

POST REVIEW

Innovative Twist to Classic Mystery Writing

by Joel Moreno

Consider a lesbian police officer investigating the murder of a homeless man in Golden Gate Park, with her key suspect a wandering old monk who only speaks using quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible. It sounds like quite a collage of ideas, yet the third mystery novel by Watsonville author Laurie King shows intelligence and intricacy, and succeeds as an engaging bit of page-turning mystery penmanship.

"To Play the Fool" begins with a police investigation into the murder of a homeless man in Golden Gate Park. At the outset of the investigation, Inspector Kate Martinelli meets up with Brother Erasmus, a charismatic monk figure who has the perplexing habit of speaking only in quotations. Circumstantial evidence appears to implicate Erasmus as the murderer, but the case is far from clear and Martinelli has her doubts that the monk could have actually killed the man. She does believe that Erasmus at least has information pertaining to the murder, but the situation is not made any easier when Erasmus refuses to cooperate.

Erasmus is a lingering member of a defunct Fool's movement, a

kind of religious cult which advocates a total lack of personal will or positive action.

Erasmus is a modern day representation of the medieval Trickster, often associated with the court jester in the Middle Ages. King describes the Trickster as a combination of "subtle wisdom and profound stupidity, a person both divine and animalistic." Later she writes that the ministry of such an archetypal Fool is to "undermine

beliefs, to seed doubts, to shock people into seeing the truth."

Erasmus has a profound affect on all the people he touches in the novel. He preaches, he listens, he offers compassion, he does not judge. To his congregation of homeless persons, "he is like a small fire that [they] warm [their] hands over."

And what does the Fool do when challenged by a confrontational situation like a prison sentence for

first degree murder? Absolutely nothing, of course, as taking direct positive action would go against the whole nature of his foolishness.

As King explains through one of the book's characters, a medieval court fool would occasionally insult the king, the early Christians embraced martyrdom. "Fools have never been content unless they were putting themselves at risk... It's all a means of courting madness." Although, madness may assemble the most confusing of puzzles.

Stymied in her attempt to gain any concrete leads in the case, Martinelli remains reluctant to believe the weight of circumstantial evidence fingering Erasmus as the killer. She begins investigating the Fool's movement as it existed in the late-1960s England and takes a personal interest in uncovering Erasmus's true identity and tragic past. She aligns herself with a group of academics to help her decipher the sometimes cryptic messages in Erasmus's quotations.

Erasmus seems more inclined to resign himself to prison than to assist in the investigation until a startling event causes the reluctant homeless preacher to shed his pretenses.

Martinelli doesn't manage to express much sympathy for Erasmus or for anyone, for that matter. On several occasions she's

ready to arrest the monk, despite her own doubts about his guilt, but she overcomes these shortcomings in some small way when the peculiarities of the case force her to draw upon resources she wasn't previously aware of having.

In many ways, "To Play A Fool" expands the Martinelli character, letting the woman detective grow and emerge as a modern-day, middle-class heroine attempting to stay sane in a very crazy world.

King received the prestigious Edgar Award for her 1993 novel, "A Grave Talent," which introduced Inspector Martinelli in the author's first published murder mystery. She has also authored "The Beekeeper's Apprentice," another mystery novel with Sherlock Holmes and her own character, Mary Russell.

King said she anticipates writing future mysteries with Martinelli as the central protagonist.

King has a series of speaking engagements taking her from "Aptos to Anchorage," as she said. She will discuss and sign copies of "To Play the Fool" at the Bookworks in Aptos on Wednesday, March 1, from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. She will also speak at the Book Cafe in Capitola on March 22.

All her books are available through St. Martin's Press in New York. □



Laurie R. King