

Astoria is featured in promising new series

It's officially beach read season and I have a good murder mystery for those of you who embrace the whole sandy towel/beach umbrella/cold drink scenario.

Nichelle Seely, an Astoria-based architect and member of the city's Design Review Commission, has turned her hand to writing fiction.

"A Memory of Murder" featuring investigator Audrey Lake and a series set in Astoria, is her fine debut.

Audrey is a prematurely retired undercover detective with the Denver Police Department. In her last deep undercover assignment, when she posed as drug addict Zoe Crenshaw to infiltrate a major drug ring, her alter ego began inhabiting her psyche.

On top of that, Audrey experiences occasional hallucinatory episodes.

Whether any of this was triggered by the drugs she had to ingest to maintain her undercover identity is up for question, but the culminating bust on that assignment was a violent melee that left her physically injured and emotionally traumatized. Her hospital stay and a doctor's prescription of anxiety meds are no cure for the nightmares that continue to haunt her.

This week's book

'A Memory of Murder' by
Nichelle Seely

Paperback \$12.99; Kindle \$4.99

When Audrey inherits an old house in Astoria, she beats a hasty retreat out of Denver, hoping that Oregon will give her a chance to vanquish the past. Flushing her pills down the toilet of the fixer-upper she finds waiting for her is a bold first step in declaring her intentions — but Zoe's voice in Audrey's head continues to pop up at inopportune times.

Next, Audrey has a vivid hallucination that features a woman who later is found drowned in the river. Audrey worries that she may still be suffering from psychosis.

But when local police chalk the death up as accidental, she feels something is profoundly wrong. Her hallucination suggested foul play was involved. She undertakes her own investigation of the circumstances.

Seely does a nice job of describing both the physical landscape and the ambiance of Astoria.

Likewise, she ably combines the notions that an investigator's work depends on fact-finding, but it also

involves intuitive work. Of course, Audrey's psychological aberrations seem to take this to the extreme — or do they?

The pacing of this story slows towards the book's end when, due to the extrasensory element, the whodunit reveal takes place rather awkwardly before the final confrontation.

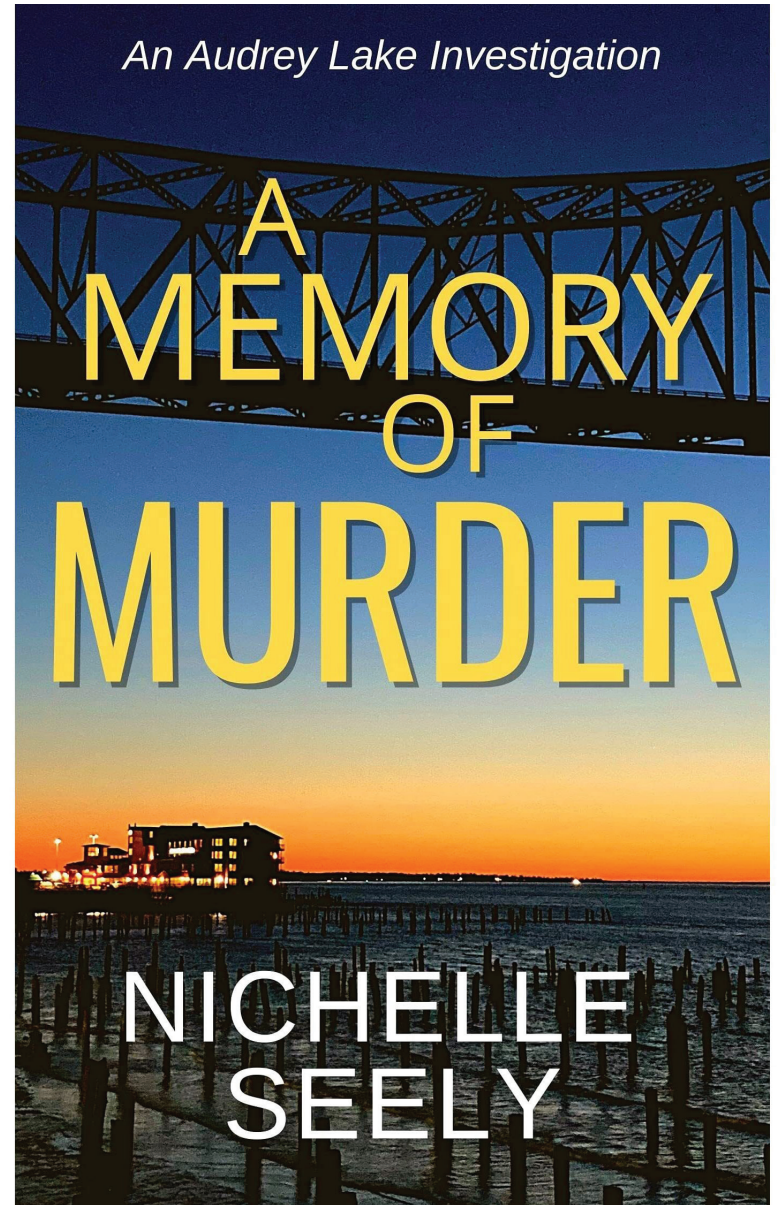
But the author has been so thoughtful in creating a cast of dimensional characters that you're likely to forgive that. Audrey is well fleshed-out; sympathetic but complicated; and she's contending with personal problems that may never be neatly tied up with a bow.

Her developing reliance on her next-door neighbor and her rocky start with the skeptics at the local cop shop have the potential to grow in interesting ways in succeeding books in this series.

And that occasional voice in her head — Zoe's unvarnished commentary — is an intriguing wild card that's bound to stick around for a while.

"A Memory of Murder" is a harbinger of more good titles to come.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.



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