



A Long December

Donald Harstad

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A Long December:

American crime fiction's best-kept secret-as if Michael Connelly had spent twenty-six years as a small-town cop in Iowa-has written his breakout book.

Brief Description:

The people of Nation County, Iowa-a heartland town straight out of a Coen Brothers movie or a John Cougar Mellencamp song-practice a unique brand of American stoicism. You betcha. And they rely upon their public servants to shield them from the horrors of the outside world. Carl Houseman, deputy sheriff of the 750-square-mile county, dedicates his life to keeping his citizenry so secure that you can leave the door unlocked at home and walk his streets with a big hello and a smile to every stranger. On Houseman's watch, the mounting terrors of the new world order stay far away.

But December 2001 could change all of that. Outsiders are everywhere. The meat plant is now kosher and there are more Jewish fellows per capita than any other place in the country. Hispanic and other foreign workers, with dubious immigration papers, have taken jobs from the locals. Eighteen other languages are now spoken within the tiny region, and Carl and company can't speak a single one.

Then the eighty-odd-year-old Heinman brothers' call comes in from their farm down in Frog Hollow. They've witnessed an execution-style killing not one hundred yards from their pig feeders. The victim's awful dead and half his head's been blown off. The boys haven't seen nothing like it since Normandy. When Carl gets to the scene, he believes them.

What follows is a masterful police procedural thriller-think Joe Wambaugh crossed with Fargo-written with a singular and authentic voice that has electrified readers around the world.

A Long December Details

Date : Published March 1st 2005 by Rugged Land Books (first published 2003)

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Author : Donald Harstad

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From Reader Review A Long December for online ebook

Maddy says

RATING: 3.25

Carl Houseman is the deputy sheriff in the small town of Nation County, Iowa. When he receives a call from 2 local farmers about an execution style killing that they witnessed, he knows that there are outside forces at work. The area has changed a lot since the days when he first took on the job. The area has attracted a lot of immigrants, and the local culture is changing, slowly but surely.

As it turns out, the murder is connected to an attempt by terrorists to poison the meat at a local plant which is slated to be shipped to kosher delis across the US. One of the immigrant workers is exposed to the toxin used and dies a hideous death. Before the full investigation starts, most of the plant workers "disappear" since they are worried about their immigration status.

As Harstad details the investigation, he intersperses chapters where Houseman, the local dispatcher, Sally; the FBI agent, Hester Gorse and a special agent, George Pollard, are being held under siege in a barn at a local farm. They don't really understand why they are being attacked, but it boils down to terrorists in the neighborhood.

A LONG DECEMBER didn't entirely work for me for a few reasons. The book is set in December 2001, and terrorism is very much on everyone's mind all across the United States. However, I found it a stretch to think that terrorists were going to launch one of their plans from a small backwater town in Iowa. The idea that they were planning to poison meat which was being sent to kosher delis around the country seemed ludicrous, at best.

And secondly, I found the structure of the book did not work for me. It alternated between a recounting of the investigation of the murder and the siege scenario, which in terms of time occurred at the end of the investigation. The reader did not really know why the siege was taking place and what was involved. I think this was Harstad's way of infusing some action into the investigation, but it just muddled things because we didn't have enough information to understand what was going on. A purely chronological narration would have worked better, in my opinion.

The Carl Houseman series is about the most realistic US police procedural being written today, and that is both its curse and its blessing. Sometimes Harstad goes overboard on the procedural stuff, which makes it difficult to understand. He insists on reproducing the conversations held between the police officer and the dispatcher, which consist of dialogue such as the following: "Three, request you ten-twenty-five with Car Forty; not ten-thirty-three, but as soon as possible....Ten-four....I'll ten-twenty-one, she said..." At the same time, he includes salient details which enhance the realism of the narrative, such as the fact that the police lock their cars with the engines running so that their dispatch radio transmissions won't run the batteries down.

