

Par Four

Elizabeth Gunn

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Jake Hines has just been promoted to Chief of Detectives in Rutherford, Minnesota, (a disguised Rochester, home of the Mayo Clinic and IBM). It is not a big city with big city crime, but it's trying hard.

The mystery starts out with the robbery of a bar, the owner duct-taped to a chair. This seems to tie in with a number of similar robberies that Jake has had to deal with recently. Only a day or two goes by in his investigation when the owner of the bar and her teenage son are found floating in the local river tied together. She died of multiple stab wounds; he died of drowning.

During this lag period the daughter of a police dispatcher is kidnapped. The cops go nuts, swarming over the town, following every lead to an eventual assault upon a known crack house in the worst part of the city. Tension is high, the action intense, and the police's mission successful. Too successful. Was this a real kidnapping? Who was the strange man with the high-pitched voice who called in saying he had the girl, but not demanding a ransom? And why? And why, shortly after, do two kids show up at the police station and confess to the burglary?

From this point the novel accelerates at an ever-increasing rate, delving into a variety of seemingly unrelated crimes: crack deals, burglaries, murders and the peculiar kidnapping. They eventually ricochet into each other, providing a critical mass that explodes into a coherent story. Too coherent, perhaps, so many loose ends, all tied into a nice, too-neat bundle. Although satisfying, the sense that every crime in Rutherford is related strikes me as being hard to swallow.

Jake is an engaging character surrounded by a quirky bunch of detectives, medical examiners and state crime scene experts. Although his relationship with his girlfriend isn't completely detailed, it's tantalizing in the signals between the two of them that are left unsaid. This is the second novel in a series, and a strong one. The plotting was complicated, the characterizations deft, the sense of pace dead on. All in all, a very fine mystery.

MARK TERRY (January / February 1999)

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