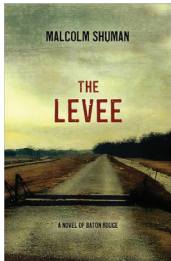


prospect of an evolving Italian-American literature without the touchstone of an immigrant experience seems grim: indeed, most selections in this book hark back to the immigrant experience, which amounts to a redux from an earlier time in America as well. Bold and enterprising in scope, *Wild Dreams* will endure as a milestone in Italian-American literature. *Korina Cornish*

## MYSTERY



### The Levee: A Novel of Baton Rouge

**Malcolm Shuman**  
Academy Chicago Publishers  
Softcover \$16.95 (230pp)  
978-0-89733-583-6

Only an experienced writer like Malcolm Shuman could write a mystery like *The Levee*, because it takes the confidence of experience to strip away the usual conventions and present a coming-of-age story with a dark whodunit at its heart.

With fourteen mystery novels to his credit, Shuman shrewdly, and for the most part seamlessly, weaves a simple but compelling story of how one night changes four teenage boys. But things are never quite what they seem, and the truth is packed away until the surprising conclusion.

There is a conventional underpinning—the older man returning to the scene of his boyhood to find answers to a troubling episode from adolescence—but the author uses it only as a springboard to create settings worthy of a Gothic thriller and characters who have the kinds of secrets readers won't be able to guess.

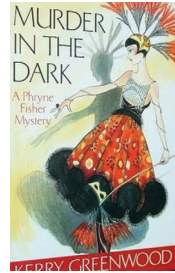
The book is set in and around Baton Rouge, both in 1959 and the present-day. Among other places, the action occurs at an abandoned slave plantation, a cemetery where a teacher is brutally murdered, and an old mansion spooky enough to scare the bejebbers out of the Hardy Boys.

Shuman's teenagers, Colin, Stan, Toby, and Blaize, have all the traits and differences you'll find in most teenage boys, though one has to wonder if the kids of 1959 were as foul-mouthed as Shuman remembers.

Colin is the narrator, both as a youngster and as a sixty-three-year-old crime writer who tries to face up to something that still gives him nightmares. The parallel narratives show Stan as the most mysterious, Toby the least likeable, and Blaize as the one you think you understand the best—but don't.

Part of the interest in *The Levee* comes from some of the secondary characters, an assortment of weird or troubled southerners who'd fit in some of Faulkner's stories: Rufus Sikes, the "meanest white trash S.O.B. who'd ever lived"; Bergon, a brooding Cajun storekeeper, and the eerie Darwin Droad, who could give Boo Radley a run for his money.

Based on a true story, *The Levee* at times is overly fanciful, and the ending includes a somewhat strained politically correct twist on top of a revelation about the murder. But these things detract only a little from a well-paced, fun read. *Dick Cady*



### Murder in the Dark

**Kerry Greenwood**  
Poisoned Pen Press  
Hardcover \$24.95 (278pp)  
978-1-59058-439-2

It's the Last Best Party of 1928, held over five days on the grounds of the old Chirside place in Werribee, Australia, and thrown by the decadent Templar twins, the end of an illustrious English family in possession of a huge fortune and a large following of devoted acolytes. Phryne Fisher has been invited.

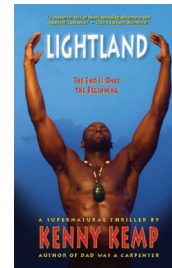
At twenty-eight, Phryne is unflappable—if anything, she seems to like "wickedness." She is a Latin-quoting, French-poetry reciting lady with a soft spot for adopted children and the uninhibited erotic practices of the sybaritic Templar twins. Of the party, she says, "It might be dangerous and it will certainly shock you. And I might even want to be shocking myself, you know."

But murder, poisonings, and several stabbing will try anyone's sense of fun. She must solve a series of riddles to uncover "the stone-cold killer" out to murder one of the Templars. With the help of a haplessly infatuated young man at the party, Phryne has to outwit and stop this trickster.

Bound to delight fans of lady detective series from Agatha Christie to Alexander McCall Smith, this mystery evokes a time and place in a far-off land, peopled with marvelous, endearing characters, and led by the amusing, acerbic, clever Phryne. After someone attempts, for instance, not "to kill, just to mutilate" with ground glass in her cold cream, she dons her negligee and secures her little gun in her sleeve to investigate. "She needed some answers. And some coffee."

This is the sixteenth book in the Phryne Fisher series by Kerry Greenwood, author of more than forty novels and the recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the Crime Writers' Association of Australia. Though contrived, this mystery is not without pleasures. The characters are well-drawn, the dialogue crackles, and the action never flags. The story may take place near Melbourne, but it's nearer still to the opulent center of the jazz age when sex and opium went hand in hand like murder in the dark. (March) *Trina Carter*

## SPECULATIVE



### Lightland: A Supernatural Thriller

**Kenny Kemp**  
Alta Films Press  
Softcover \$14.95 (464pp)  
978-1-892442-39-0

In 2029, scientists race against time to find a cure for a hemorrhagic fever named for the blue-black bruises it causes: Cobalt is fast and deadly—a pandemic killing millions.

Chris Tempest, an archaeologist, and Kate Seagram, a medical researcher for the CDC, have a long-distance relationship—Chris in New York, Kate in Washington—until Chris brings back a mummy from Tanzania. The tribesman was buried in a cave with his heart in a canopic jar. The discovery leads the pair in two entirely different directions: tests on blood from the ancient tribesman's heart show he was immune to Cobalt, and Kate's boss clones him to find a cure. However, cloning tears K'tanu's spirit from Lightland, the afterlife where he has been peacefully dwelling with his wife and children.

With an eye-catching cover and billed as a supernatural thriller, the book is filled with references to religion, faith, and life after death, but no real depth. The somewhat shallow characters have doubts, too casual to be called crises of faith, that resolve too easily—with visions or even convenient visits to Lightland—yet their doubts persist. There's no doctrine in this book to offend religious denominations, and there are supernatural elements, but they seem more tacked on to the story than flowing through its veins, more coincidence than miracle.

The story rockets along at a good clip, with fluid writing and lots of scientific detail—some of which the reader will wonder about, because of other inaccuracies in the text. In one example, Chris has been living in a deserted house for two years when one day he finds the skeleton of the former owner sitting against the garage wall, still fully clothed, with the butt of his last cigar on the ground near his left hand. However, the house is isolated; animals would have dragged off the body, and the butt would have rotted away to nothing. Also, none of the main characters contract Cobalt, although there are plenty of opportunities and none of them is immune.

The author's prose flows smoothly: "Mother Moon was rising majestically above the trees. Tonight, she would watch over both K'tanu and Father Sun as they died and awaited rebirth tomorrow." With more character development and more life in the supernatural elements, it would have been a superior book.

Still, there's plenty here to hold readers' interest. *Marlene Y. Satter*