FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

The Belen Hitch
Pari Noskin Taichert
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The author runs a website called Bad Girls Press, which offers public relations advice to "intelligent, creative & wise women," and "promotes Bad Girls and the positive work they do."

That's a clever hook to attract readers, especially youngish female readers, to this novel, Taichert's second mystery. But its protagonist, Sasha Solomon, a PR professional making her second appearance in Taichert's writing, is not what is usually thought of as a bad girl. "Bad" here means gutsy, independent, and eccentric, and Sasha is all three. Living alone with a quirky cat (Leo da Cat, "a mercenary … tom"), she finds the dead body of Phyllis Petty, who is also quirky and is "bad" in a more traditional sense: a famous painter, she creates controversial works about Christ, Moses, and Buddha.

Solomon is hired by communities to reconfigure and market their historic properties. In this novel, she decides that the sleepy (real) town of Belen, New Mexico, might appear on tourists' itineraries if The Harvey House is transformed, and takes it upon herself not only to determine what that transformation should be, but also to investigate Petty's possible murder. In her search, she meets eccentric and unsavory characters, eats a lot of ethnic and '50s comfort food, and hangs out with her elderly mother, a new beau, and her opinionated cat.

This amateur sleuth is a vivid protagonist, and the landscape and lifestyle of New Mexico also play central roles in the book. The cuisine, the ethnic populations, the regional art, and the railroad history appear distinctly; it's obvious that the author lives in New Mexico. A public relations consultant and freelance journalist, Taichert was nominated for a prestigious Agatha Award in 2004 for *The Clovis Incident*, the first in this Southwestern-based series.

The title of this novel is confusing: what exactly is the hitch? Like most mysteries, this plot actually contains several hitches. Also, Solomon's project—assessing the appropriate conversion of an historic property into a museum, art gallery, or B&B, or a combination thereof—seems somewhat unrealistic. As trains continue to rumble by loudly, and as security is critical to museums and galleries (but not always to B&Bs), the final decision about The Harvey House seems somewhat impractical.

This mystery is more about the relationships that people have with each other and with place than it is about layers of intrigue or puddles of blood. It winds a gentle, often humorous pace through the streets of Belen as the characters reveal themselves and as Solomon helps solve the mystery and bring neighborly relations back to this small community. From this interlude, Solomon, the "bad" girl, learns one thing: "If I ever find a dead body on my first day on the job again, I'll quit." Taichert fans, take note.

Deborah Straw