

First Avenue—the Dark Side of Seattle’s Past

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by Nick DiMartino

With wet cheeks and Band-Aids on three fingernails, I finished reading Lowen Clausen’s recreation of Seattle’s notorious peepshow district in the 70’s, *First Avenue* (Watershed Books). It’s a quick, compelling, literate read about a Seattle cop whose determination to solve a particularly horrible crime entangles him in unsuspected mysteries and secrets of his own life.

It’s a hybrid book—a police procedural with the pace and character attention of a novel—and it’s a personal vision of a dangerous world where goodness is still possible. Clausen’s likeable 36-year-old hero, Sam Wright, hides his soft heart with a macho pose. When he appears to be bullying a street youth, he’s really protecting a fourteen-year-old runaway from the harsh realities of First Avenue. When he finds a shoeless derelict accusing a wino of stealing his shoes, Sam finds the man some shoes. He’s the kind of cop you can cheer for—the kind you hope you’ll meet when you need one.

Sam and his policewoman friend, Katherine Murphy, are a force for compassion on a street with more than its share of ugly secrets. Their viewpoints alternate throughout the novel, along with that of a young Alaskan girl whose secret agenda in Seattle leads her into the deadliest basement on First Avenue.

The novel unfolds on real streets in familiar Seattle locales—including a notorious doughnut shop across the street from the Pike Place Market. The author’s spare prose and familiarity with Seattle create a gritty, believable world for Sam Wright’s dangerous journey into self-knowledge.

Clausen graduated from the University of Washington, and was a real-life Seattle cop for thirteen years. His police details ring simple and true. His peripheral characters—the shoeless wino trying to go straight, an elderly Filipino trying to run his restaurant without his son’s help—are expertly drawn and quite winning.

The novel begins with a particularly grim crime inspired by a real incident in Clausen’s years on the force. “I had a call where I found a dead baby,” he said, “much like in my story. The odor and scene in the room were similar to the way I described it in the book. So was the story of the baby crying, for days and days. It was one of the few scenes from my work that I couldn’t push away or forget. I dreamed about this baby, and she has haunted me since. She is the main force behind this book.”

Lowen worked First Avenue for several years in the late 70’s and early 80’s, as well as Capitol Hill and the north end. He managed to combine two very different worlds—being a student by day in the radical college world of the 70’s, and by night entering the world of law enforcement.

“I told very few people in either place what I was doing. In all, there were probably three or four professors who knew where I worked and about an equal number of students. In the same way, few cops knew that I was a student at the UW. When I started in 1969, I found myself in a job where I was hated for what many thought I represented—support for the Vietnam War, anti-black, anti-gay, anti-student. I didn’t represent any of that, but that didn’t matter. In 1969, my wife, Pat, and I had a new baby, and I needed to work. The police department was one of the few organizations hiring people. Seattle was in the grip of

a massive Boeing layoff, and there were no jobs for 21-year-old kids. Nobody else would pay me a decent wage, if any wage at all.

“When I was a policeman, I had to work at keeping an open perspective. It would have been easy to develop an ‘us versus them’ mentality. Many cops did, as did many protestors and activists. It's easy to do, and dangerous.”

What gave you your first idea for the book?

“When I was working First Avenue, I knew that I was ready to leave the police department. So I began writing some notes for myself with the idea that I might use them later in a book. Besides, nothing happened at 4 am, and I had time to think. I called them ‘Notes from First Avenue,’ and this was the working title through most of the book's evolution. I thought of many different titles. In the end, I simply shortened the working title. A few of the characters are begun in these notes—Silve, Henry, and Sam. I also wanted to write about that baby. I wanted to give her some life beyond the bitter, short life she lived, to make a few of us think about her a little.”

The book took about eight years to write. He and Pat were building various businesses during those years, “but I worked on this book whenever I had a little free time and a little desire. I tested my English teacher's theory about writing. Lois Hudson, a fine writer and a professor at the UW, told her students that if we could quit writing, we should. I couldn't quit, and I didn't, but this book took a long time. I have fifteen versions of the story.”

One of the most memorable aspects of First Avenue is the ending. You'll be surprised at what is answered, and what isn't. “I didn't wrap up all the details on purpose,” said Clausen. “I took the story as far as I wanted. In the last two chapters, I write about everything I thought was important. As far as Sam's two romantic interests, he chooses and he makes the right choice.”

Richly-described peripheral characters, types that are often marginalized, are one of Clausen's strengths. “The best part about writing the book was to meet Henry and Silve and Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez. I felt a great loneliness when I finally finished the book and could no longer visit them every day.”

Though the police work in the novel all has the ring of authenticity, not all the incidents spring from Clausen's experience. Fiction and non-fiction weave together, feeling equally true. One of the most thrilling and realistic sequences is entirely fictitious, but filled with the telling little details of an actual event.

First Avenue is published by Watershed Books, operating out of Ballard. The book will be released as a Signet paperback in December of this year. Tammy Domike, the manager of The Seattle Mystery Bookstore, gave the book to the Signet sales rep, who passed it along to the Senior Editor at New American Library. “It is unlikely that anything would have happened if I had sent NAL a manuscript,” said Clausen, “except that it would have taken up a few inches in their slush pile. This book business is a strange business.”

And what was the most difficult part of writing the book?

Clausen smiled. “Writing one good sentence after another.”