

## Mayor aims to keep readers guessing with latest book, 'Red Herring'

By JON POTTER / Reformer Staff

Saturday September 25, 2010



Archer Mayor discusses his new book, "Red Herring." (Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer photos)

BRATTLEBORO -- Archer Mayor strode in, and once he had placed his motorcycle helmet on the conference room table, taken off his leather jacket, hung it on the back of a chair and sat down, the sleeves of his blue checkered shirt were plainly visible.

What you couldn't see was what he had up them.

The Newfane resident and author does indeed have an extra trick or two up his sleeves in his latest novel, "Red Herring," hot off the presses from Minotaur Books. It has received strong reviews from the four major advanced criticism review sources in the business -- Kirkus, Publisher's Weekly, Booklist and Library Journal.

Publisher's Weekly wrote: "As usual, Mayor skillfully combines a gripping police

procedural with a view of smalltown life balanced by bits of humor applied at just the right time. The suspense builds toward an ending that reveals a surprising motive and a chillingly realistic villain."

Mystery, murder, misdirection and headlong dives into the depths of human behavior are nothing new to Mayor, whose life, both in fact -- as a law enforcement officer and death investigator for the Vermont Medical Examiner's office -- and fiction -- as the author of 21 novels in the Joe Gunther series -- is spent dealing with the messy stuff of life.

"Loss, death, mourning, disorientation, fundamental emotional upset these are the things I spend an inordinate amount of my time dealing with," said Mayor in an interview at the *Reformer* office recently. "I have to tell my readers, 'Hey, these characters are make-believe.' But are they? I dip my ladle into the same experiences as you do."

Mayor seems particular deft with his ladle in "Red Herring," a fascinating whodunnit and whydunnit that begins with a series of seemingly unrelated deaths, linked only by a common calling card left at the scene. From there, it draws out like a sword from a scabbard, guided by Mayor's keen eye for detail and his knowledge of police procedure.

Left with a baffling set of clues, Detective Joe Gunther and his team at the Vermont Bureau of Investigation work to unravel the mystery, drawing on the full spectrum of tools -- from street-level legwork in and around familiar Brattleboro settings to the latest scientific analyses performed at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. It culminates in a jaw-dropper of an ending that, for obvious reasons, can't be revealed here.

Through it all, Mayor gives us plenty to think about, not just because of what's happening, but why it's happening. In the case of "Red Herring," the stuff people carry around with them, the emotional wounds that never fully heal those play a big role in all the characters' lives, no matter which side of the law they're on.

"The more we spend time with others who have suffered loss the more we begin to empathize and understand the unheard weeping of these people," said Mayor. "We are occupants of a culture which thinks, by and large, what you see is what you get. But what you see is not always what you get. I just want to acknowledge what we all carry around inside of us."

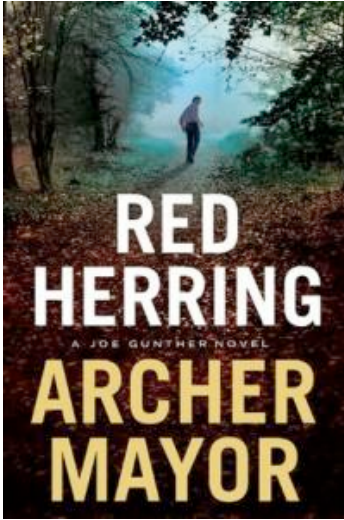
Mayor's annual rite of fall -- the book tour that accompanies the release of any new novel of his -- begins this Sunday with a stop at Olde and New England Books, 47 West St., in Newfane at 4:30 p.m. Between then and Dec. 4, there are nearly 30 other stops, including several more in the area. Most are in New England, but the tour does take him as far as Scottsdale, Ariz.

Mayor said he enjoys meeting his readers and hearing their thoughts on his books. He's often amazed to hear how they picture Joe Gunther or Willy Kunkle and how invested their own imaginations are in his books.

"I tell these stories *with* my readers. I don't tell these stories *to* my readers," he said.

One place you probably won't see Mayor this fall is in a cutesy gift shoppe, buying picture postcards of Vermont to send to his friends. He's not out to run Vermont down; let's just say he's realistic.

"One of the incentives of this series is that it is as much a portrayal of Vermont and its people as it is about the telling of the stories. I leave it to the chambers of commerce and the Tourism Bureau to portray Vermont in the way Bob Newhart would have it," he said. "We're all human beings, and our pride notwithstanding, we're all pretty much like each other. Very, very many of us have unhealthy instincts, and they need to be discussed.



"We are a fascinating species, and what we have done with this unique capability is a mixed bag, and the jury's still out on whether we're putting this brain to it best use," he added. "The realization of that is what drives me from book to book."

If that sounds cynical, you might forgive Mayor, whose life's work, in addition to mystery novels, includes too many brushes with too many of the world's dark and depraved souls.

In addition to working as a death investigator, Mayor has also worked in law enforcement, first with the Bellows Falls Police Department and through the Windham County Sheriff's Department. His work as a deputy sheriff got him appointed the Windham County Special Investigations Unit, a multi-agency task force which focuses on crimes against children. "Sadly busy," is how he describes the task force's workload. "And sadly we predict becoming busier. We're called Windham County Safe Place, and we want to encourage people to know we are a harbor."

All that, and of course the life of a novelist. Mayor is already at work on the next Joe Gunther novel, which has the working title "Tag Man."

"I'm playing a bit on the horror of unknown fears," he said of the book-in-progress.

For more information about his books and his tour stops, visit [archermayor.com](http://archermayor.com).

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