

BOOK BREAK

Stock characters weaken Michigan mystery



VICTORIA DIAZ

"Buried Secrets," by Trish MacDonald Skillman (407 pp., \$4.99, Dell — pb).

Set in Michigan on the shores of the fictional Trumpeter Lake, "Buried Secrets" is one of those stories in which the main character emerges from an unremembered past. Trouble is, she desperately needs to remember.

Here, each time she senses something about her early childhood, struggling young mother Nicki Prevot either passes out or experiences a breath-stopping panic attack. The most mundane things can trigger an attack: a photograph she glimpses while standing in line at the local grocer's, a couple of Sesame Street puppets, a package of Popsicles. Shown a can of fish-bait worms by her five-year-old daughter, Lexie, she utterly freaks. After about the hundredth time she is so afflicted, we start to suspect something really creepy has burrowed deep into her subconscious. (Maybe, in fact, it's so deep it will never see the light of day?)

This Michigan story starts out about

1,000 miles south of Great Lakes country, somewhere in Texas (the town is never named, but it could be modeled after Wichita Falls, where the author lives and works). The aforementioned Nicki Prevot is in big trouble, financially speaking. She's lost her low-paying job at the bank; she's living with friends in a neighborhood that, on its good days, is really bad. Not only is her early childhood lost, but the future looks pretty dark and foggy, too. Her tiny daughter, Lexie, is half-sick emotionally, the result of a recent, violent experience she witnessed from her bedroom window.

Then, just about the time you think things couldn't get worse, they do. The violence on the street outside spills over and makes its way literally to the inside of the small place she calls home.

Then, just when you think the end has come, things get better and, actually, this story has only just begun. When the dust has settled from this latest violent episode, Michigan attorney Reed Jordan appears, to inform Nicki that some nameless benefactor has left her not only a small fortune, but also a lovely home on the shores of Trumpeter Lake.

Nicki and oh-so-cute Lexie pack their

bags and head north, set on a better life.

Then, wouldn't you know? They've barely got new curtains hung when everything starts to fall apart all over again.

The usual stock characters (cast here as Nicki's neighbors) cross and re-cross paths as this central drama begins to unfold. Many of them, by the way, have their own muzzy pasts.

First, there's Mid. She's the warm, nurturing, housekeeper — the mother somebody-or-other never had. Then there's the unpretentious, down-to-earth caretaker, Bob Stockton, who says things like "bein'," and "helpin'," and "durned," and "everbody." The feisty, elderly woman with a strong tendency toward matchmaking is labeled Gwyn Chamberlin; the smitten, unmarried, middle-aged schoolteacher, Devon Rheams. The Michigan attorney is one of those guys who falls for his "beautiful client" at first sight.

Nicki Prevot is that "beautiful client," of course, and while Skillman has given her a little more depth and freshness than most of her other characters, she has an odd tendency to slip out of character. Considering her recent experiences and her tendency to otherwise overprotect her little girl, she repeatedly



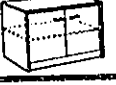








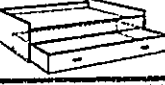


allows the child to spend extended time alone with people she herself barely knows, for instance. (Though the child, Lexie, starts off rather appealingly, she loses some of that appeal along the way. Apparently, her pouty, petulant behavior is supposed to be cute in its way. Instead, it's just very close to tiresome.)

Anyone who has ever spent a wakeful night in a lakeside cottage listening to mysterious nocturnal sounds, or who has been lulled to sleep by water lapping at a nearby shoreline will appreciate Skillman's richly-drawn lake community scene. Her subtle and complex depiction of a child molester's aberrant thoughts and feelings also go far to redeem this book, along with a little sleight-of-hand "trick" she pulls off rather craftily in the end. It's not really a trick, though. If you pay close attention, you'll see it was pretty much there all along.

Victoria Diaz of Livonia, a longtime member of Detroit Women Writers, has a lifelong interest in reading "everything from great novels to cereal boxes." You can leave a message for her on a touch-tone phone by dialing (313) 953-2047 and her mailbox number, 1854.BJ30

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