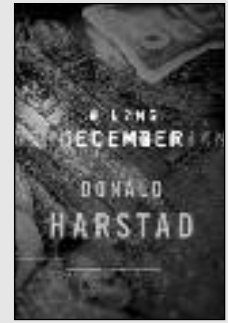




What's Happening With... Donald Harstad

by Brian Skupin



DONALD HARSTAD READING LIST

THE CARL HOUSEMAN NOVELS

- Eleven Days, 1998
- The Known Dead, 1999
- The Big Thaw, 2000
- Code 61, 2002
- A Long December, 2003

So far Donald Harstad has published five books about Carl Houseman, a good-natured, buffet-loving deputy sheriff in fictional Nation County, Iowa. Houseman's talents for observation, deduction, and getting along with people have made him the senior investigator in the department, and the no-nonsense approach he and his colleague Hester Gorse—"I wanted to make it clear that no one was going to have fun with this woman, ever," says Harstad of the name—bring to investigating both the mundane and the outré crimes they face made the series a popular one with readers.

But since *A Long December* came out in 2003, there haven't been any more books.

"After *Code 61* came out my editor at Doubleday told me he was leaving to start his own press, and he asked me to come with him. We had always had a good relationship, so I thought 'What's the worst that could happen?'"

Unfortunately the worst did happen. Rugged Land Press went out of business shortly after publishing *A Long December*. Consequently distribution and sales of that book were much smaller than for previous books, and now Harstad is up against the publishing numbers game.

"After Rugged Land went belly up, we talked to other publishers, but they all look at the sales of my last book, and decide they don't want to take the risk."

Harstad was born in Los Angeles, but his mother brought him to her hometown in Iowa when he was still a toddler, after his father died in World War II. After marrying his high school sweetheart, he moved back to L.A. and got a job working for a studio. But when they started a family, they moved back to Iowa again. Harstad found work as a police dispatcher, and later became an officer, and then deputy sheriff.

Harstad wrote the first Houseman book, *Eleven Days*, back in 1986, but it wasn't published until 1998.

"When I wrote it I was still with the sheriff's department. I got a call from the secretary telling me there had been a mistake with paperwork, and it turned out I had eleven days more vacation than I thought—and I had to take it starting the next day."

Houseman, who had never written before, took the eleven days and wrote a book about a police investigation in Iowa that takes place over the course of—eleven days.

After finishing the book he sent it to a few publishers, but there was no interest. He gave up on publishing it until the late 1990's, when someone contacted him after his mother's funeral.

"She told me that my mother had always told her I had written a good book, and since she worked in Hollywood, would I mind sending it to her." This led him to an agent.

At this time Harstad was still a deputy sheriff in Illinois. "Six weeks after I got an agent, I took a call from the dispatcher, and she said 'Uh...' Usually when they pause like that it's bad news. Then she said 'Uh...' again, and I thought, oh boy, this is really bad. It turned out she was trying to figure out the 10-code for "Your agent called and you have a two-book deal with Doubleday."

Harstad didn't agonize about whether he should quit his job or not.

"I divided the amount I was getting from Doubleday by my current salary. Then I went to the sheriff and told him I didn't work there anymore."

Fans will be happy to hear that Harstad is still writing the Houseman series. In the latest one, Carl goes to London to investigate the disappearance of a girl from Iowa after her trip there.

"It becomes a political problem for the mayor, so he sends Carl to London. Carl doesn't think he can investigate the case—he has no standing there—but he agrees to the free two week trip!"

Harstad explains, "The London cops are saying, 'Don't bother us,' and Carl is saying, 'I don't want to bother you,' but then it works out.

"My wife and I were in London during a visit by President Bush, and there were 14,000 cops in London per shift, and none of them were doing anything unrelated to the presidential visit. So in the book Carl gets traction because no other cops have time to work the case."

Harstad is also writing a standalone novel. And a French company has just purchased the rights to one of the unpublished Houseman books, and is inquiring about further books.

"I'm hoping they publish it and then sell the English-language rights back to a US publisher." Either way, Harstad isn't worried.

"My whole life, I've never known what I'd be doing six weeks in the future." ✦

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