

Mayor releases 30th Joe Gunther mystery novel

"Bomber's Moon"
by Archer Mayor.
Minotaur Books, 2019

Archer Mayor's 30th Joe Gunther mystery opens in Wilmington, with Sally Kravitz, the grownup daughter of the "Tag Man," in the series' eighth book, sitting in her car opposite a bar with "enormous plate-glass windows," watching the man she is following as a private investigator. The bar is not quite The Maple Leaf, which, unlike the watering hole Mayor describes, was never the locus of a car dealership. But this is a minor deviation in a scene that catches mood perfectly, and it prepares Wilmington readers for a far larger invention: Thorndike Academy, an exclusive prep school founded 65 years ago in Vernon. As the book progresses, Thorndike gradually takes its place in a split-screen view of southern Vermont. Dominating one screen is back-street Brattleboro and modest-income Bellows Falls, with the poverty-driven drug scene lurking at their edges. Dominating the other screen is Thorndike's world of trustees and donors, mostly millionaires who have made the area their home since World War II. As the plot moves forward, Thorndike's history and culture gradually come to dominate the whole screen.

The "bomber's moon" that gives the novel its name is a full moon that, in the days before night vision goggles and radar, allowed night bombers to see their targets clearly. Such moons present dangers as well as opportunities: a plane flying by moonlight is highly visible to its target. The most intelligent of the book's three murder victims dies because he becomes so excited by the discovery of his target that he makes the fatal mistake of revealing himself too clearly. Like the other victims, he is

presented from several points of view, a technique that gives each victim depth of character; they are flawed but sympathetic human beings who have been caught up in circumstances over which they have lost control. In some cases, Mayor presents scenes from the victims' points of view; one result is a quiet sequence that must be one of the most disturbing descriptions of cold-blooded murder in the literature, and which becomes shocking as the identity of the murderer emerges.

Mayor keeps up the suspense by presenting episodes that are happening simultaneously. Sometimes we see

thieves and drug dealers at work, other times we see Gunther and his colleagues puzzling over questions to which an alert reader knows some, but not all, of the answers. Together with enjoying Mayor's well-handled suspense, readers familiar with his series can delight in a new generation of characters. Sally Kravitz, a loner with a habitual suspicion of humankind that comes from her upbringing, meets and slowly becomes friends with Rachel Reiling, the young investigative reporter who is the daughter of Joe Gunther's lover – and who, as the result of her fearless determination

to get a story, sometimes crosses lines in a way that Gunther has to stop.

Sammie and Willy Kunkle's daughter Emma is now a toddler, and Sammie, looking around her at the opulent campus of Thorndike Academy, thinks longingly of the great advantages such a school could give her child; but she also sees that such schooling would make Emma no longer "one of us." As always in Mayor's novels, the differences between rich and poor are not those of talent or intelligence, or of love between parents and children, but of a paradoxical opportunity. In this novel, the author leaves no doubt that entitlement to well-heeled success, like the vista offered by a bomber's moon, can lead to terrible wreckage.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



One-Minute Book Reviews

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