

75th may be one novel too many

By **STEPHEN DOW**
For *The Outpost*

I have nothing but respect for Bozeman author B.J. Daniels. Her newest western romantic suspense novel, "Lone Rider," is her 75th book since 1995. Last year alone, Daniels published five novels.

As someone who often struggles to put out an 800-word newspaper article each week, I can't help but be impressed by Daniels' productivity.

However, if "Lone Rider" is any indication, Daniels should start focusing less on quantity and more on quality.

First, let's consider its title. The lone cowboy mentioned in the title is one of the most overused clichés in western literature, but Daniels embraces it. This is indicative of her writing style in general. If you can think of a clichéd character or

circumstance, you'll likely find it in "Lone Rider."

The first chapter is the biggest offender in this sense. For example, consider the book's opening paragraph:

"The moment Jace Calder saw his sister's face, he feared the worst. His heart sank. Emily, his troubled little sister, had been doing so well since she'd gotten her job at the Sarah Hamilton Foundation in Big Timber, Montana."

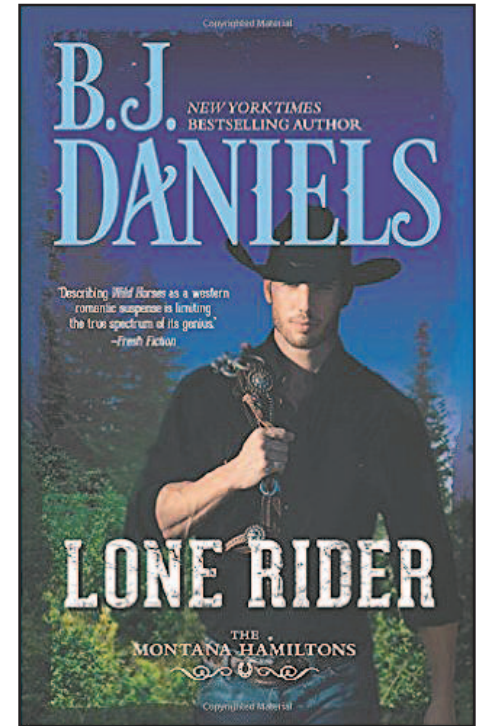
The "troubled little sister" cliché is just as old as the "lone cowboy" and Daniels utilizes it just three lines into the book. By the end of this first chapter, we've also been introduced to the sheltered daughter of a senator (Bo Hamilton) and the rugged cowboy who broke her heart (Jace Calder).

The worst part of this is that the clichés pass as character development.

For example, once we know that Emily Calder is the "troubled little sister," we don't learn much more about her character. She continues to be featured throughout the novel, but never grows as a person. This makes it difficult to care about her or any of the other characters – even when Daniels places them in extreme danger.

This reliance on cliché leads into "Lone Rider"'s biggest problem – it is simply not well-written. Sentences throughout the book range fall into three basic categories: those that rely on clichés and generalities ("The house she rented was small," page 133), those that are repetitive ("The terrain looked as forbidding as it was," page 227) and those that are unintentionally hilarious when you take them out of context ("Who gets their butt cheek tattooed?," page 115).

Another problem with "Lone Rider" was its disturbingly misogynistic attitude toward its female characters (especially Bo). It could be argued that the violence against Bo is shown to demonstrate the depravity of the story's "evil" characters, but even that doesn't seem like a good reason to show extended scenes of violence and abuse. Equally disturbing is the notion of women being used as property with one character being "branded" (via



the aforementioned butt tattoo) to show that she was the property of a certain organization.

Clearly, I'm not the target audience for this book – after all, the cover features a buff cowboy who looks like he's about to audition for a Chippendales show – but it's hard to imagine that anybody will be naming "Lone Rider" their favorite book of the year.

