



A Clue for the Puzzle Lady

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A Clue for the Puzzle Lady begins a new series of mystery novels by Parnell Hall. Hall is the creator of the popular Stanley Hastings detective stories. While the Hastings character is a completely unromantic private investigator bumbling around New York City, Cora Felton (the “puzzle lady” of the title) stumbles around the small town of Bakerhaven. She stumbles because she overindulges in alcohol. She also chain-smokes and has a penchant for gambling. She is quite intentionally portrayed as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple with an abundance of vices.

A Clue for the Puzzle Lady resembles the Hastings novels in two respects. It is clearly geared toward humor, and the dialogue sports Parnell's very identifiable style, as characters routinely harangue and talk past one another.

In other ways, this book differs from the Hastings novels, and not for the better. It never really achieves a sense of gravity. The mystery does not run deep or even break new ground. In addition, Parnell is not able to convey a sense of place in the novel. He has at least a superficial feel for New York City, but his small town is strictly television quality, which is to say, completely unauthentic.

While Cora Felton is a character with some appeal and definite potential, Parnell does very little with the crossword puzzle theme. Puzzle enthusiasts will find *The Crossword Murder* (1999) and *Two Down* (2000) by Nero Blanc much more to their liking.

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