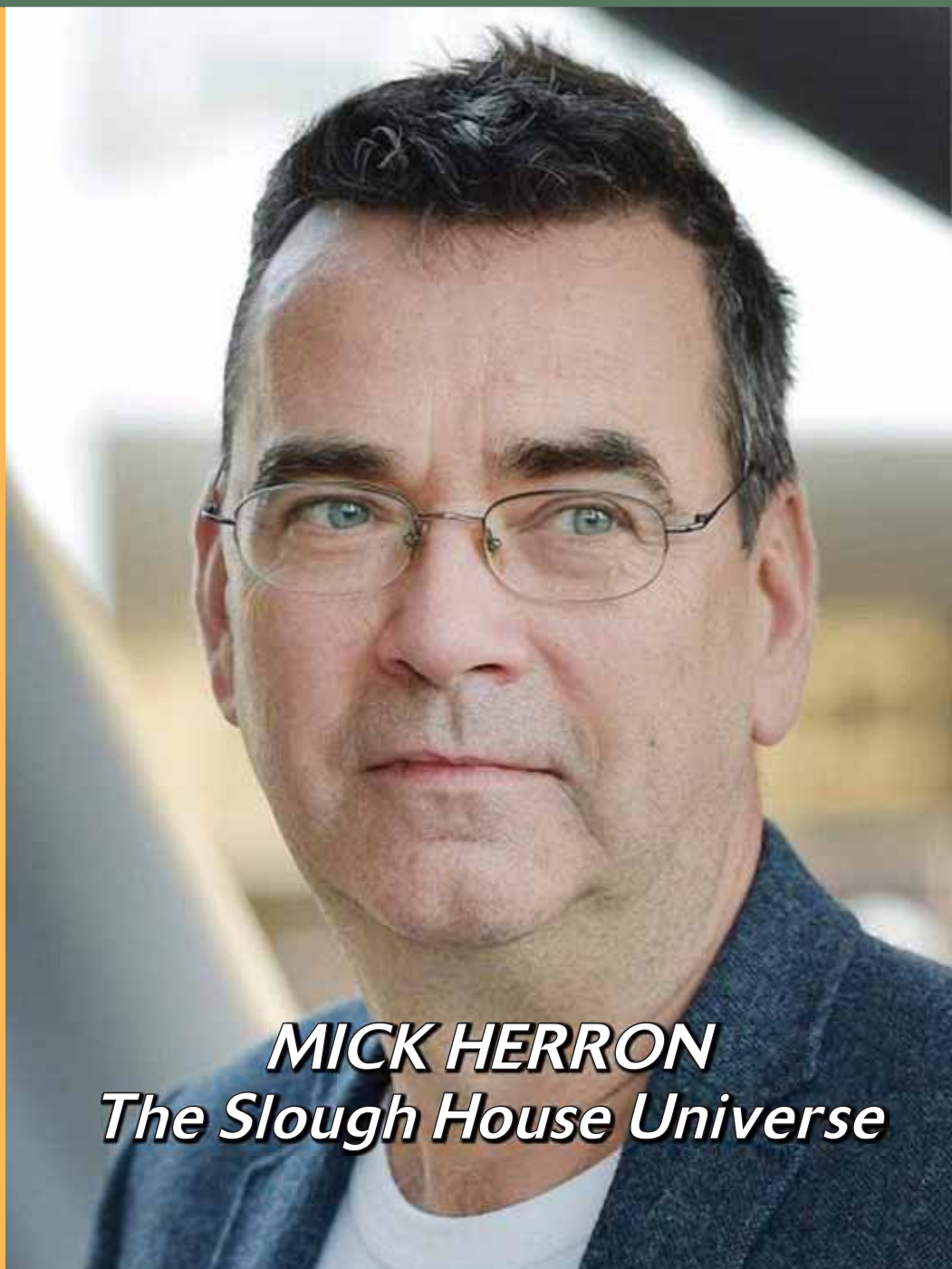


# *Deadly Pleasures* *Mystery Magazine*



***MICK HERRON***  
***The Slough House Universe***

# Mick Herron's Slough House Universe

Much like the best sci-fi writers, Mick Herron has created an ever-expanding universe with its own unique language, which finds at its center two buildings – Regent’s Park and Slough House. In Regent’s Park, it is the best of times; in Slough House, it is the worst of times. Regent’s Park is where the elite of Britain’s MI5 intelligence service is housed. All its members are seemingly ambitious and have clear paths to climb, but at Slough House, where MI5 sends its rejects and screw-ups, there is a general malaise and a feeling of utter failure – a hole that there is no climbing out of. Its inhabitants, called “Slow Horses,” know that they can never get back into the good graces of Regent’s Park and must live out their days doing mundane and unimportant assignments. It is either that or quit, and some eventually do that as well.

This arrangement enables MI5 to sidestep any legal hassle and tribunal threats for wrongful termination. And this way the downgraded spies can be kept on a short leash to make sure any secrets they may know are not shared with undesirables. Their tasks are menial and ones that can cause no harm. But... somehow, somehow the Slow Horses seem to manage to get mixed up in serious matters, much to our delight as readers.

These novels are billed as being espionage novels – and they certainly are, but there is perhaps even more space in them devoted to the inner workings of MI5 than to any spy-on-spy espionage – especially the friction between Regent’s Park and Slough House. So if you are expecting a traditional “spy story” in each book you may be disappointed. It is perhaps closer to the TV program *The Office* than to *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier,*

*Spy*. When you get right down to it, the series is about fascinating people and how they interact, with a bit of danger thrown in to spice things up. That is why it has become so popular with readers with a wide range of tastes – and not just spy fiction aficionados.

## Mick Herron’s Slough House Bibliography

**Novels** (Plot summaries can be found below in the individual reviews of the books)

**SLOW HORSES** (2010)

**DEAD LIONS** (2013)

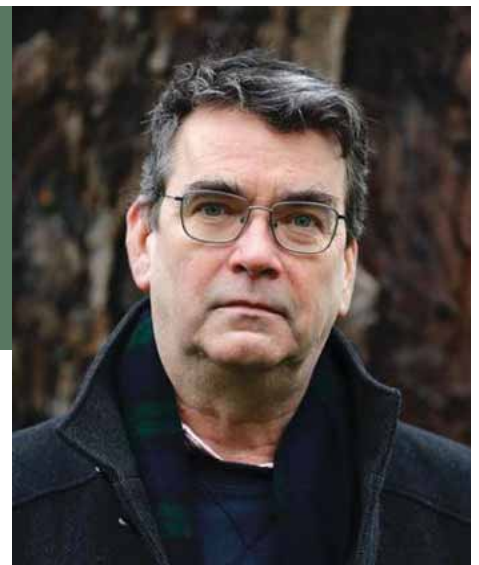
**REAL TIGERS** (2016)

**SPOOK STREET** (2017)

**LONDON RULES** (2018)

**JOE COUNTRY** (2019)

**SLOUGH HOUSE** (2021)



### Novellas

These all feature **John Batchelor**, a milkman (babysitter of retired spies).

**The List** (2015). Dieter Hess, an aged spy, is dead, and John Bachelor, his MI5 handler, is in deep, deep trouble. Death has revealed that the deceased had been keeping a secret second bank account—and there’s only ever one reason a spy has a secret second bank account. The question of whether he was a double agent must be resolved, and its answer may undo an entire career’s worth of spy secrets.

**The Marylebone Drop** (2018). Old spooks carry the memory of tradecraft in their bones, and when Solomon Dortmund sees an envelope being passed from one pair of hands to another in a Marylebone café, he knows he’s witnessed more than an innocent encounter. But in relaying his suspicions to John Bachelor, who babysits retired spies like Solly for MI5, he sets in motion a train of events that will alter lives.

**The Catch** (2020). John Bachelor is the saddest kind of spy: not a joe in the field, not even a desk jockey, but a milkman—a part-time pension administrator whose main job is to check in on aging retired spies. Late in his career and having lost his wife, his house, and his savings after a series of unlucky choices, John’s been living in a dead man’s London apartment, hoping the bureaucracy isn’t going to catch up with him and leave him homeless. But keeping a secret among spies is a fool’s errand, and

now John has made himself eminently blackmailable.

## The Characters

To understand and enjoy the Slow Horses series, it is essential to get these characters clear in one's mind. It makes the reading of the novels much smoother. If you are just starting the series (with **SLOW HORSES**), it will be helpful to have this character list close at hand.

Along the way, the Slough House Universe adds some characters and sheds others. It can be dangerous to be a Slow Horse.

## At Slough House

Slough House inhabitants are known as "Slow Horses." Slough House is a character in and of itself. The word "Slough" rhymes with bow wow.

**Slough House** is located on Aldersgate Street right next to the Barbican Station in London. The run-down, four-story building is situated between a newsagent and a Chinese restaurant. One doesn't enter from the single, nondescript door on the street, but must go around to the back to gain access through a door that always sticks. At the beginning of **DEAD LIONS** a stray Siamese cat takes us on a tour of the building. In **SLOUGH HOUSE**, we see the building through the eyes of an imaginary estate agent describing it to a prospective buyer (a tough sell).

*"Slough House was a branch of the Service, certainly, but 'arm' was pitching it strong. As was 'finger', come to that; fingers could be on the button or on the pulse. Fingernails, now: those, you clipped, discarded, and never wanted to see again. So Slough House was a fingernail of the Service: a fair step from Regent's Park geographically, and on another planet in*



*most other ways."*

*"Nobody left Slough House at the end of a working day feeling like they'd contributed to the security of the nation. They left it feeling like their brains had been fed through a juicer."*

At the core of this series are some major continuing characters and the names of these prominent characters appear in larger **red** type.

**Jackson Lamb**, easily the world's worst boss, was a noted Cold War spy,



Gary Oldman  
as Jackson Lamb

stationed principally in the Zoo (Berlin). Lamb is a chain-smoker who is overweight, slovenly irreverent, politically incorrect to the max, insulting, flatulent and dismissive. His only redeeming qualities seem to be a sly cunning, an impressive memory and a fierce protectiveness of his domain and his "joes," as he refers to his Slow Horses. Lamb is totally unpredictable and often makes deductions that rival those of Sherlock Holmes. Mick Herron admits that Jackson Lamb was inspired by Reginald Hill's Andy Dalziel.

*"I look at Jackson Lamb and think: My God, did I write that? My mother reads this stuff!"* – Mick Herron

All the residents of Slough House, when they first arrive at their new assignment, are initially suspected to be plants sent to spy on the Slow Horses for Dame Ingrid Tearney or Diana Taverner, the heads of Regent's Park.

**Roderick Ho** is a computer whiz but socially obnoxious. Hacking skills – 99%, people skills – zero. Ho is sent to the Slow Horses not because he did anything wrong but because no one can stand to be around him. Ho exhibits some sociopathic tendencies and has an imaginary (or is she?) girlfriend named Kim. Self-awareness is not his strong suit. Ho thinks he's "cool," but he's obviously not. Jackson Lamb skewers him when mention of Ho having a girlfriend comes out:

*"And this is an actual relationship? Not an abduction? Well well well."*

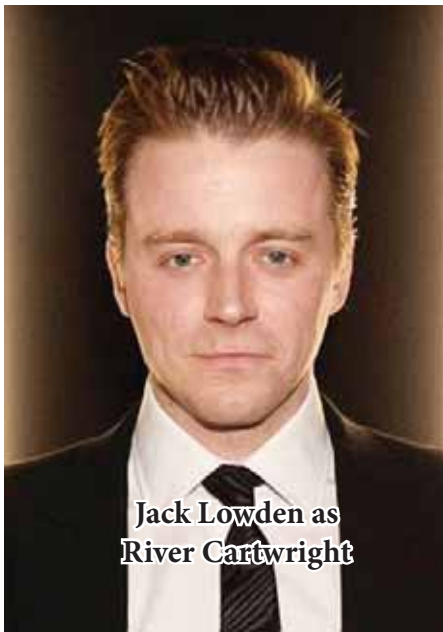
Lamb dropped the appalled expression, and beamed round at the company. *'See what you can achieve with a little application?'*

He patted Ho on the shoulder. *'It does me good to see you rise above your disability.'*

*'I don't have a disability,' Ho said.*

*'That's the spirit. . . '*

**Catherine Standish** is an alcoholic who was former secretary to the head of MI5 (Charles Partner). She is the administrative force that keeps Slough House running. Catherine was not relegated to Slough House but came at the request of Jackson Lamb. She sees it as penance for past sins and her alcoholism, and soldiers on with quiet dignity and a deep sense of loneliness. Catherine is highly perceptive and isn't cowed by Jackson Lamb.



**River Cartwright** is young, white, fair-haired with grey eyes and a mole on his upper lip. River crashed King's Cross at rush hour during a training exercise. Everyone thinks it was a colossal blunder, but River later discovers he was sabotaged by a rival. River's grandfather, **David Cartwright** ("OB"), is a legend at MI5 so River is kept on out of respect for the retired spy.

**Louisa Guy** messed up surveillance of a small arms dealer and guns got into the wrong hands. Despite that error, she is possibly the most competent of the Slow Horses. Min Harper and Louisa have an affair that is revealed in the sec-

ond novel, **DEAD LIONS**. She is in her 30s and apparently is quite attractive.

**Min Harper** left a classified disk on a train and as a result wound up at Slough House. He is divorced with two children. Min teams up with Louisa Guy.

**Struan Loy** is the Slough House joker and possibly a plant by Diana Taverner.

**Sid Baker** is a young, attractive agent who is sent to the Slow Horses for murky reasons. She is injured in the line of duty (bullet to the head) and is spirited to parts unknown at the end of **SLOW HORSES**. [Spoiler Alert] Some think that she died, but Sid reappears in the seventh novel, **SLOUGH HOUSE**.

**Jed Moody** is former "dog," or heavy at MI5, put out to pasture with the Slow Horses.

Added characters in the second book in the series, **DEAD LIONS**:

**Shirley Dander** is five-foot two, barrel-shaped, in her mid-twenties and dresses all in black. She has olive skin with a full mouth. She is sent from Comms at Regent's Park to Slough House after justifiably punching a colleague who was sexually harassing her. Shirley gets a high from doing her job and occasionally from cocaine. She has skills and doesn't mind bending the law to get what she's after. This is not someone to physically mess with for she is fearless and very aggressive.

**Marcus Longridge** is mid-forties, bald, black, south-London born of Caribbean parents. He is exiled from Regent's Park Ops because of his gambling habit – deemed unreliable (too much of a risk taker). Marcus is married with children. He sees himself as a man of action who is chained to a desk.

Added characters with the fourth book in the series, **SPOOK STREET**

(may contain spoilers):

**J.K. Coe**, wears a hoodie and plays an "air" keyboard while listening to his iPod. He is a strange bloke, but surprisingly insightful. He has serious mental health issues that seem to ameliorate when he commits extreme violence.

*"As far as River and the other denizens of Slough House are concerned, JK Coe is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, the whole package then refashioned in the shape of a surly, uncommunicative twat."*

**Moira Tregorian** is a new administrator brought in to fill the space left by Catherine Standish. She prides herself on organization – good luck with that at Slough House. Moira is sent there by the new 1<sup>st</sup> Chair, Claude Whelan, for reasons that Jackson Lamb mysteriously figures out.

Added characters in the sixth book in the series, **JOE COUNTRY**:

**Alec "Lec" Wicinski** – a spy, who is still trying to figure out how and why child porn was found on his office computer. He is later attacked and facially disfigured.

**Richard Pynne**, also known as "Dick the Pr\*ck", is as an up and comer in MI5 Ops – Lady Di's new lap dog. He wears glasses and his receding hairline led to his shaving his head. He is a Cambridge grad, of course.

### At Regent's Park – Headquarters of MI5

**Dame Ingrid Tearney** is 1<sup>st</sup> Desk at MI5, She is a middle-aged woman with a squat body, who wears fashionable wigs. Dame Ingrid is adept at playing power games and will not be easy prey for Lady Di who seeks to replace her.

**Diana Taverner** ("Lady Di") is 2<sup>nd</sup> Desk (Ops), which is one of five top



Kristin Scott Thomas as  
Diana Taverner

positions that all report to the 1<sup>st</sup> Desk. Supremely ambitious, Lady Di raises scheming to an art form, although some of her schemes are so complex that they are bound to fail. She plays a major role in each book in the series. She and Jackson Lamb are in an eternal struggle to outwit each other. Taverner directly supervises Slough House, the Hub (operations agents and analysts), the Dogs (internal police) and the Achievers (door breakers, nose breakers, boots on the ground). It would be impossible to find a Regent's Park blunder so bad that she won't go to great lengths to cover up. [Spoiler Alert] Later in the series, Lady Di takes over as 1<sup>st</sup> Desk.

**James Webb** ("Spider") is a former friend to River Cartwright. It is later discovered he betrayed River to gain professional advancement. He is not as smart as he thinks he is.

**Nick Duffy** is head of the Dogs, MI5's internal investigative unit.

*"The position was more akin to enforcer than executive, and the Dogs were kept on a pretty long leash, so Duffy's role basically meant that he could bite whoever he liked, and not*

*expect more than a tap on the nose."*

**Molly Doran**, keeper of the paper records (and secrets) in the basement archives of Regent's Park. She is missing her legs and gets around in a wheelchair. Her mind and memory are impressive. Molly and Jackson Lamb have a history, hinted at but never revealed. She is the antithesis of the "Beast," the digitized databases of MI5.



Added characters with the fourth book in the series, **SPOOK STREET** (may contain spoilers) :

A new 1<sup>st</sup> Desk, **Claude Whelan**, is installed. He comes from MI6 to provide "new eyes." Whelan is a short man with a high forehead and a pinched way of speaking. But his manner is generally pleasant and informality the key to his character. Lady Di is able to play him like a fiddle.

Likewise, a new head Dog, **Emma Flyte**, replaces Nick Duffy. She came from London's Met and is jaded against spy shenanigans. She is also model-level beautiful.

*"'You're all crazy,' Flyte said. 'We prefer the term 'alternative-ly sane'."*

**Bad Sam Chapman** is an ex-head of Dogs who left in disgrace over a large sum of missing money. He is now a finder of missing children and teenagers.

## Other Characters

**Peter Judd** is an unscrupulous, ambitious and amoral senior politician. By the third book, he is Home Secretary (overseeing MI5), who is critical of Regent's Park and bears them a grudge because they wouldn't hire him as a young man. His plans to take MI5 down a peg in **REAL TIGERS** go awry, much to the delight of the Slow Horses.

**Frank Harkness** is an ex-CIA agent

who has gone rogue and sometimes works as a mercenary. He has a surprising connection to a Slow Horse. Introduced in **LONDON RULES**, Harkness play a major role in that book and **JOE COUNTRY**.

## Terms of Use

**MI5** is responsible for protecting the U.K., its citizens and interests, at home and overseas, against threats to national security. It is comparable to the FBI in the U.S.

**MI6** (Secret Intelligence Service) is responsible for gathering intelligence outside the U.K. in support of the government's security, defense, foreign and economic policies. It is comparable to the CIA in the U.S. MI5 and MI6 have an intense rivalry and rarely share information or cooperate with each other (sounds familiar).

**The Achievers** are MI5's leg-breakers. They don't play by the rules.

**The Dogs** are MI5's internal police. Their office space is referred to as **The Kennel**.

**The Hub** is the area at Regent's Park that houses operations agents and analysts. It sits just outside of Diana Taverner's glass-walled office.

A **Joe** is an MI5 operative.

**Joe Country** refers to when an agent is out in the field on assignment. "He's in Joe Country."

**Spook Street** is a phrase that refers to intelligence officers watching every word and guarding every secret at all times. It can also refer to an agent's home base, where he resides when not in Joe Country.

**Milkman** is a babysitter to retired spooks. He keeps them happy and more importantly, quiet.

**Down the Corridor** refers to Westminster (Parliament).

**Limitations Committee** is the Parliamentary committee with financial oversight of MI5. Chaired by Leonard Bradley, then Oliver Nash.

**Over the River** refers to where MI6 (foreign intelligence) is housed.

**Under the Bridge** is an action taken sub-rosa or without legal sanction.

A **Cold Body** is a ready-made identity just waiting for someone to take it on. The identity documents are real, not fake, and have been generated over a lifetime, just waiting for the right intelligence source or agent to assign them to.

**London Rules** are the rules for survival in MI5:

1. Cover your arse.
2. Force others to take you on your own terms. If they don't, stay in their face until they do.
3. Always be a fair distance from a screw-up.

**Moscow Rules.** There really is only one – Watch your back.

**The First Law of Spook Street** is that secrets don't stay secret.

A **Tiger Team** are hired guns who test the strength of your own defenses rather than wipe out your enemies.

**Tricks and Toys Section** is the Regent's Park gadget section ruled over by a black woman named simply Terrance. Very James Bondish.

**Spooks' Chapel** is a small church in Hamstead that is used for discrete funerals of ex-spies. It's real name is St. Leonard's.

wonderfully descriptive phrasing and worldly wisdom.

Herron challenges the reader to look beyond the obvious and read between the lines. He doesn't spell everything out, but by the end of each novel there are few, if any, remaining mysteries – unless Herron wants you to read the next in the series because of a continuing string. And once the last page is turned over, you're saying to yourself, "Wow."

The beginnings of each subsequent book in the series are less confusing as the reader becomes familiar with the Mick Herron/Slow Horses universe. That's the key – to read on until you master the characters and the universe they inhabit. Then you'll be hooked.

## DP Reviews The Novels

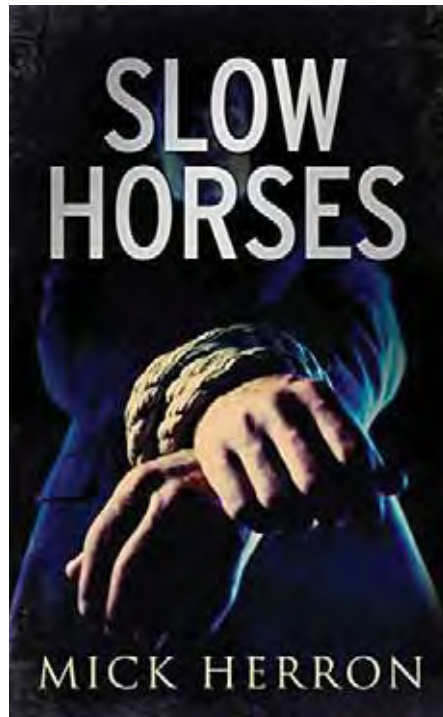
### SLOW HORSES

SohoConstable, \$25.00, 2010

*CWA Steel Dagger nominee.*

Reviewed by **Kristopher Zgorski**

Rating: A-



**SLOW HORSES** follows the tradition of espionage novels but manages to also forge its own unique path through the tropes of that genre. **SLOW HORSES** works perfectly well as a stand-alone

novel, with a story that has a beginning, middle, and a satisfying end; but it also is a novel that skillfully puts into place a network of important elements that will sustain the series for years to come.

The main storyline of **SLOW HORSES** deals the abduction of young man by a group of unknown extremists. The kidnappers are threatening to broadcast the beheading of this man live on the Internet. The newest member of Slough House sees an opportunity to redeem his career and slowly the entire agent-base of that organization becomes entangled in rescuing this victim, while also figuring out how his abduction relates to the scandalous history of a disgraced journalist.

Elevating this series and working to capture reader attention for the series as a whole are the elements that Mick Herron carefully laid while creating this "world."

First there is the Slough House itself. This is a foundation that certainly opens up countless avenues of exploration, but one that also hooks the reader with how ingenious it is. In short, when a British intelligence officer makes a career-ending mistake during an assignment, they are shifted to this undesired branch where the tedious and mundane investigative tasks seem almost designed to drive them to resign, retire, or quit. But what happens when those officers elect not to give up and instead endeavor to do whatever is necessary to salvage their reputations and careers?

That framework needs a host of very interesting characters to fill it. In **SLOW HORSES**, readers meet folks like Jackson Lamb and Catherine Standish who have been part of Slough House from the beginning, as well as newer "recruits" like River Cartwright. By the very location of their offices within the Slough House complex, readers begin to see bonds forming between subsets of this crew. Since many of these agents are disgruntled, there is also the aspect of in-fighting that helps to create internal stress that must be dealt with.

Each of these characters comes with a built-in backstory. These histories are complex and will unfurl slowly across the series. In addition to whatever

## Mick Herron's Writing Style

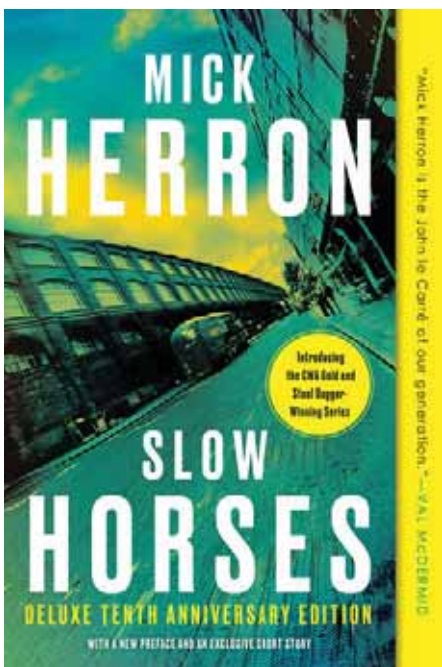
There are a handful of writers whose distinctive writing styles set them apart from all other writers. I'm thinking of authors such as Ken Bruen and James Ellroy. Well, Mick Herron is another. The style is hard to describe, but if you put one of his Slow Horse novels in front of me with no cover and the character names removed, I'm sure that I could instantly identify it.

The first novel in the series, **SLOW HORSES**, starts with confusing, multiple points-of-view chapters. A quarter of the way through the book the reader's head is spinning. Then things start to even out and get entertaining – especially the dialogue and the behind-the-back, inter-office machinations of the Slow Horses and Regent's Park. Interspersed are wee dollops of subtle and sometimes farcical humor. Each book is filled with

mistake they might have made in that one critical assignment that changed the course of their careers, they also have goals and desires, friends and family, wants and needs. It's the humanity in each of them that will appeal to readers and turn casual fans into Slough House fanatics.

Of course, Mick Herron knows that he also needs a few external enemies, so in addition to the kidnappers in **SLOW HORSES**, he also highlights the conflict between the Slough House folks and the more traditional factions of British Intelligence – MI5, etc. This plays into the plot of **SLOW HORSES**, but it also an important element for the series moving forward – casting the Slough House agents as a fringe (and sometimes rogue) group unhampered by the need to keep up appearances.

Mick Herron is often compared to the likes of John le Carré and Martin Cruz Smith. These are accurate comparisons not simply because of the genre and similar themes/topics, but each of these authors write incandescent prose. Reading **SLOW HORSES**, there are some metaphors and turns of phrase that will take your breath away – both in their sublime beauty and in how accurate, simple, and understandable they are. Mick Herron knows how to lure readers in and leave them satisfied at every turn.



Soho Press has published a special 10th anniversary edition of **SLOW HORSES** with an original Slow Horses short story and an interview with the author.

#### Jeff Poppel's Take on SLOW HORSES

This well-crafted and clever spy thriller set the scene for the Slow Horse/Jackson Lamb series and excelled in its intricate plotting, sardonic dialogue and memorable characters. The story flowed well, but probably at a slower pace and with less suspense than the later books. It is, however, a crucial starting point for readers who want to get into the series, as Herron skillfully establishes the background to the main characters, especially Jackson Lamb and River Cartwright.

It is a thoroughly enjoyable book that shook up British espionage fiction in the early 2010s and set the future path for one of the most acclaimed spy series of recent times.

#### DEAD LIONS

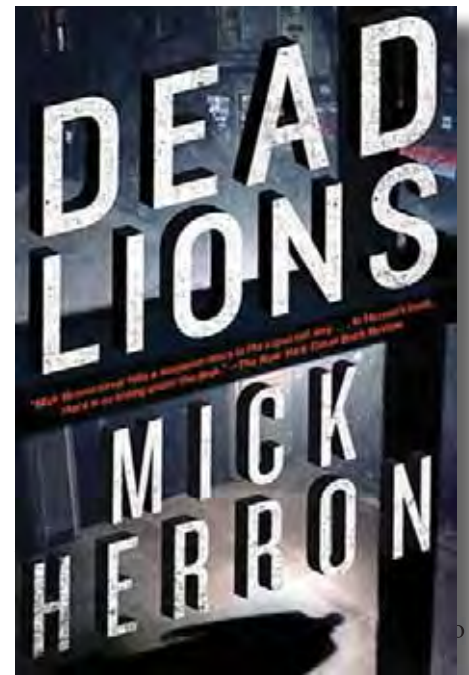
SohoConstable, \$25.95, 2013  
CWA Gold Dagger winner  
Barry Thriller Award nominee

Reviewed by George Easter

Rating: A

Dickie Bow is a former “street walker” who worked with Jackson Lamb in the Zoo during the Cold War. When Bow dies under suspicious circumstances, Jackson Lamb is curious to find out if he was murdered. So a Slow Horses “under the bridge” investigation ensues with some clever and illegal detection on the part of Shirley Dander that leads to the sleepy Cotswolds village of Upshott. River Cartwright is dispatched to work undercover and find out if there is a Russian sleeper spy (a “cicada”) in Upshott.

