

Query

by Mathew Paust

The murder of two teens late one humid night on a tiny rural Virginia island brings a dark, malignant mystery edging into the village known as Leicester Court House. One of the first to perceive this danger is local lawyer Joe “Blow” Stone, hired to represent the youth suspected of killing his friends for no apparent reason. As more seemingly motiveless murders occur, Stone follows links back to the hushed-up poisoning of a dozen U.S. senators, who became violently ill after desserting on cherry cheesecake in the Dirksen Dining Room two years earlier. Although most of the victims recovered, they found they had no more taste for sweets. Eating more nutritiously, they lost weight, burned off diabetes and other chronic ailments, and now were healthier than fat-cat politicians had any right to be. So what's the problem?

After an investigator discovered the tainted cheesecake's source, she reported her findings, and disappeared. A team of agents claiming to be “from the government” and assuming her autistic boss knew how to find her, tortured him for over a year to no avail. Finally releasing him and tracking him to Leicester, where he'd started a new life, the agents switched strategies. They'd found that empathy seemed to be his true weakness. Ergo, by killing innocents around him, presuming he would blame himself for their deaths, he would break. Desperate to find the source of the chemical that had ruined the senators' sweet teeth, the team saw its stakes as nothing short of saving the national—if not the world's—economic health. A sweets-shunning, robust populace, they believed, would devastate the commercial food industry, and bring crashing down Big Health Care, Big Insurance, Big Pharma, Big Banking...all of the Bigs, all of them.

Joe Stone can trust only two people to help him protect his community from more random murders—an auxiliary sheriff's deputy he's known since childhood, and the autistic hero's dangerous daughter.

I confess to toying for half a moment with adding “Big Publishing” to my list of Bigs above, but allowed a second thought to restrain me from risking both big toes beyond my illusion of sanity. I’m shakily aware marketing realities with fiction are ever fluxing, so I am hesitant to suggest a proven genre or category into which *Dubious Appetite* might comfortably fit. Retrospectively I would suggest that without conscious design this novel comprises a hybrid of genres, including elements of the crime, mystery, suspense, legal, and satiric forms—and possibly others. Startling me during its fifth rewrite was the notion that hey, *Dubious Appetite* just might be something sidling up Tarantino's alley! Hmmm...

