

Work is piling up. I've too many irons in too many fires. There isn't enough snow for skiing and too much snow for gardening. My kids are both sick with colds. What I need is respite from the winter blues. As miraculously as sighting the first robin of spring, a colleague lends me the most recent novel by her favourite crime writer. Respite with a capital R!

Grave Secrets by Kathy Reichs is breathless adventure. Dr. Kathy Reichs, PhD is a forensic anthropologist for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, in North Carolina and for the Province of Quebec. She is one of only fifty forensic anthropologists certified by the American Institute of Forensic Anthropology. She is a professor at the University of North Carolina. When not in North Carolina she lives in Montreal. She is well qualified to educate regarding DNA evidence, embryonic stem cells, and computerized reconstruction of a murder victim's head. She also entertains with descriptions of Montreal's gridlock, the street scene and the Canadiens.

As I read, I thought that in some ways crime stories are very formulaic. The timing is quick. Dialogues are staccato. The story rapidly unfolds. My interest is never lost and my escape is complete. My favourite crime novels obliged me to read cover to cover without a break. Some of the rules for crime mysteries have evolved. No longer is the detective a hard drinking, cliches spitting, low on academic credentials, high on instinct, hard-boiled, Lethario, gumshoe.

In Grave Secrets the heroine, Temperance, "call me Tempe," Brennan is on the wagon. She is a divorced, career woman, a parent, and a holder of a PhD in forensic anthropology. She is Canadian so she thinks frosty one liners, but delivers civil responses. She has a social conscious.

In fact, the setting for the novel is mostly in Guatemala where she has volunteered to exhumate bodies of Mayan peasants slaughtered during the 1980s regime of a sleazy dictator. Reichs seamlessly blends historic fact into her novel.

While the Mickey Spillanes of yesterday's crime novels routinely picked-up and shortly thereafter dumped their dames, in Grave Secrets, Tempe has two male detectives vying for her attention. That's a subplot added for comic relief. Tempe combines her knowledge in forensic studies, her experience identifying bodies discarded in septic tanks and her occasionally fallible instinct to solve a complex mystery. Remember, this is stuff the author has actually done!

As the story unfolds, several social issues are examined. We are introduced to the political realities of Guatemala. When regimes are changed, not all of those who committed atrocities are brought to justice. Many butchers are able to conceal their trails, and reemerge as a part of the reform package. There is grave risk to those who stumble or deliberately explore the butchers' histories.

Reichs also reminds us that every society has lecherous parasites preying on young women. These vermin occur in all social strata from diplomats to paid labourers.

Reichs explores double standards. One set for men and another for women or the accommodating guidelines for the prosperous and much harsher, less flexible rules for the poor.

And finally Reichs provides a tip for people in love. If you want to secure the attention of that person who has put a flutter in your chest, be one of those rare people able to make the object of your attention feel, rightly or wrongly, that their thoughts are the only thoughts in the galaxy that interest you.