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Hit Man



Synopsis

Keller is a killer. Professional, cool, confident, competent, reliable. The consummate pro. The hit man's hit man. But he is a complex person: understandably guarded and reclusive, icy and ruthlessly efficient, he is also prone to loneliness, self-doubt, and career worries. Indeed, he is going through a full-fledged mid-life crisis. Keller may be a crack assassin, but he is also an all-too-human being. As Keller goes about his rounds, fulfilling his contracts, he learns a few crucial truths about himself and the ways of the normal world and winds up a wiser (if not a better) man.

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Customer Reviews

A man known only as Keller is thinking about Samuel Johnson's famous quote that "'patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'... If you looked at it objectively, he had to admit, then he was probably a scoundrel himself. He didn't feel much like a scoundrel. He felt like your basic New York single guy, living alone, eating out or bringing home takeout, schlepping his wash to the Laundromat, doing the Times crossword with his morning coffee... There were eight million stories in the naked city, most of them not very interesting, and his was one of them. Except that every once in a while he got a phone call from a man in White Plains. And packed a bag and caught a plane and killed somebody. Hard to argue the point. Man behaves like that, he's a scoundrel. Case closed." But Lawrence Sanders is such a delightfully subtle writer, one of the true masters of the mystery genre, that the case is far from closed. In this beautifully linked collection of short stories, we gradually put together such a complete picture of Keller that we don't so much forgive him his occupation as

consider it just one more part of his humanity. After watching Keller take on cases that baffle and anger him into actions that fellow members of his hit-man union might well call unprofessional, we're eager to join him as he goes through a spectacularly unsuccessful analysis and gets fooled by a devious intelligence agent. We miss the dog he acquires and loses, along with its attractive walker. Like Richard Stark's Parker, Keller makes us think the unthinkable about criminals: that they might be the guys next door--or even us, under different pressures. For a small selection of the many Blocks in paperback, try Coward's Kiss, A Long Line of Dead Men, The Sins of the Fathers, Such Men Are Dangerous, and especially When the Sacred Ginmill Closes.

For some years now, Block's been chronicling the adventures of fatalistic hired assassin J.P. Keller. Now Block (The Burglar in the Library, p. 912, etc.) has revised and collected ten stories showing Keller doing what he does best. As he sallies forth from his First Avenue apartment to one American city after another at the behest of the old man in White Plains, Keller ponders whether he can kill a man he's grown to like, mops up after hitting the wrong target, serves as cat's-paw for killers initially more clever than he is, and agonizes over which of two clients who've paid to have each other killed he's going to have to disappoint. In between his methodical executions, he also checks out real estate in Oregon, consults a therapist, takes up stamp collecting, wonders if learning more about flowers would enrich his life, buys earrings for the woman who walks his dog, and worries how much of a commitment he can make to either the woman or the dog. It's the combination of the many things Keller ruminates about and the many things he tries not to ("This is the wrong business for moral decisions," the old man's secretary admonishes him) that gives him his melancholy fascination. Is the result a novel or a cycle of stories? Block's ravenous fans--delighted to see at least three masterpieces ("Keller on Horseback," "Keller's Therapy," and "Keller in Shining Armor") gathered in one volume--won't care any more than Keller would. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I'm a huge fan of Lawrence Block, one of the best and most prolific fiction writers of our day. "Hit Man" features one of my favorite of his characters, Keller. Keller is the mild mannered hit man who is good at his job and between jobs just wants to enjoy his otherwise common and ordinary life. His interactions with his employer, his thought processes as he approaches his assignments, and his non work-related relationships and activities between jobs are all described in hilarious and entertaining style and fashion by master story teller Lawrence Block. I wish I were a better writer if only to give Mr. Block his due in this review.

After reading, the Grey Man series, Victor the Assassin series, Matt Helm, John Rain, Jack Noble, Nick Stone, Mitch Rapp, etc, the Keller series is the Junior Varsity of Assassin series!! 75% of the book is silly dialog between Keller and his handler. There is very little action and what action there is seems to be "glossed over" And, I'll be damned if I didn't try to buy book 2 to see if the writing improves, AND ITS NOT AVAILABLE!!! IM OUT!!!

