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BEN GELMAN: SOUTHERN ILLINOIS USED AS BACKDROP FOR MYSTERY NOVEL

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Fans of detective fiction will no doubt remember the famous Father Brown stories of G.K. Chesterton in which an unobtrusive little Catholic cleric solved mystery after mystery in his own quiet, persistent way.

Now Southern Illinois readers have a chance to follow the detective career of their own fictional Catholic priest, Father John Henry Westermann, in the first published novel, "Heat," by Jack Frerker (Pax Publications, Olympia, Wash., \$13, 217 pages, paperback).

Frerker, 66, himself a retired Catholic priest, grew up in Carlyle and was an assistant pastor at St. Francis Xavier in Carbondale before serving for 17 years as pastor at the Newman Center in Carbondale. For various periods of time he also served other parishes in Southern Illinois.

He moved to the Northwest after his retirement, and now devotes his time to writing.

As a native of Southern Illinois, he is well qualified to describe the people, the customs and the places of the area.

"Heat" takes place mainly in the fictional community of "Algoma," where Father John is pastor of "St. Helena's," during the months of June and July, when temperatures often soar into triple digits at this time of the year.

Father John recalls his youth in "Algoma" when the children were divided into "cat-lickers" -- those who attended Catholic school -- and "pup-lickers" who went to public school.

Carlyle may or may not have been the model for "Algoma."

many familiar actual places as Father John drives the back roads of Southern Illinois in his little black car, trying to solve the mystery surrounding the death of Miss Annie Verden, an elderly lady who has lived all her life in a "mansion" in "Algoma."

The author describes the story as a series of inextricably connected secrets that occupy the curiosity and attention of the local pastor in a drama of death and redemption that plays out with legal implications and pastoral solutions.

Father John's curiosity is originally aroused by the peculiar color of Annie Verdon's dead face that he notices when he visits the hospital to administer last rites.

He also is intrigued by a recent visit to Miss Verden by her only relatives, two great-nephews from Pittsburgh, Pa., shortly before her death.

In addition, he would like to know more about the dead woman's relationship with Horace Denver, who runs the junkyard in town and was a frequent visitor to the Verden mansion.

Father John's investigation involves delving into old newspaper files and interviews with a banker and a lawyer, among other old-time acquaintances of Miss Verden.

Part of the charm of the novel is its leisurely pace, which allows the author to tell of a sumptuous breakfast and iced tea on Miss Verden's "summer porch" on different occasions some weeks before her death.

Frerker also is able to write about what he has discovered about the "bar pits" from which dirt was brought during construction of area roads. He attributes the term to a corruption of "barrow pits," because the dirt was carried in wheelbarrows. I have heard the term was originally "borrow pits," because the dirt was borrowed from one location to shore up another place.

"Heat" is a satisfying piece of detective fiction that makes for especially suitable reading during the torrid months of a Southern Illinois summer.

Frerker might well consider following it with the further adventures of "detective" Father John -- perhaps during other seasons in Southern Illinois.

The author will hold a number of book signings in Southern Illinois, the St. Louis area and the Twin Cities during the next couple of months. Scheduled for Carbondale are the following:

Aug. 19 at The Bookworm, 618 E. Walnut St., 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.

Aug. 19 at the Newman Center, 715 S. Washington Ave., 7 p.m.

Aug. 20 at St. Francis Parish, 303 S. Poplar St., 2 p.m.

Aug. 20 at the Carbondale Public Library, 405 West Main St., 7 p.m.

If you cannot find "Heat" at your local bookstore, you may purchase a copy by sending \$13 plus \$2 shipping and handling to Pax Publications, 7315 Henderson CT SE, Olympia, WA 98501, or you may order online at jackfrerk@aol.com.

BEN GELMAN is the former Sunday news editor for The Southern Illinoisan and is an avid bird watcher.