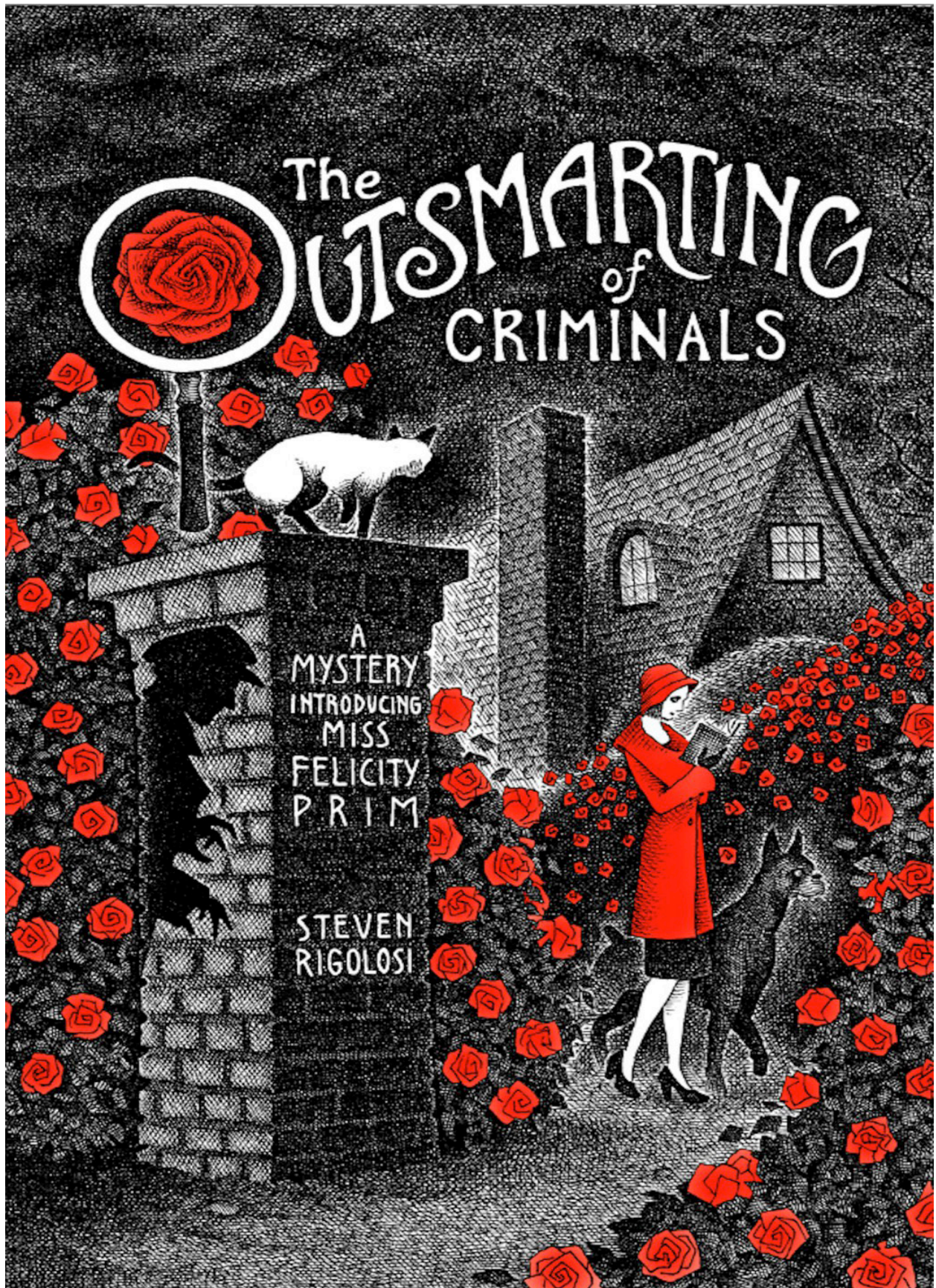


The Outsmarting of Criminals

A Mystery Introducing Miss Felicity Prim



Reader's Guide

Q & A

with Steven Rigolosi

Q. With *The Outsmarting of Criminals*, you enter cozy territory, which is a departure from your previous work. Why did you decide to write a cozy?

A. I wouldn't say I set out to write a cozy per se, but I'm proud to have written one. I started thinking about the types of books I like to read and how sometimes I need to be transported to a kinder, gentler place. I wanted to create an atmosphere of warmth—of friendship and small-town relationships—while also layering on a traditional mystery. A female amateur sleuth seemed the best way to accomplish that.