Meanwhile the pair of Min Harper and Louisa Guy, who have partnered up in more ways than one, have been surreptitiously seconded to Regent’s Park and James “Spider” Webb to be hosts and secondary protectors to a visiting Russian oligarch, whom Webb wants to turn into a resource for MI5. The seemingly disparate story lines come to an exciting climax that takes place in the center of London and in the



#### REAL TIGERS

Soho Crime, \$26.95, 2016  
Last Laugh Award winner  
CWA Gold Dagger nominee  
CWA Steel Dagger nominee  
Theakston's Crime Novel of Year nominee

Macavity Award nominee

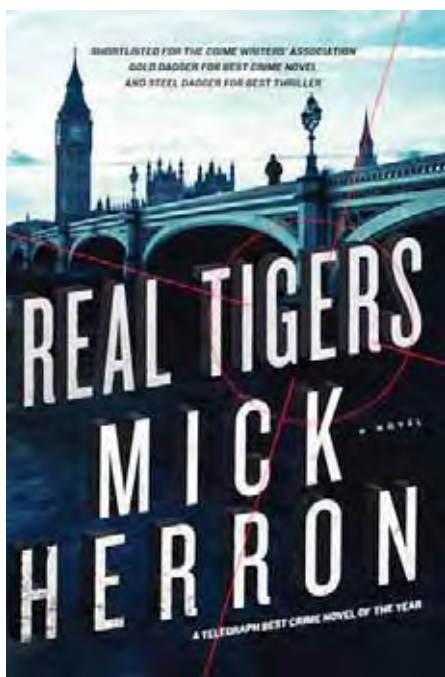
Reviewed by George Easter

Rating: A

This is the third of the “Animal” titles of the series. First we had horses, then lions and finally tigers. The animal names have plot significance to each of their respective novels.

The story starts quickly when Slow Horse Catherine Standish is kidnapped off a London Street. Fellow Slow Horse River Cartwright is given the task of acquiring a piece of classified information from headquarters at Regent’s Park within a very short time frame in order to gain Catherine’s release. He almost succeeds.

Enter the new Home Secretary Peter Judd whose sole purpose in life seems to be the obtaining of power and control. He is already the person that MI5 reports to, but that is not enough. He wants to have a strangle hold on it and its 1<sup>st</sup> Desk, Dame Ingrid Tierney. So Judd enables a “tiger team” attack on Regent’s Park to test its defenses and succeeds in embarrassing the 1<sup>st</sup> Desk.



But those who carry out the “tiger team” attack have alternative objectives and that is when everything goes off the rails.

Long about page 131, Dame Ingrid receives the following edict – “*Slough House,*” Judd said, “*Close it down. Today.*” You’ll have to read **REAL TIGERS** to find out how that plan is thwarted. It involves lots of action and danger.

**Warning:** When it comes to the black humor in these tomes, it is best to resist the temptation to read bits aloud to whomever is in the same room as you are. Trust me, I’ve tried this and it doesn’t work. As funny as these bits may be, they aren’t so humorous to those who are unaware of their context. Just recommend that those in the room read the series and get enjoyment that way.

#### **SPOOK STREET**

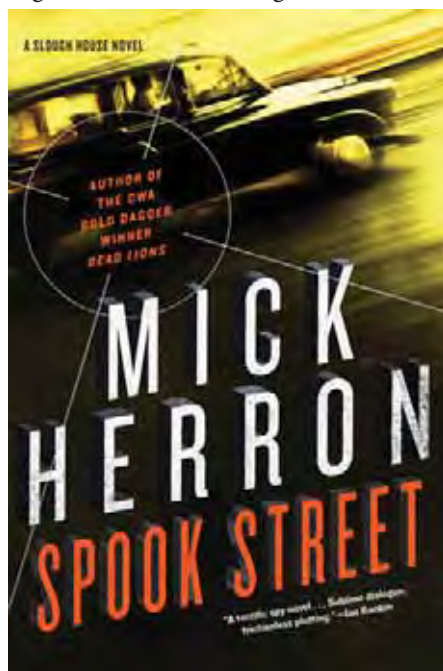
Soho Crime, \$26.95, 2017  
*Last Laugh Award winner*  
*CWA Gold Dagger nominee*  
*CWA Steel Dagger winner*  
*Theakston’s Crime Novel of Year nominee*  
*Barry Thriller Award nominee*  
**Reviewed by George Easter**  
**Rating: A**

From the age of seven, River Cartwright was raised by his maternal

grandparents. His grandfather David Cartwright, affectionately referred to as OB (“Old Bastard”) is a legend in MI5 circles and River’s childhood was rife with spycraft instruction. River’s grandmother is gone now and his grandfather is slowly losing his mental capacities.

Someone who looks suspiciously like River makes an attempt on OB’s life and River travels to France following up on a clue found on the perpetrator’s body. Who would want to kill an old man who is mentally failing?

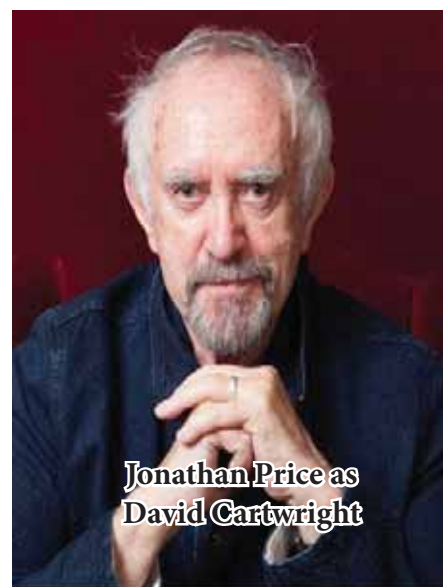
In a parallel story line there is a terrorist attack in a London shopping mall and many young people die. As MI5 investigates, there are some disturbing facts that come to light – ones that



Diana Taverner and her new boss, 1<sup>st</sup> Desk Claude Whelan, are keen to keep hidden.

**SPOOK STREET** sees an infusion of new characters. There is a new First Desk in Claude Whelan, and a new Head Dog in Emma Flyte. However, these two will soon learn that part of being involved in the Secret Service is that not only are there secrets, but many are kept even from those who should be in the know – and which may come back to bite those who have inherited them.

**LONDON RULES**  
 Soho Crime, \$26.95, 2018



**Jonathan Price as David Cartwright**

*Capital Crime Best Thriller Winner*  
*CWA Gold Dagger nominee*  
*CWA Steel Dagger nominee*  
*Last Laugh Award nominee*  
*Theakston’s Crime Novel of Year nominee*  
*Barry Thriller Award nominee*  
**Reviewed by Jeff Popple**  
**Rating: A**

Mick Herron is in fine form with the fifth novel in the Slow Horses series.

**LONDON RULES** continues the adventures of the bunch of disgraced British spies who have been banished to an archives center at Slough House and renamed the “Slow Horses.” When the attempted murder of one of their number is linked to a current campaign of terrorist attacks, the bunch of misfits see an opportunity to redeem their careers. Of course, nothing is smooth sailing with the “Slow Horses” and the book builds to a strong climax amidst double-dealing, treachery and a dash of violence.

This stylish and witty spy thriller excels with its intricate plotting, sardonic dialogue and well-crafted characters, and will keep you reading well into the night. It also features some fine writing, as in Herron’s opening description of dawn arriving at Slough House: “**it comes wearing safecracker’s gloves, so as not to leave prints on windowsills and doorknobs; it squints through keyholes, sizes up locks and generally**





cases the joint ahead of approaching day.”

Highly recommended.

**JOE COUNTRY**

Soho Crime, \$26.95, 2019  
 CWA Gold Dagger nominee  
 Theakston's Crime Novel  
 of Year nominee

Reviewed by Larry Gandle  
 Rating: A

The disgraced MI5 spies at Slough House all have their own problems they must deal with. New recruit, Lech Wicinski, is trying to discover how he was found with child porn on his work computer. Louisa Guy feels an obligation to find the lost son of her now deceased ex-lover in Wales. When Jackson Lamb finds out a man responsible for killing a member of Slough House may be after the son Louise is searching for, he sends out the troops to possibly kill him.

I have not really liked the Slough House books before. This is the sixth book in the series and probably the fourth I have read or attempted to read. So many times our impression of a book can be determined by what we read immediately before this book and the expectation in that it is supposed to be a thriller. The style of writing is such that the plot moves along slowly and

there are so many characters to keep straight that it makes the reading of the book initially quite demanding. In other words, to appreciate the books, the reader must work for it.

Whenever I approached a Mick Herron book, I had most likely come off reading a few international thrillers and simply was not in the right frame of mind for the Slough House books. This time, knowing how slow these books are, I read several slow and dull books that were long-listed for the Booker Prize for literary fiction. By comparison, they made **JOE COUNTRY** a pleasure to read. It is still a slow read and George emailed me a list with a description of each of the characters that helped. I will say, initially, the characters can be



confusing as there are probably up to six separate subplots involving each of them. However, as the book progresses, the subplots coalesce into perhaps two or three very much related plots and the pacing picks up to thriller pace. It is really a unique style of writing and with some concentration, at least initially, it really works. Jackson Lamb is one of the most comical characters I have read in quite some time. I laughed out loud on numerous occasions.

I confess that by giving the book its due, I really liked it – as I do value originality. Now I fully understand why the Brits nominate Mick Herron every

year for CWA awards. Consider me now transformed from a hater to a fan. Highly recommended.

**SLOUGH HOUSE**

Constable Crime, \$27.95, 2021

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Rating: A

Mick Herron's **SLOUGH HOUSE** is probably one of the most eagerly awaited novels of 2021.

The seventh book in Herron's highly acclaimed series about Jackson Lamb and the Slow Horses of Slough House, it finds the team in a higher level of agitation than usual. They are still reeling from the bloodbath at the end of **JOE COUNTRY**, and it now seems that they have been wiped off the MI5 database. Some of them are also certain that they are being followed. When death strikes several former members, it seems that the Slow Horses are being targeted, despite Lamb's protestation that:

**“They’ve never needed to kill us. I mean, f\*\*\*ing look at us. What would be the point?”**

To give away any more of this exquisite plot would be a crime, other than to say that, as usual, the Regent's Park's 1st Desk, Diana Taverner, is busily plotting





away in the background. This time, however, it seems that she has gone too far in accepting the help of arch-manipulator Peter Judd in mounting a retaliatory attack against the Russians in response to their Novichok poisonings in the U.K.

As with the previous books in the series, the plotting is superb, and Herron adroitly brings together his various strands in a clever and idiosyncratic manner. There are the requisite twists and turns, and there is probably a higher level of suspense and action than in the previous books. He moves the plot along with some urgency and the story builds to a thudding conclusion.

As always, the dialogue sparkles and Lamb is in brilliant witty form, albeit always politically incorrect, especially during his encounter with a gay dwarf. The characterisations are nicely nuanced and described with a razor sharp wit. Lamb is perhaps becoming too much of a caricature of himself, although in couple of scenes Herron skillfully reminds us that Lamb still has the tough street smarts of a good agent. Regular readers of the series will also enjoy the return, although sometimes very briefly, of characters from earlier books.

In all, a very enjoyable read that also effectively uses its pre-COVID Brexit background to make some astute reflections on the state of society, especially in

Britain.

**George Easter's Take on SLOUGH HOUSE:** Every book in this series is a gem and **SLOUGH HOUSE** is no exception. Not only will I continue to avidly read this series, but I will treat each new Slow Horses novel as I do a new Michael Connelly novel and devour it within two days of receipt. **SLOUGH HOUSE** left us a bit of a cliffhanger regarding River Cartwright and Sid Baker, so that will make anticipation of the next in the series that much more tense. **Rating: A**

**Steele Curry's Take on SLOUGH HOUSE:** The seventh novel in the author's Slough House series roars along with wit, deft characterization and a timely plot. Picking up on the actual attempted poisoning by Russian spies of a former Russian intelligent agent and his daughter in the U.K. in 2018, **SLOUGH HOUSE** chronicles what happens back in the U.K. when MI5 retaliates in Russia by killing one of the spies responsible for this poisoning. Unfortunately, the members of Slough House are the ones who must bear the consequences of this retaliation.

**SLOUGH HOUSE** once again demonstrates that Herron is an outstanding storyteller who makes every word count with a unique writing style. His Slough House novels are marked by sparkling dialogue, an acute sense of place, and a colorful cast of characters,



Olivia Cooke as  
Sid Baker

highlighted by the incorrigible Jackson Lamb (the head of Slough House) and the treacherous Diana Taverner (the head of MI5). Throughout the series, Lamb's perverse mode of leadership

somehow enables the members of the lowly Slough House department of MI5 to survive, or at least most of them.

This is one of those rare novels where you inadvertently slow down your pace of reading to make your reading pleasure last longer. Plus, no sooner had I finished reading **SLOUGH HOUSE**, I felt compelled to immediately read it a second time. This is a truly brilliant novel in every possible respect. **Rating: A+**

## Why Are the Books So Popular?

The popularity of the Slow Horses series did not happen overnight. In fact, it started off quite slowly. In England, Constable published **SLOW HORSES** to underwhelming sales and decided to not publish any subsequent novels in the series. It wasn't until 2014 that publisher John Murray stepped in and recommenced the publication of the series in the U.K.

In America, Soho Press had greater faith in the Slow Horses and has published all seven novels to increasing sales with each one. In this age when most publishers demand instant gratification and don't want to invest money to build readership of a series over time, Soho Press should be commended for their initial patience with and belief in this series.

Crime fiction (spy fiction) experts were in tune from the very beginning as witnessed by how many awards the novels have won and been shortlisted for.

The novels are not easy, facile reads, especially at the beginning. Mick Herron makes the readers work a bit and figure certain things out for themselves. I think this may have had something to do with the series slow start. But word-of-mouth recommendations are a wonderful thing and I'm certain that a reader is willing to put in the effort if the promised payoff is great. If you haven't read this series previously, consider this a word-of-mouth alert. It is essential to start at the beginning with **SLOW HORSES**.

So why are these book so popular

now? It's hard not to root for the underdog, isn't it? Then there is that amazing satisfaction when those same underdogs outshine their supposed betters. Along the way there's Mick Herron's ascerbic, biting sense of humor that is its own form of entertainment. And, there's the wonderfully politically incorrect Jackson Lamb character. Once you are used to it, Mick Herron's prose is an absolute delight to read.

The continuing storyline is also a major factor in the reader returning for each episode. Details about major protagonists are stingily meted out over the course of the series. Our natural curiosity keeps us coming back to find out more. Hence, it is important to read this series in the order in which the novels were published. Some characters die and you wouldn't want to know that ahead of their demise.

Warning: there is a fair bit of profanity and crudity, especially whenever Jackson Lamb opens his mouth. If you are offended by that, you'll either have to adjust to it or skip this series, in which case you will miss out on a lot. In this day and age of ubiquitous profanity, I've learned to just ignore it.

## Mick Herron

Mick Herron was born in Hewcastles upon Tyne and now lives in Oxford, where he enjoys the odd game of squash when not writing.

He has a degree in English from Baliol College, Oxford.

## TV Production

Apple TV+ is producing a television adaptation of the Slow Horses series with Gary Oldman starring as Jackson Lamb and Kristin Scott Thomas as Diana Taverner. Six episodes will be based on Herron's first book, **SLOW HORSES**, and the other six will be based on his second novel, **DEAD LIONS**. The production has been delayed by Covid-19, but recent news indicates that shooting production has commenced. I don't have Apple TV+ but I will sign up when this series becomes available.

**“I'll tell you what, to have been lucky enough to play Smiley in one's career; and now go and play Jackson Lamb in Mick Herron's novels—the heir, in a way, to le Carré—is a terrific thing.” — Gary Oldman**



Gary Oldman as  
Jackson Lamb

## Other Recent Espionage Novels

Spy fiction continues to be popular in today's market. In the old days we basically had only one boogeyman -- the Russians. They've come back in a big way, but now we in the West have to also contend with Jihadists, the Chinese, the North Koreans and sometimes even our so-called Allies. The espionage writer is spoiled by a feast of possibilities.

Here is a sampling of what is available.

### BOX 88

by Charles Cumming  
Harper Collins, £12.99

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

The current pack of quality Brit-

ish spy fiction writers are clearly led by Mick Herron, but running closely behind him are a group of very talented writers including Henry Porter, John Lawton, Tom Bradby and Adam Brookes. Also belonging to this group is Charles Cumming, who has been turning out intelligent and suspenseful spy novels since 2001.

His latest book, **BOX 88**, is a tense tale about deep secrets and old betrayals. Lachlan Kite is a member of a secret, high-level spy agency, Box 88, that runs clandestine missions away from the prying eyes of the traditional agencies. Kidnapped by Iranian Intelligence after attending the funeral of a childhood friend in London, Kite is forced to go back over the early days of his career when he was involved in a botched mission in 1989. With his family under threat, Kite desperately tries to escape without revealing the truth of what really happened back then.

This is a well plotted spy novel, that smoothly moves back and forth between the present and 1989, when Kite, as a young man, was sent to spy on a close friend and his family in France during a holiday break. There are some good twists and turns, and the sections set in the present are very tense, as the reader tries to work out what is happening. I was probably not as engaged with the sections set in 1989, the idea of a late teenage spy did not ring true to me, but overall I really enjoyed **BOX 88**.

It is not in the same class as his excellent earlier novels, **A COLDER WAR** and **THE TRINITY SIX**, but it is still a very good spy novel with which to pleasantly while away a weekend.

### THE FRENCHMAN

by Jack Beaumont  
Allen & Unwin, \$A29.99

Rating: B+

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

**THE FRENCHMAN** by Jack Beaumont provides a refreshing, slightly different approach to modern spy fiction.

Beaumont is apparently the pseudonym of a former French intelligence operative who now lives in Australia, and his debut book is filled with a lot of convincingly detailed spy tradecraft



and seemingly insider knowledge of the French security services.

The story opens with a jolting prelude in Singapore and Pakistan, before moving to an exciting operation in Palermo, aimed at disrupting a new terrorist organization. The mission goes terribly wrong and leaves Alec de Payns, an operative in the secretive Y Division of the French foreign intelligence service (DGSE), suspecting that there is a leak in his team. That suspicion grows as de Payns is tasked to investigate a heavily secured biological plant in Pakistan that may be producing a weaponized bacteria capable of killing millions.

**THE FRENCHMAN** is a confidently plotted and well-written novel. Beaumont moves his story along at a good pace and it builds to a violent climax in Paris, complete with the usual concluding twists. The book particularly excels in its detailed descriptions of spycraft, the politics of French Intelligence operations and the security measures taken by agents. In the main this is seamlessly woven into the plot, although it appears overly elaborate at times. The descriptions of the operations and locations are also well done, especially the chapters set in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Beaumont's characters are credible and are not the one-dimensional, gun-toting superheroes to be found in

some spy fiction. He is also very good at articulating the personal cost of spying, both on the families of the French agents and the foreign assets that they use.

Overall, a very enjoyable and thought provoking spy thriller.

#### **A HOSTILE STATE**

by Adrian Magson  
Severn House, £20.99

**Rating: B+**

**Reviewed by Jeff Popple**

Adrian Magson is one of my favorite current writers of action spy novels.

His series about former MI5 agent Harry Tate is superb, as are the two hard-to-get novels in his Gonzales & Vaslik series, **THE BID** and **THE LOCKER**. Running alongside these series are his books about Marc Portman, a freelance professional shadow, or watcher, who provides protection to British and American agents in potentially hostile situations. He works in the background, stays off the record and often the people he is guarding have no idea he is there. As with Magson's other books, these are good, old-styled spy novels with up-to-date plots, exciting shoot-outs and betrayals.

**A HOSTILE STATE** is the fifth book in the series and finds Portman in Lebanon on a last-minute assignment. A straightforward collect-and-go job, with Portman providing protection to a CIA source who needs to be extracted. Things quickly go bad when the source does not show up and Portman is ambushed. It soon becomes very clear that someone had advance warning of Portman's arrival and wants him dead. With his controller back in Langley hamstrung by internal politics, Portman goes on the run. Fearing that there is a leak at the heart of the CIA, Portman realises that he has to play by his own rules to survive.

This is a very enjoyable spy thriller that starts violently and keeps up a brisk pace for most of its length. Portman's race through Lebanon, aided by a middle-aged, female British agent, is nicely concocted, credible and very exciting, and is probably the highlight of the book for me. The action on the ground

is nicely contrasted with the internal intrigue back in Washington, and Magson is as adept at the backroom scenes as he is with describing a gunfight.

In all, it is a very entertaining spy yarn. It probably does not have the myriad of surprising twists that is expected of modern thrillers, but it still works quite well. For me it is not quite as good as the Harry Tate novels, but it is still in the top echelon of espionage novels.

**George's Take.** There is nothing like an exciting chace to make a thriller like this one live up to its name. Adrian Magson is one of the best at this kind of novel and this is a series that never disappoints. Top-notch.

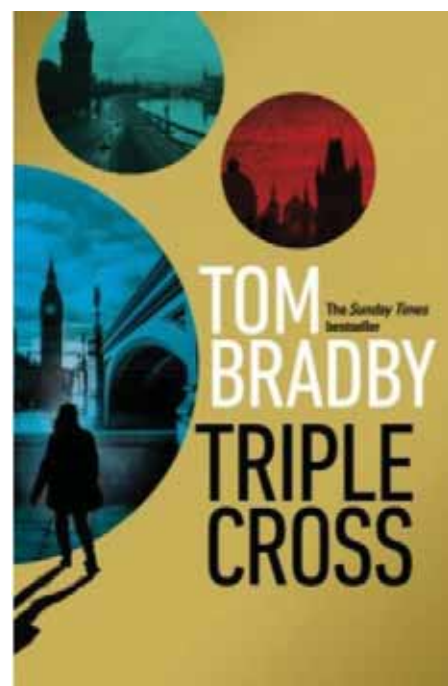
#### **TRIPLE CROSS**

by Tom Bradby  
Bantam Press, £12.99, May, 2021  
Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00,  
September, 2021

**Rating: A-**

**Reviewed by George Easter**

Former MI6 operative Kate Henderson is vacationing in Southern France with her family, when she receives a surprise visit from the UK Prime Minister, asking for her help. He wants her to prove that he has been the subject of a Russian campaign to discredit him, rather than the Russian agent that some still believe him to be. The PM be-



lieves that there is a mole in MI6 who is behind this fake news and he wants the mole unmasked.

Kate accepts her new role very reluctantly and only because the PM made her an offer she couldn't refuse. A major part of her reluctance comes from her distrust of almost everyone around her. Yet, she perseveres with the complex investigation, getting into some tight fixes. What we get is a spy procedural not so different in style from a police procedural but with a bit more danger involved.

On a personal level, Kate is trying to be the best mom possible to her two children who desperately want her to patch things up with her estranged husband.

Having read all three novels in the series, I can safely say that they were meant to be one story told in three parts. Now that the storyline that began in **SECRET SERVICE** has concluded in **TRIPLE CROSS**, is that the end of the series? The author may think that Kate Henderson is too good a character to discard (I agree), so he has left her career in MI6 quite open-ended as **TRIPLE CROSS** winds down. I wouldn't be surprised to see more of her in the future and I certainly hope that comes to pass. I've thoroughly enjoyed this series and highly recommend it to you.

**LAST DANCE**

by Jeffrey Fleishman  
Blackstone, \$25.99, 2020

**Rating: A**

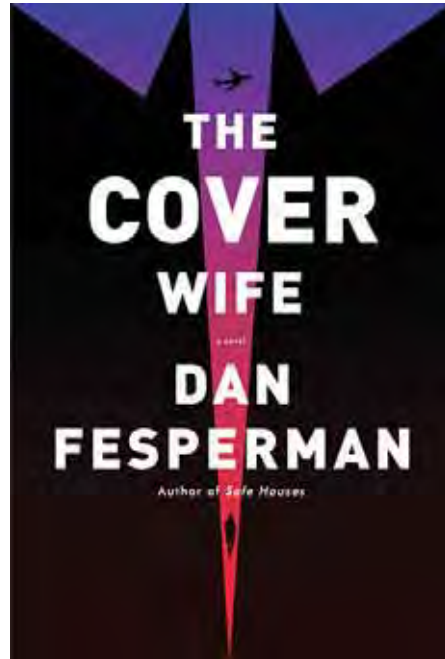
**Reviewed by Steele Curry**

The famous Russian ballerina Katrina Ivanovna is found dead of an apparent overdose in downtown Los Angeles. Detective Sam Carver is convinced she was murdered. Before an autopsy can be performed, Katrina's body disappears from the morgue. Several days later, a friend and neighbor of Katrina's was also murdered. Then, a third related person was shot dead in front of Carver in a bar.

As Carver's investigation proceeds, the number of suspects related to these killings increases to include two Russian hitmen, a gunrunner, a powerful billionaire film producer now living

in Beverly Hills who was formerly a Russian spy, and Katrina's aunt, herself likely a Russian espionage agent. Carver soon learns that the FBI has been conducting its own long-running investigation of the film producer related to Russia's involvement in U.S. election tampering. He comes to realize that all of these cases are entwined with the Cold War never ending.

Carver is a compelling character



with some past demons, cosmopolitan tastes and a relationship with Lily Hernandez, a uniform cop who wants to make detective so she can partner with Carver. The author is a terrific storyteller who writes with verve and soulful sophistication. I'm greatly looking forward to reading more about Carver.

**THE COVER WIFE**

by Dan Fesperman  
Knopf, \$26.95, July, 2021

**Rating: A-**

**Reviewed by George Easter**

Professor Winston Armitage is an expert on the Quran and its translations. He has published a new book that refutes the assertion that jihidi martyrs are promised 72 virgins after death, and this has caused a furor in Muslim circles. He is on a European book tour in October of 1999, with heavy security and CIA agent Claire Saylor posing as his wife.

Added to that duty, Saylor is also pulled away every day for a couple of hours by her minder Paul Bridger to surveil a local (Hamburg) Mosque and take notes on a particular group of young men who may be radicalized. But she quickly perceives that she is not being told the whole story and begins her own investigation. Of particular interest to her is the apparent new recruit named Mamoud. She teams up with Ken Dolan, another agent who is a liaison between the CIA and the FBI. His role in the story is not only to help Saylor but also to show how dysfunctional the CIA and the FBI were in sharing information pre-9-11.

The trail Saylor follows leads to a surprising revelation and some frightening situations. To reveal too much of the plot would spoil it for the reader. Suffice it to say that **THE COVER WIFE** is a "what if" book. It shows how close we could have come to preventing 9/11 from happening. But inter-agency jealousy and intra-agency bumbling proved our won undoing.

Barry-Award winner (**SAFE HOUSES**) Dan Fesperman has come up with a tightly-written, suspenseful and thought-provoking thriller. His experience as a foreign correspondent is evident throughout the narrative.

**THE OLD ENEMY**

by Henry Porter  
Atlantic Monthly, \$26.00, June

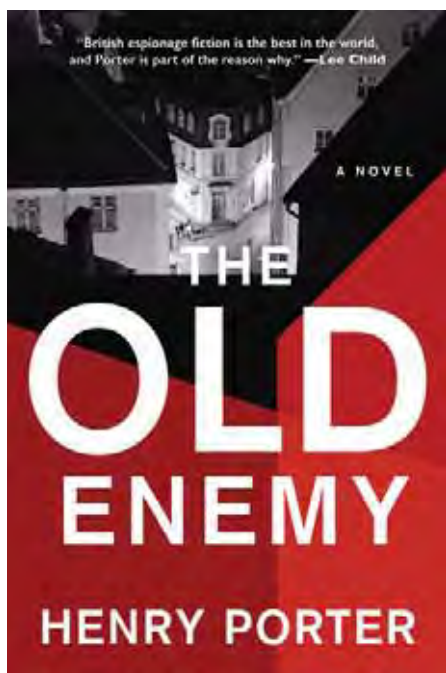
**Rating: A-**

**Reviewed by Jeff Poppel**

It seems that Henry Porter's **THE OLD ENEMY** has been a long time coming. The third in his series about former MI6 agent Paul Samson, **The Old Enemy** was originally scheduled to be published in September 2020, but has only just made its way into print. The good news is that the wait has been well worthwhile.

**THE OLD ENEMY** is worthy successor to the terrific earlier Samson books, **Firefly** and **White Hot Silence**, and in many ways is also a moving conclusion to Porter's earlier series of books about legendary MI6 agent Robert Harland.

**THE OLD ENEMY** opens with the



murder of Harland, who also featured in *White Hot Silence*, on a remote stretch of the Baltic coastline. Meanwhile billionaire philanthropist Denis Hisami is poisoned with a chemical nerve agent as he is preparing to give evidence at an US Congress hearing on his supposed links to militant Kurdish factions. Unknowingly linking the two attacks is Ex-MI6 agent Paul Samson who is also assaulted at the same time on a London street while watching over a young woman connected to a controversial Non Government Organisation. While Hisami lies in a coma in a hospital bed, Samson sets out to find out why the three of them were targeted for death. It soon becomes very clear that Hisami and Harland were conducting a dangerous operation against an old and powerful enemy. Joining forces with Hisami's wife, and the love of Samson's life, Anastasia, Samson has to battle against tremendous odds to outwit an enveloping conspiracy that reaches to the top of the British and American governments.

This is a compelling spy story that starts at a brisk pace and quickly catches the reader up in its thrall. The plot is cleverly constructed and Porter deploys some compelling action set-pieces to keep the story rushing along. By alternating the viewpoint between Samson and Anastasia, and occasionally some minor characters, Porter maintains a

tight grip on the reader's attention as the various strands of the plot unfold and the secrets at the core of the story are unveiled. As Samson tries to unravel the reasons behind the killings, Anastasia battles with the high level American politicians and corrupt business people who want Hasami's secrets to remain buried.

