

# Archer Mayor

Fans of literary and genre fiction can find the best of both in Archer Mayor's crime novels. Now up to 18 volumes in the Joe Gunther series, Mayor continues to write richer, deeper, always-unpredictable stories that earn reviewer praise and reader loyalty as well as awards. The *Chicago Tribune* has called them "the best police procedurals being written in America." Mayor fuels his craft by working as both a sheriff's deputy and a death investigator in Vermont, where his stories are rooted. An early stint as a medical illustrator, followed by rescue and fire work, put him on this path. "An excess of exposure to death and violence started the ball—with interest," he says. "If I'm going to write about cops, I need to write for cops. Part of my ambition is to give cops a voice, and try to portray the position society puts them in."

**Credits:** The Joe Gunther series started with *Open Season*; the latest title, due out next month, is *Chat*.

**Why:** I write for a coterie of complex reasons, but the two main propellants are ignorance and curiosity. I write about what I don't know and research it, then share the results with readers. I found my niche as a kid in storytelling: a near necessity for growing up on the road over half the world and traveling light. I received schooling in four languages, some of it minimal; but what I missed out on grammatically, I compensated for by listening carefully, thereby learning the musicality of language. I try to bring some of that musicality to my readers.

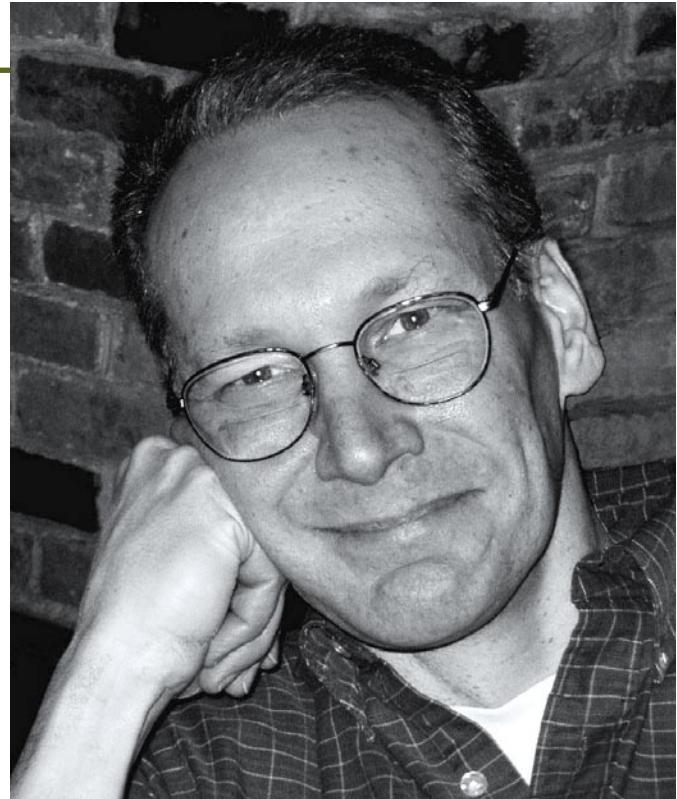
**Routine:** I write whenever, wherever I can —cars, bus stations, other people's couches. I've gotten good at compartmentalization, especially now with my other jobs. ... I shoot for five pages a day, which lets me turn out a book a year.

**Maintaining a series:** The series endlessly surprises me. I don't keep a master plan full of details; it's all intuitive. The trick is, don't overanalyze and overplot. Do pay attention to reality, and let the story unfold like life—the more mechanisms you introduce into your writing process,

the more mechanistic it becomes. I like to let readers fill in the blanks and take possession of the story. They bring thirsty imaginations to a book and want to engage, so I give them creative room.

**Revisions:** I like to edit and am big on cutting—my primary tool is a razor blade. Writing amounts to creating an oversized clay model; editing is the removal of the excess clay to reveal the piece inside. I edit as I go but don't worry about polishing until the book is complete. Then I use test readers. ... The quality I want to inject into these books is a matter of pride; I want each to be a seamless, uplifting, enjoyable experience for my readers. So my first rule of writing is: Never forget your reader when you write.

**Business:** Writing is my job, my business; so, like the guy running a hardware store, I need to keep my wares on the shelf. I therefore launched AMPress to reissue my first 12 titles after the rights reverted back to me. This put me among the first frontlist commercial writers to publish their own backlists—and gives me true possession of my art for the first time.



Elizabeth Mayor

**Getting ideas:** I just look around! My process is less about writing murder mysteries, and more about regular people resolving conflicts. I'm interested in what makes people tick. The stories start with a "what if" idea, then I let the characters tell me where it will go.

**Influences:** In my genre, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross McDonald, many others—I'm impressed by voice, and favor a neutral narrator who observes everyday life. But I don't read mysteries anymore because I write them all day; I'll read history and novels, whatever else captures my fancy. I can never read enough. Look at my shelves!

**Advice:** Say it once, say it well, and move on. Be thick-skinned, be flexible, and throw away your first three novels. There's no embarrassment in failure; that's how we learn. And trust your readers' intelligence—it's all about bridge building. Your job is to build an enticing bridge halfway.

*Interview by Carolyn Haley, a freelance writer and editor in Vermont.*