



# Return to Sender

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## **Return to Sender** Mindy Halleck

1955 ~ Father Theo Riley never wanted to be a priest, nor a killer. The former boxing champion and Korean War veteran gave up more than a career when he went into the Army. He lost the only thing he ever wanted: his love, Andréa Bouvre. Friends thought Theo entered the priesthood to mend his broken heart or atone for the massacred orphans he couldn't save in Korea. However, the truth is much darker and more damning, tied to a blood debt and family secret that has haunted Theo since he was a boy. He drinks to forget he ever had a life of his own—waits for death, prays for mercy, and hopes for a miracle. He gets all three when a child goes missing, another shows up on his doorstep, and the love of his life drives back into his world; the seaside hamlet of Manzanita Oregon. Theo's dream reunion with Andréa becomes a nightmare when a serial killer who considers himself a holy man targets the town and everyone Theo loves. Drinking days decidedly behind him, Theo and some old warriors set out to send evil back to hell and a few good souls to heaven in RETURN TO SENDER.

## **Return to Sender Details**

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Author : Mindy Halleck

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Genre : Suspense, Thriller

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## From Reader Review Return to Sender for online ebook

### R.C. Bean says

I was provided with a digital copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

The tale revolves around Father Theodore Riley, whose mission it is to become a priest, according to the wishes of his mother. Set in the post-Korean war time frame, the tale takes us through Riley's journey as he returns from the war to find ruined remnants of all that he had left behind, when going away - his beloved, his sister, his birth town have all been ravaged in different manners and to different degrees. As he finds solace in the mystic veil of alcohol, the story also takes us through how he goes about setting to become a priest and his internal transformation therein.

This is a very deep book, dealing with existential ideologies and raises questions on motives and intentions. It's hard to categorise this book into a particular genre, as it has threads of romance, war, crime, drama and spiritual existence, all beaded with traces of melancholy. The book has a dark and stormy undertone, which seems to go with the effect that the author aimed for. I loved Riley's characterisation - especially in the places where regrets having lost Andrea, the remorse that fills him on not having heard her out, the emptiness that fills him when he achieves his mission but is left with nobody to share it with, the helplessness that overwhelms him at the sight of his war-torn town and the anguish he feels at the pain of his sister, are all beautifully portrayed. The narration is exceptionally brilliant - the author has a knack for conveying a point without actually directly writing it down, making the reader believe that they somehow thought it up! The pace of the book feels a bit on the heavier side at times, but for a novel of this stature, a faster pace wouldn't have done justice to the scenes and the thoughts being spoken about.

This is a wonderful piece of literary fiction, and I highly recommend it to lovers of existential philosophy and drama.

My rating for this book: 4.5 stars

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### Karen PH says

Mindy Halleck's literary thriller *Return to Sender* takes us to small town America after the Korean War. Her lyrical prose weaves a tale of love, sins, failure, atonement and redemption.

Halleck's protagonist, Theo, an alcoholic Irish priest, lives the life his brother was robbed of. He seeks atonement for his childhood revenge against those who took his brother's life, and his failure to save unwanted mixed-race orphans in the Korean War. The wound of his lost childhood sweetheart rips open when he retreats to his hometown on the Oregon coast and she returns to pack up the family home.

Ordered by his bishop to provide chaplain services at the state prison, Theo meets the devil incarnate in Genghis, a religious fanatic behind bars for crimes against children. Genghis escapes and heads for Theo's sanctuary. Theo, Bud, his friend since childhood, and Soloman, his Indian mentor from his teen years and the last of his tribe, band together to save those they love from the impending storm Genghis brings to their door.

I recommend this book for its lyrical voice and story.

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## Jessica H says

Mindy Halleck's debut novel, *Return to Sender* is a multi-layered psychological exploration of pain, guilt, shame and ultimately (this isn't a spoiler), redemption. Halleck digs deep into the darkest pockets of her character's psyches and tugs at secrets that would rather remain hidden.

