

Carom Shot:

An Algy Temple Mystery, by J.J. Partridge

Reviewed by Joan Retsinas

Algy Temple is an intriguing amalgam, blending Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey and Robert Parker's Spenser - coated with a Rhode Island veneer. Like Wimsey, Algy is a patrician, but a Providence version. Algy lives in a stately carriage house on Congdon Street, holds an almost dilettantish job as counsel to an Ivy League University (called Carter, to confuse no one), has a gentleman's passion (and talent) for pool, and yearns to disentangle the threads of a mystery circumstance has plunked at his ivied feet. Temple even has a counterpart to Wimsey's Harriet Vane - Temple's lover, Nadie Winokur, a psychology professor at Carter, shares in his sleuthing, adding her skeptical perspective to his tentative construc-

tions of the case.

This patrician lawyer-detective, though, shares some of Spenser's quirks. Like Spenser, Algy cooks, muses on the vagaries of his place in the universe and fights in self-defense - not often, but enough to fascinate the reader.

The core mystery is steeped in an eddy of side-stories - or are they? The central mystery revolves around the murder of a Carter drop-out, the daughter of a Providence police officer. But the more Temple delves into her life, the murkier the details. Did she have an abortion? How did she get her stash of money? Who were her lovers? The characters echo familiar people: the city's flamboyant mayor; the rising son of a political-ly entrenched family; the inflammatory minister; the conservative talk-show darling / University

professor. Racial tensions come to the fore, as do women's rights, free speech and class-clashes. Throw in some drugs and sex, too.

The action takes place over a week, and Partridge lets the reader into the mind of Algy, who probes apart the salient from the extraneous. The denouement comes as a surprise - but the groundwork was laid in the first few days, so the reader (and Algy), reflecting back on key events, can see the inexorable conclusion.

Partridge also lets the reader into the heart of Providence. Algy knows and loves the city and the reader follows him down Benefit Street, past the Avon Cinema, to Thayer Street, to Verrazano Park, to the Public Safety Complex. Algy's secretary remembers the blizzard of '78 when the unplowed state shut down for a week and the

Friday of the plot is a "snow day" in Providence, with most streets unplowed. Algy drives through Elmwood, remarking that it was built for workers at Brown & Sharpe, Corliss, and Gorham. He sips vin santo and nibbles on can-tucci at Gasbarro's on Federal Hill. Rhode Islanders will be traipsing through familiar terrain in this mystery - and non-Rhode Islanders will savor the strong sense of place throughout the story.

The author, a long-time Providence attorney, is a first-time mystery writer who has created a charming sleuth.

Mystery-afficionados are always searching for a new detective: we gobble up stories faster than writers can write them. Algy Temple is a wonderful addition to the ranks of sleuths. I wish him well, and await a sequel.