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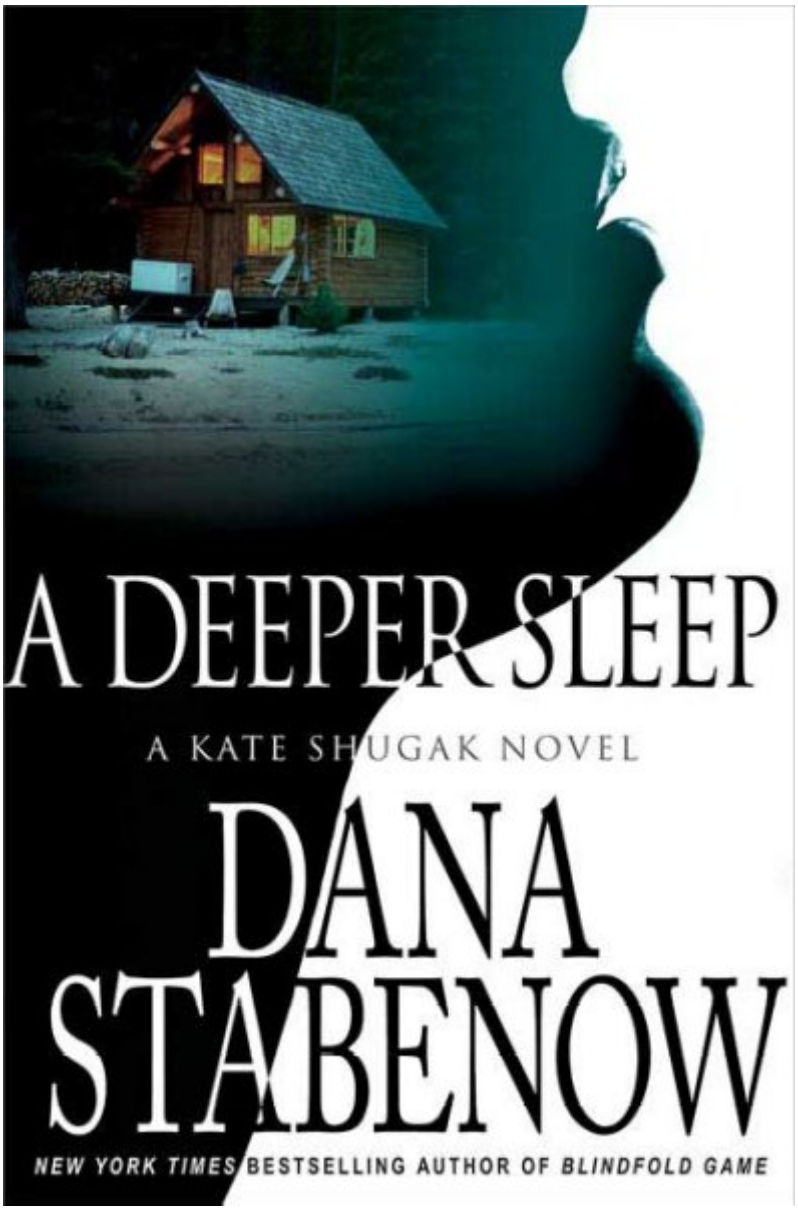
A Deeper Sleep



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Recently, I had to do some long-distance driving so I did something I rarely do, listen to a book. I chose *A Deeper Sleep* [2], a mystery by Dana Stabenow. I wanted something both absorbing and light while I was negotiating the long interstates of Illinois.

This book was spot-on. It?s set in and around Denali National Park. If you like your sleuths both tough and appealing, Kate Shugak is the detective for you. She?s part Aleut, has lived on the outskirts of the great national park all her life and has a good deal of street (or should I say trail cred) with the natives, most of whom are her relatives.

Near the small community of Niniltna, an evil guy, Louis Deem, has killed his wife and attacked several girlfriends?one way to get rid of your exes. Kate and Trooper Jim Chopin work together to locate the evidence that will seal his fate. But though they manage to arrest him several times?he?s a sly, cagey murderer, and a jury (swayed by an excellent Anchorage defensive attorney) releases him.
A big family, the Smiths, moves into the area. They may or may not be living on an illegal homestead at the edge of the park. The family is very conservative and everyone seems cowed by the father, except his oldest daughter Abigail who starts dating Louis. Mr. Smith shares with Deem an interest in gold mining, or at least making money from the mines without doing any backbreaking work.

What I really like about the series is that Stabenow has a deep understanding of the Alaskan lifestyle in general and Aleut native culture in particular. She describes clueless city guys who drive snow machines into the wilderness without proper training, supplies, or even a dose of fear. Too many people get lost in the park doing what Shugak calls ?suicide by Alaska.? Their folly boosts the local economy because the natives later sell the expensive snow machine equipment that was abandoned.

Stabenow also describes a native feast and the female leadership of the clan, powered by what she calls the aunties. In fact, before she died, Kate?s grandmother encouraged Kate to become the next leader. But so far, Kate is not ready for that. She?s healing from a vicious beating and has recently moved because thugs set her cabin on fire. She?s parenting an adopted teenage son, and has a strong romance with a man who is not sure he wants to commit. Her new dog, Mutt, accompanies her on most outings, but that?s not always a good thing.

Bernadette Dunn does an excellent job giving voice to the characters. She deftly switches between male and female, educated and not, native and non-native, old and young. She manages to convey authentic native accents, a special needs person?s dialogue, and even Shugak?s beloved dog, Mutt, thinking.

When Kate?s love life or Deem?s latest cruelty really upset her, she bakes bread. This mystery presents some lovely domestic scenes where Kate, her son and her boyfriend share several fantastic Alaskan meals. And interspersed between thrilling plot developments and the development of very real and human characters, Stabenow slips in exquisite descriptions of Alaskan scenery. Curl up in the heat of summer and enjoy this cool Alaskan mystery.

If you want to begin with the first in the series, choose It?s a Cold Day for Murder [3]. You won?t be disappointed. And if you want to try another Alaskan mystery writer consider John Straley. He writes about a completely different area of Alaska, Southeast, which is even more beautiful than interior Alaska and just as interesting. The Big Both Ways [4]also has a Puget Sound connection.

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Posted by Dory L. on Aug 1, 2012

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