What a great storyteller is Lawrence Block!! Who else could put the fun in assassination, I ask you readers?? Block has a gift for comedy. His delivery is fast paced and non stop. It's very similar to stand up. Keller is a true blue New Yawker, practical and generally unconcerned about ethics. He likes dogs and stamp collecting. He rescues children from danger. He gives money to shelters for homeless animals. The people Keller slays are usually corrupt business types that the world can live without. Wit and deadpan humor are the hallmarks of this very fine writer. Enjoy!

I liked this book a lot. It's hardly literature but has no pretention to be. The style is dry humor, which I love, and the author makes the protagonist very sympathetic, quite an achievement considering his job! If you've read and liked Thomas Perry's Butcher's Boy series, you'll like this. Unlike other picaresque modern novels (eg Jack Reacher), Block writes less about the weapons and techniques, and more about the hitman's daily life and interactions.

Lawrence Block writes with a series of brief brush strokes. Like a pointillist painter he makes short stabs at his canvas. He paints a spare picture. But within his laconic, classic hard-boiled style is great humor and observation. His protagonist, John Keller, is a monster, but we're never revolted by him. He's fascinating, sympathetic and wired all wrong. He kills people. A lot of people. Sometimes for money, sometimes by mistake, sometimes because he's a dupe. The book is actually a series of short stories which were printed separately in other publications. They more or less follow a chronological order. They're fascinating, if you can handle the low-key style. I was skeptical after reading the first story. It was interesting but a little too crudely written. But you can see Block stretch his legs and find his voice with each successive tale. I really enjoyed the book and I'm off to find another in the series.

Hit Man is the first in a series of books starring J.P. Keller, a laid-back assassin who, save for his profession, is just like the rest of us: he walks his dog, goes out on dates, wonders about the lives of

strangers he passes on the street, and takes up stamp collecting to alleviate his boredom. Hit Man isn't a conventional thriller; it's an unconventional portrayal of a remorseless killer as an ordinary guy. Lawrence Sanders started writing about Keller in short stories that mostly appeared in Playboy. Hit Man collects many of those stories and adds more material, but it still reads like a series of related stories rather than the novel it purports to be. There is no central plot. Keller gets a call from Dot in White Plains, who works for the old man; Dot relays an assignment to Keller, or Keller gets it directly from the old man; and Keller travels to wherever and makes the hit. Along the way Keller philosophizes and muses about his life and the lives of others, whether clients, victims, or total strangers. Some hits are more difficult than others; some present Keller with ethical dilemmas, creating interesting situations for a man who operates outside the boundaries of ethical behavior. Toward the end the old man becomes a bit dotty, forcing Keller to decide whether he wants to continue working in his chosen profession. The interplay between Dot and Keller is often hilarious. Keller is an affable killer; the stories are surprisingly lighthearted and amusing, given the subject matter. Readers looking for a thriller or a mystery might be disappointed with Hit Man. This isn't a mystery and it isn't exciting; it's a series of scenes from a man's life. The man happens to be a killer. On that basis, the book works.

As a therapist and crime writer myself, I'm fascinated with the question of psychopathy and what motivates deviant behavior. Lawrence Sanders's understated anti-hero hitman Keller is a man with a screw missing--that essential element of compassion that makes taking another human life reprehensible. And yet, other parts function fine. The compassion is present for animals, and he has a few people (Dot! OMG!) who he actually likes. The dry, matter-of-fact way in which he dispatches his victims allows the reader to continue to like him--there is no gratuitous, sadistic violence, it's utilitarian, dry-cleaner violence (unless Keller's angered, like when he bludgeons a man with a tire iron who he thinks is stalking a helpless female client.) My psychological spidey-sense was interested in where this was going and in the ways Keller escapes his chosen path--by imagining alternative lives for himself in new towns, by looking for his own name in the phone book of places he travels to kill, by allowing his erstwhile girlfriend to take the dog that enriched his life. This is a book that will stay with me awhile, bears re-reading, and will influence my characterization in my own writing. I can give no higher compliment. Toby Neal Author of the *À Blood Orchids* (The Lei Crime Series)

Not bad and fairly entertaining, easy read.

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