A Book of Practical Cats

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When you notice a cat in profound meditation, The reason, I tell you, is always the same: His mind is engaged in rapt contemplation…

The Naming of Cats — TS Eliot

The Tail of the Tip-Off is the thirteenth in the series of Mrs. Murphy mysteries, written by Rita Mae Brown and Sneaky Pie Brown. For those of you unfamiliar with this series, Mrs. Murphy is a brown tabby cat who lives in Crozet, Virginia with her human companion, Mary “Harry” Haristeen, and her two animal companions: Pewter (a grey cat), and Tucker (a corgi). Harry, the postmistress of Crozet, has an insatiable curiosity about anything going on in her small town. In these mysteries, the animals talk to each other and to other animals as well, using their senses to discover clues that humans cannot perceive and trying to communicate them to their owners. Lest you think this is just too cute, the humans cannot understand the animals and hear only assorted meows, barks, chirps, and neighs. Anyone who has a cat or a dog can understand the frustration the animals must feel when they are being very clear about what they want and we “just don’t get it.”

The plot of this murder mystery centers on the University of Virginia women’s basketball team and the basketball stadium known as “The Clam.” After one game, avid fan and local contractor H.H. Donaldson drops dead in the parking lot of an apparent heart attack. In the morgue, the coroner notices a small bump on the victim’s neck and discovers that the left ventricle of the victim’s heart was contracted, while the right ventricle was normal. Pronouncing that the victim was done-in by an unidentified poison, he sets in progress a series of formal investigations by the sheriff’s office and informal ones by Harry, her friend Susan, and her sometime rival in love and horseback riding “Boom Boom” Craycroft. Mrs. Murphy, Pewter and Tucker are, of course, involved in the latter because they go almost everywhere with Harry.

Having to send the body to the State Coroner’s office in Richmond to identify the poison ensures that there is plenty of time for multiple suspects to arise, additional victims to…
As to the plot, the contractor H.H. Donaldson was not a very nice person, so he was hardly mourned. His widow emerges as the prime suspect because it turns out that H.H. had been having affairs all over the county. The local building inspector and his assistant are caricatures of nasty bureaucrats and one almost wishes that either of them would be the next victim or the murderer. A competing and more successful contractor is a genuinely nice person with a devoted family. The new architect in town is an attractive young woman who is aloof and somewhat prickly, and except for the fact that she takes in a stray Labrador retriever, not very likeable. If one is new to this series of books, then keeping track of all the characters will likely be a daunting task; however, most of the characters are long-time residents of Crozet and recur frequently in these mysteries. The fact that many of these characters reappear in Brown’s books facilitates solving each mystery: it is almost guaranteed that both the victim(s) and the murderer are characters new to the series.

I confess that my addiction to the Mrs. Murphy mysteries lies in the fact that I have both a brown tabby cat and a fat gray cat, and that I grew up about fifteen miles from Crozet, so I know the area and landmarks very well. As murder mysteries go, Rita Mae Brown’s are certainly not classics. They are, however, very entertaining and make excellent summer beach reading.