



Relief Valve

J.L. Merrow

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If you dig up the past, be prepared for some dirt to stick.

The relationship between Tom Paretski, a cheeky plumber with a gift for finding hidden things, and PI Phil Morrison may only be a few weeks old, but already it's under attack. Tom's friends and family are convinced the former bully isn't good enough for him, and they're not shy about saying so.

Then Tom's prickly older sister, Cherry, is poisoned at her own engagement party. Tom's left reeling and not knowing who to suspect. Could it be her new fiancé, Gregory, a cathedral canon with an unfortunate manner and a taste for taxidermy? Or someone from her old writers' circle, which she left after a row? Or could the attack be connected to her work as a barrister? Meanwhile, Tom's honorary auntie's left him a gag gift from beyond the grave that could be more significant than anyone knows.

Phil's fighting against the clock to solve the case before somebody ends up dead. And with the poisoner hiding a dark secret, Phil's terrified Tom could have been the target all along.

Relief Valve Details

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From Reader Review Relief Valve for online ebook

ttg says

4.5 stars - I thought this was a pretty fabulous sequel to Merrow's 2012 mystery romance *Pressure Head*. Tom's bright narration is back in full-force, and it's hard not to be charmed by him and the colorful denizens that dot Merrow's cozy English countryside world.

Book 2 finds plumber Tom (who has an innate ability to find hidden things, including buried bodies) getting used to his new relationship to former high school bully/now all-grown-up boyfriend Phil and getting even more used to his family reentering his life as his sister Cherry tells him that a) he has a surprise bequest from a neighbor who had passed away and b) she's getting married and wants Tom to meet her new beau, the literally big-handed clergy member Greg.

The engagement party is interrupted by an attempted murder and Tom and Phil (who's a private detective, as well as protective boyfriend) are on the case to find out who's tried to poison Cherry.

The case gives Merrow a good excuse to introduce a village full of red herrings for Tom to parse through, some funny, some melancholic, and along the way, he discovers some things he hadn't been searching for, as well as finding out the greater depths of his and Phil's developing relationship.

Tom is one of my favorite Merrow heroes, second only to Al in *Muscling Through*. She's created a real winner here with his cheeky, flirty charm and his upbeat presence as he works his plumbing jobs, seeks out answers for the case, and quietly juggles his self-conscious feelings for Phil and his fear that he won't match up to Phil's deceased husband.

The side characters are also great, whether it's flamboyant BFF Gary and his former porn star beau, closed-up Cherry who slowly thaws as she and Tom grow closer again, or Tom's police contact Dave. Phil is a stalwart presence in Tom's life. Neither he nor Tom are great at communicating or navigating the ups & downs, but slowly, they inch forward as they see what the other wants, and you can tell that even when they're clumsy, they care about each other. (And I love the times when Tom decides to not say what he's feeling, but then blurts it out automatically, like a reflex.)

The mystery is fun and twisty, and I didn't guess what was going to happen, which is always a plus. I also loved how much Merrow painted in the villages and towns where everyone lived. You get a real feel for the English countryside setting.

I think the only thing I wasn't a fan of was some of Tom's mental tangents, but overall, I liked his narration so much, that I was able to glide through most of those.

It's also pretty low heat, with just a few intimate scenes, and others that are fade to black. I was fine with this because I loved the story, but for those looking for a five-pepper heat mystery, this isn't the one.

If I could have a wish, it would be to see this on TV. It would be a GREAT mystery series. But until the BBC picks it up, I am 150% satisfied with the funny and charming world that Merrow has built in these books, and ECSTATIC that at the end of book 2, she announces that the adventures will continue for our plumber in book 3, *Heat Trap*.

Review first posted this week over at Boys in our Books:

Rosa, really says

Lust: The covers. I have wasted many a 5-minute block staring with lust & fascination at the covers of this series as they sit side by side on my kindle. It's not just that the guys are hot (they are, naturally) but the covers are so well-done they make staring at them a pleasant way to pass a lunch hour.

