

Professional Book Review

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“A captivating portrait of a charmed life in the 1990’s deep south that follows the riveting path of Captain Billy M. Mitchell, former CIA agent, following the tragic death of his twin daughters at the hands of a brutal abduction in the wee hours of a drunken night.”

Regeneration, second chances, and revenge are the central themes of an immersive second novel by the much-praised crime writer Stephanie Ann Miller, creator of the *Hot Fire Sails* detective series. The sequel returns with former Captain Billy Mitchell starting over in charming Beaufort, South Carolina, in the miserable mug of a July summer where hurricanes abound and air-conditioning is on everybody’s bucket list. Reinstated now as Detective Mitchell, he is back on the job ready for action in *Southern Nights* after losing his gourd from a twelve-month suspension due to hunting down the man who brutally murdered his family. Now, after a stint in rehab and mandatory counseling, he is on the path of investigating Charleston police lieutenant Mark Anders whose prints recently emerged in a series of arson crimes where the crisp bodies of streetwalkers were found pinned to crosses wearing nothing more than an auction tag with an eBay emblem.

An unknown deranged lunatic is stalking young women who are registered to an escort service all the way from Charleston to Savannah, at regular weekly intervals. Not only that, the Lexapro loon is now sending Mitchell taunting letters swearing to wreak fiery balls of arson havoc among the corrupt network of girls selling services to wealthy southern aristocrats. Yet when the arsonist’s cruel path of chaos and vengeance threatens to burn the daughter of Mitchell’s best friend from college, he now must race against a ticking clock to make the pieces fit before she becomes the next victim. With no help from the department run by the dark Lieutenant Mark Anders who tries desperately to shut down the investigation, Mitchell taps into his own brains and brawn to unravel a mystery that lands him too close to home and once again threatens the stability of his career.

Stephanie Ann Miller leads readers down a dizzying path of heart-pounding adventure and suspense while increasing Detective Mitchell’s healing arsenal in the aftermath of a gut-wrenching loss. Anchored by quintessential setting backdrops consisting of chirping locusts, old creaky and rickety southern porches, snapping alligator mouths, and fried green tomatoes under a firefly moon, sudden twists abound that will raise the neck hairs of even the sleepest reader. Miller generously provides a tale of mystery and second chances that showcases an inner passionate credence of Detective Mitchell that pushes him to smash down sexual predators as a modern day

hero motto after a graveyard pledge to the memory of his two twelve-year-old little girls. Miller deploys the craft of smoke and mirrors to bring alive a quaint southern life where nobody locks their doors and women walk the streets alone safely at night even with their noses in their phones.

Until now.

The setting backdrop is so vividly written during squirmy scenes that she craftily uses sound, smell, and the creepy textures of ghastly swamp residue and beetle shells to heighten suspense at precisely the perfect moment to keep readers quickly flipping the page. Dodging booby traps and bullets while unfolding itty bitty clues, Mitchell speeds to uncover the truth before he loses his job, his best friend, and his professional credibility. His path is paved with dynamic characters such as the snooty Miss Lucy Loo, who under no uncertain terms will remind readers of Bridget Fonda as the slutty Southern belle 'Nancy Lee' in the sharp-humored blockbuster hit from 1991 - *Doc Hollywood*. Readers can estimate that Miss Loo will rise to the pedestal status of annoying-neighbor-turned-lover, in future sequels to *Southern Nights* as promised in the epilogue.

While Detective Mitchell will never be adored by people he works with, his gradual evolution to expanding his social network after setting his world on fire allowing others to get closer to his heart is a critical subplot to what will undoubtedly be future novels in the series. A fascinating twist in the book is that the author makes it clear who the arsonist killer is with no mystery behind his identity. This means readers get to see first-hand through his blood-thirsty eyes what he's doing, why he's doing it, and what he hopes will come of it. The suspense in the story is further heightened not from the unknown, but from the unfortunate close-up of knowing what he is about to do while sitting back hanging onto your seat as you watch him do it. In the end, Detective Mitchell shakes up a powerful crime cocktail of skills that once again puts him on the thin red line of breaking boundaries that threaten to send him straight back to the binding straps of his shrink's electric shock therapy.

Only this time, the killer takes the volts.

The narrative in this story moves at a fast clip making it hard to set down the book. *Southern Nights* is a treat for lovers of crime drama and suspense seen through the eyes of a grieving hero where second chances ignite the same hope we all share deep within that the strong can survive during the worst of times while the weaker go to the wall. Mitchell is an endearing protagonist with a sharp mouth, quick wit, and snappy attitude that despite the insult to secondary characters, is far beloved by readers all the more. If you're searching for a novel that redefines a dark hero with the looks of Russell Crowe, look no further than the steamy Stephanie Ann Miller's *Southern Nights*.