

'The Dead of Winter' is a clever murder mystery

By VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

"The Dead of Winter," by Paula Gosling (The Mysterious Press, \$21.95, 328 pp.).

"Do you suppose the earth's center of gravity has shifted... and Blackwater Bay is now... where New York used to be and as a result we're all being adversely influenced by Manhattan's stars?"

A concerned character voices this concept early on in this cleverly-entitled, usually clever murder mystery — and it's no wonder. Unpleasant events are occurring with increasing frequency in Michigan's fictional Blackwater Bay area, disturbing the usual calm enough to make inhabitants question if the planet itself

hasn't gone a bit wobbly.

Begin with the frosty morning when ice fisherman Frank Nixey discovers a fish-ravaged corpse bobbing up through a hole in the ice "like a dumpling in the stew." Bad enough in itself, but this corpse has a hole in its head, too.

This is the third violent death to occur in the resort area recently, and things are going to grow considerably worse (we soon learn) before they start to get better. By the time our tale ends, two other bodies will turn up, neither of which will make a pretty picture on discovery. A model high school student and Homecoming Queen will disappear under highly-mysterious circumstances. And, this being January and Michigan, wouldn't you just know that a monumental blizzard will play a major role in the chilling denouement?

At the center of the story is a home economics teacher, Jess Gibbons, determined to turn over a new leaf in her humdrum life as the story begins; the amiable hard-working sheriff, Matt Gabriel (add a Southern accent, and he could be Sheriff Andy Taylor); his sidekick, George Putnam ("energetic as a puppy and with about the same amount of... sense"); Jess' long-time

friend, Tom Brady; and Jason Phillips, a kind of odd-man-out who teaches chemistry at the local high school. (Jess shares her sprawling lakeshore home with Tom, Jason, and several other teachers, by the way).

A large supporting cast enlivens the action and adventure. And, though no player — major or minor — is especially three-dimensional, just about every single one of them is colorful and engaging in his or her own way.

There's an Ice Festival before our story is over, and an almost lethal Ski-doo race, and Jess falls through the ice, but not before she falls for the gorgeous new veterinarian in town, and not before we begin to suspect a possible mob connection in all the trouble, and not before the local high school, and a couple of house cats start acting peculiar, and some "designer dogs" show up. And then there's a whole

bunch of other stuff afoot. The requisite suspicious characters make an appearance, along with the handful of red herrings. Oh, and Jess finishes the artful quilt she's making for an international show coming up in Houston.

Along with her careful detail (right down to the minutiae on Jess' imaginative quilt design), Gosling's pacing is as crisp as a glittery January morning.

Some readers may feel at odds with her decision to do away with a character who might seem to deserve a better fate. This part of the novel complicates even further a sufficiently knotty plot, and with it, a kind of terrible tragedy seems suddenly to spill over into something that felt essentially much lighter, slightly blurring the grand design of this particular story.

Living, a Detroit native now living and writing in England, claims that she's ending her Blackwater Bay mysteries for the foreseeable future with this book (others include "The Busy

"in Blackwater Bay" and "A Few Dying Words"). Reportedly, she's now hard at work on a mystery that will be set in Detroit's General Motors Building.

Last words: The Cultural Arts Division of the City of Southfield will present acclaimed crime writer, Elmore Leonard, as their speaker in this season's finale of the Author Lecture Series, Sunday, May 6, at the Southfield Radisson Hotel. An 11:30 a.m. luncheon will precede Leonard's presentation. Tickets for lunch are \$15. Tickets for the lecture only are \$5. Call (810) 424-9039 for reservations.

Don't forget to stop in at the newly opened Barnes & Noble, 2800 S. Rochester Road, Rochester Hills. The 42,000-square-foot bookstore will offer customers more than 160,000 titles, and will feature as part of its new services a department in which readers may buy and sell used books.

Schoolcraft hosts 'Author' series

Schoolcraft College in Livonia will present its "Author-Author" series, led by successfully pub-

lished authors including Loren Estleman, 6:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesdays, May 14 to June 11. Programs are open to the public and interested writers and aspiring writers can register for one program or the entire series of five. The cost is \$80 for all five programs, or \$20 per individual session. Call (313) 462-4448 to register.

Program participants will have an opportunity to learn how each author works in his genre as well as acquire writing techniques and publishing tips. For beginning, as well as advanced writers, the series includes authors:

• Thomas Lynch discussing, "Poetry for the Seniors," May 14;

• Paul Stawski, "Writing for Children," May 21;
• Loren Estleman, "Writing the Mystery," May 28;
• Ruth Ryan Langan, "The Romance Novel," June 4;
• Victoria Diaz, Observer & Eccentric columnist, "Short Fiction," June 11.

Lynch's poems and essays have appeared in publications in the U.S., United Kingdom and Ireland including the "New Yorker," "Harper's," "The Paris Review," "The London Review of Books," "Poetry Ireland," and many others.

Author of a series of space stories for children, Paul Stawski will discuss the pleasures of writing for children.

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