A LONG DECEMBER is the fifth book in the series. Harstad has a straightforward writing style and a group of characters who are interesting enough to follow from book to book. He was a deputy sheriff in Iowa, and that experience adds a lot to his books. I'd like to see him write what he knows and focus on local police situations rather than shooting for the big plot hook, such as terrorism. His books tend to get overrun with officials from local, state and national law enforcement agencies. It would be interesting to see the local

department work a case all on its own.

Jean Marie says

It's always fun to read a Donald Harstad book since I live in the fictional county of "Nation"; I have known Don and his wife "Sue" for many years. The writing is pretty precise and in the local lingo.

Larry says

Harstad's cop-savvy fifth novel about the Nation County, Iowa sheriff's department returns to the theme of the 2nd and 3rd: the impact of terrorism on rural America. As before, Carl Houseman, senior member of the sheriff's department (but not the sheriff) is in the middle of things. In fact, he and three others (a fed, an Iowa state cop, and his department's dispatcher) are pinned down in a barn while fighting for their lives. How they came to be there, and how they get out, makes for an absorbing book. I wish there were a sixth book in the series (there is, but it wasn't published by a national firm).

Jon Koebrick says

Number 4 in the Carl Houseman series is his best work I have read. The mixing of timelines can be tricky to pull off and he was successful. These are great books if you know eastern Iowa and stand on their merits too even if you don't know Iowa. A very good book.

Nathan Grosse says

Long story short, it's a small-town murder that ends up leading to something a whole lot bigger. And while the author certainly knows his stuff, all the police lingo can begin to get a little confusing/annoying. The plot alternates between the same characters, but in two different time frames, which is definitely a unique concept. It makes things a tad confusing, but it adds interest as well.

The plot begins to become rather long and drawn-out, but the author provides enough interest here and there to keep you reading on. Sometimes the action is like a snail crawling through molasses, and sometimes it's downright nerve-wracking!

Overall, I found "A Long December" to be enjoyable, but not the sort of book I would reread over again.

Eric_W says

As you know, I am a big fan of Donald Harstad. This book is of even more interest because it takes place in the fictional town of Battenberg, clearly patterned after Postville, Iowa, not far from where I live in NW, Illinois. Postville was the subject of two very interesting books about the economic rise and downfall of a town that became a microcosm of problems with immigration in the United States.

Prior to 1987 the town had been mostly German and Norwegian, basically your standard homogeneous farming community in the Midwest. It was in slow decline as are most towns in this area. Then a group of Hasidim Jews from New York purchased an old meat-packing plant, fixed it up and made it kosher. They were soon shipping kosher meat all over the United States, the plant became the largest of its kind in the world, and the community began to thrive, but was accompanied by the usual discomfiture of many Spanish-speaking (not Mexican Spanish, but Honduran and Guatemalan Spanish which made it difficult for the police to learn the language aside from financial issues,) workers mixing with the more staid farmers. In addition there were the religious differences. All well and good and Stephen Bloom wrote a book which became a Frontline TV special about how diversity was working in a small Iowa community. The town began to thrive.

Then in 2008 the black-shirted Sicherheitsdienst, otherwise known as the INS and ICE, raided the factory, locked up many of the workers, placed their children, most of whom had been born in the United States, in foster care, and arrested the manager of the plant. It has since been shut down and the community has begun a slow descent back into decline.

This then forms the backdrop for Harstad's book which was written in 2003, before the shutdown of the plant, when many illegal immigrants were being imported into the community to staff the plant.

A couple of farmers witness the shooting of a fleeing man on a gravel road near their farm. Then another man is found dead in an apartment. Their only link seems to be the kosher meat-packing plant in near by Battenberg. Then they discover the dead man did not die of natural causes, but had ingested ricin. Soon the county becomes a busy place indeed. "There were people representing the FBI, DOJ, CDC, FDA, DEA, ATF, OSHA, as well as the EMD. I felt like I was watching CNN."

A recurrent theme in Harstad's books is the respect he has for local law enforcement and disdain for the inter-agency bickering and power-pissing contests that hinder the local focus on a crime. The federal agencies do have the resources, however, so cooperation is always essential if not required.

The plot is the least important element in Harstad's books. The recurring characters, Sally, Carl, Hester. Lamar, and peripherally Volont, and George, become so real and likeable, that the reader wishes he could meet them all over dinner somewhere just to watch the often comic interplay among them.

