

Dead bodies, sliced fingers and a union

Bartender Brian McNulty gets a gory new mystery to solve.

By William McKeen, Special to the Times

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Like all fine bartenders, Brian McNulty listens well, tells great stories and mixes a mean martini. But unlike your typical booze slinger, McNulty is also a master detective.

He's also kind of a pain in the neck. He caused so much fuss on his last job -- while solving a mystery -- that the union of bartenders and hotel employees transferred him to the Savoy. This gone-to-seed joint in West Manhattan is like a faded photograph in some once-proud family's album. It's also the perfect setting for a murder or two.

The union is at the center of things. McNulty is from an old union family, and his father quotes chapter and verse from Depression-era communism. When McNulty's friend and fellow bartender Barney Saunders is beaten by thugs - and his fingertips severed with a cleaver - the staff of the bar is united by anger and fear.

The union leaders react with nonchalance, and the staff goes on strike when the hotel manager shrugs off the finger-chopping. Pretty soon, the manager is dead. Fingers start pointing, mostly at the fingerless Barney and a young server named Betsy. McNulty at first defends them, but then wonders if they might be carrying on an affair behind the back of Betsy's husband, a jealous-beyond-belief cop. When he also turns up dead, McNulty learns that he can trust no one.

Lehane's novel is steeped in Irish lore, union history and the stale-beer smell of a bar after closing time. *Death at the Old Hotel* is much more than a linear mystery. It's also a generational saga of McNulty, his father and his wayward son.

Lehane knows this world. He was a bartender and a union organizer and is a natural storyteller. There's a lot of action, but the fascinating part of the book is getting inside McNulty's mind and seeing what makes this man tick.

William McKeen is chairman of the journalism department at the University of Florida.

Death at the Old Hotel

By Con Lehane

St. Martin's, 230 pages, \$24.95

Festival of Reading

Con Lehane will appear on a panel, "Crime and Character," at 3 p.m. Saturday.