

Intelligence in Public Media

Central Park West (A Novel)

James Comey (The Mysterious Press, 2023), 329 pages.

Reviewed by Mike R.

Former FBI Director and Deputy Attorney General James Comey, author of the memoir *A Higher Loyalty: Truth Lies, and Leadership* (2018) and the follow-up *Saving Justice* (2021), has taken a stab at writing fiction. *Central Park West*, a courtroom and investigative whodunit set in New York City, will have difficulty standing out from other mysteries on the shelves. It ultimately shows itself to be a solidly written novel, although one must overcome a formulaic feeling and a shaky start in which the central crime in the prologue—the murder of a former New York governor in a staged suicide—will be seen as implausibly conceived by those familiar with the chronic health condition used to cover it up. Yet the book recovers to a degree from these initial impressions, the plot is sound, and the action decently paced even if Comey lacks in that ability of great writers to completely absorb the reader in its pages.

The author smartly avoids a tale of Washington intrigue. The nation's capital is not the most welcoming of venues in today's political climate and Comey's polarizing profile could have served as a distraction in such a scenario. Instead, to set the story in a different element altogether he harkens to his early days as an assistant US attorney (AUSA) for the Southern District of New York (SDNY) in 1987–93 (and headed the office in 2002–2003).

Comey's protagonist, Nora Carleton, is a Southern District AUSA on the violent and organized crime unit. Comey cut his teeth on this same beat and was a key prosecutor of John Gambino, head of one of the Five Families controlling the New York underworld. Comey's descriptions of La Cosa Nostra and references to Salvatore "Sammy the Bull" Gravano ring authentic. He layers on Empire State politics and "Me Too" movement sexual predators à la Harvey Weinstein to create a tale at once classic and up to date with current headlines.

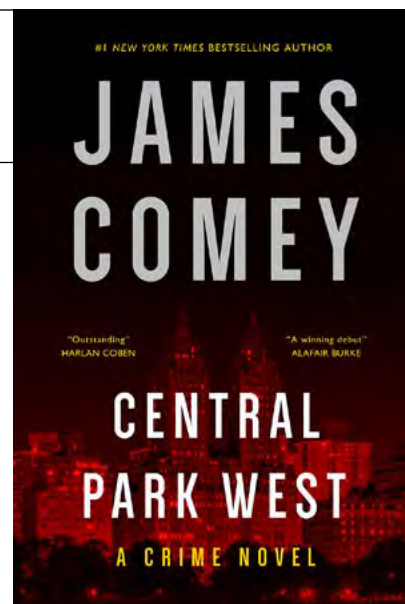
The best character by far is Benny Dugan, a US Attorney's Office investigator and former New York Police Department detective. Benny is a stand-in for the late Kenneth McCabe, chronicled in Comey's previous work and heralded as "the greatest organized crime

investigator this country has ever seen," whose forte is put to good use in this saga. Larger than life and portrayed with a mixture of bravado, charm, intelligence, and humor, he steals every scene he is in.

Succeeding on the strength of a supporting cast member is a tall order, though. Try as Comey might to inject his actual protagonist with verve, she can't hold a candle to Benny. Even efforts to flesh out her personal life fall flat. Referring to her and a mate as the "Nick and Nora" duo only raises false hope of a comparison to Nick and Nora Charles, Dashiell Hammett's famous sleuthing couple of the 1930s; the allusion is that much more painful for its absence.

Comey mines an intimate knowledge of his old stomping ground in Manhattan, in particular the several-block area encompassing the SDNY, the FBI New York Field Office, NYPD headquarters, courthouses, and jail. He thoroughly establishes his geographic bona fides, reciting building histories, architecture, and the physical routes between them. But he doesn't know when enough is enough; belaboring the number of stairs at one location versus another, for example, is a level of detail too far.

He also interjects numerous explications of legal, law enforcement, and criminal terms and concepts, including through awkward insertions in the dialogue. For generations of Americans steeped in crime shows and mystery novels, some of this might be overkill. And in light of a longstanding public fascination with organized crime, does a canary stuffed in the mouth of an assassinated mob informant not speak for itself?



All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Although concerned more with law enforcement and prosecution than intelligence, the novel treats of this latter aspect as well, albeit more mutedly. The heavy investigative focus is largely intelligence by another name. Benny's stock in trade especially points up the value of methodical collection and analysis. Benny Dugan/Kenneth McCabe was famous for building up over decades a repository of information about La Cosa Nostra through painstaking photographic documentation of attendees at key organized crime social rituals such as funerals, creating a primitive sort of "link analysis." Although seen by some as a waste of time, these detailed observational records would prove invaluable in showing otherwise unapparent connections and helping to make a case.

Comey also embeds some interesting tidbits about FBI surveillance squads as the novel's investigation kicks into high gear. The Special Surveillance Group and Special Operations Group, he writes, comprise "one of the FBI's

least-known and most-hallowed capabilities—critical to following foreign spies and sophisticated criminals." Whether on foot or in vehicles, these surveillance experts, so-called "ghosts," blend seamlessly into their environment.

Numerous intelligence practitioners have written novels, but Comey is the first FBI director and most high-profile US national security leader to do so (not counting former presidents, in which category both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton have earned a place). The poster child for such senior figures turning their sights to fiction, however, is found across the ocean. Stella Rimington, a 1990s-era director general of MI5, became the author of the Liz Carlyle series of intelligence novels. Comey is no Rimington, but his foray into fiction is not without reward. For fans of mystery novels and police procedurals, *Central Park West* would make a worthwhile pick from the library shelf or discount rack.



The reviewer: Mike R. is a member of CSI's History Staff.