

Wouldn't it be fun to visit Pommeroy's Wine Bar for a half-bottle of Chateau Thames Embankment and encounter Horace Rumpole? Rumpole, like Bertie Wooster, is a favourite English literature comic character. John Mortimer has written another collection of Rumpole stories compiled into "Rumpole Rests His Case." It's a sterling, new addition to the Castlegar and District Public Library.

The marvelous thing about Rumpole stories is that they can be read anywhere, anytime. No need to wait until half eight, after the children are tucked in bed and flick on the telly in search of British comedy. When I think of British comedy, I realize that more than Vauxhalls, warm beer and boiled-to-mush Brussels sprouts, what the British have contributed to western civilization is an uninterrupted stream of humour from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Gilbert & Sullivan, Carry On flicks, the Goon Show, Monty Python, Mr. Bean through to John Mortimer. Of course, Oliver Cromwell and Margaret Thatcher were humourless eddies.

Flowing back into the main current, characters from past adventures make cameo appearances. Claude Erskine-Brown, dismal queen's counsel or as Rumpole redefines the legal acronym, queer character, is still grouching about Chambers. The Timson clan of inept, Cockney criminals are again accused and then absolved by the adroit Rumpole. Soapy Sam Ballard, stuffed-shirt and head of chambers continues to predispose himself to ridicule from Rumpole.

Rumpole delights when he discovers that Ballard was once Bonzo Ballard, lead guitar for the Pithead Stompers. This knowledge becomes grounds to undo a politically correct ban on smoking small cigars in chambers.

Naturally, Rumpole's wife, Hilda or she who must be obeyed, is back. In one story she is preoccupied with a tabloid feature entitled "Famous Bottoms. Fit these to the Faces of the Stars." Her fascination with British tabloids leads to nearly having the Rumpole flat made over to include a talk pit and a relationship area at the expense of the gas fire, mantle, and the sitting-room carpet which is a little worn round the fireplace from inaccurately thrown cheroots.

There is a serious side to Rumpole. He champions fundamental principles of justice, legacies of British law such as the presumption of innocence and the right to cross-examine. Rumpole advocates in favour of global human rights or a justice which transcends all cultural traditions.

Not for Rumpole, the politically correct term 'respecting ethnicity' which justifies refusing refuge to claimants from countries where women are denied education and treatment in hospitals or are whipped for wearing trousers. Rumpole exposes the politically correct as racism in sheep's clothing.

He is called to the Home Office which is pandering to voters who gather in pubs and discuss hanging and flogging first-time offenders and who fear that soon we won't be able to tell Gloucester Road from Suez High Street. While MPs are willing to keep Britain white in order to hold their seats, Rumpole has higher principles.

Rumpole, like Adam, is tempted. While at the Sheridan Club he is briefed by Bunty Heygate MP and offered a bribe. If Rumpole agrees to throw a Refugee Tribunal, he can park his bottom on a judge's bench until retirement.

The final story is my favourite. In a demonstration of creative genius, Mortimer sets the tale in an entirely different context. There is still a crime and a resolution, but the larger story is the fate of Rumpole himself.

Judges, tabloids, politicians and even the dear old Church of England are skewered by Rumpole. The incisions are quick and painless, thoughtfully honed to the point that book feels like pure entertainment.