The story moves smoothly and violently across Europe before coming to a tense conclusion in Washington. The characters are well-developed and interesting, and the locations are simply, but convincing, sketched. There is also enough convincing modern spy craft to satisfy even the most demanding armchair spook and there are some depressing insights into the British and American political systems. Recent events in America add some currency to the story and Porter is very good at portraying the close links between the twin worlds of Intelligence gathering and politics. There is also plenty of poignancy in **THE OLD ENEMY** and quite a few shocks and surprises.

The ending is probably a little drawn out, and lacks the explosiveness of the conclusions to **FIREFLY** and **WHITE HOT SILENCE**, but is still quite effective and gripping in its way. Long term fans of Porter's spy novels will also enjoy the return of several characters from his earlier books and I liked the wrapping up of various past storylines.

The complaints are few. Some elements stretch credibility, but not to breaking point, and I thought that some trimming would have made it a tighter and more exciting read. There is also a sense of repetition at times, but overall I really enjoyed it. In all, **THE OLD ENEMY** is an outstanding spy novel.

2021 has already brought us one great spy novel in the form of Mick Herron's **SLOUGH HOUSE** and I think that **THE OLD ENEMY** is not far behind it.

#### **RED WIDOW**

by Alma Katsu

Putnam, \$27.00, March, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

CIA operative Lyndsey Duncan has

been recalled to Langley from her post in Beirut, Lebanon because of her affair with a British intelligence agent, which is a no-no. A former colleague, Eric Newman, Chief of Russia Division, has specifically asked for her to head up a search for a possible mole. Three Russian "assets" have recently been killed and it is strongly suspected that someone within headquarters or Moscow Station has been feeding the names of its informants to the Russians. Lyndsey is devastated when she finds that one of the three dead is her former asset, Yaromir Popov (code name Ghenghis), whom she grew to love as a father-figure.

As she is settling in, Lyndsey befriends CIA colleague Theresa Warner, the widow of a legendary agent killed by the Russians when he attempted to exfiltrate one of his sources from Russia. The number of suspects is whittled down to three and Lyndsey is sad to admit to herself that Theresa is one of them.

This plot summary will be very brief so as to not spoil any of the surprises that come along the way and there are quite a few.

The author's background, that included thirty-five years as an intelligence analyst for agencies like the FBI, NSA and global think-tank RAND, certainly adds verisimilitude to the



**Alma Katsu**

narrative. This is a novel that pits the “follow the rules” kind of spy vs. the “end justifies the means” kind of spy.

It comes as no surprise when the mole’s identity is revealed, but the mole’s motives add nuance to the plot line and the reader’s sympathy is engaged. Lyndsey Duncan proves to be a strong and likeable character and I can see this becoming a series.

**NORTHERN SPY**

by Flynn Berry  
 Viking, \$26.00

**Rating:**

**Reviewed by George Easter**

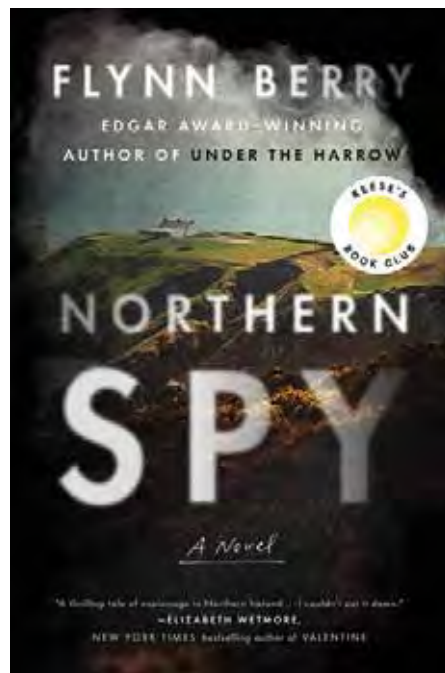
A different kind of spy story. In the old days, there was only two kinds – a narrative that involved American or British spies versus Russian ones; or WWII one involving Nazi spies. Now we not only have spies from the resurgent Russia, but from other hot spots such as China and North Korea. And then there are the multitude of spy thrillers that involve spying on the radical jihadists whom seem to be omnipresent in today’s thriller fiction.

Enter into this mix, NORTHERN SPY, which is a story about Northern Ireland. Wait a minute. I thought that the English-Irish conflict had been settled or at least tamped down by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Well, those supposedly buried animosities have resurfaced and the IRA is once again making Northern Ireland a dangerous place to live.

Tessa is a producer at the BBC in Belfast and is the mother of a new baby. While at work one day, she sees a newsfeed about another IRA operation. Security footage reveals Tessa’s sister Marian pulling a black ski mask over her face.

The police think that Marian, who is otherwise employed as a paramedic, has joined the IRA. Tessa doesn’t believe it. After all, she and Marian are very close and she knows that Marian abhors the violence. The only explanation is that Marian has been abducted and somehow forced to participate in an IRA attack.

When Tessa finds out the truth about Marian’s involvement with the IRA,



Tessa is forced to make a very difficult choice, one that could put her life and the life of her dear son in danger. But to choose to do nothing could be equally dangerous. So Tessa agrees to become a spy for the British MI5.

Edgar winner, Flynn Berry excels in her descriptions of physical settings and of current Irish politics. This novel will appeal to a wide range of readers including fans of mainstream fiction.

**IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS**

by Bryan Christy  
 Putnam, \$27.00, April

**Rating: A-**

Tom Klay is a highly regarded international journalist who works for the prestigious magazine The Sovereign. Years ago he was involved in a fatal accident while he was driving drunk. A young boy died and he has never been able to forgive himself.

Most of his time has recently been spent in Africa where he has written several pieces on endangered species and the rampant poaching of big game animals. On one fact-finding trip to Kenya, his good friend Bernard is murdered and he is wounded. Tom is sure that a notorious poacher named Ras Botha is responsible and seeks ways to bring the man down.

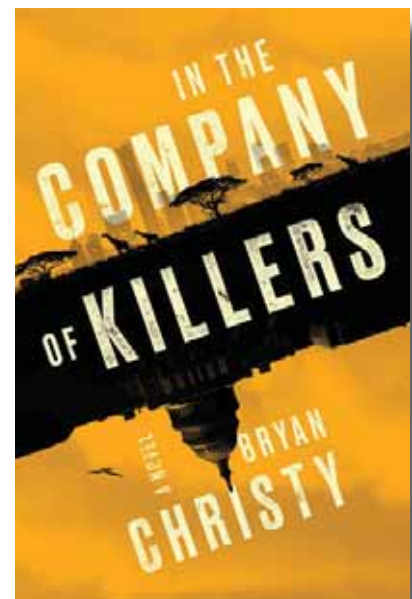
Meanwhile, back at the magazine, there is a changing of the guard and

Tom is not too happy about it. His boss has cancer and the company is being sold to a ruthless billionaire who undoubtedly will take it in a new direction – one that Tom is not sure he wants to follow.

Unbeknownst to all but a handful of people (including his boss who recruited him), Tom Klay is also a fact-finding agent for the CIA. His cover as a travel-anywhere, talk-to-anyone investigative reporter is perfect cover for CIA intelligence gathering.

Bent on revenging his friend’s death, Tom is at a crossroads and doesn’t know whether he wants to continue working for the CIA and working for The Sovereign. The CIA comes up with a solution: work with former lover Hungry Khoza who is set to prosecute Botha and bring him to justice. So Tom takes on this one last assignment, little knowing that it would turn out to be much bigger than he envisioned.

Bryan Christy certainly has writing chops. IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS has garnered three starred reviews (out of four) in the library journals, a sure indicator that the author knows what he is doing. The spying aspect of the novel is quite minimal. I would categorize it more as a novel of revenge. It does meander a bit here and there, but the overall quality of the writing counterbalances any of that. Overall, a very impressive and morally ambiguous first novel.



## A Conversation with Bryan Christy

Debut novelist Bryan Christy talks about *IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS* (Putnam, \$27.00, April, 2021)

**You had what many would consider the coolest job in the world. You were head of Special Investigations for National Geographic with a virtually unlimited budget to travel anywhere on the planet and investigate criminals. Why would you leave all that to write fiction?**

It was absolutely amazing, and my team and I did some good. Through our investigations we helped influence China to close its ivory market, saving tens of thousands of elephants. We got Vatican City ivory dealers raided and a pedophile monsignor defrocked. We exposed corruption in South Africa. Prosecutors and legislators around the world cited our work in improving laws and sending some major traffickers to prison. All good.

But there are limits on what truths can be told in journalism. As a criminal investigator I began to see relationships among powerful actors that could not fit into a single magazine article or documentary film. Mark Twain famously said, "Truth is stranger than fiction." But fiction, when it's good, can be more illuminating than truth. It's why Twain wrote fiction himself.

**What inspired you to write *IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS*? Where did the title come from?**

I wanted to write the kind of book I like to read—a good adventure story involving real world forces and full characters that makes me feel a little smarter for having spent the time. I've crossed paths over the years with private military contractors and long wanted to write a story about that world. I'd

recently done a project in South Africa where I met some criminals who were both ruthless and charming, and then just when I needed extra inspiration in the villain category, Rupert Murdoch bought National Geographic placing the world's flagship magazine and television assets in the hands of its most powerful and destructive media mogul. Imagination took over from there.

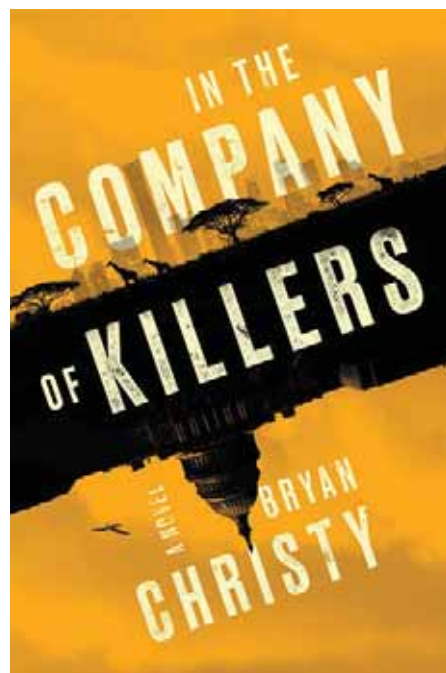
The title comes from a pivotal moment in the latter half of the book when Tom Klay realizes he's been naive to the evil that surrounds him. Klay is a very good investigative journalist who tracks down criminal kingpins, but not all that is wrong with the world can be put on a Wanted poster. Injustice thrives when its perpetrators are perceived to be too big to tackle or too many to confront. If you look around, we are all in the company of killers; the powerful who game or break the system to achieve their goals and the good people who allow bad things to happen by staying in their own professional and personal lanes. The Trump presidency,

for example, greenlit some of the darkest angels we've seen in this country in a long time—in politics, media, finance, defense, and technology. As we witnessed at the Capitol on January 6, people died as a result. Klay decides to take on what he considers "an unwinnable case," and stand up to these dark forces. It is his only hope to reclaim himself.

**You were initially a CPA and then a successful lawyer, specializing in international law. What led you to become a writer?**

Every male Christy since 1898 had been a mortician until I came along. I've always wanted to be a writer, but if I was going to break family tradition, I felt I had to be responsible about it. I did what writers do when they can't bear to disappoint their parents. I went to law school. I was working at a firm in Washington, DC when I got word my father had only a few days to live. Before he died, I decided I had to tell him why I'd become a lawyer. We were in the hospital. I was moistening his lips with ice chips. He looked at the bowl I was holding and said he would give everything he owned for a whole ice cube. He told me never to forget that in the end nothing material mattered; I shouldn't worry about success as others defined it. He loved to fish, he said. If he had it to do over he would have spent more time in his boat out on the lake, fishing.

I enjoyed law but it wasn't my boat out on a lake. My boat was writing. I went back to my law firm and quit. Six years later I had my first draft novel, a thriller. I drove to New York City to meet my new agent for the first time. Unfortunately, our meeting was set for the afternoon of 9/11. I saw the planes go into the towers on television. Nobody on the street that day thought they would fall. I spent the day as a volunteer, bring-







ing water to first responders. When I later met my agent he told me the thriller was dead, pick a new genre. I reached out to the CIA and to contacts in the magazine world. I decided whichever path opened first I would follow it.

**How did you become a special investigator for *National Geographic*?**

I met an editor at *National Geographic* who asked me how I would approach a story assignment from them. They didn't do crime, he added. I looked back at Nat Geo's work on animals and realized they were often telling crime stories, they just didn't know it. Their stories had all the elements, but the balance was off. Readers often felt sad or powerless after reading them. I proposed modifying their story-telling approach to move from victim-based stories focused on endangered species to villain-based stories that exposed kingpins and corrupt government officials.

My first assignment was to go after a reptile trafficker operating in Malaysia named Anson Wong, the so-called Pablo Escobar of Wildlife Trafficking. I set up a two-year investigation to expose him and the government officials who enabled him. As a result of my investigation, police raided his farm, seized his animals, and took away his license. When he was caught moving more an-

imals, he was arrested and hit with the longest prison sentence for wildlife trafficking in Malaysian history. Meanwhile an anti-corruption squad raided the Wildlife Department. The story made international news and members of Malaysia's parliament used my work to pass new wildlife protection legislation.

**How much of your protagonist, Tom Klay, is based off yourself and your experience?**

That's the beauty of fiction. What surfaces from your subconscious as you write—is it your invention, or is it you? Tom Klay is a fictional character. The story is made up. I drew on my experience as an investigative journalist to give him authenticity but Klay's a different guy. He's darker, more cynical. He's had some terrible experiences I haven't had. That said we do have certain things in common. We both grew up in a funeral home, we both worked as criminal investigators for a famous international magazine. Klay employs investigative techniques I've used in the field. However, Klay accepts the CIA's offer, which is something I would never have done as a journalist.

**What were some of your most memorable moments as an investigator? What were some of your most surprising?**

Oh, I loved all of it. Truly. The first time seeing an elephant in the wild. Or a giraffe running free. Getting arrested in Tanzania, of course. We were moving fake elephant tusks with GPS transmitters hidden inside through the airport in Dar es Salaam for a story on ivory trafficking. It was a long night but I made friends among those who arrested me. The challenge is to communicate your humanity and to listen for theirs. And keep your sense of humor. In my fiction I want to continue that.

**The book is filled with intimate detail about a host of things – hunting, Africa, international geopolitics, weapons systems, computer security, and a good deal more. What additional**

**research did the book require and how did you go about researching it? What was the most interesting or surprising thing you learned?**

I approached the novel the way I would a criminal investigation. I got out a whiteboard and drew a tree of my main issues and characters and set about learning everything I could about them. More than once I imagined the most outrageous criminal operation I could, only to see it happen in real life shortly after I'd sweated a chapter. In most cases I scrapped those scenes. A few times I made them bigger.

I was surprised to learn the CIA actually maintains a venture capital firm. It's called In-Q-Tel, the Q purportedly coming from James Bond's fictional inventor, and is used to seed high tech startups. The mixing of fact and fantasy by real world spies engaged in complex Wall Street investing struck me as too good to pass up as a novelist.

I was also surprised to discover National Geographic's early history with the CIA, including one disastrous effort to plant a listening device on the Chinese border, resulting in plutonium rolling down a Himalayan mountain into the Ganges. The father of the CIA, Wild Bill Donovan, was a regular at Nat Geo headquarters back in the day. Many people know that famous spy novelist Charles McCarry was CIA, but few people know he was also a *National Geographic* editor-at-large.

**Your first book, *The Lizard King*, was nonfiction. How was the transition into writing fiction?**

Non-fiction has handrails. Chronological sequence is there to assist you. So are facts. You have them or you don't. You hit limits on what you can accurately say about a character's internal life. There is a joy to research that is usually rewarded.

Fiction has no limits. Genre helps. A crime helps. But you have many, many more choices to make, and discarded ideas don't always stay dead. In fiction you can kid yourself that excess re-



search is a form of writing when it's not. Imagination is your job. A geopolitical thriller should feel real, the danger impending. One of the main reasons I left National Geographic was to explore topics that are too large or untidy to fit into reported stories. *In the Company of Killers* is fiction, but that doesn't mean it's not true. And, if I'm right about what's coming, readers should definitely be concerned.

**What were the influences, literary and otherwise, that shaped you, both in writing this novel, and earlier?**

My mother brought books into our home. The Flannery side of the family talked books, checked on what you were reading, celebrated a good author discovered, and cursed one who'd let them down. My grandfather was a one-man fireplace we gathered around for stories well told. The Christys, by contrast, were not avid readers, but oral stories play a vital role in a funeral home. Before they're called eulogies, they're what we tell each other to give others meaning and to take form ourselves. I grew up surrounded by stories.

For love of literature, writing, and animals my mom gets all the credit. My father taught me empathy for strangers. My uncle the FBI undercover agent taught me how to investigate. I spent a number of years with a Philadelphia underworld fence who taught me that the "good" aren't always right, nor the bad wrong. I had the great fortune to spend a summer with James Alan McPher-

son at the Iowa Writers Workshop who opened my eyes to the importance of writers as a kind of surgeon laying open the world for others to work on. That's carried me.

**What do you feel is the most relevant theme set forth in your novel?**

This is the story of one man's awakening to his moral obligation to act in the face of largescale injustice. Tom Klay is a loner. He changes story assignments. He changes identities. He doesn't have to stand up or stand still for very long. He skates above the world he wanders. He does not get involved.

Greed is everywhere in the book and takes many forms. Klay's greed is to keep his life rolling steadily along with himself in control. But Klay is also a witness. He has traveled the world and has seen the effects of unchecked power and greed. Terry Krieger's greed is more conventional. He's handsome, brilliant, extraordinarily wealthy, diplomatically savvy. A war veteran. He's got it all. And yet, more is what he wants.

I wanted to pit two American ideals against each another: the uber capitalist versus the lone individual. The idea is a story that reflects in some way the United States today. "American Exceptionalism," the notion that the United States is a city upon a hill, beacon for the world, included the idea that ours was a nation worth emulating, that Americans stand up to injustice and support democracy and basic human rights. Even Milton Friedman's "Greed is Good" philoso-

phy that fueled the 1980s recognized the need to produce a good output. But that moral imperative has been stripped from our national identity. It's not just support for democratic institutions and a free press that is eroding; fundamental stories we tell ourselves as Americans are dissolving, too, so that lately words like liberty and freedom are confused with selfishness and ignorance.

**In 2017 you testified before Congress on the importance of law enforcement in remote parts of Africa and the risk of spillover from wildlife-based disease. Do any notes of the argument you made then pertain to what has happening with the COVID-19 pandemic?**

I testified on the costs of failing to protect the natural world, including failing to support rangers and others on the front lines in Africa. The risks, I said, were increased terrorism, political instability, and emergent disease. Spillover diseases like Covid—I cited Ebola—are a direct result of failing to adequately conserve and protect wildlife and natural habitats. Even though I knew the risks to be real, and had seen the bushmeat and other wild trade firsthand, I felt like an academic warning those politicians of a possible future disaster. Two years later the bomb went off.

Experts tell us COVID19 is not the last pandemic we will see. We should be listening carefully to those scientists who study the relationship between ecosystems and the chain of events that lead to the outbreak of zoonotic disease. We are focused on politics and, appropriately, on vaccines. The more difficult task is to understand and modify the human behavior that is a leading cause of this type of pandemic. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for the supply end of disease. Like Tom Klay, we've ignored our call to action with disastrous results. The question is, having seen death, will we act now?

**What's next for you and Tom Klay?**

By the end of *In the Company of Killers* Tom Klay has finally found peace. It turns out that doesn't last.

# Larry Gandle Critiques

## TheEdgars



Every year the announcement of the Edgar shortlist is met with some bewilderment for some of the titles included, and most definitely for titles that are excluded. Included are some titles otherwise unknown and excluded are some of the most widely discussed titles of the year. This past year, George and I scoured the internet looking for Crime Fiction Best of the Year lists. The last issue of *Deadly Pleasures* contained all the lists from widespread sources, including international lists. George then did something I don't think was ever done before. He sorted out all the titles into how many mentions they received from all the 50 "Best: lists.

The clear favorite -- above any others -- was **BLACKTOP WASTELAND** by S.A. Cosby. It is not on the list. **THE SEARCHER** by Tana French was second and is also missing. The fact that these and others were excluded from the list perhaps makes the shortlist somewhat suspect. I checked the list of submitted books before the announcement of the shortlist and I did note that every top-rated book was submitted. As it turns out, four out of six of the Best Novel shortlist and only one out of five of the Best First Novel list has a substantial number of votes. So, other than the omission of **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**, four out of six is not bad in the Best Novel category and, ironically, in the Best First category, the book that got zero mentions is my favorite book of them all!

So here is my annual assessment of the Edgar shortlists. As I noted previously, I will not read or review Best Paperback and Ebook Originals because we do not review books that are not available in a physical form.

## Best Novel

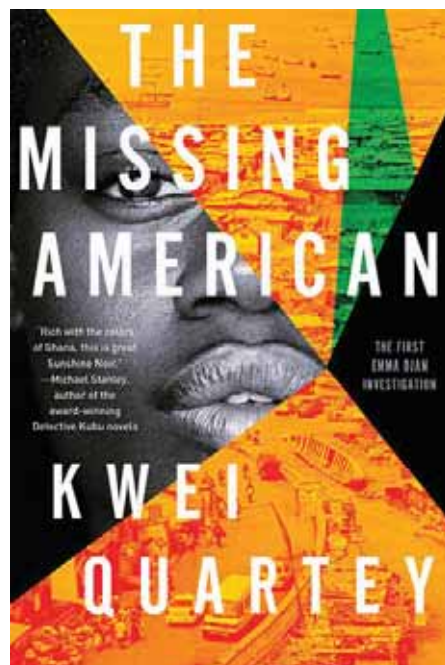
I did not particularly care for the vast majority of this list. Some were noted as the best of the year in multiple lists but they did not strike a positive chord with me. In my order of preference they are:

### THE MISSING AMERICAN

by Kwei Quartey  
Soho, \$27.95

**Rating: A**

Gordon Tilson, a middle-aged man living in Washington DC, is still mourning his wife's death. She was from Ghana and together they made quite a few trips there. He goes onto a widows and widower website and meets a very attractive woman from Ghana. He falls in love with her but she tells that her sister got into a car accident and they need money for medical care. He sends thousands of dollars then plans to visit her. He travels to Accra and disappears.



Emma Djan works as a private investigator in Accra and is hired to look into Gordon's disappearance. To do that, she must enter into the world of the sakawa scams, which are internet scams that originate in Ghana and Nigeria. The closer she gets to the truth, the more dangerous it will get for her as the villains go way up the hierarchy of the government.

This book surprised me. I was expecting another long, dull, dreary British type of PI novel. Instead it is more of a thriller. Short chapters with alternating points of view, similar to a James Patterson novel, keeps the pacing of the compelling plot moving along. The locale is quite foreign to me and the topic of internet scams is fascinating. Characters are complex creations with almost none of them truly and totally evil. It is a unique novel, an exciting novel and a totally compelling read. In my mind, this is the Edgar Best Novel winner.

### THE DISTANT DEAD

by Heather Young  
Morrow, \$27.99

**Rating: A**

In a small Nevada town, the burnt body of a local math teacher, Adam Merkel, is discovered by one of his sixth-grade students, Sal Prentiss. Sal is a quiet and lonely boy who recently lost his mother to an apparent heart attack and now lives with his uncles on the Prentiss land where the body was discovered. Nora Wheaton, a social studies teacher at the same school as Adam, is stuck in this small town caring for her father who sleeps in a trailer outside their home. He is racked by guilt over the death of his son in an auto accident while he drove intoxicated. Nora looks into Adam's past in an effort to



discover some clues that may have led to someone killing him. Along the way she discovers some things about herself, her father and Sal that leads her to some degree of hope in the future.

This is a remarkable and quite literary novel. It is beautifully written with realistic and sharply drawn characters. The depiction of the locale appears to be vivid enough for the reader to get a sense of the insular and claustrophobic small town life that exists there. The solution to the death is both clever and, in a sense, inevitable. It is a compelling read, not just because of the plot, but, also the sympathetic characters that inhabit the book. This is a very worthwhile contender for the Edgar Award best novel and one of the best books of last year. Highly recommended.

#### **THESE WOMEN**

by Ivy Pochoda

Ecco, \$27.99

**Rating: B**

In West Adams, a seedy area of South Los Angeles, prostitutes are being killed. There is, apparently, a serial killer amongst them. We get to know them and their stories. They all live a life on the edge, all into drugs and using sex as their means to some kind of an existence. It takes Essie, a vice cop, to begin to realize that a serial killer is on the loose. No other member of the police really seems to care.

Feelia survived a brutal attack including having her throat cut and a bag

placed over her head while left for dead in 1999. She sees a white woman following her for over fifteen years. The police think she is crazy. Essie pays attention and Essie will get results.

Sometimes there are books that you might admire but could really not recommend. This book is one of them. It is a very unpleasant read filled with odious characters that you would never want to spend time with. The author uses a technique where you get to know the character fairly well- then kills them. It is awful. I will admit the book is very well written and totally compelling. Characters are realistic and well thought out. There is a certain sense of realism in the situation, the locale and the dialogue. However, I really did not enjoy the read or getting to know these characters. It is skillfully written and, as such, is a worthy addition to the Edgar shortlist. I would just point the reader elsewhere.

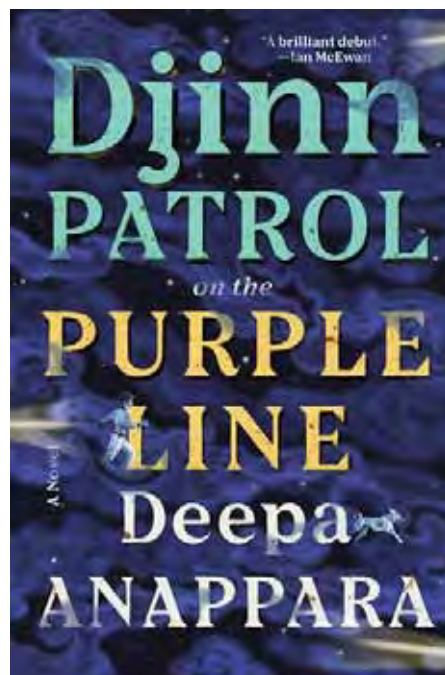
#### **DJINN PATROL ON THE PURPLE LINE**

by Deepa Anappara

Random House, \$27.00

**Rating: B**

In a crowded smoggy city in India, children are disappearing. Nine-year-old Jai has lost two classmates in the span of a few days. The police are not doing anything so Jai and his friend,



Pari, decide to become detectives and solve the disappearances. They plunge into the local bazaar in an effort to discover clues not heeding the danger they are in. Eventually the disappearances hit much closer to home and the stakes rise considerably. The question always remains- where are the missing children?

One of the great difficulties a writer must experience if writing first person as a nine-year-old child, is to accurately depict the thoughts that that child would have. They are the thoughts of a child- not an adult. In my opinion, the author fails resoundingly. The words, the situations, the reasoning is not at all that of a child. The dialogue is so very stilted- and I refer specifically to the dialogue with Guru in the city. It almost reads as a young adult novel. However, overlooking the obvious flaws, the plot is compelling and I managed to read most of the book in one day. This novel has been named on a few best of the year lists. I am not sure I agree but it is great for the pool or the plane. A mild recommendation.

#### **BEFORE SHE WAS HELEN**

by Caroline Cooney

Poisoned Pen Press, \$26.99

**Rating: C**

Clemmie, a resident of a South Carolina retirement community, checks in on her unpleasant neighbor, Dom, on a daily basis because he lives alone. One day, he is not there. As Clemmie explores, she comes upon a stunning sculpture and makes the mistake of photographing it and sending it to her nephew. The nephew inadvertently sends it onto a man who claims it was stolen from him. Next thing we know, Clemmie is in the middle of a drug dealer's search for money that was with the sculpture, putting her life in danger. She also lives as an alias to hide a secret past that she wants to stay away from. There is now a definite danger that the authorities will discover who she really is.

This is another silly book about septuagenarians. It is a bit darker than a simple 'seniors solving crimes' mystery but not enough to cause any real suspense. Characters are shallow and the plot is easily forgettable. The story

just never appears realistic enough to move me, the reader. This is another head scratcher of an Edgar nominee for Best Novel. To think of the many other books much more worthy of taking its place, is quite aggravating. I know the Edgar committee works hard and takes their job seriously, overall, but this is another blown call.

### THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB

by Richard Osman

Pamela Dorman Books, \$26.00

**Rating: C-**

In a small English village, four septuagenarians meet every Thursday to solve cold cases of the local police. Well, they have their hands full when a local real estate developer is killed in his own home- bludgeoned. They seem to have something over the local police department as one of the women has a history in some kind of law enforcement agency in her past. Others die, clues come in and the local police are unable to solve anything without the help of these four elderly nursing home residents. The excitement never ceases.

This is a very popular book written by a popular British television personality. Others have loved this book (including George). Obviously, the Edgar committee did, as well. This is a first novel but given that Richard Osman is not American, he cannot be eligible to win the debut category. I did not like this book at all. In fact, I would have stopped reading it after having read almost half of it. It is one of those books in which I would find something else to do- anything- rather than continue to read it. It is not at all to my taste. It is on the level of a quilting club mystery. But those books are relatively brief and most can be read in a single sitting. (Cat mysteries are actually superior and certainly more interesting.) This book is...so...freaking...long! I will also add that it is totally idiotic. Four septuagenarian nursing home residents solving crimes while marginalizing the local police? I simply cannot get past that. The fact that this book is actually on the Edgar shortlist baffles my mind. I expected much more from this book given the great things I was hearing about it. That probably

added to my disappointment. This is one of the worst books I have read in the past year. It is an awful Edgar nominee, IMHO. To me, reading a book such as this is one of the hazards of agreeing to read a complete shortlist.

