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[The Atlanta Journal-Constitution: 1/23/04]

Southern mystery writers make a killing

By DON O'BRIANT
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The South doesn't necessarily have a higher homicide rate than other places; it just seems that way when you take a look at all the mystery novels set in the region.


From Carl Hiaasen's Florida to James Lee Burke's Louisiana

and all the states in between, murder and mayhem run rampant. No fewer than two dozen mystery novels have been set in metro Atlanta, including whodunits by Kathy Hogan Trocheck, Walter Sorrells, Fred Willard, Phillip DePoy and Patricia Houck Sprinkle.

Where a novel is set is just as important as the characters, says Sprinkle, author of "Somebody's Dead in Snellville" and "Death of a Dunwoody Matron."

"When I was doing the Atlanta series, getting the flavor of

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each neighborhood was really important," says Sprinkle, who joins Sorrells, DePoy and six other authors Saturday in Smyrna to discuss why the South is such fertile ground for crime fiction.

"I spent a lot of time in the neighborhoods, ate in the restaurants, talked to people who lived there, and tried to find the driving force," Sprinkle says. "In some Dunwoody neighborhoods, for example, I found that owning the right car and living in the right size house were necessary for acceptance."

Sorrells, an Edgar Award winner who has written a series of Atlanta novels under the pen name Ruth Birmingham, says it's difficult to capture the essence of the entire city. One of his novels, "Blue Plate Special," takes place in a Cabbagetown diner, but generally Sorrells says he tries to encompass all aspects of the city and its residents, from blue-collar types to Buckhead matrons.

"What is interesting about the town is that there's such a contrast between the Old South and the new city with no identity," he says. "It's really a huge suburb with a modest-sized city in the middle."

Edgar Award-winning playwright and novelist Phillip DePoy admits he had difficulty capturing the city in his series of Flap Tucker novels.

"I grew up in Atlanta and I still think about what Atlanta was like in the 1950s and mid-'60s," DePoy says. "Certain parts of Ponce [de Leon Avenue] haven't changed since

MURDER GOES SOUTH

Authors Mignon Ballard, Evelyn Coleman, Phillip DePoy, David Fulmer, Gwen Hunter, Walter Sorrells, Patricia Houck Sprinkle, Kathryn R. Wall and Fred Willard will talk about Southern mystery novels 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday at the Smyrna Community Center, 200 Village Green Circle, Smyrna, 770-

1955, but in other parts of town you have all these ghosts of the past that nobody else sees. You try to describe that now and that Atlanta doesn't exist except in my mind."

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DePoy has solved the problem by starting a new series set in the Georgia mountains, with a folklorist as the detective. In "The Devil's Hearth" and "The Witch's Grave," Fever Devilin returns to his home in the mountains after a career in academia in Atlanta.

"I love writing this series because I started doing research in the mountains in 1968," DePoy says. "I wanted to be a folklore major at Georgia State [University], but they had no such major then. Some of the mountain people I interviewed then are still alive."

DePoy weaves in folk tales with Devilin's efforts to solve the murders, but the most important element in the novels is the pervasive sense of place.

"The way the people behave is very particular to their mountain and their home," he says. "The food and the music and the way people talk are all part of the setting."

Sprinkle, too, has ventured far beyond the perimeter for her new series set in Middle Georgia.

"Writing about this area between Augusta and Macon is harder because I have to go there and stay in motels, take historic house tours, and do other research," she says. "I subscribe to their newspapers and I read all about local issues. It's a fascinating area. It's rural and families have lived there for several generations. The murders tend to be family murders."

In Sprinkle's novel "Who Let That Killer in the House?" the murder involves a black family and a white family whose lives have been intertwined for generations. In "Who Killed the Queen of Clubs?" one of the club women in town is murdered.

"Once again, setting is so important," she says. "And when you're writing about the South, you have a tension between what the South is really like and the stereotypes New Yorkers have about what the South is like. 'Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil' is more like what New Yorkers think Savannah is like."

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