



## The Big Thaw

*Donald Harstad*

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**A killer is placing his cross hairs over the American heartland....**

The pair of frozen corpses were found under a tarp in the machine shed of an empty farmhouse. Two males - - brothers -- both killed by bullets from a Russian automatic fired at close range. The cops have a suspect: a man Deputy Sheriff Carl Houseman busted five years earlier and the county's lead suspect in a series of recent robberies.

Houseman knows they have the wrong guy. He also knows they've got something bigger than a burglary gone bad ... especially when the FBI starts showing up in Maitland. The brutal double homicide is just the tip of the iceberg in a case where a killer's trail keeps disappearing like footprints in freshly fallen snow, and where one bad break can send a good cop into a deep freeze.

## The Big Thaw Details

Date : Published May 1st 2001 by Bantam (first published August 15th 2000)

ISBN : 9780553583038

Author : Donald Harstad

Format : Paperback 416 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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## From Reader Review The Big Thaw for online ebook

### Iowa City Public Library says

Frigid days like today make me think of Donald Harstad's mystery novels set in Northeast Iowa. If you haven't read Harstad and enjoy mysteries, he's worth a try. Harstad, from Elkader, was a deputy sheriff in Clayton County for 26 years before retiring to write full-time. Harstad didn't plan to become a writer, but a bit of serendipity and excess vacation time changed his life. I've heard Harstad tell this story a number of times, and it's one of my favorite author stories. One day Harstad was called into his boss' office and told he had to use eleven days of vacation or lose it. It was February and Harstad's wife is a school teacher, so a trip to a sunny beach wasn't possible. It was horribly cold outside so Harstad decided to hunker down inside and write a novel. After teaching his Commodore Amiga computer to swear, he spent the next eleven days writing his first novel, Eleven Days.

Harstad draws on his extensive experience in law enforcement to weave together complex stories with a strong sense of place. I especially like Harstad's characters. Officer Carl Houseman is the protagonist in the books and he reminds me a lot of Harstad. Hester Gorse is a tough but personable DCI agent who helps Houseman work through details. Although Eleven Days is my favorite Harstad novel, The Big Thaw is the book I think of when it's cold. In the novel there's fresh snow on the ground, the wind is blowing, visibility is bad, and it's -30 degrees. It's only -1 today in Iowa City – a heatwave! ~Enjoy~ --Kara

From ICPL Staff Picks Blog

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### Edith English says

#### Didn't like

I tried really hard to get into this book but couldn't get past all the minute detail. The police jargon was overwhelming and very distracting. It seemed unnecessary for the story.

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### Danell DeBacker says

I have read nearly all of Donald Harstad's books (with the exception of November Rain. It had been so long since anything new was published I forgot to keep checking) and the Big Thaw is my favorite of them all. I lived in Dubuque, IA at the time I found Mr. Harstad's books (a town in the general vicinity of the action of the story) so not only was it relatable geographically and demographically. I also used to work as a public accountant auditing some of the local riverboat casinos on the Mississippi River making the subject even more fascinating.

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### Eric\_W says

Carl Houseman, a deputy sheriff in Nation County, Iowa keeps watching the Weather Channel as the worm-like jet stream moves gradually north bringing the promise of a January thaw. In the meantime, he and his colleagues, not to mention the FBI and Iowa DCI, have their hands full trying to solve the murders of two

burglars on a remote farm. There is the usual turf war between the various departments.

The FBI is reluctant to release information to their “hick” fellow officers (there is a very funny scene where the local officers have to remind the FBI city types that tailing someone by car in a remote county where four cars constitutes a traffic jam is not something easily accomplished).

Harstad, a deputy sheriff in Iowa for twenty-six years, obviously knows his rural police work and writes well. Their adversary is the pseudonymous Gabriel, a former special operations Army officer and explosives expert. He has convinced some locals they owe no allegiance to the federal government and can set up their own country, but they need a lot of money to buy a small yield nuclear weapon from the former Soviet Union to give themselves leverage. (I’ve always thought the way to deal with these crazies who want their own countries is to let them have their several hundred acres, fence them off, and then not issue them entry visas into our country. See how long they can last without being able to head to the nearest grocery store to buy food. ? )

Houseman is called to assist another deputy in stopping a suspicious driver. It’s Fred, a known burglar, obviously quite shaken, who points them to a farm where his cousins have been killed. The trail leads to Gabriel and black, ultra-fast snowmobiles (these turn out to be FBI issue). Houseman works with his DCI crony, Hester Gorse, (now stationed for her normal rotation on the General Beauregard, a gambling boat on the Mississippi — a great spot for Houseman who loves the boat’s buffet). They gradually collect evidence that suggests Gabriel is going to hit five banks in the area. Good police work narrows down the location to the bank taking the Beauregard’s deposits.

