



## A Life for a Life

*Lynda McDaniel*

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### **A Life for a Life** Lynda McDaniel

When a young woman is found dead in a wilderness area of the North Carolina mountains, the county sheriff says suicide. Della Kincaid disagrees. As a former reporter in Washington, D.C., she knows how to hunt down the real story. But she's living in Laurel Falls, N.C., trying to revive a struggling general store and create a new life for herself. Without her usual sources, she turns to an unlikely cast of characters—friends, customers, ex-husband, and forger. With their help, she uncovers how unbridled greed has spawned an interwoven series of crimes and sorrows. Along the way, Kincaid discovers how much the Appalachian landscape and its people mean to her.

Lynda McDaniel, award-winning author of 15 books, has woven together true events from her early years living “back to the land” in Appalachia with an intriguing mystery story.

"A Life for a Life," an autobiographical mystery novel, shares funny, moving, and surprising stories from those years. You'll meet a cantankerous laundromat owner who was just as weird as Lynda portrayed her, and a gentle giant of a beekeeper whose love for his family was as big as he was. And Cleva, who's based on a lovely woman who taught Lynda how to can tomatoes and make the best blackberry jam you've ever tasted. Many of the other characters are fashioned after real people who opened their hearts to this deer-in-the-headlights city slicker. Lynda had moved to the mountains of North Carolina to see what rural life was all about. Over the years, she realized that everything that is important to her today—she learned in her Appalachian home.

### **A Life for a Life Details**

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## From Reader Review A Life for a Life for online ebook

### Kevin Keith says

The first of (so far) three books about an unlikely duo caught up in the local mysteries that pop up in a mountain hamlet in rural North Carolina, "A Life for a Life" introduces the fish-out-of-water investigator and her equally outsider sidekick, along with what will obviously be the recurring cast of colorful local yokels and flamboyant big-city contacts. The story gives us a sense of each of their characters, and the slightly awkward friendship that develops between the two protagonists. Along the way they force the closed-minded local sheriff to reconsider the apparent suicide of a young woman in the nearby woods, and stir up more hornets' nests than any two people ought to.

Della Kincaid is a former investigative reporter who leaves her Washington, DC, big-city life, and disgraced reporter ex-husband, behind, and buys the general store in a tiny hollow in the mountains of North Carolina, intending to live in quiet small-town retreat. She doesn't count on the begrudging attitudes of the local population toward change, and outsiders; she also doesn't expect the store to come with its own built-in Boo Radley, the teenage "Abit" who still lives next door with his family, the former proprietors of the store. Abit is an engaging and well-meaning kid with an unspecified learning disability; he got his name from his father, who would always tell people he was "a bit slow". Della struggles to settle on a more dignified name for Abit, who until then had not realized he needed one. Della tries to win the locals' acceptance, and their business, and makes friends with Abit, who, after his family simply stopped sending him to school, hangs around the store with nothing to do.

Soon after her arrival, Della comes across the body of a young woman in the woods. There is a suicide note in her purse. The sheriff writes it off as open-and-shut, but Della is not convinced. She uses her reportorial skills, and some of her former contacts, to probe into the case, despite being warned off by the sheriff. Along the way, she develops an increasingly respectful relationship with Abit, who finds pride in himself when she gives him a part-time job in the store, and shows unsuspected abilities when he contributes his own discoveries to the investigation. Not surprisingly, there is more to the story than first appears, and, not surprisingly, a lot of conflict to go through to bring it all to light. The end of the book points the way to a brighter future for both parties to this awkward partnership.

The story presentation is a little precious, perhaps unnecessarily so. It is framed as a retrospective from the point of view of Abit, who speaks in a short introductory chapter about his memories of the time 20 years before when he met Della and got involved in the murder investigation, both of them turning points in his life. The writing in that chapter is plain, but clear and grammatical; in comparison with later chapters, we see how much he has developed since the time setting of the story, and thus by implication how much good Della has done for him. The remaining chapters are all in the contemporary time of the murder and its investigation. There is no concluding chapter in the later time-frame to close the bookending started by the introductory retrospective, which gives that opening chapter an even more awkward feeling.

