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Literary Collections

The Asey Mayo Trio
Phoebe Atwood Taylor
Contryman Press
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> *Asey Mayo, speeding in his Porter roadster along the Skaket shore lane, diagnosed the northeast storm coming up as one of Cape Cod's superdoopers. Appraising the rising wind, the bulbous black clouds streaking overhead, the odd atmospheric light that cast a purple tinge over everything, from the white beach to the scrub pines, he decided he'd miss getting home before things broke by about ten minutes of his cousin Jennie's chatter. For even if she fulfilled her promise to be packed and waiting on the doorstep of the Merton Hall School for Girls, where she'd been helping the housekeeper prepare for opening day, Jennie would still waste time in conversational afterthoughts.*

Those who have spent time on Cape Cod will appreciate the attentive detail the author pays to the region in this series. In the above excerpt, Mayo, a professional handyman and amateur sleuth, and an acerbic, 1930s New England version of Columbo, is about to encounter a violent nor'easter whose destruction will lead to the disappearance of a group of schoolgirls and their teacher in one tale from *The Asey Mayo Trio: Three Cape Cod Mysteries* (0-88150-171-9). The Mayo books were revived this year by Countryman Press, which has led to a resurgence of interest in Taylor, who was a significant contributor to the "golden age" of American mysteries.

Taylor, a lifelong New England resident, hailed from a family that had inhabited Cape Cod for more than three hundred years, and wrote thirty-three novels before her death at age sixty-seven in 1976, including some under the pen names Alice Tilton and Freeman Dana. She was one of the first to use a regional, rural setting for mystery tales, providing the foundation upon which contemporary thriller scribes such as James Patterson have built.

Though she never enjoyed commercial success, Taylor did have many fans. Margaret Mitchell (*Gone with the Wind*) was an admiring peer who encouraged Taylor to infuse her stories with as much Cape Cod detail as possible, and as she did, a devoted cult of readers spread from the New England states across the country. After Taylor's death, little was heard about her for almost twenty-five years, until Foul Play Press, then an imprint of Countryman, queried booksellers about mystery writers they would like to see introduced to a new generation of readers. Taylor's name surfaced repeatedly, leading to a revival of her work. In February of this year, Countryman reissued the "Asey Mayo Cape Cod Classics" for the second time, hoping to appeal to those who appreciate smart sleuthing, salty Yankee banter, and whodunits that hold the reader right up to a dramatic revelation in the book's final moments.

The seemingly idyllic backdrops of Taylor's resort communities are anything but (Weesit is named after an actual neck of land on the Cape, and nearby Orleans is a real town). These settings provided the author with myriad possibilities for death, revenge, scandal, and intrigue. She gave Mayo his debut in 1931 in *The Cape Cod Mystery* (0-88150-046-1), in which he aids a friend whose vacation home is the site of the murder of a novelist. In *Punch with Care* (1946, 0-88150-229-4), a senator's wife becomes lost luggage during a one-way ride on the Lulu Belle, an antique railroad line.

What begins as a treasure hunt turns into an auction that ends in death as a result of a bitter rivalry between two art dealers in *Going, Going, Gone* (1943, 0-88150-172-7). In 1938's *The Annulet of Gilt* (0-88150-078-X), Mayo confronts secrets from his own past, linked to a murder in a rental property leased to a dagger-carrying group of foreigners. One of the best-known of the series, *The Mystery of the Cape Cod Tavern* (0-88150-047-X), was published in 1934, and is set in Weesit's Prence Tavern, where the fatal stabbing of the watering hole's legendary owner reveals that a group of corrupt law officers and famed writers, all of whom gather there regularly, could now be suspects.

Mystery devotees will find much to savor in Taylor's well-crafted, enigmatic Mayo character, as well as in the rich New England atmosphere in this series of novels, which present a look at Cape Cod in a time before the world came to know it as a vacation destination. These stories offer puzzles to ponder and riddles to reason out, set in ambient detail that even the most recalcitrant Cape Codder couldn't find fault with.