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Murder Bay: A Ben Carey Mystery
David R. Horwitz
Top Five Books
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Talk about a cold case! Here's a fictional one that dates back to the early days of the American Civil War. Naturally—or, more accurately, supernaturally—the only witnesses to the original crime are ghosts. In 1957, Korean War veteran Ben Carey is a street cop in Washington, D.C. When he is promoted to a new assignment and told to set up operations in a dilapidated old mansion the department has been using for spare office space, the mystery unfolds. Horwitz unwinds his convoluted yarn in alternating time zones, shifting from events that start in 1862, when Union soldier Mordechai Finkel is injured in the second battle of Bull Run, and then returning to the winter of 1957-58 to chronicle Carey's investigation of Finkel's ill fortune.

Almost as soon as Carey and his fellow cops move into the mansion, they begin hearing and seeing things that can't be explained rationally—footsteps on an empty staircase, oddly dressed figures glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, the sudden appearance of a child's toy. Carey isn't given to superstition, but the phantom manifestations occur with such frequency and urgency that he finally concludes they are trying to draw his attention to some dark occurrence that has taken place in the house. When a fellow police officer commits suicide, Carey discovers that he has left behind a sketchbook with drawings of the apparitions that are haunting the house. At this point, he decides he has no choice but to investigate these unsettled spirits.

As Carey seeks to identify the insistent spirits and discover how they relate to each other, the Civil War chapters focus on the wounded Finkel recuperating from his wounds in the stately D.C. home of Senator Eugene Morrison and being lovingly attended to by the senator's beautiful daughter, Louisa. It is an idyll destined to be short-lived. There is no such coziness, however, in Carey's life. His too-hasty marriage is falling apart. The only positive effect of the breakup is that it enables him spend more time sleuthing in Civil War archives.

Horwitz, who died before this book was published, tells an involving, period-perfect story. The action is fast-paced and convincing within its premise, and the characters are expertly drawn. Hard-eyed rationalists will have some difficulty adjusting to the ghostly elements, but there is enough solid gumshoe work to make this more of a mystery than a fantasy.