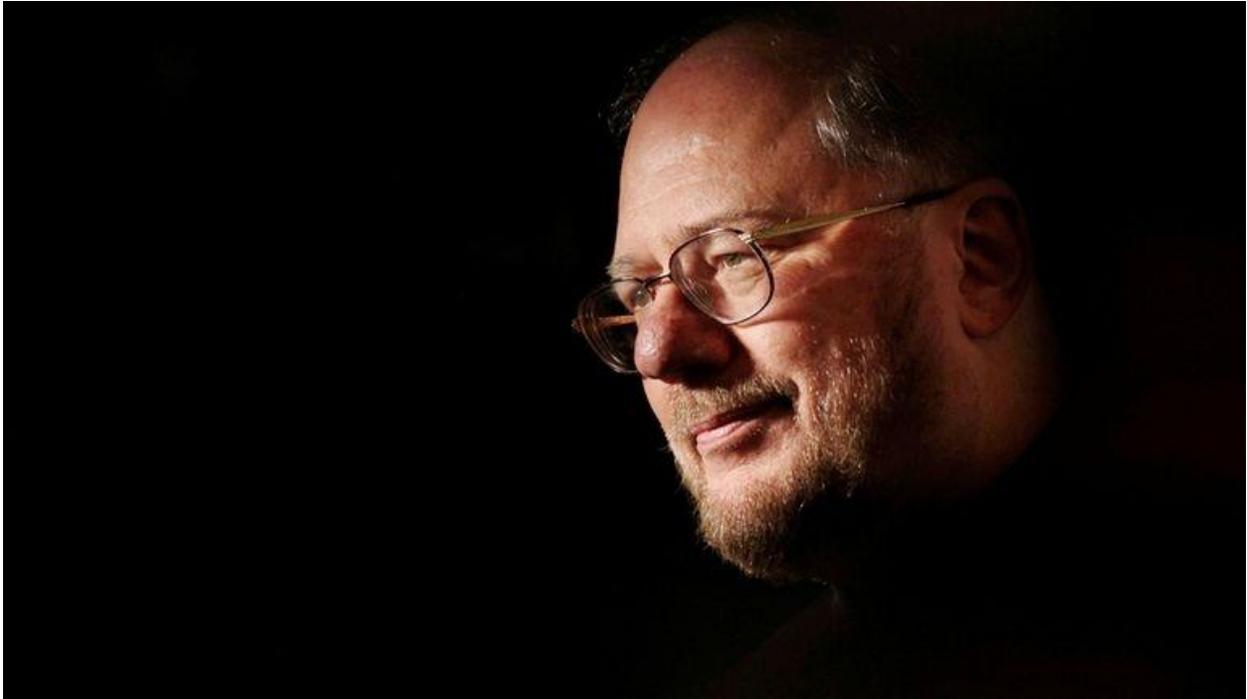


ENTERTAINMENT **BOOKS**

'Murder Your Employer' review: Rupert Holmes' wicked tale



Rupert Holmes, who was raised in Levittown, brings humor and suspense to "Murder Your Employer." Credit: Corbis via Getty Images/Walter McBride, 2012

By Marion Winik

[Special to Newsday](#)

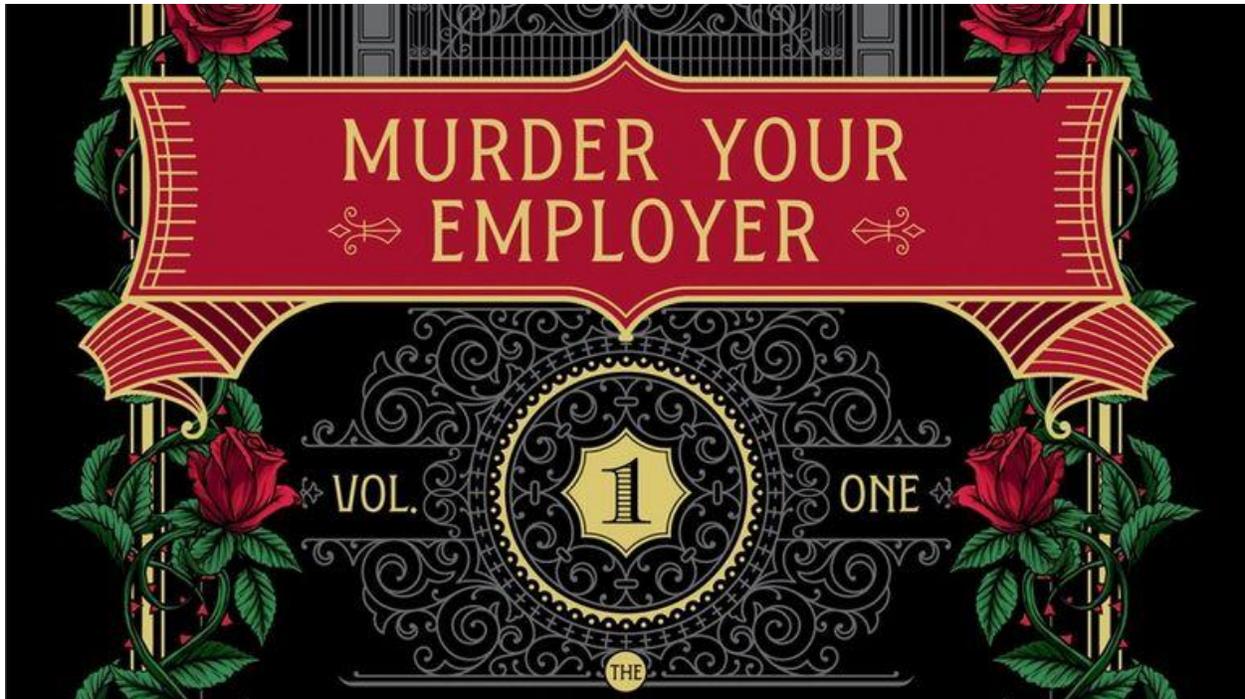
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MURDER YOUR EMPLOYER: The McMasters Guide to Homicide by
Rupert Holmes (Avid Reader, 400 pp., \$28)

