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, Montana – a town with more than a few passing similarities to Budewitz’s hometown. The heroine is Erin Murphy, a former 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,” the first book in the series. It featured an evocative and humorous as seen in Erin’s praises of snowplow drivers. “I sing the praises of snowplow drivers. I sing them in squalls and blizzards, whiteouts and flurries, in slip, slide, and slash. 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 belies.”

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 very end.

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

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.

The reliance on cliché leads into “Lone Rider’s” biggest problem – it is simply not well-written. Sentences throughout the book range into these 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 then 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.

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