

Color Tour

Aaron Stander

Writers and Editors (June 2006)

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A popular young private high school teacher and her lover are found naked and murdered on a bleak Lake Michigan beach just after the summer season has ended. When Ray Elkins, the very literate and easygoing county sheriff, investigates the crime scene, he sees something in the dead girl's face that elicits memories he can't quite bring into conscious focus. Thus begins the author's second Ray Elkins mystery. (His first was *Summer People*, published in 2000.)

The sheriff has no shortage of suspects. Ashleigh Allen—the slain teacher—was, as it turns out, an object of both widespread desire and envy. A free spirit who took and rejected lovers on her own terms, she was also the grandniece of the ritzy school's founder. Some of her fellow faculty members were sure this connection had won her preferential treatment, and they resented her accordingly. Others, including the headmaster and some of the older students, were enamored of her.

So it's up to Elkins and his efficient deputy, Sue Lawrence, to filter it all without bruising too many sensibilities. Elkins is a local boy who returned home after college and military service. He knows the lake, its moods and seasons, and the year-rounders who make up the town and feel both relieved and depleted when the summer people depart. And, without making a big deal about it, Elkins also knows good books and fine wine.

In his low-key but dogged way, Elkins keeps cutting away at guises and pretenses until he finds himself in the cross-hairs of the killer—or killers. Moreover, it becomes increasingly clear to him that he may have a closer link with the dead girl than simply that of solving her murder.

As in most appealing thrillers—and this is a superb one—location is as important as plot and character. Stander's descriptions of the vast lake and the close-knit community surrounding it carry all the chill and hues of approaching winter. Of one character, he observes, "She knew that a storm had been predicted for later in the evening, but as her eyes ran along the gentle curve of the horizon, she couldn't see a hint of the approaching clouds—just the golds, reds, and darkening blues as the sun started to slip into the water." Elsewhere he notes, "Patches of scarlet still remained in protected stands of maple. Fall's specially musky perfume hung in the air."

With a protagonist as deep and textured as Ray Elkins and a backdrop as varied as this resort community, Stander has created a high-quality mystery series.

EDWARD MORRIS (August 7, 2006)

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