Each substantive chapter is told in the voice either of Della or Abit, usually alternating chapters; Abit's chapters, in mountain dialect, underscore his lack of education and worldliness, while Della's carry hints of her sophisticated tastes and big-city ways. The alternating voices sometimes seem like a somewhat forced device, as does Abit's slightly unconvincing struggle to understand and communicate, which often seems merely as if a character of normal intellect were speaking in a crude stage dialect. Though much of the charm of the book is found in Della's growing appreciation of what Abit has to offer, and Abit's blossoming under her encouragement, it can seem condescending, because Abit's "slowness" is not sold very convincingly. As Abit himself perceives, his real handicap is not that he can't participate but that people refuse to let him.

Many of the supporting characters seem rather like Central Casting knockoffs of standard types: the belligerent southern sheriff, the sniffy religious woman, the resentful hillbilly, etc. The book does not go so far as self-parody; the characters are interesting and human, but perhaps a bit too familiar.

The actual mystery seems plausible, but undersold. The crime turns out to be tawdry and sad, and the final revelation, after many convoluted chapters of devoted sleuthing and infuriating setbacks, comes too fast and easy. More-even pacing would have helped, and the louche' ex machina character of the ex-husband is both unnecessary and annoying (it's easy to see why she left him; it's not easy to see why she puts up with him anymore).

All in all, though, it is an engaging story with interesting and charming characters. It reads as a kind of cozy freelance-investigator procedural - nice middle-aged ladies running around asking questions, with the occasional run-in with the law, armed militias, callous frauds, angry rednecks, rascalion former convicts, and LexisNexis thrown in. Though I first questioned some of the story mechanics, as noted above, I eventually found myself drawn into the story and wanting to see it through. After finishing it, I look forward to reading the next volumes in the series.

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### **Sophia says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It gives a welcoming insight in to life in rural Appalachia, such great writing and details allow you to picture yourself among the townsfolk and inside the country store. The two main characters are very likable, especially Abit who I found myself championing for through the whole story. The murder mystery definitely kept me intrigued with a few turns along the way. A great quick read.

I received a download of this book through a Goodreads Giveaway. My review is honest and in no way influenced by the giveaway.

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### **Kathleen Kelly says**

Reporter, Della Kincaid, has decided to move from Washington, D.C to Laurel Falls, N.C for a simpler life. While walking in the woods she is surprised when a man runs past her saying that "there was a body". Della and her dog do come across a body of a young woman, a supposed suicide. Della does not believe this, in spite of the suicide note.

Della enlists the help of numerous people in the community and Washington as it becomes apparent that the sheriff won't do anything to investigate the death. He claims it is suicide and that is that.

Della moved to Laurel Falls and bought a store and at first the people in the community are a bit reluctant. Most small communities are suspicious of "outsiders". The previous owner of the store, has a son, Abit. Abit is considered "not quite right". He appears to have some learning disabilities. He helps Della around the store and he becomes involved with helping Della find out who "murdered" the young woman.

The story is told in alternating chapters by Della and Abit. We learn about each of these characters that are so pivotal to the story. Della has an ex husband, who I believe she still has feelings for but he was unfaithful to her and she has a hard time believing him when he says he has changed. Abit's father is one of those down south old fashioned curmudgeon. He has very rough exterior but I believe deep down he really cares about his son.

I really enjoyed this story, a fast read with believable characters plus a suspenseful murder mystery makes this a book well worth the read. I liked how both Della and Abit's characters got stronger as the story moved on. Nicely done!

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## Skjam! says

Disclaimer: I received a download of this book through a Goodreads Giveaway to facilitate writing this review. No other compensation was requested or offered.

There's big doings down to Coburn's Country Store. The new owner, Della Kincaid, used to be a big-city reporter in Washington, D.C. She's fixed the place up nice, settling into life in this rural North Carolina community, and taken a sisterly interest in Abit, the learning-challenged boy who lives next door. She enjoys walks in the mountain forest with her dog Jake—or at least she did until she found a dead woman's body.

No one knows who the woman is or how she got there, or who the man Della saw running from the scene is, but the sheriff is quick to rule the case a suicide. Della isn't convinced, and starts snooping with the aid and/or obstruction of her quirky neighbors.