**My pick: THE MISSING AMERICAN** by Kwei Quartley

## Best First Novel by an American Author

At first glance, it appears to not be an impressive list at all. However, except for one dud, it is a very strong list -- including one of my favorite books of the year.

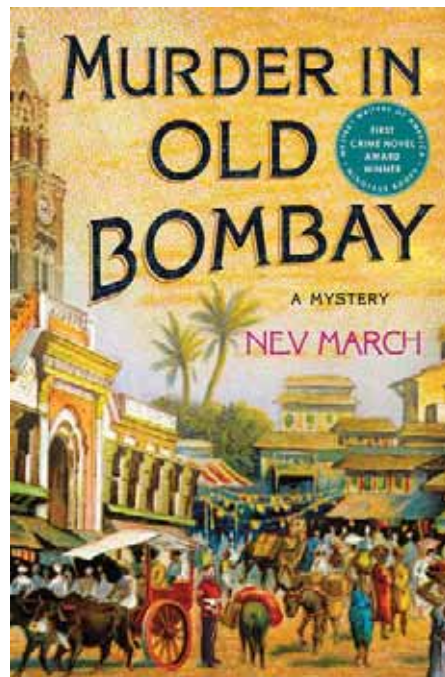
### MURDER IN OLD BOMBAY

by Nev March

Minotaur Books, \$26.99

**Rating: A**

In 1892 Bombay, two young women commit suicide by jumping off a tower at the university. The women are from the Framji family- a wealthy Parsee family. The Framjis feel justice is not served by the sham of a trial and the final analysis that it was suicide. Captain Jim Agnihotri has just been released from a local hospital after suffering wounds from a fight in Karachi. He has read in the newspapers about the dual suicides and is convinced it was murder when no witnesses come forward. He



approaches Adi Framji, the widower of one of the women, and is soon hired to look into the event. As Jim investigates, he is soon beaten and battered as someone wants to keep him from the truth. He also begins to fall in love with Diana, Adi's sister, knowing they could never marry for religious reasons. As Jim gets closer to the truth, he places himself and the Framji family increasingly in harm's way.

I dreaded reading this book among the Edgar shortlists. It is a very long novel and I assumed, with its horrific title, that I was facing another extremely long dull, dreary British style police procedural. I was very wrong. This ambitious novel is so much more than a simple investigation of a baffling crime. It is an epic adventure novel and moves around the country highlighting the history of India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jim adores Arthur Conan Doyle and there is much Holmesian references. The book is part mystery, part historical novel, part thriller and part romance. It all blends together into a totally compelling novel reminiscent of thrillers of the past. (The author states she was influenced by Rudyard Kipling's KIM). Characters are overall well developed and sympathetic creations but the villain, Akbar, is a cardboard cutout. There is so much to this novel that it leads me to think that with adventure novels- they just don't write them like this anymore. Very well done and easily the best debut novel of the year.

**PLEASE SEE US**

by Caitlin Mullen  
Gallery Books \$26.99

**Rating: B+**

Atlantic City, bleak, rundown and devoid of tourists, is the home of several young women looking for a new start in life. There is Clara, a sixteen year old psychic who lives with her Aunt Des on the boardwalk, helping to run a psychic reading shop and to help out with various cons her Aunt develops. Clara longs to travel to California to meet her mother again and start a new life. Lily has come home after a romantic betrayal from her artist boyfriend in New York City where she ran a Soho art gallery

with some success. She longs to start out again, on her own, after spending this summer, with her mother, in Atlantic City. There is also a serial killer on the loose who is collecting young women and placing them in the swamplands outside the city. It is no surprise that eventually all these characters will meet just prior to a resolution.

Atlantic City is portrayed as a city of lost souls- crumbling and dangerous. There is so much good in this remarkable debut novel. There are rich characterizations of the main characters but minor characters are sketchy and come off as caricatures. The dialogue is reasonably realistic and the setting is so very vivid that it emanates hopelessness. However, the reader must buy into the psychic visions that Clara has which does play an intricate role in the plot. In my mind, the visions give away too much to bear any realism. Also, there are too many coincidences in the plot and a very unrealistic thread on how Lily discovers the artist of the paintings she admires. There is enough good in the book to earn my own admiration and I consider it a very worthy contender for the Edgar Award Best First Novel. Highly recommended

### **DARLING ROSE GOLD**

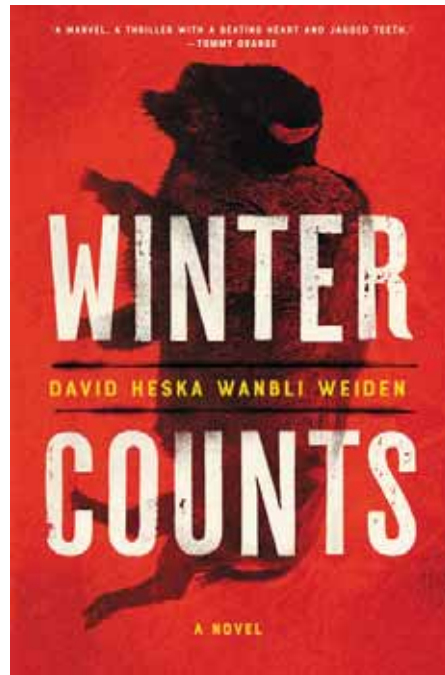
by Stephanie Wrobel  
Berkley, \$26.00

**Rating: B+**

Patty Watts is getting out of prison after her incarceration of five years. Her daughter, Rose Gold, is coming to pick her up. It seems that Patty has been convicted of starving her daughter, keeping her in a wheelchair and incessantly visiting physicians. In fact, it was Rose Gold's testimony in court that put her mother away. Now, with nowhere to go, Patty begs her daughter to let her live with her, at least temporarily. Rose Gold agrees but in this new relationship, there is much more than meets the eye. Someone is going down!

These are two of the most odious characters I have come across in quite some time. Both are psychopaths and make for a perfect pair of totally unreliable narrators. Their interplay, as they subtly battle, is fun to watch. The suspense of the book centers on exactly what

do each of them have in store for the other. Rose Gold is not the helpless little girl she was when her mother got put away. The twist at the end will surprise the reader and make reading the book very worthwhile. Highly recommended due to the character studies and the uniqueness of the plot.



### **WINTER COUNTS**

by David Heska Wanbli Weiden  
Ecco, \$27.99

**Rating: B**

Virgil Wounded Horse is a local enforcer for an Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He is hired to physically assault a local tribesman for bringing hard drugs into the reservation and selling them to local kids. When his nephew, Nathan, almost overdoses on heroin, the stakes are considerably raised as the job becomes much more personal. Virgil must confront his past, as well as, his current situation as a Native American with all the trials and tribulations it brings. As Virgil gets closer to the truth about the drugs, things get increasingly dangerous and deadly.

There is a lot that is good in this debut novel. The author succeeds in conveying to the reader the problems Native Americans must endure. Their lives seem bleak and so many of them have lost hope in their future while resorting to alcohol and drugs as a means of

escape. The story is compelling and the characters display a richness not often seen in a first novel. However, as the story reaches its climax, the book changes from an intelligent regional mystery to a run of the mill thriller with all the stock features such as the hero held at gunpoint while the villain divulges all. Reality must be suspended multiple times for the final gunfights. Exciting- but nothing new or unusual. For that reason, the book loses its excellent rating but is still a worthwhile and recommended read.

### **CATHERINE HOUSE**

by Elizabeth Thomas  
Custom House, \$27.99

**Rating: D**

Catherine House is a school of higher learning. Tuition is free and the admission process is grueling. Once school begins, there will be no contact with the outside world whatsoever- including family or friends. Ines has no outside life and nowhere else to go so she accepts the admission offer and finds herself living in an isolated old mansion with her roommate, Baby. She initially decides not to study, fails and begins to have a change of heart while imprisoned in the tower. She becomes a better student. Things turn a bit more sinister when Baby is imprisoned and they are told she is dead.

The book is awful. Several times while reading it, I looked it up on the Edgar shortlist to make sure I was reading the correct book. **It is Not crime fiction!** Science fiction- maybe. There is something called a plasma pin which causes some sort of hallucinations. Who know? Who cares! It almost reads as a YA novel.

I would never have considered reading this book if the Edgar judges didn't (mistakenly- IMHO) consider it worthy of inclusion on the shortlist. This is the second worst book I have read in the last year. Please avoid and shame on the Edgar committee.

**My prediction:** If it was my pick, I would go with **MURDER IN OLD BOMBAY**. However, given this time of diversity, I will go with **WINTER COUNTS**.

# The Edgar Award Winners 2021

## Best Novel

**DJINN PATROL ON THE PURPLE LINE** by Deepa Anappara – Winner

BEFORE SHE WAS HELEN by Caroline B. Cooney

THURSDAY MURDER CLUB by Richard Osman

THESE WOMEN by Ivy Pochoda

THE MISSING AMERICAN by Kwei Quartey

THE DISTANT DEAD by Heather Young

## Best First Novel by An American Author

**PLEASE SEE US** by Caitlin Mullen – Winner

MURDER IN OLD BOMBAY by Nev March

CATHERINE HOUSE by Elisabeth Thomas

WINTER COUNTS by David Heska Wanbli Weiden

DARLING ROSE GOLD by Stephanie Wrobel

## Best Paperback Original

**WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING** by Alyssa Cole – Winner

THE DEEP, DEEP SNOW by Brian Freeman

UNSPEAKABLE THINGS by Jess Lourey

THE KEEPER by Jessica Moor

EAST OF HOUNSLOW by Khurram Rahman

## The Simon & Schuster Mary Higgins Clark Award

**THE CABINETS OF BARNABY MAYNE** by Elsa Hart – Winner

DEATH OF AN AMERICAN BEAUTY by Mariah Fredericks

THE LUCKY ONE by Lori Rader-Day

THE FIRST TO LIE by Hank Phillippi Ryan

COLD WIND by Paige Shelton

## The G. P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award

**VERA KELLY IS NOT A MYSTERY** by Rosalie Knecht – Winner

THE BURN by Kathleen Kent

RIVIERA GOLD by Laurie R. King

DEAD LAND by Sara Paretsky

THE SLEEPING NYMPH by Ilaria Tuti



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Fan Guest of Honor: Ali Karim



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For Info: [bloodonthebayou@bouchercon2021.com](mailto:bloodonthebayou@bouchercon2021.com)



# The Barry Award Nominations 2021

The winners of these awards will be announced at the Opening Ceremonies at the New Orleans Bouchercon on **August 26, 2021**.

All readers of Deadly Pleasures are qualified to vote. Please submit votes to [george@deadlypleasures.com](mailto:george@deadlypleasures.com) by **July 15, 2021**.

Many, many thanks to our nominating committee members who put a lot of time (reading and evaluating) and then nominating.

## Best Novel

THE BOY FROM THE WOODS, Harlan Coben (Grand Central)  
THE LAW OF INNOCENCE, Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)  
BLACKTOP WASTELAND, S. A. Cosby (Flatiron Books)  
AND NOW SHE'S GONE, Rachel Howzell Hall (Forge)  
MOONFLOWER MURDERS, Anthony Horowitz (Harper)  
ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE, Louise Penny (Minotaur)

## Best First Novel

DEEP STATE, Chris Hauty (Atria/Emily Bester)  
MURDER IN OLD BOMBAY by Nev March (Minotaur)  
THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB, Richard Osman (Viking/Pamela Dorman)  
THE EIGHTH DETECTIVE, Alex Pavesi (Henry Holt)  
WINTER COUNTS, David Heska Wanbli Weiden (Ecco)  
DARLING ROSE GOLD, Stephanie Wrobel (Berkley)

## Best Paperback Original

WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING, Alyssa Cole (Morrow)  
MONGKOK STATION, Jake Needham (HP)  
HIDE AWAY, Jason Pinter (Thomas & Mercer)  
BAD NEWS TRAVELS FAST, James Swain (Thomas & Mercer)  
DARKNESS FOR LIGHT, Emma Viskic (Pushkin Vertigo)  
TURN TO STONE, James W. Ziskin (Seventh Street Books)

## Best Thriller

DOUBLE AGENT, Tom Bradby (Atlantic Monthly)  
BLIND VIGIL, Matt Coyle (Oceanview)  
ONE MINUTE OUT, Mark Greaney (Berkley)  
THE LAST HUNT, Deon Meyer (Atlantic Monthly)  
EDDIE'S BOY, Thomas Perry (Mysterious Press)  
THE WILD ONE, Nick Petrie (Putnam)

## Editor's Message



### This Year's Bouchercon is a Go!

Tired of virtual mystery conventions? Then do what I'm doing and sign up for this year's Bouchercon in New Orleans (August 24-29, 2021). I've gotten my shots and feel safe to travel. As more and more of us become vaccinated, I'm sure the number of attendees will balloon. Right now there are about 800 people signed up, of which 300+ are authors.

The 2016 Bouchercon was also held in New Orleans and was just about the best Bouchercon I ever attended. The same people are putting on this one, so it should be lots and lots of fun.

I'm most looking forward to getting together with Ali Karim, this year's Fan Guest of Honor, whom I haven't seen in person since 2016. Here's hoping that any travel restriction between the U.K. and the U.S. will be lifted by August, 2021. Same goes for Jeff Popple and his new bride who plan to come from Australia.

**Confusing Email Addresses.** I use two e-mail addresses. Both are safe to open. My main one is [george@deadly-pleasures.com](mailto:george@deadly-pleasures.com) but since switching servers a couple of years ago, I've had difficulty with aol email addresses in particular. I can receive them, but if I reply or send a new email to an aol address it bounces back. I've tried to figure out how to solve this problem and neither my computer guy nor I have come up with a solution. If someone knows a fix, please send it to me.

So when I send out the links to each new issue I send them from my gmail address: [george.easter45@gmail.com](mailto:george.easter45@gmail.com). That ensures that everyone will get the link if their email address is still current. **It is important to send me any change in your email address.** It is now the only way to communicate with you and if the email address I have for you no longer works, I have to wait to hear from you before I can get your subscription going again.

**New Regular Column – Introducing...** I started this column in *DP* Issue #89 with Introducing...Max Tomlinson – an author published by Oceanview Publishing with whom I was really impressed. My intent was to introduce you to an new author or a new series by a veteran writer that not many of you may be acquainted with. If you are a dedicated reader of *Deadly Pleasures* you will know by now that we try to shine a light on not just the most popular writers and their works, but other lesser-known, talented writers who may be underappreciated or overlooked.

So I've been on the lookout for short series (so far) by new writers or ones that you may not have noticed. In this issue the Introducing... column will shine a spotlight on female thriller writer Steph Broadribb. Future columns will treat the works of writers such as Andrew Mayne (his Florida Underwater Investigative series), Lee Goldberg (his Eve Ronin series), and John Galligan (his Bad Axe Wisconsin series) – all male writers who have female lead protagonists. I just noticed this so don't try to figure out why I was attracted to these series. It has nothing to do with the male/female thing.

This is requiring a lot of extra reading on my part so we'll see if I can keep this up for each issue. Please send feedback if you read any of the series I write about and let me know if my recommendation was valid.

**Great Online Author Interviews.** The pandemic shutdown has caused us to find our entertainment within the walls of our home. Many, like me, have turned to books and I'm grateful to have this obsession with reading to pass what would otherwise be boring hours of time. Others turn to the internet or to TV streaming. I've done a bit of that as well, but keep going back to books at the end of the day. The three best sites for excellent author interviews that I've found are:

**Thriller Talk** by Kim Howe and Ryan

Steck which is found on youtube.com. Just enter "Thriller Talk" into the search box on YouTube. The authors interviewed so far are Dean Koontz, C. J. Box, S. A. Cosby, Peter James, Rachel Howzell Hall, Lisa Jewell, Lisa Gardner, Brad Taylor, Mark Greaney, Chris Hauty, Steve Berry, Joel Rosenberg, Don Bentley, J. T. Ellison, and Jack Carr

**The Crew Reviews** (<http://thecrewreviews.com/index.php/podcasts/>) also concentrates on thriller writers, but I recently watched interviews with C. J. Box and Michael Connelly, whom I don't consider thriller writers. I know these authors pretty well but was surprised to learn a lot I didn't know about them.

**The Red Hot Chilli Writers** (<https://www.redhotchilliwriters.com>) is a podcast hosted by two of my favorite writers, Abir Mukherjee and Vaseem Khan. They are sometimes joined by another favorite writer of mine Amit Dhand (who publishes under the name of A. A. Dhand), as well as Ayisha Malik, Imran Mahmood and Alex Khan. The banter between Abir and Vaseem is lively, humorous and informative.

With all three of these sites, the interviewers come well prepared and ask intelligent and probing questions.

**A Sad Note.** My older sister Charlotte (my only sibling) recently passed away at the age of 80. The first couple of weeks after her passing were pretty tough on me, but I'm getting adjusted now. She never married and since I'm her only heir, it has fallen on my shoulders to wrap up her estate which includes cleaning out her house and putting it up for sale. My family hopes to accomplish this in a 2-3 month time period. But this task is taking up most of my time and has affected the publication schedule for this magazine, which you will notice did not meet the exact three month target of April 21, 2021. I hope you understand. I have a lot of help from my *DP* contributors in getting the material that goes into this magazine, but it is solely up to me to lay it out and get it to the finish line. Sometimes "life" or in this case "death" interferes. Postscript: Charlotte was an avid mystery fan and read each issue of *Deadly Pleasures* from cover to cover.

## Assistant Editor's Message



It seems like recently I have been reading a lot of redneck mystery novels. These are books written about characters at the lowest end of society. It's okay occasionally but I have been reading these books seemingly one after the other. So many of them are considered the best of the year and they are excellent. This led me to note that it is interesting that British mysteries set in the country are in idyllic villages with greenery and hedges. These are pleasant places to visit. In the United States, the setting is in rundown trailer parks or horribly maintained homes in the middle of nowhere. These are locales and setting I am okay reading about but do not want to go anywhere near.

There must be a certain sense of insularity in judging the Edgar Awards. Omitting a book such as **BLACKTOP WASTELAND** and including other books not nearly as universally regarded might reflect taste or simply not paying attention to what books respected reviewers are praising. When I judged the Thriller Award, I made sure I was aware of what books were being touted as excellent. I made sure those books were submitted for the award so the shortlist would truly reflect the best of the year and not what simply appealed to our personal tastes. This is always an issue for the Edgar Awards. Yet, they do manage to include some of the books considered the year's best.

Marilyn Stasio finally retired from the *New York Times Book Review*! I have never hid the fact that I am not a fan. They were cryptic columns and it was never clear which books she liked or disliked. We had to search for a telltale adjective such as 'charming' or 'engaging' to determine her opinion. I found her column a waste of space and her selection of books bewildering. Her column was taken over by a previous *DP* reviewer, Sarah Weinman, who I consider to be one of the most insightful

writers and reviewers today. She is an inspired choice and her columns are incredibly well written. She also makes it clear what books she likes and why. I am glad for her getting the opportunity.

I attended a reviewer's panel a couple



Sarah Weinman

of years ago at Thillerfest. According to the panelists, none of them would write a negative review. I have often said it is a disservice to the readers to not let them know what we think- good or bad. We are not working for the publishers or the authors. Once a book is published, it is a commodity. As reviewers we owe it to the readers to give them our opinion- even if we put a book down and never finish it. I have recently started **THE SURVIVORS** by Jane Harper. I made it about a third of the way through and did not find it remotely interesting and I stopped reading it- giving it the dreaded DNF rating (did not finish). This information can be useful to the readers. It can also lead to some awkward moments at Bouchercon!

I was recently in Houston and decided to visit the mystery bookstore there. Now please understand- this store is a destination location. There are no nearby pedestrian walkways or coffee shops. There is no reason to be in the neighborhood except to visit the bookstore. My understanding is that independent

bookstores have been struggling and we should do what we can to support them. With this in mind, I drove out of my way and went to the bookstore. I had a specific book in mind which I wanted to buy. I walked into the shop and there was a man at the register doing paperwork. Next to him stood an elderly woman opening small boxes. They never once looked up when I entered the store or said a word to me. I walked over to a rack filled with the book I wanted to purchase. I picked up a copy and went to the register to pay. The gentleman took my credit card and asked if I wanted a bag. That would have been the extent of any interaction in the store if I didn't mention how many copies of the book they had. He told me it was the month's selection of the new bookclub they started. I walked out thinking to myself, 'Why did I come here? I don't feel like anybody gave a damn about me.' Now, I paid \$31.00 for this book in the store. I could have ordered it from Amazon for \$16.40 or the Kindle for \$14.00. I wanted to support the store so I went out of my way to purchase it from them. I get as much attention walking into Barnes and Noble and, incidentally, would have gotten thirty percent off.

Independent bookstores, in order to succeed must at the bare minimum, make the customer feel valued. A friendly greeting such as, "Welcome in. If you have any questions or need any help, just ask. If you want some suggestions, that's what I am here for." This might have led to a friendly discussion and it would have been probable that they would have sold me a couple of more books. I would also walk out feeling good about my purchase and anxious to return next time I am in town. Instead, I felt like an intruder. I have visited the Mysterious Bookshop in NYC and the customer is always greeted by someone sitting at the front desk with another person at a desk further in the store willing and able to help. The customer leaves feeling appreciated. For these bookshops to survive, that should be the priority. As far as the mystery bookstore in Houston, I would not waste my time going back there. I just don't get it!

# He Ran For The Gold

by George H. Madison

Richard Sale was born in New York City on 17 December 1911, a fourth generation New Yorker. He died in Los Angeles, California on 3 March 1993, having successfully transitioned from a sophisticated New Yorker to one of Hollywood's highest valued, elite, hired guns. He's best remembered as a Tinsel town screenwriter; however, as a writer of mysteries his sobriquet was "The Dumas of the Pulp". It is estimated that Sale wrote 1,000,000 words a year and 500 stories in a ten year period (1930s).



Sale was born to be a writer and sold his first short story when only twelve years old. It's said that he couldn't pass a typewriter without producing a story. He was educated at Washington & Lee University (1930-1933) and became a newspaper man in New York City. Sale served in the U.S. Navy during WWII

as a correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Pulps were enormously popular during the 1930's; predating pocket books. For reasons that escape me, each seemingly featured a hardboiled newspaperman. Sale drew upon his first hand experiences and contributed Joe "Daffy" Dill. His stories represent writing of unusually high quality. Harold Q. Masur, creator of the Scott Jordan series, was one of his great admirers.

In 1936, he wrote **NOT TOO NARROW, NOT TOO DEEP**. It was purchased by Hollywood and in 1940 was made into a hit movie, *Strange Cargo* starring Clark Gable and Joan Crawford. Not really a mystery, and escaping from the Devil's Island Penal Colony is definitely not to my taste. Nevertheless, its popularity placed the Hollywood stamp of approval on Sale's career and predicted his future.

By 1944, he was ready to follow a horde of other mystery book authors to Hollywood where writers were needed to script the many "B" mystery/detective movies that were being rapidly produced at a staggering and Homeric rate. The exodus was largely from the east coast and Tinsel town became a place where good writers were content to hide in plain sight while collecting substantial paychecks, a heretofore unknown luxury to almost all of them. Sale was a first rate product of his times, although much of his talent as a writer was squandered while pandering to the movie moguls.

Unlike most other gifted writers, Jonathan Latimer and Harry Kurnitz for



example, Sale was unique for achieving a trifecta as a screenwriter, director and producer, permitting him to lead the luxurious Hollywood lifestyle to which he aspired. He became an avid yachtsman and a hunting and fishing devotee. A dedicated hobbyist, he enjoyed electric trains and cameras, and proudly possessed a complete collection of Nick Carter paperback originals. His dalliances were many.

Sale developed an expertise in science and medicine that were essential ingredients in his mysteries. These elements provide them with a slightly macabre atmosphere and subset.

From 1944-1956, Sale labored for six different studios, turning his attention at the propitious moment from the big screen to the small screen (CBS-TV).



He wrote for the *FBI* and *Yancy Derriger* shows among others. Later, he became active in the production side, too. One of his wives, Mary Loos, was a collaborator on many Hollywood projects from 1946-1971. She was the niece of the famed writer, Anita Loos.

Sale's complete emersion in film-dom's subculture should not eradicate his accomplishments as a mystery writer. We should only bemoan the limited number of his books which may be characterized as possessing unusual wit, bizarre plots, intelligent dialogue, a sense of humor and pleasant banter between endearing characters. It isn't often that one is in the company of a homicide detective named Daniel Webster.

Arguably, his best and most famous mystery is *LAZARUS #7* (1942). It's a dandy tale of murder and suspense. Tropical disease expert, Dr. Stephen Mason, teams up with the aforementioned Daniel Webster in a medical setting. Mason desperately seeks to leave Hollywood and return to his position at the Rockefeller Institute, NYC, but murder and romance with a movie producer's secretary disrupts his planned departure. A looney doctor/scientist only adds to the mayhem.

By that time, Sale was familiar with Hollywood and exploits it in a carefully constructed plot. Nowhere is his innate cynicism better expressed than when the hero naively proclaims that you cannot get away with murder in America, to which a longtime Tinsel town resident replies: "In the U.S. you mean. But this is Hollywood".

*PASSING STRANGE* (1942) is the sequel to *LAZARUS #7* and is labeled "A novel of Birth & Burial" in which Sale is at his playful best. Dr. Peter Merritt becomes involved in a complex medical based murder while in California. When he returns to NYC, he promptly becomes a target for bad guys who seek to make him a member of the "Better Dead Club". Folks die before the Doc and Det. Daniel Webster bring the adventure to a satisfying conclusion.

*DEATH AT SEA* (1940), aka *DESTINATION UNKNOWN*, involves the inadvertent adventures of ichthyologist (think fish) Gabriel Adams. Strange do-



ings aboard a ship. Duplicitous dames and murder follow our accidental hero.

*HOME IS THE HANGMAN* (1943), aka *SAILOR, TAKE WARNING*, involves macabre murder in the West Indies. Mike Heyward arrives in Haiti to find murder, adventure and romance awaiting him in a meteorological station during a hurricane. A simple and direct WWII adventure mystery.



*LADY AT MIDNIGHT*, aka *MURDER AT MIDNIGHT* (1945) finds Harvard grad and news commentator, Pete

Wiggins, and his wife in a complex tale of murder and intrigue involving their adoptive daughter. Who was that lady in the dark? The Wiggins family calls upon ex-cop Al Garrity to help solve the puzzle.

The three aforementioned titles are but samples of Sale's pulp-like work in book form.

*BENEFIT PERFORMANCE* (1946) is a clever and enjoyable nostalgic trip back to the pulps. At least it appears that way to me. Having just completed a movie, film star Kerry Garth hires a stand-in to take his place at a movie premier so that he may vanish from public view and rest. Chaos arises when the stand-in is murdered. Who was the intended victim? Why? It moves quickly.

*THE OSCAR* (1963) is his infamous and trashy book made into a worse movie in 1966. It was a critical and box office disaster. The legendary New York Times reviewer, Bosley Crowther, remarked: "Another distressing example of Hollywood fouling its nest....it doesn't need enemies as long as it has itself".

*FOR THE PRESIDENT'S EYES ONLY* (1971) is a radical departure and represents Sale's attempt to capitalize on the James Bond craze. Surprisingly, it's quite good and had unrealized screen potential.

The first draft was the last draft. Speed and production were the aim. Despite these less than lofty goals, Sale's talent managed to occasionally surface in his few mystery books. As Spencer Tracy say about Katherine Hepburn in the classic film, *Pat and Mike* (1952), "Not much meat on her, but what's there is cherce."



## *It's About Crime* Marv Lachman



### The Short Stop

Time has a way of creeping up on you, and I just realized that this is the 50th year I've prepared lists of my favorite short stories each year for this column and its predecessors.

2020 was a better year than some for the mystery short story. I read over 200 stories and came up with a list of ten that I thought were the best. It was when I tried to pick my one favorite story that I ran into trouble. The ten stories were so close in quality that it was difficult to choose. I finally picked Wayne J. Gardiner's story, listed below.

#### Lachman's Favorites:

**Liza Cody** -- "My People"  
(EQMM Nov./Dec. 2020)

**David Dean** -- "The Scourging of Jim Blake"  
(EQMM July/Aug. 2020)

**Wayne J. Gardiner** -- "Strictly Business"  
(AHMM July/Aug. 2020)

**Barb Goffman** -- "Eat, Drink, and Be Murdered"  
(AHMM Nov./Dec. 2020)

**Steve Hockensmith** -- "The Death and Carnage Boy"  
(EQMM July/Aug. 2020)

**Jane Jakeman** -- "The Oxford Ghosts"  
(EQMM Sept./Oct. 2020)

**Margaret Maron** -- "By a Hair"  
(EQMM Jan./Feb. 2020)

**Jane Pendjiky** -- "Fruiting Bodies"  
(AHMM Sept./Oct. 2020)

**Peter Turnbull** -- "The Banks of the Ouse"  
(EQMM Jan./Feb. 2020)

**Stacy Woodson** -- "Mary Poppins Didn't Have Tattoos"  
(EQMM July/Aug. 2020)

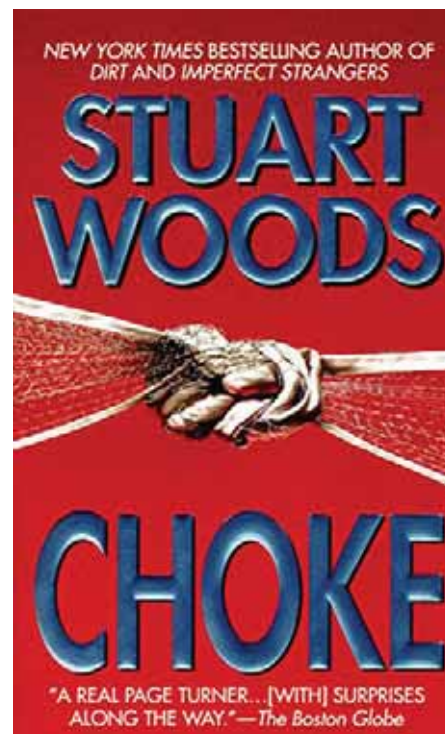
### Notes on Novels

### Recently Read

Based on past reading, I am not a fan of bestselling Stuart Woods. However, the combination of tennis (a sport I played for seventy years) and mystery led me to read his **CHOKES** (1995).

