

## BOOK REVIEW

*'Straight Pool'*

BY J. J. PARTRIDGE

Reviewed by JOAN RETSINAS

Algy Temple, the detective-hero of "Straight Pool," (A Chukar Book, 2008) is a staid bachelor in his 50s and an attorney for Carter University on the East Side of Providence (the reader doesn't need to be much of a detective to guess the comparison).

For recreational reading, he likes thrillers, especially series. Algy notes, "A series makes me feel like an insider as my favorite detectives learn their craft, find their slants on the state of the human condition, develop personal traits helpful and hurtful and confront their inner devils. Except for Parker, they even age."

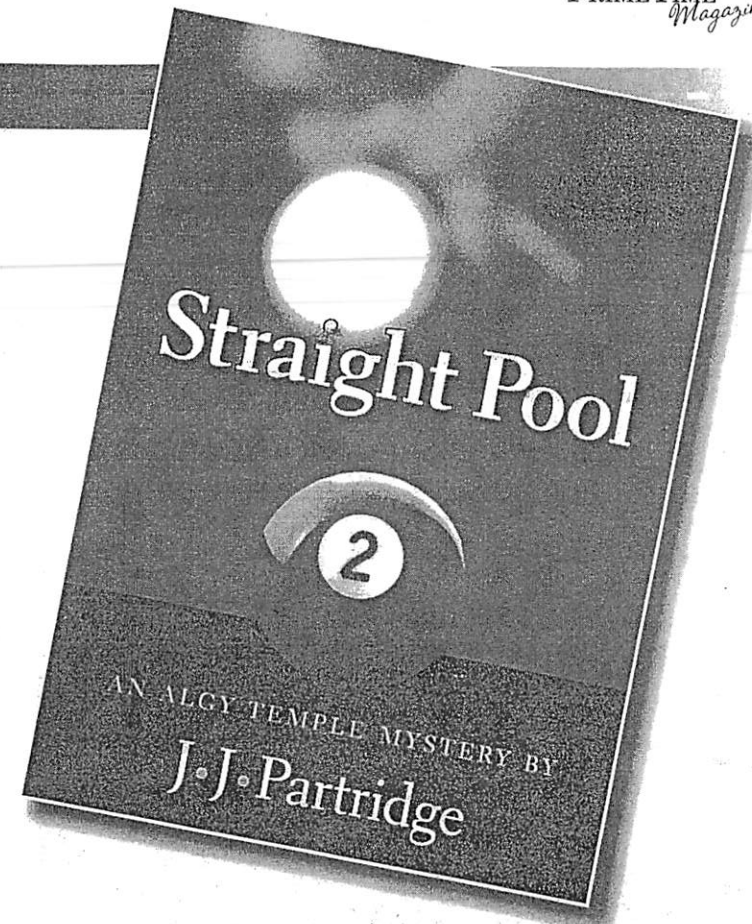
Readers who met Algy Temple in "Carom Shot," the first in the series, will mark the transformation as this new fictional detective learns his craft. "Carom Shot" focused on Providence politics, with its intermix of ethnic cleavages and the town-gown schism. "Straight Pool" takes Algy to Westerly, where a ne'er-do-well brother-in-law of a politically connected family ends up implicated in the arson of a clubhouse on a new golf course on land once upon a time owned by a local native American tribe, the Quonnias.

A club employee is found dead at the scene, and the family enlists Algy, a long-time friend, to "handle it." The world of Providence politics seeps into Westerly; and the same cleavages and schisms set the background for the tale.

This time Algy remains just as cerebral as in the first book. At one point he probes the complexities of insurance law - after a page of who owes what to whom under what circumstances, I wondered that anybody could earn a living pondering those stipulations. At another point he discusses the cases that come across his desk as university counsel, plumbing financial minutiae. He dissects the intertwining financial, political and familial ties of the characters.

His observations of the world around him draw the reader in. He knows Rhode Island, eating at familiar places (he gets croissants from Seven Stars bakery on Hope St. and goes to Federal Hill for dinner) and traveling down familiar neighborhoods from Fox Point to Watch Hill. He understands the two degrees - sometimes, one degree - of separation dividing Rhode Islanders, and he knows the impact of generations-old strife. He astutely describes the manners and dress of those around him almost like a fly on the wall. Indeed, this reticent attorney probably seems a fly on the wall to the medley of characters flurrying around the murder.

And, of course, Algy has a passion for pool. Readers who share the passion will delight in the tight matches, the difficult shots. He has other passions as well; for the movies (he cites scenes from films as varied as the "Shawshank



Redemption" and Katharine Hepburn flicks); for food (he cooks); for cars; for opera. The reader wants to meet him.

But it is the mystery itself that shines. This is a cerebral tale, replete with red herrings that lead down varied paths. Does this tale revolve around the obvious suspects? That seems too easy - but maybe not. What role did the 1938 hurricane play? Who is backing the native tribe to establish a casino? What role do the states' environmental regulations play in the plot? Is the mob involved? What about Magua, the warrior, whose centuries-old rage pervades the story? Algy thinks his way to the solution. So will the reader, along the way gaining insight into Rhode Island's turbulent history, from the 17th century onward.

The reader will also gain insight into Algy's moral compass, for this detective, new to the genre, works from a grounded philosophy. Like Lew Archer, one of Algy's detective-heroes, Algy himself "satisfies a sense of justice and tries not to do harm."

The author J.J. Partridge is the founding partner of Partridge, Snow and Hahn. He lives on the East Side. He understands the political maelstrom that is Rhode Island. He shares Algy's passion for Italian cuisine, movies and detective thrillers. But he hasn't battled against Magua. ■