhead, a Professor of Film, and Ruth, their ascerbic secretary. Val has just purchased the old delapidated Oracle Theater in West Hollywood, a relic from the glory days of the Silver Screen. He and Kyle, and Kyle's new girlfriend, Fanta, a twenty-year-old law student, are looking the place over and discover cans of film in the projection booth that are labeled, "Greed." Could this be the long-lost film by Von Stroheim of which only a two-hour version now exists? When they go down to the basement of the theater, they start digging around and find a wall where there shouldn't be a wall, and start to remove some of the bricks. When they are finally able to enter, they find another treasure trove of "Greed" reels that leads them to believe that they have found the only copy of the director's cut that was rumored to be ten hours long. On exploring this secret room further, they finally shine a light into a corner and see a skeleton – obviously someone who has been dead for quite some time. The police have to get involved, but not before Val and his friends remove all traces of the film. Who is the skeleton and who killed the man it was. This is a light plot and a good easy read from one of the masters of the genre. It does seem, however, that Estleman tries a little too hard to try and fit in all of the film trivia he managed to turn up dealing with the actors and films of the era, and some of story requires a long suspension of disbelief. I read the second book in the series first – having missed this first one – and actually thought it was better than this one.

Craig Pittman says

A fun read for lovers of old movies, but not much of a mystery.

Loren Estleman has created an interesting lead character in Valentino, a film archivist for UCLA who buys an old movie palace and discovers it contains both a skeleton and a long-lost Erich von Stroheim masterpiece.

Valentino's adventures in trying to solve the crime, keep the cops from confiscating the fragile film and romance an attractive CSI tech make for an enjoyable tale, most of it told in spritely bits of dialogue full of movie references (and the ghost of von Stroheim, who keeps showing up to urge Valentino to save his lost film).

But in the end there's only one real suspect in the killing, so it doesn't take Basil Rathbone to figure out who the killer might be. I'll have to check out at least one of Valentino's subsequent adventures to see if Estleman finds more interesting cases for him.

Alison C says

Frames, by Loren D. Estleman, is his first novel featuring Valentino, a "film detective" (Estleman has written numerous short stories featuring this character, many of which can be found in EQMM, but this is the first full-length novel). Valentino (who has no first name, it appears) looks a bit like the silent film star of the same name, but he's living in contemporary Los Angeles, where he works at UCLA's film department as a sort of sleuth of old film. That is, he searches for and hopefully secures for the University long-lost film footage, adding to the history of that fabled, yet ephemeral, art. In Frames, he finds himself in the possession of a mouldering old movie palace, not quite sure how he came to acquire it, and even less sure about his decision when a skeleton turns up in the place. But along with the skeleton, there is what appears to be a complete copy of Erich von Stroheim's early silent masterpiece, "Greed," rumoured to be 8 or 10 hours long (as opposed to the studio-chopped version of four hours). Valentino, along with his mentor and friend, Professor Broadhead, decide to remove the film canisters before reporting the skeleton, which leads to numerous problems with the local police - who, happily enough for him, happen to include Harriet, a forensic scientist who he hopes will figure large in his life in the future.... This is a light-hearted story, despite the skeleton, and there's plenty of humour to go around, but also a great deal of Hollywood lore from almost a century past; Estleman knows his stuff, and to my delight he proves it by adding a serious bibliography concerning the silent film era in general, Stroheim's work specifically and "Greed" itself. Valentino is an engaging character, and the people with whom he surrounds himself are equally interesting. So, nothing terribly profound, but a whole lot of fun to read. Recommended, especially for film buffs!

Greg Trosclair says

This is the first Valentino, film detective story. I really enjoyed this. I am truly looking forward to the other books in the series. I love all the movie history and love of the movie business that Estleman inserts into this series.

Patrick says

Loren Estleman is that rare novelist who is worth reading in as many different genres as he chooses to write (at least three by my count), and this breezy little novel about where modern Hollywood meets its own past was a fun read-- think screwball comedy for the digital age.

I especially appreciate that so many of the characters in the book are drawn sympathetically. "Fanta" and "Kyle" and "Harriet" and "Sergeant Clifford" and "Kalishnikov" and Valentino himself are people whom I'd actually like if they were real. Even "Anklemire," the former Marketing Weasel now slumming in UCLA's Information Services department, brims with sleazy good humor.

So why three stars rather than four or five? In two words, "shop talk." What got to me after awhile was Estleman's near-manic insistence on packing the story with film trivia. I get that the lead character and his friendly supervisor are both film geeks, but I also get the impression that Estleman was trying too hard.

