

## BOOK BREAK

## Latest McCone thriller is literary dessert



VICTORIA DIAZ

"A Wild and Lonely Place," by Marcia Muller (386 pp., \$19.95, The Mysterious Press).

Someone is planting bombs in San Francisco's foreign embassies. Who will stop him before he strikes again? Sounds like a job for Sharon McCone.

Detroit native Marcia Muller, creator of popular private eye McCone, has all the can't-miss ingredients down pat here.

Her hard-edged female detective hangs her hat in the ever-appealing City Beside the Bay (as with McCone herself, its frayed spots only add interest). She drives a red sports car. Rarely runs out of drop-dead verbal comebacks. Likes kids, but has none of her own. Has a lover, but is unencumbered by marriage. Owns two cute cats. Dines on stuff like ropa vieja, sourdough bread, and morning-after omelets. Favors wine and espresso for drinking. Sometimes shares a romantic cottage in Mendocino County with able lover Hy Ripinsky. Finds adventure in intriguing spots. Encounters colorful characters along the way (porno actress, religious

zealot, loquacious Hispanic maid, et al.). You get the picture.

As the curtain rises on this latest McCone mystery, we find our bold detective (these days, a kind of Nancy Drew-Wonder Woman-approaching middle-age type) in the American Southwest, approximately 6,500 feet above the Tehachapi Mountains, piloting a little Beechcraft that is about to be in big trouble. Suddenly, some potentially lethal, clear air turbulence sends the aircraft into a plummeting spin. McCone's passengers — the aforementioned Hy, sick as a dog, and a small, frightened girl — can't help, of course. The chips are decidedly down, and McCone must save herself (and her passengers) by herself. This being a 1990s detective novel, our dauntless heroine finds herself in similar do-or-die situations with incredible frequency. (She makes a lengthy, nighttime swim through unfamiliar waters to save the girl; swims back to a rescue boat, the girl in tow; deftly dodges would-be captors at the local airport; outsmarts another wily foe at another airport; lands a crippled plane. . .)

If some of these remarks sound a bit like left-handed compliments, perhaps I'll plead nolo contendere. If you open this book expecting a notable literary

landmark, you're in for disappointment. It's about as formulaic as they come right now, which can be seriously formulaic. On the menu of literature, you'd be sure to find it in the desert column (maybe under "sorbets"?). But, on the other hand, who among us wants or needs to read a masterpiece every time out? God knows, sometimes desert — and desert alone — is what can get you out of bed in the morning.

Go along as McCone traces the elusive Deple-bomber through the streets of San Francisco, and on to such far-flung spots as the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean, the Keys, the Mojave Desert. You'll catch a glimpse of Phoenix and Dallas, too. And you'll even get a quick look at the local color around Fresno and Bakersfield. ("When I was a little kid in Fresno," one character observes, "my daddy used to say that on a clear summer night you could sit on your front porch and listen to Bakersfield suck.")

With her straight-on, no-nonsense prose, Muller is one of the best around at building tension with words, with grabbing readers' attention from the outset and efficiently riveting them to their seats to the end. She's also a whiz at moving her story ever forward via dialogue, a form of action in itself in this

action-packed story.

Surprisingly, I found special fun in this techno-thriller precisely because of Muller's attention to technical detail. Since my ignorance of computers is a shame and disgrace, I'm usually pitifully lost in any form of cyberspace. Consequently, I closely identified with McCone and her stated "inability to internalize computer-related information." Throughout this novel, she has no choice but to change that "inability." And, as she does so, her learning becomes a basic, clearly-stated "lesson" for readers who don't know a window from a board from a room, electronically speaking.

So, for all kinds of different reasons, you could do much worse than leaning back, putting up your feet, and following the intrepid McCone as she goes after the bad guy.

If you really want to get the full flavor of the story, perhaps you'd best do so with a warming cup of espresso at hand. Or perhaps a bottle of '93 Deer Hill Chardonnay — the kind McCone's saving for her fast-approaching 40th birthday.

Victoria Diaz of Livonia, a longtime member of Detroit Women Writers, has a lifelong interest in reading "everything from great novels to cereal boxes."

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