

SUSPENSE

These walls can talk

A Boston prosecutor enlists the help of asylum inmates to solve a murder in this dark and chilling novel.

BY WANDA J. DeMARZO

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THE MADMAN'S TALE. John Katzenbach. Ballantine. 438 pages. \$24.95.

"I can no longer hear my voices, so I am a little lost," admits the bewildered Francis Xavier Petrel at the opening of John Katzenbach's latest bewitching novel. This intriguing beginning promises a tantalizing read, and in his eighth work of fiction, Katzenbach keeps that promise.

The suspenseful *The Madman's Tale*, about obsession, insanity, murder and unlikely heroes, begins and ends with the middle-aged Petrel, who spent years in an asylum and now lives on the fringe of existence. He has spent most of his years listening to the clamor of voices in his head: They were his friends, advisors and family.

Now, the voices are stilled, and Petrel is alone in a one-room apartment in New England when he receives a letter from the Committee to Preserve the Western State Hospital. It is the 20-year anniversary of the institution's closing, and there is a movement to turn some of the grounds into a museum. Petrel, as one of the last patients to be released, is invited to attend the day-long seminars and events. There he meets an old friend, who reminds him of long-ago, horrible events at the hospital.

And so it begins. Petrel returns home, and the past takes over, shrouding and driving him. The white walls of his apartment become his manuscript as he recounts his story of the serial killer The Angel; the beautiful scarred prosecutor, Lucy Jones, obsessed with finding the psychopath who has killed three times and left her disfigured; and Peter the Fireman, a haunted inmate looking for absolution. Jones also recruits the help of Petrel, who understands insanity, in her quest. They hunt for the Angel as he circles around them, bringing death.

What better place for a psychopathic serial killer to hide than an insane asylum? According to some theories, the infamous Jack the Ripper hid in an institution, and he was never caught.

There should be no interruptions once you begin *The Madman's Tale*. Katzenbach's wonderful, tense narrative flows effortlessly, drawing you deeper and deeper into a chilling atmosphere of evil, darkness and shadows. Something bad -- very bad -- is going to happen, you can tell. And because Katzenbach makes his unfortunate characters so sympathetic, you care about what happens to them. This haunting story will linger in your mind long after you've left the asylum.

Wanda DeMarzo is a Herald staff writer.