

BOOKS



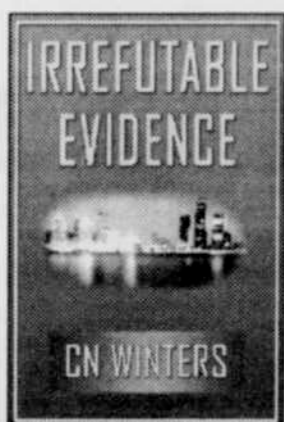
## Springtime for Portland

When you're looking for delicious bad, look no further than lesbian mystery

BY KAREN KUDEJ

February in Portland=several more months of rain. Now is a good time to plan your reading list to get you through the dewy spring days ahead. If you're looking for a guilty pleasure to round out your list—a book that is light, fun and reasonably suspenseful—a cheesy lesbian detective novel is the way to go. Here are four recent ones—featuring lovely detectives and lots of cheese.

**IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE**  
by C.N. Winters; Renaissance Alliance, 2002; \$15.95 softcover



Sara Langforth is a real estate agent who witnesses a murder after taking a homeless man to lunch in a seedy section of Detroit. After barely escaping herself, she finds a police station.

The dashing Lt. Denise Van Cook takes the case and spends most of the novel giving Sara round-the-clock protection from the murderous thugs who are out to get her before the case goes to trial. But no matter where they try to hide—from Sara's trust fund house in the Bahamas to five-star hotels in Montreal, and even to Niagara Falls—the bad guys find them.

Who is giving them away? Who cares. The bigger question is, When are Sara and Denise going to get it on? To be honest, this is more of a cheesy romance than a cheesy detective story. Sparks fly from the get-go, and Denise must struggle to remain professional despite the "sexual fire that scorched through her veins."

When it comes to cheese, this novel is Limburger. The quality of the writing is irrefutably poor, but the book is rather fun, especially if you read it aloud and whisper, sigh, chuckle and grin your way through it with the characters—and maybe your own protector.

**STREET RULES**  
by Baxter Clare; Bella Books, 2003; \$12.95 softcover



When several members of the Estrella clan are murdered in an apparent gang-related incident, Lt. L.A. Franco, aka Frank, of the Los

Angeles Police Department and her team of detectives begin to follow the easy lead.

The plot thickens when Placa Estrella, an up-and-coming gangbanger, gets "smoked" the day before she is supposed to meet with Frank to tell her something important. With the help of chief county coroner Gail Lawless, Frank begins to suspect that one of her fellow "suits" may be involved.

In the world of cheese, *Street Rules* ranks a mild Swiss. The plot has some twists, but there are a few holes—several of them created by references to the prior Detective Franco novel, *Bleeding Out*. The slang is overdone, the relationship between Frank and Gail lacks enthusiasm, and the ending is anti-climatic despite the potential for serious drama.

But you have to give credit to a lesbian cop who can wield Chicano street talk and thinks Don Giovanni "sounds dope."

**A DAY TOO LONG: A HELEN BLACK MYSTERY**  
by Pat Welch; Bella Books, 2003; \$12.95 softcover



Helen Black is a former detective on parole in small-town Mississippi. After doing time for negligent manslaughter, she is trying to get back on her feet with a warehouse job and a room at Mrs. Mapple's boarding house. But when her 9-year old neighbor, Sissy, disappears, Helen's sleuthing instincts kick in.

She faces many obstacles, including a gruff detective who knows too much about her; an ex-cellmate who shows up to cause trouble; and Mrs. Mapple's teen-age son, who is in over his head. Fortunately, Helen can find comfort at Rosie's Café, a conveniently located lesbian hangout. Sissy's hot-tie aunt, Valerie, doesn't disappoint either.

The writing is rough around the edges, but with an action-packed plot and an unexpected killer, I'd categorize *A Day Too Long* as a competent cheddar.

**DAMN STRAIGHT: A LILLIAN BYRD CRIME STORY**  
by Elizabeth Sims; Alyson Books, 2003; \$13.95 softcover

Lillian Byrd appears to be your average, down-to-earth Midwestern lesbian with a pet rabbit named Todd. She is hunkered down for the winter in her cold Michigan apartment, recovering from her previous adventure in *Holy Hell*.

When her best friend, Trudy, calls in distress from Los Angeles, Lillian jumps at the chance to offer her assistance in a warm climate. Lucky for us all, her visit happens to coincide with the Dinah Shore golf tournament.

Genie Maychild, "dominatrix of the LPGA tour," takes a liking to Lillian, and soon our unlikely heroine is pulling all kinds of antics to find out who is harassing Genie.

While the plot may be a little farfetched, the writing is strong and filled with humor. One can't help but like Lillian—she is by far the best detective of the bunch. *Damn Straight* rates a flavorful dill havarti. **J**



## Political action

The West Wing meets gay fiction in *Man About Town*

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

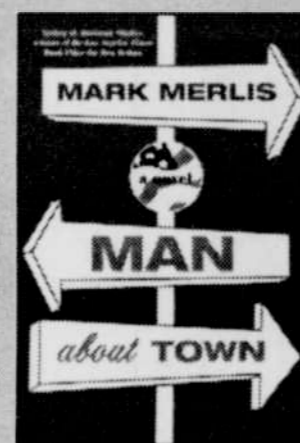
If you've ever wondered what would happen if the writers of *The West Wing* were to concoct a gay story line, Mark Merlis' *Man About Town* (Fourth Estate, 2003, \$24 hardcover) may partially address that curiosity.

Joel, a middle-aged congressional adviser, has been left by Sam, his partner of 15 years. Sam is being recruited to work on a bill that subtly yet viciously discriminates against AIDS patients, and he's haunted by memories of his first erotic experience: a pubescent glimpse of a male swimming-trunks model in the back of an *Esquire*-like magazine.

Joel's curiosity about the ad leads him to instigate a crazy search for the nameless swimwear model of yore while neurotically attempting to re-enter the dating scene and feeling the heat at work. Joel is, for most of the book, floundering—not very bravely, but often very comically—through an unforeseen midlife crisis.

Clearly, Merlis' own background as a policy analyst informs the book's realistic glimpse into the inner workings of our capital city's corridors of power and of Joel's conflict over doing a job requiring political impartiality, even when it means participating in something morally troubling.

The other elements are less scrutable. Joel



and his friends are a pernicious element: superficial, affluent, aging, white gay men possessed of endless self-absorption, tiresome cattiness and a not-insignificant touch of racism. Joel seems to suffer from terminal boomeritis. Sexual orientation aside, all the broadest generalizations one could make regarding that generation—smugness, self-aggrandizement coupled with self-pity, an obsessive and graceless pursuit of youth, a fixation on status and income, impotent liberal guilt—are bountifully present.

Countermanding our protagonist's personality is Merlis' seeming awareness of its repugnant aspects, and *Man About Town* achieves its most natural feel when Joel is treated as a loutish figure of satire. This could be an overly flattering interpretation of not entirely clear intentions, but, like Sinclair Lewis and John Updike before him, Merlis is capable of showing us the rather pathetic yet somehow moving humanity underlying the (perhaps culturally imposed) layers of foible and folly.

If it's slightly bothersome that Merlis is indulgent of Joel's worst qualities, he does strike a tone ambivalent enough to set *Man About Town* apart from the ghetto of simplistic gay fiction. It is, if not a monumental step forward, at least a solid veer in the right direction. **J**

### Military Meat



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