

Small Press

Reviewing the Independents

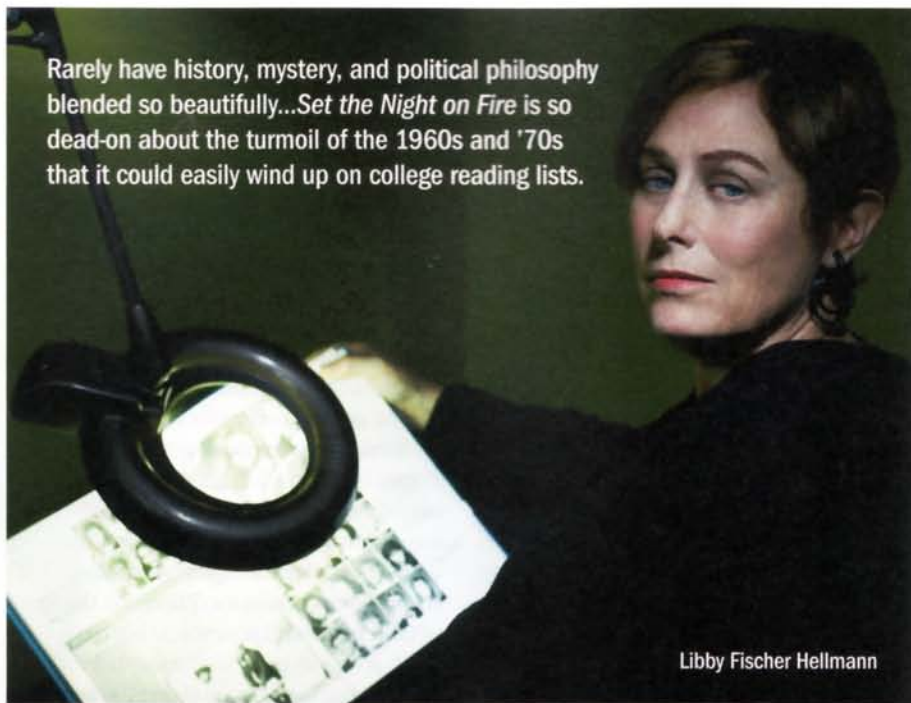
by Betty Webb

The snows may be deep where you are, but things could be worse. You could be stuck in the house with nothing good to read. Fortunately, some fine independent press books recently arrived to cheer us through this bone-chilling season, so let's start with the best. The countercultural movement of the Sixties and Seventies reemerges in *Set the Night on Fire*, a haunting thriller by Libby Fischer Hellmann (Allium Press, \$16.99 soft cover, \$26.99 hardcover).

Charles Manson, Bob Dylan, Neil Armstrong, the hippies and yuppies, the Chicago Eight, the Weathermen, the Kent State killings—all pop out of the time machine as young Lila Hilliard attempts to discover why someone has fire-bombed her house, killing her father and brother, and is now trying to kill her. Aiding in her quest is the older-but-wiser Dar Gantner, a paranoid ex-con who in the '70s was a founding member of the radical student collective that may be implicated in the ongoing attempts on Lila's life.

In a twisted plot worthy of Machiavelli, Hellman segues back and forth through the decades, from student radicals to modern politicians, contrasting early '70s idealism with today's cynicism. As Lila and Gar explore the roots of the contemporary killings, they discover that not everyone in the collective was what they appeared to be. In some cases, surface idealism fronted for malice; apparent naïveté disguised venality. Now those old duplicities are playing out to taint one former member's current involvement in high finance and ruin another member's presidential aspirations.

Hellman trots out so many plot twists and time turns that it's sometimes hard to keep up, but it's definitely worth the effort. *Set the Night on Fire* is not only an engaging thriller, but it's a thoughtful exploration of the differences between activists who meant well, and those who were just in it for the power trip. Rarely have history, mystery, and political philosophy blended so beautifully, and Hellman makes it look easy. *Set the Night*



Libby Fischer Hellmann

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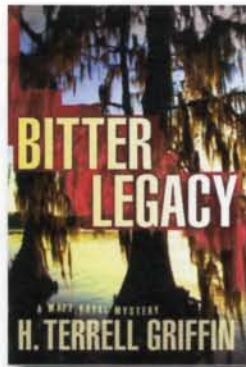
on Fire is so dead-on about the decade's turmoil that it could easily wind up on the required reading list in college-level American History classes.

I'll admit it, I'm a total sucker for Maureen Carter's tough and not always admirable British detective, Bev Morriss. In *Death Line* (Creme de la Crime/Dufour, \$14.95), Bev is still recovering from the knife attack that almost killed her, but did manage to kill her unborn twins. The aftermath of the attack also damaged the career of Bill Byford, her former boss, to the extent that he's being pressured to re-

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sign from the force. Bev doesn't always handle stress well, so when the mean streets of Birmingham, England see an increase in child abuse cases, she begins to unravel. Then 10-year-old Josh Banks—child of a drunken prostitute—is abducted. When his body is found, Bev suspects the case has a connection to the decades-old kidnap and murder of 10-year-old Scott Myers, and against the warnings of her higher-ups, begins working the case. She's not the only detective haunted by the child killings. Each of the hardnosed coppers on her squad has nightmares about tiny corpses, and their memories haunt each of them in different

ways, often making them rage against each other. Bev is an intriguing character—foul-tempered, foul-mouthed, and so vicious that the other cops have to pull her off mouthy suspects. But Bev can also be tender, too, especially with crime victims, and there are enough crime victims on her Birmingham beat that she gets plenty of practice. In lesser hands, Bev would be unlikable, but the brilliance of Carter's writing keeps us sympathetic towards this damaged copper, even when she's speeding down the road to self-destruction.



The gritty, exciting *Full Mortality* by Sasscer Hill (Wildside Press, \$11.95), is set on Maryland race tracks, where protagonist Nikki Latrelle is a female jockey attempting to survive in a man's world. And a rough world it is, too. Nikki's world is as dirty as it is glamorous, packed with physical violence, betting scams, and insurance rip-offs, where horses and humans often pay the ultimate price. Simply because of her gender, the gutsy Nikki is so loathed by some male jockeys that one engineers an on-track accident that kills her horse and injures her. When the jockey is later found murdered, Nikki becomes the main suspect and is warned off the track, which dries up her income. Now she can't even make her rent, let alone pay the board bill for the horse she rescued from a slaughterhouse. To keep body