

Local author's debut is a dramatic whodunit

By ANNE STINSON

Book Critic

Cheating Death By Judith C. Reveal

Cambridge Books, a subsidiary of Write Words Inc., 213 pages.

There must be something in the water. How else to account for the proliferation of fine writers here on the Shore?

Just out is Judith Reveal's debut novel, an adroitly crafted whodunit set mostly in Kent County. The cast includes a diabolic maze in the garden of a creaky old estate, a cove carved into the sometimes benign and sometimes terrifying Chesapeake Bay and a villain with the Dickensian first name Odious.

This reader totally missed the identity of the killer — and the victims which piled up in ominous numbers. Surprises abound in a tale that grows more spooky with every chapter.

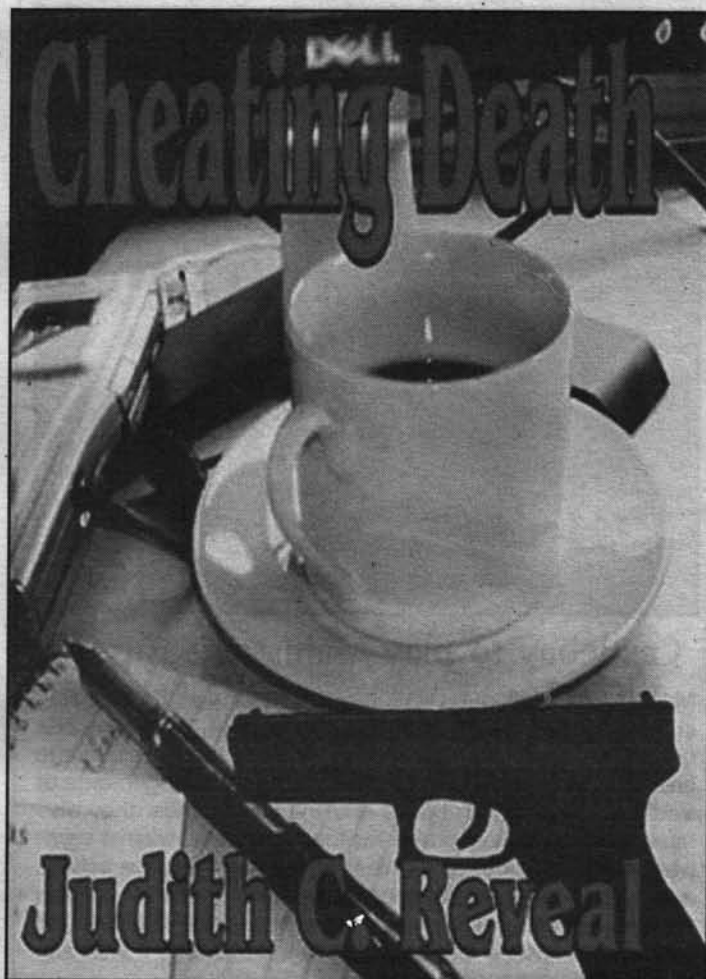
The protagonist is an inquisitive woman newspaper editor named Lindsey who's bought a little newspaper in Greensboro. Her managing editor and sidekick is Conrad, a bustling, clumsy gay man with a nose for news. He frequently urges her to pursue stories that intrigue his curiosity.

This time it's a quixotic obituary that arrives at the paper. It states that the writer's brother Leon is a murder victim. Lindsey, it turns out, is acquainted with both Leon and his obituary-writing brother, Thaddeus. The two brothers were a well-known team of writers and producers of successful musicals.

The writer half of the team had been incognito at a retreat for aspiring writers in Kent County, the Writers' Bloc, to finish a script away from time-wasting interviews. The owner of the haven is none other than the odious Odious.

Conrad insists that Lindsey investigate the retreat under the guise of writing a series on local live-in places where writers could work in quiet isolation.

Lindsey takes up the challenge when Thaddeus begs



her to find out how his sibling died. So she's off and the plot thickens. Could it be coincidence that a local publishing company has just printed a script for a musical with Odious's name on it as the author? Reveal deceptively spills the beans early on in the book. She shows how Odious has been stealing manuscripts for years and passing them off as his own. But don't be fooled. Reveal is as clever as

her creations.

As Reveal introduces a new character in almost every chapter of the first half of the book, the reader must pay attention to who's who. It's like a ball game where you can't tell the players without a scorecard, but tension builds as the reader is teased into sorting out potential victims and culprits.

And what a motley crew Lindsey meets at this old

house with a secret room, a moving bookcase and a gazebo remote from the estate. There are half-heard whispers that drift up to her attic room, the sound of footsteps in the night and an air of conspiracy as thick as storm clouds building across the Bay.

A new writer in residence checks in and people begin checking out — permanently. The newcomer is a lovely young Irish girl with one blue eye and one green eye. The whole staff at Writers' Bloc stiffens on edge: Frank, the groundskeeper who's evasive; Gladys, an obese wannabe poet whose bad verse was published long ago by Odious's unofficial partner, Beatrice, the owner of the publishing house; the bookkeeper, Tufts, financial wizard and manager at Writers' Bloc and his wife, Clovis, the surly maid-of-all-work. And yet another new boarder, Ray, an affable young man shows up with a lot of questions.

Lindsey gets lost in the high, convoluted maze and makes a gruesome discovery. Meanwhile, trees lash and the sky darkens. It is a dark and stormy night, for sure. The air, both in the wind and in the people with their nerves on edge, erupts with electricity.

Reveals bring it to a lightning conclusion, all in a fast-paced, thoroughly dramatic denouement as the Writers' Bloc comes to a fiery end.

I can't wait for her next book in what cries out to be a series.

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