

'F' is one of the year's top mysteries

By Peter Robertson
American Library Assn.

F is for Fugitive. By Sue Grafton. Holt. 261 pages. \$15.95

One of the more popular series of crime novels in recent years is the "alphabet" mysteries, starring plucky California sleuth Kinsey Millhone. The first was "A" is for Alibi. With "F" is for Fugitive, author Sue Grafton has reached the sixth letter.

Her twice-divorced, oft-mishandled and distinctly unfeminine private investigator, Millhone, finds new wrinkles on an old crime — and secrets aplenty in a sleepy coastal town. Floral Beach has a couple of places to eat, a bar with a jukebox, a few bikers and a 17-year-old murder case that someone wants reopened.

The body of pregnant teen Jean Timberlake had been found on the town beach years ago. Bailey Fowler, her boyfriend, was charged. He copped a manslaughter plea, served one year, busted out of jail and was later recaptured. Now, his father, dying of cancer, hires Kinsey to clear his son's name.

"F" is for Fugitive is one of the better mysteries to come along this year. Grafton, who has a light narrative touch, is blessed with the gift of knowing instinctively the right measures for the makings of a sly and delicious mystery concoction. Her sleuth is plucky and funny, not too blusteringly hardboiled, resourceful without being comic-book heroic and cynical without lapsing into tired gumshoe disillusionment.

Her settings are subtly evocative. The desolate town of Floral Beach functions every bit as effectively as the author's characters; the suspiciously pure school principal, the dead girl's no-good mother, the lofty local doctor, the "other" boyfriend, and Bailey's family — depressed, ailing parents and a long-suffering sister.

The sandy beach and the deadbeat bar, Bailey's father's hotel and Jean's mother's dive of a home all figure strongly. All are made to merge with the characters to give this book a sad and haunted atmosphere.

If Grafton displays a weakness, it is in the blurred rush at the novel's end. Bailey's second escape, and the killing

that precedes it, are bafflingly obscure in the narrative. The reader is left with the odd sensation that sleuth Millhone hasn't done enough cerebral work to justify the sudden revelation of twisted desire and dark guilt.

Happily Sue Grafton has another 20 opportunities to get it perfect, as opposed to her present state of near-perfection.

The Mother Murders. By Dale Gilbert. St. Martin's 256 pages. \$16.95.

Readers first met this unusual team in Dale Gilbert's earlier mystery, "The Black Star Murders." For-

Entertainment Outlook

ner Chicagoan Matt Doyle does the bulk of the legwork, all of the shooting and takes time off for the odd spot of romancing. Hidden within a Southern California mansion, and protected by his formidable reputation, retired Secretary of State Carter Winfield indulges in the higher forms of thinking and the lion's share of worrying.

The often prickly relationship between the halves of this sleuthing team was cleverly blueprinted in the earlier work. This time the author shifts through several gears. The new-

style plotting is hectic, but agreeably so, with the cerebral Winfield allowed to reveal the warm heart behind his aloof manner and daunting vocabulary. Matt gets to show some more brainpower, and an amazing capacity for surviving bloodshed.

elusive secret partner in the drug business — a young actress/director killing for profit, trust fund, and all the classic "poor little rich girl" reasons. That mistake nearly costs Matt his life, although Carter is ultimately able to spot the twisted trail.

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What Matt fails to uncover is the

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