Q. How does Miss Prim fit into the long line of intrepid female amateur sleuths?

A. Miss Prim is very aware of her predecessors. She considers them her mentors. As she undertakes her first investigation, she is forever asking herself how the heroines of the great crime novels would have handled the situation. She believes she has big shoes to fill, and she has a lot to learn. But she's devoted to perfecting the art of criminal outsmarting, and she realizes she's going to have to learn the ropes as she goes along.

Q. Is it fair to say that *The Outsmarting of Criminals* plays with the conventions of the mystery genre?

A. That's completely fair to say. As I was thinking about writing the book, I made a list of all the conventions that always seem to work for me. For example, I love the devices of the secret diary and the hidden passage. I'm a fan of locked-room mysteries, and what village doesn't have its share of eccentrics and derelict mansions? I wanted to use all of these conventions while also calling attention to them and celebrating them. So I guess you could say that *The Outsmarting of Criminals* is a tribute to the genre.

Q. And what of Miss Prim? Where did she come from, and where is she going?

A. Just about everyone I know, myself included, has been the recipient of kindness from an older woman. That's such a powerful image because it generates so many fond memories. Miss Prim is a tribute to the many genuine women with kind hearts and generous natures. She puts people first while being a modern, educated woman who can take care of herself. She has her quirks—don't we all?—but her colleagues and neighbors respond well to her because they sense that she will be a good, loyal friend. As for what's in store for her ... only time will tell.

Questions for Discussion

1. Throughout *The Outsmarting of Criminals*, the author consistently refers to his protagonist as “Miss Prim” rather than as “Felicity.” Why do you think he does so? What effects does this choice have on your perception of the character and the story?
2. Miss Felicity Prim is quite happy living in a “small world.” While she’s aware of her surroundings, she simply chooses to ignore the aspects of the modern world that she does not think will bring her happiness. Is Miss Prim naïve, or is her perception of herself as a “modern woman” on target?
3. Explore the relationship between Miss Prim and her older sister, Celia. How are the sisters similar? How are they different? In what ways is Celia the “typical” older sister? In what ways is Felicity the “typical” younger sister and youngest sibling?
4. What roles do Mr. Cornelius Prim and Mrs. Charity Prim play in *The Outsmarting of Criminals*? Even though they are no longer alive, can they be considered “characters” in the novel? If so, how?
5. Discuss the book’s epilogue. Why do you think the author chose to include it? Is it effective? How does it tie into the theme of “family” that is so important to the Prim sisters?
6. *The Outsmarting of Criminals* has been described as an *homage* to the cozy mystery genre. In what ways does it celebrate the conventions of the genre? In which ways does it call attention to the suspension of disbelief that is often required of readers who love mystery fiction?
7. What are Miss Prim’s flaws, and is she aware of them? Do her foibles affect her ability to conduct an investigation as the “criminal outsmarter” that she wishes to become?
8. Did Miss Prim make the right choice when choosing between Doctor Amos Poe and Detective Ezra Dawes? Is her choice consistent with her character? Why or why not?
9. Discuss the friendships that develop in *The Outsmarting of Criminals* and how they differ. For example, how is Miss Prim’s friendship with Dolly different from her friendships with Lorraine Koslowski, Valeska Reed, and Faye and Kit Cotillard?
10. What inspired the name of the bookstore, Cambria & Calibri?

(continued on next page)

11. To which mystery writer is the author tipping his hat with his references to “Mrs. Mallowan’s Lemon Sugar”? Which popular mystery writer’s work might have been the inspiration for Greenfield’s neighboring town, Two Oaks? Which popular novel is the author acknowledging in the epilogue?

12. *The Outsmarting of Criminals* is the first in a projected series featuring Miss Felicity Prim. Do you think Miss Prim and Miss Lavelle will end up friends in later installments, or do you foresee a future filled with continued conflict and misunderstandings between the two?

13. Would it be accurate to consider Bruno the Boxer a “character” in the novel? What roles does he play in Miss Prim’s life and in the plot?

14. Do you think Celia and Maude the tavern keeper are a good romantic match? Do they have a future together? Why or why not?

15. In what ways is *The Outsmarting of Criminals* a celebration of books and the printed word? How does this approach to novels match, or conflict with, Valeska Reed’s approach to organizing the bookshelves at Cambria & Calibri?

About the Author

STEVEN RIGOLSI is an editor of academic books in geography and economics. *The Outsmarting of Criminals* is his fourth novel, following *Androgynous Murder House Party*, *Circle of Assassins*, and *Who Gets the Apartment?* He lives in New Jersey. He maintains a blog at stevenrigolosi.wordpress.com. He loves all canines, and particularly Boxers.

