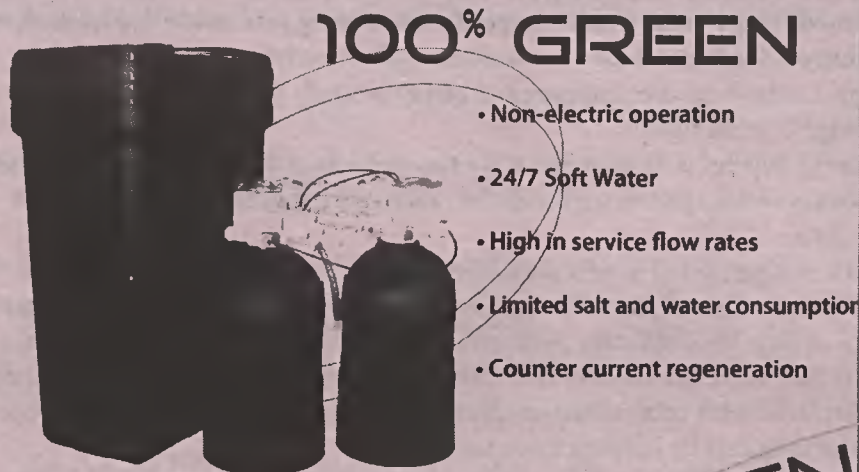




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Book Talk

X by Sue Grafton

GP Putnam's Sons, New York 2015

Review by Ken Wilkins

X Factor



Change is in the air. Summer has ended, giving us the promise of cooler weather and shorter days. Daylight Saving Time has barely a month to go. Christmas can't be far away (unless you're a kid). These things are predictable, and so far the Kinsey Millhone series from Sue Grafton has been equally so. No longer: the latest and 24th book in the bestselling series abandons the expected title format for Grafton's choice of only the letter. Fortunately, Grafton has otherwise returned to form and created an excellent beach read.

We get the "X" immediately, in the person of Teddy Xanakis, who is planning to steal a painting from her ex-husband. We do not know, however, anything about the timing of the theft. It could have occurred years before the telling. After the introductory chapter, Grafton switches gears and takes us to Millhone's mundane existence, with appropriate allusions to previous adventures:

From here the book branches into several different, but mostly related, plots involving a woman looking for her birth son, just out of prison; a private investigator from an earlier case; and, as we've come to expect, Millhone's landlord and their local Hungarian restaurateur. The side plot with Henry and his new neighbors turns out to be one of the most interesting parts of the book.

As the main case develops, Grafton does a nice job of feeding us information in pieces, never giving away too much. There is an evil serial killer at the heart of the mystery, always an attraction in these sorts of tales. Millhone once again has a brush with death. These things are almost obligatory in this series, but here the formulaic nature of the alphabet tales does not detract from the reader's enjoyment.

X may not be the best of the series, but really, who can remember the others? Here we get what we expect, and perhaps a bit better than many of her other offerings. Grafton uses her usual device of Millhone's summary of the case to tie up loose ends, and here is my main quibble: she seems to have either written enough words or to have reached her deadline, as she just stops and gives us an epilogue.

This is her chance to philosophize, and she takes it:

There's a commonly accepted assumption that the rich are greedy and uncaring and the elderly are frail and ineffectual. This isn't always the case, of course. . . . The more I see of this world, the more I understand that justice isn't cut-and-dried. There are more compromises than you'd imagine, and rightly so. Law and order, punishment and fair play, are all on a continuum where there are far more gray stretches than there are black and white.

This may not be much to take away from a 416-page novel, but, hey, it's beach reading—oh, sorry, summer's over.



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