This is nominally a murder mystery, but you can't read three consecutive paragraphs in the book without encountering a cinematic reference of some kind. Sometimes the allusions are unobtrusive, but more often than not, they read like what you'd get if everybody in a room were trying to outsmart each other. These characters have a patter. If I may traffic in movie references for the sake of a point myself, "Frames" is like a mashup between "The Pink Panther" and "The Philadelphia Story" -- each a good film in its own right, but bound to lead to confuzzlement when combined, which is why I "refudiate" Estleman's intent while admiring his craftsmanship.

Although Valentino has title billing, the characters that kept me reading were the beautiful law student with the preposterous name ("Fanta") and the emerald-eyed LAPD sergeant whose best scene is an interrogation. Without those two women, the story would drop from "likable" to merely okay. Still, you could do worse in picking a summer read.

Kathleen says

Having grown up within shouting distance of UCLA and a Hollywood brat to boot, this book was a natural for me. I loved the setting and the old industry feel but I felt the central character was rather bland and undeveloped. I am hoping that in subsequent books the author gives us more background on what motivated Valentino to become a "film detective".

In addition I thought that a police detective in a busy Los Angeles precinct would have been too involved with current cases to devote as much energy to this cold case as she did. The way she pursued the fragile film footage was also unrealistic. She could have easily waited for the film to be transferred since the body has been undiscovered for over thirty years. Would a couple of weeks really mattered? It seemed as if Estleman was creating drama where none needed to exist.

I want to learn more about Valentine, Fanta and the professor so I will read the next book in the series.

GlenK says

Frames, the first of Loren Estleman's Valentino mysteries, is great fun. In it, Valentino (just Valentino), a UCLA film archivist (or as he calls himself, a Film Detective) finds himself owner of the Oracle, a long abandoned Los Angeles movie palace. Valentino's purchase of the old theater seems not the best of ideas (he can ill afford the restoration costs) and two immediate discoveries - the walled up skeleton of a decades old murder victim and a complete (or near complete) print of the long lost Erich von Stoheim film *Greed* - complicate matters enormously. Contributing to my enjoyment of this book is the light tone - it seems similar to a Kinky Freidman mystery - and the supporting characters of film scholar Broadhead, brainy law student Fanta, and LAPD medical examiner Harriet. Also like Kinky Freidman. here the mystery (and the murder) is not really the point, the characters are. Good show.

James Thane says

I've long been a fan of Loren Estleman's long-running Amos Walker series. Set in Detroit, it's one of my favorite hard-boiled detective series. In *Frames*, Estleman shifts gears pretty dramatically, moving the setting

to L.A. and introducing a new protagonist named Valentino. Valentino, who does not resemble his famous namesake, is a film archivist at UCLA, whose business card describes him as a film "detective." (This is L.A., after all.)

As the book opens, Valentino buys a run-down old movie palace that should be slated for the wrecking ball. But Val dreams of restoring the theater and living in it as well. His purchase immediately produces two major surprises when Valentine discovers a skeleton that's been left behind a walled-off section of the theater's basement. Even more amazing, he finds several cans of film apparently containing the only surviving copy of Erich Von Stroheim's famous long-lost masterpiece, *Greed*. Somehow, none of the theater's previous owners have noticed the treasure that was right under their eyes.

For reasons that don't really make a lot of sense, the homicide detectives investigating the murder in the basement insist on confiscating the film as well. Valentine fears that the police will mishandle the fragile movie and destroy it before he can transfer the film to safe stock. (This, even though the film has somehow survived sitting around for decades unprotected while the theater decays around it.) Valentine slips the film out of the theater before the police notice it, but they soon realize what has happened and demand that Valentine return the film within three days.

There's no way that the film can be safely transferred in that limited amount of time and so Valentine's only alternative is to solve the decades-old crime within the three days and then hand the police the solution to the mystery rather than the film.

This is a very light book, especially compared to Estleman's much grittier Detroit novels. The characters are quirky and funny, and the plot never allows the reader to actually suspend disbelief. But it is clearly a labor of love. Estleman has immersed himself in the history of film and in the technical details of film preservation and restoration, and those who love the movies will find it an entertaining romp. For my own part, I prefer Estleman's darker work, but I enjoyed this book nonetheless.

Martha says

Loved it--some of the best dialog I've read in a while. The main character is a film historian, and the book is certainly well researched--not often do you get a mystery with an extensive list of references at the end. What's not to love?

Gabriel says

*** 3.75 ***

In my quest to follow this author I've recently discovered, here I am writing my own review about a new book, for me, from his Valentino series I'm reading now...

This in itself is more a novella than a novel, a short book, as a pilot if I may say, for a series of mystery the author is launching...

In all honesty, I love it, and I'm a bit sad it's short, I wish it would be longer so we can enjoy more...

What I personally find unique and special, worth attention, it's a remarkable writing style, especially spread

with a great sense of humor but placed in a very subtle way all over the dialogue of the characters...