Although it starts in the fifth set of the Men's Final at Wimbledon, tennis turned out to play a negligible part of this book. Many writers, in acknowledging help from others, often take the blame for errors. Woods, after thanking Victor Mulcahy for his help, amusingly says, "If I got any of the tennis stuff wrong, it's his fault." Whoever is to blame, there is a serious tennis error on page 4 of the hardcover edition, though it doesn't impact on the book.

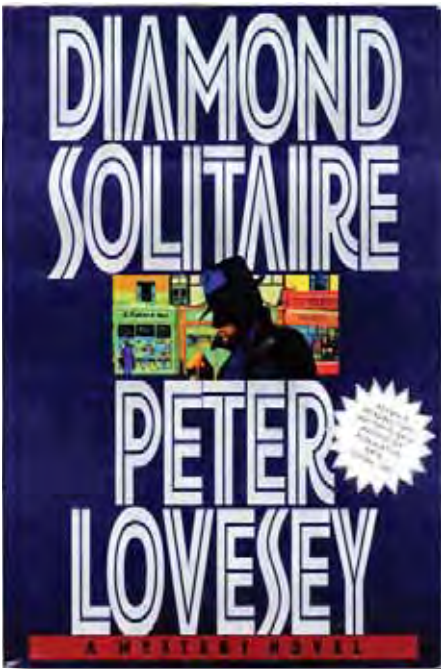
The main protagonist in Woods'



book is former tennis pro Chuck Chandler, reduced to giving lessons at a small club in Florida. Chuck becomes involved with some wealthy newcomers to the club who may be connected to gangsters and millions of dollars that was stolen from the mob. The writing is nothing special, with overreliance on sex scenes and foul language. However, Woods describes Key West very well, and he does include exciting car and boat chases at the end.

"Escape" is what we usually look for in our mystery reading, and too many current books don't provide it. Their interest is in providing realism, causing them to bring in many of the current problems of the world. (I fear that within the next year or so the Corona Virus pandemic will appear as plot device for many mysteries.) If you want true escape, go back in time to Victor L. Whitechurch's **MURDER AT THE PAGEANT** (1930), reprinted by Dover in 1987. We have a wealthy English home with murder occurring after an opulent pageant. There is a dying message, and more detectives than suspects to puzzle it out. Clues abound, but they aren't always useful for the reader to solve Canon Whitechurch's (he was an Anglican churchman) complicated puzzle. Never mind. The atmosphere and language of the people ninety years ago is so different from today that it will provide you with "escape." For example, because there is no police car in the local village, when a suspect has to be taken into custody, the police call a taxi.

Peter Lovesey started off as a writer of historical mysteries. (More about that later.) In **THE LAST DETECTIVE** (1991) he created Inspector Peter Diamond, a modern police detective who has proven to be Lovesey's most popular creation. The book was one of the most critically praised of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its sequel, **DIAMOND SOLITAIRE** (1992), is another fast-moving book. Diamond, never politically correct, has left the Bath police. In the book's surprising opening, Diamond, now a nightwatchman, finds an autistic child spending the night on a sofa in Harrod's department store! Though he eventually gets a financial



supporter, he generously helps the child, who has played a role in a murder, in this case that takes him to the United States and Japan.

The book is more a thriller than a detective story and contains many disparate elements, including autism, sumo wrestling, pharmaceuticals, and the Stock Market, plus the third chapter which has some of the best erotic writing I've read in a mystery. Lovesey does a good job of bringing it all together, even depicting New York City in what would qualify as good American regional writing. There are some drawings as clues that require deduction, but I suspect readers will have difficulty in figuring them out; I did. A convenient confession wraps up this most enjoyable book.

Peter Lovesey's first novel, **WOBBLE TO DEATH** (1970) celebrated its fiftieth "birthday" in 2020, and the author's current publisher, Soho Crime, has brought out a 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collector's Edition, giving me the opportunity to do something I seldom have time for: rereading a book. It's the best sports mystery I ever read, this side of Dick Francis. Set in 1879 the subject is the "Wobble," a sport that was popular in the 19th century. It can be described as a fast-walking race over considerable distances. The sport, new to me in 1970, is fascinating to read about and is

matched by the people Lovesey created: gamblers, promoters, spectators, trainers, journalists, and walkers, or as they are called, "pedestrians," at least one of whom will be murdered. This is the first appearance of Sgt. Cribb who went on to be Lovesey's series character in books and a television series. The relationship between Cribb and his cohort Constable Thackeray is interesting and complex throughout the series.

It's February first as I write this. Sheltered in New Mexico where it's 50 degrees and sunny while I read of the snow storms hitting the eastern U.S. Still, I'm not warm yet after reading Julia Spencer-Fleming's **THROUGH THE EVIL DAYS** (2013). In it a huge snow and ice storm hits New York State while all problems imaginable strike the characters in Millers Kill, NY. Clare Fergusson is pregnant, and she and Russ must decide whether she should have an abortion. Clare may lose her ministerial position because she slept with Russ before they married. Meanwhile, she may have contracted fetal alcohol syndrome, and she still suffers from PTSD from her service in Iraq. Russ may lose *his* job because the politicians are thinking of the ultimate in defunding: abolishing the local police force. Hadley Knox (she and Tommy Flynn have become characters of equal importance in the series) is harassed by her ex-husband and may lose her children. Meanwhile, there are meth dealers to provide considerable danger. Above all, there is that storm that lasts four days. Like all Spencer-Fleming



Julia Spencer-Fleming

books it is readable from page one. There is considerable suspense throughout, and even a fair play detection clue.

## Doom with a View

If, as many maintain, Film Noir is a separate category of mystery film, *The Killers* (1946) was a great example, including many of the characteristics generally associated with noir. It has a potential victim who is willing to accept whatever fate has in store for him. There is Ava Gardner as one of the best of noir femme fatales. And the movie is in black-and-white.

In 1964 *The Killers* was remade in



color, with the story simplified and many of the plot twists eliminated. Many bloody shootings were substituted. The killers are Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager, and they have far larger roles than did William Conrad and Charles McGraw in 1946. Though they are the killers, they are the ones who investigate why they received a contract on John Cassavetes, playing the part that Burt Lancaster originally had. There is too much auto racing (a boring sport to me) and too much sunshine, not helpful to noir atmosphere. Ronald Reagan is evil but bland in his acting as a crime boss. He was to learn how to act, I guess, since three years later he became governor of California, and we know what happened after that.

# T Introducing ... Steph Broadribb

*by George Easter*



I'm always on the lookout for good female action thriller writers because, frankly, there are too few of them and I feel a need to encourage and support the ones who have the guts to write and publish in this male-dominated field. My latest find is Steph Broadribb.

Steph Broadribb, a.k.a. Crime Thriller Girl, describes herself as follows: "I started out as a corporate suit by day and a crime fiction blogger – Crime Thriller Girl (hence the name of my blog) by night. Now I'm a thriller writer, writing as Steph Broadribb and Stephanie Marland. I'm an avid reader of all things crime thriller and I love to connect with people who share the same passion for books.

"Here's a little more about my writing selves...

"As **Steph Broadribb** I write the Lori Anderson action thriller series for Orenda Books. While researching the books I trained as a Bounty Hunter in California and travelled around the US scouting locations. My debut thriller – **DEEP DOWN DEAD** – was shortlisted for the ITW Best First Novel, the eDunnit eBook of the Year award, the Dead Good Reader Award for Fearless Female Character, and Dead Good Reader Award for Most Exceptional Debut. (She has written three more in the series.)

"As **Stephanie Marland** I write the Starke/Bell psychological police procedural series for Trapeze (Orion). This series draws on my own experience as a blogger and the research I did (when working at a university for my day job) into human behaviour in online groups. The first book – **MY LITTLE EYE** – came out in April 2018, with the second – **YOU DIE NEXT** – published

in ebook and paperback in April 2019.

"I was born in Birmingham and grew up in Buckinghamshire, and most of my working life has been spent between the UK and USA. I'm an alumni of the MA in Creative Writing (Crime Fiction) at City University London, and a member of the International Thriller Writers (ITW) and Sisters In Crime organisations. I currently live in Buckinghamshire surrounded by horses and trying to wrangle an unruly but adorable puppy!"

## The Bounty Hunter Lori Anderson Series

**Florida Bounty Hunter Lori Anderson** has the following back story as the series begins, as told in her own words,

"Ten years ago, JT'd been a reclusive bounty hunter and I'd been grieving the death of my best friend, who'd been shot in front of me by my good-for-nothing husband, Tommy. Tommy had evaded the cops and disappeared into the wind. JT had helped me find him. He'd taught me how to track a man and how to capture him. But when it came to me bringing him in, Tommy attacked me, and I emptied my gun into him. JT never understood why I didn't shoot to disable rather than to kill, just as he'd taught me. I couldn't explain why either. That night, as JT helped me bury Tommy's body, our romance died. The next day I packed my belongings in silence and drove out of JT's life. Four months later, when I realized I was pregnant, I made the decision never to tell him – he'd let me go and he'd never





once tried to make contact after the fact. He'd been the love of my life, but I'd gotten used to the idea that I'd never see him again. And it's stayed that way until earlier this year..."

The four novels in this series are really just chapters in one long story. Each starts right where the last left off – usually involving some sort of cliff-hanger ending.

**DEEP DOWN DEAD** (Orenda, Kindle, \$0.99, Trade Paperback \$14.95, 2016). Lori Anderson is as tough as they come, managing to keep her career as a fearless Florida bounty hunter separate from her role as single mother to nine-year-old Dakota, who suffers from leukaemia. But when the hospital bills start to rack up, she has no choice but to take her daughter along on a job that will make her a fast buck. And that's when things start to go wrong.

The fugitive she's assigned to haul back to court is none other than JT, Lori's former mentor and lover – the man who taught her everything she knows ... the man who also knows the secrets of her murky past. Not only is JT fighting a child exploitation racket operating out of one of Florida's biggest amusement parks, Winter Wonderland,

a place where 'bad things never happen,' but he's also mixed up with the powerful Miami Mob. With two fearsome foes on their tails, just three days to get JT back to Florida, and her daughter to protect, Lori has her work cut out for her.

**DEEP BLUE TROUBLE** (Orenda, Kindle, \$6.15, Trade Paperback, \$14.95, 2017). Single-mother Florida bounty hunter Lori Anderson's got an ocean of trouble on her hands. Her daughter Dakota is safe, but the little girl's cancer is threatening a comeback, and Lori needs JT – Dakota's daddy and the man who taught Lori everything – alive and kicking. Problem is, he's behind bars, and heading for death row.

Desperate to save him, Lori does a deal, taking on off-the-books job from shady FBI agent Alex Monroe. Bring back on-the-run felon, Gibson 'The Fish' Fletcher, and JT walks free. This is one job she's got to get right, or she'll lose everything...

**DEEP DIRTY TRUTH** (Orenda, Kindle, \$7.99, Trade Paperback, \$15.95, \$2018). Single-mother bounty-hunter Lori Anderson finally has her family back together, but her new-found happiness is shattered when she's snatched by the Miami Mob – and they want her

dead. Rather than a bullet, they offer her a job: find the Mob's 'numbers man' (North) who is in protective custody after being forced to turn federal witness against them. If Lori succeeds, they'll wipe the slate clean and the price on her head – and those of her family – will be removed. If she fails, they die.

With North due in court in 48 hours, Lori sets off across Florida, racing against the clock to find him and save her family. Only in this race the prize is more deadly – and the secret she shares with JT more dangerous – than she ever could have imagined.

**DEEP DARK NIGHT** (Orenda, Kindle, \$0.99, Trade Paperback, \$15.95, 2020). Working off the books for FBI Special Agent Alex Monroe, Florida bounty-hunter Lori Anderson and her partner, JT, head to Chicago. Their mission: to entrap the head of the Cabressa crime family. The bait: a priceless chess set that Cabressa is determined to add to his collection.

An exclusive high-stakes poker game is arranged in the penthouse suite of one of the city's tallest buildings, with Lori holding the cards in an agreed arrangement to hand over the pieces. But, as night falls and the game plays out, stakes rise and tempers flare.

When a power failure plunges the city into darkness, the building goes into lockdown. But this isn't an ordinary blackout, and the men around the poker table aren't all who they say they are. Hostages are taken, old scores resurface and the players start to die.

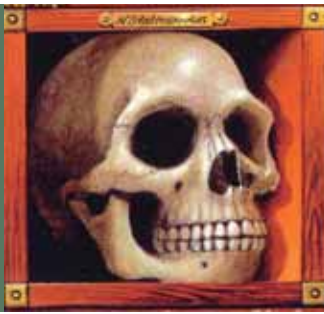
I give this exciting series an overall rating of A- because of the quality of the writing and the realistic action scenes. Steph Broadribb is adept at keeping the narrative progressing at a rapid pace. The character of Lori Anderson is as admirable as she is tough. She is my favorite kind of character – a clever survivor. However, Lori is not Stephanie Plum. These are much darker tales.

Kudos to Orenda for publishing this series as well as another favorite – the Emma Viskic /Caleb Zelic series.



# The DP List

## 2021



Titles listed garnered starred reviews in the four library journals (*Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist* and *Library Journal*) and a glowing review in *Deadly Pleasures* as indicated. These books are the best of the best for 2021.

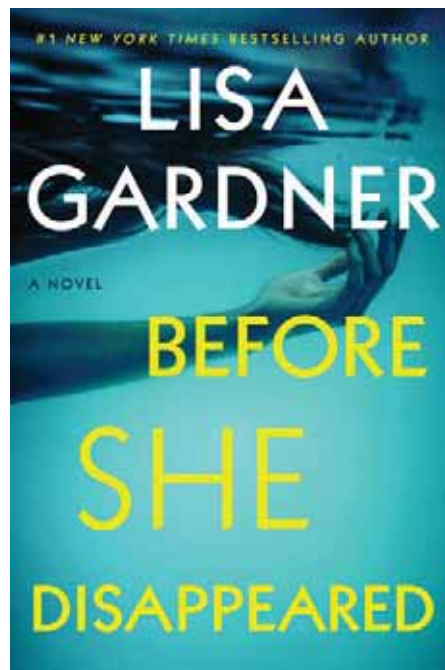
### Best Novels

**\*\*NORTHERN SPY** by Flynn Berry (Viking, \$26.00). A producer at the BBC and mother to a new baby, Tessa is at work in Belfast one day when the news of another raid comes on the air. The IRA may have gone underground in the two decades since the Good Friday Agreement, but they never really went away, and lately bomb threats, security checkpoints, and helicopters floating ominously over the city have become features of everyday life. As the news reporter requests the public's help in locating those responsible for the robbery, security footage reveals Tessa's sister, Marian, pulling a black ski mask over her face. The police believe Marian has joined the IRA, but Tessa is convinced she must have been abducted or coerced; the sisters have always opposed the violence enacted in the name of uniting Ireland. And besides, Marian is vacationing on the north coast. Tessa just spoke to her yesterday. When the truth about Marian comes to light, Tessa is faced with impossible choices that will test the limits of her ideals, the bonds of her family, her notions of right and wrong, and her identity as a sister and a mother. Walking an increasingly perilous road, she wants nothing more than to protect the one person she loves more fiercely than her sister: her infant son, Finn. **Kirkus**, **BL & DP**

**\*\*THE LAST THING TO BURN**

by Will Dean (Atria, \$27.00). On an isolated farm in the United Kingdom, a woman is trapped by the monster who kidnapped her seven years ago. When she discovers she is pregnant, she resolves to protect her child no matter the cost, and starts to meticulously plan her escape. But when another woman is brought into the fold on the farm, her plans go awry. Can she save herself, her child, and this innocent woman at the same time? Or is she doomed to spend the remainder of her life captive on this farm? **PW**

**\*\*BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED** by Lisa Gardner (Dutton, \$27.00). When Frankie Elkin, a recovering alcoholic on a mission to find missing people that the system has forgot, arrives in Mattapan, Boston and starts asking around about Angelique, a missing teenage girl, the locals and the detectives still on Angelique's floundering case are suspicious.



But if Frankie's hard knock life taught her anything, it's that if you keep asking questions, someone is going to crack. As her amateur investigation starts to take shape, people around Mattapan start paying attention. And before long Frankie's quest to find Angelique turns into more than she, or anyone else, bargained for. **BL & PW**

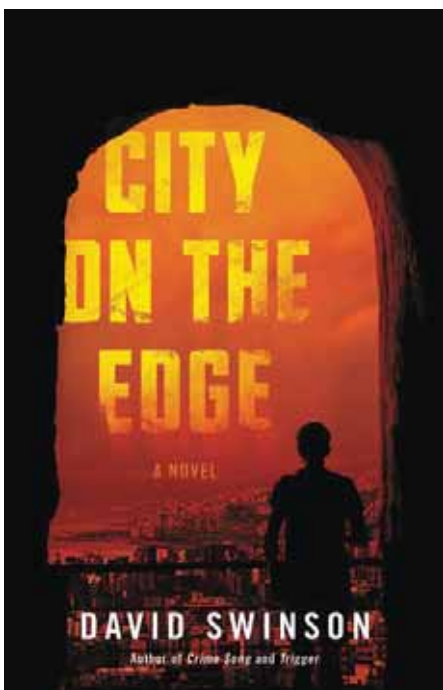
**\*\*THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS** by Elly Griffiths (Houghton, Mifflin, \$25.00). The death of a ninety-year-old woman with a heart condition should not be suspicious. Detective Sergeant Harbinder Kaur certainly sees nothing out of the ordinary when Peggy's caretaker, Natalka, begins to recount Peggy Smith's passing. But Natalka had a reason to be at the police station: while clearing out Peggy's flat, she noticed an unusual number of crime novels, all dedicated to Peggy. And each psychological thriller included a mysterious postscript: *PS: for PS*. When a gunman breaks into the flat to steal a book and its author is found dead shortly thereafter—Detective Kaur begins to think that perhaps there is no such thing as an unsuspecting death after all. **BL & DP**

**\*\*THE COMMITTED** by Viet Thanh Nguyen (GroveAtlantic, \$27.00). The Committed follows the Sympathizer as he arrives in Paris as a refugee. There he and his blood brother Bon try their hands to capitalism in one of its purest forms: drug dealing. The Sympathizer is both charmed and disturbed by Paris. As he falls in with a group of left-wing intellectuals and politicians who frequent dinner parties given by his French Vietnamese "aunt," he finds not just stimulation for his mind but also customers for his merchandise. But the new life he is making has dangers he has not foreseen, from the oppression of the state, to the self-torture of addiction, to the seemingly unresolvable paradox of how he can reunite his two closest friends, men whose worldviews put them in absolute opposition. **Kirkus & PW**

**\*\*THE ART OF VIOLENCE** by S. J. Rozan (Pegasus, \$25.95). Former

client Sam Tabor, just out of Greenhaven prison after a five-year homicide stint, comes to Bill Smith with a strange request. Sam is a colossally talented painter whose parole was orchestrated by art world movers and shakers, but Sam's is convinced that since he's been out he's killed two women. He doesn't remember the killings but he wants Smith, one of the few people he trusts, to investigate and prove him either innocent or guilty. **PW & BL**

**\*\*CITY ON THE EDGE** by David Swinson (Mulholland, \$28.00). In 1973, 12-year-old Graham Sanderson, the narrator of this outstanding thriller from Swinson (the Frank Marr PI series), moves with his family to Beirut, Lebanon, where his father, a Foreign Service officer, is posted to the U.S. embassy. For Graham, it's an opportunity to make two expat friends who will help him explore the delights and occasional risks of a new place and different culture. Observant and inquisitive, Graham soon becomes aware of the underlying sense of danger and imminent violence that hangs over the city, the result of forces he can't understand. When Graham discovers that his father carries a gun and holds clandestine late-night rendezvous with strangers, the boy suspects he may be working for the CIA. Events take



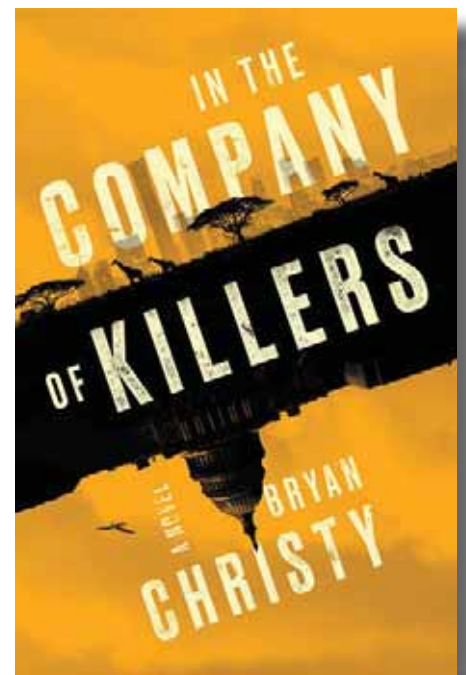
a darker turn after Graham secretly witnesses the murder of an Arab by a foreigner, possibly an American involved in illegal gunrunning. **PW**

**\*\*THE CONSEQUENCES OF FEAR** by Jacqueline Winspear (Harper; \$). October, 1941. Daily bombing raids have made it perilous to move about London, yet among the Londoners "doing their bit" to aid the war effort are fleet-footed boys who run messages for government offices while dodging debris and aerial raids. On one such errand, a young runner witnesses a murder destined to send shock waves through the secret war plans of British and Free French agents. It will take psychologist and investigator Maisie Dobbs to prove the truth of the frightened boy's story and unravel the geopolitical significance of the killing. **PW & BL**

**\*\*WE BEGIN AT THE END** by Chris Whitaker (Henry Holt, \$27.99). Duchess Day Radley is a thirteen-year-old self-proclaimed outlaw. Rules are for other people. She is the fierce protector of her five-year-old brother, Robin, and the parent to her mother, Star, a single mom incapable of taking care of herself, let alone her two kids. Walk has never left the coastal California town where he and Star grew up. He may have become the chief of police, but he's still trying to heal the old wound of having given the testimony that sent his best friend, Vincent King, to prison decades before. And he's in overdrive protecting Duchess and her brother. Now, thirty years later, Vincent is being released. And Duchess and Walk must face the trouble that comes with his return. **Kirkus & PW**

### Best First Novels

**\*\*IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS** by Bryant Christy (Putnam, \$27.00). Tom Klay is a celebrated investigative wildlife reporter for the esteemed magazine *The Sovereign*. But Klay is not just a journalist. His reporting is cover for an even more dangerous job: CIA agent. Klay's press credentials make him a perfect spy--able to travel

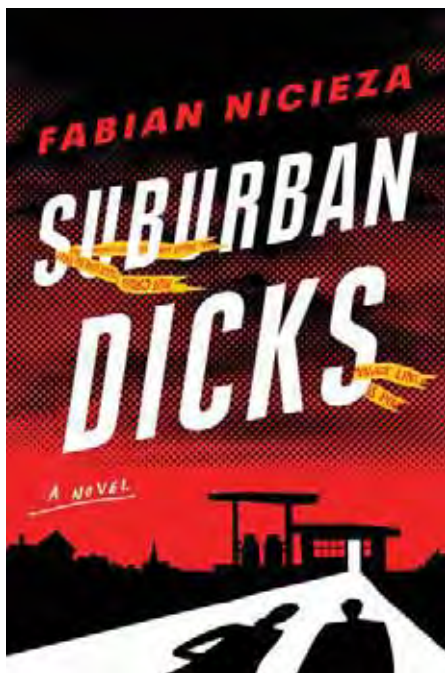


the globe, engage both politicians and warlords, and openly record what he sees. When he needs help, the Agency provides it to him, and asks little in return. But while on assignment in Kenya, Klay is attacked and his closest friend is murdered. Soon Klay's carefully constructed double life unravels as his ambition turns to revenge. **PW, Kirkus & BL**

**\*\*EVERY LAST FEAR** by Alex Finlay (Minotaur, \$26.99). After a late night of partying, NYU student Matt Pine returns to his dorm room to devastating news: nearly his entire family?his mom, his dad, his little brother and sister?have been found dead from an apparent gas leak while vacationing in Mexico. The local police claim it was an accident, but the FBI and State Department seem far less certain -- and they won't tell Matt why. The tragedy makes headlines everywhere because this isn't the first time the Pine family has been thrust into the media spotlight. Matt's older brother, Danny -- currently serving a life sentence for the murder of his teenage girlfriend Charlotte -- was the subject of a viral true crime documentary suggesting that Danny was wrongfully convicted. Though the country has rallied behind Danny, Matt holds a secret about his brother that he's never told anyone: the night Charlotte was killed Matt saw

something that makes him believe his brother is guilty of the crime. When Matt returns to his small hometown to bury his parents and siblings, he's faced with a hostile community that was vilainized by the documentary, a frenzied media, and memories he'd hoped to leave behind forever. Now, as the deaths in Mexico appear increasingly suspicious and connected to Danny's case, Matt must unearth the truth behind the crime that sent his brother to prison – putting his own life in peril and forcing him to confront his every last fear. **DP**

**\*\*SUBURBAN DICKS** by Fabian Nicieza (Putnam, \$27.00). Andie Stern thought she'd solved her final homicide. Once a budding FBI profiler, she gave up her career to raise her four (soon to be five) children in West Windsor, New Jersey. But one day, between soccer games, recitals, and trips to the local pool, a very pregnant Andie pulls into a gas station--and stumbles across a murder scene. An attendant has been killed, and the bumbling local cops are in way over their heads. Suddenly, Andie is obsessed with the case, and back on the trail of a killer, this time with kids in tow. She soon crosses paths with disgraced local journalist Kenneth Lee, who also has everything to prove in solving the case. A string of unusual occurrences--and, eventually, body parts--surface around



town, and Andie and Kenneth uncover simmering racial tensions and a decades-old conspiracy. **Kirkus, PW & DP**

## Best Thrillers

**\*\*2034: A Novel of the Next World War** by Elliot Akerman & James Stavridis (Penguin, \$27.00). On March 12, 2034, US Navy Commodore Sarah Hunt is on the bridge of her flagship, the guided missile destroyer USS John Paul Jones, conducting a routine freedom of navigation patrol in the South China Sea when her ship detects an unflagged trawler in clear distress, smoke billowing from its bridge. On that same day, US Marine aviator Major Chris "Wedge" Mitchell is flying an F35E Lightning over the Strait of Hormuz, testing a new stealth technology as he flirts with Iranian airspace. By the end of that day, Wedge will be an Iranian prisoner, and Sarah Hunt's destroyer will lie at the bottom of the sea, sunk by the Chinese Navy. Iran and China have clearly coordinated their moves, which involve the use of powerful new forms of cyber weaponry that render US ships and planes defenseless. In a single day, America's faith in its military's strategic pre-eminence is in tatters. A new, terrifying era is at hand. **Kirkus & BL**

**\*\*SLOUGH HOUSE** by Mick Herron (SohoCrime, \$27.95). At Slough House—MI5's London depository for demoted spies—Brexit has taken a toll. The "slow horses" have been pushed further into the cold, Slough House has been erased from official records, and its members are dying in unusual circumstances, at an unusual clip. No wonder Jackson Lamb's crew is feeling paranoid. But are they actually targets? With a new populist movement taking hold of London's streets and the old order ensuring that everything's for sale to the highest bidder, the world's a dangerous place for those deemed surplus. Jackson Lamb and the slow horses are in a fight for their lives. **BL & DP**

## Best Paperback Originals

**\*\*SEARCH FOR HER** by Rick Mofina (Mira, \$9.99). At a truck stop near Las Vegas, fourteen-year-old Riley Jarrett vanishes from her family's RV, turning their cross-country dream of starting over into a nightmare. Investigators have their work cut out for them. The massive, bustling truck plaza in the desert is the perfect place for someone to disappear—or be taken. Detectives pursue every chilling lead as all eyes fall to the newly blended family with a tragic past. With the clock ticking down on the likelihood that Riley's alive, suspicions run deep. Everyone—from Riley's mom to her stepdad to her stepbrother and her ex-boyfriend—has something to hide. **DP**



**\*\*STRANGER AT THE DOOR** by Jason Pinter (Thomas & Mercer, \$15.95). When Rachel Marin discovers an ominous email her son's teacher sent to her just before his murder, she knows she must help bring his killer to justice. But soon a figure from her past reappears, threatening to expose Rachel's darkest secrets if she doesn't tread lightly. And when her son is recruited by a shadowy businessman who may be connected to the murder, Rachel knows this has just gotten very, very personal. **PW, BL & DP**

# The Mason Collins Series

*Still Going Strong!*



Have you ever followed an enjoyable TV series only to find it suddenly cancelled – often with unresolved, underlying plot lines? Well, I occasionally have the same feeling of disappointment when a good writer (of a good series) suddenly finds himself or herself without a contract for further books in the series. Prime example: Taylor Stevens and her Vanessa “Michael” Monroe series.

