

In Search of Mercy

A Dexter Bolzjak Mystery

[Michael Ayoob](#)

Minotaur Books (Hardcover)

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Review: Far more of a character study than a mystery, *In Search of Mercy* introduces Dexter Bolzjak, who is drawn into the search for a Hollywood starlet with Pittsburgh roots that disappeared 40 years ago. Author Michael Ayoob won the 2009 [Best First Private Eye Novel Competition](#) with this novel, which he originally titled *Shots on Goal*.

Dexter is working two dead-end jobs when he's approached by Lou Kashon, a bum who inexplicably throws around \$100 bills when the mood suits him, to find his long lost love, an actress named Agnes Zagbroski, who took the stage name of Mercy Carnahan when she was "discovered" by Hollywood in the 1940s. Dexter thinks Lou is crazy -- and he probably is -- but he's intrigued nonetheless. Kidnapped and abused by four men eight years ago, Dexter is still trying to straighten out his life. Not that finding a woman who seems to have vanished over 40 years ago is going to make a difference, he still sees a purpose in following through on the task, even if it means failure -- and most assuredly that is what is in store for him.

Set in 2001, *In Search of Mercy* seamlessly moves between events in the past -- Dexter's ill-fated hockey game as a senior in high school and Mercy's early film career -- and the present, and blends scenes from all time periods into surreal dreams for Dexter that seem more fact than fiction, more real than not. It's an unusual mixture that works ... mostly due to the author's deft command of the story being told. Dexter's life is such a mess that he needs something tangible to keep him focused, and it's ironic that his amateur investigation, as intangible as it is, is what he latches on to. In what is otherwise a superbly crafted novel, the only disappointment comes on the final page, where an ambiguous -- and truly unnecessary -- twist is included that is rather incongruous to everything that preceded it, and serves to diminish, if ever so slightly, everything that preceded it.

Dexter Bolzjak is not a professional private investigator in *In Search of Mercy* -- and barely an amateur one -- yet this is almost certainly the first in a series. With this strong introduction to the character, it will be most interesting to see where the author takes him next.

Special thanks to Minotaur Books for providing a copy of *In Search of Mercy* for this review.

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