

Trouble in Amish Paradise

MSU veterinarian publishes debut thriller

By **BILL CASTANIER**

Last week I read two books. The first was “Camino Island,” another ballyhooed thriller from John Grisham, who is well known for the more than 20 legal thrillers he has penned. The second, “Casting Demons Into Swine,” is by MSU veterinarian R.J. Erskine of Grand Ledge. Set in the 1980s, the novel follows a young vet who gets caught up in a mystery in Pennsylvania’s Amish country.

Grisham’s annual entry in to the beach read world is a literary mystery — which I am a sucker for — in the vein of John Dunning’s “Booked to Die” series, which features an independent bookseller as the protagonist. In Grisham’s novel, some high-tech thieves steal five original F. Scott Fitzgerald manuscripts, including “The Great Gatsby,” from a university’s archives. The manuscripts land in the hands of a successful independent bookseller in a Florida beach front community, which is run by a man with a penchant for rare books and beautiful women. It’s rumored he may trade in and collect stolen literary gems.

An insurance recovery company hires a young woman to go to the island and act as bait and detective. Coincidentally — and there are many coincidences in “Camino Island” — the young woman had summered on the island growing up as a child and a teenager. Without giving away the dreadful conclusion, let’s just say that in the end, everyone gets what they want.

Do not read this book. Instead order Erskine’s more lifelike and enjoyable read off of Amazon (\$9.99 paperback, \$3.99 Kindle). It is a much more interesting and layered approach, with much more likable characters, including an old Scout — the Jeep-like vehicle — named “Lucille” after B.B. King’s guitar.

Interestingly, Grisham and Erskine do have something in common. Both writers turned to self publishing their first books, which led to Grisham peddling his books from the trunk of his car. The 21st century equivalent finds Erskine selling his novel on Amazon. The self published book is uncharted territory for Erskine, whose previous published work detailed such choice subjects as mastitis therapy and ruminant physiology.

Don’t be alarmed when you read “self published.” Erskine’s book is professionally edited and presented with very few of the embarrassing gaffes that usually show up in self published books.

“Casting Demons Into Swine” is about a large animal veterinarian who works primarily with cows, so there are no cute

cat or dog stories save for Precious, a mixed-breed canine sidekick of the vet. In fact, the tension in the book begins with a large black dog that is killing farm animals and may be rabid.

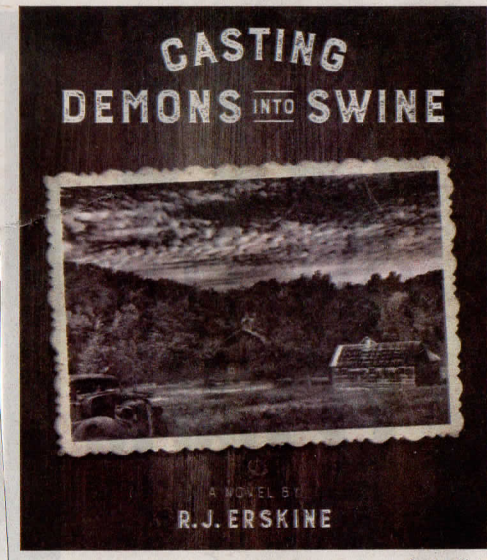
Erskine has been a veterinarian for nearly 30 years, and his power of observation and the ability to convert it to prose is impressive. He studied at the University of Illinois before moving to Pennsylvania, where he received both an advanced degree and an intense introduction to the lives of Amish farmers.

Erskine, who lives on a gentleman’s farm in Grand Ledge, recently met with me at the Delta Township Library to talk about his long-awaited — by him — book. Several decades ago and right across the street from the library, cows ranged at a large dairy farm owned by the Sharpe family. He reflects on what it was like in the 1980s for a young veterinarian.

“I like how dairy farmers think,” Erskine said. “They are straightforward, practical and you know where you stand. They face the eternal struggle against the entropy of nature, and they know there are no guarantees.”

The book is semi-autobiographical in that Erskine’s first job in the field is the basis for the book’s backdrop. So when he writes about prolapsed placenta repair, he did it. Erskine is one of those writers who keeps daily journals, and it’s those journals which allow him to re-create the life of a young vet and the realistic scenarios in the book. When he writes about what it was like to be called out in the middle of the night during a raging snow storm to help a desperate farmer, he nails it.

Erskine’s protagonist, Malcolm Cromarty, is a likeable, dedicated vet who is dealing with a recent divorce while



learning the ways of the Amish. Along the way, he will find a love interest and learn more about the home remedies and superstitions of the Amish. He even grows to like being called “veterinary” as he tries to decipher the German of the Amish.

He said the book began more as a “memoir book” similar to James Herriot’s “All Creatures Great and Small,” but that his first drafts of the novel “read like a clinical manual.”

“I struggled with balance and learned to write realistic and not crude (in describing treatments and procedures),” he said, adding that he also learned a lot about plot, dialogue and pacing.

Some of the book is tear-jerking and some is outright funny, including the name of Erskine’s publishing company, Stray Voltage, a less than subtle reference to the effects of high power lines on cattle and people.

He emphasizes that the novel is not “a primer on Amish life,” nor is it a thriller in the shadows of a Robin Cook. The book, which Erskine sees as developing into a series, is “more about how common people deal with a problem.”