Another author who found himself in that position was John A. Connell, who wrote two novels that were published in hardback by Berkley in 2015 and 2016 (**RUINS OF WAR** and **SPOILS OF VICTORY**). They were set in post-WWII Germany, which I found fascinating because my uncle Fred Taylor helped rehabilitate a German city during that period of time.

Both novels were well received and critically acclaimed and **RUINS OF WAR** was nominated for a Barry Best First Novel Award. I read and enjoyed both of them a lot. However, there was a major shakeup at Berkley and John’s contract was not renewed. What was John to do?

In John’s own words, “my agent refused to try to find another house to continue the series, even after I’d finished the third, **BONES OF THE INNOCENT**. Upon his urging, I tried a new, contemporary thriller series, a la’ Steve Berry, but finding a publisher for that one got to be an uphill battle. He urged me then to try a domestic thriller, but that’s not me.

“After a couple of years, I decided to go independent. In early 2019, I got the rights back to the first two in the series, **RUINS OF WAR** and **SPOILS OF VICTORY**, and self-published them with new titles and covers (Nailhead Publishing is my own imprint). I published **BONES**

**OF THE INNOCENT** shortly after, and then in early 2020 I published **TO KILL A DEVIL**. I then dusted off a stand-alone novel I’d written before the Mason novels, rewrote it and published that in May, 2020 as **GOOD NIGHT, SWEET DADDY-O**. And, now, I’m about to publish the fifth Mason Collins story, **WHERE THE WICKED TREAD**, on February 13, 2021.”

Imagine my surprise and delight when I recently discovered that John was still writing and publishing. He sent me (from France, where he lives!) hardback copies of **BONES OF THE INNOCENT**, **TO KILL A DEVIL** and **WHERE THE WICKED TREAD** to review. I enjoyed them so much that I decided to write an article about them as opposed to single reviews. I might mention here that the hardbacks he sent me are beautifully produced, with sturdy spines and fine paper – much better than the standard fare the American publishers put out. The cover art is stunning. All of his books are also available in Kindle and trade paperback editions.

## John A. Connell Bibliography

### Mason Collins’ Series

1. **RUINS OF WAR** (2015) re-titled **MADNESS IN THE RUINS**
2. **SPOILS OF VICTORY** (2016) re-titled **HAVEN OF VIPERS**
3. **BONES OF THE INNOCENT** (2019)
4. **TO KILL A DEVIL** (2020)
5. **WHERE THE WICKED TREAD** (2021)

**Stand-alone Novel**  
**GOOD NIGHT, SWEET DADDY-O**  
(2020)

## John A. Connell Biography

John A. Connell is a 2016 Barry Award nominee and the author of the Mason Collins series. He was born in Atlanta then grew up in Ohio, New York and Virginia before ending up in Atlanta again at the age of thirteen. He has a BA in Anthropology, and has been a jazz pianist, a stock boy in a brassiere factory, a machinist, repairer of newspaper racks, and a printing-press operator. He then moved to Los Angeles to work as a motion picture camera operator for film and TV, where he worked as a cameraman on films such as *Jurassic Park* and *Thelma and Louise* and on TV shows including *NYPD Blue* and *The Practice*. John and his wife spend their time between the U.S. and France.

## The Mason Collins Series

The five novels in the series (so far) are, in effect, just chapters in one long story. Each book begins shortly after the end of the prior one. There are a few continuing characters that pop up here and there to lend Mason a helping hand. Connell infuses each novel with many fascinating details of post-WWII Europe (and in one case, Tangier) that appear accurate to me. And since Mason is getting into one fix after another, there are any number of exciting action scenes to move the plot along. I read the last three novels one right after another

and had a great time in doing so.

Some might compare his work to that of the late Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther series and there is some justification in doing so. Mason and Bernie are both good detectives, but Mason is much more of a man of action than the cerebral Bernie. If you like to read about the time period (1945-1947), then you will enjoy both writers' works.



### RUINS OF WAR

re-titled **MADNESS IN THE RUINS**

by John A. Connell  
Berkley, \$26.95, 2015  
Nailhead Publishing,  
TPB \$14.99, Kindle \$3.99

**Rating: A-**

Munich, Germany, late 1945. Mason Collins is an army criminal investigator who in a prior life was a Chicago homicide detective – then a soldier and then a prisoner of war. He doesn't want to return home, where he was set up to take a fall by a corrupt police department, so he signs on with the occupied forces in Germany.

New in Munich, Mason is assigned a puzzling, bizarre and brutal murder to solve. Then more dead bodies show up, certainly the victims of the same murderer. Battling against a hostile

population, officious superior officers and a brilliant murderer, Mason succeeds in the end, as you would expect him to. But at what price?

Connell appears to capture the essence of what it was like to live in chaotic 1945 Munich. It wasn't good, especially if one were German.

Overall he tells a good story with several red herrings and interesting characters to follow. **RUINS OF WAR** is for those who like to read about this time period and need a good mystery.

### SPOILS OF VICTORY

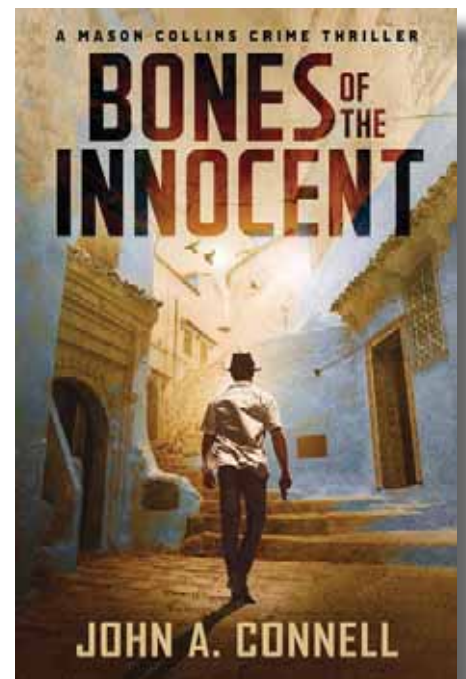
re-titled **HAVEN OF VIPERS**

by John A. Connell  
Berkley, \$26.95, 2016  
Nailhead Publishing,  
TPB \$14.99, Kindle \$4.99

**Rating: B+**

Garmisch-Partenkirchen is a fairytale town with gingerbread houses that has attracted many Nazi war criminals in post-WW2 Germany. And the gang running things are ex-Nazis and crooked U.S. Army officers. In other words, it is a target-rich environment for an army investigator.

U.S. Army detective Mason Collins comes to town to investigate the murder of his friend, a Counter Intelligence Corps agent named John Winstone,



who, in turn was investigating large-scale crime and corruption. When Mason manages to upset the crime ring's applecart, the crime bosses are not happy and seek revenge.

Mason has an on-again, off-again romantic relationship with war/investigative reporter Laura, which continues through the series.

### BONES OF THE INNOCENT

by John A. Connell

Nailhead Publishing, Hardcover  
\$28.99,  
TPB \$14.99, Kindle, \$4.99, 2019  
**Rating: A-**

June, 1946, Marseilles, France. No longer a U.S. Army detective, Mason Collins is hiding out from a team of assassins sent by a crime ring run by powerful people. It's a matter of revenge because Mason dealt the ring a severe blow by his investigation chronicled in **SPOILS OF WAR** (re-titled **HAVEN OF VIPERS**). But just when matters seem most bleak, a stranger, one Carson Trusdale, appears out of nowhere and offers Mason a way out. The British diplomat entices Mason to follow him to Tangier, Morocco, where a very wealthy expat is willing to pay Mason a handsome sum to find his kidnapped daughter, Cynthia Brisbane.

She is one of three girls from wealthy families who have disappeared over the last few months.

Once in Tangier, Mason gathers a small group of helpers, including police Captain Rousselot whose investigation into the disappearance of the girls has been stymied by his superior at every step of the way. No one seems willing to help, even the parents of the missing girls are evasive when Mason turns to certain subjects. But he begins to make some headway when he discovers that there are also Moroccan young women who have gone missing. Needless to say, Mason gets into a lot of scrapes because he shares that character trait that most of our heroes have – fearlessness.

Connell has a cinematic approach to his settings and the talent to make them come alive with words that feed the reader’s imagination. His depiction of 1946 Tangier is vivid and memorable. He also writes the kind of novel I like to read – a combination of detection and action.



**TO KILL A DEVIL**

by John A. Connell

Nailhead Publishing, Hardcover \$27.99,  
TPB \$14.99, Kindle, \$4.99, 2020

**Rating: A-**

Back in Europe (Vienna), Mason Collins is once again a target for the

crime ring that seeks revenge on him for his actions in **SPOILS OF WAR** (re-titled **HAVEN OF VIPERS**). While Mason was in Tangier, the gang went after his friends and loved ones, so he is determined more than ever to find out who is the shadowy figure pulling the strings, a certain someone called Valerius – and eliminate him.

It seems that many people Mason question know the man by name and fear him, but know blessed little that will help Mason find him. So he teams up with his old friend counterintelligence agent Mike Forester and his love interest Laura to “kill a devil.”

Along the way, we readers are treated to a vivid description of post WWII Vienna, divided into different Allied zones of influence, which adds dramatically to the danger of travel around the city.

The Russians enlist Mason’s help to find a spy feeding information to the Americans and in return for their help in unmasking Valerius, he says he will find out who the spy is (but has no intention of doing so.) Will Mason finally be able to rid himself of his nemesis?

Connell brings post-World War Two Vienna to life in vivid detail and veracity.

**WHERE THE WICKED TREAD**

by John A. Connell

Nailhead Publishing, Hardcover \$27.99,  
TPB \$14.99, Kindle, \$4.99, 2021

**Rating: A-**

1947, Graz, Austria. We find Mason Collins residing in a British jail for beating up a British army major who was who was in the midst of an attempted rape. His good friend, intelligence agent Mike Forrester, comes to the rescue and sends Mason on a sub rosa mission that he is all too willing to accept. The Allies have released the former Nazi SS Obersturmführer Theodor Ziegler on promises of cooperation in future intelligence gathering and this sticks in Forrester’s craw, who wanted him tried and hanged. Mason



was an eye-witness to Ziegler’s war crimes and is all too eager to get a shot at putting him down. Ziegler was last seen heading towards an Italian rat line, one of the Nazis’ favorite escape routes through Italy.

It seems that Ziegler has joined up with other escaping Nazis who are determined to abduct a mysterious woman and her young son. Mason’s troubles escalate when he agrees to escort the woman and her son to safety, while helping to smuggle a convoy of Jewish refugees down through Italy to a ship awaiting in Naples. And Naples just so happens to be the place where he is to rendezvous with Laura, the elusive love of his life.

Man plans and God laughs seems to be an appropriate way of describing what happens next. What seems a simple plan turns out to be anything but as Mason must overcome one challenge after another to obtain his goals.

**WHERE THE WICKED TREAD** ends on a real cliffhanger, which makes me anticipate the next book in the series even more.

John A. Connell has penned what has become one of my favorite series. Each new novel will be a “must read.” You can jump in anywhere, but if you are like me, you may want to start with the first in the series, now named **MADNESS IN THE RUINS**.

# Central Booking

*Kristopher Zgorzki*



## GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL

By Aimee Molloy

Harper \$27.99

Rating: A-

While it is true that many crime fiction fans enjoy being surprised during the reading process, this has led to some authors stretching credibility in order to embed the wildest twists possible, which can often have the opposite effect, frustrating the reader. However, in a book like **GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL**, Aimee Molloy shows that a subtle shift designed to subvert standard genre tropes can have a seismic impact on the reader's experience. Molloy does this not once, but twice, in **GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL** and as a result, the reader closes the cover at the end feeling truly surprised and satisfied.

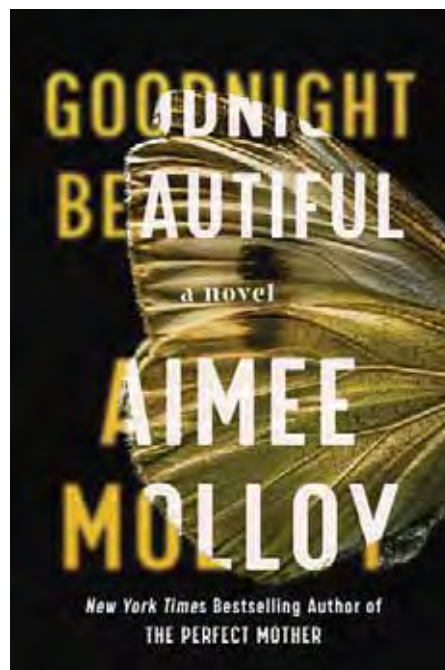
Sam and Annie had a whirlwind courtship and after only a few weeks of marriage decide to relocate to a small community in upstate New York. Chestnut Hill seems like the perfect place for Sam to open his new psychiatry practice. After all, therapy can be a lifeline for individuals in remote locales and let's face it, the residents are bound to have secrets, right? Besides, Sam's mother is in a care facility close by, dealing with dementia, and this move allows them to give her the comfort she needs as she continues to decline.

With Sam focused on his career, Annie finds herself lonely in this new town where she knows no one. It is only when Sam vanishes that Annie realizes that something is very, very wrong. But where do you begin investigating when everyone is a stranger and the police assume your husband is having an affair with one of his patients?

With this relatively simple and

straight-forward setup, Aimee Molloy takes the reader on a twisted journey with unexpected revelations and dangerous assumptions. Her prose keeps readers engaged and compels them forward, making **GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL** one of those books that demands to be consumed in as few sittings as possible. Along the way, Molloy weaves in such disparate topics as the television show *The West Wing*, kinky roleplay, Stephen King's **MISERY**, and oh yes... that yellow wallpaper that adorns Sam's office, which is almost certainly meant to evoke Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story.

Once read, **GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL** will not be forgotten. Aimee Molloy uses the reader's familiarity with crime fiction traditions as a shield to obfuscate deliberate misdirection and clever manipulation. Coupled with her excellent debut, *The Perfect Mother*, the release of **GOODNIGHT BEAUTIFUL**



**FUL** solidifies Aimee Molloy's tenure in the crime fiction realm as one that will be marked with inventive storytelling and complex characterization, all in the service of extremely entertaining novels.

## WATCH HER

By Edwin Hill

Kensington \$26.00

Rating: B

Edwin Hill burst onto the crime fiction landscape with his debut novel, *Little Comfort*, before returning a year later with another Hester Thursby mystery, **THE MISSING ONES**. It is clear that readers love Hester, so it is little surprise that Edwin Hill released a third novel featuring this obstinate but loveable librarian. Like the previous two books, **WATCH HER** breaks rules and forges a singular path that uniquely belongs to Edwin Hill.

Prescott University is owned and run by the Matson family. The Matsons are a wealthy family with more than enough secrets to fill every closet in their palatial mansion located in the heart of Boston's Jamaica Pond neighborhood. Maxine works at the University, but her tendrils extend far deeper into the Matsons' lives than anyone is aware of. At her request, Librarian Hester Thursby and Detective Angela White make an appearance at Pinebank – the Matson Family Estate – after a suspected break-in. The only trouble is, nothing was stolen; in fact, something was left behind. Hester and Angela discover a copy of George Eliot's **ADAM BEDE** in the home and no one knows where it came from or why it would have been left behind.

Maxine gets Hester more tangled in the Matsons' issues when she provides her with a mysterious list of students and requests that Hester investigate. Of course, Hester cannot resist the opportunity to use her research skills – unaware that she is about to stumble on a nest of secrets that extends into the past and affects the future of so many. Edwin Hill uses four narrative voices to explore his plot this time and much suspense is generated from their interactions with



each other – who knows what and when. Throughout, the presence of long-buried secrets clashes with the exposure of current day troubles.

One of the strengths of Edwin Hill's work is that he allows his stories to unspool realistically, never rushing plot elements at the expense of character development. This is especially important in **WATCH HER** as the early section of this novel introduces a bevy of characters who will gain importance as the storyline progresses. Some of these are familiar to readers of the series – like Angela White and Morgan – but many of the others are making their first appearance and it is important that readers have some time to absorb their personality traits and their distinct relationships before the plot gains in complexity.

The for-profit educational system has had plenty of controversy in recent years. This timely element will keep readers invested throughout the investigation. Edwin Hill wisely pairs his series heroine, Hester Thursby, with a real law enforcement officer for much of this case. That eliminates any of those “stretching the bounds of credibility” moments so common with amateur sleuths. But this is not to say that Hester fails to hold her own. She remains a unique character in the crime fiction genre and shows that the iconic portrayals of academic librarians fail to address the array of personalities possessed by workers in that field. Certainly, across the course of this series, Edwin Hill has shown that he will populate his pages with characters who never adhere to any expected parameters and instead accurately reflect the world in all its myriad variety.

While **WATCH HER** can be enjoyed as a stand-alone suspense novel, for those readers who have followed Hester Thursby on her journey, this novel will provide some true revelations. Hester's relationship with Morgan is a loving one despite the complex dynamics at play. As any couple will tell you, even after years together it is possible to discover new things about your partner; however, Hester and Morgan truly have much to learn about the other and **WATCH HER** provides the beginnings of that process.

Edwin Hill has been a shining light in the crime fiction community for a number of years now and while he has the devoted loyalty of his fans, these books deserve a wider readership and **WATCH HER** seems the perfect book to break out and bring new readers to Hester Thursby's side. Whether you start here and then read the others or choose to enjoy the books in chronological order, once you read Edwin Hill you will be a forever fan.

### FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT

By Elle Cosimano

Minotaur \$26.99

**Rating: A**

Crime fiction readers who occasionally stray into the Young Adult category will likely already know the name Elle Cosimano. After all, her 2015 release, *Nearly Gone*, was nominated for an Edgar Award. Now Cosimano is turning her attention to more mainstream crime fiction – and if **FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT** is any indication of her niche, she is going to be a welcome addition to the ranks.

The tone of **FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT** lies somewhere between hilarious and heartfelt, or conversely satire and seriousness. Elle Cosimano draws the reader in with some unabash-

edly uproarious set-pieces before pulling back the layers to reveal a deeper emotional core. Regardless of the nuance, Cosimano's prose is always elegant and addictive.

### FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT

**IT** starts with a moment every author wishes they had thought of. Our heroine – Finlay – is meeting with her agent at the local Panera. As they discuss the plot of her new novel and how it must be a “hit” to elevate her “contract,” they are overheard by a stranger who comes to believe that Finlay is a killer for hire. But rather than report her to authorities, this woman wants to pay Finlay (a hell of a lot of money) to knock off her scoundrel of a husband.

Finlay can certainly use the money, but kill someone? Finlay thinks maybe if she just trails the loser, she will uncover a way to help without the need for bloodshed. One misadventure after another gets Finlay tangled in a knot that puts her own life at risk. Fortunately, she gains a side-kick and accomplice in her former nanny, Vero (short for Veronica.) You know those friends that you could call on to help dispose of a body? Put Vero at the top of that list – literally! With Finlay and Vero we have the Lucille Ball and Ethel Mertz of crime-solving...er crime-causing...er whatever you want to call it. These two are a match made in literary heaven and will keep readers entertained with their hijinks.

Juxtaposed with all of this madcap adventure is the serious business of single parenting, especially during a contentious divorce where a new (beautiful) step-parent is soon to be involved. Like the hitman plot that fuels the novel, these domestic scenes vary between comedically silly and tragically unfortunate. While Elle Cosimano keeps the surface light, there are real-world issues on display here and readers will come away with more respect for working parents.

Reading Elle Cosimano's **FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT** is like eating a mixed collection of bon-bons while lounging next to a crackling fire under a cozy blanket – you never know



where the next bite will take you, but you know it will warm your heart, comfort your soul, and be damn satisfying. Fortunately, this is the start of a series, so Finlay and gang will be back for more misadventures soon – and hopefully for years and years to come.

### **BLOODLINE**

By Jess Lourey  
Thomas & Mercer \$15.95  
**Rating: B+**

Trying to pin down Jess Lourey's writing style is pointless. She has crossed the gamut of sub-genres within the crime writing arena and beyond, but what has remained consistent is the presence of well-developed characters, unpredictable plots, and that elusive addictive nature that transforms fans into fanatics. That said, in her last two novels Jess Lourey has stumbled upon a trademark which she has wielded like a weapon, slaying any doubts, and racing to the top of many "to-be-read" piles. In these novels, *Unspeakable Things* and **BLOODLINE**, Jess Lourey has used true crimes from her home state of Minnesota as inspiration – but not as roadmaps – for her complex storylines and the results have been stellar achievements.

It's the 1960's and Joan Harken has seen how rough city life can be – in fact, she's lucky to be alive after facing that violence first-hand – so when her fiancé suggests they move back to his hometown of Lilydale she embraces the idea with enthusiasm tinged with uncertainty. At first, the quaint small-town vibe of Lilydale seems like just the salve she needs to ease her mental distress, but as news of her pregnancy spreads among the townfolks, Joan begins to notice flaws in the just-a-bit-too-perfect façade.

As a journalist, Joan becomes entangled in the unsolved disappearance of a child in the town's history. Could what happened to this boy provide the answers Joan is looking for? When a man arrives in town claiming to be the missing boy, the reactions of the townfolk are both surprising and concerning. Now it seems like every movement Joan

makes is being monitored, and what is with that mysterious shadowy figure Joan keeps seeing out of the corner of her eye?

In **BLOODLINE**, Jess Lourey blends elements of mystery, suspense, and horror to stunning effect. The tone of the whole novel perfectly transports readers back to a time when small-town life was viewed as an ideal. And yet, Lourey elicits the same unease that Joan feels from the readers of the novel as well. Something just isn't right here. Structurally, there is a "frame" story in **BLOODLINE** that keeps interrupting the main narrative. This frame story gives readers a clue to the trouble ahead and allows them to watch for precipitating events and evidence of shady dealings.

The plot of **BLOODLINE** continues in this serpentine manner. So many disparate parts must come together for there to be a satisfying conclusion but rest assured Jess Lourey has this under control. From the creepy service organization (called Fathers and Mothers) to the matching smallpox scars on many of the characters, this is a finely constructed tale of mystery and mayhem. Readers can't help but be intrigued and she keeps them glued to the pages until Jess Lourey is ready to drop her biggest surprises.

**BLOODLINE** is another fabulous achievement for Jess Lourey. As a stand-alone, this novel will surely bring new readers to the fine work of this word-smith. Waiting to see where Jess Lourey goes next is going to be the difficult part.

### **THE PROJECT**

By Courtney Summers  
Wednesday Book \$18.99  
**Rating: A**

When Courtney Summers won the Edgar Award in the Young Adult category for her 2018 novel *Sadie*, long-time fans such as myself nearly stood in ovation. Here was a book that took serious chances and really said something to readers – both young and old. Since then, we have waited patiently to see



how Courtney Summers would follow up this success and now she releases **THE PROJECT**. Believe me when I tell you it was more than worth the wait.

At the core, **THE PROJECT** is a story of sisters – Beatrice (Bea) and Glory (Lo) Denham. When a tragic car accident takes their parents from them and leaves Lo at death's door, it seems that all is lost forever. But then along comes Lev Warren, the spiritual leader of The Unity Project, making promises to the vulnerable Bea. When Lo eventually wakes in the ICU, she learns that her parents are gone (dead) and her sister is gone (left); Bea has joined The Unity Project.

Several years later, working a grunt job at a highly controversial magazine, Lo stumbles upon what she hopes can be her first big journalist assignment. After witnessing a suicide on her way to work, she discovers that the victim's father believes that The Unity Project is at fault. The fact that this boy called out Lo's name before he jumped onto the subway tracks links this back to Bea and sets Lo on a journey to save her sister – and herself.

Granted unparalleled access to Lev Warren and The Unity Project, Lo's exposé proves to be more complicated than she could ever imagine. Every step is a potential trap and Lo, for all her sin-

gle-mindedness, is still in an extremely vulnerable state.

Readers know that Courtney Summers isn't going to take the easy path – nor even the predicted path – with her novels and **THE PROJECT** is no different. This is a difficult read in the sense that the scars, both literal and figurative, are very near the surface. Anyone who has ever wondered about how cults work and what types of people are susceptible to them will find much to explore in **THE PROJECT**; but trust me when I say that you may be surprised.

To narrow **THE PROJECT** down to a “cult novel” is unfair. It is really a book about self-discovery, trauma, faith, and family and uses the cult as a powerful backdrop upon which all of that unfolds. Courtney Summers is a beautiful writer; she crafts sentences that sing while they mine for emotion that wants to stay buried but ultimately must be torn asunder. Forget trying to mount a defense against the hypnotic power of **THE PROJECT**.

Who knows where Courtney Summers will go next, but I know that her fans will follow her anywhere and we will be justly rewarded.

### **MURDER MY PAST**

By Delia C. Pitts  
BookBaby \$16.99

**Rating: B**

You may not have heard of The Ross Agency Mystery novels by Delia C. Pitts, but that is certainly not because they are unworthy of attention. In fact, in many ways that is a symptom of the type of divide the books themselves address. Delia C. Pitts has a knack for giving voice to those who society too often chooses to ignore. The Ross Agency is a private detective firm based in Harlem that is willing to take the cases the police department cannot be bothered with – at best, these cases are simply minor nuisances not under the purview of law enforcement; but unfortunately, it too often means the cases involve populations that those in charge find insignificant or unworthy for a whole host of irrational reasons (race, income bracket, gender, sexuality, and even age.) **MURDER**

**MY PAST** finds series lead SJ Rook at the precipice of two very personal cases. Does that make these cases different from what the Ross Agency typically investigates? That remains to be seen.

When Rook's self-made, affluent ex-wife Annie Perry reappears out of the blue, she proves to be a tantalizing distraction that he really cannot afford. This clash of worlds seems primed to lead to disaster and sure enough, it is not very long before Annie is dead and Rook is on the case. Pulling back the curtains on Annie's history uncovers new-found strength in Rook. Here is a character who is steadfast and loyal, but with a vulnerable side buried under the façade. When clues lead to suspects in higher education, Rook discovers that success breeds complications just as easily as struggle does.

Meanwhile, Rook's investigation opens avenues of exploration within his current relationships as well. His girlfriend, Sabrina, and her father have long desired answers in a personal mystery of their own. Brina's mother simply vanished twenty-five years ago and that trail has long been colder than a winter wind. That is about to change.

Crime novels are often described as character-driven or plot-driven, but with the Ross Agency novels it is really the best of both worlds. These characters are so fully-fleshed out, with dialogue the rings authentic at every turn, that readers will be forgiven for thinking of them as living, breathing entities. But Pitts also plots with the skill of a spider weaving a masterful web. Unspooling multiple mysteries in tandem is daunting, requiring that everything mesh in ways that never seems contrived or accidental. Delia C. Pitts makes it look effortless and isn't that exactly what we want in our storytellers?

Arriving at the end of **MURDER MY PAST** will sadden some, not because the ending is unsatisfying or disappointing (in fact, just the opposite is true,) but simply because it means we must leave these Harlem residents and return to the real world after a bit of escapism peppered with social commentary. Something tells me that more than a few readers will be back for the further

adventures of this kick-ass crew.

### **THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS**

By Elly Griffiths

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt \$25.00

**Rating: A+**

No one is going to accuse of Elly Griffiths of taking too long between books. In addition to two very successful series – the thirteen novels featuring Ruth Galloway and five Brighton mysteries – she decided to write a children's series and a collection of linked stand-alone novels. The first of those stand-alone books, *The Stranger Diaries*, would go on to win the 2020 Edgar Award for Best Novel. Now, the second of those books has been released in the US. **THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS** once again features DS Harbinder Kaur, one of the most unique characters in crime fiction.

DS Harbinder is an Indian Sikh lesbian who lives with her tradition-minded parents, to whom she has not yet come out of the closet. While we are in a period where readers must champion #ownvoices stories of diversity, it is nice to see some authors rise to the need for more diversity by stepping out of their comfort zone to craft fully-realized characters that celebrate people that are nothing like themselves. Respect and empathy are key here and Elly Griffiths has shown in these two novels that Har-



**Elly Griffiths**

binder Kaur is a character she is invested in and the risk pays off in dividends.

**THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS** starts innocently enough with the death of a ninety-year-old resident at a senior living residence hall. The only unusual detail is that this woman was a devoted fan of crime fiction and a look at her bookshelf reveals countless novels dedicated to her and thanking her in their acknowledgements. When her caretaker, Nataalka Kolisnyk, reports that someone broke into the room while she was helping the family box things up, her story is hard to believe: A masked gunman entered the room, searched for and found a particular book, grabbed it and rushed out the door.

This puts DS Kaur on the track of a literary mystery. Who was this woman and why did a thief target her home only to escape with a crime novel? Aided by the most eclectic group of amateur sleuths imaginable, Harbinder sets out to find the answers. That group of sometimes bumbling and sometimes brilliant cohorts consists of Nataalka (the victim's part-time caretaker), Edwin (another elderly resident at the senior complex), and Benedict (the owner of the local coffee shack.) Without approval from Harbinder, they set out on a road-trip seeking the truth of what happened, only to stumble upon more murders.

In **THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS**, Elly Griffiths has written a love letter to and for crime fiction fans. Simply by having the original victim be a fan of these types of books is going to have the reader invested in the outcome. But Griffiths has crafted a backstory of literary history that will have readers longing to read the made-up books that play a part in the case. Needless to say, this strange trend of having this woman repeatedly mentioned in the dedications and acknowledgements of various novels only deepens the mysterious aura. There is even a whole section in the middle of the novel that takes place at the Aberdeen Literary Festival. While this particular event is fictional, fanatics of the genre will delight in seeing their beloved crime-writing conventions memorialized with such a detail-filled tribute. There is even a funny scene where

Nataalka meets a group of book bloggers at one of the sponsored social gatherings that are part of the festival.

