

The Midnight Special

Larry Karp

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Like the turning of carefully synchronized gears, like the tinkling orchestrations of an antique music box, Karp's book makes music. And like one of the minor characters, a street kid named Jitters who has a bizarre neurological disorder known as synesthesia—meaning he sees sounds—this novel dazzles all the senses.

Dr. Thomas Purdue, a Manhattan neurologist, has several passions. He restores and collects antique music boxes. Not the plastic ballerina that pirouettes above the cheap thing found at the drugstore, but works of art from the 1800s that play complicated versions of operatic scores. Purdue's other passion is sticking his nose where it doesn't necessarily belong.

It begins with one of his elderly stroke patients calling to say she'd killed somebody. When he arrives to help her, however, the victim—apparently not quite dead—had risen from the floor and made a hasty exit.

This is the first turn of a crank that starts a complicated plot spinning. Before Purdue can say, "I don't seem to have very many patients," he finds himself in search of a rare, perhaps one-of-a-kind, music box known as a plerodienique-revolver whose estimated worth is \$200,000. With the assistance of his "antique picker," Broadway Schwartz, they ramble all over Manhattan, in and out of reputable and disreputable antique stores and restorers, playing alternating games of Hide the Music Box and Find the Corpse. Bringing along one colorful eccentric after another, they attempt to untangle a mess of fraud, theft, blackmail, and murder. Neither is afraid to stoop to their own little con games and deceptions in order to unearth the truth.

Karp's work seems like a full-to-brimming combination of a British cozy, a hardboiled Chandler-esque P.I., and the madcap comic capers of Donald Westlake. The writing is punchy, vivid, and alive. For example: "From Edna's on Lexington to Mick the Dick and Soapy Sandy's Second Avenue yuppie pad. First thing this strongarm private eye and his pickpocket wife did last year when they came into a pile of money was move out of their sagging old house in Flatbush into a spanking eastside high-rise condo... Mick and Sandy always sat stiffly in those chairs and sofas, wearing their store-bought respectability like itchy woolen trousers. Eventually they'll realize they're still Mick the Dick and Soapy Sandy, plenty good enough."

Karp's *The Midnight Special*, simultaneously silly, sonorous and resonant, is better than plenty good enough.

MARK TERRY (May / June 2001)

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