

Putnam writer has fans fretting over Stella

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Judy Clemens worries about Stella Crown.

So, apparently, do a lot of other people. Heaven knows, they have reason.

The latest doings around Stella's Pennsylvania dairy farm include one friend menaced by some decidedly unsavory characters, a second hospitalized with stab wounds, another round of vandalism and a new hired hand with a batch of unpleasant in-laws and a troubling — possibly lethal — secret.

Stella also has to contend with a natural disaster. And if that's not enough, she's also trying to figure out whether she's in love — or ought to be.

All of this is packed into Clemens' second Stella Crown mystery, "Three Can Keep a Secret" (Poisoned Pen Press, \$24.95). What's more, all these new troubles follow only weeks after the traumatic events chronicled in Clemens' first book, last year's "Till the Cows Come Home."

Stella is still nursing painful injured ribs from a motorcycle crash in the first book. Worse, her beloved Harley is still in the shop, in serious if not critical condition.

So this time, when a tornado took out Stella's garage and feed barn, Clemens' mother thought it was too much.

"Oh, good grief!" she said. "She has to deal with this yet?"

But Clemens figured it had to be that way. She wanted to catch Stella still working through the raw grief from the death of a cherished father figure in the first book, and she needed the tornado so Stella would have to provide a home for the new hand and her 8-year-old daughter.

"I wanted Stella to have to face that," Clemens said this week at her Putnam County home. "She is hard to get to know. It's hard to pierce her, to get inside her. She's a very private person. She's made it clear that she likes living by herself; she doesn't want to have to deal with anyone else in the house. And now she's forced to."

The Chicago Tribune's review of "Three Can Keep a Secret" called Stella Crown "one of the most original figures in recent crime fiction." Orphaned as a teenager, Stella is tough, smart and independent to the brink of combativeness. Describing her, Clemens comes up with words like "prickly" and "edgy."

Stella Crown, in other words, is not your run-of-the-mill fictional detective. And Clemens, whose first effort was nominated for two of the mystery genre's most prestigious awards, the Agatha and the Anthony, does not write run-of-the-mill mysteries.

She resists formulas at every turn. In "Three Can Keep a Secret," Stella never even sees a dead body.

Clemens was a little nervous about that. She worried that book was too much character study, that the plot wasn't sufficiently "driven."

So far, nobody seems to mind. The reviews have been strong and the fans who boosted Clemens to those Agatha and Anthony nominations are already yammering for more Stella Crown.

"People don't mind that there's not a dead body," Clemens said. "They seem to find the mystery in Stella's own life intriguing enough."

The latest chapter in that mystery will be officially unveiled with a reading and a book-launch party this weekend.

Meanwhile, Clemens is finishing up the much-anticipated third installment, which is due next summer. Once again, the book will be as much about Stella as about the events around her.

"She is a strong person. She's a prickly person, and edgy. That's important in who she is and she's going to have to confront that," Clemens said, a note of concern in her voice. "... If she doesn't let people in, if she doesn't let down that wall, she's going to end up all alone. And I don't want her to be alone; nobody wants to be alone. She's going to have to make some compromises, and that's very, very difficult for her."

From what we've seen so far, Stella Crown's life is never easy.

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