"Thus, although the majority of Earth's surface is covered in water, there are also a great number of shoe stores, many of which are staffed by one owner, one employee, and a person at the register named Jackie."

Should this sentence, found in the first few pages of "Murder Your Employer: The McMasters Guide to Homicide," strike you as rather clever, you have a treat in store with the third novel from Rupert Holmes. "Murder Your Employer" is a book of surpassing cleverness, written by a man whose protean reserves of wit have given us cultural touchstones ranging from the 1979 pop hit "Escape (The Piña Colada Song)" to the Tony Award-winning musical "The Mystery of Edwin Drood."

Holmes, who was born in Northwich, England, then moved to Levittown when he was 3, goes on from his shoe store wisecrack to make a larger point about workplace oppression. Who among us has not known "repressed rage and seething resentment toward one's ostensible superior?" Thus we will surely sympathize with Cliff Iverson, of Baltimore; Gemma Lindley, of Haltwhistle, Northumberland, England; and Dulcie Mown, of Hollywood, California. All three are planning to kill their bosses, and to that end are matriculating at The McMasters Conservatory for the Applied Arts, having been transported to the impressive British-style campus by means they cannot describe. The location is such a secret that students are taken in under sedation.



"Murder Your Employer" is the delicious and clever new novel by Rupert Holmes, who grew up in Levittown. Credit: Avid Reader

When they arrive, they begin a program designed to train them in the fine art of murder, here known as "deletion." But first they must be able to respond in the affirmative to a series of questions designed to weed out all but the truly essential "deletions" and insure that the removal of the proposed victim from this vale of tears will not only hurt no innocent person but will improve the lives of others. The McMasters curriculum covers everything from Poisoning to Alibis — "Dulcie Mown was late for Alibis and had no excuse" — and a typical student schedule might include "Sporting Chance" in the gym with coach Alwyn Tarcott and "Eroticide" with Vesta Thripper, registered nurse.

Iverson, it quickly emerges, has already tried and failed to rid the earth of the vile Merrill Fiedler, his boss at aircraft manufacturer Woltan Industries. An

attempt to push him into the path of an oncoming IRT train while wearing a fat suit disguise was foiled by a pair of "policemen" who are actually emissaries from McMasters, and who spirit Iverson to McMasters to ensure he'll have better luck next time. Though tuition at McMasters is extremely high, Iverson is lucky enough to have a mysterious benefactor who is paying his tab in full, and who requests only that he keep a detailed journal of his experiences.

That journal forms one of the narrative threads of the novel, which includes charming pen-and-ink illustrations and a detailed campus map by Anna Louizos. The other portions of the book are ostensibly authored by Harbinger Harrow, Dean of Admissions and Confessions. Harrow provides context for and commentary on Cliff's journal, and also fleshes out the stories of Gemma and Dulcie, a nurse and a Hollywood actress, respectively. In all three cases, the argument for deletion is strong. Fiedler's cruel manipulations caused the deaths of two of his employees — wonderful people Cliff dearly loved. If not stopped, Fielder will soon be responsible for many more tombstones — he refuses to spend the money to correct a design flaw in a forthcoming aircraft that will cause it to crash.

Gemma's incompetent, lazy, sleazebag of a boss, Adele Underdon, is also her blackmailer. Which is only part of why she needs deletion. Dulcie, who is actually the famous film star Doria Maye, is going to put a stop to the Harvey Weinstein-style depredations of Leonid Kosta, the head of her movie studio.

With the help of the august faculty, each student at McMasters devises on their "thesis" — their plan for deletion — throughout their time on campus,

then executes it immediately upon graduation. The book follows them back into the outside world and through the headspinning intricacies of their deletion schemes, which are so very head spinning and intricate that a layperson might lose the thread for a moment or two. But what a grand finale it is, a veritable fireworks display involving scuba divers, racehorses, a burning building, a trick convertible and a host of peccadilloes. ("At the time, Finny was uncertain if "peccadilloes" related to bullfighting, stuffed olives, or small leathery mammals, but after looking up the word at home, he better understood Kosta's wishes.")

In a kind of coup de grâce of Holmesian cleverness, "Murder Your Employer" is billed as the first of a series.

By Marion Winik