
IN BRIEF: MYSTERIES

Recipes for Love and Murder

By Sally Andrew

Ecco, 419 pages, \$26.99

Tannie Maria, the half-Afrikaans half-English narrator of South African writer Sally Andrew's irresistible first novel, "Recipes for Love and Murder," lives in the Klein Karoo ("one of the quietest places in South Africa"), where she dwells in harmony with all neighbors ("coloureds and whites do not look so different from each other out here in the country") and writes a "love advice and recipe column" for the Klein Karoo Gazette. The widow of an abusive husband, Tannie Maria sees food as "medicine for the body and heart." She envies romance—"that deep love I had never had"—and, as much as she enjoys cooking and eating, admits: "I'd like some kind of life before death."

But it's death that shakes up Tannie Maria's life: One of the correspondents to her column is murdered, apparently by a brutal spouse. Or was a heartsick female neighbor to blame, as the widower insists? Then again, maybe the killer was someone covet-

ous of mineral rights to the dead woman's land.

Feeling guilt for not having saved a life, Tannie Maria joins with her paper's young female "investigative journalist" to find the murderer. Soon these two are themselves in danger, as it becomes clear their quarry is willing to kill again.

"Recipes for Love and Murder," an intriguing mystery in an exotic locale, is a work of enormous charm. Tannie Maria, who speaks in an intimate patois ("the languages are mixed up inside me"), is one of a kind: a woman who talks to her chickens as she feeds them, talks to her food as she cooks it, and is sensitive to the appeal of the handsome police detective she insists she's assisting: "I could feel the warmth coming off his body, like he had just come out of the oven."

Among the recipes this down-to-earth protagonist dispenses is this one, for reconciling fate and free will: "We can be sure that our lives will all end with death. There's not much we can do about that. But you can add love and good food to your life. That is your choice."

—Tom Nolan