

CNY PAGE-TURNERS

Skaneateles, Solvay surface in plots of two recent books by local authors

By **Nicki Gorny**

Contributing writer

Familiar Central New York locations take on an element of fiction with the release and promotion of two locally authored books.

A dog walker faces mystery and murderous accusations in Skaneateles in “The Chocolate Debacle,” by Karen Winters Schwartz.

“A lot of the book is about having a relationship with that town,” said the Marietta native, who said she included many locally specific locations and events in her plot.

Likewise, author Judith LaManna Rivette draws heavily on a setting in Solvay for her early 1900s tale of mother-daughter witch women in “Saint Carmella’s Grotto.”

“**The Chocolate Debacle**,” by Karen Winters Schwartz (Goodman Beck Publishing, \$14.95).

A dog walker faces mystery and murderous accusations in Skaneateles in “The Chocolate Debacle,” by Karen Winters Schwartz.

Following the theme established in Winters Schwartz’s two earlier books, “The Chocolate Debacle” explores the effects of mental illness.

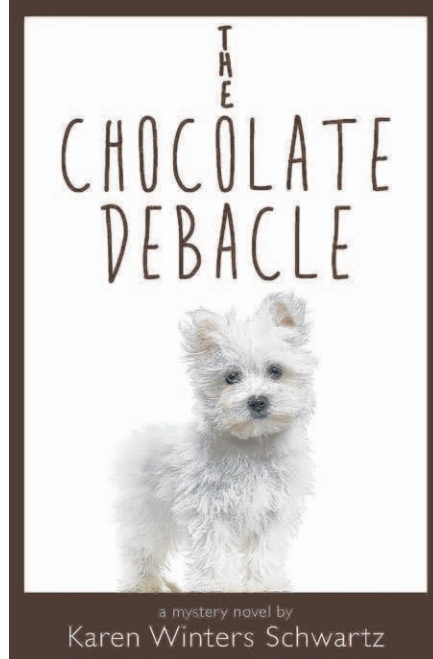
The author, who is president of the Syracuse affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said her 26-year-old, dog-walking protagonist, Trey Barkley, has been in and out of hospitals multiple times for mental illness.

The murder of his friend and employer, elderly Florence Loughton, a dog owner, pushes the plot toward Trey’s arrest as well as toward an opportunity to explore how society interacts with people with mental illness.

“The judgment, the misunderstanding, the misconceptions regarding people with mental illness,” Winters Schwartz said. “People just don’t get it.”

Given that much of the book focuses on the protagonist’s relationship with the town, the setting stands as an important element. In Skaneateles, Winters Schwartz said, she found the ideal place: a small town where residents are very proud of their community.

“I thought it was a perfect setting to look at the social aspects of a small town



in a beautiful community, and these people who don’t fit into a round hole,” she said.

While Winters Schwartz said she wrote about actual locations and restaurants, she said local readers will also recognize the town’s annual Dickens Christmas as a major plot point.

Her protagonist portrays the Ghost of Christmas Present in the town’s annual event, where street performers act the parts of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” on weekends between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Described by the author as a “cozy mystery” that’s most appropriate for those above the age of 13, “The Chocolate Debacle” has been widely available in print and digital format since Oct. 1.



“**Saint Carmella’s Grotto**,” by Judith LaManna Rivette, self-published, \$10.

Judith LaManna Rivette draws heavily on a setting in Solvay for her early 1900s tale of mother-daughter

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witch women in “Saint Carmella’s Grotto.”

When LaManna Rivette was collecting anecdotes for her “Solvay Stories” series, she said she heard a few that were too risqué or rumor-based to include in her historical account of 100 years of memories about growing up in the village. These instead became the inspiration for her fictional “Saint Carmella’s Grotto.”

“I just kept it in the back of my mind,” she said. “Then my imagination worked the rest of it.”

The book follows the story of a mother and daughter who live as witches on the outskirts of Solvay in the early 1900s. Trained to remove the “evil eye,” or the problems someone suffers when someone else wishes them ill, the pair treat Solvay villagers with herbal remedies.

Although the mother-daughter duo is fictional in “Saint Carmella’s Grotto,” LaManna Rivette said Solvay did at one time have a witch woman living on the outskirts of the village.

The setting for the book will also still be recognizable for Solvay visitors today, even 100 years after the plot takes place. The church, for example, is based on a real place even though “St. Carmella” herself is made up.

A “historical intrigue” novel that’s appropriate for young adults and up, “Saint Carmella’s Grotto” has been available since late August. It’s can be purchased for \$10 at the Book Cellar in Solvay, 1701 Milton Ave., at the Onondaga Historical Society, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse, and online at LaManna Rivette’s website, judithlamanna.us.

By the way, LaManna Rivette says she’s already working on a prequel, which will be followed by a sequel.