The mystery at the core of **THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS** is well-thought out and Elly Griffiths skillfully places both true clues and red herrings to keep the reader on their toes while they witness this inimitable group investigate an escalating series of crimes. The solution is both satisfying and bittersweet, however word on the street is that DS Harbinder Kaur will be back for another stand-alone case soon, so fans can rejoice knowing that this is not the last time we will see this one-of-a-kind detective.

### **BLACKOUT**

By Marco Carocari  
Level Best Books \$17.95  
**Rating: B**

In his debut novel, **BLACKOUT**, Marco Carocari takes a number of familiar crime fiction tropes and skews them ever so slightly, thereby breathing new life into each of these familiar constructs, and ultimately leading readers to a fresh and unique conclusion.

The opening scene of **BLACKOUT** takes place in Manhattan on July 13, 1977. Historians will know this is the date most of New York City suddenly lost electricity for almost twelve hours. It is at the beginning of this chaos that Marco Carocari introduces readers to Francesco DiMaso and his young son, Franco. In a city that is about to devolve into a dangerous and unpredictable pandemonium, Francesco – an off-duty police officer – finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, desperate to keep his child safe. With this extremely evocative opening tableau, Carocari hooks readers immediately and leaves them longing for more.

From here, the action jumps forward to 2016 with a scene that echoes Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Rear Window* and/or the many works that film has already inspired (among them *The Bedroom Window* and *The Girl on the Train*.) A now adult Franco is "entertaining" his

latest trick on the rooftop of the building where he resides, when the hot stud he found via the MeatUp app offers him a joint. Unaware that his mind has been altered by the possibly-laced drug, Franco believes he sees an extremely violent argument taking place in one of the apartments across the street. Before he knows what hit him, the police are questioning why he is passed out on the street and Franco has no memory of his actions following the rooftop tryst the night before. He tries to convince the authorities of the possible murder he witnessed, but their investigation fails to turn up any evidence of a commotion or, for that matter, a body.

Days later, things take a turn when a body is ultimately discovered in a different location and traced back to the apartment Franco highlighted. Only problem: Franco knows the victim and it turns out his fingerprints are all over that crime scene. Now Franco is an everyman, tangled up in a mess that is far beyond his control. As the investigation into this current crime advances, Marco Carocari weaves flashbacks to the night of the NYC blackout into the narrative like walnuts in a trendy vegan brownie. Crime fiction fans will know that these two cases will eventually converge – fortunately in completely unexpected, but absolutely plausible, ways.

Marco Carocari populates his story with likeable characters who are realistically flawed and infinitely relatable. Peppering the narrative, Carocari provides just enough humor and romance to keep things from becoming too heavy or morose, without leaving any doubt that crime and corruption are the centerpiece of the novel. All of this action takes place against the backdrop of New York, a city that experienced unfathomable change between the late-seventies and the modern-day.

**BLACKOUT** is the chance for readers to jump in on at the starting point of Marco Carocari's career. No matter whether he continues Franco's story as a series and ventures into more stand-alone territory, this is an author to keep your eye on.

# From The Waterfront

Ted Hertel



## WEDDING STATION

by David Downing

Soho Crime, \$27.95, March 2021

Rating: A

On the night of February 27, 1933, crime reporter and former communist John Russell witnesses the fiery destruction of Germany's Parliament building, the Reichstag. Six days later federal elections are held, putting the Nazis in complete power. While Stormtroopers unleash a campaign of terror against communists, Jews, socialists, and others, life must go on for Russell. Not only is he on the verge of being thrown out of Germany due to his recent separation from his wife, he has a six-year-old son to worry about. Among the crimes he must report: the gruesome murder of a young homosexual who left behind a horror-filled tell-all journal, the disappearance of a prominent fortune teller, the search for a young woman who has vanished after falling in love with a communist, a mysterious coded notebook of a dead man, and more. All the while he treads the thin line between doing his job and staying out the way of the Nazis.

This compelling novel is the seventh in David Downing's consistently excellent John Russell "Station" stories. It is a prequel to the previous six novels, set six years before *Zoo Station*, the 2007 novel that opened the series. It is not necessary to have read those books in order to follow this one. However, once you read this one, you will definitely want to go out and get the others to read them immediately.

Franklin Roosevelt had intoned "that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" in his first inaugural address five days after the burning of the Reichstag.

But in Germany fear was entangled in every aspect of daily life, from whom a person spoke with to what a reporter wrote to politics, sexual orientation, and religion. One wrong thought or statement or action could result in beatings, torture or death. Reporting the truth about the Nazi regime, exposing its lies, could bring arrest and the closing of the newspaper. The forces of law and order had become the people who were committing the crimes. Truth had lost the battle and the lie would be enshrined in the law at the point of a gun. The rule of law was replaced by screams in the night.

All of this Downing brings to life in the way that his protagonist must struggle with doing his job. Fear hangs over this entire novel, from the opening scenes of the Reichstag in flames to the penultimate passages inside the horrors of the *Sturmabteilung* Stormtroopers' cells. It's an examination of what a

political person has to do when political hope is gone. The questions – and answers – are frightening.

As with all of Downing's novels, the book has been meticulously researched, but that research is presented in such a way that it blends in seamlessly with the story, being informative rather than intrusive. Downing has captured a terrible period of history in a fascinating and suspenseful tale, one that holds the reader from the first page to the final words.

## THE ART OF VIOLENCE

by S. J. Rozan

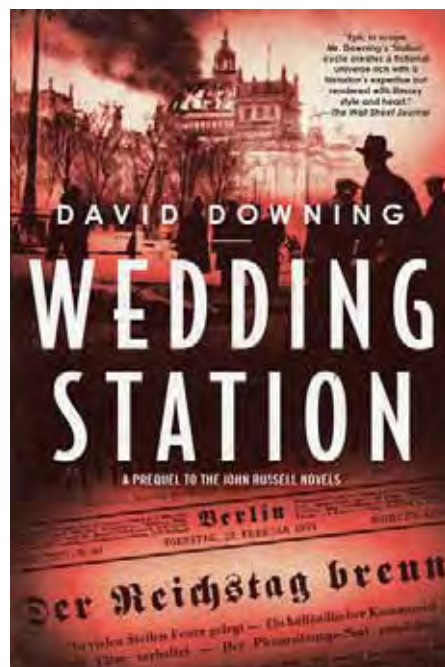
Pegasus Crime, \$25.95, December 2020

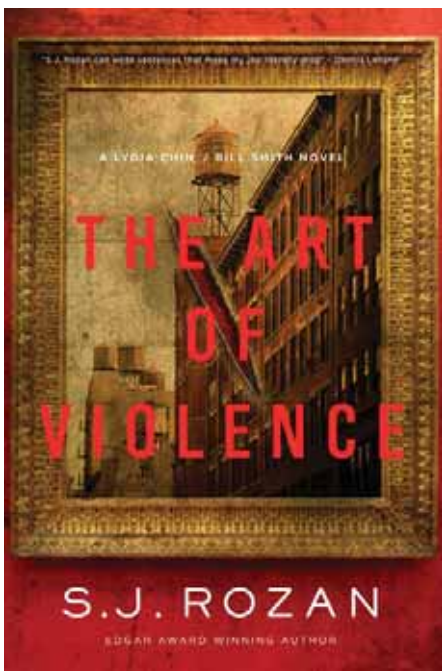
Rating: A-

Not everyone is happy that Sam Tabor is out of prison after a mere five-year stint for the vicious murder of a young woman. But his prison art had caught the attention of the art world, which campaigned for his release. The artist believes that he has murdered two additional women since his release, so he asks P.I. Bill Smith to investigate the murders, not to prove his innocence, but instead to prove his guilt. Due to alcohol-fueled blackouts, Tabor cannot remember anything that happened on the nights of the killings. Smith enlists the help of his partner in both love and business, Lydia Chin, because he actually believes that Tabor is not a serial killer. But as more bodies and evidence pile up, it looks like Smith could very easily be wrong.

Fresh off the long-awaited return of the team of Chin and Smith in 2019's *Paper Son* comes this engrossing novel about a tortured man who has no idea whether or not he has returned to his killing ways of years earlier. Hated by many who believe his release from prison after such a short stint for murder was a miscarriage of justice, Tabor has infused his art with scenes of violence buried within the work itself. What role does art play in violence? Or violence in art? S.J. Rozan integrates this theme perfectly into her novel without hitting the reader over the head with it.

In spite of the fact that Tabor is a convicted killer, Rozan has created in





him a sympathetic character. She paints a portrait (pardon the pun!) of this deeply troubled man inflicted with a host of psychiatric (and perhaps conflicting) diagnoses, alcohol abuse, and a deep-seated belief that he really *is* out of his mind. She brings him fully to life with all of these problems, along with startlingly realistic dialogue.

While this novel is told from Smith's point of view, Lydia Chin plays a big role in helping both Smith and Tabor. The reader is also treated to scenes with Chin's mother who has her own thoughts about Smith, yet manages to assist, even if unwittingly, in resolving the case. The plot moves smoothly through to the end, filled with clues that the reader only wishes they could have spotted earlier. This absorbing novel is a must-read for all of Bill and Lydia's many fans, but totally accessible to those who have not yet read one of Rozan's captivating stories.

### **SLOUGH HOUSE**

by Mick Herron

Soho Crime, \$27.95, February 2021

**Rating: B**

Brexit has struck Slough House, MI-5's depository for demoted spies. This "special needs" group, the "slow horses," have been wiped from Service records,

pushed deeply into the cold. As fatal "accidents" begin happening to them, Jackson Lamb, head of the division, makes the effort to keep his remaining team safe from harm. But there are enemies everywhere, from the Russians to MI-5 itself, perhaps using them as targets. Sometimes "they" really are out to get the paranoids. Can Lamb devise a plan in time to protect his crew and save his operation?

This is the seventh novel (there have also been three novellas) in Mick Herron's consistently entertaining Slough House series. Winner of the CWA Gold and Silver Daggers, Herron has the ability to write compulsively readable novels, filled with suspense, crisp dialogue, and dark humor. He manages to take a wide cast of characters, give them each their own quirks and personalities, and set them off on individual missions all with one central goal: to come out the other end still alive.

The novel is rife with parallels to current politics, as well as the nightmare of Brexit, all the while asking whether disgraced spies are worth anything. Can a bunch of slow horses outwit the GRU, the Russian foreign intelligence agency? Or even their own MI-5 bosses? Jackson Lamb and his group of discredited agents find that this is the world they move in now. One where decisions are based, not on the greatest good or the most just cause, but simply fouling up the opposition, even if the opposition is your own side.

This is a series best read from the beginning due to numerous backstory references throughout. Even a new reader will gain an appreciation of the complexity of the novels by jumping in here, but may find some bits of confusion along the way.

*Smiert szpionam*, as Ian Fleming said. Death to spies? Not if Jackson Lamb can help it.

### **SO YOUNG, SO WICKED**

by Jonathan Craig

Black Gat Books, \$9.99, April 2021

**Rating: B-**

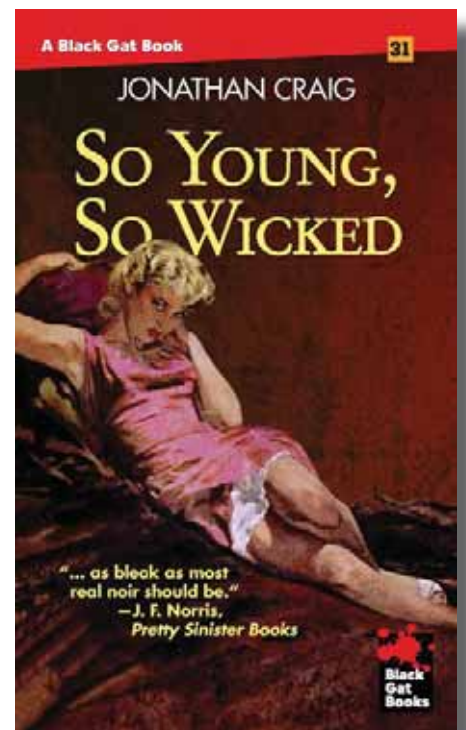
Hitman Steve Garrity is given a new assignment: kill a beautiful fifteen-year-

old girl. He's not told why this must be done, only that if he doesn't do it, he'll be the one killed, very slowly, by the syndicate. Just to make it harder, the death has to look like an accident. And if that's not bad enough, he's given only a couple of days to do the job right.

This novel was originally published in 1957 by paperback publisher Gold Medal Books. Jonathan Craig (born Frank Eugene Smith) was head research analyst for the Pentagon during WWII and later an advisor to President Truman at the Potsdam Conference. He started writing western and crime stories in 1947, moving to police procedurals and standalone novels in 1952.

This is a dark tale that builds suspense by using the short timeframe that Garrity has to complete his assignment. Along the way he has to figure out how to make the death look accidental, all the while having to make his appearance in the small town where the girl lives look natural. Can he drown her while she's swimming? Stage an auto accident? Push her down some stairs? How will he avoid suspicion and get away with it? And, perhaps most difficult, how will he discover the reasons why the syndicate wants a young girl to die?

This is a bleak noir tale that gets



bogged down a bit in the middle while Garrity is trying to answer these questions. Other than that, it moves along well and tells a suspenseful story in under 200 pages with a clever finish that makes the trip to the end worthwhile.

### ONE GOT AWAY

by S. A. Lelchuk

Flatiron Books, \$27.99, April 2021

Rating: B-

Nikki Griffin, bookstore owner/private investigator/all around kickass, is hired by the wealthy Martin Johanssen to investigate Dr. Geoffrey Coombs. Martin's even wealthier 81-year-old mother is "dating" the much younger Coombs and, in fact, she has transferred more than one and a half million dollars to him. He believes that Coombs is blackmailing "Mother," though he has no idea over what. Martin wants to intervene before things get even more out of hand. Nikki's investigation leads her to the very charming Coombs and into serious danger with real criminals involved in human trafficking.

I really enjoyed the first novel in this series, the Barry-Award-nominated **SAVE ME FROM DANGEROUS MEN**, but I didn't find this story quite up to the initial one. You don't have to have read the previous book to follow this story. The story takes quite a while to actually get going, however, with more exposition than is needed. It also has many of the P.I. tropes that had been scattered throughout the earlier book. Here we have the almost obligatory lying client (along with just about everybody else), people who aren't what they seem to be, the family with hidden secrets, Nikki getting involved with the man she has been hired to follow, taking on a young kid as a sidekick, and the like. Of course, as always, it's what an author can do with these things once they are headed down this path.

Fortunately, Lelchuk does manage to combine these elements (some of which seemed like serious mistakes, unlike her character's carefulness in the first book) into a fast-moving (once it gets going anyway) tale. His protagonist is one tough lady, shooting her way out



S. A. Lelchuk

of trouble and finishing villains off like Mike Hammer did back in the day. She has her cadre of just the right friends when she needs them, but usually she manages quite well on her own, thank you very much, which in large part is the point of having a protagonist – female or male – around which to build a story. One needs to overlook the implausibility of the whole thing, but that's often what fiction is: suspension of disbelief to enter an entertaining and exciting world that the reader will hopefully never be a part of under any circumstances. So sit back, relax, and enjoy.

**George's Take:** I'm in total agreement with Ted's opinion on **ONE GOT AWAY**. It didn't have near the "juice" of the first novel, **SAVE ME FROM DANGEROUS MEN**. Nikki Griffith is a great character who needs a good plot to show her stuff. **Rating: B**

### SLEEP WELL, MY LADY

by Kwei Quartey

Soho Crime, \$27.95, January 2021

Rating: B

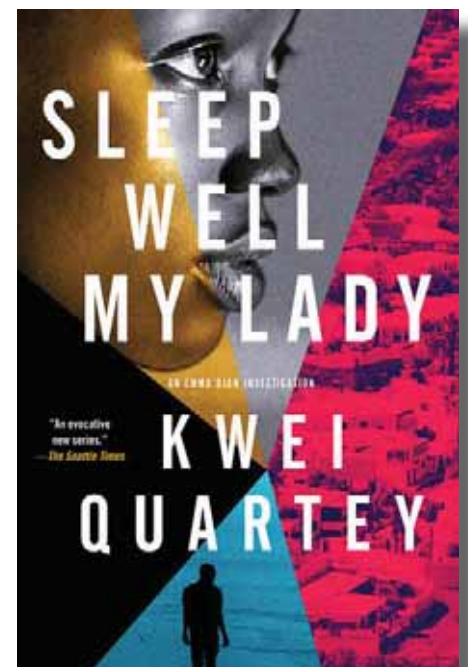
Ghanaian fashion icon and media celebrity Lade Araba Tagoe has been brutally slain in her own bedroom. The suspects are many but her chauffeur is arrested shortly after the crime is discovered. Ten months after the arrest Araba's Auntie Dele hires the Sowah Private Investigators Agency to investigate the murder, while the driver is still

sitting in prison. The aunt believes that the killer is actually Augustus Seeza, the talk show host and married lover of the deceased. All the agents, including Emma Djan, the only woman in the agency, are assigned by Sowah to look into the case due to its prominence.

This is the second case for Emma Djan, the first being the Edgar nominated (for Best Novel) *The Missing American*. Having read the prior novel is not necessary to understand this one, as all characters and any background information is given here.

The story is told in a non-linear fashion, jumping points of view and time periods, although each jump is made clear so that the reader knows exactly when and where the chapter is set. Rather than being mystifying, this actually helps provide the reader with information as it is needed. So some scenes are set twenty years before the murder, while others occur up to a year later. It also allows the author to slowly "peel back the onion" to disclose the lies and secrets each character has, as well as the interconnections among them.

The story reveals the incompetence and corruption in the Ghana justice system, from police to judges, and how innocent people can be held for months without fair hearings. It also examines all too briefly the sexism that is rampant in the fashion industry. As most



everywhere else, power and money mean more than justice. So it's up to Emma Djan and the Sowah Agency to set things right.

A couple picky points: The cover of the novel refers to this book as "An Emma Djan Investigation," but that gives short shrift to work of the other agents at Sowah. All have nearly equal roles in the investigation, including undercover work and outright questioning of witnesses and suspects. It's as if Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct novels were all labeled "A Steve Carella Investigation." Further, although the book is set in Ghana, other than a bit of a sense of the culture, I had little feel for that country here. I would like to have known more about the landscape, the people, the sights and sounds and smells of the nation.

#### WHERE HAVE YOU GONE WITHOUT ME?

by Peter Bonventre

Keylight Books, \$15.99, January 2021

**Rating: C**

Newspaper columnist Eddie Sabella receives a phone call about a statue of St. Joseph that has begun weeping real tears in a local church. There appears to be no rational explanation for this, which sparks his interest. He checks out the story, then writes his column. Shortly after the story appears in the paper, the statue is stolen. The cops aren't all that interested in the theft, so Eddie, seeing yet at least one more column out of it, begins investigating. Along the way he rediscovers his long lost love and tries to rekindle the flames. He also discovers that certain unsavory elements are not all that interested in having him investigate. These are people with secrets they'd rather keep hidden, a deadly serious hitman, and Mafioso with ideas of their own.

Author Peter Bonventre has created one extremely inquisitive character in Eddie Sabella. The reporter is not afraid to ask the dangerous questions, no matter how much trouble they might cause for him. He's a curious guy, with an itch to scratch that could get him killed. Yet he plows straight ahead in the quest for

that once in a lifetime story. But when he comes up against dangerous people who constantly lie to him, how far will he have to go for answers? On the other hand, when it comes to women, the otherwise sharp Eddie is pretty much stupid, as he admits to himself.

This is a fairly straightforward story without a terribly complex plot. A number of red herrings get thrown in (often in the form of lying witnesses) and some of the other elements are relatively cliché. The mystery of the sobbing statue is given short shrift, buried under some of these other plot points. A lot of time is spent in restaurants ordering carefully described food and drink. While that made me hungry, the overall meal of the book was only mildly satisfying.

#### THE INNS (AND OUTS) OF COURT

In this very occasional sub-column I take a look at books involving attorneys as principal characters and how close their actions come to reality (not that that's necessarily important in fiction, I suppose. After all no one is expected to take the bar exam based on what they read in a novel. Books of this nature are strictly for entertainment. That doesn't stop me from commenting on them).

#### A CERTAIN MAN'S DAUGHTER

by Timothy J. Lockhart

Stark House, \$15.95, February 2021

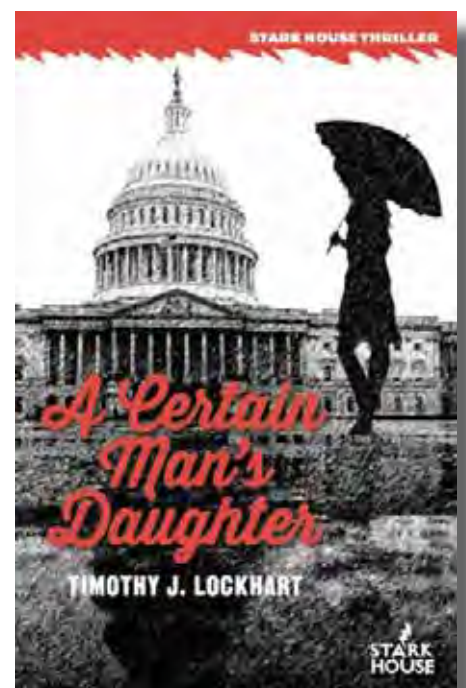
**Rating: B+**

Lisa Lindstrom asks attorney Robert Shipley, her law school lover of years gone by, to investigate a videotape blackmail scheme. The future United States Senate hopeful has been caught on camera in bed with another woman. She has five days in which to announce that she has decided not to run or the tape will be released. Shipley tells her to go to the cops, but she won't for fear that word of what happened would still get out. So, even though he's a business lawyer, he undertakes the investigation. When he goes to meet Lisa's lover at her apartment, he finds her dead, shot in the chest. Figuring that the blackmailer

is also the killer, he gets mixed up with politics, strippers, and assorted criminals as he tries to extricate Lisa from her trouble.

Shipley acts pretty much as a private investigator as he goes about looking into the murder and the blackmail scheme. That pretty much begs the question for me: why did Lockhart choose to make his protagonist a lawyer instead of a private investigator? The last time I met a lawyer who investigated blackmail and murder was *never*. Add to that the numerous offenses that Shipley commits as he goes along: theft of evidence from a crime scene and then withholding it from the police, violating client confidentiality, sleeping with his client (that is a major – I'll use the legal term here – *no-no!* for lawyers), and so forth. Can you say "disbarment," Robert? Also, Shipley, be sure to check the law firm's employee handbook to see what it says about sexual harassment!

Further, he eventually winds up getting fired by Lisa and still plunges ahead with his ever more dangerous investigation without hope of recompense. This is exactly what happens in just about every private eye novel you've ever read. The case really sounds like a job for someone trained in criminal investigation. Shipley isn't even trained in criminal law (beyond that one manda-





tory law school class in it, I suspect). So why did Lockhart choose a lawyer here instead of a private eye? The answer may just lie in the fact that Lockhart himself is an attorney who has worked for the C.I.A., D.I.A., and the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Having said all of that, Lockhart has created an interesting character in Robert Shipley, put him in a difficult situation, and allowed him to muddle his way through to a bloody conclusion in the hot seat of America power. Along the way we get an inside look at Washington politics and the dirty way it is often played, complete with lobbyists, mob-connections, and hardball-playing politicians. There is a touch of humor, often pointed at the system (“That’s about all members of Congress do now, you know, raise money for the next election.”). All of this combined makes for an entertaining and insightful look at how “the game” is played.

## TELL A NOVELLA

### THE ALBUM OF DR. MOREAU

by Daryl Gregory

Tordotcom/Tom Doherty Associates,  
\$14.99

E-book \$3.99, May 2021

Rating: **B**

It’s 2001 and the WyldBoyz are the world’s hottest boy band. Well, that is, if you can call these genetically engineered human-animal hybrids “boys.” But if nothing else they are the only band of that, um, nature and together they have an amazing sound. There’s Bobby the ocelot, Matt the bat, Tim the pangolin (think scaly anteater), Devin the bonobo, and Tusk the elephant. When the science barge they were on exploded, they managed to escape and were “discovered” by Dr. Maurice Bendix. But at the end of their current tour, “Dr. M.” is found brutally murdered – slashed to death – in their hotel suite. The boyz are, naturally, the prime suspects. It is up to Detective Lucia Delgado to step in and put all the pieces together.

Daryl Gregory has created a weird and amusing mashup of H. G. Wells

horror/science fiction, classic murder mysteries, and the popularity of boy bands. Told with a wink and a grin (and a number of entertaining puns) Gregory takes the reader on a wild spin through one night in the life and death of these young “manimals.” The book is arranged along the lines of a record album, each chapter being one “track” in the album. Lyrics are occasionally added, though the reader has to make up their own music, of course. There is also fan adulation in the form of Delgado’s daughter, people dressed up in animal costumes, and a wild party with deadly consequences.

Distilled down to its essence, the story smacks a bit of John Dickson Carr and his brilliant locked room mysteries, though not nearly as complex in either their creation or solution. There are secrets within secrets, misinformation aplenty, combined with the questioning and the gathering of the suspects, all as one should expect from a traditional mystery. It just has these other bizarre elements as integral parts of the story, which add to the fun. This unusual little book makes for quick reading for an evening’s entertainment.

## AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

### UNUSUAL SUSPECTS: Selected Non-Fiction

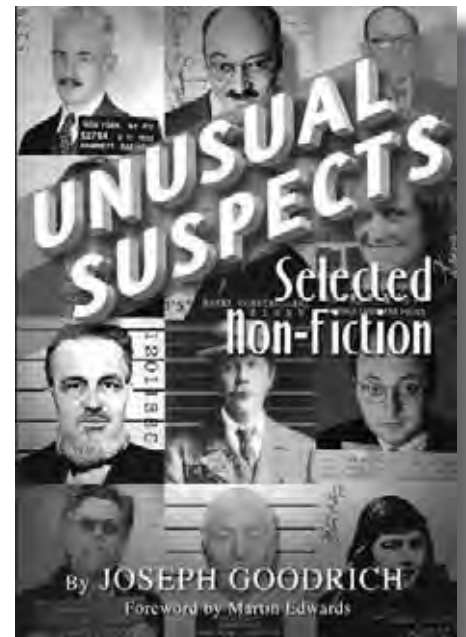
by Joseph Goodrich

Perfect Crime Books, \$12.00, June 2020

Rating: **A**

Edgar Award winning playwright Joseph Goodrich, editor of the fascinating *Blood Relations: The Selected Letters of Ellery Queen 1947-1950*, has compiled an entertaining and very informative collection of essays he has written over the years about both famous and not so well-known authors of books, plays, film, and television.

From Golden Age authors like Dashiell Hammett and Elizabeth Daly to Nicholas Meyer and Ashley Weaver



(who may be ushering in a new Golden Age), Goodrich pieces together not only what other writers have said but also interviews he conducted to weave a history of mystery over the years. He drops in interesting bits of trivia (who knew that Peter Falk did not originate the role of Levinson and Link’s sleuth Columbo?). He relates an amusing story of his telephone encounter with Dilys Winn, proprietor of Murder Ink, the NYC bookstore, when he tried to join her sixteen-day mystery readers tour of Britain – when Goodrich was a mere thirteen-year-old in Minnesota! Along the way we learn of Wynn’s history and just how Goodrich’s efforts paid off.

There are many such stories along the way, from the creation of the brilliant *Foyle’s War* television series by Anthony Horowitz to how Goodrich himself came to write the play which would win him the Edgar: *Panic*. Each of these short essays (usually four pages or so) is filled with often little-known facts, personal insights, and details that make the subjects spring off the page.

As befitting the editor of *Blood Relations*, there is also a long section on Ellery Queen and his creators. He gives us the history of the radio shows, the Jim Hutton TV show, and background of the two authors. We are also treated to the notes of Manfred B. Lee, perhaps the lesser known of the cousins who

(along with Frederic Dannay) created Ellery Queen. Lee undertook numerous lecture tours and the notes from three of those events are reproduced here. They make for absorbing reading and insight into Lee, Dannay and Queen.

The final section is a long essay on Derek Marlowe, tracing his life and how Goodrich came into contact with him while Goodrich was working in a bookstore in L.A., then followed up later with those who knew Marlowe. These include Marlowe's sisters and his son, as well as such luminaries as Tom Stoppard and Piers Paul Reid, both of whom had shared a flat in London with Marlowe. We get a glimpse of Derek Marlowe remembered, from his life to his work (of which his first and best novel was **A DANDY IN ASPIC**, published when he was only 28).

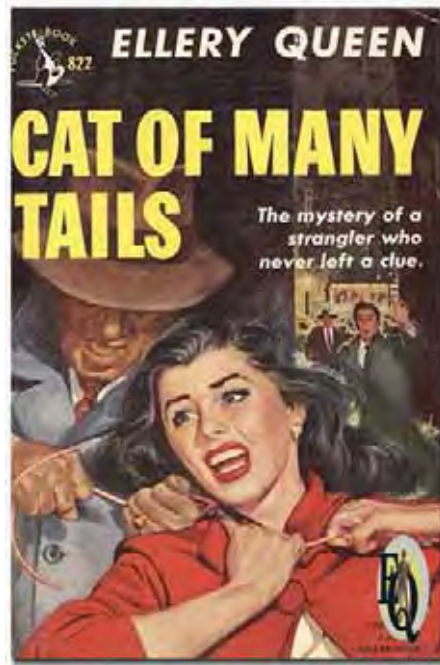
I started to make a list of the books mentioned in this collection I wanted to add to my TBR pile, but then gave up when I discovered that I wanted to read just about every book. I decided it was easier to keep the volume on the shelf and refer to it when wondering what I should read next. You'll want to do the same.

