

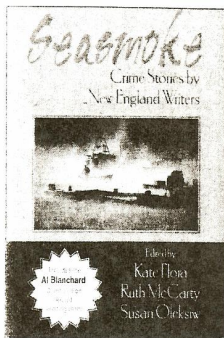
Killer crime collection

"Seasmoke: Crime Stories by New England Writers," edited by *Kate Flora, Ruth McCarty, and Susan Oleksiv*, Level Best Books, 263 pages, \$15.

BY WILLIAM D. BUSHNELL
Times Record Contributor

Famous mystery writer Raymond Chandler knew a thing or two about murder. In a 1944 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* he perceptively wrote: "The boys with their feet on the desk knew that the easiest murder case in the world to break is the one somebody tried to get very cute with; the one that really bothers them is the murder somebody only thought of two minutes before he pulled it off."

Chandler is long gone, but New England still has plenty of mystery and crime writers to carry on the fascination with murder and mayhem. "Seasmoke" is a smart anthology of crime fiction, clever short stories contributed by 23 New England writers whose skill and imagination provide tales of crime and murder with twists, turns, subtle clues, suspense, and a few sat-



isfying surprises.

In "Taking Care of Stevie," author Caroline Cairns tells of an exasperated sister who is fed up with getting her brother out of trouble. When thugs threaten to kill him over gambling debts, she decides to take care of the bad guys and her nagging problem all at once. In Ruth M. McCarty's excellent story, "Pay It Back," an abused wife doesn't realize she has agreed to a murder until later when it is clear she is expected to reciprocate.

Crime, however, does not

always involve murder, as several stories reveal. Stephen Rogers tells of a police stenographer whose intentional typos result in a high conviction rate until a job cut forces the steno to take a different view. In "Liberty," Frank Cook writes about a man whose brilliant scheme to rob his rich neighbors turns out better than he ever thought. And John Russo's story is an intriguing tale about a professional gambler who makes a strange bargain to guarantee the win at a Caribbean casino poker tournament.

In another story, an unlikely killer thinks too much about murder, first as just a harmless, amusing diversion, then later as a foolproof plan with the perfect murder weapon. In "Scientific Method" by Norma Burrows, a serial killer brags about the four inviolate rules of successful murder, then makes a mistake.

Other stories include two women married to the same man who collaborate on his demise, but one wife has an additional thought; a murder solved with Feng Shui; another solved with the hood orna-

ment of a Mercedes; a carefully drawn courtroom drama with a grieving victim planning horrific revenge; a grandmother who swindles everyone in sight; and a crooked antiques dealer who takes advantage of the wrong old lady.

All of these stories are well-crafted, taut, and suspenseful, but three really stand out. S.A. Daynard's "The Good Samaritan" is by far the creepiest and most chilling, with a serial killer no one would ever suspect. In "Killer De-Termination," Paula Mello tells of a newly hired bank loan officer whose employment contract has no escape clause and some fine print he doesn't believe. Finally, Woody Hanstein's legal thriller, "Nobody's Perfect," reveals that a courtroom may not bring justice to the guilty, but a late night visit might.

These writers are all talented, skilled with plots, clues, character development, snappy dialogue, and the refreshing ability to tell their stories vividly and succinctly. And their stories prove that Raymond Chandler was right all along.