Love: Learning new Briticisms. When I read the term “dicky tummy” my first thought was *I wish I had a dicky tummy*...then I realized it meant nausea and not, ahem, sexual matters.

Love: Phil, aka Mr. Tight-of-ass-&-lip. At times it's like he's being paid to avoid any kind of emoting. However, if Phil is reluctant to talk, Merrow lets us know, through brief comments & sideways glances, that his granite exterior hides a lot of personal pain. Phil's got a lot of shit going on in his head and I sometimes wonder what this series would look like from his point of view.

Love: Tom, aka Mr. Charming-or-he-who-winks-too-much. Tom isn't too super in the communication department either. He appears a much more open character, but he's got his own issues to deal with and frequently runs scared if the conversation threatens to move in a direction he might find hurtful. At one point in *Relief Valve*, Phil actually starts to open up a little & Tom bounces out of bed, winks (probably) & announces he needs a shower. SIT THE FRAKKING FUDGE DOWN, TOM. And stop winking...you're gonna fracture an eyelid.

Love: Tom & Phil. Okay, so both Tom & Phil have issues, but it's excellent how a lot of these issues stem from the same event (view spoiler). In *Relief* they never really bring it up themselves, but it is mentioned by other characters. It's a continuing source of tension that hangs over both novels.

Love: Tom & Phil again. *Relief* deals with the fall-out of their new relationship. (I must be slow 'cause I didn't even notice this at first—I was too busy wondering when the bodies were going to start dropping.) It takes place only a few months after *Pressure Head* and Tom & Phil aren't quite an established couple yet. They spend most of their time dancing around their own feelings & each other's while simultaneously dealing with disapproval over their relationship from Tom's friends and family. Several miscommunications ensue.

Love: Tom & Phil 4-EVAH. Our boys don't spend all of *Relief* running scared. There's plenty of sweetness for us romantics—there's also at least one burning hot sex scene (the impatient may turn to location 2464). Most of the novel consists of them becoming more comfortable as a couple and learning to trust each other. I loved experiencing that with them. It made me smile like silly when Phil passed on a blowjob to check out a bump on Tom's head: “Phil slung his arm around me and pulled me in close. ‘Come on, let's just watch the telly’...I sighed and cuddled into his side. Bloody cock-blocking head wounds.”

Like: The mystery. Merrow spends more time establishing the list of suspects before any crime actually occurs. By the time it did, I was feeling a tad impatient. It wasn't until about 50% through that I stopped looking for bodies on the ground & realized I had a cozy on my hands. At that point, my formative years watching “Murder She Wrote” with my gramps kicked in & I was able to just relax and enjoy myself.

Love: JL Merrow. She provides no easy solutions. She's sneakily using humor, mystery & a limp to cover up darker themes--like the ramifications of homophobia & fear. Or how a decision we made in split second 15 years ago can haunt us for a lifetime. She's so good, it's just awesome. (*happy sigh*)

Looking forward to: Plumber's Mate #3 (which is called Heat something or other). I think (hope) we'll see more of both Tom & Phil's families & get more of Tom & Phil in wuuuuuv.

4.5 stars

Mandy*reads obsessively* says

I liked the first book Pressure Head but I **absolutely adored this awesome sequel** Relief Valve and I have to add both covers are a real treat.

When I finished Pressure Head I was still a little unsure of Phil, I hadn't totally forgiven him for the role he played in Tom's injury and the '*strong, silent, macho PI*' warning is accurate, so I also wasn't sure how he really felt about Tom.

This story is told from Tom's POV and let me tell you, Tom's head is the **best** place to be. His comments, thoughts and dialog had me chuckling and smiling. There were even rumors I giggled. Humor is hard to do, but J.L. Merrow has it down to an art, it's funny and entertaining without being coy or OTT.

