



Shadow of a Distant Morning

William Topek

Kansas City, 1934. Devlin Caine, a WWI veteran and former Pinkerton's operative, is hired by a wealthy industrialist to check out a potential business partner. The job is simple and the money good, but for Caine, it's a short step from checking public records to being roughed up in a back alley. Clearly there are things the client neglected to mention, such as Caine's predecessor on the job being found in the Missouri River with a slug in his chest. When the man Caine is investigating turns up murdered as well, Caine finds himself in the middle of a power struggle between his client, a competing industrialist, and a local underworld boss – all after a coded notebook Caine found in the dead man's hotel room. Desperate to unlock the mystery of the notebook (and to protect his client's beautiful young daughter), Caine plays the three men against each other in an effort to buy time. He knows only one of the three rivals can win this battle, and backing the wrong side will cost lives, starting with his own.

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“A fast-paced mystery thriller filled with more than its fair share of suspense, secrets, lies, subterfuge, manoeuvring, blackmail, intrigue, danger, and even romance.”

~The Scribe's Desk - Kyra Dawson

“Topek transports you back in time through the seamless use of authentic details, descriptions and dialogue. The plot is full of twists and turns and will keep you guessing until the very end.”

~ Suzi Davis - Author

Discussion Questions

1. How was the protagonist's character developed over the course of the book? Through his actions? His speech? His thoughts? A mixture?
2. In what ways, if any, was this historical setting reminiscent of contemporary times?
3. What drives Devlin Caine? What aspects of his character enable or compel him to take risks? Sense of justice? Just trying to make a living? A need to solve puzzles? Other?
4. What sparks the romance between Devlin and Melinda? What draws them together at first? What brings them much closer later in the story?
5. Who was the most morally reprehensible character in the book? Why?
6. What made the characters and situations in the story seem believable or not believable?
7. How did this book differ from other detective or mystery novels you may have read?
8. Do you feel the historical detail hampered the story or enriched it?
9. What are some of Devlin Caine's strengths and what are some of his flaws?
10. How did you respond to how the story ended? Did the ending satisfy you as a reader? Why or why not?

William Topek is originally from the Midwest, but has lived and worked throughout the United States and overseas. His widely varied career has included serving on active duty in the U.S. Air Force, teaching in a foreign middle school, and conducting regulatory seminars and security training as an employee of the federal government. He is a graduate of the University of Kansas and received his MBA from Willamette University in Oregon. His interests include film, fiction, history and the art of storytelling.



Interview with William Topek

Q: Why did you choose to write a 1930s detective story for your first novel?

A: I'm a big fan of old-time detective heroes like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. I thought it might be fun to come up with my own take on a character like that and put him in his own adventure.

Q: How does your character, Devlin Caine, differ from fictional private eyes of the past?

A: I like to think that Caine is maybe a bit more realistic, more moderate, than some of his predecessors. He's neither as coldly calculating as Spade nor as tough and morally intransigent as Marlowe. And he's certainly not as violent as Mike Hammer. But Caine is smart and experienced, and I like how he uses his training and wits to minimize risks while still taking them, how his creativity allows him to come up with novel solutions to situations.

Q: What was the most difficult part of writing the book?

A: Getting the period right. I did a great deal of research, all of which I found fascinating. I wanted the story to have a contemporary feel to it, like it was happening now and not in some distant past, as I felt this would give the story more immediacy, more vitality. I even wanted the book to read as though it could have been published in 1934, so I was careful with some of the language and to avoid any anachronisms in terms of events, technology, slang, etc.

Q: Why did you choose to write the novel in the first person?

A: I wanted the reader to connect with Caine, and getting to share his thoughts and perspectives was the fastest way to accomplish that. It also helped in some ways with developing the story, as Caine's internal musings and deductions moved the plot along more quickly at some stages.

Q: Is it difficult to write in the first person?

A: Personally, I find it exhausting. You basically have to stay "in character" the entire time you're writing. You have to make every word consistent with your character's view and speech patterns, and every clue or development has to come in some way through his senses or awareness.

Q: Are you similar to your hero, Devlin Caine? Is he basically an extension of the author?

A: I wouldn't go that far. We have some similarities in views and tastes and preferences, but he has a very different background and set of experiences than I have. If you're in trouble, you'd definitely want Caine and not me. But I do like to think I'm a better writer than he is!

Q: What is the hardest part about writing?

A: Apart from all of it? I'd have to say the constant, unrelenting need for balance. Balance between too much and too little detail, between developing characters through equal parts of description, action, speech, observations of others, etc., between believability and excitement. You have to keep the reader engaged, which means giving enough detail to allow images to form in the mind but keeping the story moving fast enough to sustain interest. Like anything else, you'll only briefly and accidentally pass through that midpoint of perfect balance on your way toward the other extreme, but you try your best to hover as close to it as you can for as long as you can.