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Clarion Review ★★★★½ **MYSTERY**

Murder 101

Richard Boyer
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With entertaining waggishness toward university environments, Murder 101 *is a witty mystery novel.*

In Richard Boyer's witty mystery novel *Murder 101*, a death among the intelligentsia sets university tongues wagging and puts one professor on an investigative path.

Monroe is a high-minded history professor at Northlake University, where an outsider, Eliot, was recently named the president. Others in the faculty resent Eliot as an interloper, but Monroe identifies with his new colleague. Both men hate the bureaucracy of academia; both long to protect the university as an agora for the free exchange of ideas. And so, when Eliot runs afoul of processed peanuts and dies alone in his office, Monroe is unable to let the incident go.

Monroe ingratiates himself with the police investigator in charge of the case, who happens to be an old friend. He begins a layman's investigation into Eliot's death, which may have been planned. The possibility consumes Monroe. He discovers a possible money laundering scheme connected to the college's art gallery, as well as shady dealings with China in pursuit of funding for a new institute; he witnesses as a coworker's RV is bombed; and he is present for the investigation into the death of a woman who was in possession of a priceless musical instrument. Suddenly life at tiny Northlake is not so humdrum after all.

Monroe is a droll, somewhat pretentious lead, wont to pontificate on academic ideals and prone to sensuous indulgences. Some background information—about his football playing days, and regarding how he charms women—is underaddressed. His investigative instincts prove strong, though, mollifying any concerns about his self-insertion into the criminal investigation. Beside Monroe, the official police investigator comes to seem less crucial to solving the case than the professors who were aware of Eliot's day to day activities; all have secrets. No one quite equals Monroe's presence, though.

The mystery itself becomes as much about the seediness of bureaucracy as it is about the murders; its turns are piquing, if not always involving. An insider's tone pervades the book, which is at its best when it remembers to wink toward the audience: "A muffin is a weird murder weapon," one dry professor remarks. Similarly, when evidence is found in a dusty book, it is regarded as proof of the importance of the classics; a dictionary is used as a weapon, and becomes a symbol of the power of words. Such waggishness toward university environments is entertaining. Still, many other conversations trend toward rare works of art, sought after instruments, and professional accolades—interesting topics on their own merit, though here they feel too compressed to properly breathe.

Honor trumps ambition in the cheeky mystery novel *Murder 101*, wherein a curious professor refuses to be stymied by university bureaucrats.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January 28, 2021)

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