





Sunken Dreams: A Jake Caine Archaeology Mystery

Steven Kuehn. Five Star Publishing. 2016. 297 pp, \$25.95 (hardcover), \$3.99 (Kindle).

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A great read to curl up with between perusing site reports, *Sunken Dreams* by Steven Kuehn is an intriguing mystery set at an archaeological field school in Wisconsin. The novel follows the adventures of Jake Caine, a hardworking professor from Wisconsin State University. While preparing for field school excavations at an Oneota village on the shores of Tay-

lor Lake, Caine becomes engrossed in solving the possible murder of Jacklyn Wardell, his predecessor, after learning that the circumstances of her death were suspicious. After a visit from Wardell's mother, who believes her daughter's death was no accident, Caine begins to gather information to prove what really happened.

Kuehn's background in the archaeological profession allows him to create a realistic portrayal of the world of archaeologists. Readers with a background in the field will appreciate Kuehn's effort to deglamorize the occupation. He describes the building Caine works in at the university as severely worn, with elevators and electricity that barely work. Computers crash constantly and artifacts are stored in a dank basement. The Wisconsin field school is hot, humid, and dusty. Far from chasing golden idols and biblical relics, students spend their time excavating, mapping features, taking extensive notes, and meticulously cataloging artifacts. While at the dig site, Caine encounters the familiar problems of looters, trespassers, a rival professor who is trying to prevent Caine from getting tenure, and also struggles with balancing work and personal relationships.

Despite the attention to detail in creating the setting, Jake Caine is the only character who is fully developed. Most of the secondary characters have minimal personality and are somewhat flat. This in turn causes portions of dialogue to sound wooden. The character of Al Droessler, for example, was under-utilized. Droessler is interesting and quirky retired photographer with ties to the original Wardell field school excavations. Unfortunately, his role in the novel is short lived.

Close regard is paid to the importance of archaeology throughout the book. At several points, Caine reminds his students that interpretation of artifacts is the priority. He even posts a sign in their makeshift laboratory which states, "Archaeology isn't about the artifacts; it's what the artifacts can tell us about the people." I enjoyed this emphasis as, all too often, artifacts take center stage and what they indicate becomes secondary. Archaeology also brings the community together, educates residents about regional native people, and eventually brings closure to Jacklyn Wardell's family and colleagues. Kuehn's Jake Caine follows in the footsteps of Angela Lansbury's depiction of a loveable amateur sleuth Jessica Fletcher in *Murder, She Wrote* and Kathy Reichs' clever Temperance Brennan, a crime solving forensic anthropologist. Overall, *Sunken Dreams* is a wonderful first novel and I look forward to reading more Jake Caine mysteries.