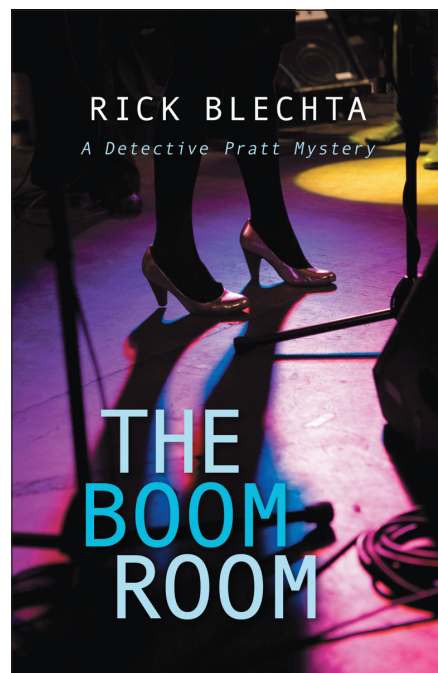


READING GUIDE



THE BOOM ROOM RICK BLECHTA

Reading level: 4.2

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, police procedural, rock and roll,
music, nightclubs

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Summary

Detective Mervin Pratt is called in to investigate a murder at The Boom Room, a popular downtown nightclub. He is unhappily paired with Harry Gordon—not his usual partner, but the two just happened to be available at the time.

Upon arrival, Pratt sees that the club's owner, Joseph Lewis, has been stabbed to death in his basement office. Gordon, already having secured the scene, has detained the bandleader, Jamie Clark, convinced it's an open-and-shut case: Clark had argued loudly with Lewis that afternoon, and the two men had parted in anger.

Pratt's younger partner, David Ellis, arrives and offers to help out, aware of the bad blood between his mentor and Gordon. But when Ellis confesses to being the suspect's half brother, Pratt tells his young partner to butt out or risk compromising the investigation.

The case against Jamie Clark darkens when the bloody knife discovered under the photocopy machine is confirmed to belong to the young man. But Pratt still has trouble linking Clark to the murder; a couple of odd smudges on the blade have Pratt thinking there's something suspicious afoot. When Joe Lewis's wife, Margerie, urges Pratt to hurry up and solve the case so she can sell The Boom Room, she immediately becomes a suspect.

Pratt eventually includes Ellis in the investigation, because he trusts the younger man, admires his instincts—and needs his help. The investigation broadens as the partners check out The Boom Room's manager, Carl Thomson, who had offered to buy the club a month prior, against Joe Lewis's wishes. Pratt discovers Carl Thomson has also been involved in a covert romantic relationship with his boss's wife, throwing them both under suspicion. Also under scrutiny is Carolyn Tucci, Jamie's girlfriend, who swears Jamie is innocent.

Pratt rings doorbells in Lewis's neighbourhood in hopes of finding out more about Carl Thomson and Margerie Lewis. A young woman gives him a valuable lead, and he is able to confirm the couple's illicit union. While Pratt is chasing the Lewis/Thomson connection, Ellis is getting to know Carolyn Tucci. She suggests the police check into a mysterious guy named Mike Master.

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Pratt sends out a request across the wider network of law enforcement agencies, seeking more information about Mike Master. While he's waiting for this information to trickle in, he follows a hunch and heads back to The Boom Room to inspect the band's equipment. He discovers a second knife carefully hidden in the back of an amplifier; the news shocks Gordon, who had assumed the case was sewn up. The police captain is impressed with Pratt's typically thorough investigative tendencies.

Pratt's request for information turns up a sheriff who is familiar with Mike Master—but under a different name. Master is suspected of killing a young woman and has been diagnosed as borderline psychotic. Pratt instructs a couple uniformed officers to round up the band's members (who all live together in one house) for further questioning—including Mike Master. Meanwhile, Carolyn Tucci has asked to meet again with Detective Ellis to share some more information with him about the ultra-slippery Master. But when Tucci doesn't show at the appointed time, Ellis begins to wonder if she's in trouble. He calls Pratt, and the two head to her apartment.

Officers assisting on the case are able to find two of the three band members at their house, but not Master—he had already departed in a fury upon discovering someone had been rifling through his room. When Pratt and Ellis arrive at Tucci's apartment, they find Mike Master stabbed to death—an apparent act of self-defense by Tucci. But upon later questioning, her affair with Mike Master comes out—as does the fact that her fingerprints were found on the magnet that had held the second, secret knife inside the amplifier. Pratt solves the mystery: Tucci followed Master's orders to kill Joe Lewis and pin it on Jamie Clark. But when Master failed to follow through on his promise to make Tucci the band's manager, Tucci turned on him and killed him too. In the end, Ellis's younger brother is released from suspicion.

