

“Think of a Number” by John Verdon. Crown Publishers, 2010. \$22.00, 418 pages.

How many times have you heard the phrase, “Think of a number”? Usually, it’s part of a magician’s trick or an attempt to be a deciding factor in a minor dilemma. It’s an innocuous request, not something you would ever consider a prelude to murder.

Retired NYPD homicide detective Dave Gurney is contacted by an old college acquaintance with what he calls “a disturbing situation.” Once an alcoholic, drug dealer and a con man, Mark Mellery is now a well respected guru of spiritual healing, but Gurney’s old friend has recently received some disquieting letters with vague references to something terrible Mellery has done in the past. The first missive asks him to think of a number, any number up to a thousand, and then to open the small included envelope. Mellery is stunned when he opens the envelope to find the random number he selected. “Now see how well I know your secrets,” claims the sender.

Unsettled by the veiled threats in the letters and baffled by the sender’s correct prediction, Mellery has contacted Gurney in the hope that he might be able to do something. Bored with retirement and intrigued by the puzzle, Gurney agrees to investigate never anticipating that these strange letters will turn into a life and death game of cat and mouse with a serial killer.

Gurney is drawn into an investigation with incomprehensible evidence – footprints that stop in the middle of nowhere, secret messages written with oils from the skin, gunshot wounds purposely hidden by stabbing, taunts from the killer written in rhyming verse, and the inexplicable ability of the killer to correctly predict a seemingly random number, not just once but several times and for more than one victim.

Full of twists and turns, “Think of a Number” is at times a complicated, classic mystery, a lightning fast thriller, and a police procedural. But despite the baffling puzzles, Verdon plays fair with his reader. The clues for the mystery are there, if you’re paying attention.

“Think of a Number” is an exceptional first novel, well written and thoroughly engaging, and I hope that we see more from this talented writer.

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