

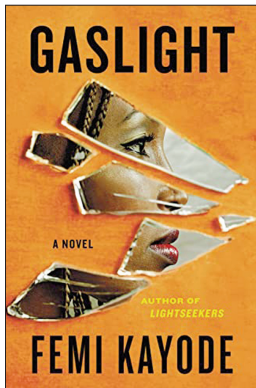
BOOKED & PRINTED

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Sometimes, even the best sleuths grit their teeth at the difficulties of a potential investigation. The climate may be too perilous, the society too much trouble, the truth too elusive—perhaps one not worth knowing. Though an investigator might at first deny the individuals beseeching them for their skills, some catalysts of crime are simply too powerful for the justice-driven to disregard. This month, *Booked and Printed* examines two novels of reluctant sleuths buffeted by dangerous elements, struggling toward the truth.

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Investigative psychologist Dr. Philip K. Taiwo cannot abide the hypocrisy laden in a megachurch, much less the high-wattage smiles of the moneyed leaders who run one. But in present-day Ogun State, Nigeria, an enormous



Christian congregation reels. Its charismatic and adored bishop, Jeremiah Dawodu, is under a cloud of suspicion. The clergyman's independent, outspoken, young wife has disappeared, leaving blood traces, and the police claim the bishop has murdered her. Dr. Taiwo's sister is a devout member of the church, and she pleads for his help to prove Dawodu's innocence. Reluctant at first, bristling at the courtesy he is required to show, Dr. Taiwo finds his first impressions of the bishop to be somewhat surprising. As he studies church leadership and congregants, Dr. Taiwo retraces the steps of the missing woman, Folosade, discerning what sinister, powerful

forces might have driven her disappearance.

So begins *GASLIGHT*, the strong sophomore procedural in the Dr. Taiwo series by novelist Femi Kayode. This second novel immerses us in the communities of southwestern Nigeria. As a Nigerian doctor who came of age in the United States, Dr. Taiwo is by turns deeply affectionate and deeply ambivalent toward his home country. His nuanced perspective guides us through its traffic, police stations, social media trends, mansions, militarized checkpoints, and lively schools. Dr. Taiwo's ex-mercenary sidekick, Chika, reprises his technological, military, and linguistic competence, providing brutal practicalities as foils to the psychologist's cerebral nature.

In the history of solitary, isolated, cynical sleuths, Dr. Taiwo appealingly breaks the mold in an important way: he's a family man. After encountering

the behavior of California police, his attorney wife swore to raise their three children far from the mortal threats of anti-Black racism in the United States. Together the family relocated to faculty housing at the Nigerian university where both parents teach. Dr. Taiwo's interactions as a loving husband and father provide touching subplots, revealing the deep anxieties of Black parents helping children navigate colorism and code-switching between cultures.

Meanwhile, the conspiracies Dr. Taiwo encounters remain firmly within the grim, blood-curdling veins of noir. Readers will appreciate the dynamism and suspense of the investigations. Dr. Taiwo laments the relative lack of professional protocols and central databases in Nigeria, but his gumshoe methods are riveting, blending the modern with the tried-and-true. Sensitive, captivating conversations across Nigerian languages blend with bank statement data crunching, poring over social media, and long drives to the working-class streets, school campuses, and gated mansions across Ogun State. The narrative gives the voices of Nigerian women and girls careful attention, alert to the distinctive trials and violence they face, both in the country and globally. The book, too, is haunted by a disembodied voice in italics, one whose motives will come to the brutal fore by the end.

Gaslight is a powerful, immersive entry in what will hopefully be a long series of Dr. Philip K. Taiwo crime novels.

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BLIZZARD begins with a momentary, absent-minded gesture. The narrator, Bess, lets go of a little boy's hand to tie her shoes. By the time she looks up, the boy is gone. No search should be necessary—after all, she looked away for only a second. But the rough weather of this remote region of Alaska shows no mercy. The slashing winds and driving snow of a once-in-a-lifetime whiteout have banished all auditory and visual abilities. What was supposed to have been a walk between Bess and the boy becomes a desperate quest against time, the elements, and certain death.

Elsewhere in the squall, Benedict is a local young man who houses Bess and the boy. He panics at their absence and begins his own search. Benedict enlists his pugilistic, prejudiced neighbor, Cole, for help, while Freeman, a solitary, elderly veteran, soon ventures out too.



Debut author Marie Vingtras's multi-voiced thriller is available in the English language for the first time this year, thanks to a tense and able translation from the original French by Jeffrey Zuckerman. In the novel's elliptical passages, we grow to know more about each person's dangerous journey. Each chapter takes the form of one character's voice, and most are

brief, some hardly reaching a full page. The concision and mystery of each first-person testimony reveals more of the searchers' pasts.

There are risks of relying on brief, shifting monologues across a short novel, where some characters might have needed more attention than others. Freeman's motivations and decisions, as the Black veteran father of a soldier son suffering from PTSD, might have used more depth. As it stands, the novel leaves both father and son characters thinly drawn.

The structure of the story is the thriller's greatest strength. Readers accustomed to a single perspective may find the shifts between narrators jarring at first, but the initial disorientation—somewhat like entering an ongoing weather event—soon grows rewarding. The blizzard wrenches each character's worst memories and impulses from them, some more appalling than others, lashing the past to the urgent present.

While the search for the boy through brutal weather goes on, the plot grows more complex, with clarity and revelations arriving in the narrative like sudden pauses in wind through gales of snow. Some searchers have motivations that stretch far beyond the snowstorm, ones that may or may not involve a true recovery. What was once baffling becomes interconnected, and truths emerge for brutal confrontation. Sometimes a physical storm is not the worst peril. It only masks the greater human tempests to come.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: THE FIRE LADDIES: THE BALTIMORE CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY by Mark Hannon is out this year from MT Publishing. • William Burton McCormick's novella **HOUSE OF TIGERS** is available in electronic format from Wildside Press.