

‘Danger Within: An Alice Ott Mystery’ by Dusty J. Miller; ‘Helen in Trouble’ by Wendy Sibbison

By STEVE PFARRER
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Danger Within: An Alice Ott Mystery by Dusty J. Miller. CCE Publishing

Frances Crowe, the venerable Northampton peace and environmental activist, died in 2019 at age 100. But she lives on in the fiction of Dusty J. Miller, a friend and fellow activist who has made a fictional Crowe the central figure in her mystery novels about an elderly internet sleuth who confronts corrupt government operatives, dishonest nuclear plant owners, and others who threaten the public good in the name of power and profit.

Miller, a retired psychotherapist who splits her time between Belchertown and Florida, has published four previous books centered around Alice Ott, a dogged Western Mass activist and investigator who doesn’t let her wheeled oxygen tank slow her down.

In Miller’s newest mystery, “Danger Within,” Alice and her fellow crime fighters head to Florida where, amid the health threats posed by COVID-19, they investigate a series of mysterious deaths and injuries among whistleblowers who have been calling out the practices of a sleazy company that runs nursing homes in the Sunshine State.

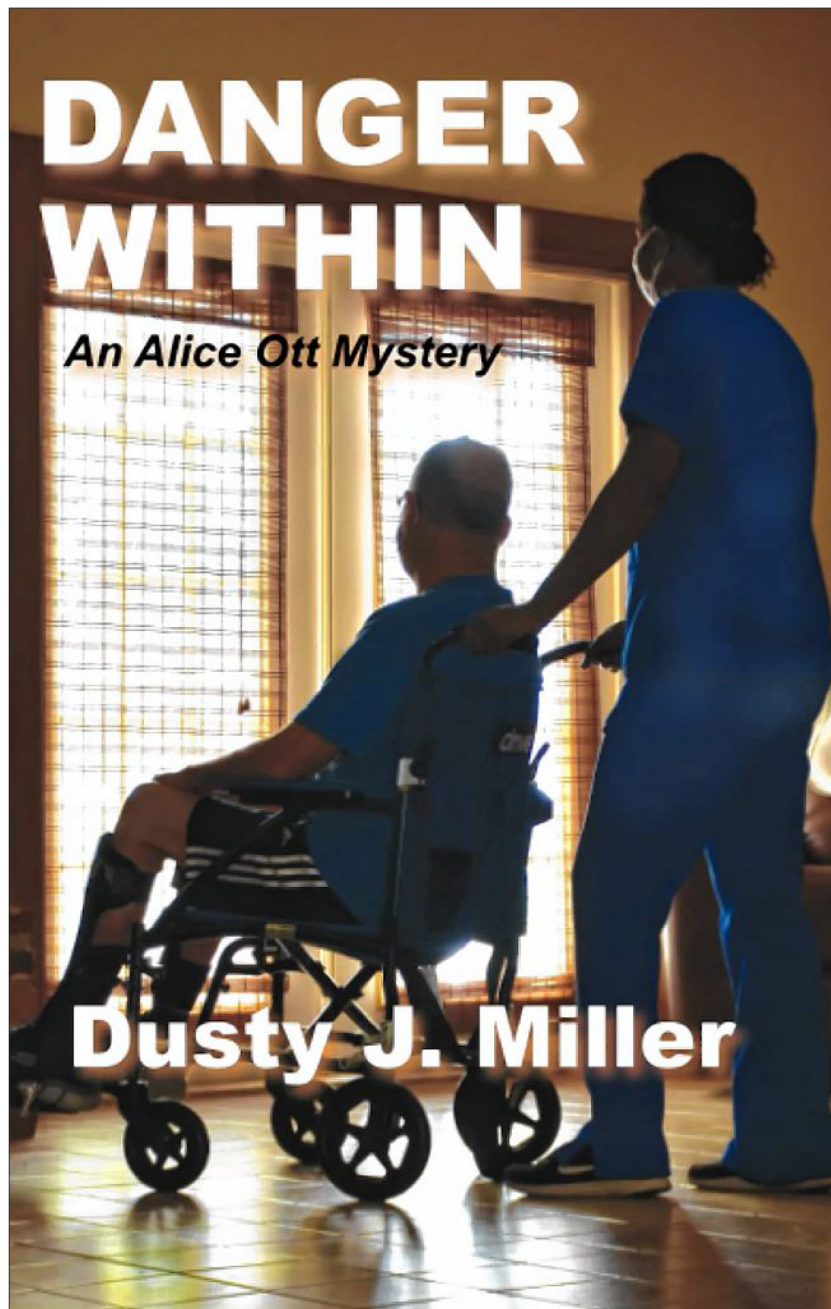
The story cuts right to the chase. Kori Harris, a black woman who’s been visiting her ailing grandmother in a nursing home called Serenity Place, has become friendly with staff there who tell her that the owners, the TouchStone Corporation, have been pocketing federal money for COVID relief while employees go without adequate PPE equipment or the overtime pay they were promised.