Although the prolog explains Father Theodore Riley's position (physically and emotionally wounded alcoholic priest assigned to redeem the unredeemable), the first few sentences of the opening chapter give readers a clear understanding of the real Theo Riley.

"The concrete towers of the Oregon State Penitentiary rose high, a doomed cathedral...I parked my '39 De Soto, took another swig of Murphy's, put the bottle back under the seat... Next to the front gates lay a bird—a sparrow. Smashed, rusty brown-and-white feathers fluttering in the breeze. I wanted to scoop it up, take it home, and bury it on Neahkahnie Mountain. Instead, I walked by it and through the overlapping, locking metal gates. I was late."

Theo wants to scoop up smashed and troubled souls and to heal them in the spiritual haven represented by his beloved Neahkahnie Mountain. But this priest is too late to save the innocents he shepherds. He is too late to redeem or even forgive the most depraved of those he must face. Theo fears that he may be too late to save those he loves, and he is sure that without assistance from a Spirit Guide far more powerful than the law or the church, he will be too late to save himself.

*Return to Sender* is both chilling and gripping. Although this title is Halleck's first work of fiction, she is an accomplished writer and she is skilled at weaving words and at shining light in dark corners in search of story and of truth.

Jessica H. Stone

Author of

*Doggy on Deck: Life at Sea with a Salty Dog*

and

*How to Retire on a Boat*

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## Lilac Reviews says

This is a great thriller novel. The chapters are labelled when the point of view changes from the main character Theo Riley or the villain, Genghis Hansel. There are also times when we are in a character's past. It is a difficult task to decide exactly where to start a story. The author shares a portion of Theo's childhood before we are given a hint the current conflict and main story line. I understand why the author might have thought we needed to know his backstory. But she shared two different time frames before immersing us more in the present day. I found that this jumping from childhood to present, teen /early adult to present, made it awkward to really get into the story. I would have much rather have seen the character's present inconsistencies and then discover where they came from. This may have just been me though. But if you have some of the same hesitancy in the early chapters, please keep reading. The story line is worth the time spent on the foundation building.

“Let’s face it, I wasn’t supposed to be drafted or in love. I was supposed to be a priest.”

With these two short sentences we see a great deal of surprise and conflict. How our life is assumed to play out and how others and events influence it. Sometimes we put ourselves in self-imposed boxes. Theo didn’t exactly feel ‘called’ to become a priest as other clergymen may have been. Other labels to describe him were that he was a war hero and a boxer. Violence is not a word one typically associates with a priest. His potential for violence was one of his demons.

The balance between the protagonist and the serial killer was well drawn and anyone that reads thrillers and likes books set in the 1950’s will enjoy this book greatly.

This book was provided free for me to read and write an honest review.

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## **Julie says**

Return to Sender by Mindy S. Halleck is 2014 Booktrope publication. I was provided a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Return to Sender is a multi- genre novel with many layers which intertwine. Set back in the era immediately following the Korean war and centered geographically around Oregon, the story follows Father Theodore Riley from his childhood to his return from the war and his subsequently entering the priesthood , something he felt he must do to honor his mother, who dreamed of having a son become a priest, and to pay the penance for his deeds which haunt him daily.

The horror of war, the loss of the love of his life to another, and the return home to find his sister in emotional pain and that his town has a dark underbelly of crime involving missing and dead children had Theo embracing the bottle a little too much.

The crime is a major thread in the book, the death of children running throughout, gives the story a dark and edgy atmosphere. However, the reader is also concerned for Theo and this life he has chosen. It is obvious he is only going the motions of priesthood. His heart is broken about the loss of Andrea, the girl he left behind when he went away to war. His sister is only a shell of the girl he remembers, and now he is dealing with his job as part of a prison ministry, which has put his family at risk.