This is the first in a series of "Appalachian Mountain Mysteries" set in the 1980s, and featuring characters loosely based on the people the author met when she lived in North Carolina. (A sequel was published last month.)

Most of the chapters are narrated by Della, but there are also chapters from the viewpoint of Abit (birth name Vester), a teenager who has a learning disability his family isn't fully understanding of. He's large for his age, and sometimes his words come out wrong, so his father took him out of school. As a result, Abit spends most of his time hanging out on the porch of Coburn's, observing. This habit comes in handy when there's a murder to solve! (He also writes with a bit of dialect.)

The sheriff is intellectually lazy and impatient, so jumps to conclusions, and has a grudge against Della (his family owns a competing store) so doesn't listen to any of her theories or evidence. In fairness, we later learn that the townsfolk have not bothered telling the sheriff important details about the case because they don't like him. There's a more sympathetic law enforcement officer, but he doesn't have jurisdiction, and then becomes a suspect when certain information about his past surfaces.

Another important character is Della's ex-husband Alex, also a reporter, but disgraced due to apparent plagiarism and his drinking problem. He helps with the investigation, not least because he has access to the Lexis-Nexis database, big back in the 1980s.

The resolution to the case is mostly offstage, though savvy readers should be able to spot the culprit earlier.

Like a fair number of "cozy" mysteries, the book spends a lot of time detailing the delicious meals the characters are enjoying. I was a bit disappointed that there were no recipes in the back.

The characters are likable enough, but the book never really gripped me. Recommended to cozy mystery fans interested in the Appalachians atmosphere.

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## **Katherine says**

A look into life in rural Appalachia and a murder, too. Nice writing, limited dialogue, flat characters...although they were not run of the mill, and cheesy ending to go with the title. Probably will not read any more in this series.

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## **Ana Manwaring says**

Lynda McDaniel's cozy mystery, *A Life for a Life*, is one of the most satisfying books I've read this year. Everything about the book delighted me. I want to know more about the quirky folks in the North Carolina mountains and their southern customs.

The story is a cloze puzzle with protagonists Della, a former high-profile Washington D.C. journalist, and Abit, a somewhat "slow" fifteen-year-old local, meting out information in chapters of alternating points of view. The book commences with a prologue where Abit announces, "My life was saved by a murder." It's true. Throughout the narrative Abit and Della form a bond, and both characters journey into self-discovery and growth. Each brings skills and knowledge to the murder investigation and life in a closed society that the other lacks. Colorful supporting characters add to or hinder the work of living in Laurel Falls and finding a murderer.

McDaniel's writing style, while vivid with detail, is deceptively straightforward. She uses authentic sounding dialog and delivers real down-home southern mountain culture in what one reviewer compared to the style of Fannie Flag. *A Life for a Life* has also been compared to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both are character driven and back a strong message of forgiveness, redemption and acceptance. The characters and the setting are as much to do with the story as the mystery. McDaniel's attention to detail and adroit descriptions allow the reader to step right into Laurel Falls. Drawing from her "back to the land" years in North Carolina, McDaniel has stitched a patchwork of true and fictional events and people into a thoughtful mystery rooted in race, greed power and sorrow.

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## **Sharon Grow says**

Della Kincaid and her dog Jake, find the body of young woman in the woods surrounding her home in Laurel Falls, North Carolina. The woman is unknown to the members of the small town and the sheriff is sure that the woman committed suicide. Della and her friends are not so sure. Della, who now owns the local store, was once a reporter in Washington D.C. and is determined to find out what happened to the woman, even asking for help from her ex-husband, Alex. Della befriends a young man with learning disabilities named Vester, but everyone calls him Abit. Abit works in her store to earn money and their friendship deepens as the story progresses. Although the chapters rotate between Della telling her story and Abit telling the story from his view point this does not make the story confusing, but enhances the actual information for the reader. For anyone who has ever lived in a small town environment, you will love the variety of characters in this low-key mystery which is as much about the mystery as it is the people in the town. I very much enjoyed this book, the story, the mystery and the characters. (by paytonpuppy)

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## Wall-to-wall books - wendy says

Very nice little mystery! The whole story had a very authentic feel to it. The story flips back and forth between the point of view of Abit, a fifteen yr old who is a bit delayed, and Della, a woman who runs the local general store, former reporter. I really like books that do this. I have to say this is probably my favorite way for a book to be written. I like getting inside the mind of two different characters.

