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IN PRINT

Review

What a mystery!

Gay detectives and quirky crime stories all the rage for Western publishers

"I think, until a decade or two ago, people who only knew about this region from its literature might have got the idea that it was still 1930 and we were all miserably and humourlessly drowning in dust," says Gayleen Froese about the rise of Western Canadian mystery literature that is proudly planted in Western geographies. She is the Edmonton-based author of *Touch*, a supernatural thriller-mystery novel set in Victoria.

"I like *Who Has Seen the Wind*," she continues. "I like *As For Me and My House*. But are those the only stories we have to tell?"

These days, the enthusiastic response is "no." The last decade has witnessed an explosion in mystery novels set in the Canadian West. In recent years, independent publishers such as NeWest Press, Insomniac Press, and Dundurn Press have chosen to include mysteries in their releases each season.

Amber Rider, general manager for Edmonton-based NeWest Press, says that NeWest's "mysteries are part of our mandate to publish Western Canadian voices. We consider them in the same way we consider literary fiction." That is, NeWest sees no difference in artistic merit between the more popular genre of mystery writing and the "literary fiction" that tends to sell less but is regarded as "fine" art.

Rider says that NeWest's mysteries have distribution throughout North America and see sales that are "on par with the industry." Cynics may point out that mystery sales are typically higher than "literary fiction, and tend also to be cheaper and faster to produce. But that situation means, mysteries can help a publisher earn a bit of extra cash to fund releases that don't sell as well. (Poetry, anyone?)

Economic realities and snobbish observations aside, the upshot of the situation is that the literary mapping of Western Canada is well under way in a genre sought out by a large number of mainstream readers.

Anthony Bidulka is the author of the Russell Quant mystery series. *Flight of Aquavit*, originally published in 2004, sold out its original run and is being re-released this spring in a trade paperback edition. (The fourth Quant mystery is due out this fall.) He says that part of the reason he chose to set his stories in Saskatoon was the sheer dearth of Canadian mysteries "based outside of metropolitan Canada" (basically Toronto or Vancouver). At the time he created Quant, "to write about a Saskatoon detective, then make him gay, then make him a kind of 'traveling' detective, left me with something new and exciting and untried."

As a "travelling detective," Quant's mysteries begin and end in Saskatoon, but require that he travel to more "exotic" locales.

"I love doing this," says Bidulka, "setting Saskatoon alongside other great cities of the world."

The most interesting aspect of this trend, however, is how the authors are using mystery to challenge what academics call "heteronormativity": many of the protagonists are queer, but queer in a matter-of-fact, you-don't-need-to-pull-out-your-rainbows way.

In fact, when asked about the representation of queer detectives, authors Froese, Bidulka, and Garry Ryan all said that their protagonists were meant to normalize queerness. In fact, Froese says that "there wasn't a conscious decision that Collette [one of two female protagonists in *Touch*] would be a lesbian" at all.

In contrast, Garry Ryan, author of *The Lucky Elephant Restaurant*, says that creating Detective Lane as a gay

man was an entirely deliberate choice. As a high school teacher based in Calgary, Ryan says he saw that "some of my gay students committed suicide, became depressed, abused drugs, or engaged in high risk activities. [...] It was time to create a hero who was ethical, a protector of children, and gay. It was a way to respond—through fiction—to the family values movement and some of its inherent bigotry." Ryan says that when his students read his books it is "a tremendous gift."

Regarding his reading audience's demographics, Bidulka claims both heterosexual and homosexuals enjoy his writing. "Indeed, the gay population is a strong reader base for me," he says. "But I've also had a big response from mystery readers who are looking for something a little different than a standard mystery".

Similarly, Froese says, "No one seems to have a problem with Collie being a lesbian, which has been something of a pleasant surprise for me. Readers have been far more concerned about the fact that my characters swear so #\$\$%@!% much."

New Mysteries set in the West recently released:

Anthony Bidulka *Flight of Aquavit* (Insomniac Press, 2004)

Gayleen Froese *Touch* (NeWest Press, 2005)

Garry Ryan *The Lucky Elephant Restaurant* (NeWest Press, 2006)

Kay Stewart and Chris Bullock *A Deadly Little List* (NeWest Press, 2006)

JAY SMITH