Tom and Phil are dating and things are going well : **"Now I came to think about it, I wasn't really sure how many actual dates we'd been on anyway. Do sneaky house searches and near-death experiences count? Probably, if you're going out with a private investigator."**

As the blurb indicates there is a lot going on, Tom's older sister Cherry has some news, for one she's engaged to Gregory, a very umm..*interesting* man of the church, and then Tom has some kind of inheritance that he will need to use his *special gift* to find.

Darren and Gary also make an appearance and have news of their own.

I loved Tom and Phil's first visit to Gregory's home, I could picture poor Tom aghast at all those creatures **"Thank God we're out of there. That place gives me the bloody creeps. It's like Animal Rescue after the zombie apocalypse in there."**

Then of course there is the attempt on Cherry's life, all the suspects keep Tom and Phil busy trying to figure out the who's and whys of it.

The Literati and its cast of characters gave me a new insight to writer's circles and cliques, although I'm sure much of it was tongue and cheek.

"I tried another circle first, but I couldn't get on with it. Too much banging."

"Er, what?" I had brief visions of highly educated orgies, everyone quoting Shakespeare as they shagged.

"It was the chairman. He was a little overenthusiastic with his gavel. It used to give me terrible headaches."

Besides the humor and just plain lightness and fun of this story, I finally got what I felt was missing from the first book, more of Tom and Phil's relationship.

Phil is still a bit tight-lipped but now I'm sure he's the right one for Tom (and of course the right one for Arthur and Merlin, Tom's cats) Phil actually surprised me once or twice with his romantic notions.

“There was another pause. “I could probably throw together a curry.”

Phil sounded a bit uncertain, so I thought I'd better encourage him. “If it helps, I'll definitely put out after.”

“Bit rash making promises like that. You haven't tasted my cooking yet.”

I can **absolutely recommend** this book to everyone who's read Pressure Head and to those who haven't yet, you really need to, so you can then read this *awesomesauce squee* inducing sequel.

This book is 100% fun entertainment and I will do a **Mandy Happy Dance** if J.L. Merrow writes a third book about this couple. I am in no way ready to let them go.

Heller says

4.5

A wonderful reunion with old friends. I'm really glad that I re-read Pressure Head as a refresher before I read this one because it was just so nice to be back in Tom's head. I love his voice.

This story really advanced the relationship between Tom and Phil. How they feel their way to the next steps was at times painfully awkward to read and it worked so well. I still find Phil more than a bit of mystery but he's being revealed bit by bit. I'm really looking forward to Book 3 (I don't know when and if it's coming but I'm thinking so because there are things I still need to know!!)

I adore Gary and Darren who remain strong and detailed characters here. There is also real insight as well into the family dynamics of both the MCs which I'd love to see explored more.

I've been waiting for this book for a while and it was everything I could have hoped for, just a wonderful read. By no means standalone so if you haven't read Pressure Head what're you waiting for?

DarienMoya says

~RELIEVED IT FINALLY ENDED~

I'm trying to figure out what went wrong with this sequel. I freaking loved the first book Pressure Head, it had so much charm and wit and I really liked it. *Relief Valve* lacked all the fun, and Tom's voice lacked all the things I loved from him in the first book. I mostly found him flaky, and a little annoying.

Tom and Phil are still together after the crazy that was the first book. They've settled into their life, Tom the Plumber and Phil the P.I. It's still not clear how together they are, and their relationship is still sort of up in the air, but their British and ain't no one discussing feelings. When Tom's Aunt dies and leaves him some crazy unusual instructions to find her will, he has to reconnect with his sister. That goes all types of awkward, and it's clear that they're not very close.

Seems his sister is getting married and Tom is all types of surprised. When the engagement party rolls around, things doesn't go as expected and soon Toms standing over the convulsing body of his sister and it looks like not every one is feeling the love. Someone has just tried to kill his sister and it's Tom and Phil on the case.

First of all, I was looking forward to mystery aspect of it all and the use of Tom's gift. What gift you wonder, he's able to find things, just about anything really. His ass didn't use the gift at all, just spent his time being a sarcastic bastard bordering on the line of downright asshole. The storytelling to who was trying to poison his sister lacked finesse and not even cast of *Midsomer Murders* towns people (seriously I love that show) could make it any better. It did have some British wit, and I did laugh a little but mostly I was bored. Could the real Tom please stand up!