I loved the dialog and conversations. All the characters were so real feeling. I really liked both Abit and Della. They had a nice relationship - kind of sweet. She was so nice to him.

I have to admit that it was a little slow for me in spots but that didn't stop me from enjoying the book. It actually felt like it was supposed to be that way - just lolly-gagging along just as you would imagine life would be in the Appalachian Mountains. Another review mentioned "To Kill a Mockingbird" and I was like "YEAH!" It does have that feel to it.

I voluntarily posted this review after receiving this book from Partners in Crime Book Tours. Thank you!

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## Joann says

What a delightful book. I felt like I was being taken back in time when things were a lot slower and less hectic. The characters are so real and it is wonderful to see how Abit grows into a young man with the help of Della, a store owner in a small town of North Carolina. Along the way we meet the people who live in the small town and learn about their lives. This is a slow paced mystery but it was a satisfying read. Not a page-turner though. A 3.5 star.

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## Fran says

A Life for a Life: Lynda McDaniel

Stereotyping people is wrong and even misdiagnosing a student or older person because they appear to you on the surface to be mentally challenged or slow is not always the case. When the book opens we meet ABT a young man who befriended the other voice heard throughout this novel. Her name is Della and she too has a difficult past as this young man finds himself sitting outside of her store everyday a murder is committed in the woods not far away as Della and her dog Jake take some time to chill out and relax as she finds the body of a young girl and from this point on their two lives not only intertwine but will change forever. What happens when a murder, a tragedy turns into something positive for two mismatched people? Living in a small town everyone gossips and knows practically everything about everyone else. This town is no different. When Della alerts the sheriff about the death of someone named "L" he dismisses her and claims it appears to be a suicide based on a note that she found on the victim. But, something does not ring true and Della begin a former reporter and very inquisitive won't give up until she finds out who this young girl was and allows her the dignity of being properly laid to rest. A Life for A Life is a heartwarming story of how a serious tragedy gave two people a new start in life. With a sheriff named Bower who discounts much of what he hears about most things she turns to ABIT or Vester Jr. his real name to help her decipher the clues, find clues and even learn that he too has a strong value in life as we learn in the prologue when they decide to

collaborate and write a book about that spring day.

ABIT's father is abusive and cruel and although at times he shakes off the insults and physical abuse he seems to muddle through. Thinking he is worth not much and no longer allowed to do the one thing that matters to him, attend school, he trudges along each day sitting outside the Coburn store that his father once owned and hopes to see Della, get into some conversation and feel wanted. But, things take an unusual turn because Della is consumed with the murder and with the help of her friend Cleve who alleviates her stress when things get hard; they aim to learn the harsh truth about many of the people and a killer that just might be hiding in plain sight.

Della and Abit formed an alliance and since she needed help in her store she asked him to stock, watch the store and even created a Rolling Country Store that he and a man named Duane would run together. Since he was not old enough to drive they traveled together bringing food and other supplies to people that needed them. Laurel Falls, N.C. is the setting and the dialogue at times represents it so that readers get a flavor of the community and the people. Della was married to a man named Alex and the author shares their past together and when he shows up things start to drastically change.

Finding out the name of the murder victim and meeting her family was the start of honing in on why she might have been killed. But, learning about an organization named Green Treatise whose members hated the government, did not want to pay taxes and resented anything about the government unleashed a whole group of suspects and some surprised Della and Alex when they decided to attend one of their meetings. Someone was calling Della threatening her to back off and to make sure she got the message they torched her store. With the help of ABIT things got under control since his powers of observation helped save the day. But, this fight was not over and a funeral for the dead girl was planned and the suspects were all present but who chose to gain from her death?

