

Ship Shapely

Alistair Boyle

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Before Les Quincy disappeared, he was a professional flagpole painter and a sexually profligate sailboat captain. The suspects in his disappearance, all shapely young women, served as his crew and took turns sharing his bed. If this sounds like a farce, it is. The action is just shy of slapstick in Alistair Boyle's fifth mystery starring private investigator Gil Yates.

Readers of the earlier books will know the premise: Yates is the alter ego of Malvin Stark, a plain brown wrapper of a guy with a dead-end marriage, a dead-end job and a daughter who prefers his financial support to his proximity. As Gil Yates, the man sheds his drab covering, solves mysteries and makes enough dough to finance his hobby of raising rare and expensive tropical plants.

His client in this case is the sailboat captain's presumed widow. She provides him with pictures of the sexy suspects, and Yates gallivants about Hawaii, Tennessee and California interviewing them. He find a surprising number of these ladies naked, or nearly so, although one happens to be in a middle of a drug deal and her charm is therefore diminished. As the cops surround her house, she doesn't mind asking Yates for a favor. "You put your arm around me from behind—push your fist into my back as though you have a gun," she suggests. "Ask for safe haven somewhere or you'll shoot me."

Yates handles that situation, his subsequent arrest, the explosion of his car and threats on his life, with wry cynicism and quirky humor. His cynicism is centered mostly on his family, his quirky humor on the things he is enthusiastic about. Like certain words: "Dewlaps has always been one of my favorite words," he muses. "So descriptive; it has so much flair and panache. I use it at the least opportunity."

In a genre with a recent habit of explicit cruelty and violence, Boyle's light comic mystery, is, as Gil Yates would say, "a different kettle of gefeltefish entirely."

RICH WERTZ (September / October 1999)

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