FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Guilty Mind
Irene Marcuse
978-0-8027-3354-2
(May 31, 2001)

The most artful mystery writers immerse their readers in locale as well as in false leads. Marcuse has staked out the streets and parks around Columbia University as the habitat for her social-worker sleuth, Anita Servi (introduced in last year's The Death of an Amiable Child). Hers is a clamorous and variegated turf on which the multicultural dial has been turned all the way up to eleven.

Servi and her husband, Benno, who are white, are in the delicate and prolonged process of adopting Clea, who is black and by now seven years old. When Clea's beloved babysitter, also black and a graduate student at Columbia, is murdered soon after Benno takes her home, he becomes the prime suspect. In trying to exonerate her husband, Servi bears the added weight of having to deal with distracting emotions. For starters, she thinks that Benno might have been having an affair with the sitter. Worse still, she fears that Benno's arrest may cause the adoption authorities to take Clea away from her. Then there's the dread of having to face her estranged mother, who's rushed in from California to offer unasked-for assistance.

Servi is strengthened in her ordeal by a community that is as colorful and intricately woven as a Persian carpet. But there is suspicion being generated as well as support. Was the murder born of misplaced passion, she begins to wonder, or from a clash of intractable cultures? As she pushes on with her mission, Servi introduces readers to exotic foods and art, intriguing cultural traits, finely sketched minor characters and the kind of always-there neighborliness one associates with sitcoms. One of the mysteries Servi unravels in the course of her snooping is the identity of her own father.

By making Servi psychologically complex instead of a predictable instrument of discovery, Marcuse ensures that the outcome of her story will be especially compelling. Although she is underused dramatically, Rosemarie, the heroine's take-charge mother, is a charming addition to the cast. There are so many contending nationalities, races, religions, economic classes, and age groups for Servi to navigate, that it's a wonder there's only one murder to contemplate.

Edward Morris