

The mystery of why we love reading mysteries

By Laurie Hertzal

Star Tribune

At one time, there was nary a mystery to be found on my shelves.

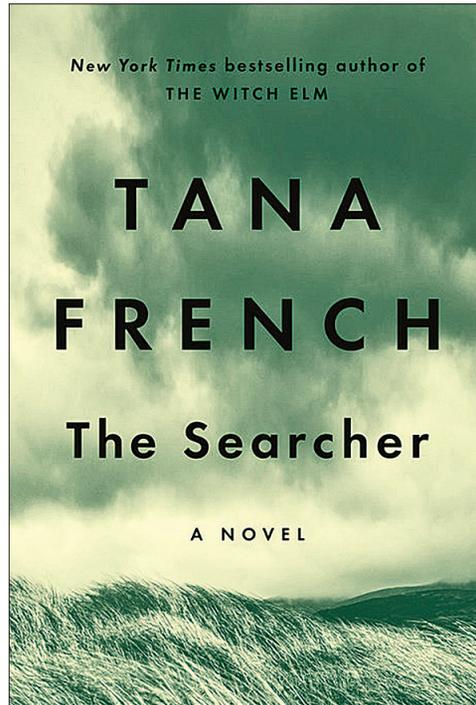
Last year, right around this time, I had coffee with a writer in a Minneapolis park. She's someone I've interviewed several times before, and as we walked back to our cars she asked me the question she always asks: "What are you reading these days?"

I didn't have a great answer. At the time, I wasn't reading anything new or daring. I wasn't even reading anything for work. We were halfway through the second year of COVID-19, and to my surprise, I was reading mysteries — one after another.

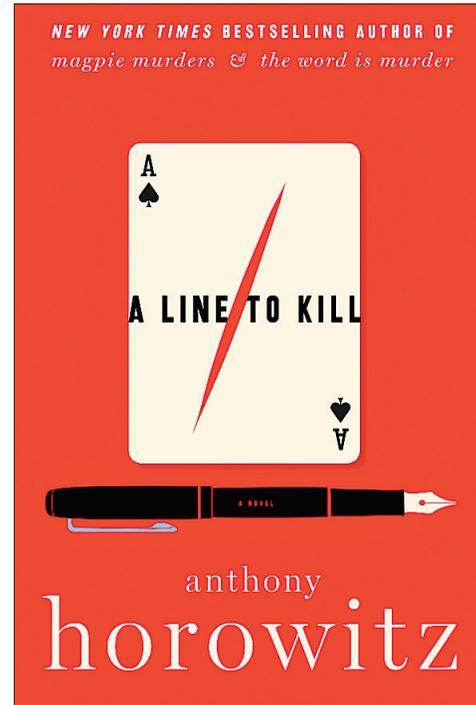
I've never really been a mystery reader. It's not a snobbish thing, though it might sound like that; I know plenty of brilliant people who love mysteries, including most of the critics who write for these pages. (They fight over who gets to review the new Kate Atkinson.)

Minnesota is bursting with wonderful mystery writers (and I don't dare start naming them or I will run out of room) and I've read a lot of their books, which I always enjoy, and I've interviewed many of the authors, who are always unexpected and entertaining and eloquent.

But mysteries as a genre never attracted me: I don't like gore, I don't like violence, I don't like to be scared. And I didn't like that it seemed like beautiful young



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women were often the victims.

I had not yet understood that there are all kinds of mysteries — classic mysteries, police procedurals, cozies, spy thrillers, legal thrillers, psychological thrillers and detective novels.

And then, a few months into the COVID-19 lockdown, I picked up a mystery for no particular reason and I started

reading. And then I read another, and another. I found that I liked being engrossed. I liked being flummoxed. I liked trying to puzzle things out, looking for clues, trying to find the answer, being tricked by red herrings.

I realized that there are just as many kinds of mysteries as there are any other novels, and that all I had to do was figure

out which kinds I liked (as it turned out, police procedurals and detective novels) and which ones I didn't (anything that will give me nightmares).

I came to love Anthony Horowitz and Richard Osman because they are funny as well as clever, and because the murders in their books are generally not gory. I love Tana French because her books are set in Ireland and because the mysteries are so complicated that I can't figure them out.

A colleague gave me "River of Darkness" by Rennie Airth and I found it so frightening I had to put it down halfway through; it was months before I dared pick it up again. But I had to finish it; there is no doubting Airth's skill.

Still, what I didn't understand was why I had suddenly started devouring mysteries at this time in my life.

The writer I had coffee with had a pretty good idea. The world is so difficult now, she said. Everything is complicated. You like mysteries because they have answers. They are solvable.

She might be right. It's soothing to read something that provides answers when we are in the middle of a time when the problems are huge and answers are scarce. But maybe there are other reasons, as well.

Do you love mysteries? Why? Have you come to appreciate a genre later in life, something that surprised you? Write to me at books@startribune.com.

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