The Terra-cotta Dog (Inspector Montalbano Mysteries) by Andrea Camilleri

Andrea Camilleris Inspector Salvo Montalbano has garnered millions of fans worldwide with his sardonic, engaging take on Sicilian life and his genius for deciphering the most enigmatic of crimes.

The Terra-cotta Dog opens with the inspectors mysterious tête-à-tête with a mafioso, some inexplicably abandoned loot from a supermarket heist, and dying words that lead him to an illegal arms cache in a mountain cave. There, in a secret grotto, he finds a harrowing scene: two young lovers, dead fifty years and still embracing, watched over by a life-size terra-cotta dog. Montalbanos passion to solve this old crime takes him, heedless of personal danger, on a journey through the islands past and into a familys dark heart amid the horrors of World War II bombardment.

From sly comedy at the expense of his fellow policemen to personal soul searching that helps him enter the minds of those he must investigate, Montalbano is a detective whose earthiness and imagination coalesce into a unique, unfailing appeal.

My Personal Review:
This is the second translation by Stephen Sartrelli that I have read of an Inspector Salvo Montalbano mystery by Andrea Camilleri, and I enjoyed it immensely. While THE SHAPE OF WATER (four star review 12/18/03) was an entertaining introductory volume to this series (which has become a best seller in Europe), I found the authors technique in this story of utilizing a present day mystery which Montalbano has to unravel as the introduction to an unrelated fifty year old murder mystery to be both clever
and unusual. Usually when such crimes are resurrected decades after their occurrence, it is because they have some direct connection to the present day events under investigation, not the casual and coincidental connection which is the case in this story.

Several threads are very cleverly intertwined in this story, which begins with a meeting with Montalbanos boyhood friend Gege Gullota, a small-time hood to whom we were introduced in the first volume in this series. A famous and highly placed Mafioso has requested that Gege arrange a meeting between the Inspector and this individual, and the consequences flowing from this meeting form the backdrop for much of the storyline which dominates the early part of the book. There is another element of the story which at first appears unrelated but in typical Camilleri fashion is eventually interwoven with the main plot, this involves a strange supermarket heist in the middle of the night only to have the loot found in an abandoned truck the next day. Unexpected deaths and attempted murders soon occur, and the trail of events leads Montalbano to a mysterious mountain hiding place for contraband and the eventual discovery of evidence of a fifty year old crime in a hidden and long sealed grotto watched over by THE TERRA COTTA DOG whose presence is the basis for the title of the book.

As the story proceeds, Montalbanos life itself is threatened, and the resultant events ironically enough provide him with the opportunity to engage in a digression from his police work and satisfy his curiosity regarding the long ago tableau which he literally unearthed. This is both a police procedural and a character study, and it succeeds wonderfully in both respects. Part of the charm is that many of the characters from the earlier story appear, providing continuity and a feeling of familiarity. We gradually become better acquainted with the Inspectors police associates, as well as with his personality quirks and eating and reading habits.

Finally, a scene where Livia (his friend and lover), Anna (the young woman infatuated with him), and Ingrid (the beautiful foreigner whom he has secretly helped in return for her secret aid in his investigations) all appear simultaneously to express their concern for his safety is a wonderful moment. Thus, some part of my greater enjoyment of this book than the first volume clearly resulted from the fact that in the tradition of other successful detective series this book continued and built upon the foundation of the earlier volume. Sicily and the fictional town of Vigata and its citizens and environs seem to come alive with the help of the authors careful attention to detail. One nice feature of this series that deserves comment is the fact that this is one of those Penguin soft covers that really are pocket sized, so they conveniently fit in a corner of your bag or coat pocket and are easy to read on the train or plane.

My only caution would be that these are stories of detail, both with regard to Montalbanos personal habits and also with regard to the mysteries themselves. There are only brief moments of intense action, and most of the violence happens outside the direct scope of the narrative. The details are cataloged and evaluated by the author with regard to Montalbano and by Montalbano with regard to the various mysteries which he is trying to unravel. The solution to the mystery of THE TERRA COTTA DOG is
clever, very intellectually satisfying, internally consistent but in some ways very quiet and anti-climatic in tone.

Disclaimer: While I was contacted by an employee of the publisher and asked to review the most recent book in the series, I wanted to introduce myself to the character as the author intended and decided to read the volumes in order to determine if the series was of interest to me. Based on my enjoyment of the first two stories, I definitely plan to further enjoy following Detective Montalbano as he attempts to solve additional cases. As a disclaimer, I know no one employed by the publisher and have had no contact with either the author or translator. However, I believe it appropriate to disclose that as is customary I was furnished a review copy of this book but I did not provide any assurance that I would produce a review or what its contents would be if I did so.

Tucker Andersen

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