Someone received a phone call to come to that clearing and said he was needed there. He thought that it was some kind of joke or prank by the Green Treatise. Maybe an initiation, of some guys from the government who were trying to "broker a deal." This is the man that Della saw at the sight in the clearing where the girl was killed. He touched her to see if she was alive but she was dead cold. As he stated if the sheriff bothered to look into things he would find his fingerprints at the scene but then something changes and someone is arrested for the murder but is he guilty. Working for the forest service and having feelings for Della, Gregg becomes a suspect and Della and Abit along with Alex went on a crusade to prove him innocent. This is a story told from two different voices and two different perspectives yet in the end they intertwine and blend together. Della not accepted by everyone in Laurel Falls with a somewhat checkered past and wanting to start over again yet at times floundering. Wondering why Alex was willing to help her solve the murder yet at times doubts and concerns popped into her mind. Abit has been labeled as mentally slow or challenged but as you get to know him and understand him better you will realize that he has an innate ability to sense situations, care for people and just wants his father to finally be proud of him but he feels he will amount to nothing hence living down to his own expectations by sitting outside Della's store in his own chair, an nobody better take it, and laments, listens to gossip and hopes to spend time with Della.

A story told in two voices and yet there are many more that are heard as Della and Alex start to bond yet one simple misunderstanding might alter it all. While Della found a suicide note at the crime scene, Cassie who is Gregg's assistant found another one and there lies where the mystery takes on a new tone. As Della looks at both notes she realizes that something is off. Enlisting the help of a former forger named Nigel who now works for the Treasury Department with his help she uncovers a major clue that forces Bower to realize that this might not be a suicide and that someone other than Gregg might have committed the murder but will he follow up on it or is there something else we don't know? Evidence found in Gregg's truck was it planted? Who wanted everyone to think he was guilty? Why didn't the sheriff want to look further? With the Rollin Store doing well and Abit and Duane working together Della determined to find the real killer. When Alex disappears for a while Della becomes suspicious but when he returns with Abit you won't believe what you

see and how Abit's transformation changes it all. Labeled, thought to be slow as the novel progresses you learn how much he yearns to go back to school, make himself and his father proud of him and why doing this job and working for Della has changed his life and hers too. With the killer on the loose they have to sort it out before Just who was scamming and stealing for older people? Who was pretending to house people in need but in reality taking what they owned and using it for herself to profit feeding them oatmeal and pretending to give them a clean and safe place to live?

Just who wanted Lucy dead and why and was coming after Della? Warnings not heeded and more lives on the line will they stop this person or will another body be found? An ending that will create some surprises and twists and a former Washington, D.C. reporter named Della who had investigative reporting in her blood and just might prove to be more than just the owner of a the Coburn Store and Rollin Store but maybe Ellicott City's new sleuth. Characters whose voices are definitely defined and a plot that keeps readers wondering until the very end. A LIFE FOR A LIFE: How far will you go to save yours? What happens in a small town when a murder saves not only life but opens new doors for even more?

Fran Lewis: Just reviews/MJ magazine

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### **Ann says**

I enjoyed this book about people in the Appalachian mountains. Della wanted to move out of her town and ended up in this little town called Laurel Falls She bought a little grocery store from the owners who lived next door. They had a son who liked to sit on the stores porch all the time . His dad called him Abit cause he was abit slow. His dad took him out of school when he was young yet. Abit ended up helping Della at the store do things for her. Della finds a girl dead and the sheriff said it was a suicide, but Della and Abit thought other wise. So them two and Dellas ex-husband tried to find out what really happened to this young girl . At first nobody cared about it but Della intended to find out the real truth. I'm going to read the next book called The Roads to Damascus.

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### **Stanley McShane says**

Protagonist Della Kincaid is a former DC reporter who fled from a failed marriage, years of tension, deadlines, and subtly veiled threats regarding her stories. She's bought a small mom and pop general store in the North Carolina holler of Laurel Falls and "inherited" the 15-year-old slightly learning disabled porch resident, Abit Bradshaw (son of the previous owners), and mixed breed, mid-sized doggy Jake. It was when she was hiking the woods with Jake that she encounters the body of a young woman.

