

Billings: 'Cozy' mystery leads Webber to write

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father's desk," Budewitz said. "I was literally writing on the desk because I still didn't understand the concept of paper at that point."

Budewitz spent her childhood in the Billings area. She attended elementary school at St. Pius and graduated from Central Catholic High School in 1977.

After graduation, she moved to Seattle to study and practice law. She lived there for 12 years before moving to her current home in Big Fork, Montana.

During all this time, Budewitz's desire to write never went away. She started writing in earnest in 1995 with a mystery series set on the Flathead Reservation. However, after 10 years of trying to get her books published, she became discouraged and took a break from writing.

She was drawn back into the writing world when other mystery authors started asking her questions about how to accurately depict the legal system in their novels. Budewitz set out to answer those questions in her book "Books, Crooks, and Counselors," which won the 2011 prize for Best Nonfiction Book at the Agatha Awards, which honor the best in mystery writing.

"In the course of writing that book, I realized that I wasn't done writing my own stories and that mystery wasn't through with me," Budewitz said.

Thus, Budewitz began work on a new series of novels – "The Food Lovers Village Mystery" series. The series, which is set in a fictionalized version of Big Fork, has developed quite a following. Budewitz attributes this to the books' focus on characters and lack of potentially disturbing content.

"My books never have any graphic sex or violence," she said. "But there is a lot of graphic food."

On top of writing a new installment in the "Food Lovers" series each year, Budewitz recently launched a new series called "The Spice Shop Mysteries." The

first novel in the series – "Assault and Pepper" – was released on March 3. As with her previous series, Budewitz chose a setting that she was intimately familiar with: Seattle's Pike Place Market.

Budewitz frequently visited the market during her time in Seattle and thought that it was an ideal setting for a mystery series. She noted that it has 300 shops and restaurants, 200 day stalls and more than 10 million visitors every year – all on just nine acres of land.

"You put all that together and you're guaranteed that some interesting stuff's going to happen," she said.

Those who read either of Budewitz's series will find that they are very place-centric. This is something the author attributes to her upbringing in Montana.

"I am a very place-oriented writer," she said. "Setting is incredibly important to me, and I believe it is because I grew up here with a very strong connection to the land. Montana had been a grounding place that has been very important in my life."

'Yoga, dogs and murder'

Tracy Webber's life has followed a path that mirrors Budewitz's in many ways.

Like Budewitz, Webber lived in Billings during her formative years. She attended Elysian Elementary School and graduated from West High School in 1982.

After graduating, Webber, like Budewitz, moved to Seattle. After filling a variety of positions (including senior manager at Microsoft), she became the owner and manager of Whole Life Yoga.

However, unlike Budewitz, Webber never had any desire to be an author. Even though both of her next-door neighbors were writers, Webber had no intentions of following in their footsteps.

That all changed one night when she was reading a book by one of her favorite "cozy" authors, Susan Conant, and found herself laughing out loud at the author's comments about "crazy dog

people." Webber went online to find out more about Conant and was led to cozymysteries.com. The discovery of the website was a revelation for Webber.

"I had no idea that there was this whole genre of lighthearted mysteries," Webber said. "I just knew that it was the sort of thing I liked to read."

Shortly after this, Webber was struck by the idea of writing her own "cozy" mystery series – focused on a yoga instructor named Kate and her dog, Bella.

"If you had asked me two hours before I read that Susan Conant quote if I would write a novel, I would have looked you in the face and said 'absolutely not,'" Webber said. "The notion just came all of a sudden and wouldn't go away."

Webber procrastinated on writing the novel for two years, then wrote her first draft within three weeks. That novel, titled "Murder Strikes a Pose," was the first in the "Downward Dog" mystery series and is now up for a Best First Novel prize at the Agatha Awards. Meanwhile, the second installment in the series ("A Killer Retreat") was published in January.

Even though she's fairly new to the mystery writing world, Webber says she's been enjoying every minute of it.

"It's been a delightful time," Webber said. "I write what I love – yoga, dogs, and mysteries. As the tagline for my series says, 'Yoga, dogs, and murder ... what could be more fun?'"

The 'cozy' crucible

Both Budewitz and Webber readily admit that the writing process has come with occasional challenges – including getting their novels noticed in a world where a million new books are published every year.

"The hardest part of this process for me has been trying to figure out how my book gets noticed," Webber said. "How do people even know my book exists, let alone know that it's something they'd like to buy and read?"

Despite challenges, the authors have been pleasantly surprised by the friends they've made.

"I always thought that being a writer would be a lonely endeavor, but it truly hasn't been," Webber said. "I'm making a lot of friends and building a whole new community outside of my yoga community."

Budewitz agreed. "The 'cozy' genre is a crucible," she said. "It brings people together in a way no other genre I've found does."

This is definitely true in the case of Budewitz and Webber. Considering that they have so much in common, it's a bit surprising that they didn't meet until two years ago – coincidentally on the same weekend that Budewitz won her second Agatha Award (this one for the first entry in the "Food Lovers" series).

Since that time, Budewitz and Webber have become fast friends.

"It's funny how the world has taken us in different directions, but brought us back together," Webber said. "It's been such a pleasure getting to know Leslie."

The writers are fans of each other's books as well – Webber says that she loves the Montana setting of Budewitz's "Food Lovers" series, while Budewitz admires how the younger writer incorporates the yoga world into her stories.

Coming Soon

Although they have each written multiple novels, Budewitz and Webber aren't close to running out of ideas for stories.

"There are stories everywhere," Budewitz said. "There is such a richness and abundance of material everywhere you look."

Webber added, "I evidently like to kill people because by the time I had finished the first book, I had victims two and three planned out already. I have six books

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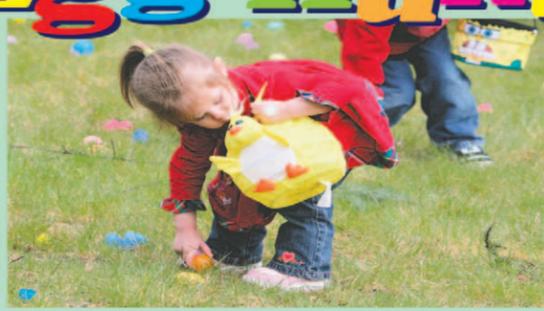


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