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Jess Montgomery. *The Stills*.
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Reviewed by *Betty J. Bruther*

Jess Montgomery's new book in the Kinship Historical Mystery series takes a deep dive into Prohibition and its impact on the people of fictional Bronwyn County, Ohio. Returning as main characters in the book are Sheriff Lily Ross and her friend Marvena Whitcomb Sacovech, the protagonist of *The Widows*, which explored the world of coal mining in Appalachia through the eyes of two women—one, a member of the local elite, the wife and widow of the local sheriff Daniel Ross; the other, a widow, a member of the working class. The author highlights the efforts of union organizers to expose the unsafe conditions in the local mines and the tyranny of the mine owners in the company town through the medium of a murder mystery. A second novel, *The Hollows*, works in the same manner, allowing the author to explore two major themes—white supremacy and male privilege.

As the new story, *The Stills*, opens, a teenage boy witnesses a seemingly murderous attack on a federal agent. In the aftermath of the attack, he drinks some of the moonshine that he was guarding, and collapses. Sheriff Lily Ross is forced to arrest and imprison Marvena Sacovech, the producer of the illicit spirits, which are believed to be tainted. Subsequently, Sheriff Ross discovers Marvena's moonshine is not tainted; instead the teenager's sipping has revealed that he has sugar diabetes. Marvena had produced the moonshine to raise money to treat her daughter's severe asthma, which is treated through her grandmother's homeopathic treatments and the local doctor's prescription of

asthma cigarettes. As for the diabetes, the youngster learns to inject himself with insulin. Faith healing, folk medicine, and scientific remedies for common ills are a secondary focus of this text.

Sheriff Lily Ross also discovers that two individuals from *The Widows* have returned to the county—Elias and Luther Ross, both of whom had been involved in local corruption and the murder of her husband, Daniel Ross. Their appearance is the first of a series of events, including two murders that shake Sheriff Lily Ross's faith in her friends. George Vogel, a crime boss, and his minion, Abe Miller, are back, as are his new wife, a local, Fiona Weaver Vogel, who has inherited property from her recently deceased uncle, Henry. George Vogel has plans for isolated, rugged Bronwyn County—he wants to build a secret moonshine factory on his wife's property. Furthermore, as readers discover, the federal government has poisoned manufactured alcohol, so that it cannot be used as a base in making illicit spirits. Rumors of tainted alcohol spread throughout the community, threatening the independent craft distillers. In fact, George Vogel plans on tainting the local speakeasy's alcohol, but the plan is revealed. Both Luther Ross and Elias Ross are removed permanently from the tale; George Vogel goes to jail. Two murders are solved. A Christmas celebration ends the tale; life returns to normal in Bronwyn County, Ohio, in December 1927.

Women are the stars of the series—Lily Ross, the sheriff; Marvena Sacovech, the working-class country woman, and even the nascent crime lord, Fiona Vogel. Each woman proves strong and resilient. They chart their own courses, overcoming obstacles set in their way, leaving behind the societal expectations of their roles. For example, in *The Widows*, Lily and Marvena work together to solve the murder of the sheriff, Daniel Ross, whose widow, Lily, has been appointed sheriff to serve out his term until a special election. Often municipalities and counties did this very act, appointing the widow to serve out her deceased husband's term until an election, so that the family could receive a paycheck. Often the women were just figureheads, but in real life as in the novel, some became excellent law officers, winning election in their own right. Readers also take a deep dive into the life

of an Appalachian coal miner. The novel opens with the explosion and deaths of miners at the Widowmaker mine, located near Rossville, a classic company town. A local miner and union organizer, Tom Whitcomb (Marvena's brother) has been accused of Daniel Ross's murder. Lily and Marvena investigate the murder, one hoping to reveal the truth about her husband's death and the other, hoping to clear her brother. During the investigation, readers are introduced to life in the company town, where the mine owner, Luther Ross, pays the miners in company scrip, not U.S. currency, forcing them to purchase food and other necessary items from the company store. He also owns all housing in the town, so he can evict union organizers and others that he feels are a threat to his profits. He can even close the company-owned elementary school, so that the older boys are forced to work in the mines. George Vogel, the regional crime lord, has invested in the mines, hiring enforcers to help Luther Ross suppress the union organizers. Both men place monetary profit over human lives. Although the two women solve the murder, they find themselves making a Faustian deal for the greater good of the community. Rather than face arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, George Vogel withdraws his money from the mining company. Once that happens, the mining company is sold to new, more humane owners. The new owners allow the establishment of a union and upgrade mine safety. Tom Whitcomb is cleared of any complicity in Daniel Ross's murder, but the men who ordered the sheriff's death are allowed to leave the county.

Approximately six months later in *The Hollows*, Lily Ross, the newly elected sheriff, becomes embroiled in another murder, the brutal death of an elderly woman thrown in front of train. The elderly woman holds a dark secret which is revealed over the course of the novel. Lily Ross and Marvena Whitcomb discover the pernicious role of white supremacy and male privilege in their community. Lily finds that her community has a white supremacist underbelly—the presence of a women's chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. The elderly woman, suffering from what is clearly Alzheimer's disease, called dementia, has retreated into her distant past, escaping from the local mental asylum,

The Hollows, and wandered into danger. Her secret, written in her journal, rests hidden in the asylum. Meanwhile, Hildy Cooper, a friend of the women, finds herself rebelling against the expectations of her mother, who has arranged for her marriage to an older wealthy man. Cooper inserts herself into the investigation, placing herself in some danger as a resident of the asylum, so she can find the woman's journals. She reads the journals, finding a mentor in the life of a world traveler and adventurer. She finds the courage to break her engagement. The journals also contain an explosive secret, a member of the regional elite has been "passing for white" unknowingly. As a child, the elderly woman had carried a newborn African American child to an abolitionist family where he was raised as a white man. Since that time, members of the family had left behind their abolitionist beliefs, embracing the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy. The killer hoped to maintain the family position in society, and therefore, brutally murdered the old woman.

As for the novels, they fit neatly into the regional historical mystery genre, allowing the reader to explore the history of a particular time and place, touching on current "hot button" issues, such as feminism, socialism, and racism, all within the context of a re-created world. You, as reader, can be looking over the shoulder of a private investigator, Alba Flavia, walking the mean streets of Imperial Rome in the first century of the Common Era or "the eye of the red tsar," Pekkala, walking across Red Square in Stalin's Moscow searching for the truth about the deaths of the Romanovs. And you might learn a bit of history.

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