

Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet

Harry Kemelman

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A pharmaceutical mishap draws Rabbi Small into a murder investigation in this *New York Times* bestseller

New Age thinking has come to Barnard's Crossing, Massachusetts. The recently elected president of Rabbi David Small's synagogue is intent on using temple money to build a meditation retreat. The congregation is practicing yoga, buying crystals, and reciting chants. When a troubled young man returns to the town after spending time in a controversial Hasidic cult, the rabbi expects him to be another New Ager. But things take a grisly turn away from new-fangled mantras of peace and love when something terribly old fashioned happens: murder.

An elderly patient dies after being given the wrong medication by the local pharmacist, who coincidentally is also the Hasidic man's father. When the dead man's family suggests the mix-up was intentional, both the druggist and his son become suspects and it's up to Rabbi Small to investigate by drawing on some Old Testament wisdom in a village of New Age fads.

Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet Details

Date : Published August 4th 2015 by Open Road Media Mystery & Thriller (first published 1976)


ISBN :

Author : Harry Kemelman

Format : Kindle Edition 312 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Literature, Jewish, Religion, Judaism

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From Reader Review Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet for online ebook

Debra says

I like a quick read and enjoy the explanations of Judaism mixed in with the mystery of who killed Mr. Kestler and why. Was it an accident, was it murder, only the Rabbi is tenacious enough to follow all the threads and discover the truth.

Garrett Zecker says

This is the second Rabbi Small mystery that I have read. I started with Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home, which I would say may not have been the best starting point, but that is okay. I enjoyed this book - it is your regular sort of formulaic mystery that I will not entirely comment on for fear of giving anything away, but basically revolves around a local prominent businessman dying after a sudden illness, and the surrounding controversy regarding a storm and an extremely busy pharmacy. In terms of the congregation, there is the normal bickering about how some money is to be spent, and what to do about some real estate. It was entertaining, fast paced, and not the most well written books I have ever read, but a fun read nonetheless. I was able to digest it in 3 visits to the gym, so it is a quick read. The beauty in the Rabbi Small mysteries is the subtle philosophy that Kemelman throws into the books - and mind you they are small and thoughtful pieces that are not really religious, per se, but rather reflect on ethics and being a good person, and these are reflected in not only Rabbi Small's religion, but of the people around town. This book did have an interesting little part toward the end regarding the roots of the Jewish faith and how it may be interpreted by other faiths, and what is interesting is that it is seamlessly thrown in to the text where it needs to be, and the rest of the characters in the book are usually just as knowledgeable as the audience; there is always something to learn and take away thematically from the book in addition to it just being a sort of paperback mystery. It is fast, fun, and if you like mysteries that can teach you something about the detective's career or life that you may know nothing about, this is another mystery that will satiate your appetite.

Carol says

Once again my favorite rabbi book character helps to solve a murder. Rabbi David Small reminds me of the TV detective Columbo, not because of his attire but because he asks questions and/or listens to people and uses his unorthodox reasoning skills to come to a conclusion. His main job, as he sees it, is to remind his congregation when they seem to be straying from the correct path according to his religion. And therefore he explains differences between Christianity and Judaism, ostensibly to a character in the book but actually to the reader. If I had one criticism it would be that the female characters are so marginal. Rabbi Small's wife Miriam only serves as a foil to provide information to the reader, as do the other female characters. And when he shuts himself up in his study, which he does quite a bit, she is way more understanding than a human wife would be.

Kate says

I enjoyed this and will look for others in the series. It's especially tasty for those of us with an interest in/knowledge of Judaism--those without it will likely feel a little left out (and maybe bored).

Also, the 70s were weird, and don't let the Baby Boomers tell you otherwise.

Dawn says

Not one of the better books for Rabbi Small. I get a little tired of the Rabbi and the congregation always butting heads over something.

Andrea Hickman Walker says

I really do like the rabbi in this series. And I particularly like that the people in his congregation and the other people that are interacted with are well-rounded characters. I like Lanigan and the relationship they have. I do not like that the rabbi has a daughter named Hepsibah (really? Hepsibah?), but presumably that's a cultural thing. I enjoyed the mystery here, especially since I didn't see the resolution coming - I will say that the 18 bothered me throughout and I was a bit annoyed when it seemed like it wouldn't be resolved, but I felt the same way about the way the temple board behaved and that didn't get resolved. I do hope that Kaplan felt appropriately chastened for his behaviour.

Nan Silvernail says

In the midst of a terrible storm in Barnard's Crossing lives will pass, fuse and explode like the lightning lashing the land. An old man calls in a doctor, even though he is suing him. A much-trying wife needs medicine as well. A father wants to pass his drugstore on to his son who has come home for a visit. The son thinks his life lies elsewhere. The Rabbi is dashing through the rain, trying not to get wet and is not succeeding very well. But the real storm will break after the physical storm has passed, for a man lies dead.

Tony says

WEDNESDAY THE RABBI GOT WET. (1976). Harry Kemelman. ****.

Here is another excellent work by Kemelman featuring Rabbi David Small. Although Small is featured as the sleuth of the novel, he really doesn't do much sleuthing. What he does is facilitate the solution to a mystery that arises in his town involving members of his synagogue. Kemelman uses every opportunity to sneak in his views on the nature of 'Jewishness' as the story progresses. In addition to reaching the bottom of an unexplained death, Small manages to impart his views of what makes a Jew – and, more importantly, a good Jew...one who lives according to the teachings of their founders. Kemelman manages to grab the reader in very subtle ways – ways that he uses on members of his congregation also. At the time of his writing these novels, Kemelman was highly prized by a large group of readers. Today, it seems that his style of writing

and his plot outlines appear outdated to those of us who have become accustomed to car chases and violence in our detective readings. I think it is a welcome return to sanity in mystery writing to go back to Kemelman and rediscover his characters and style.