Mystery a tasty treat

By **STEPHEN DOW**
For *The Outpost*

Writing mysteries can be a difficult task. On one hand, readers expect these novels to have a certain familiar formula. However, authors who follow the formula too closely run the risk of creating something too familiar. With "Butter Off Dead," the third book in her "Food Lover's Village Mystery" series, Big Fork-based author Leslie Budewitz proves that she is more than capable of walking that fine line.

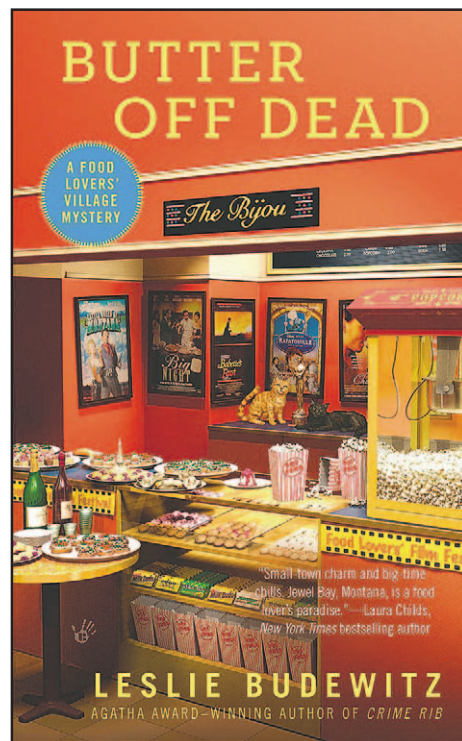
For those unfamiliar with the "Food Lovers" series, it takes place in Jewel Bay, Mont. – a town with more than a few passing similarities to Budewitz's hometown. The heroine is Erin Murphy, a former Seattle resident who returns home to help her mother run the family Mercantile. In addition to running the shop, Erin also unofficially works to solve the surprisingly large number of murders that take place in her small town.

In this book, the case revolves around the murder of Christine – the ex-girlfriend of Erin's brother Nick and the organizer of the First Annual Food Lover's Film Festival. As Erin probes into the death, she discovers that she may not have known her family and neighbors as well as she first thought.

Last March, I reviewed "Assault and Pepper," another of Budewitz's novels. In many ways, "Butter Off Dead" feels very similar to that book. Both have a heroine juggling her work life and crime solving. Both take place in a small, tightly knit community. Both feature groan-worthy puns in their titles. Budewitz's love for food is present in both stories and is seen here through the paragraphs describing the food sold in the Mercantile.

Despite this, "Butter Off Dead" never feels like a reread. The character development is top notch, and Erin is a truly likable heroine. Meanwhile, supporting characters such as Erin's mother, nephew and pet cats provide solid comic relief.

Equally strong is Budewitz's sense of place. Her description of a Montana tourist town in the middle of winter is just as evocative as her descriptions of Seattle's Pike Place Market featured in "Assault and Pepper." The author conveys the struggles of running a business in Jewel Bay during the off season, but also shows why people would want to live there in



the first place.

Budewitz's descriptions are often both evocative and humorous as seen in Erin's ode to snowplows on page 162:

"I sing the praises of snowplow drivers. I sing them in squalls and blizzards, whiteouts and flurries, in slip, slide, and slush. I sing them too in wet and powder, in blinding pellets, in soft snow drifting from the sky like petals from an apple tree. High above the road the plow drivers sit, in lumbering orange mastodons with chains on their tires and engines that could turn the earth on its axis. Mastodons with blades for tusks, capable of moving mountains, sand and gravel in their bellies."

This kind of wonderfully creative language is featured throughout the 275-page novel and it certainly helps "Butter Off Dead" stand out from other mysteries.

Ironically, the main problem here may be the central mystery itself. I had figured out Christine's killer about 200 pages before Ms. Murphy did. Luckily, there is a truly surprising second mystery in the latter half of the book that will keep you reading to the end.

All in all, Jewel Bay proves to be a lovely place to spend a few hours. And with every passing novel stronger than the last, Mrs. Budewitz is proving to be a bit of a mystery-writing jewel herself.

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