

Book Review

A Siege of Bitterns

By Steve Burrows

Dundurn Press, Toronto, 2014

352 pages

By Denise Desmarais

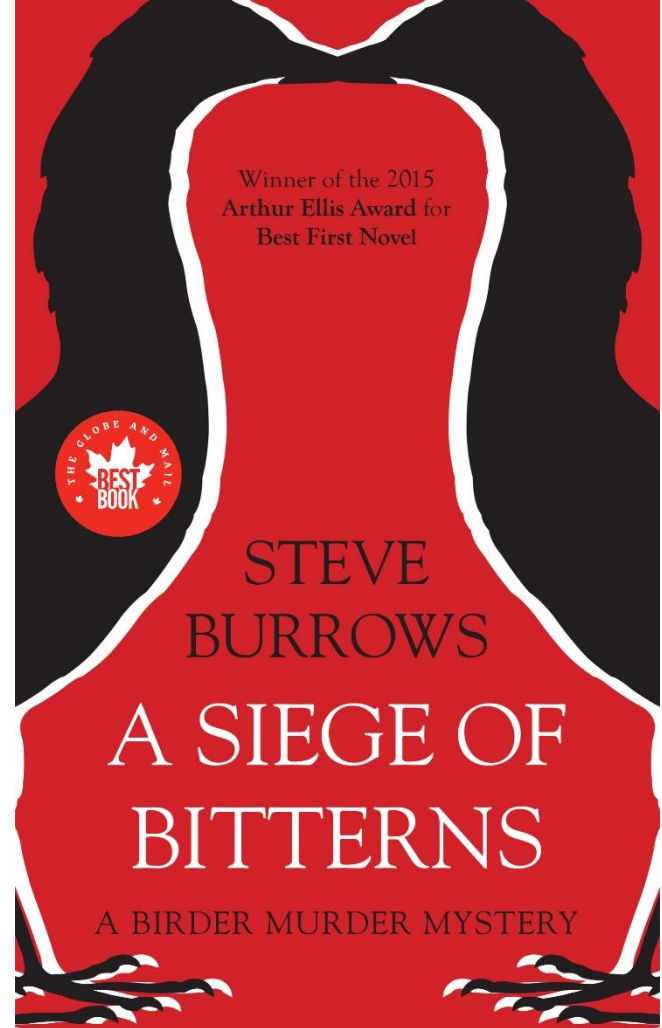
Steve Burrows is a British-born Canadian writer currently living in Oshawa. An avid birder and environmentalist, he worked as a journalist for most of his life, and in 2014 wrote the first book in his series of “Birder Murder Mysteries”. That novel, *A Siege of Bitterns*, won the Arthur Ellis Award for first novels and made it to the Globe and Mail’s list of 100 best books of 2014.

A Siege of Bitterns introduces us to Burrows’ main man, Detective Chief Inspector Domenic Jejuene, a Canadian living in Britain, who possesses an uncanny talent for getting to the bottom of “who done it”. Surprisingly, Jejuene is not at all enamoured with his job, but sticks with it only because he’s so darn good at it. He’d rather be birding. In *A Siege of Bitterns*, Jejuene and his cast of non-birding fellow detectives set out to solve the gruesome murder of Cameron Brae, television personality and birder extraordinaire.

One of Burrows’ goals in writing and in life is to draw attention to the disastrous loss of wildlife habitat experienced worldwide, and he makes his case in a “novel” way in *A Siege of Bitterns* when the health of the salt marsh, a precious avian habitat, is endangered by human activity and corruption.

The novel takes place in the fictional village of Saltmarsh in the real county of Norfolk, England. Norfolk is a popular birding destination where it is possible to view many species of wading birds in its salt marshes. (Cley Marshes of Norfolk pictured on next page.) According to eBird, an impressive 435 species of birds have been observed within its boundaries. Burrows begins his story with a fine description of the Norfolk Marsh where the murder has taken place. It’s the sort of description rarely found in murder mysteries, but one that might be appreciated by Burrows’ birding audience because of the obvious birding potential of this marsh and because most birders enjoy reading descriptions of extraordinarily beautiful places.

Like most murder mysteries, this one includes plenty of twists and turns, red herrings and dead ends that would appeal to almost any murder mystery reader. However, Burrows also manages to make birds a significant component of the narrative, which could make *A Siege of Bitterns* particularly interesting to amateur ornithologists. Aspects of birding culture, methods, etiquette



and competitiveness are embedded in the storyline and might remind readers of themselves or someone they know.

I generally avoid murder mysteries because I find they tend to be plot-driven and sometimes lacking in character development and writing style. But I found this mystery much more enjoyable than most. I'll admit that some of the crime-related details were wasted on me, but the people and the wordcraft were not. Read the book because of the descriptions, the birds, the politics or to find out who done it, but I recommend you read it.

If any of you are planning a trip to England, the Cley and Salthouse Marshes in Norfolk County in the east of England attract hundreds of birders from all over the world.



Ian Clapper, Wikipedia