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Cathi Unsworth

House of Anansi Press (December 2014)

Softcover \$19.95 (407pp)

978-1-77089-387-0

After Detective Sergeant Sean Ward is wounded in the line of duty and forced into a very early retirement from the force, he decides to take up work as a private detective specializing in cold cases. Retained by a lawyer intent on proving her client's innocence in a twenty-year-old case, Sean heads to the seaside town of Ernemouth where, in 1984, sixteen-year-old Corrine Woodrow was convicted of a ritualistic, satanic murder. But Ernemouth is a town that protects its own and will do anything to keep its secrets.

Cathi Unsworth is a master of suspense. Chapters alternate between Sean's investigation in 2003 and the lives of the key Ernemouth players for the year leading up to the 1984 murder. At first, it's not clear how the two story lines connect beyond the mutual inclusion of Corrine. But as the story progresses, Unsworth deftly weaves the two together, illuminating a spiderweb of darkness and deceit as the chilling tale becomes clear. Unsworth doesn't identify the murder victim until the actual act itself, carefully crafting a story in which it could be nearly anyone from the 1984 sections, which ratchets up the tension. The icing is Unsworth's beautiful way with words, from haunting descriptions of an old farm to her knack for nailing a character completely in two sentences: "There was something in Edna's manner that put Wayne's teeth on edge. That sense of hysteria bubbling under those chintzy dresses and that helmet of hair was much too close to the surface."

ALLYCE AMIDON (Winter 2015)

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