



Check into the riveting 'Paragon Hotel'

For a sleek, oh-so-sly, hard-to-put-down mystery, look no further than Lyndsay Faye's latest novel, "The Paragon Hotel."

Faye, who grew up in Longview, Wash., has trafficked, variously, in stories that have revived Sherlock Holmes, reconceived of Jane Eyre as a serial killer and investigated big-city crime in the pre-Civil War era.

For her latest book, Faye introduces Alice "Nobody" James, a moll in Prohibition-era New York. In the opening chapter, Nobody gets some lead pumped into her, courtesy of a dustup with the Mob, and escapes on a westbound train.

Our antiheroine becomes increasingly feverish as she crosses the country in a Pullman car. But Max, a chivalrous porter who boards in Chicago, takes Nobody under his wing.

When they get to Portland in the middle of the night and she refuses to seek medical attention, he escorts her instead to the Paragon Hotel.

This turns out to be an all-black establishment with a doctor on the premises – a black doctor – who will tend to her wounds. But the doc is just as unenthusiastic as Nobody about getting found out.

Portland is a staunchly Jim Crow city with a growing Ku Klux Klan presence. Black-white relations are not just discouraged, they're punished. So folks at the Paragon are deeply motivated to keep Nobody's presence hush-hush – which turns out not to be a bad

THIS WEEK'S BOOK

"The Paragon Hotel"

By Lyndsay Faye

G.P. Putnam's Sons – 432 pp

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thing for a woman who is trying to hide from the Mob while recuperating from gunshot wounds.

But not everybody at the Paragon is unwelcoming.

When he is in town, Max is a staunch ally, with the potential for being something more, if miscegenation weren't a thing.

Little Davy Lee is a charmer, a mulatto child whom everyone adores. He was adopted as a foundling by another hotel resident, club chanteuse Blossom Fontaine, when she was performing in Seattle.

And Blossom "adopts" Nobody, too, recognizing a fellow odd-duck.

Over late-night whiskies, the chanteuse confides, "We go through our lives, so many of us, as fractions of ourselves, with all the other puzzle pieces buried where no one can see them."

This story is told in then and now chapters – as Nobody recuperates, she reflects on the events back East that got her into her current fix. From an early age, she'd been a resourceful asset for one of New York's rising Mob bosses. Chameleon-like, she changed outfits and attitudes, blended in without being noticed and gathered useful information.

Now she knows too much to be safe in her hometown.

But when young Davy goes missing – possibly kidnapped from a Portland amusement park – and police can't be bothered to look for a child of color, Nobody has just the tools and temperament to unravel this mystery.

She navigates the Prohibition era's racism, substance abuse, changing sexual mores and gender roles, as well as corruption, complacency and deceit. And in working to uncover Davy Lee's fate, she begins to define her own purpose and identity as well – no longer just a Nobody.

"The Paragon Hotel" is a five-star read.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com



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