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Siren Song: A Suspense Novel

Stephen Schwandt
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While teacher's fatigue has yet to acquire the bloody cachet of "going postal," it does add a complicit shadow pathology to this novel, in both its protagonist and its author. JP Griffith, young, lovelorn, and divorced, takes off after his last class fluffs *The Old Man and the Sea*. Flooring his Jeep in land-weary disgust, he drives north, to the shimmering aquatic charms of Door County, Wisconsin, there to find a sale-priced cabin cruiser called *Siren Song*, as well as a dishy waitress at the Swedish pancake house, who (call it kismet) was so disenchanted by *her* English teaching job that she took this position where she's "dressed to yodel." Their first date is Chemistry 101, with a dash of nervous journalism.

Who was that policeman JP saw racing along the foggy bridge last week, only to crash and drown minutes later? Her ex-husband, who (call it karma) just happened to be the *Siren*'s last owner, and he had told her nothing about any unsolved murder case or recovered cash. His most suspicious activity in their short marriage was writing short stories late at night. Turns out that the cop, Parnell, stored these sketches along with a complete set of John MacDonald mysteries in the boat's bulkhead. That will be the smoking gun in the ensuing bloody hunt for the truth of Parnell's death in this brightly paced, winsome mystery.

The author has created a well-rendered atmospheric feel for that spit of land between Green Bay and Lake Michigan, an appreciation for the local sea-salt characters, one of whom is Parnell's ex-creative writing teacher. This an unsurprising stretch for Schwandt, who, besides being a high school literature and writing teacher, has five well-received young adult novels to his credit and one previous adult book, *The Last Goodie*, itself praised by John MacDonald.

Yet graduating from young adult to adult is not so easy. MacDonald's protagonist is so frequently cited as to risk copyright infringement. And, like a good teacher, Schwandt outlines his plot points serially, typing out the list of coincidences, presumably so that younger readers can keep up. He uses more than enough profanity (in a clumsily staged gunfight), but any writing teacher will explain that good dialogue is not driven by Tourette's Syndrome. The real surprise of the ending, which *is* a surprise, is a measure of how much good will the narrator has earned, to see him spend it on the wrong siren. That, reader, is the mystery.
(October 16, 2004)

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