

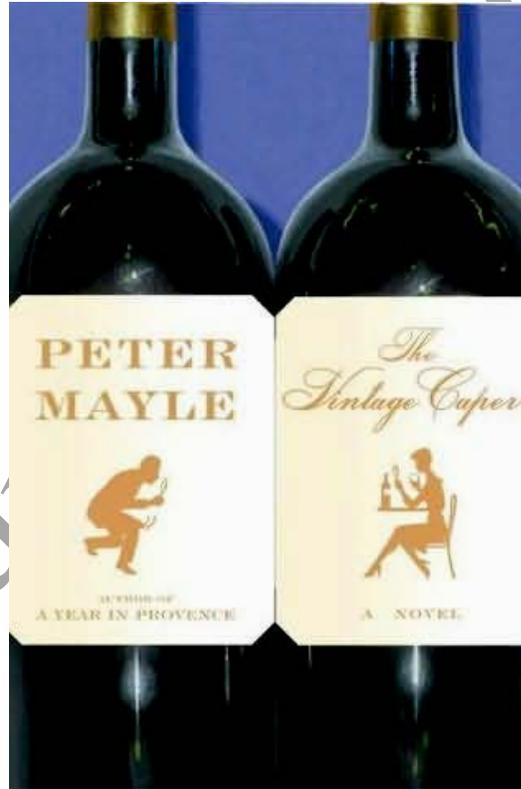
You've got Mayle

Acclaimed writer pens captivating caper tale

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

A real treat to kick off the new year. Many readers will recognize the name of Peter Mayle, award-winning author of the autobiographical *A Year in Provence*, detailing the experiences of a largely unilingual English couple who move from an executive-based life in London to rural France, and their efforts to renovate a decaying villa while adjusting to a very different lifestyle. A light-hearted yet insightful account of the travails of cross-cultural living that many readers can identify with, the book enjoyed phenomenal success when it first appeared in 1989, and was soon released as a DVD to equally widespread popular acclaim. In the intervening years Mayle has followed his initial success with nearly a dozen other books, including *Toujours Provence* (one of my favourites, for his entertaining dissection of the idiosyncrasies of the French language), *Hotel Pastis*, *A Dog's Life*, *Chasing Cézanne*, and *A Good Year*. A recipient of the *Légion d'Honneur* for his cultural contributions to French life, Mayle and his wife Jennie (also an accomplished writer) continue to live in the region that has brought them fame and fortune. His latest literary foray explores the realm of caper plots, stories that feature a likeable rogue and focus on the howdunnit-and-will-they-get-away-with-it aspect of crime fiction; and as we have come to expect from this author, it is a captivating tale.



The Vintage Caper
(Alfred A. Knopf, 2009)

Successful entertainment lawyer Danny Roth lives in a gated community in the secluded hills above Los Angeles, enjoying the good life, marked by the obligatory trophy wife bedecked in designer clothing and expensive jewelry, an attention-getting collection of contemporary art, and a vintage Mercedes gull-wing coupe. But the centerpiece of his vanity is his world-class collection of

vintage wines, valued at approximately three million dollars. Danny's problem is that too few people know about it; after all, what's the point of being obscenely wealthy if you can't show it off? So he arranges an interview with a member of the press, the better to showcase his collection to the admiring masses.

The ancient Greeks cautioned against hubris, or excessive pride, and they would have taken comfort in what happened next. During a trip to enjoy the sybaritic amenities of Aspen, Roth's wine collection is ripped off, the cream of his collection taken in the dead of night. The caretaker is missing as well, and as he was an illegal alien, it seems likely he might have been involved.

Discovering the loss on his return, Roth is predictably livid; the wine was insured, of course, and barring the return of his precious assets, he wants compensation. Realizing that the beleaguered LAPD are unlikely to give the theft of some cases of wine a high priority, the insurance company hires a private investigator to look into the case. Enter Sam Levitt, a former corporate lawyer who had found the world of corporate takeovers and asset-stripping insufficiently challenging, and had turned his talents to perpetrating crimes himself, his only caveat being that they not involve violence.

Sam's new career had occasionally resulted in his spending time in foreign prisons and suffering physical abuse, leading him to consider yet another career change. Pondering his options while immersing himself in the study of wine in Paris, Sam decided to establish himself as a consultant and private investigator to the insurance industry on matters involving loss by theft. As he

liked to put it, he was a poacher turned gamekeeper.

Working on expenses and a hefty commission, Sam agrees to look into Roth's loss. It doesn't take long to determine that wines of that quality are hard to flog. Realizing that they are unlikely to show up on eBay, he travels to Europe to see whether some unscrupulous collector might be involved. Teaming up with a French colleague and posing as a writer and a photographer putting together a book about world-class private cellars he soon tracks down what he believes to be the missing cases in the cellar of a wealthy and powerful *Marsellais*. But of course, even rare and expensive wines exist in collections around the world, and Sam realizes that it will be difficult to prove that these particular bottles came from Roth's cellar. How can he solve the case without risking people's reputations and still collect his fee? Sam's mind niggles at the problem until he comes up with an ingenious solution, one which will, however, put himself and others at risk.

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There are few writers alive who can match Peter Mayle's way with words. In conveying the big picture of plot and character and setting, he never loses sight of the core of writing: the well-turned sentence, placed in a coherent, thoughtful paragraph, which is itself part of an exquisitely-planned whole. His books — any of them — could be (and should be) used in writing courses everywhere; they are paradigms of calculated yet flowing exposition, and *The Vintage Caper* is no exception.

To draw attention to these technical virtues, however, is to lose sight of what's most compelling about this book. It is an informed story by one of the world's great storytellers, wrapped around the sights and smells and tastes of one of the most seductive regions of the world. Adding a *souçon* of social commentary, Mayle even finds time to slyly skewer the lifestyle of the Beverly Hills *nouveau riche*. I look forward to each of his releases, and this one does not disappoint. It is a fine tale, a credit to the genre of caper fiction and an engaging entry into Mayle's other work if by some chance you haven't already read him.

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