

Review: 'A Slow Fire Burning,' by Paula Hawkins

A third compulsively readable whodunit from the author of "The Girl on the Train"

By **Malcom Forbes**

Star Tribune

Early one Sunday morning on a quiet stretch of London's Regent's Canal, Miriam makes a grisly discovery. In the houseboat next to hers lies the bloodied body of a young man. He has been stabbed repeatedly and, as a finishing touch, has "a wide smile carved into his throat."

The police arrive, the victim is identified as Daniel Sutherland, and Miriam's shock is replaced by a sense of calm, even optimism — for this murder has given her "an opportunity to avenge the wrong that had been done to her."

Paula Hawkins' third novel gets off to an intriguing start. Miriam turns out to be one of several female protagonists with a link to the deceased. This being a Hawkins novel, those char-

acters are all prime suspects with both the means and the motive for murder. They have dark secrets, disturbing thoughts, unhealed wounds and desperate urges to settle old scores. But which one was crazed enough to kill, and why?

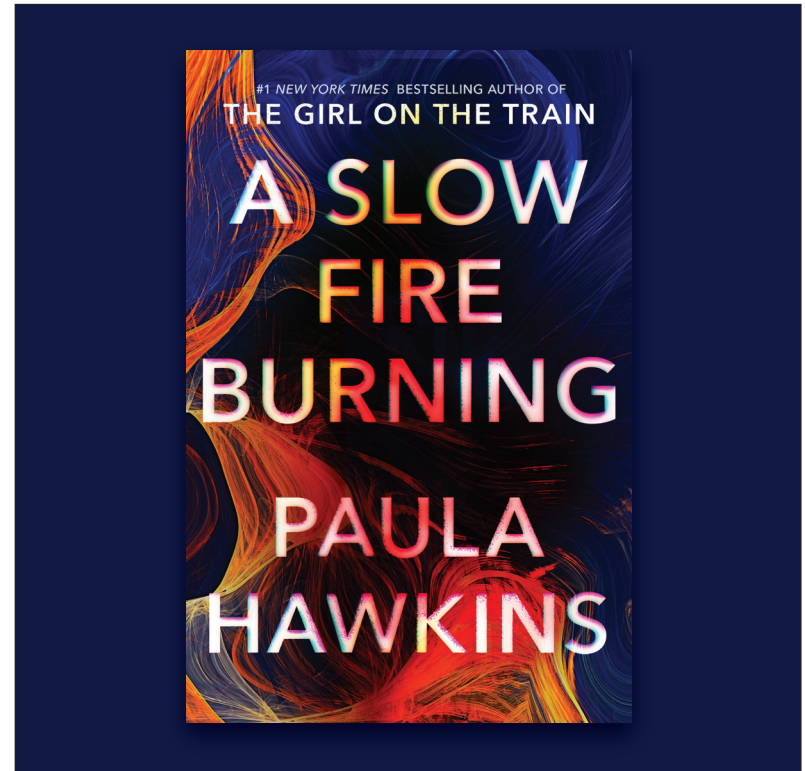
Miriam is a busybody who records "comings and goings" on the canal in a little black book. She is also a magpie who takes people's small possessions as "keepsakes" — including a key, "still sticky with blood," from the crime scene. Carla, Daniel's aunt, is still mourning her sister, Angela, who died in a supposed accident eight weeks previously. But it is nothing like the grief that engulfed her after her 3-year-old son fell to his death while in Angela's care.

And there is Laura — or, as she is known locally, "Mad Laura" — who had been on a date with

Daniel that ended with a blazing argument. Detectives find her fingerprints in his boat and a bloodstained T-shirt in her home. It isn't the first time this damaged individual has been in trouble with the police; the question is whether she has progressed from minor offenses to full-scale murder.

As the mystery deepens, two other characters emerge as possible culprits: Carla's ex-husband, Theo, and Laura's only friend, Irene. With the cast complete, Hawkins' elaborate guessing game becomes even more fiendish. Episodes from back stories show how characters have processed pain and trauma into hatred and bitterness. Some have suffered betrayals of trust, others have been used and abused.

We examine each profile, sift the scattered details — a bad mother, a missing dog, a series



Riverhead

"A Slow Fire Burning," by Paula Hawkins

of graphic sketches — and follow the twists and turns to a denouement spring-loaded with one or two final surprises.

At one point, author Theo jokes about taking inspiration from Daniel's murder and writing a book called "The Boy on the Boat." This is, of course, a sly nod toward Hawkins' inter-

national bestseller "The Girl on the Train."

"A Slow Fire Burning" lacks the suspense of that debut but it still manages to be a gripping page-turner. The source of its narrative force is its compellingly unpredictable characters. As Miriam puts it, "We all have our monstrous moments."

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