

"Button, Button" Who's Got the Button

Gail Soberg-Sorenson

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The cold landscape of Minnesota isn't frigid enough to keep troublemakers and evil doers inside. In the mystery novel, [i]Button, Button, Who's Got the Button[i], storms rage across the Midwest countryside, while a different kind of storm sends the Poval family and their friends into chaotic cyclones of emotional trauma.

Kirsti Poval resembles any average college student teetering on the brink of graduation and the rest of her life. But her plans go awry when she falls in love with Jack Ireland, a wrenchingly handsome man whose loyalty lies first with his work as a detective and only second to the people he loves. The fact that Jack is deeply involved with a serial killer case —the Purple Button Case —doesn't help the first few rocky weeks of his marriage to Kirsti. Her family tries to do what they can to welcome their new son-in-law into the family, but even with the support of her mother, father, sisters, and grandmother, Kirsti finds her new life fraught with hurt feelings and frustration. When the serial killer makes Jack the focus of his deranged game, Jack and Kirsti find themselves fighting not just for their relationship, but for their lives.

Gail Soberg-Sorenson has a talent for thinking up quirky character traits for the people who populate her novel, like Grandmother Poval and her habit of hoarding magazines and newspapers until they tower beside her favorite chair. However, nearly every character in the book, even the minor ones like Kirsti's disheveled economics professor, is granted several paragraphs of extensive detail. These descriptions, evidence of a lack of focus, are tedious and often disruptive to the flow of the plot.

This lack of focus spurs several extraneous subplots as well. Readers don't need to know about Kirsti's reproductive difficulties, which take an entire chapter to explore. Nor do they need the history of the Crawford law firm, where Kirsti works. Some critical streamlining would render the novel faster, tighter, and less tangled.

The narrative also tends to repeat itself. Brice Buchanan, Jack's boss, listens to his two detectives make fun of each other and explains their jocular behavior in the face of a serial killer: "He had been with these two detectives for many years and knew that the more rein you gave them, the better they were. This was their way of letting off steam." Brice has expressed this sentiment several times during the first two thirds of the book; by chapter forty, the line is redundant.

Marriage, murder, and mayhem —Soberg-Sorenson has packed her book full to bursting with troubled scenarios and troubled people. Perhaps if she had made more choices about what to leave out of the novel, readers would find it easier to care about the characters who remain.

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