Books referenced:

Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America

Postville: USA: Surviving Diversity in Small-Town America

LindaN says

Narrator Carl Houseman describes in his late-middle-age, somewhat overweight and self-deprecating way events surrounding 2 horrific deaths in small-town Iowa. His investigations lead him to a meat-packing plant and to encounters with the diverse population of legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere--you-name-it. The settings--the plant, the farms--many abandoned--the small towns--ring true of Iowa. There is a lot of griping about bureaucracy and paperwork and some unnecessary official cop lingo that is a challenge to decipher. As the plot unfolds, the details become grandiose and stretch one's credibility. Nonetheless, this was an enjoyable and captivating read with very likable "good guys."

Susanne says

I picked this up on a friend's recommendation -- and while I found the central crime drama compelling (terrorism involving toxic ricin in the nation's meat supply) and the setting, in Iowa, intriguing, I could have done without all the cop jargon. There's such a thing as TOO much verisimilitude, when whole paragraphs are devoted to dialogue like this:

"Nation County Three, go ahead 918," I said. "Stand by for one, Three. TAC six from 918?" TAC 6 answered, and I recognized Mary's voice. "Yeah, Three and TAC Six, we're just about overhead, now." . . . "We'll be working the area, but we're gonna avoid being overhead. Advise when you want close watch. Understand you have a 10-52 that's going to be coming up that lane toward the barn?" "Ten-four," said Marty. "Go up on Orange for a minute."

Linda Chrisman says

I have enjoyed all the books by Harstad. Wonderfully drawn characters and written with a good humored wit, this is an excellent series. Of course his Carl would have Girl Scout cookies on the trunk of his police cruiser!

Chrisl says

Perhaps my least favorite of the Harstad novels. I don't much like books with FBI and terrorists, but the main characters are as enjoyable and realistic as they are in the four previous tales.

A quote for librarians:

"As I entered the library, I almost turned and left. There was a class of about thirty fourth-graders and a teacher sort of invading the place. They were all over, and Martha Taylor, my former classmate and current librarian, was helping round them up. She saw me, glanced over toward the computers, looked back, and gave a little wave. That triggered the memory that she'd been one of our high school cheerleaders, and that we'd called her 'Boom Boom,.' Boom Boom the librarian. I couldn't suppress a grin."

(The library was where deputy Houseman met with an informant.)

Karen says

Enjoyable small town crime novel with an international reach. I really enjoyed this book, despite not having read any others by this author. I found the place and characters convincing, the story made sense and all the loose ends were tied up nicely. The plot built well to the conclusion. I would happily read another.

Jim Angstadt says

In spite of numerous objections, I liked it.

Numerous objection:

1. Formula: bad stuff happens, release most of the facts, action happens, the appearance of resolution, repeat.
2. Overuse of cop jargon; ten codes to be specific.
3. Lack of character development.

On the plus side:

1. Main character is reasonable, and sees his own short-comings and faults.
2. Treatment of "fed" characters. The "Feds" are part inspired, part self-important, part doofus. Well done.

Why, why, why, was the book type so small? Was the editor 23 years old?

Catherine says

Love Donald Harstad but not one of my favorites. The beginning got me then I started to get bored...and then the ending hit and I got sucked in again. Wonderful detail and still a great author just not my top pick of his.

Mary Sue says

Proud to list this author as an Iowan. Proud of and amused by his characters Carl and Hester and Lamar. Glad Harstad picks topical subjects for each books theme. This time he combines the "Postville" influx of cultures with the sensitivities of Homeland Security, and puts them in rural/small town Iowa that most of the country can identify with. Keep up the good work Donald!

Ron says

I believe that this is Harstad's last book. They have all been great, well written with interesting characters and situations. Harstad is a former Iowas deputy sheriff who knows all the ins and outs of police work. He is a life-long resident of Iowa and knows the country and the weather which both figure prominently in his stories. His dialogue is excellent and the attitudes of the characters are real and down to earth. Great read.