Kori has contacted a lawyer, and the two are working to get statements from workers for a potential lawsuit. As the book opens, Kori goes late one night to meet a source who promises her some additional names for the suit — but the source, a white man, assaults her and leaves her unconscious.

Back in western Massachusetts, Alice is struggling with the isolation imposed by COVID; she’s trying to figure out a way she and her French lover, Gerard, can spend more time safely together, and Miller brings some gentle humor to scenes in which Alice deals with the pitfalls of the coronavirus.

“(Alice) still felt overwhelmed by adding her mask to everything else she had to manage: her portable oxygen tank, her glasses, her cane, her hearing aids, and her purse,” Miller writes. “It was exhausting just getting all the paraphernalia attached in the right order.”

Then Alice gets a call from another western Massachusetts friend, Nancy Warren, who’s in Florida and tells Alice about the assault on Kori and a more deadly attack against



a nursing home employee: He’s been run off the road and killed after he gives testimony on TouchStone’s corruption to the lawyer. Is Alice willing to come to Florida to get involved in the investigation?

Of course! “How could she resist the call to get back into the ever-expanding fight for justice?” Miller writes.

So Alice, Gerard, and some of their fellow activists are soon en route to Florida, where they join forces with Floriana Watson, an African American woman running for state representative who’s also trying to blow the whistle on TouchStone’s corruption — a task that makes them all potential targets for violence themselves.

In an afterword, Miller notes that she had originally planned to end her Alice Ott series with the death of Crowe but changed her mind with the onset of Covid and its enforced isolation.

“I wrote ‘Danger Within’ to comfort myself with Alice’s steadiness and clarity,” she says, “and also to shine a light on how I saw the virus threatening the elder population of

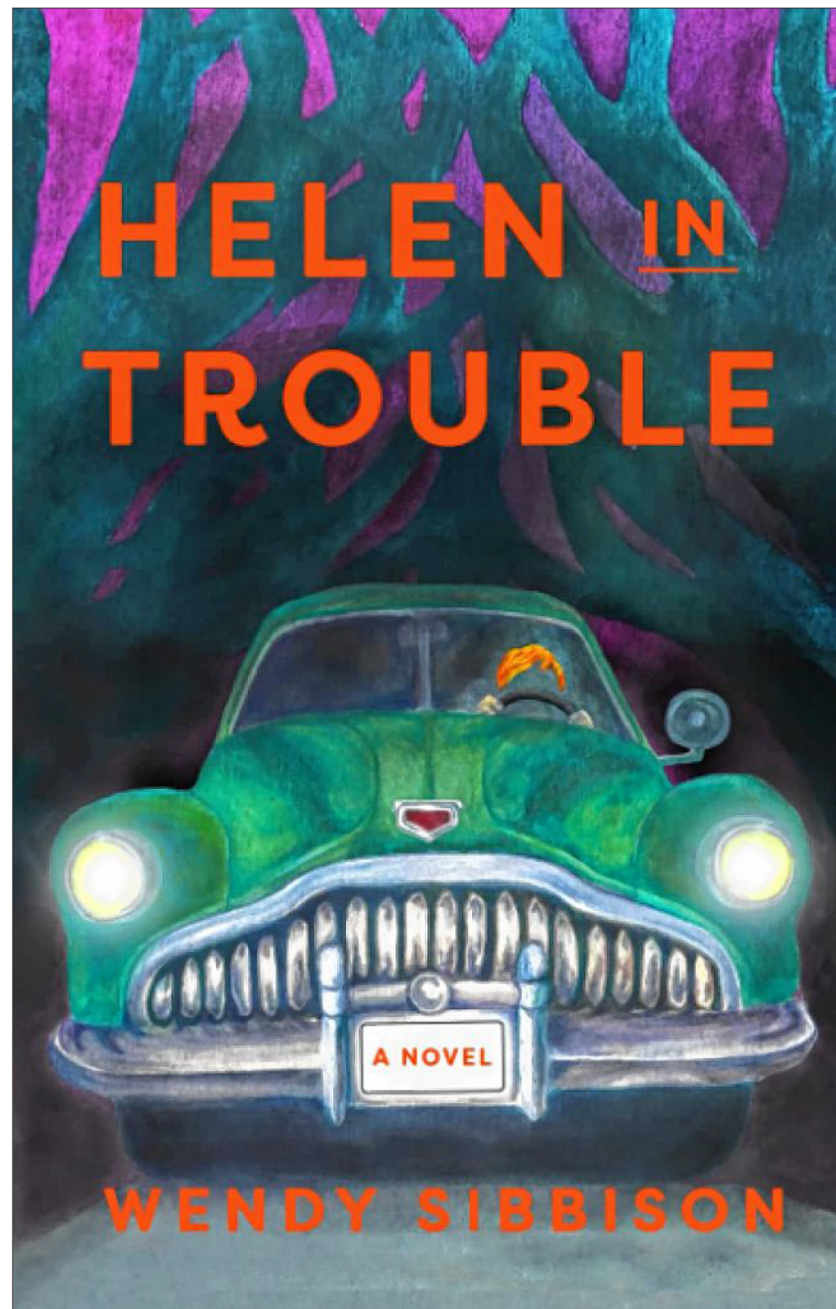
the U.S.”