I don't particularly like the comedy style, with telling jokes or even worse the silly comic situations series of events or actions, as if I would enjoy this style, I would look for this kind of books to spend my time with...

I enjoy and look for a mystery book, maybe some thriller here and there, so this is what I am aiming for... this book, along with the series as well, is a mystery in itself, and a good one I may add, yet, pleasantly presented with pleasant and entertaining humor in dialogue, which I for one, really, really enjoy it...

Another remarkable and special aspect worth mentioning would be how the author is using his love and extensive knowledge of old movies, to make a great setting for a mystery, for a murder investigation and for unfolding a plot, presenting great characters and more, all that and more in a short style of a book, a novella style...

It's amazing to me how come now, in the digital era we live in, the author dares to present his audience a topic based on old movies, old and long gone movie stars and even old landmarks of the movie industry, like an old movie theater... it's also amazing to me to see how the author is presenting us, and even promoting us the idea that's OK to be a couch potato and just watch movies at home, or go to the movies as a hobby...

I too, personally enjoy watching movies, not, in particular, the old ones, but anyway, I enjoy watching movies, diving in the astonishing world of movies, escaping from the ugliness of the reality that surrounds us every day, yet, I was somehow thinking is a bit wrong to have "watching movies" as a hobby... hehe... wrong, or not, I for one, I'm still watching and will be watching movies, but this author, with this book, with this series, is showing us that's OK, and even more, not only it's OK, but some people make a lifetime hobby of this... thus, I don't feel that odd anymore about myself for loving to watch movies as well... hehe...

I for one, I am also amazed to discover due to this author and his book, there is also some kind of science of movies, and even more, already a history of movies and moviemaking... I guess, by me not being a moviemaker myself, just a movie consumer, I didn't realize clearly there is a science already about movies and making movies, but this author will introduce us, its readers to this movie science, or to be more specific to movies history... and he's well versed in this area, with well researched and documented topics, so this book, this series, this author, is worth a try, it will worth your time...

As I said, from my point of view, I was a bit sad so see this book was so short, I wish it would be longer, so we can enjoy more... at the time I'm writing this review, I'm already reading the second book in the series, Alone a short one as well and I look forward to the third book in the series... if you somehow follow my reviews, you'll soon read about what I've discovered with the next books in the series by this author....

Rachel says

A delightful book, charming and playful. I will read more of this series.

Melissa says

If you love old movies (and I do) then this is a fun book with an interesting minor mystery.

"Enter Valentino, a mild-mannered UCLA film archivist. In the surreal world of Hollywood filmdom truth is often stranger than celluloid fiction. When Valentino buys a decrepit movie palace and uncovers a skeleton in the secret Prohibition basement, he's not really surprised. But he's staggered by a second discovery: long-lost, priceless, reels of film: Erich von Stroheim's infamous Greed. The LAPD wants to take the reels as evidence, jeopardizing the precious old film. If Valentino wants to save his find, he has only one choice: solve the murder within 72 hours with the help of his mentor, the noted film scholar Broadhead, and Fanta, a feisty if slightly flaky young law student. Between a budding romance with a beautiful forensics investigator and visions of Von Stroheim's ghost, Valentino's madcap race to save the flick is as fast and frenetic as a classic screwball comedy. A quirky cast of characters, smart dialogue and a touch of romance make this Estleman's most engaging and accessible novel to date."

Margaret H says

Average. No major mystery. Only huge film buffs will understand most of what's talked about between characters.

Frank says

I really enjoyed FRAMES, the first in Estleman's Valentino mysteries. Valentino is a UCLA film archivist or Film Detective who decides to buy an old movie palace in Hollywood called the Oracle. He needed a place to live but also wants to restore the old place. While going through the projection room, he discovers some old film canisters that are labeled "Greed." Can they be the lost full length epic silent film of Erich von Stroheim that originally ran between 8 and 10 hours? Then in the basement, he discovers the walled up skeleton of a decades old murder victim and more film canisters of Greed. But the skeleton complicates matters on whether the film can be kept away from the police who think it may be connected to the possible murder victim in the basement. Valentino and his associates decide that they must try to solve the murder before the police lay claim to the film.

I found this book to be a lot of fun. The characters are well portrayed including not only Valentino but his associate, Broadhead; law student Fanta, and an LAPD medical examiner Harriet who seems to be drawn to Valentino, not to mention the ghost of von Stroheim who wants Valentino to take care of his *kindling* (child). The book was also filled with film trivia especially about the silent era and other older movies. "Greed" was an adaptation of the novel "McTeague" by Frank Norris which I read quite a few years ago and thought it to be a great realistic classic. I would recommend this one to any film buffs or lovers of movie history and I definitely will be reading more in this series.
