

THE TIMES

BOOKS | FICTION

The McMasters Guide to Homicide: Vol 1 by Rupert Holmes review — want to murder your boss? Here’s how:

A resentful engineer is sent to Hogwarts for homicide in this quirky black comedy, says Mark Sanderson

Mark Sanderson

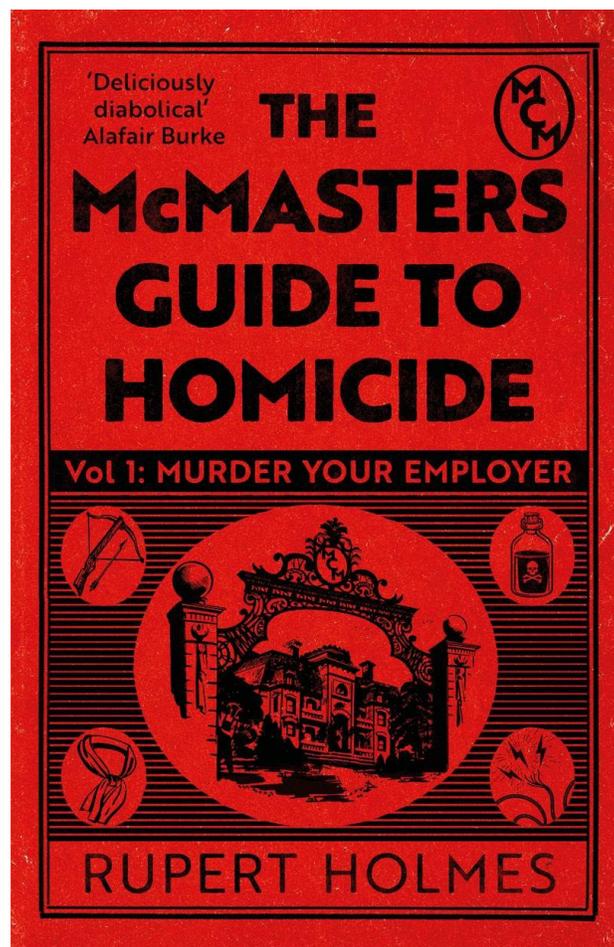
Saturday February 18 2023, 12.01am GMT, The Times

Cliff Iverson is not a happy bunny. The aeronautical engineer loathes Merrill Fiedler, his boss at Woltan Industries, for several reasons. He has altered Iverson’s electrical plans for the W-10 — already “back-ordered by Pan American, BOAC, and Turkish Airlines” — to cut costs. Unfortunately, “if for any reason the hatch doorway blew out, the pilot would be manning a 130-ton glider with no way of controlling its descent”. Fiedler has caused the deaths of two of Cliff’s friends and sacked Cliff for challenging his dreadful management skills. How can this monster be slain? By being pushed under a subway train, of course.

Until push came to shove, Cliff’s only crime had been “white wine with steak”. Consequently, it’s not long before two cops are knocking on his hotel door in downtown Manhattan. Fiedler, alas, has survived. They point out all the flaws in his attempt at murder — his ridiculous disguise, the lack of research and forward-planning — but, rather than arresting him and, this being the 1950s, sending him to

the big house for a very long time, the duo pull the poor bunny out of all that. The fake flatfoots offer him a reprieve — if he drinks a Mickey Finn.

Cliff wakes up at the McMasters Conservatory for the Applied Arts, “a finishing school for finishing people off”. He is welcomed by Dean Harbinger Harrow, the head of the institution, who has no hesitation in giving unsuitable candidates a glass of poisoned sherry. McMasters, a high-security Hogwarts that teaches skills rather than spells, is a lovely place but, like the Hotel California, those who flunk can never leave. The pass rate is 83 per cent. Such is the level of secrecy the students haven’t a clue where on earth they are.



These chosen few are taught such subjects as alibi creation, electronics and explosives by a variety of eccentrics. Vesta Thripper’s specialist subject is “Eroticide”:

“Romance, desire, seduction and heartbreak are among the most potent arrows in the McMasters quiver.” Monsieur Tissier, the excellent chef, is an expert on toxins, whereas Coach Tarcott, who ensures all students can run for their lives, “once pinned a heartless champion’s bronze medal to their chest with a nail gun”.

We follow Cliff’s progress along with that of Gemma Lindley (who wishes to dispose of a blackmailing boss) and Dulcie Mown (a Hollywood star who wishes to nix the evil head of her studio). Once they have answered the “Four Enquiries” correctly — “Is this murder necessary? Have you given your target every last chance to redeem themselves? What innocent person might suffer by your actions? Will this deletion improve the life of others?” — Dean Harrow reveals how their plans succeeded or failed.

His contributions to the text — interpolated with extracts from Cliff’s journals — conjure up a weird world with its own lunatic logic that can be reduced (ad absurdum) to the maxim: “Do in others as you would have others do you in.” If Gormenghast Castle and its grounds were refurbished, or the illustrations of Edward Gorey came to life, they would be in the same neighbourhood as this college in the “Poison Ivy League”.

Holmes is a good name for a crime novelist. He has previously adapted Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie and John Grisham for the stage (and wrote and performed *The Piña Colada Song*). Although this beautifully designed DIY manual is full of twists, the emphasis is on comedy: “I summoned all the bravado left in me and discovered there was none.” Such arch humour may not tickle everyone’s funny bone but the extraordinary Holmes can pull the heartstrings too. If you enjoyed Ian Sansom’s series of County Guides (that began with *The Norfolk Mystery* in 2013) — and, if not, why not? — you will love this gigglesome guide to the graves of academe.