Bev says

Back in the mists of time (when I was in high school), I gave Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small series a whirl. I don't have reviews from that era of reading and I apparently didn't even think enough of (or read enough of) my sampling to think it merited an entry with a star rating in my reading log. But it seems to me that Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet (1976) is the very book I tried and didn't connect with. So, when it came up as I did a search for a suitable "Silver" book that I would have to borrow to read for the Vintage Mystery Bingo Challenge, I decided to give Rabbi Small another try. Unfortunately, I have to report that he still doesn't do a whole lot for me. Oh, the plot is serviceable enough, but the characters just don't engage me. According to the book flap on my library's edition, Rabbi Small is supposed to be one of the "most endearing sleuths in modern fiction." I'm afraid that I just don't see it; he comes across as rather bland to me. But...let's talk about the plot for a moment.

This sixth outing for Rabbi Small involves the mysterious death of an elderly man with his fair share of enemies. Old man Kestler dies from an apparent mix-up in medication. Was it an accident on the part of the dispensing pharmacist? Did a family member give him too much--thinking if one is good then two is better? Or was there some malice aforethought? When Kestler's son starts stirring up trouble with threats of a malpractice suit against the doctor involved, Police Chief Hugh Lanigan begins to quietly investigate...taking Rabbi Small into his confidence along the way. But when Lanigan arrests a troubled young man who has come home to his father's pharmacy and who had a past history of difficulty with Kestler, the good rabbi begins to investigate in earnest and finds ties to his own congregation and a planned real estate deal.

As mentioned above, the plot is serviceable. But it is also uninspired and not quite what I expect of a murder mystery. (view spoiler) It's hard to stay interested when the mystery isn't entirely what one has bargained for. And the characters didn't engage me either. They just seemed to be going through the motions of a role in a mystery story. The book was a quick read for all that and decent. But I'm fairly certain that I won't be revisiting Rabbi Small again.

First posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Jamie Collins says

Another nice Rabbi Small mystery - I've read from *Friday* to *Wednesday* now. These are quiet little murder mysteries, set in a small town in Massachusetts in the 1960's and 70's. They're quick reads, simply written, and the stories are used as a framework for giving the reader gentle lessons in Judaism. The rabbi solves the mysteries using "Talmudic reasoning and insight".

In this book, the rabbi is proving obstinate again. The temple board of directors wants to buy some property in New Hampshire to establish a retreat, and Rabbi Small objects, partially on the grounds that such a thing "smacks of Christianity rather than Judaism.... It suggests convents and monasteries, an ivory-tower attitude.

Retreat - the word itself suggests retiring from life and the world. That's not Judaic. *We participate.*" To finance the purchase the board intends to sell some property that was bequeathed to the temple, and the rabbi explains how this would conflict with the man's dying wish, and thus break Jewish law, if not the law of the land.

And oh, yeah, there's a murder to be solved, too.

Lisa Feld says

It's interesting jumping from book one to book six and seeing how Kemelman has developed as a writer. He's got the pacing and tone of a good mystery novel and uses the form well to investigate the tensions of religious Jewish life in the mid-seventies: the ecstatic prayer, meditation, and spiritual exploration that drew so many Conservative Jews to Havurah, Carlebach, and the Renewal movement and away from the more formal and structured practice of Kemelman's Rabbi Small.

As a reader who grew up steeped in that more spiritual Jewish practice (and who has seen its long-term impact on American Judaism), it's amusing and somewhat fascinating to see Kemelman's verdict: the meditation yearnings in Rabbi Small's congregation turn out to be a flash in the pan, ultimately unsatisfying and unsustainable as gurus move through town and on to greener pastures. Rabbi Small's order and tradition win out, regaining the confidence and support of his flock. But he still gives a nod of respect to the Hasidic mixture of strict practice and ecstatic faith of a fellow rabbi in another (safely distant) community.

Lora says

I had only read the first book in the series when I bought this one (#6). There wasn't any problem skipping ahead in the series, and it was a solid mystery with some interesting reflections about the nature of Judaism (a religion that is more ethics-based than mystical).

Paula S says

When an sick old man dies from penicillin allergy the police takes notice and as usual it is Rabbi Small who finally puts all the pieces together. This book was a bit heavy on temple politics, but was otherwise a nice mystery.

Susan says

I really enjoy this series. I'm glad my sister introduced me to it. The books are informative about Judaism, and thought-provoking about religion in general. The rabbi reasons out the mysteries and the conclusions are usually a surprise to me.

Ari says

The first third of the book feels like not-very-exciting sketches in the life of the Jewish community of a small New England town. (As near as I can tell, Barnard's Crossing is somewhere near Woburn.) Then somebody dies. At first, this seems like just another detail of the setting. Things then rapidly accelerate, once it becomes clear the death was due to foul play. The last third of the book went by in a rush, and I found myself enjoying it much more than I expected.

It feels very different from most mystery novels. There's fairly little action, most of the characters aren't directly connected to the murder, and many of the side plots aren't closely tied to the main narrative.

This is the sixth book in a series. I hadn't read anything else in the series, but I didn't feel like I missed anything jumping in here.
