A Birder Murder

by Stephanie Malinski

In a town that thrives on PTA meetings and the only important news is the result of last night’s “big” game, Shakopee, Minnesota needed something new to discuss. (In my four years at the high school, the football team won one game.) This fall Jan Dunlap’s book provided just the pick-me-up the community needed.

“It’s the most exciting thing to happen since the President visited the Farm!” gushed Shakopee High School (SHS) librarian Dennis Straus told SHS’s newspaper, The Prowler. The visit to which Straus was referring occurred in 2000, when President Bill Clinton visited the Hauer (the equivalent of royalty in Shakopee) family’s farm to give a speech on American trade. This fall, Dunlap’s status as hometown author, turned her into a Shakopee hero who even overshadowed President Clinton.

The community knows Jan Dunlap. As a guidance counselor at SHS, her college essay help pushes countless graduates into their first choice schools each year. Additionally, Dunlap is a Shakopee native; in a small town like Shakopee, where gossip is traded over coffee and peach cobbler at Wampach’s diner, being a native means that everyone knows your father, or grandmother, or maybe your Aunt Cathy – you cannot be anonymous. What the community did not know though is that Dunlap is an avid birder. She has spent years of her life handcrafting her backyard to make it a welcome haven for birds across the country. When she decided to write a novel, Dunlap stuck with what she knew, combining her hobby and her career.

Last fall, the guidance counselor sat down to write about another birder guidance counselor. There were a few differences though: her fictional counselor was a man named Bob White, and he lives in a town adjacent to Shakopee. White discovers a body while birding in Minnesota’s North Shore. He then spends the rest of the novel trying to solve the murder mystery.

Her inspiration came from the high school students with whom she interacted daily. “It became obvious [while working as a counselor] that this is really good, fertile ground for developing characters,” Dunlap told The Prowler. Additionally, Dunlap used her own son Bob as a reference. Bob, an expert birder, “makes sure all the birding references are accurate,” she continued. “He’ll tell me it’s not right if I have a certain bird nesting in a tree, and they actually nest on the ground.” However, Dunlap’s book is not just for the avid birder or even just for those who prefer murder mystery books. She incorporated humor to try to appeal to a larger audience. “I wanted it to be really humorous, there are lots of eccentric birders out there,” said Dunlap.

Although the book has not yet been released, there is already a 16-person wait list at the Shakopee Branch of the Scott County Library System. Additionally, the town is now planning a celebration bigger than the annual Derby Day’s parade. The “Friends of the Library Society” is planning a reception in her honor. Dunlap will be present, signing books and will read some excerpts from the mystery. She has even hinted that she may bring a chapter or two from her second book, Murder on Warbler Weekend, which follows her first book, and is part of the four book series named Bob White’s Birder Murder Mystery, which will be released later this year.

After the reception, there will be a dinner at Arnie’s Friendly Folks Club Bar. Tickets are $15 dollars a person (a bit steep, but who can resist Mayor John Schmitt’s homemade venison
chili?) and include dinner, dessert from the *Midwestern Pie Ladies*, and entertainment from Dunlap’s nephew’s band, *Beneath The Burning Pyre*.

Following the dinner, Dunlap will give a short reading and will then be presented with the first annual Shakopee Award for Achievement in Literature. After what will certainly be a heartfelt acceptance speech, Shakopeeans can look forward to dancing the night away. Dennis Straus told *The Prowler* that the entire staff at SHS is “excited to kick of their heels and dance in honor of Dunlap.”

The following morning, Dunlap will be the first guest at Shakopee Library’s new series entitled “Local Authors reading to Children.” She will read two short books, likely about birds, to children in grades kindergarten through second. After, the library will provide a cupcake snack and Dunlap will lead a workshop on writing your first book. Each child who attends will go home with a six-page laminated story and a new knowledge about birds species commonly found in Minnesota. Finally, after a long celebration, Dunlap will return to work on Monday and will hopefully start gathering inspiration for her next book.