

IN SEARCH OF MERCY, by Michael Ayoob (Minotaur, \$24.99),
recommended by JB, Seattle Mystery Bookshop, Seattle, WA;
www.seattlemystery.com:

Michael Ayoob's *In Search of Mercy* is an interesting book on many levels. His debut, it is told by Dexter who, eight years before, was abducted and assaulted by some lunatic hockey fans after he blew an important high school game. Now, eight years later, he's just getting by (that's Job 2) while keeping his memories of the assault in check (that's Job 1). His safe, little world gets challenged by a local bum who is nearing the end of his life and who asks Dexter to find someone. Why Dexter? Lou, the bum, knows Dex's dad and simply has faith in Dexter's abilities.

What really gets under Dex's skin is that the woman he's supposed to find was one of film noir's greatest and most elusive stars, Mercy Carnahan. Before she was a star, she was engaged to Lou but their relationship fell apart after the war. Lou wants one last chance to say hello and goodbye. The problem is Mercy quit the limelight cold and no one has been able to find her in forty years. Dex is determined to succeed, really, I think, to prove to himself that he can do it, that he's not a failure.

The title, then, plays on a couple of levels. Dexter is searching for Mercy, the actress. But he's also searching for the mercy he's never granted himself and for a merciful ending to Lou's questions about Mercy and what happened.

Ayoob's writing is smooth and assured and he's got a good eye for character, place and atmosphere. He's also got a great sense of story and it wasn't until the very end of the book – I hope this isn't giving away too much – that I realized he'd done a rare thing: he'd written a compelling mystery that was not built upon, or involved with, murder. A rare and pleasant surprise.

In Search of Mercy is a great debut. And a winner. It is the the most recent winner of the Private Eye Writers of America Best Private Eye Competition.