Harstad writes a denouement that is quite realistic and plausible, I thought, unlike some other crime novelists who seems to believe a book must end in an orgy of violence.

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### **Carla JFCL says**

I liked the overall plot of this book, found it to be a fast read, enjoyed the characters, and it held my interest. It is kind of a rough read in spots because the writing - especially dialogue - doesn't quite hang together all the time. I had to do a fair amount of rereading to figure out who was saying what at times. I was also quite surprised to find a lot of typos, as this is not a self-published book and is, in fact, put out by a major publisher (Bantam). Of course this can be easily overcome while reading, but it's a disappointment.

I'll offer only one other criticism: this author really needs to consult a thesaurus for words to use other than "grinning." It seems like every character in this book does nothing but grin. Can't they smile, or smirk, or something else once in awhile?

The author does do a good job describing a brutal Iowa winter; unfortunately, I know all too well what those are like.

Finally, except for one part (I don't write spoilers so will just say it involves the motivation for the crime that is central to the story) I found the plot to be plausible, which helped make it enjoyable.

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### **Bobby Underwood says**

It's so cold in Iowa, you may want to wear a pair of warm gloves while reading Harstad's wintery Carl

Houseman novel in order to avoid frostbite. You can almost feel the blanket of snow covering the roads and smell the coffee brewing back at the station as Maitland's favorite deputy sheriff returns for a third entry in Donald Harstad's fine series.

A break-in at a rural Iowa farm where no one is home will leave two burglars dead, murdered execution style, and Houseman with a suspect he believes to be innocent. Only when vague Special Agent Volont from Harstad's previous entry, *Known Dead*, arrives does Houseman discover a deadly foe has returned to Nation County.

DCI Agent Hester Gorse returns for this entry, as does Carl's boss Lamar, capable dispatcher, Sally, FBI Agent George, and reporter Nancy Mitchell, who looks to be a very interesting addition to this very enjoyable series. The rural atmosphere and Houseman's self-deprecating humor during tense situations are the trademark of Harstad's novels.

A moonlight chase on snowmobiles, an autopsy, and robberies at a bank and aboard a gambling ship will all lead right back to the snow-covered farmhouse where Houseman's investigation began, setting up a deadly confrontation for our favorite resident of Maitland.

This is a cold one, but a good one. Wearing a pair of long johns while turning pages is optional, but highly recommended!

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### **Rachel Groves says**

I really enjoyed the writing but hadn't realised that this is the 3rd book in a series when I started it. A lot of series you can start anywhere and go back to read earlier books - but this particular story not only referred to previous happenings a lot but also gave me spoilers about what to expect (who was hurt or killed, who the bad guy was). That took some of the enjoyment out of it for me and got a little repetitive too. I can't say what my rating would have been had I read them in order but I am going to try the first book and see how I get on because the style is great and it started out to be a really intriguing, atmospheric read that had my hooked from the start.

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### **Karen Griffin says**

#### **Good tale about a country law officer**

Lots of characters who fit perfectly into their roles. The hero is also believable and behaves appropriately and not like James Bond, making him likeable and understood. Good ending also without leaving you hanging .

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### **Lukasz Pruski says**

Donald Harstad is the author of two very good police procedurals, "*Known Dead*" and "*Eleven Days*" (I have reviewed these 4-star novels on Goodreads) . He is also the author of lame and silly "*Code 61*", with a plot that includes references to vampires. A 26-year-veteran of Sheriff's Department in an Iowa County, he is at his best when he writes about the actual procedure when the sheriff's deputies are working on solving a case.

I was hoping "The Big Thaw" will be more like the first two books rather than the vampire idiocy. It falls somewhere in between.

The book reads great for the first 150 pages or so. Two frozen bodies are found, packed in a tarp in an empty Iowa farmhouse. The victims seem to have been executed. The narrator, Carl Houseman, the senior deputy at the Nation County Sheriff's Office, does not believe the main suspect, a small-time burglar, is the culprit. Then, quite suddenly, the novel turns from riveting to ridiculous. Deputy Houseman asks a journalist and a photographer to help him in solving the case. Some plot twists of "The Big Thaw" would rather belong in a cheap James Patterson's novel.

Fortunately, the extended ending sequence is written much better as it again focuses on procedure. We get delightful passages about how the Bad Guys make fools of the combined and bumbling forces of the Sheriff's Office and other agencies. Mr. Harstad certainly knows from his own experience how calamitous the cooperation between different agencies might be.

