

Book Review: A Calamity of Souls
By David Baldacci

I've read more than two dozen of David Baldacci's books, and thoroughly enjoyed every one of them. But with his latest release, "A Calamity of Souls," Baldacci has elevated his game to another level.

In an opening Author's Note, Baldacci explains that he began writing "A Calamity of Souls" by hand in a journal more than a decade ago. He then put it aside, but writes "something kept pulling me back to the story."

As a reader and reviewer, something kept pulling me back, too. That 'something' was a superb and enthralling narrative that was hard to put down.

The story unfolds in 1968 in Virginia, just weeks following the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Two lawmen are in the process of arresting a young black man for the double homicide of an elderly white couple in their home. And from there, the story explodes off the pages.

Jack Lee, a 33-year-old white attorney, is asked to represent the accused murderer, Jerome Washington, who swears his innocence. Despite warnings from many local residents that doing so will be suicide, career-wise and then some, Lee takes the case. And almost immediately, Washington's spouse, Pearl, is charged as an accomplice.

Lee is soon aided by black attorney and civil rights advocate Desiree DuBose from Chicago, and the heat is immediately turned up as both Lee and DuBose experience vicious personal attacks aimed at scaring them into dropping the case. Of course, the attacks only make them more determined to defend the wrongfully accused couple.

What unfolds is a racially charged murder case that, given the prejudiced climate of the times, seems unwinnable. Baldacci skillfully and methodically puts the pieces of

the murder-mystery together, dropping periodic breadcrumbs of hope each time Lee and DuBose appear to reach a dead end.

The story climaxes in a vivid courtroom drama where racial hatred is on full display. The last 60 pages or so, with a myriad of twists, turns and surprises, is a powder keg of emotion.

“A Calamity of Souls” is an important story to read. It not only addresses the realities of a tumultuous time in U.S. history, it reminds us that, unfortunately, many of those realities are still with us. The setting may be 56 years ago, but much of it could be the headline on yesterday’s newspaper.

Baldacci has written about a dozen standalone novels, and almost as many series. “A Calamity of Souls” is listed as his latest standalone, but it’s easy to see how this could become his next big series.

Five very enthusiastic stars for Baldacci’s latest work. If you’ve enjoyed his previous books, you won’t want to miss this one.