The narrative explores the town, the diversity, the Shaman who advises Theo, and the darling little girl who makes an appearance in the middle of the book, which helps to fill out the story and gives it an additional perspective which I felt was badly needed, as at times Theo was just too dark and depressing, as of course is most of the subject matter. Naturally, we all wonder about Andrea because we know she is around and we want to know what went on with her while Theo was away, because she did feel as though Theo's duties took a priority over their relationship and love and it's not until Theo knows she has moved on without him that he realizes he should have been more sympathetic to her point of view and now he is torn up over it. So, for awhile I wasn't sure how to feel about this woman who has done as much damage to him as the war itself perhaps.

For a first novel this is exceptionally done. The problem I had was that at times the story seemed to move very slowly with the crime element, and certainly took it's time getting down to the heart of the matter which was the love story between Andrea and Theo and getting all the answers we craved. Once we did finally have confirmation of what some readers will have suspected, it was a bit anti-climatic. The explanation is one that was a bit shocking and more than cruel, but one I have encountered before from time to time in

novels. So, I had to wonder how often something like this really happened to people separated by war. I would like to have seen the pace picked up a bit in the midsection and perhaps allow us to see a little more inside the relationship between Theo and Andrea in the last quarter of the book.

The crimes and the criminals are more than creepy and will give you the shivers. The subject matter is difficult since there are children and abuse involved and a screwed up way of looking at religion which could be hard for some readers to digest.

Overall, this is one of those thinking man novels that adds a flair of literary fiction and offers more than the basic crime solving elements, and digs deep into the psychological aspects of life, the scars, the pain, the crushing reality of war, loss, fear, evil, but also offers us hope, peace, redemption and justice and most of all love.

4.5 rounded to 5

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### **Dorothy Rice says**

A powerful and deft debut novel from Mindy Halleck, *Return to Sender* weaves together the life stories of the varied residents of a small town on the rugged Oregon coast. All of the characters, a resilient, quirky and irresistible bunch, led by the charismatic and tortured priest, harbor wounds and secrets that are closely held and difficult to exorcise. From the wise Solomon, last of his tribe, to the troubled little girl who finally finds a home and family, *Return to Sender* brings to life a very particular cast and a special time and place that I won't soon forget. I couldn't put it down.

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### **Paddy Eger says**

Mindy Halleck has written a novel with great intrigue, vivid descriptions and characters along with a fluid story that draws you into and holds you in the tiny oceanfront community of Manzanita, Oregon.

She brings so many elements into play: treachery, guilt, conflict, loss and recovery, redemption, family and more. It's a hard book to set aside once you enter into the community of characters.

A wonderful read!

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### **Librarian Judith says**

Mindy Halleck shares a suspenseful look at a small town and a family in the 1950s who has seen more than its share of death and suffering. It is told, in first person, from multiple characters viewpoints, but the author clearly labels each change, which helps keeps any confusion at bay. There are also several divergents in time as the characters look back at times earlier- these are also labeled before each segment.

It's more suspense than mystery as there is no wondering who the "bad guy" is...he's actually one of the point of view characters. However, the suspense as the final climax of the book draws near had this read eagerly turning pages. I could so see this as an edge-of-the-seat kind of movie. I love historical suspense movies and this one would make an excellent one!

The characters are not perfect. They are all flawed, all real, and you really pull for them to overcome the issues they have and the fears that stop them from pursuing their happiness. Their backstory is clearly drawn and you see how they become the people they are today--and the story also shows us as readers how decisions we make carry long-lasting implications for our lives.

Thanks for a good read! I'm glad to have found a new author at the beginning of her career and I look forward with interest to her next offering. 4 stars.

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### **Jessica Edouard says**

#### **Brilliant, a story not to be forgotten!**

Still shaken by this emotional, perfectly written tale all I can say is , wow! I'm not sure if I should cry or smoke a cigarette. All bets were off when I read the word, Bear! Thank you, Ms. Halleck, I very much look forward to your next novel and by the way, it's now 4 a.m! Bravo!

