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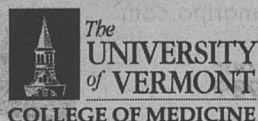
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## arts

# Three Mysteries

BY E. LYNN LEMONT

Vermont's own lesbian press, New Victoria, has released three mysteries this fall – a hit and two hmms.

The hit is *Owl of the Desert* by first-time novelist Ida Swearingen. It's a tautly written suspense story following Kate Porter as she exits prison on a trip to find her father, the man who put her there. The twist is that she and her family are not leftist revolutionaries or members of the Weather Underground, but a right wing militia group called the American Patriotic Front.

Bud is the general of the Texas-based militia, the father who raised Kate and her brother Dwight by military discipline. Dwight, crippled by the premature explosion of a homemade bomb probably intended for the Jewish editor of a newspaper, has become a televangelist. Kate almost escaped the militia's reach, getting Bud's permission to attend the University of Kansas in pre-med.

A bank robbery gone wrong, the death of a bystander, the abandonment of the "troops" by the general, and Kate's improbable escape form the backstory. After two years underground, the memory of the secretary dying in her arms got to be too much, and she turned herself in to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation Agent Ray Gruber.

By turning state's evidence, Kate got a 12-year sentence. When the book opens, she's just out, and her first desire (after beer and the blues) is to find her father and kill him. Of course it's not that simple, even with the help of Gruber. And then there's her brother's political backing of figurehead candidates in a grab for power, a drug importation ring, and her ex-girlfriend from prison, who improbably turns up in the middle of a scam and a murder, but manages to help.

Swearingen, who has been a taxi driver and a beet shoveler before working as a family therapist, writes compellingly of a world

under the radar for most of us. I'd read anything else she wrote in a heartbeat.

One of the two hmms is *Dispatch to Death* by Martha Miller, the third of her books (the first a collection of lesbian erotic stories, the second a mystery whose protagonist is a minor character in *Dispatch*). Trudy Thomas, a lesbian taxi driver who drives a lavender cab for the Red, White, and Blue Cab Company (long story) of Springfield, Illinois, is drawn into several drug-connected murders by the attractive but mysterious Anita Alvarez, who claims she is the governor's illegitimate daughter.

What follows is a plot that onscreen would elicit shouts of "Don't go there! She's trouble! She's using you!" If all lesbian taxi drivers were as naïve as Trudy Thomas, they'd be an endangered species. Every single contact between Trudy and Anita ends in someone being shot and/or several someones being murdered. Let's just say that Trudy's motivation for remaining involved is not adequately explored. And, somehow, the traumatic effects of being shot don't really show except for a few brief paragraphs glossing over some months driving for a pizza company and being "depressed."

If you really like mysteries and are willing to consume literary junk food just for its lesbian content, then go ahead and order this one.

The third book from New Vic this fall, another hmmm (maybe it deserves a few more mmmms), is *Sudden Loss of Serenity* from first-time novelist Jacqueline Wallen, who otherwise teaches psychology and human development at the University of Maryland.

The plotline is interesting enough: A neighbor – and best friend – of protagonist and college professor Claire Winston is found murdered in a cemetery, the body blindfolded. There are connections to a possibly shady guru teaching an esoteric Buddhist practice called Chöd that involves facing demons and fears and offering up one's life. And to top it off, Claire's biracial

daughter Serenity is discovered missing the same day.

Serenity's father and Claire's ex-husband is a lawyer in the state's attorney's office. The investigator is a black female police detective who can't understand how Claire let such a fine black man slip through her hands. The characters are reasonably well drawn, and the explanation of Chöd makes a kind of paradoxical sense. The red herrings pointing to various suspects are adequately distracting to create tension.

But there's something not quite convincing about the assemblage. The players are too civilized, the resolution so accidental. If the purpose of detective fiction is to leave the reader with a sense of order restored, this book fails that purpose.

And if I were judging a book's quality from the number of typographical errors missed by the editor, *Sudden Loss of Serenity* would be a candidate for bottom of the list. As I was reading, the number of typos began to bother me. In a mass-market paperback from a mainstream publisher, I might notice two or three typos. In *Serenity* there were nearly two dozen. I decided to keep track: *Dispatch* had eight; *Owl* had two. By way of comparison, a mystery I read from glibt publisher Alyson Books had seven typos, and a lesbian memoir from Michigan State University Press had none.

Perhaps the smaller gay and lesbian presses are undercapitalized and cannot afford to pay someone with a fresh pair of eyes to proofread their manuscripts. Perhaps the assumption is that mystery readers aren't that bright or don't care about language. Whatever the reason, it reflects badly on the presses, and readers deserve more respect. ▼

E. Lynn Lemont reads and writes in Franklin County.