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapter 1, the reader learns of the “bad blood” between Detective Pratt and Detective Gordon. Research the meaning of this idiom. Where does it originate?
2. Detective Gordon insists that Jamie Clark killed Lewis despite the kid's denials. “A couple hours' grilling downtown and this kid will fold like a cheap suitcase,” he says (ch. 1). The phrase *like a cheap suitcase* is an example of a simile, which is a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” Discuss how literary devices like similes add to the telling of a story. Find other examples of similes in *The Boom Room*.
3. Detective Mervin Pratt is richly characterized throughout the book; he comes across as very real and authentic to the reader. Make a character map or sketch of Pratt. Include his physical, psychological, professional and moral characteristics—and any other domains you think are important. Add to this sketch as you read *The Boom Room*.
4. As you see it, what drives Pratt to be so thorough in his investigations? How would the world change if everyone did their jobs as conscientiously as Detective Pratt? How would your workplace change? Now pan out even wider: how would the country's economy change?





5. Read the conversation between Pratt and Ellis at the beginning of chapter 3. How does the author develop character through this passage of dialogue? How does he advance the plot? Provide specific examples from the text.
6. In chapter 4, Captain McDonnell demands that the case be wrapped up quickly. “We’ve looked bad in the club district the past few months,” he says. Explain how this reality could potentially impact the outcome of the Lewis case. Do you think these kinds of situations are regularly taken into consideration on police forces?
7. Good dialogue blends the words characters say to one another with short clips of narrative called beats. A good beat creates a clear image for the reader of what one or both characters are doing, how they’re feeling or what’s going on around them. Here’s an example from chapter 5, where Pratt interviews Margerie Lewis for the first time:

“Why are you so interested in talking to me, detective?” she continued. “You’ve already got your murderer.”

“Just doing my job.” Pratt crossed one leg over the other so he could write more easily. “Did your husband ever talk to you about the club?”

Margerie rolled her eyes. “All the time. I think he cared more about that dump than he did about me.”

Find other examples of passages where the beats add interest and texture to the story. What makes them work?

8. The negative relationship between Detectives Pratt and Gordon intensifies in the beginning of chapter 8. In your mind, write the scene that dramatizes the original conflict that resulted in their mutual distrust. Jot notes about this interaction and share them with a partner or the wider group. Optional: Take it a step further and fully write the scene you’ve envisioned. Use dialogue and narrative to bring the two men’s interpersonal conflict to life.
9. In a mystery, a red herring heightens suspense and adds challenge to the mystery by misleading the reader—or the detective. Go back through *The Boom Room* and make a list of red herrings. Which ones are the most convincing? How do red herrings help an author pace the story?
10. When Detective Ellis meets with his brother’s girlfriend in chapter 12, he is struck by how much the young woman reminds him of their mother—and he wonders if his brother also recognizes this. What is your take on the theory that we are drawn to people who represent our parents?
11. As you see it, for what reason does Detective Pratt cross lines in order to allow his younger partner to help him with the investigation? He knows it could confound the case and land them both in trouble. Explain your thinking.
12. Pratt doesn’t enjoy using the computer to do his work, and he has even less love for social media sites such as Facebook. As you see it, what are his reservations? How do you view social media?





13. In the final scene, Pratt explains his hunch that Mike Master was likely the mastermind behind the murder of Joseph Lewis:

“Based on what Sheriff Warsh told me,” he says, “I’m pretty sure it was Master pulling the strings. But there’s probably no way we’ll ever find out. Warsh thinks Master was borderline psychotic. The scary thing was that he was near-genius in intelligence. We all know those are the worst kind.”

To whom is Detective Pratt referring when he says *We all know those are the worst kind*? Which criminal cases come to mind for you?

14. Conflict is what makes a story interesting and keeps it moving along. Typically, story plot follows one of four basic patterns of conflict:

1. *Person against nature.* Tension comes from the character’s battle against strong forces of nature.
2. *Person against person.* Tension comes through the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.
3. *Person against society.* Tension comes from the main character’s struggle against some societal factor that must be overcome.
4. *Person against self.* Tension is created as the protagonist faces internal conflict; the hero has two or more courses of action and must decide which course to take.

Discuss the kind of conflict patterns evident in *The Boom Room*.

15. Write five questions you would ask Mervin Pratt if you were to meet with him over a coffee.