Secondly, the book was too long. It was dragged out with some over the top reveal that didn't even fall well with the story-line and the reveal of the villain was a letdown. No one quirky character could save this for me, I just can't understand what went wrong...I'm not here for Relief Valve and was relieved when it finally ended. Still like Tom and Phil doing each other though ?????

Overall, not a fan of this second offering. I will be checking out the third part because I do like J.L Merrow as an author and I'm not giving up on Tom and Phil. I legit like these dudes, and everyone is allowed to have an off day.

Argona says

I enjoyed this second book but not as much as the first one. A few times characters' reactions were a little hard to believe and as a result, I didn't like Tom as much as the first book. Hearing about the death of a loved one, even one you haven't met in years, is quite a blow and I can't imagine anyone thinking about sex right after that. But my main disappointment was regarding the relationship. Tom and Phil's relationship advanced to a new level but it wasn't explored at all. For example, I didn't get to learn much about Phil, why he moved to the country side, Why Tom is so special to him and so on. I understand some topics are better left to the dust, but certain topics need to get discussed to move a relationship forward in a sensible way. Also the pacing was a little too slow for my taste. All in all, this was a pleasant read and I am still fond of Tom and Phil, looking forward to reading the third book.

Isabel says

I had fun reading Pressure Head, but this book is so much better! For one, I start to actually love Phil... We can see now that he really loves Tom and that their relationship can be a solid one! And then there is Tom!!!

He is brilliant and funny. Being inside his head is like being in an hilarious party! The way he thinks... what he thinks... well, you have to read this to really appreciate the brilliance of his mind!

I also want to say that I am so happy!!! There will be a third book "Heat Trap"! YAY!!!!

Kaje Harper says

This is a smooth, fast-reading installment in the life of psychic finder and plumber Tom Paretski, solving a mystery as his relationship with P.I. Phil Morrison moves forward. I love Tom's narrative voice. He's funny and sometimes snarky but in a good-hearted way. He's not pretentious, and he has a fair bit of tolerance for the quirks of others, even as he complains cheerfully about them. I enjoyed meeting more of his family, and finding out more of his backstory. His first-person viewpoint really makes this story for me.

Phil remains a bit of an enigma. Their relationship clearly becomes warmer, with serious affection and even real love under the joking banter, but the reader is left to infer what is going on with Phil. I did warm up to him more in this story, and I look forward to continuing to have the real Phil revealed in the next installment.

These are as much mystery as romance. If someone was looking for a gay cozy-mystery, this series would be a good choice. There is the usual array of suspects, who mostly know each other, with a share of eccentrics among them. There is a palpable warmth between Tom and his friends, and a growing love story, but it is all handled with a light touch and without real angst, even when events become serious. A fun series, and I will grab the next book when it becomes available.

Xing says

Rating: 3.5 stars

*****Contain mild spoilers for Pressure Head*****

So the sequel to Pressure Head was still a pleasant read, but didn't meet my expectations. The book blurb explains it all: a murder-attempted mystery. And just like the predecessor, the story is heavily focused on the mystery and investigation.

Some interesting developments include learning more about Tom's family, most of all, his older sister Cherry. We pretty much get all the old gang back: Gary, Darren, Dave, Merlin&Arthur (<3), and of course Phil.

Which brought me to what I didn't like about Relief Valve. Pressure Head left a lot to be learned of our mysterious ex-cop and current PI. He was an enigma in many ways: with his ex-husband and family. We learn very little in this book, and Phil still remains a mystery after all this time. It kind of annoyed me. But if there was one positive in Phil's development in Relief Valve, it was his blatant show of affection and love to Tom.

So yeah, it took the whole of this book, but it looks like Tom and Phil are FINALLY progressing in their relationship (which was a "sort of" relationship for the majority of Relief Valve).