Overall, an interesting and pleasant read, and somewhat believable plot, except for a few ludicrous twists.

Three stars.

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### **Janell says**

I probably need to preface this review by stating that I am a native Northeast Iowan. And it's about time I got around to reading one of Don Harstad's books as I live just one of the next towns over from where he was employed as a sheriff's deputy before he began his foray into writing. But even though I might have had a little easier time than some, imagining just such a scenario as that which takes place in 'Big Thaw,' I truly enjoyed this mystery set in rural Iowa. I felt Harstad's scenes were well-researched, and his background as a deputy must have provided a lot of fodder for the characters he created. I am anxious to read another book relating to the fictional sheriff's deputy, Carl Houseman's toils and travails!

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### **Trilby says**

Don't believe the descriptive blurb on goodreads. If you liked "Fargo", you may not like, and may in fact hate this novel. Like "Fargo" it's about crime in upper Midwest, but it has none of the wit and satirical bite of the movie. The narrator, a small-town Iowa cop, is likable, but he ain't no Margie. The criminal he's chasing is a master, a would-be terrorist. (Ya sure, dat's real likely to happen in Hicksville, Iowa.) The other characters are pretty much flat, predictable types, the silliest being a sexy dumb/clever photographer with the unlikely name of Shamrock. What's good about the novel is the insider's view of police work in the rural Midwest. Harstad, a former Iowa cop, presents a believable portrait of the politics and inner workings of small-town law enforcement.

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### **Helena Bowles says**

A return to form with the third outing for Carl Houseman. While I felt the pacing of "The Known Dead" was a little off, this time it is spot on.

Houseman gets caught up in a pursuit and picks up a local loser who dropped off a couple of friends so they could burgle a house. Yesterday. He hasn't seen them since and it's the middle of an Iowa winter. He's afraid they've frozen to death... Upon investigation, Houseman finds them. Yes, they're dead, but not of the cold. They've been shot and there's a mystery about the owner of the house they were attempting to burgle.

"The Big Thaw" is a bookend to "The Known Dead". Together they tell two halves of one story. You can read this as a stand alone but you'll get more out of it if you've read "The Known Dead", and I think that book stands up better considered as the first half of one long novel. There are characters that cross over the two books - one very significant - and both focus on the US militia movement and its beliefs/plans/resources/abilities.

As usual Harstad is brilliant at evoking the Iowa countryside - minus 50, considerably colder than your domestic refrigerator! Houseman continues to be an engaging and enjoyable character. For various reasons we get less of DCI Agent Hester Gorse until the last third of the book and an extended climax that is brilliantly done. No spoilers, but the tension is very cleverly ramped up given that this is not a personal action set piece, but more a long drawn out planning and response, managerial sequence. As such it is far more believable - and exciting - than the gun battle courtroom sequence in "The Known Dead".

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### **Kate says**

It was fun to read a book by a local author, but this one wasn't exactly top notch. It was an interesting story to start, but the story became more and more unbelievable it progressed.

What I noticed most about this book was the strong masculine feel to it. There was very little character development that had to do with emotions - lots of procedural stuff, as someone in my book club describe it. The big indicator to me on how masculine the book was... a two page spread on details of a 22 caliber pistol versus a 22 caliber semi-automatic, or something like that.

Unless you want to support a local Iowa author, don't waste your time!

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### **Michael says**

Dpty. Sheriff Carl Houseman is called out on a freezing night in Iowa. Two home burglars are found dead in the home of Cletus Borglan.

Borglan is a wealthy farmer and believer that the govt. is interfering with the average man's rights.

The investigation slows down but one Housesman's fellow officers spots a snowmobile with sound suppressors and a driver with night goggles. When stopped the driver tries to fight with Houseman and the other officer but he's subdued. They find that he is a FBI agent.

When the Agent in Charge of the FBI arrives at the police dept. he tells Carl and the others that he's been after a man named Gabriel, real name John Henry Nieuhauser, who is planning on robbing 5 banks and had been in Cletus' home when the burglary took place.

Harstad's writng style is picturesque and could easily be filmed, it also makes it easy for the reader to imagine the scenes as if watching the story unfold.

Houseman is an interesting lead character and likeable. He is knowledgeable but still has flaws. Also interesting to read is the effect the time spent with murder investigation and how that can weigh on the quality of home life.

The robbery scenes were a bit drawn out and the story drifted but overall a good read.

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### **Spin2Knit says**

#### **Good read**

This one had me from page one. Great characters, wild plot and super human bad guy. A very entertaining book.

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