Helen in Trouble by Wendy Sibbison. Booksmyth Press

Retired Greenfield lawyer Wendy Sibbison has turned to writing fiction in recent years, and in her debut novel, “Helen in Trouble,” she’s plumbed a subject of great concern to her and millions of other Americans: ever-growing efforts in many states to restrict women’s right to abortion.

“Helen’s story is loosely based on events of my own life when I was in high school,” Sibbison notes on her website. “In those days, not only was abortion a crime, it was even against the law to provide unmarried people with birth control. Wrap your mind around that.”

The story, set in 1963, opens with 16-year-old Helen waking up in a library at the University of Virginia, where she’d gone to visit her boyfriend, Quentin, a freshman at the school. Last night, Helen blearily recalls, there was quite a bit of drinking, and she thinks she and Quentin had sex — or did they? If they did, it



doesn’t seem Quentin used a condom or practiced *coitus interruptus*, their usual means of birth control.

After Helen returns to her prep school just south of Washington, D.C., Quentin drafts a letter to her explaining why he hadn’t used birth control that evening, thinking to do so “would be wrong, even evil, a turning away from the sublime.” Then he admits to himself he’s just been stupid and selfish — and he never sends the letter or tells Helen what happened.

Soon enough, Helen will discover she’s pregnant, leaving her to navigate terrifying terrain on her own. Pregnancy for a teenage girl or young unmarried woman in 1963 “signified disaster on a mythic scale, the termination of respectability, the cancellation of any claim to future happiness, an irreversible and public shaming.... Pregnancy was capital punishment for having sex.”

Things are not helped at home, where Helen dares not tell her parents anything. Her mother, Rosemary, has her own backstory that might actually aid her daughter, but she herself grew up in a family where

much was left unsaid, and she has been consistently silent about her past.

For Helen’s emotionally awkward father, Dave, his daughter’s crotch “was apparently a region of horror.” When he sees her lying down one day on the living room couch, her feet up in front of her and her knees slightly apart as she reads a book, he quickly averts his eyes and says “For God’s sake, put your legs down!”

Helen will have to investigate the possibility of getting an abortion — and the criminal charges that could come with that — in a story that offers both a portrait of white Southern life and culture at a time when the Civil Rights movement is taking off, as well as an examination of what one critic calls “the vagueness of the body to an adolescent girl, the way it feels like a foreign country you happen to live in.”

Kirkus Reviews calls Sibbison’s novel “[a] beautifully written, compassionate coming-of-age tale with subtle mythic overtones.”

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