And one last gripe I have: the lack of Tom's psychic awesomeness. I mean, his ability to find things played a pretty huge part in Pressure Head. He hardly used his ability in this book at all! Part of his quirk was being a psychic plumber, but he just felt like...well, a plumber in this book. Which is nice and all, but it just left me feeling a little cheated.

So yeah, more of funny Tom. Awesome cats. Sexy Phil. And mysteries galore! Overall, it was still a good read.

Sofia says

3.5 stars

I liked how Merrow is building their tentative relationship bit by bit, nothing ready made. I also liked the development in the other characters, they change, grow. I have to admit that the humour, wit, compliments of Tom, irked me a bit sometimes but beneath that layer the story, the people in it, are good.

and yes I'm going on to Heat Trap some time soon.

BR with Carol and Maya

Sunny says

I love Tom. The way he views people and describes what is happening, his outlook on life in general...I love all of it. And what about Phil? He's a bit of an unknown, that one. Keeps his cards close to his chest, but we get a few peeks, and I like what I see. He's seems a little vulnerable, a little wary, and a lot turned on by the adorable Tom. Watching the two of them together, all the hot, sweet, funny, and awkward moments, was so much fun.

Awesome characters, interesting story. I can't wait to read more :)

Side note:

Tom reminds me a bit of Al in Muscling Through.

Julio Genao says

sophomore sidestep: set phasers to pun.

with a pun density that approaches truly dangerous levels, much of this is pretty funny.

if i had to give a dar complein, it would be that i find it really frustrating when characters can't sort-out things that i, as the reader, already can.

it's an ancient trope, and the basis of hitchcock's famous maxim about how to create suspense: you don't need to blow anything up to freak people out excitingly—so long as the audience knows the ticking time bomb's under the desk, and the hero doesn't.

i just wish that in this case this device were not repeatedly deployed across several scenes of tom and phil locked in a silent duel, *britishing* one another to death with subsumed emotions and a truly irritating compulsion to, you know, not discuss what's plain as the dick in my mouth:

these kids are in luuuuuuuuuuuurrrv.

good fun, otherwise :-)

Mark says

This book has just rocked my socks! WOW - LOVED IT!!!! Tom Paretski has just become one of my all time favourite characters. Once again he gets involved in solving an attempted murder on his sister and lands himself in situations that had me on the edge of my seat, but also had me laughing out loud just reading about the characters and their antics.

His elder sister, who he hasn't had much contact with over the last few years, contacts him and arranges to meet him for tea. His sister is a barrister, very conservative and straight laced. She informs him that their Aunt Lol has died, however in her will she leaves the advice that she has hidden something for him in the house and he should use his talent for finding things to discover it. Maybe a last little game from his Aunt? But she always believed in his power and his sister has been named executor of her will. What he finds there changes his whole look on life.

While they are out his sister informs him that she is seeing someone and even more surprising he is a vicar. Well, I just loved this whole conversation between the two of them. JL writes the most engaging dialogues and the fact that this is written in first person from Tom's point of view let's you read his thoughts, which are absolutely hilarious at times. As a good friend of mine says, Mandy, on Goodreads writes in her review, "*Tom's head is the best place to be.*" I couldn't agree more! That's exactly the whole charm of these books is getting in Tom's head and you soon realise this is one great guy, with a great look on life and heart of gold.

"Cherry ate polite for breakfast. "We didn't see you at Mum and Dad's for Christmas. Again."

It sounded like her court voice.

And I put it to you, m'lud, that the defendant wilfully and culpably spurned his mother's roast turkey and all the trimmings (cries of horror from the gallery"

Anyway, the evening comes to meet Gregory the vicar, his future brother-in-law and brings Phil with him. Upon arriving at the house.....

I pushed the antique doorbell, one of those fancy Victorian ones with "Press" written on it in fancy font,

presumably for the benefit of those who couldn't work it out without instructions. It jangled sonorously.

"They don't make 'em like that anymore, do they?" Phil muttered as we shuffled our feet on the Old Dean's doorstep.

