

Crime in a familiar locale

New mystery is a twisty, turny ride

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“Murder on

Mount Monadnock”

By J.S. Winter

Surry Cottage Books

277 pages

\$12.99

Grand Monadnock is associated with so much social, political and artistic heritage that J.S. Winter, a teacher at Keene Middle School, decided to create a playful mystery about the landmark. A big secret here, a little spice there and, voila, “Murder on Mount Monadnock.”

Anyone who follows the endless array of writings about “the mountain that stands alone” will find this one a bright and bouncy addition to the Monadnock library. Not only will readers find Winter’s book a skillful story set on our hometown mountain, but also an intriguing speculation for one of the real-life murder mysteries of Mount Monadnock itself.

Winter’s tale is chockful of the right ingredients — locked diaries, blackmail letters, missing brass buttons, boot marks and drag-the-body clues.

Not to mention a French-accented detective and the glittery heyday of 1910 resort life. The historic Half Way House perched on the sunset side of the mountain becomes the animated hub of the famous and the flamboyant who never tire of dark speculations.

The mountain provides an ideal mystery setting. The many long and short footpaths — Do Drop Trail, White Arrow Trail, Hedgehog Trail, Thoreau Trail — leading from the popular Half Way House ensures that someone is certain to get lost and into trouble. Who wouldn’t get lost in the twists and turns through the shadowy trees and alongside steep cliffs? Likewise, someone is sure to know the hideouts and secret caves on the Pumpelly Trail.

The special spark in Winter’s mystery is her adroit interweaving of the guest luminaries at the turn of that century. Read on and let the time chains of history

loose.

You'll meet young Franklin Delano Roosevelt visiting the Half Way House before he contracted polio; listen to Mary Roberts Rinehart, author of the national classic "The Circular Staircase," as she describes the criminal mind (she was the Agatha Christie of America); read what Mark Twain and Robert Frost have to say at a writers' workshop.

Monadnock is the training ground for heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson for his grudge match against champion James Jeffries. Well-known baseball player Smoky Joe Wood shows up and so does poet Amy Lowell, novelist Willa Cather and artist Abbot Thayer as well as Philip Ayers who led The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests in saving Monadnock, and Allen Chamberlain, who wrote about the great mountain — they all make full-fledged appearances with speaking parts.

They all criss-cross each other on the way to solving the whodunit of dead Marie Langtry, beautiful daughter of the stage-star-of-the-era Lillie Langtry.

Did Marie die from an accidental fall off Black Precipice? Or was she pushed? Neither, says former French-born Boston detective Robert de La Tour.

"The girl's injuries could not have been caused by a fall."

And a push really doesn't answer the question "but then what?"

Famous mystery writer Rinehart explains the difference between novelistic murders and real-life versions.

"Murder mysteries are written by those who like to plan murders but don't want to go through the messy task of actually performing them. Each of my victims is based on someone I would like to murder. My agents and my husband have been the secret victims many times!"

Boxers and ball players, politicians and poets, socialites and seducers — it's a fecund setting for any alluring woman dead by mountain.

In fact, detective de La Tour found Marie's stocking in a hidden rendezvous cave — under the bed.

What else could be lost and found that points to Marie's death? What greed or lust or power of celebrity?

A lost manuscript of Henry David Thoreau is certainly possible. After all, he camped on the mountain to learn more about the sacred steps to this wondrous peak.

If the key to Marie's saucy diary could be found, why not Thoreau's lost manuscript? And what about those summit sights in the nights?

In the end, J.S. Winter keeps us going with one red herring trail after the another and lets us peek into the time warps of Mount Monadnock.

She convinces us with gentle persuasion and style, not blood and guts, and it shows that she wants us to have some of the same fun she's having.