

## Fourth Down and Out

**Andrew Welsh-Huggins**

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*A flawed PI destined to be a sympathetic protagonist across a series is introduced in this complex noir mystery.*

Prowling the streets of Columbus, Ohio, in his entertaining debut mystery, *Fourth Down and Out*, veteran journalist Andrew Welsh-Huggins asks his character, private sleuth Andy Hayes, to solve a complex, interrelated series of crimes that drive Ohio State University football action off the newspaper's front page.

Columbus resident Welsh-Huggins has his scene down pat, from government buildings to trendy coffee shops, and he makes good use of his familiarity, such as knowing the best abandoned quarry to dump a body into. Similar to how James Lee Burke treats Cajun country or Sue Grafton the California coast, Welsh-Huggins is out to make Columbus a character.

With a talent for contriving a page-turning mystery, realistic and riveting, Welsh-Huggins employs a linear, complex plot with assorted bad folk doing bad stuff. The narrative is seamless and logical, opening with Hayes enjoying his Sunday paper in a coffee shop. A prospective client shows up, a man who is a target of extortion. The should-have-known-better professional was seduced into kissing a neighbor's teen daughter, a snuggle captured on video and worth a thousand dollars. A simple enough case, true, but as Hayes digs deeper, he uncovers more than a thousand bucks' worth of trouble.

Andy Hayes, nicknamed "Woody" in appreciation of OSU's notorious former football coach, is employed by a prominent attorney, but he takes jobs on the side. While other characters are nicely described, we get only a general sense of Hayes—forty-something, relatively tall, banged up from football, but still hard enough to apply a little muscle when necessary. He is an everyman, a sympathetic yet interesting protagonist, right out of the book of flawed heroes. Decades ago, Hayes was a top-notch OSU quarterback. OSU was close to the national championship, but Hayes was arrested for point shaving. Hayes's backstory unfolds slowly, scattered hints expanding his character.

Welsh-Huggins's new Columbus Columbo promises new territory for a detective series, and, as with most mysteries in the noir style, it's good country for a writer with the ability to head out into the gray area where the conflict between good and evil results in entertaining mystery reading.

GARY PRESLEY (Summer 2014)

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