

Arts Books

A threefer of keepers

Enjoyable reads for the summer

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There are alternatives for summer reading that are well written and fun without being too light and silly. Here are looks at a stand-alone novel by *New York Times* bestselling author Sharyn McCrumb, plus new installments in two of my favorite series.

In *Once Around the Track*, novelist Sharyn McCrumb returns to the world of NASCAR with a character-driven story about the first all-female racing team. McCrumb became a fan a few years ago when she studied stock car racing as she penned *St. Dale*, the very interesting retake on *The Canterbury Tales*. In the process, she also found her driver, Ward Burton, who was the inspiration for Badger Jenkins, the driver in the novel chosen to be the lone male on the women's team.

As many locals know, NASCAR fans pick a driver to support, and the loyalty to that driver extends even after his death in some cases -- Dale Earnhardt, for example. But extreme fan loyalty can also be difficult, as McCrumb writes on her Web site. "What really interested me in this story was that feeling of awe that fans have for their driver, and the mythology they create about a man who is a stranger to them."

McCrumb also takes a close look at the double-sided nature of celebrity -- like superheroes, these drivers seem to become quite different when they don the firesuits. She calls it "the Spider-Man effect."

If you know very little about NASCAR and want to find out what the hoopla is about, check out McCrumb's entertaining and well-researched story. McCrumb notes that she consulted various experts to ensure accurate technical details. "This may be the first book ever to have a pit crew to make sure I got everything right."

Alexander McCall Smith is as delightful in person as he is on the page. The prolific author was in Charlotte a year or so ago and gave one of the funniest lectures I've ever heard. Resplendent in his kilt, he regaled the audience in Booth Playhouse with thoughts on being a writer and on life.

The eighth book of his *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series, *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, showcases all the characters fans have come to know and love. In this outing, the main character, Precious Ramotswe, is busy with a sensitive investigation at a hospital, so her husband Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni takes on an investigation of his own. (McCall Smith says he really doesn't know what the initials J.L.B. stand for.) We also get to know more about the impending wedding of Mma Ramotswe's assistant Mma Makutsi and Mr. Phuti Radiphuti. A bit of conflict between Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi adds some intrigue.

In addition to a look at life in Botswana, the series offers well-written, thoughtful stories with good characters and no gore. Through Mma Ramotswe, McCall Smith espouses a gentle and philosophical -- and often humorous -- approach to life.

Jacqueline Winspear's *Maisie Dobbs* series continues with the fourth book, *Messenger of Truth*. This is an intelligent and evocative series, set in England in the time between the wars, and Maisie Dobbs is one of a generation of women coming to terms with life made very different because of the first conflict. As a young girl, Maisie was "in service" when her employer, Lady Rowan Compton, found her reading in the library. Lady Compton took Maisie under her wing and paid for her education as well as introducing her to the man who became her teacher and mentor, Maurice Blanche.

In *Messenger of Truth*, Maisie's business as a psychologist and private investigator has grown, and she's getting settled in the new flat she purchased. The twin sister of artist Nicholas Bassington-Hope comes to consult Maisie because she doesn't feel her brother was careless enough to fall from a scaffold built for the installation of his latest, highly anticipated work of art. The police think the death was an accident, but Maisie soon realizes there's much more to the family -- and to this artist -- than meets the eye.

On a personal level, Maisie grapples with her break from her longtime mentor, Blanche. As her assistant Billy Beale deals with family problems of his own, exacerbated by the worsening economic depression, she also ponders the larger implications of how some handle wealth while most of the rest of the population struggle to survive.



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Once Around the Track

by Sharyn McCrumb

Kensington Books, 320 pages, \$25

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

by Alexander McCall Smith

Pantheon, 213 pages, \$21.95

Messenger of Truth

by Jacqueline Winspear

Henry Holt, 323 pages, \$24