

## Minnesota author Susan Koefod chooses a timely subject for her debut mystery

By Mary Ann Grossmann

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When Susan Koefod heard about three dead babies found between 1999 and 2007 in the Mississippi River south of the Twin Cities, she couldn't stop thinking about the little ones.

She wondered who would discard a healthy baby in the river. Why?

"I thought I would get these troubling stories out of my head if I wrote about them," says Koefod, who lives in West St. Paul.

That's the genesis of her debut mystery, "Washed Up," first in a series featuring alcoholic detective Arvo Thorson and smart school social worker Christine Ivory, who is mildly obsessive/compulsive.

Thorson and Ivory don't get along, but they're attracted to each other. They're forced to work together to protect a traumatized 11-year-old who finds a drowned newborn on the banks of the Mississippi and holds the key to identifying the parent. Other characters include Arvo's scheming ex-wife and a power-hungry, ruthless politician.

In an eerie example of real life meeting art, a fourth baby's body was found in the river near Winona last month during the same week Koefod's book was published. An even more startling coincidence is that a bracelet was found with this baby's body, and a bracelet is a crucial clue in "Washed Up," which Koefod wrote in 2008.

"I couldn't believe it happened again," Koefod says of the newly discovered body. "And in two of the previous cases, the babies are related. How could you do it twice?"

So, Koefod is in the odd position of promoting a

book she couldn't have

known would be so timely, while worrying that renewed media attention to the babies might turn some readers away from her novel.

"My biggest fear is that people will say they can't stand to read about this topic," says Koefod, who holds an MFA from Hamline University's writing program.

### MYSTERY OR ROMANCE?

"Washed Up" is set in the fictional Minnesota community of Somerset Hills, which Koefod never identifies geographically. The only clues are that it is close to a refinery and some important scenes take place at a club called King of Spades. (There is a King of Diamonds club in Inver Grove Heights.)

"The Inver Grove of my youth inspired this setting," says Koefod, who biked and hiked in Dakota County when it was more rural in the 1960s. "Hearing about other mystery writers whose settings are in the Twin Cities, I wanted to make mine larger, more imaginary. I can understand why Garrison Keillor is vague about the location of Lake Wobegon."

Koefod's poetry, short stories and memoir have been widely published in online publications, literary magazines and anthologies. But her "day jobs" have been in the business world.

"When I graduated from the College of St. Catherine in 1981, we were in a recession similar to this one," she recalls. "The only businesses that were hiring

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English majors were insurance companies. I stayed 14 years at Prudential." She works now for Express Scripts in Bloomington.

Koefod's husband, Kurt, is a retired professional photographer who helps staff and students with computer technology in the West St. Paul/Mendota Heights school district.

The couple has three children. Ryan, 27, is a linguist; Libby, 15, is a student at Sibley High School; and Sam, who turned 14 Saturday, is at Heritage middle school.

Like many novelists, Koefod wrote several unpublished manuscripts, one of which was praised by best-selling Minnesota author Judith Guest. She was encouraged to continue writing fiction by Mary Rockcastle, her thesis adviser at Hamline, and Sheila O'Connor, thesis committee chair. (Rockcastle's new novel is "In Caddis Wood," O'Connor's is "Sparrow Road.")

"When I was ready to write genre fiction, I had to choose between mystery and romance," Koefod says. "My mom was a voracious reader of romances."

Her parents, Jack and Dolores Isaacs Schneider, live in Inver Grove Heights. Dolores grew up in West St. Paul, and her best friend lived in the house now occupied by Susan's family.

## CAUSES FOR CONCERN

Why did Koefod choose to write a mystery?

"I think it has to do with my five brothers," she says. "In romance, the protagonist is usually female. I like men and am interested in how they think. But I am getting better at writing female characters. One friend said I write as a mother. And a mystery is a quest, as life is a quest. What I tried to do is add little elements to the story not normally found in mystery. The river itself is like a character, and the language is more poetic." Then she adds, "But there are car chases, too."

When Koefod was researching her novel, she visited the Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nursery, where executive director Mary Pat Lee (another St. Kate's alum) showed her around.

Koefod learned that during 2009 in Minnesota, almost 4,742 children were the victims of abuse and

neglect. In the same year, the nursery was forced to turn away twice as many children as it could place.

"For many stressed parents, asking for help is a huge step toward improving their family's lives," Koefod says. "When they make the call and no help is available, consequences can be dire."

That's why she is donating honorariums from her readings at Dakota County Library branches to the Crisis Nursery. She's also accepting individual donations.

Koefod is raising this money because she's touched by the nursery's needs and because of her personal concern as a novelist: "I don't want anyone to think I am making money on these babies' deaths."

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**Title:** "Washed Up"

**Author:** Susan Koefod

**Publisher:** North Star Press

**Cost:** \$14.95

**Author appearances:** 7 p.m. Tuesday, Dakota County Library Wentworth Branch, 199 E. Wentworth Ave., West St. Paul; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, Twin Cities Book Festival, Minneapolis Community & Technical College, 1501 Hennepin Ave., Mpls.; 7 p.m. Oct. 18, Barnes & Noble, 3225 W. 69th St., Edina; 10:30 a.m. Oct. 20, Dakota County Library Wescott

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