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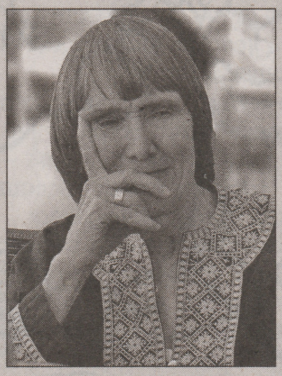
Mystery set on Lake Champlain

"The Inland Sea: A Mystery"

Sam Clark
Rootstock Publishing, 2020



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

Generally, a mystery novel is a whodunit: a victim is found, a clever detective investigates, and gradually the evidence leads the detective to the murderer. In "The Inland Sea," Sam Clark turns the whodunit plot on its head. The novel opens by describing the grudges that form the murder's 1972 backstory, moves forward 36 years to the murder, and finally, it brings in the detective, Fred Davis, to solve a crime the reader has already seen being committed. It's a truly enterprising variation on the genre, and it should appeal to many mystery fans.

Primary among the reasons for its appeal is the personality of Vermont State Police Sergeant Fred Davis. At 53, he's a detective three years from retirement, a non-farming member of the Davis Family Farm on South Hero Island, a longtime lover and builder of wooden boats, and an aficionado of Lake Champlain, its islands, and its inhabitants. His intelligence and his ability to delegate work equitably make him popular with his team, and his gregarious nature makes it easy for him to befriend both the lake's summer residents and its full-time denizens, thus collecting chance observations that gradually lead him to the murderer. One of the most puzzling things Davis discovers as he opens the case is that the victim, Paul Brearley, has been officially declared dead (presumed drowned) for 18 years.

The reader, as always in this book, has learned a fair amount about Brearley before Davis enters the scene. Brearley's family has long been one of four that co-own Osprey Island, a tiny island in the Inland Sea (the part of Lake Champlain that is east of North and South Hero islands and west of the Vermont shore). Well off, athletic, and successful, Brearley unaccountably abandoned the ministry, his wife, and his son in 1990, and simply disappeared. His new life as Paul Baer, so different from his former one, fascinates Davis; and the apparent lack of motive for his disappearance, while it has little direct bearing on the case, is of deep interest to 81-year-old Pliny, one of Osprey Island's other co-owners and a retired minister with whom Brearley, in his "first" life, was close. The friendship that develops between Davis and Pliny subtly opens a window on the summer communities that developed around Lake Champlain in the three decades following World War II.

A mystery that portrays both victim and killer before the plot gets well under way is unlikely to be a thriller, and—with the exception of an excellent fast-paced chase scene toward the end—"The Inland Sea" moves relatively slowly. More than compensating for this leisurely pace, however, is its intimate knowledge of Lake Champlain and its brief but detailed sketches of the varying cultures of the people who live around its shores. Clark clearly knows every bay and every tiny island that the lake affords. All the details that inform the mystery's setting—the time it takes to get from one place to another, the changes in the weather, the difficulties of navigating tricky spots, the policing of the Canadian-Vermont border, the life of South Hero farmers—ring absolutely true. Readers familiar with Lake Champlain will read "The Inland Sea" with delight, and those who have little knowledge of the lake may find themselves planning to visit it.