

Something sinister lurking at the zoo

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If anyone could write a believable mystery using a zoo as an authentic background, it would be Ann Littlewood. Before writing her first mystery, Ann was a zookeeper for 12 years in Portland, where she raised lions and cougars as part of her daily job.

Don't get the idea that she is a novice writer. It is just that she bided her time working in other professions before tackling her first book at age 62. Age was not an issue with her, she said in an interview, especially since her mother, Pauline E. Parker, also of Portland, didn't publish her first book until she was 85.

Writing has been part of Littlewood's life since childhood, when she wrote stories about animals just to entertain herself. But it was indeed this early yearning to write that she says started the long and crooked path to writing her first mystery, which she calls a "zoo-dunnit." Her protagonist in "Night Kill"

is Iris Oakley, the feline keeper at the fictional Finley Memorial Zoo in Vancouver, Wash. Iris' husband, Rick, who has a drinking problem, ends up dead in the lion exhibit. An autopsy shows he was drunk at the time of his death, leading the authorities to call it an accidental death, but Iris doesn't believe it and conducts her own investigation — a bit of sleuthing that takes the reader inside the inner workings of the zoo.

For her own safety after Rick's death in the lions' cage, Iris' superiors move her from feline care to bird care, and the reader suddenly gets another zoology lesson, this time on birds. But all the while, the reader is following Iris' suspicions about Rick's death. She can't shake the feeling that he was murdered.

Iris' friends and co-workers want her to give it up and move on with life. The zoo foreman would rather she get job elsewhere and makes that clear to her.

When she gets too close to



'Night Kill'
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solving her husband's death, she, too, begins to have a series of near-fatal accidents inside the zoo confines. The author's familiarity with the interwork-

ings of a zoo make the novel realistic.

Littlewood's knowledge of zoos creates some spooky night scenes in which keepers keep vigil over sleeping animals that are themselves by nature nocturnal creatures. They are also good at hiding and pretending to be docile.

Littlewood is already working on another Iris Oakley mystery — this one has Iris working with orangutans. "I have a third book in the planning stage, this one about elephants," Littlewood said. "Iris is growing into a wiser, more complex woman and as a writer I feel a little like a proud mother watching her mature."

In her third book, she introduces Iris' mother, Gloria, in the plot. Littlewood admits the character is based on her own mother, Pauline.

Actually, Littlewood's experience in helping her mother find a publisher led her to more serious writing than the tech writing she was doing as a publications manager for Kaiser Permanente.

She did the marketing research that led her mother, at age 85, to publish "Women of the Homefront: World War II Recollections of 55 Americans."

"I started writing fiction seriously in 2000 and created a new career at age 62 as a mystery writer," Littlewood said.

She said she likes working through Poisoned Pen Press, a small Scottsdale, Ariz., publisher that specializes in publishing mystery stories. "I love returning to the zoo world, filling my head with memories of the sounds and smells as I write," Littlewood said. "While my book is not based on a real murder, 'Night Kill' is based on actual events at the Oregon Zoo."

Littlewood's debut novel is timely in the wake of the 2007 Siberian tiger attack at the San Francisco Zoo. Her book reminds us that both caged and human animals can be deadly.

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