"Yeah, they do. You can get them online. There's this site: Snobs' Knobs and Posh Knockers, it's called."

"oh yeah? I've never been that into knockers, personally. Knobs, on the other hand...." Phil smirked.

This vicar is quite progressive for the church and has no problem with gay people. Well, Gregory also has a rather unusual hobby for a vicar and once again the evening they spend together at Gregory's with his sister had me snorting on the sofa with laughter. Seriously, JL can really write the funniest situations in a superb way. You get Tom's angle on everything and left me splitting my sides with laughter. It takes a lot before a book makes me laugh out loud, but this one did it on several occasions. The humour is never trivial or banal, but very British and set within a more serious situation just makes it absolutely hilarious. The evening is a success and then Phil and Tom are invited to a party arranged by Greg and his sister so all the family and friends can meet each other.

On the evening of the party Richard, Tom's older brother, and his wife are also there. Richard is successful doctor and his wife a little stuck up to say the least. So Tom has a barrister for a sister and a doctor for a brother.....and then there is Tom, a plumber? You could possibly ask yourself what went wrong? Tom always has an excuse why he didn't turn out so educated and successful, but what I like is that fact he is never ashamed of his job. This is so correct, he loves his job, earns an honest dollar and now he has Phil at his side everything is perfect. Until his sister collapses at the party after having a drink. Richard rushes to the rescue and she is rushed off to hospital where they save her life and find out later that what she drank had been poisoned. Now the perpetrator has to be found.

This leads to a great murder-mystery with twists and turns and a great plot. I really liked the way that at the beginning you feel anyone could be the suspect and bit by bit the perpetrator is revealed. Again another great build up and climax to the story. There was at least for me no guessing the murderer too early and JL leads to another great final showdown. Apart from the main murder / mystery plot there are also several sub-plots. The shenanigans with Gary and Darren his friends. The family drama, etc. All brilliantly woven into each other to make for the most entertaining book I have read in a while.

This book's strength also lies in the vibrancy of its characters, the dialogues and the plot. Phil and Tom start to become more involved with each other and you really feel the process of them falling in love until the fact is undeniable. Phil is really protective of Tom but only out of his concern for him becoming involved in situations that puts his life in danger which Tom seems to have a talent of doing. I also like the secondary characters, Tom's best friend Gary who is a complete drama queen but lovable all the same. A great sub-plot if you will, letting you know that Tom is still dealing with everyday life and its trials while in the middle of being involved in an attempted murder on his sister. The characters just leap off the page at you. The very traditional British feel is still there as with the first book, with continuous tea drinking, customs and traditions.

I have loved both books! Tom is now one of my fav all time characters and I really hope that there will be more adventures to come. After all, where Tom is, murder is only around the corner.

Natasha says

4.5 stars!

Tom and Phil are perfect, again. So much fun. This book might've been just a touch too long, IMO. I love the relationship between our two lovers. I like how they act like normal people who actually consider normal relationship milestones to be just that, milestones. Too often in this genre characters blow into the "I love you's" much too quickly, and miss all the tense, slightly awkward moments that usually happen in real relationships.

I want the next book now! Please. Pretty please.

Christina says

2.5 Stars

This was not a hit like the first book. I love Tom, but his winning combo of British cheeky wit, charm and sarcasm that sold me in the first book felt forced and overblown in this book. Sometimes his thoughts became unfocused and annoying. The pacing was slow and there was nothing new brought to the story. The mystery was ok but the typical church involvement and multiple suspects didn't grab me. It didn't have the excitement I felt in the first installment.

I also wish there was more developing of Phil's character. There was definitely progress in their relationship but I wanted a bit more from Phil. I enjoyed when we saw the serious side of Tom, like when he thinks about why Phil still where's his wedding ring or when he contemplates their relationship. I was also happy to see Gary and Darren and of course Arthur and Merlin!

Regardless of the issues I had, I still managed to smile and have a few laughs. Hopefully the next one will be toned down a bit.
