

washingtonpost.com

## Mysteries

A family in Hamburg is being picked off one by one, and Paris is a murderous feast.

Reviewed by Kevin Allman

Sunday, April 6, 2008; BW11

A new batch of mysteries features detectives working beats in some offbeat locales, from suburban [North Carolina](#) and the [California](#) high desert to the back streets of [Paris](#) and the halls of a [Hamburg](#) university.

### **THE KILLER'S WIFE** *By Bill Floyd | St. Martin's Minotaur. 294 pp. \$23.95*

Survivors of psychopathic violence -- the families of murder victims and the families of the murderers -- are the focus of Bill Floyd's first novel, *The Killer's Wife*. Leigh Wren is shopping for groceries when a stranger approaches and tells her he knows her true identity: Nina Mosley, the wife of notorious serial killer Randy Mosley, a former suburban father now on California's death row, convicted of torturing more than a dozen people.

The man in the supermarket is the father of one of Randy's victims, and in that moment the new life Nina/Leigh has constructed for herself and her young son collapses, as everyone in the McMansion community she had chosen for its very anonymity learns her secret: "Outside my bedroom window was an endless array of architecture repeated, kit houses for kit people, whose judgments after seeing my interview on TV would be as rote as their kitchen color schemes."

As Nina/Leigh recalls her marriage in flashback, she wonders: What complicity should she feel? What signs did she ignore? Could she have prevented more deaths? Soon another young girl has been murdered in Randy's distinctive style: Is it a copycat, a coincidence, or is something more sinister going on? And what's the story with the friendly married private investigators who have shown up from nowhere to help her navigate the latest media storm?

There's a final bloody showdown, of course, but Floyd wisely plays to his story's creepy strengths, emphasizing psychological suspense and downplaying gore in favor of a relentlessly unsettling tone that's far more effective than shock.

### **KILLER HEAT** *By Linda Fairstein | Doubleday. 370 pp. \$26*

[New York](#) assistant district attorney Alexandra Cooper is back in Linda Fairstein's *Killer Heat*, which finds Alex teamed up once again with [NYPD](#) cop Mike Chapman, this time investigating a serial killer with a fondness for young women in uniform.

This is Fairstein's 10th outing with Alex, who's never been the most realistic character in legal fiction, but in *Killer Heat* she's more [Nancy Drew](#) than [Nancy Grace](#). After the opening chapters, there's no courtroom action at all, and why a D.A. is working crime scenes as if she were a police officer is the book's biggest mystery.

Fairstein's NYPD is a cop shop where Mike talks in cable-TV dialogue like "Don't know if she's here or in the deep blue yonder or in a better place. But we've got a maniac on the loose -- or two." A prominent man's suicide early in the story is never mentioned again, nor is the disappearance of a black book belonging to a dominatrix with some high-profile clients; Alex and Mike, who inevitably stumble over the right clues just as they need them, couldn't care less.

Throughout, Fairstein drops subplots and characters, spackling together a flabby suspense tale with ginned-up jolts rather than authentic tension. One chapter ends with Alex interviewing a terrified informant when -- suddenly! -- a projectile shatters the window. Unfortunately, the next chapter begins "Nelly Kallin wasn't the least bit upset by the baseball that flew into the room like a missile," and some chastened neighbor kids show up to apologize. If this were a Nancy Drew book, it would be "The Mystery of the D.A. Who Was D.O.A."

**BLIND FALL** *By Christopher Rice | Scribner. 288 pp. \$26*

In *Blind Fall*, Christopher Rice's third novel, [U.S. Marine](#) John Houck, newly returned from [Iraq](#), has two personal, unrelated missions: find Mike [Bowers](#), the captain who saved his life at great personal expense, and track down Daniel Oster, the man who Houck believes molested his younger brother. What he intends to do when he finds them, Houck isn't sure, but he's not a fellow who believes in unfinished business.

When Houck arrives at Bowers's secluded cabin in the middle of the night, however, he finds his friend tied to a bed, apparently stabbed to death, and another man, Alex Martin, running from the house. Neither situation, it turns out, is as it appears, and when the police arrive, Bowers's "corpse" has vanished. Houck enters into an uneasy partnership with Martin, as both men fall under suspicion in Bowers's disappearance.

Rice has an offbeat approach to plot, continually zagging where other writers might zig, and his choice of locales (the mean trailer parks in the California high desert, a gay bar existing uneasily on the outskirts of Marine-heavy [Camp Pendleton](#)) is fresh. Unfortunately, his left-handed approach to storytelling means that some major developments are tossed off, minor ones stretch on for pages, and none of the characters fully comes to life in the novel's more gimmicky second half. Too bad, because at their best Houck and Martin feel like a couple from a postmodern, on-the-run Hitchcock film, fleeing circumstances they don't understand and people they don't know.

**A PARAGON OF VIRTUE** *By Christian von Ditfurth Translated from the German by Helen Atkins | Toby. 329 pp. \$24.95*

The title character in *A Paragon of Virtue*, German suspense novelist Christian von Ditfurth's first English translation, is a Hamburg philanthropist and businessman named Maximilian Holler, whose family is being murdered, individually, by an unknown person or group. No notes are left, no demands made, and Holler has no known enemies, just an implacable adversary who seems determined to eliminate the Hollers, one by one.

At the behest of a college friend who's now on the Hamburg police force, history professor Josef Stachelmann is called to consult on the case. Floundering in academia, ambivalent about his looming doctorate, Stachelmann finds himself embroiled in the Holler family tragedy, which seems to have

long-buried threads to the country's Nazi past, and the professor begins to learn just how deeply -- and disparately -- the sins of the nation's fathers are being visited on their sons.

Ditfurth, who is a historian, unwinds his story slowly and methodically, hinting at glimmers of the whole puzzle in every chapter, until all is revealed in the novel's final pages. Other Stachelmann translations are on their way to [North America](#) and [England](#); fans of Ruth Rendell should welcome Ditfurth's quiet, authoritative voice.

### **MURDER IN THE RUE DE PARADIS** *By Cara Black | SOHO. 305 pp. \$24*

Paris at its most chic -- and gritty -- is the setting for *Murder in the Rue de Paradis*, Cara Black's latest little black dress of a mystery starring the half-French, half-American and thoroughly soignée Aimée Leduc, granddaughter of a Parisian private eye who's gone into the family business.

In one evening, Leduc accepts both a retainer contract from a prestigious video-production company and a proposal from her [Agence France-Presse](#) photojournalist boyfriend, Yves. The next morning, a flic appears at her office to take her in for questioning: Yves has been found dead in one of the city arrondissements, apparently murdered by a junkie male prostitute -- and Aimée's was the last number dialed on his mobile.

Today's Paris, both international and quintessentially French, an intriguing blend of centuries of decay and mod futurism, is a fine backdrop for a modern noir, and Leduc finds herself navigating a tightly spun web worthy of a classic spy thriller, complete with a Métro bombing and shadowy assignments with Kurds and Sunnis. Leduc's City of Light is a stylish, dangerous place throbbing by night to an ominous techno world beat, and Aimée Leduc is a marvelous invention, a third-generation Sam Spade in couture.

*Kevin Allman is a novelist and reviewer living in New Orleans.*

#### **Post a Comment**

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company