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### **Morgan Wyatt says**

Return to Sender is a novel about impulsive choices and the continual impact they have on our lives. Author Mindy Halleck paints a colorful portrait of family tensions in the turn of the century Ireland. A tragic choice sends the Riley family to America to escape the machinations of a vengeful rival. It also sets young Theo onto the path of priesthood that is both unwelcomed and unsuitable. The timeline jumps around a bit, reflecting on what could have been, then hurling itself into the present. The heart of the story is the relationship between an unrepentant convict and the reluctant priest.

It is a story well worth telling. Author Halleck inserts many touchstones familiar to older Irish Catholic families. Her immersion into the subject shows in her detailed descriptions and use of Gaelic-flavored dialect scattered throughout the novel.

The book handles difficult topics such as religion, justice, and redemption. Kudos to Ms. Halleck for taking on such heady subjects. The book has a lyrical quality, almost like a poem with its endless metaphors and the avid love of a descriptive phrase.

Continual time jumps, excessive metaphors, and sentences stretching into infinity confuse the narrative. It often takes rereading a sentence without all the asides to make sense of it. While an interesting read, it could be a better read with some judicious editing.

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### **Pamela says**

Congratulations, Mindy Sitton-Halleck! Return to Sender put me on the Oregon coast and took me back in time--to Manzanita's quieter days. Sitton-Halleck's fictional characters became as solid as her setting. I came to know how each of them moved around the small town. Her rotating narrators fleshed out the view points. Readers spend time at the home of her hero-warrior-priest tending to his fish tank, in the country store with his sister making pie, or with her nasty villain concocting his nasty,villainous notions. We come to feel

familiar with the cast, in their pockets. Having read the author's blogs I know that her sage, Solomon, she based on a man she knew as a child. Here she honors his superior connection to nature and spirit. Return to Sender is an interesting look at themes of justice, religion, exploration of self, and home.

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### **Deb Idiens says**

I loved this book! I loved the characters and how they were portrayed, and how the story just kept you reading. I really did not want this book to end, but couldn't wait for the ending. I have found a new author to read and follow. Thank you Mindy.

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### **Judith Works says**

A gripping novel set in a small town on the Oregon Coast not long after the now-forgotten Korean Conflict. The plot is tightly wound and the characters are compelling as they all struggle with secrets, lies, and regrets. I particularly liked Solomon who sees far into the future.

Small town life in that period is captured nicely with clothing, food, news clips, and vehicles. Life seemed simpler then, but after you read this story you will know that that is only a dream; the reality was just as complex.

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### **Kay says**

Theo, aged 10 in Ireland, takes a stand in the world of gratuitous violence. Becoming American, he finds new violent depths in unspeakable tragedies of orphans in the Korean War. Atoning as a priest, he names his new action path when he cries out in Oregon, many years later, "I am Raven Two Fists!" having been helped to the name by the last Nehalem Indian, Solomon. That cry was my favorite moment in the book.

Such a strong story, standing tall on its own, I nevertheless found myself thinking of resonances with "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" by R. Flanagan, and how childhood and war violence strike at the heart of a man, and how an early love can haunt and keep the heart in flower. Flanagan's book was called "deeply flawed" by the New York Times and went on to win the Man Booker Prize for 2014. "Return to Sender" is only slightly flawed and wins a top place in my Good Books list. A huge plus is that "Return" is woman-written about the deep world of a man. Believable. Masterful.

So well written, but I still wanted a heavier blue pencil over a few overstretched scenes and a few extra adjectives, although the expert weaving of four people's stories kept me on the edge of my seat. All four "heroes" are battered-soul renegades, and their stories stay with me.

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### **Mary Arntson says**

I stayed up way too late reading this book. I like the way she intertwined the different lives of the people in the book. There is love, mystery and moral decisions to be made in the story. I will highly recommend it to



my friends.

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