



Taken by storm

“Whiteout” is a stunning debut novel, worthy of national recognition, but trying to get it published left its St. Paul author out in the cold.

“France is like my second home,” Brian Duren says. That’s not surprising, because Duren holds a doctorate in French literature from the University of Paris and a doctorate in French from the University of Minnesota.

Yet, this St. Paulite chose to set his debut novel, “Whiteout,” at a small resort in northern Minnesota. Duren, 64, retired in 2004 as an administrator in the University of Minnesota’s College of Continuing Education. Between work and caring for three sons, it took him eight years, “off and on,” to complete his novel.

At the heart of “Whiteout” is three siblings’ memories of the night their father was killed in a car crash during a blizzard as he drove to the family’s resort near the Boundary Waters. But is that what really happened?

Set in 1989, as the Berlin Wall is about to fall, the story begins when Paul Bauer gets a call in his Paris apartment from his sister, Christine. Their mother is dying, and Christine pleads with him to come home.

Paul has conflicted memories of the lodge and constant nightmares, and he hasn’t been home more than three times in 14 years. When his lover, Claire, urges him to return to Minnesota, he finds a tangled web of old family secrets. His brittle sister seems about to fly apart emotionally. And she obviously shares some unspoken knowledge with their surly brother, Fran, who runs the lodge. Paul has questions about the relationship between his mother and the handyman who was like his surrogate father. And why does their mother stare, night after night, at a pond near the house?

“Whiteout” is as well-written, suspenseful and exciting as any novel I’ve read lately from any New York publishing house, and it deserves national publication.

Here’s Paul recalling his summers outfitting campers at one of the principal entries to the Boundary Waters: “In late August,

when the nights turned cooler, a mist would rise from the lake like a spirit army, and in the morning, when he walked down to the boathouse, he’d stop on the main dock, trembling in the damp air, and gaze at the thick,

gray clouds of fog that hovered above the lake. Wisps of fog would ascend like gray-haired ghosts and glide away. An island would rise from the water ...”

Duren’s journey to publication was not easy.

“I had an agent years ago who was excited about my book,” he recalls. “But he wanted me to turn it into a psychological/literary

thriller, and I didn’t see it that way. So, I set it aside, thought about it for a while, then started revisions. I got some help from (awardwinning Minnesota writers) Alison McGhee and Mary Logue.”

But no publishers offered a contract.

“They’d read the first few pages, ask for 50 pages, then they’d turn it down,” Duren recalls. “This happened a dozen times. I was really frustrated.”

Finally, he decided to self-publish through Edinabased Beaver’s Pond Press.

Although Duren turned down that agent’s suggestion to make “Whiteout” a literary thriller, I think that’s exactly what he wrote.

He disagrees.

“I saw (the story) as a search for one’s self,” he said. “There are elements of a psychological thriller, of mystery, but I’ve always seen these as simply mechanics in writing a book that for me is much more about quest. The metaphor of the Berlin Wall coming down, which was used more extensively in earlier drafts, represents chaos. Paul has a wall that separates him from his parents and siblings, and when his mother dies, that wall is breached.”

As Paul begins to unravel the skein of family secrets, he keeps in touch with his supportive lover in Paris, who urges him to stay until he has worked out his anxieties about the past.

“I’m very attached to France,” Duren says, admitting it took all his discipline to keep from writing dozens of pages about France in “Whiteout” that had nothing to do with the main story.

“I spent four years in Paris,” he recalls. “The first time, I was a wandering kid of 22 and went to Europe for 11 months. I ended up doing a doctorate at the university in Paris and lived there nearly 2 1/2 years. I still go back often because I have friends there with whom I’ve been close for more than 40 years.”

Since Duren retired from the University of Minnesota, he has taught part time at Gustavus Adolphus College and at Augsburg, where he’ll return to the classroom this fall. The rest of his time will be spent working on his next novel.

“If I could do nothing but write the rest of my life, I’d be happy,” he says. “It keeps you engaged with life.”



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