Told in the POV of both Della and Abit, there is a myriad trade of hints, ideas, and suggestions to follow, carefully leading the reader into another avenue of thought. The novel, first in the series, introduces the reader to an eclectic assortment of backwoods characters complete with mannerisms and speech patterns you'd swear were learned first hand. Della's reporters' instinct is revived and she reaches out to several of her previous sources (including her ex, Alex) to help with the minute details that she feels point to murder, not suicide as the local sheriff is quick to decree and she loathe to accept.

Such a well-developed plot, gripping, that examines the characters and the mystery, each crumb leading closer to the emotional, sweet conclusion behind the climax that collars the perp and wraps the mystery. While you may have correctly guessed the perpetrator, you've also been lead on a tale both engaging and timeless. The author is a master storyteller, weaving the reader in and out of well-fleshed, fully invested characters.

I was given this ebook download by the author with no expectations regarding the read and review. My only problem came in during the second half of the book in which I began to confront a few scattered bits of crude language. I can honestly say, however, that I loved the book and can't wait to dig into the second of the series. Recommended for any who enjoy the classics (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*), literary fiction, women's fiction, and just plain ole compelling storytelling. 4.5/5

See my full review at <https://rosepointpublishing.com> on 1/20/2019

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### **Laura Thomas says**

There's nothing I love more in a mystery than a mixed bag of characters. They need to read as genuine, make mistakes, be flawed, and I don't necessarily need to like them. They need to evoke an emotional response from me.

I also need the author to hide bread crumbs throughout her tale, keeping me busy sniffing them out, and leading me down blind alleys.

I got all of that and then some. Just loved this book. The setting was fascinating. And the descriptions of the area were quite visual. I also drew from movies and shows I watch that were set in the Appalachian Mountains to get an even clearer picture.

The characters were many. I especially liked the star protagonist, Della Kincaid. She used to be a reporter in Washington, D.C. and now owns a small grocery store. She isn't afraid to stick her nose into some dark places. She's tough, smart, resourceful, and relentless, yet still has some vulnerabilities.

A close second favorite is Abit, a teenage Appalachian boy. You'll get his point of view in the story and I bet you come to adore his determination and spirit as much as I did.

The author's research into the area and its denizens shows in her telling. I felt like I'd stepped into a different place, a different way of life. Some of it not so pleasant.

Hence a murder mystery with a large suspect list and lots of secrets to peel back.

This is solid piece of work and I had a terrific time trying to figure out the villain. It wasn't easy. In fact, the author had to tell me. I guess I missed some of those bread crumbs.

And the ending was stupendous. I couldn't have asked for more.

I received a complimentary copy of this book. My review is freely given.

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### **Joan says**

This is the most satisfying mystery I have read in ages. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

The characters are the strongest aspect of this novel and they are delightful. Della Kincaid bought a small grocery store in rural Appalachia, making a new life for herself. She'd been a high profile reporter in

Washington, D.C. but had had enough of the pressure and danger. When the body of a young woman is found in the woods, Della revives her reporter instincts and will not let the murder go unsolved.

My favorite character by far, and I am sure by design, is Abit. He's a fifteen year old special needs (although they don't call it that in Appalachia) young man. Son of the previous store owners, he has his chair at the front of the store. He's a sweet fellow and Della treasures him dearly.

As good as the characters are, the construction of the novel is great too. The narrative alternates between Della and Abit, between the voice of an educated reporter and that of a country guy who hasn't made it beyond fifth grade. That way of developing the story went exceptionally well.

I highly recommend this novel to those who enjoy well crafted characters and a captivating plot. There is plenty of local color and great descriptions. I could just picture some of those Appalachian men and women. The mystery is a good one too. Thank goodness for Della as the incompetent sheriff would have never solved the case. And keep the tissues handy as the end of the novel will tug at your heart. This is the first novel I've read by McDaniel and I'll be looking for more.

I received a complimentary digital copy of this book through Partners in Crime Virtual Book Tours. My comments are an independent and honest review.

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### **Diane Griffiths says**

This book is a good look back into life in rural Appalachia and a murder to boot. The characters were accessible and seemed real to me. Was interesting to see how Abit grows into a young man with some help of the store owner Della. The story was slow paced and did not grab me, but I did enjoy reading it.

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