

The Magic Bullet

Larry Millett

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Larry Millett continues his Sherlock Holmes and amateur detective Shadwell Rafferty series with this novel, set in the early twentieth century in St. Louis, Missouri. Well-known financier Artemus Dodge has apparently been murdered in his office, a seemingly impossible task because the office suite was built like a fortress and only Dodge knew how to get in and out. A single bullet to the head and no other clues leave Rafferty scratching his head—figuratively—but pursuing an investigation nonetheless. His invitation to do so comes from the heir to the Hill railroad fortune, Louis B. Hill, much to the chagrin of the detective in charge of the case.

Dodge's life had been threatened before his murder, which prompted him to design and have built a safe house in his office building. Suspects are thick on the ground: his young and beautiful widow, his ne'er-do-well son, an office manager who's managing more than Dodge's office, an overly observant security guard, and a known anarchist. They all have reasons for wanting Dodge out of the way, ranging from money to politics to power. But they're not the only ones Rafferty has to contend with.

Detective Mordecai Jones of the St. Louis Police believes civilians should stay out of police business, so Rafferty and his assistant George Washington Thomas must move quickly to gather clues and interview potential suspects in order to avoid Jones's wrath. Amidst a streetcar workers' strike and threats from a commission bent on enforcing its own vision of patriotism, the killer gives Rafferty even more motivation: the killings may not stop with Dodge.

St. Louis in 1917 isn't a common setting for a locked-room tale, but Millett's background in architectural history brings the city to life through solid descriptions of places and people. Readers may be reminded of black-and-white films from the 1930s and 1940s by the dialogue, which is informative and well paced while being witty and true to its period. The relationship between Rafferty and Thomas is refreshing, given the time period (and to say more would be to spoil a fine thing about this novel). None of the suspects are easy reads in terms of agenda or personality, which adds depth to the story and easily engages the reader's interest.

A solid effort from a skilled novelist, *The Magic Bullet* should make fans of this series quite pleased that Rafferty is back on the job.

J. G. STINSON (May / June 2011)

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