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The Anteater of Death

Betty Webb
Poisoned Pen (December 2008)
Unknown $24.95 (270pp)
978-1-59058-560-3

Death stalks the local zoo, but it is not in the form of a ferocious lion, tiger, or bear. No, the culprit is the most dangerous and cunning animal of all, a murderer with a cryptic motive.

One of the zoo's most popular attractions is Lucy, a giant anteater. No cuddly plush toy, in zoo parlance, she is a "Code Red" animal: five feet tall, weighing a hundred and fifty pounds, with fearsome four-inch-long claws that can evis-cerate a jaguar—or a human—in one vicious swipe. When the husband of a rich zoo benefactor is found dead in Lucy's pen after an evening fundraiser, Lucy has already stripped the body of most of its skin. Initially suspected of having killed the man with her fierce talons, Lucy is "imprisoned" by the zoo administrator in a small cage. Her keeper, Theodora "Teddy" Bentley, is upset by what she views as unwarranted cruelty inflicted on the pregnant animal and is impelled to find the true killer.

Teddy's search puts her at odds with her boss, a lecherous zoo administrator (who may be even worse than he seems) as well as the wealthy denizens of Gunn Landing, a California seaside community near the zoo, who do not appreciate her intrusion into their secretive affairs. When Teddy is shot at, slugged on the head in a swirling fog, and eventually becomes a suspect in another mur-der, her life feels more complicated than that of any of the wild animals she cares for. Resolute, she ignores the frantic advice of her over-protective mother and her fugitive father, not to mention her worried ex-boyfriend's (he's a sheriff) admonitions.

The author is a former journalist who now teaches creative writing at Phoenix College. Webb has published five mysteries featuring her fictional detective, Lena Jones. Her diverse writing background serves her well and is exemplified in the descriptive dialogue she constructs for her superbly developed characters. The author has crafted a refreshingly lighthearted murder mystery, using touches of humor and a briskly fun tone (such as the amusingly odd title). She also has a knack for scene-setting, and with the zoo as the center stage for a murder mystery, Webb offers an educational opportunity for any reader who loves learning about exotic animals—or who just enjoys smart storytelling.

ALAN J. COUTURE (October 13, 2008)

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