

A GOOD WESTERN MYSTERY

“THE BLACK DOVE,” by Steve Hockensmith, *St. Martin’s Mino-taur*, 2008, \$23.95.

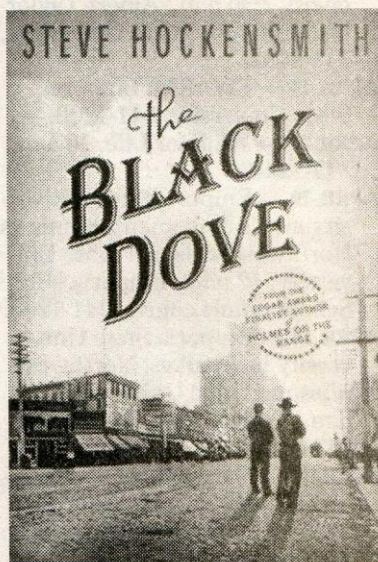
BY KATE WISE
Special to The Gazette

In a recent online interview with fellow mystery writer Bill Crider, Steve Hockensmith admitted that he never set out to write a series like the Holmes on the Range books. The author describes them as mysteries primarily, with characters who happen to be from the old west.

In Hockensmith’s third Holmes on the Range book, “The Black Dove,” the brothers Otto “Big Red” and Gustav “Old Red” Amlingmeyer find themselves in 1890’s San Francisco. When their friend Dr. Chan is murdered, the duo is eager to start on the case. What they find leads them through the depths of the Chinatown ghetto and encounters with the most violent and colorful adversaries yet. This story will have you guessing up until the end.

It is fitting then that Old Red’s hero is Sherlock Holmes. When I read the synopsis for the first book in the series, I was wary. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and more specifically Sherlock Holmes, helped me through many a tedious afternoon during my high school days, and I was loathe to see Holmes cheapened. But I also read my share of Louis L’Amour, and I couldn’t resist the enticement of a mystery-western crossover. “The Black Dove” is genre-bending; it has been characterized alternately as historical fiction, adventure, mystery, or western.

The character of “Big Red” Amlingmeyer narrates. If Dr. Watson had been a Kansas farmer-turned cowboy, he might have written somewhat in the style of Big Red. The chapter titles read like title cards from turn-of-the-century melodramas and the book has short, fast paced chapters. For busy or easily distracted readers, the book is easy to put down and pick back up. As Kansans, the fictional brothers from Parsons did not let me down; the two were true to the down-to-earth, honest



COURTESY PHOTO

ON THE SHELF

attitudes I recognize in many of my fellow Kansans, and the narrative style reminds me of listening to my grandpa — a Kansas native — talk about his days as a farmer.

“The Black Dove” is a well-deserved Edgar Allen Poe Award finalist from the Mystery Writers of America for 2008. Although one can pick up the book and enjoy it by itself, the first two books in the series, *Holmes on the Range* and *On the Wrong Track* are worth reading as well. And if you enjoy reading prose “written” by Big Red Amlingmeyer, you can find more at www.stevhockensmith.com — including a welcome to the site from Big Red himself. At the site you can learn more about the series, including previous short stories featuring the brothers.

Every book in the series is different, and does not merely follow a cookie cutter format. With the latest *Holmes on the Range* tale, Hockensmith does not disappoint. Although the books might be reminiscent of dime novels in their adventure scenes, quite a bit of character development happens for both the brothers, and we learn more of the very reticent Old Red’s past, and witness character growth from both brothers. The mysteries are as complex and enjoyable as any Sherlock Holmes tale ever was.