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Friends, family will debut Carol Bly's first novel

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Carol Bly's long-awaited debut novel, "Shelter Half," will be introduced Friday at a public reading by some of her friends and family.

Bly, who died in December, was an ethicist, writing teacher and author whose widely praised short story collections and nonfiction explored social injustices. She completed work on "Shelter Half" just before her death from ovarian cancer, and the book is now available from Holy Cow! Press in Duluth.

Bly, who lived in Madison, Minn., when she was married to author and poet Robert Bly, drew on her knowledge of small towns to create St. Fursey, where her touching, sometimes-violent and often-funny novel is set.

Although the story begins with the discovery of a dead woman in a ditch, this is not a mystery. There are hints about who killed the woman and deliberately left a trail of clues, but why she died isn't revealed.

"We are led to believe this woman was killed because she saw or experienced something she shouldn't have and the powers-that-be arranged for her demise," said Holy Cow! publisher Jim Perlman. "But this isn't explicit and maybe that's a good thing. It adds suspense and drama and a shadowy feel that feeds the novel."

Bly uses this murder to tie together the lives of her characters, who are so finely drawn they feel like your neighbors.

Among them is old strawberry farmer Dieter Stolz, regarded with suspicion by his neighbors because he has a German accent and can read music. There's chief of police Bernie Stokowski, who does a very moral thing. Pearl runs the St. Fursey VFW post, gambles a lot and is "one of the worst organists outside the Twin Cities." Auto dealer Stan Garris is battling cancer, and Brad Stropp is a drunk who beats his wife.

Two of the most interesting characters are Peter Tenebray and his daughter, Imogene. They're a wealthy family, but Imogene is a social worker who lives in a drab apartment and runs a women's center. Her father is a "cleaner," a well-connected man who glad-hands and sanitizes the reputations of companies that do dirty work. Peter loves beauty and thinks there's nothing wrong with the work he does for these corporations. Bly leaves it to the reader to figure out how Peter can promote evil and still feel that's he's a moral man.

"Shelter Half" has been chosen by Midwest Booksellers Association as its June Midwest Connections Selection, so it will be promoted in independent bookstores. It will also be a summer reading pick in the July issue of Oprah Winfrey's magazine.

Perlman has ordered 10,000 copies of "Shelter Half," the largest printing of any book his literary press has published in 31 years.

"This novel," he said, "is a triumphant crowning of Carol Bly's writing career."

Mary Ann Grossmann can be reached at 651-228-5574. **What:** Free publication reading for "Shelter

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