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MYSTERIES

Mysteries: 'I Let You Go,' 'Collecting the Dead,' 'The Dead Don't Bleed' and 'Bloodroot'

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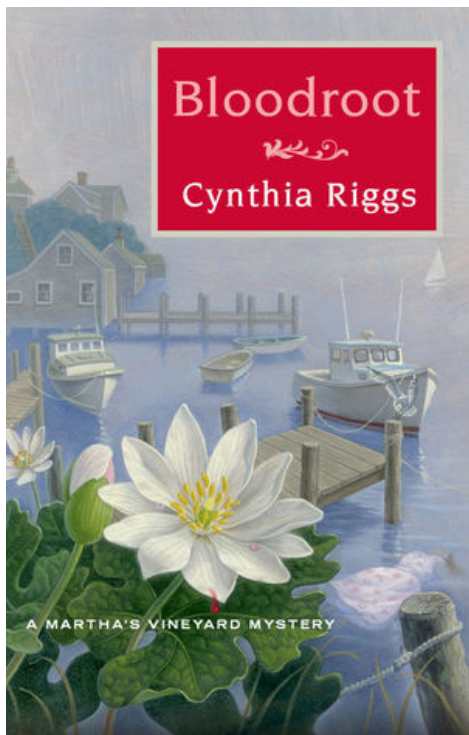
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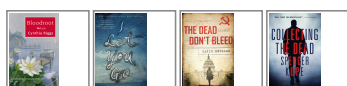
By JAY STRAFFORD Special correspondent

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NO BYLINE

"Bloodroot" by Cynthia Riggs



On a rainy day just before Christmas, 5-year-old Jordan shakes loose from his mother's hand, darts down a street in Bristol, England, and meets death. The driver who strikes the boy flees as the mother cradles her son's body.

So opens Clare Mackintosh's debut novel, **"I Let You Go"** (384 pages, Berkley, \$26), in which the author expands the boundaries of the mystery genre in a shocking, cunning psychological thriller.

Not long after Jordan's death, a broken Jenna flees to a remote seaside village in Wales, where she hopes to leave her past behind. Slowly, she begins to emerge from the darkness and resume, in different form, her career as an artist — even as she still grieves for Jordan.

Back in Bristol, Detective Inspector Ray Stevens and Detective Constable Kate Evans investigate the case, one that has aroused the public's anger.

But hang on. Midway through the novel, Mackintosh delivers a stunning twist, a

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gut punch to the reader's psyche.

To reveal more would be to soar into the stratosphere of spoilers. But there's more to come: an even greater twist that will likely induce an audible gasp from the reader in the novel's final pages, in which a monster is revealed, one who, if compared to Satan, would tarnish Satan's reputation as the unchallenged maestro of depravity.

Mackintosh, who served 12 years as a detective in the Thames Valley Police Department, left that job to work as a freelance journalist and social media consultant. Each of those skills plays out in "I Let You Go" — the title carries a double impact — as Mackintosh employs a talent for canny storytelling that tops "Gone Girl" for plot, prose and empathy.

Revel in it. Share it with your friends. But give nothing away. And if Mackintosh's next novels live up to this chilling debut, prepare for further jolts and late nights.

Color and texture. Each is a vital element in an oil painting, or an upholstery choice, or a tree's bark.

But in Spencer Kope's debut novel, **"Collecting the Dead"** (320 pages, Minotaur Books, \$25.99), they constitute a special ability for Magnus "Steps" Craig. An FBI tracking specialist, Steps concentrates not on physical clues but on the "shine" — the color and texture of murder victims and suspects he "sees" via a form of synesthesia.

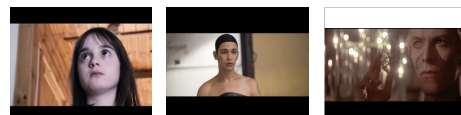
In his latest case, Seattle-based Steps and his FBI partner travel among southern Oregon, western Nevada and especially Northern California as they pursue a serial killer who specializes in abducting, raping and murdering young brunettes. The murderer also leaves his mark at each scene — a frowning visage — and he's soon nicknamed the Sad Face Killer.

Kope, a crime analyst for the Whatcom County, Wash., Sheriff's Office, hypnotizes the reader in this brilliant debut, not only for its addictive storyline but also by creating, in Steps, a good man blessed and plagued by his particular talent. Endlessly frightening, occasionally funny, "Collecting the Dead" portends a great future for author and hero in a promised sequel — and beyond.

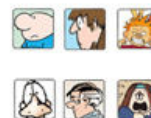
As World War II moved toward a close in the spring of 1945, the Cold War — an even more perilous conflict — was forming.

That era finds engrossing reading in **"The Dead Don't Bleed"** (320 pages, Pegasus, \$25.95), the debut novel of David Krugler, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville.

When Lt. j.g. Logan Skerrill — who works in the Naval Intelligence Office — is murdered in a Washington back alley, two investigators from the same agency, Lts. Ellis Voigt and Terrance Daley, are assigned to the case. Their task: Determine whether Skerrill was a Soviet spy and find his killer. To do so, Voigt must go undercover, an assignment that puts him at risk. But the greater danger is to the



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Scandinavian Solstice

Sun, Jun 26, 12:00 pm EDT

country, as Voigt unearths a nuclear angle and encounters a cast of well-drawn conspirators.

Krugler, the author of several works of nonfiction, brings expertise and authenticity to his first thriller, as well as a penetrating portrait of wartime Washington. And Voigt — a man with secrets of his own — stands out as one of the most intriguing characters in espionage fiction. Expect the unexpected in this thumping good read.

When crotchety senior citizen Mildred Wilmington dies after collapsing in her dentist's chair, few grieve. Not her four unpleasant grandchildren, together at Mildred's home on Martha's Vineyard for the first time in a decade. Not the staff of the dental clinic, who resent Mildred's disdainful treatment of them.

But justice must be served, and 92-year-old Victoria Trumbull is on the case in "Bloodroot" (304 pages, Minotaur Books, \$25.99), the 13th entry in Cynthia Riggs' series starring the poet, deputy and amateur sleuth.

All the suspects have motives — revenge and inheritance stand out — for Mildred's death from arsenic poisoning. Riggs, a 13th-generation Islander in her mid-80s, is adept at fashioning an intriguing puzzle rendered in no-nonsense New England prose with particular respect for the abilities of the elderly. And she spins another good yarn.

So kudos to the octogenarian author and her nonagenarian detective, who together offer a classic whodunit in this tale of arsenic and old ladies.

Jay Strafford is a retired writer and editor for The Times-Dispatch. Contact him at jstrafford@timesdispatch.com.

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