

The West Baden Springs Hotel in Michael Koryta's *So Cold the River*: Collecting Local Connections in Your Library

By Renee S. Reed

There was the hotel. And Alyssa Bradford had used the correct word in describing it, because only one word came close—surreal. The place was that, and then some. Pale yellow towers flanked a mammoth crimson dome, and the rest of the structure fell away beneath, hundreds of windows visible in the stone. It looked more like a castle than a hotel, something that belonged in Europe, not on this stretch of farmland (Koryta, 2010, p. 41-42).

This paragraph introduces the West Baden Springs Hotel in Michael Koryta's 2010 novel, *So Cold the River*. The hotel is a setting in the novel, but almost becomes a character when the protagonist, Eric Shaw, experiences paranormal flashbacks to incidents that happened in the hotel in the past. Author Michael Koryta grew up in Bloomington, Indiana and graduated from Indiana University. His father took him to visit the ruins of the West Baden Springs Hotel when he was eight. Koryta was fascinated by the hotel, which was in an advanced state of disrepair at the time he visited. He couldn't stop wondering why such a grand hotel was built in that location and why it was left to deteriorate. When Koryta began to write his string of successful crime novels he always hoped to use the West Baden Springs Hotel as a setting, but couldn't think of a way to do it without writing a casino heist novel--not a novel he wanted to write. When Koryta decided to take a new direction with his writing a few years ago and began to write thrillers with a supernatural element, he found the perfect vehicle for the West Baden Springs Hotel (Norris, 2010). In *So Cold the River*, Eric Shaw, a once promising filmmaker who is at a low point in his career and his marriage, is hired by a wealthy Chicago woman to investigate her dying father-in-law's background and to make a film about the man's early life that includes his time in the West Baden and French Lick area.

The father-in-law never talked about his past, so Shaw's only clues are the father-in-law's name, the West Baden location, and a mysteriously cold bottle of Pluto water manufactured in West Baden that the man always kept nearby. Shaw had already experienced a few visions of past or future events in his life prior to taking on his current film project. After travelling to West Baden he becomes subject to vivid visions of his film subject's past that are filled with crimes of bootlegging, intimidation, and murder. The visions seem to be fueled in some supernatural way by the bottle of Pluto water that his client gave him, as well as other bottles of the mineral water that he acquires in West Baden. Another major influence on *So Cold the River*, and the inspiration for the character of the violin playing boy in the visions, was Indiana violinist Joshua Bell's recording of *Short Trip Home* (Norris, 2010). Among the many Indiana references that Koryta includes in his novel are Indiana University, Nick's English Hut in Bloomington, Bill Cook, the history of the two hotels of West Baden and French Lick, and a cluster of three Indiana tornados that add even more drama to the climax of the novel.

Koryta's crime and supernatural thrillers would make an entertaining addition to any library, but will be particularly interesting to Indiana readers since Koryta is a local author and has more than once included Indiana locations and details in his books (www.michaelkoryta.com). Collecting books with local Indiana connections for your library's collection adds something extra to your patrons' reading experience, and is also a way to make your collection unique to the area and population that your library serves. Careful monitoring of book reviews in the library literature and the local media will help keep librarians aware of current authors with Indiana connections and books with Indiana settings.

Just a few current writers who now live or have lived in Indiana include Haven Kimmel, Meg Cabot, Scott Russell Sanders, James Alexander Thom, Susan Neville, John Green, Bich Minh Nguen, Mari Evans, Kathryn Lasky, and Andrew Levy. Don't forget the Indiana Poet Laureates, currently Karen Kovacik, who was most recently preceded by Norbert Krapf and Joyce Brinkman. Indiana has a rich literary past that includes writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Booth Tarkington, James Whitcomb Riley, Gene Stratton-Porter, George Ade, Lloyd C. Douglas, Lew Wallace, Meredith Nicholson, and George Barr McCutcheon.

In addition to monitoring your local newspapers, radio, and television sources for coverage of local books and authors, there are several other resources available. The Indiana Center for the Book at the Indiana State Library sponsors an annual contest for the "Best Books of Indiana" in fiction, nonfiction and poetry categories. You can go to the Indiana Center for the Book web site (www.in.gov/library/icb.htm) for entry information and to see the winning books from 2005 through the present. Another Indiana competition for outstanding Indiana connected authors is the Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana Authors Awards (www.indianaaauthorsaward.org), which honors a National Author, a Regional Author, and an Emerging Author each year. The authors win a cash prize and their local Indiana public library receives a grant of \$2,500 from the Foundation.

The most comprehensive source for locating works by Indiana authors and works about Indiana is the Indiana Historical Society (www.indianahistory.org/our-services/books-publications). Their press publishes academic books such as the History of Indiana series; books of Indiana photography, music, and art; historical fiction for children and youth biographies; and family history books. Other important sources are the university presses of Indiana. Two of our university presses, Purdue University Press (www.thepress.purdue.edu/) and Indiana University Press (www.iupress.indiana.edu/), include significant numbers of Indiana related titles along with academic books in their other subject specialty fields. Utilize these resources and be alert for other avenues that will lead you to Indiana authors and books about Indiana.

You will find it easy to build a collection with a local flavor that will provide resources to support the study of Indiana history and to help your patrons to know and appreciate our local Indiana writers.

References

- Koryta, M. (2010). *So cold the river*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Norris, M. (Interviewer) & Koryta, M. (Interviewee). (June 15, 2010). "Haunted river" waters flow below a grand hotel [interview transcript]. Retrieved from NPR, *All things considered*. Web site: <http://www.npr.org/2010/06/15/127561248/haunted-river-waters-flow-below-a-grand-hotel>

About the Author

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