Penny Weaver has been recruited to teach English composition at St. Francis, a historically black college in Raleigh. She feels nervous and just a little rushed. She’s replacing a professor fired for incompetence several weeks into the semester and she’ll have to push hard to cover her material in the remaining time. Plus, her students are among the most academically challenged; many of them left high school without adequate reading and writing skills for college. What happily married sixty-four-year old Penny didn’t expect was to find herself attracted to Oscar Farrell, the new chairman of the English Department. She certainly didn’t anticipate being drawn into a murder case involving the provost and a professor accused of sexually harassing female students.

What follows is a traditional mystery with little graphic violence or language. It does not focus on forensics or police procedures. It centers on the relationships Penny develops, especially with the students in her class who initially regard her, a new and white faculty member, with uncertainty. Campus politics also figure prominently, as students organize to protest dormitory conditions. Meanwhile, Oscar Farrell clashes with the administration over what he views as the school’s culture of corruption.

Her attraction to Professor Farrell complicates Penny’s personal life, as does a subplot involving her daughter and grandchild. Penny is able to draw on the support of long-time friends in the area, including fellow faculty member Sammie Hargrave and Sammie’s husband Derek, who just happens to be a law enforcement officer. Penny’s connections at both the college and within the local community give her unique insight into the case, and are crucial to solving it.

St. Francis will remind readers of Raleigh’s Saint Augustine’s College and Shaw University. The campus setting may appeal to fans of the Simon Shaw series by Sarah Shaber, also set at a fictional Raleigh institution, Kenan College. The subplots involving friends and family will call to mind the Deborah Knott mysteries written by Margaret Maron. Recommended for libraries where demand for these and similar series is high and where local interest warrants.

Judy Hogan has resided in North Carolina since the 1970s. She started the Carolina Wren Press in 1976 and helped found the NC Writers’ Network, serving as its president from 1984-87. She has taught creative writing since 1974, including two years at Saint Augustine’s College, from 2004-2006. She is the author of several collections of poetry, the PMZ Poor Woman’s Cookbook and a nonfiction work, Watering the Roots in a Democracy. Killer Frost is her first published mystery.