

READER'S GUIDE



The P-Town Murders by Jeffrey Round

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INTRODUCING *The P-Town Murders*

Bradford Fairfax, a member of a secret security agency, travels to Provincetown, Massachusetts, the so-called “gayest place on Earth,” to bury his recently deceased ex-lover, party boy Ross Pretty. Upon arrival, Fairfax learns that Pretty is only one of several young men who have turned up dead in Provincetown under suspicious circumstances. He quickly launches an informal investigation which leads him on a journey through P-Town’s dark side, full of greed, jealousy, and deadly games.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Identity

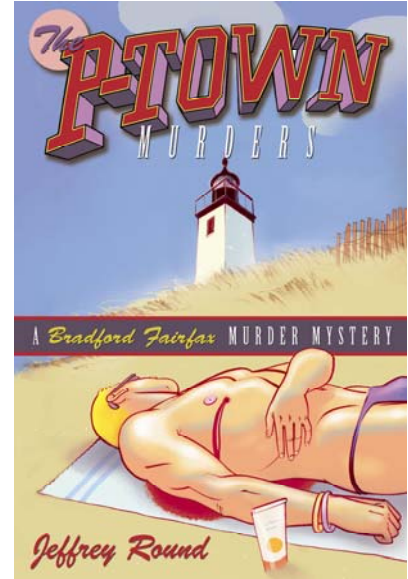
Bradford Fairfax is an agent for a covert organization, and, as such, often operates under an assumed identity. This habit of travelling incognito extends to his personal life, to the point where he introduces himself as a different person to almost everyone he meets – witnesses and potential lovers alike. The concept of a shifting identity is integral to other characters. Cinder Lindquist, the drag queen/singer, impersonates a different female celebrity every time she appears, from Marilyn Monroe to Renee Zellweger. The ultimate antagonist is also someone pretending to be something he is not.

The Search for Relationship

Due to the dangerous and sensitive nature of his work as a “secret agent for a nameless security organization,” Brad is forced to compromise his own personal life. He is unable to form any long-term relationships because his job forces him to travel at a moment’s notice, not to mention puts him in so many life-threatening situations that he feels it would be unfair to ask anyone to commit to him. This reluctance to commit seems to be common to many of the queer characters in the novel, as Fairfax muses early on: “Gays tended to collect lovers rather than cultivate relationships, Brad knew.” The only exceptions are Ruby and Halle, who are in a relationship, and Zach, whose lack of emotional restraint originally turned Brad off but begins to make him comfortable with the idea of settling down with someone.

Spirituality

One of the major forces at play in the novel is a Buddhist movement which claims many P-Town residents as its adherents. Although it turns out that the leader of the movement – the so-called Reluctant Rinpoche – is a fraud, the fact that he is able to take so many people in demonstrates their craving for spiritual guidance. Zach is one of these individuals. Not only does he show a willingness to learn from the Rinpoche, in the past he has gone on journeys of spiritual exploration where he has learned, among other things, that he has latent psychic healing abilities.



Q&A WITH JEFFREY ROUND

1. Your novel has such a wide array of characters, each with his or her own unique voice. How difficult was it to write each one so convincingly?

The trick is to create characters with distinct and vivid personalities. In the case of the mystery series, which are written very quickly, it's a little like walking through a market and picking out whatever catches your eye. Because I do on-site research, I often catch people doing and saying things in real life that stick in my mind. The character Ruby (who saves Bradford from a fast-moving car) was inspired by a woman in Provincetown who warned me about the crazy drivers there. She said, "They'll mow you down like wheat, honey!" which is what Ruby tells Bradford. That single statement was so memorable for me that an entire character came out of it.

2. You had written several plays before writing *The P-Town Murders*. Was writing a novel more challenging than writing a play? How do the processes differ?

Writing a novel is not more challenging than writing a play or even a film script. Each one has its technical requirements and restrictions, and one is not easier for me to write than another. Nor is the writing time different: despite having fewer words, a play or script can take as long to develop and write as a novel. The most obvious difference lies in the source of conflict faced by the characters. In a novel, conflict is most often generated internally (man vs. self), whereas in a play conflict usually arises between characters (wife vs. husband), while in a film the character faces challenges from the external world (man vs. shark, woman vs. shady corporation, etc). I don't have a preference for one medium over another, but I note with interest that in a play the actor has control, in a film the director has control, and in a book the writer has control.

3. Your novel takes place in a real location. How does your portrayal of Provincetown differ from your experience of it?

Very, very little. I'm a stickler for details, so if I write that the moon was full or the tide high on a particular day, you can be assured they were. I know the Pilgrim Tower has the precise number of steps I claim it has (116) because I climbed them. The only thing I had to invent in Provincetown was a coroner's office, because the town is too small to have one. Other than that, and the fact that people are far less likely to be murdered there than I portray in the book, you could use *The P-Town Murders* as a guidebook.

4. When you were writing your book, did you have a specific reader in mind?

With the mystery series, my ideal reader is Oscar Wilde. I always enjoy his wit and his tendency to try to shock the more mundane sensibilities. For that reason, when I write these books I try to shock, titillate and scandalize (as far as that would be possible) Mr. Wilde.

5. Where there any specific books or movies that inspired you while writing *The P-Town Murders*?

Not so much during the writing – I'm more likely to be influenced by music – but there are books and movies that play in my head constantly (which can lead to frequent embarrassment, but nonetheless they are there.) I'm particularly fond of Ethan Mordden's *Buddies* trilogy, George Baxt's celebrity mystery series, Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* (with the Beatles), and Peter Bogdanovich's *What's Up, Doc?* (with Barbra Streisand). If you were to excavate my brain you would find versions of these works running constantly, often simultaneously, within.



ABOUT JEFFREY

Jeffrey Round is a writer, director, and playwright who lives in Toronto. His first novel, *A Cage of Bones*, was published in 1997. *The P-Town Murders* is the first in the Bradford Fairfax Murder Mystery series.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the concept of identity function in these stories?
2. Discuss the importance of Brad's queerness. How does it affect his perception of the world around him?
3. What are the motivations behind Brad's trip to Provincetown? How do they reflect on his character?
4. Despite P-Town's party atmosphere, there exists a sense of isolation throughout. By the end of the novel, do any of the characters find completion?
5. What role do all the pop culture references in the novel play?
6. Discuss the role of women in the book. What do they represent to the predominantly male characters?
7. What is the turning point in Brad's investigation?
8. Explain the significance of Buddhism and spirituality in this book.