ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

A Touch of Murder: A Samantha Kern Mystery
Valerie Stocking
CreateSpace
978-1-935636-00-7
Three Stars (out of Five)

Playwright Valerie Stocking introduces her protagonist private eye, Samantha Kern, in her first novel, *A Touch of Murder*. Bereaved at the recent loss of her father, with whom she worked as a private investigator, and frustrated and angry that his murderer hasn't been brought to justice, Samantha compensates with rose wine. Lots of rose wine. So much rose wine that her godfather carts her off to a spa in the country, where she can dry out, while he solves her father's murder.

While Samantha makes an effort to settle in at Bridey's Spa, a woman is poisoned. Bridey, the owner, hires Samantha to find the murderer despite Samantha's inexperience (this is her first murder investigation) and youthful appearance (she looks nineteen). When the local police charge the timid, tipsy cook, Agnes, with the murder, Samantha is determined to prove her innocence. Apparently, every guest at the spa holds a grudge and a connection to the deceased, and it takes some sleuthing to uncover their well-kept secrets and sort out the real murderer.

With a long list of characters to maneuver throughout the text, the author sets up an almost insurmountable undertaking. She manages to move them about, but they remain somewhat superficial and one dimensional. Readers never spend enough time with any one character to develop a relationship.

Stocking successfully oversees a plethora of red herrings. Clues are doled out judiciously. Crucial information is released to coincide with the debunking of those red herrings. The pacing is even and trots along without a break throughout the book. The story lines concerning Samantha's drinking problem, grief over her father's murder, and the current murder interweave comfortably with the various secrets that begin to surface.

Readers are presented with both sides of the spa guests' personalities. Samantha meets them first as fellow guests. For example, "Samantha asked Letty what she did for a living. There was a pause then Letty said, 'I'm an actress.''…you mentioned you'd been in a couple of productions. May I ask what you do to pay the rent?' 'Of course,' Letty said. 'I'm a

bookkeeper.'" Later we see the seamy side with secrets revealed.

With all of the murder mysteries being written these days, those that rise to the top have a strong hook or a quirky, unforgettable character. Unfortunately, Samantha Kerns is forgettable, as are the other characters. Even the villain carries out murder and attack with hardly a ripple in the anxiety level of fellow characters, or the reader. Even with a clean plot and writing that flows well, *A Touch of Murder* can't completely overcome a staid plotline, paper-doll characters, and overwhelming use of understatement.

Dawn Goldsmith