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## Mindful Reader: Gilmanton, noir and ‘Perfectly Miserable’

By [DEB BAKER](#)

[For the Monitor](#)

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Jessica Lander, author of *Driving Backwards*, was eight when her family bought a “two-century old house” on Stage Road in Gilmanton, a place to spend their summers. Their neighbors, David and Lizzie Bickford, kept them well-supplied with pies and stories. Lander writes, “It was not until I was a young woman that I began to listen more closely. . . . David’s stories drew me in.” Lander is 26 and David 99 when her book opens.

With David’s “humble recounting of a hundred years of life in small-town America” as a starting point, Lander tells stories of her own as well. She clearly delights in sharing the lives and work of the people who make Gilmanton a thriving rural community today, including a goat-cheese maker, blueberry and dairy farmers, volunteer librarians, and the woman who orchestrates the preparation of “Gilmanton Old Home Day Beanhole Beans.”

Lander also explores Gilmanton’s “great egg-carton landscape,” and the remains of a once thriving mill community along the Suncook. In sussing out the curious existence of the town’s dual villages – Gilmanton Iron Works and Gilmanton Four Corners – she writes of “Enmities . . . tilled into the soil so deeply that when David was a kid, teens of the two villages were forbidden to date one another.” And yes, she takes note of Gilmanton’s notorious former residents, serial killer Herman Webster Mudgett, aka H.H. Holmes, and Peyton Place author Grace Metalious. But mostly, Lander celebrates small-town New Hampshire.

*Driving Backwards* is a delightful read. Lander’s obvious pleasure in storytelling is sprinkled with history, both human and natural, and her curiosity and affection for her subjects is contagious. It’s a great book to read on a warm afternoon, as Lander lovingly describes bike rides and July Fourth parades, Old Home Days and abundant gardens, swimming holes and stargazing, when “the night sky is limitless, and by association, so too summer.” I’ll be keeping an eye out for more work from this talented young writer.

■ ■ ■

I don’t usually read noir, but I’d heard a lot of good things about New Hampshire author Toby Ball’s dystopian crime novels. The latest, *Invisible Streets*, is set in the mid-1960s. Ball’s imagined city is grim, ripe for planner Nathan Canada’s New City Project, which will tear down decaying neighborhoods to create a massive business zone and Crosstown Expressway. A truckload of dynamite is missing from one of the project’s construction sites. Detective Torsten Grip, journalist Frank Frings and Canada’s right-hand man, Phil Dorman, all want to know who took it and why. Frings is also looking for a friend’s grandson, Sol Elia, who was a subject in secret hallucinogen studies as a student and may be part of a shadowy radical group, *Kollektiv 61*. Both a mystery and an examination of power and influence, *Invisible Streets* is an atmospheric, slow-burning book that illuminates the dehumanizing effects of uncompromising ideology and corruption. Frings is a thinking man’s hero whose patience pays, even when he wonders, “whether there was anyone left on his side – and what that side even was.”

Grip and Dorman are less admirable, but in Ball’s capable hands, they’re sympathetic characters. He takes you inside these men’s minds, out into the streets, and up on the girders of the City. If you’re looking for a smart, provocative crime novel, try *Invisible Streets*.

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Sarah Payne Stuart is *Perfectly Miserable*. In her latest memoir, *the Concord, Mass.*, native reflects on Guilt, God and Real Estate in her hometown. She has a love-hate relationship with her WASP family, with the formidable matrons of Concord, and with the 19th-century authors who put the town on the map. Stuart looks back not with nostalgia, but with her eyes open to the fact that she and her siblings could not wait to leave Concord, and yet she could not imagine raising her children anywhere else. Her self-deprecating observations about parenting, being the daughter of aging parents, and being a grown-up in the place you were a child are funny, smart and thought-provoking. Even when she recalls painful incidents or patterns, Stuart’s tone is affectionate, even wistful: “And still I wish I could relive it all again.” With *Perfectly Miserable*, she and her readers do.

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Stonlea: a Timeworn, Gilded Age Survivor Transformed by Peter W. Clement and Victoria Chave Clement is, as Stonlea’s owner Polly Guth, says in the

introduction, "the story of taking a Gilded Age grande dame of a summer house . . . and making it into a comfortable, year-round family house." Guth felt the restoration was "a matter of stewardship," and "continuity" – she wanted Stonlea to welcome her family and friends to Dublin to enjoy the beauty of lake and mountain just as its original owners did. She also set a very contemporary goal: net-zero energy, meaning that the home produces the energy it needs, through geothermal and solar technology. This gorgeous book, lavishly illustrated, shows Stonlea from start to finish. Even if you're not an architecture buff or don't own an old house yourself, the grand old summer houses in the Monadnock region are an interesting part of New Hampshire history, and this book is a vicarious entry into one such home.

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By STEFANIE DAZIO and DAISY NGUYEN - Today

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