

***Everyone on This Train Is a Suspect,* by Benjamin Stevenson**

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

August, it has been said, is perhaps the laziest month of the year. There are no major holidays or national events in August. What better time is there than late summer to enjoy the guilty pleasure of a brisk murder mystery.

Everyone on This Train Is a Suspect, by Australian writer Benjamin Stevenson, is a modern-day riff on Agatha Christie's classic, Murder on the Orient Express. In Mr. Stevenson's story, the train in question is the Ghan, an "opulent hotel on rails," whose 1,800-mile journey bisects Australia almost in half. The name is a nod to the rugged "Afghan Express" route, when camel-riding explorers traversed the immense red desert long before steel rails and steam engines.

To celebrate its 50th anniversary, the Australian Mystery Writers Society held a literary festival onboard the Ghan. Non-fiction author Ernest Cunningham, the first-person narrator of Everyone on This Train Is a Suspect, details the unfolding murderous events. Just how reliable Ernest is as an eyewitness remains to be seen.

The mystery writers onboard the Ghan covet an endorsement from Scottish superstar Henry McTavish, the guest of honor. Alan Royce, a former pathologist, touts his forensic expertise. A writer of psychological thrillers, S. F. Majors pens page-turning novels with twists and turns. Lisa Fulton is working on her long-awaited second book. Short-listed for many awards, Wolfgang goes by one name only. Other guests include Juliette, Ernest's girlfriend, and Brooke, who is president of Henry McTavish's fan club. Jasper and Harriet Murdoch, a self-publishing couple, are thrilled to be on the excursion.

When a murder occurs on the Ghan, the mystery authors attempt to use their sleuthing skills to solve the crime. After all, who but writers of homicides would know how to detect a murderer? Unless, of course, they committed the murder themselves.

Everyone on This Train Is a Suspect is replete with picturesque scenes as the Ghan rolls on: "The Northern Territory whipped past our window. Rocky outcrops with scraggly, crooked trees, bent low as if shielding themselves from the bright sun, gave way to spinifex-pocked orange sand, made all the more vibrant by the unblemished blue sky above. The horizon was far, still and flat, and the expanse of the Australian desert dawned on me."

By no means is Mr. Stevenson's murder mystery great literature. The dialogues at times are clunky, and there are too many characters to keep on track. Everyone on This Train Is a Suspect, however, is an entertaining and clever read, suitable for a languid August day.