

Murder At Midnight

Marshall Cook

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Monona Quinn is the editor of the *Mitchell Doings*, a small-town newspaper that occupies most of her waking hours. At the moment, however, her focus is on death—murder, to be precise. The former-big-city-reporter-turned-editor is no stranger to murder; she covered another case in the town of Mitchell, and solved it, too, just a few months ago.

That doesn't mean she's ready to face the murder of Father Michael O'Bannon, nice guy, parish priest of St. Ann's, conservative Catholic, supporter of the traditional Latin Mass, and opponent of the proposed highway expansion. Father O. is dead, and Detective Lashandra Cooper, an uprooted New Orleanian assigned to the case, needs Quinn's help getting the locals to talk.

While thoroughly enjoyable, the author's latest book about Quinn and her efforts to solve murders sometimes feels as if its elements were assembled from a list. (Take one indomitable female editor, combine with one crusty female black cop, add a mostly-too-good-to-be-true husband, throw in a corporate red herring, chop up one small town, add a dash of local color, stir well, and simmer.) But there's no denying that the recipe works, and works well. Cook has perfectly captured the feel of working on a small-town newspaper, as well as the difficulty an outsider has trying to fit into a new society. He's also nailed the discomfort felt by a woman with religious convictions who stands in possible violation of them in her personal life.

One of the nicest side dramas is Quinn's championship of a Native American student as an intern at her newspaper; the characters are well drawn and seem true to life, including the local "shock jock." Not quite so sympathetic, perhaps, is the ease with which Quinn's husband tells inappropriate jokes in what he must know are delicate situations for his wife, or the simple ignoring of the fate of Pumpkin, the cat (cat lovers will notice the lack of resolution concerning Pumpkin's welfare).

The ending of the book is a bit weak. Quinn finds the perfect candidate for a suspect and unwisely throws caution to the winds to pursue him, when she has promised her husband and friends not to venture again into harm's way alone. Fortuitously, that suspect turns out to be just another red herring, if a convincing one, and she must risk another roll of the dice to uncover the true killer.

Cook, the author of more than twenty books, is a popular professor of creative writing at the University of Wisconsin Madison Division, and edits *Creativity Connection*, a newsletter for writers. He has a smooth style, with an excellent feel for language; inconsistencies or easy ways out could be resolved with a stronger editorial hand.

Readers will enjoy Monona Quinn, and want to see more of her—even at midnight.

MARLENE SATTER (August 18, 2009)

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