

Book Review: Through the Grinder, Latte Trouble, and Murder Most Frothy, the CoffeeHouse Mysteries

Contributed by Shiftless
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A Shiftless Baristo Book Review

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Cleo Coyle's™ fiction honors the profession " plus it's™ engaging, and even includes recipes!

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If you have not yet discovered the CoffeeHouse Mystery series by Cleo Coyle, you should. I have read several of them now and I heartily recommend them.

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The CoffeeHouse Mysteries are published by Penguin. Author Coyle displays a deep understanding, not only of coffee trivia, but also of coffee shop culture. She treats the profession with evident respect and dignity.

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Coyle's™ protagonist, Clare Cosi, is an intrepid espresso shop manager in Greenwich Village, NYC. A recurring set of basic

characters reappears in each of the series. These include Clare's just-now-an-adult daughter, Joy, who keeps finding herself just on the brink of serious trouble of various kinds; Clare's ex-husband and co-manager, Matteo, for whom she continues to have strong feelings which, however, do not keep her from pursuing other amorous interests; Detective Mike Quinn, a quintessentially hard-boiled New York cop with a failing marriage and an eye for Clare; and Madame, Matteo's mother and the long time not-really-retired owner of the espresso shop.

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Essentially, the plot in each of the books follows the same outline: murder in the espresso shop, or in other places where Clare is involved in preparing or serving the beverages. Naturally, Clare gets involved in investigating and solving these horrendous crimes, while simultaneously fretting about Joy's interests in questionable men or drugs, and developing romantic interests of her own.

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Coyle is adept at working out unexpected plot developments. So far I have read three of these Coffee House Mystery novels, and I have been surprised by the identity of the real murderer each time.

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You baristi will find a smile coming to your lips repeatedly, and your heads nodding, as you read Coyle's descriptions of how coffee and espresso suit so many life purposes, from waking up, clearing one's head, maintaining late night alertness, or simply giving a lift to the day. She treats the espresso shop work as an honorable profession and not as a low-end food service job.

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Here's a sample, from *Murder Most Frothy*:
Clare recalls making espresso in her grandmother's grocery as one of her fondest memories. Even after my collegiate studies and successes as a culinary writer, I ultimately decided making the perfect cup time after time for a person who might be tired, weary, thirsty, or down, was not an insignificant thing. She gets it, folks.

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Baristi who are in their prime might appreciate Coyle's portrayal of Clare, who is not only smart, sensible, brave, and a good mother, but also a magnet for the romantic interests of worthy men, despite being surrounded by women much younger than her 40-something years. A continuing theme throughout the books is the emotional conflict between Clare's continuing affection for Matteo (her ex) and her romantic opportunities with other men. This can generate quite a bit of stress, as when Matteo is back in New York from his bean-buying trips, bunking upstairs from the espresso shop and down the hall from Clare just when she is entertaining a gentleman caller. Like all good series, the CoffeeShop Mysteries leave this inherent conflict unresolved.

Coyle knows her coffee so well that even I have learned new coffee bits by reading her books. She works in many details about coffee into the books; not part of the plot, but always part of the richly detailed setting. Also evident in the setting is the firmly-in-New-York sense of place. Coyle evidently knows the city very well, and describes in detail things such as how the ethnic neighborhoods change while following a specific subway line, or what exit to take to reach the prison at Rikers Island.

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CoffeeHouse Mystery books are the first murder mysteries that I have ever read that include recipes. No, I'm not kidding! They include not only drink recipes but sometimes bakery or cooking recipes too. I can't claim to have tried any, but some of these ideas (coffee marinade for steaks?) are just too intriguing to pass up.

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My only minor quibble about the books is that one can't easily tell in what order to read them. Since some of them refer to earlier episodes, it would be best to read them in order. However, each book stands on its own perfectly well. I think that the order is as follows:

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On What Grounds [not reviewed; I did not obtain a copy]

Through the Grinder

Latte Trouble

Murder Most Frothy

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You can add your comments on the CoffeeShop Mystery books below!

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