## THE OLD-TIMER IN THE CORNER Ellery Queen

Reading about Manfred B. Lee's lecture tours in Goodrich's **UNUSUAL SUSPECTS** encouraged me to pick up an Ellery Queen novel for re-reading. Not that I need much encouragement for that, as I've always enjoyed those novels. Queen is my favorite Golden Age novelist(s), in particular the early "Adjective-Nationality" ones. Of those the best is **THE EGYPTIAN CROSS MYSTERY**, one of the finest mystery novels of that era. But this time around I went for a slightly newer one, one where Ellery is no longer (as Lee once described him) "the biggest prig to ever come down the pike."

Outstanding is the only word to describe Ellery Queen's **TEN DAYS' WONDER** (1948). Ellery is approached by Howard Van Horn, an old friend

who is having lengthy blackouts, some lasting three or four days. Van Horn doesn't know what he does during those times, but he's concerned it's something not very good. Ellery agrees to go to Wrightsville, scene of several recent cases he has worked on, where Howard lives. There he meets the man's father, uncle, the father's young wife, and a mysterious elderly woman. From this small cast of characters comes a tale of blackmail, theft, and murder. The results of this case, and Ellery's tragic bungling of it, send Queen into a depressive spiral that will haunt him long after this novel is over (see the follow up mystery, **CAT OF MANY TAILS**, 1949).



Wrightsville is the small town Ellery has visited from time to time. This setting was one of the ways that Dannay and Lee managed to get Ellery out of big city New York as criminal investigation techniques improved and technology became more important in solving crimes than Ellery's deductive ratiocination. His first journey there was detailed in **CALAMITY TOWN** (1942), which was the first novel in Queen's third and arguably greatest period. It was followed immediately thereafter by his next case there, **THE MURDERER IS A FOX** (1945). Queen made numerous further visits to the town, including, for example, one briefly mentioned in **THE FOURTH SIDE OF THE TRIAN-**

**GLE** (1965), part of the fourth Queen period's "fun and games," as Dannay phrased it. There Ellery has just returned to NYC with two broken legs from a skiing trip in Wrightsville and must resolve this case without ever leaving his hospital room. This made him an armchair, er, better yet, a wheelchair, detective. It was yet another way to get around police investigative methods.

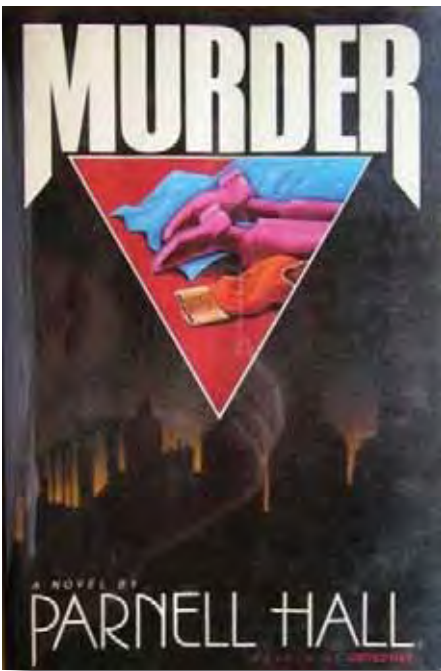
I love re-reading these books and **TEN DAY'S WONDER** is Dannay and Lee at the top of their form, as strong a novel as they ever wrote. As Shakespeare penned (**Henry VI**), "That would be ten days' wonder at the least. That's a day longer than a wonder lasts." And from that we have this terrific Golden Age novel. Will wonders never cease? Let's hope not.

## Parnell Hall

If you've ever been to a mystery convention, you knew Parnell Hall, one of the all-time great guys. His charm, his humor, his approachability, his outright friendliness made him unmissable, whether it was on a panel or singing one of his hilarious ditties from the stage or passing time with him in the hallway. And who can forget the cult classic **C.H.U.D.**, which he wrote and in which he "starred" (by which I mean, of course, "had a small part")? Sadly, he passed away on December 15, 2020, following a series of health setbacks. In his memory I pulled out an early Stanley Hastings novel and delved into it again:

**MURDER**, the second book in the series, appeared in 1987. Trouble has a way of finding "gifted amateur" Stanley Hastings. Here, at the urging of his wife, he reluctantly takes on the case of Pamela Berringer, who has managed to get blackmailed into becoming a prostitute for an unsavory character. She hires Stanley to talk to the blackmailing pimp. When Stanley shows up at his apartment, he finds the man has been murdered. To protect his lying client (aren't they always?), he "appropriates" evidence so the cops can't get it, then lies to them, only to discover that he has become the prime suspect in the killing.

As serious as all of that sounds,



Hall's sense of humor shines through the entire book (in fact, throughout the entire series of twenty Hastings' novels). Parnell often said that he created Stanley as an amateur detective so that he wouldn't have to do any actual research. While he wrote other series (such as the Puzzle Lady mysteries, the Steve Winslow courtroom dramas, and novels with Stuart Woods), the Stanley Hastings stories stand out – for me – as the most entertaining of the lot. These are funny, funny books. If you haven't tried one, get hold of some. If you like your mysteries with a light touch, you won't be sorry.

**BOOKS REVIEWED IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE**

- Wedding Station
- The Art of Violence
- Unusual Suspects
- Slough House
- A Certain Man's Daughter
- Sleep Well, My Lady
- One Got Away
- The Album of Dr. Moreau
- So Young, So Wicked
- Where Have You Gone Without Me?



**THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB**

by Richard Osman  
 Viking, \$26.00  
 Debut Mystery.

**Rating: A**

First of all, a big thank-you to George Easter for encouraging me to read this wonderful book. And thanks also to Graham Norton, for having the author appear on his wonderful show.

Retirement villages vary from town to town, and country to country. The one this book takes place at is one of the better ones, in my opinion. There are activities for different interests, and I think I'd want to join the Thursday Murder club.

There are four main members of the club, from varied backgrounds. They mesh well, and all have different skills, backgrounds, and interests which help in the case at hand.

PC Donna De Freitas is at Coopers Chase Retirement Village to give a talk on security. She finds the residents quite different from what she expected.

They don't want the usual safety talk, but want to hear about real police cases. Newly transferred here, she finds this very different from her assignments in South London. The four retirees are intriguing to her, being so different from the "norm" for elderly folks.

A local developer is found dead, and a body from decades ago has been found in a grave. Tony Curran was in the process of building a new development near Coopers Chase that would hurt the quality of life there. His death could seem a blessing in disguise, were it not a crime. The club members pull together using past experiences and intelligence, experience and just common sense to figure out both a current and decades old crimes. Both PC De Freitas and her boss, DCI Chris Hudson have become friendly with the elderly sleuths, which enriches all their lives.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and am waiting not very patiently for a sequel. Getting on in years myself, I loved seeing the club do what's neces-



**Richard Osman**

sary to "get the job done" by solving the mysteries. The characters were well drawn and distinct, with their past lives. The only thing I'd wish for is a harkening back to the golden age and a cast of characters in the book. This is something I increasingly find myself wishing for (senior moments?). All in all, a very satisfying read.

### ANIMAL INSTINCT

by David Rosenfelt  
Minotaur, \$27.99

Second in the K Team series.

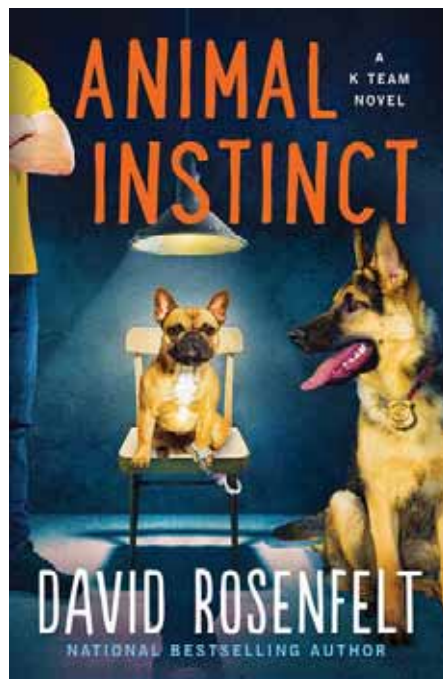
#### Rating: A

Retired cop Corey Douglas and his k-9 Partner, Simon Garfunkel, have joined forces with another ex cop, Laurie Collins to form the K team, private investigators. Joined by Marcus, a force of nature as an investigator, body guard, and someone you want on your side, they want to bring justice to their clients. Attorney Andy Carpenter (Laurie's husband) is on hand to provide legal advice.

Their current case is one that Corey is determined to solve. The murder of a young woman who he had tried to help in the past. A neighbor called to report domestic violence, but Lisa Yates denied being abused by her boyfriend, Gerald Kline. Lisa has just been shot leaving a restaurant, and Corey is sure Kline is the killer.

Corey and Simon go to Kline's home, and find him dead. Following procedure, Corey calls the police and waits at the scene. He's allowed to go home and has a sense someone has been in his house, but sees nothing of value missing. Soon he's arrested for the murder of Kline. Andy Carpenter takes the case, and even foots the bill for the bail he obtains for Corey, though he's limited by wearing a monitor with a 50 mile limit.

Corey is able to assist in his defense, but the case is very complex. Layer upon layer of deceit, and treachery. It's a good thing the K team has experts to help, and that Corey's stellar reputation as a cop help people believe in him. Many prosecution witnesses show they believe in Corey. The case is literally



down to the wire, but justice is served, Corey is found innocent and life goes on happily.

Rosenfelt is also the author of the Andy Carpenter series, and this is a nice addition to my collection. I love the cover with a very Handsome German Shepard wearing a badge on the cover. (I am currently serving as a chew toy for my new neighbor: a (now) 5 month old adorable German Shepard puppy.) I try to envision OSO as a K9, but he's too young.

Both of the series feature dogs, which is always a plus for me. The solving of the crime was done in a way that kept my interest well into the night. I highly recommend this new series.

### TROPIC OF STUPID

by Tim Dorsey  
Morrow, \$27.99

24th Serge A. Storms adventure

#### Rating: A

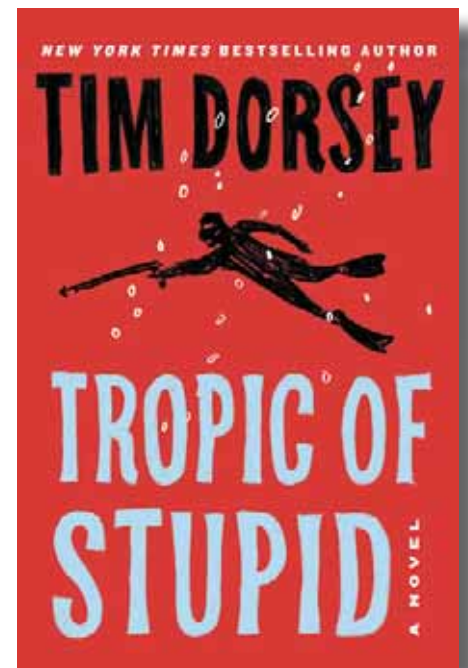
There must be something in the water or air in Florida to make people act and think as they do. Serge A. Storm is an example of one type of Floridian. Serge is a true son of Florida and an amateur historian. Reading about one of his adventures is like being on a guided tour of some of the more interesting places in the state.

This time out, Serge has an interest in family history. He's using a DNA testing service to find relatives and is on the road to track down kin. He's also getting his park passport book stamped, and has his buddy Coleman with him. A baseball star makes a cameo appearance, which adds to the flavor of the trip.

Serge finds he might be related to a serial killer who was active in Florida years ago, and was never caught. He befriends a man who had been helped in childhood by his local priest, but has fallen out of touch with him in many ways. Now a ruthless lawyer, with enough money for several lifetimes, but still wanting more. He has a change of heart and meets Serge in his new profession working in local parks. Along the way, Serge conducts some "interesting" vigilante actions, and helps out deserving people.

Reviewing Dorsey is wonderful in the reading part, but difficult in writing the actual reviews. There is so much to savor, and much of it hard to describe in a way that makes sense in this unsettled world. I can say that you need to buckle up and sit down for a wild and crazy ride. I'm wondering if there will be a

Serge A. Storms theme park in the future. I can only hope to live to go there if it happens.



# Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



## HOUSE STANDOFF

by Mike Lawson

Atlantic Monthly, \$26.00, April

**Rating: A-**

Joe DeMarco takes some time off from his duties as the “fixer” for House Speaker Mahoney. Shannon Doyle, Joe’s former girlfriend, has been murdered in Waverly, a remote town in Wyoming. She was a best-selling fiction writer who was in Wyoming researching the setting for a new novel. Her death is being passed off as a random killing by a trucker just passing through town. DeMarco doesn’t buy that and wants to see her killer brought to justice. So he dupes his boss into thinking he’s working on something else and heads to Wyoming. Once there, it doesn’t take too long for him to discover that the local sheriff’s department has not conducted a proper investigation and is in “cover up” mode. So DeMarco puts on his big-boy Jack Reacher hat and stirs up the locals as he looks into the most prominent family in the town – famous for their “standoff” with Federal officials over grazing rights on Federal land.

One might miss the incorrigible Speaker of the House Mahoney and other characters we have come to know in DeMarco’s Washington, D.C. circle, but I’m sure we’ll get reacquainted in Mike Lawson’s next book. In the meantime it was refreshing to see how DeMarco handled a totally unfamiliar landscape.

It seems impossible to me that this is the 15<sup>th</sup> in the series. Where has the time gone? I have read and gained great enjoyment out of them all. Whenever I think of this series I think of the phrase: “consistently high quality.”

Quiz: Can you name five prominent mystery writers who live in Wyoming? How about C. J. Box, Craig Johnson,

Lee Child, his brother Andrew Grant (Child) and Andrew’s wife Tasha Alexander.

## SEARCH FOR HER

by Rick Mofina

MIRA, \$9.99, March 9, 2021

**Rating: A-**

Grace and John have been through a lot. A few years ago Grace’s husband was killed in an auto accident and John’s wife and daughter died in a sailing accident. After these traumas, Grace and John met, fell in love and married. Grace brought her daughter Riley to the marriage and John brought his son Blake. As one would expect, the melding of the two families has been a little bit rocky.

John has decided to move the family from San Diego to Pittsburgh for better

employment and to give everyone a fresh start. Riley doesn’t want to leave her boyfriend and is very resistant to the move. To make things a little easier, John and Grace have rented an RV to make the trip and to see some of the sights along the way.

They make a stop at a massive truck stop just south of Las Vegas. Riley is sleeping off a recent fit she threw when her phone was taken away, so they decide not to wake her when they leave the RV and visit the facilities. Back on the road they discover that Riley isn’t in the RV and they turn around to return to the truck stop and get into a serious accident. By now Grace is frantic.

The ensuing search for the fourteen-year-old takes us on a twisty-turny ride that includes surprising revelations about all the family members. Is Riley running from her family or has she been kidnapped? Friends from California come to join in the search as investigators dig deep and then deeper.

Once again, Rick Mofina’s reporter’s keen eye for detail is on full display. His novels have the feel of a true crime narrative and are eminently believable and readable. It is why he is a Barry Award winner and such a favorite with the *Deadly Pleasures* “crowd.”

**SEARCH FOR HER** is a combination missing child thriller blended into a domestic suspense novel. If you haven’t sampled Rick Mofina yet, this novel or the Barry-Award-winning **MISSING DAUGHTER** may be the best place to start.

## A MAN NAMED DOLL

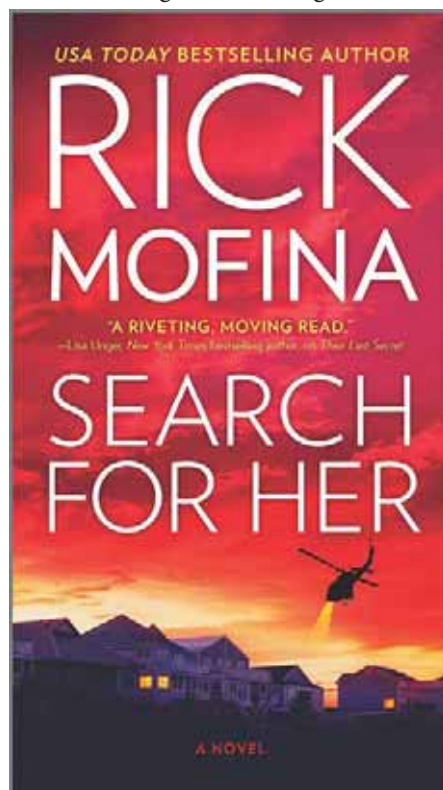
by Jonathan Ames

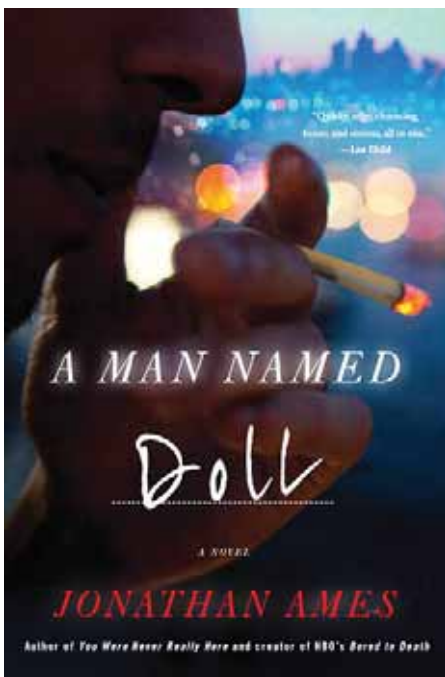
Mulholland, \$26.00

**Rating: A-**

Happy Doll (don’t ask how he got that name) is a Navy vet and ex-LAPD. Now he calls himself a P.I., but one with no current clients. He makes do by working as a bodyguard (graveyard shift) at a local Thai spa that offers its clients special services. He is there to protect the female employees from clients who have trouble with the concept of “no.”

Two events occur that change his life. One is when an old friend, in need





of a kidney transplant, asks him for one of his kidneys. Doll procrastinates in his response and his buddy seeks a more dangerous alternative. The other is when a drugged-up client of the spa threatens the life of one of the girls and Doll winds up in a life-and-death struggle.

When his buddy comes to his door he has been shot in the stomach and soon after dies. Happy goes in search of the villain or villains, with unpredictable results.

At 177 pages, this is an enjoyable, quick read, full of quirky characters and a thrill-paced and exciting plot line. I hope this is the beginning of a series. Happy Doll makes me happy.

#### THE DEVIL'S HAND

by Jack Carr

Atria/Emily Bester, \$28.00, April

**Rating: A-**

James Reece has been welcomed back into the folds of the CIA, despite the objections of some who resent the havoc he created in exacting revenge for the deaths of his wife and daughter (as well as some of the soldiers he served with). But he is taking some time off to finish what he started. There is one more name on his terminal list and he goes in search of that person.

The new President of the United

States also bears a serious grudge. His beloved fiancée was killed in the Twin Towers on 9/11. He has never married and secretly has sworn vengeance against all responsible. POTUS and Reece have a private meeting at Camp David in which the President outlines what he wants Reece to do. Reece agrees to do the President's private bidding.

Reece's plans intersect with those of some Iranian agents, led by Hafez Qassem, who wish to unleash a hemorrhagic virus on certain American cities, which, if successful, would force the President of the United States to make a difficult decision of possible epic and tragic proportions. Like any good thriller, this is a race against time.

Carr also includes in the narrative a fairly detailed synopsis of political and military decision-making as it pertains to the Middle East and describes policy, legislation and Executive orders that have brought us decades of conflict in that region. This is something rarely found in an action thriller but it adds a realistic context to the storyline. This is fiction but may have more kinship with reality than we care to contemplate – scary in concept and exciting in execution.

#### BREAKOUT

by Paul Herron

Grand Central, \$28.00, April

**Rating: B+**

It can't be a good thing if you are ex-cop Jack Constantine, who now finds himself in prison for killing those responsible for the murder of his pregnant wife. But wait ... things can get even worse – in the form of a convergence of two Category 5 hurricanes merging into one megastorm. When the storm hits, the correctional officers at Ravenhill flee (except for a rookie, Kiera Sawyer, who is left behind) and the 800 inmates are left on their own to survive. It becomes questionable which poses the greatest danger: the storm outside or the inmates inside, who seem intent on settling scores with a killing frenzy. Jack is one of those who want to settle up with the surviving members of the team who killed his wife. And there is a crime boss who blames Jack for his incarceration,

during which his beloved wife died in his absence.

Kiera and Jack team up with the plan of traversing the prison blocks to get to the place where they just maybe can get to higher ground to an abandoned part of the prison complex. Meanwhile water is pouring into the prison and the walls are crumbling.

Herron keeps the tension ratcheted up but in the end there seemed too many obstacles to realistically prevail against and I became skeptical and jaded. It is a great premise for a novel and I give kudos to the author for coming up with the idea. It is not a long book, but I feel it would have served the reader well if it had been shorter.

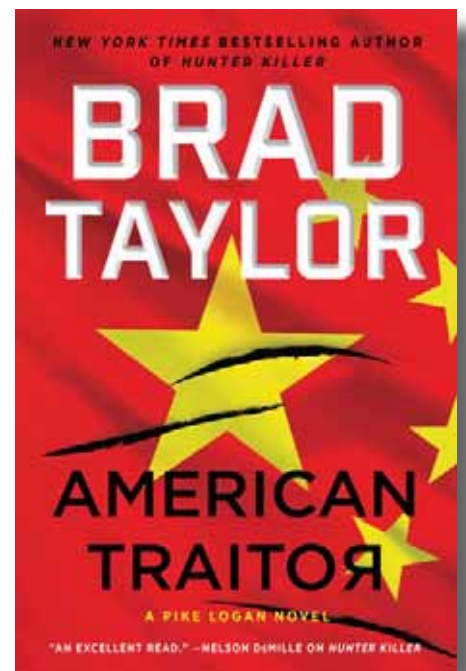
#### AMERICAN TRAITOR

by Brad Taylor

Morrow, \$28.99

**Rating: B+**

What starts out as a planned vacation for Jennifer and Pike turns out to be anything but that. Arriving at their friend Dunkin's apartment in Adelaide, Australia, they encounter three thugs bent on mayhem. Not much of a challenge for the likes of Pike and Jennifer who are as skilled as they come from years of service in the Taskforce, a sub-rosa entity for special operations, supervised by POTUS and others in



Cabinet-level positions.

It seems that Dunkin (tech guy/hacker) has become a danger to a Chinese mole at his new place of work, and the Chinese want to eliminate the threat to their plans.

Pike and Jennifer have unwittingly stepped into a conspiracy to undermine the security of Taiwan and provoke an attack by mainland China.

The setting surrounding the mainland China/Taiwan tensions is certainly topical and insightful.

**AMERICAN TRAITOR** contains a number of exciting and realistic action scenes throughout the narrative that take place in Australia and then Taiwan. There is a whopper of a coincidence that leads the team to the whereabouts of one of the main “bad guys.” This stretched my ability to suspend disbelief a bit too far. Considering world events, the plot is very timely and informative. A good beach read.

### **BASIL’S WAR**

by Stephen Hunter

Mysterious Press, \$23.95, May

**Rating: B-**

Back in 2015, Stephen Hunter wrote a novella called **CITADEL**, which Otto Penzler published under his bookstore imprint Mysterious Bookshop. It is part of a long series of bibliomystery novellas written by famous mystery and thriller writers for publication as small paperbacks and limited hardcover editions. At some point, either Stephen or Otto got the idea to turn **CITADEL** into a full-length novel and that is how **BASIL’S WAR** came to be.

Basil St. Florian is an experienced agent provocateur in the British Army. He is given a task (that is slowly revealed in the novel) that entails a clandestine entry into Nazi-occupied France, which he accomplishes in an unorthodox manner. His skills as a con man, pick pocket and master of disguise come into play as he travels to Paris under imminent threat of capture.

Basil’s nominal task is to gain entrance to a distinguished Parisian library containing many valuable tomes and take photographs of certain pages of an extremely rare manuscript (only

two copies in the world). These photos will enable English code breakers (led by professor Alan Turing) to thwart present Nazi plans and Russian post-war ambitions.

By the seat of his pants is the only way to describe Basil’s modus operandi. For instance, it would have helped if he knew how to parachute or fly a plane, but he doesn’t and has to learn on the fly (yes, that is a pun.).

The rapid pacing of this novel made this another quick read for me. But for whatever reason **BASIL’S WAR** left me flat. The hero just wasn’t all that likeable – more than a bit puffed up if you ask me. There is some clever deduction and spy craft revealed at the end that brought it up a bit as far as my rating.

### **SUBURBAN DICKS**

by Fabian Nicieza

Putnam, \$27.00, June

**Rating: A-**

Strap yourself in for a wildly improbable and enormously fun ride.

Andie Stern seems like your typical suburban New Jersey housewife with four rambunctious kids and one more on the way. Her days are spent carting her kids around from one activity to another – day after day of the same old, same old. Andie pines for her former career as a budding (and brilliant) FBI profiler, but those days are beyond the

horizon in her rear-view mirror.

One day, one of her kids desperately has to go “number 1,” so she pulls into a gas station. Two bumbling, rookie cops are there, just having arrived to find a murdered attendant. They won’t let Andie use the restrooms and her daughter can’t hold it any longer and pees all over the crime scene.

During all this fuss Andie has observed what has occurred there and has formulated hypothesis and conclusions that differ with the police version released the next day.

This is where the story takes a huge leap. Andie ties a seemingly innocuous conversation with girlfriends about their town’s denial of permits to build swimming pools with the murder of the gas station attendant (who is from India). Some of you might find that leap highly improbable (it is) and stop reading right there. You’ll miss a lot of fun if you do.

Andie teams up with local, disgraced journalist Kenneth Lee, whom she knew in high school, and together they go in search of a murderer and investigate a decades-old conspiracy.

In mysteries there are some protagonists that just stand out by their force of personality and their likeability. Andie Stern is such a character. You may cringe at her maternal skills, but she is so entertaining that I became an instant fan.

Beware: there is quite a bit of New Jersey profanity with Andie being the family’s biggest contributor to their swear words jar.

I can see Janet Evanovich fans flocking to this title.

### **DEAD BY DAWN**

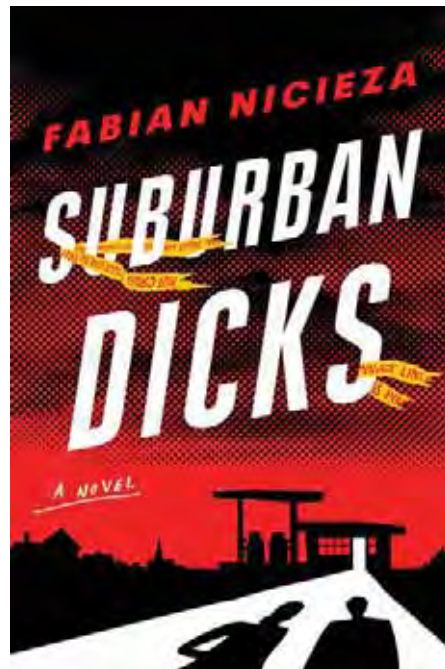
by Paul Doiron

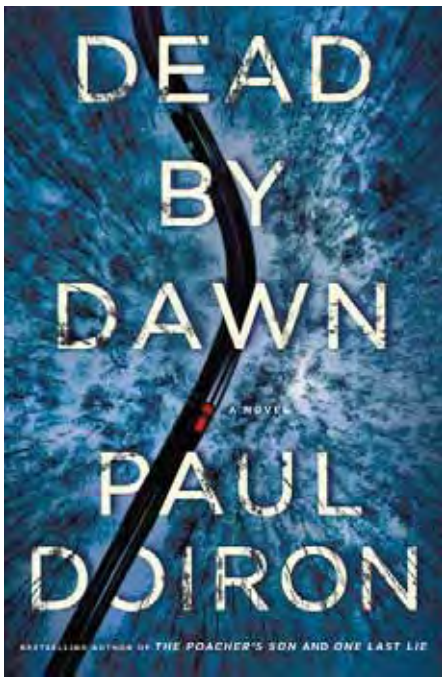
Minotaur, \$27.99, June

**Rating: A**

Maine game warden Mike Bowditch receives a letter from a relative of a wealthy professor who was declared a suicide four years ago when his body was fished out of a river. His daughter-in-law doesn’t believe the verdict and thinks that she can convince Mike to open the case again.

Meanwhile, it is time for Mike to take his half-wolf, half-dog Shadow for a





visit to his vet, a matter of a couple of hours' drive. The town where the rich professor drowned is close by to the vet's practice so Mike thinks he can kill two birds with one stone.

With Shadow sedated and sleeping in his custom carrier (he's really large and half-wild), Mike starts retracing the steps of the original investigation into the death of Professor Chamberlain. His interviews with the principal witnesses in the case are met with suspicion and mistrust on both sides. By the time he leaves in the early evening to head home, Mike definitely suspects that something is amiss, especially among the residents of Pill Hill.

He takes a turn a little bit too fast and encounters lots of sharp spikes that someone has spread across the road. His tires burst and he loses control of his vehicle, which plunges into the frozen river at the side of the road. He is now in a fight for survival for him and for Shadow. Nature seems to have stacked all of its elements against him, but it isn't just nature. There are humans that for some reason desperately want Mike dead. How he escapes from one threat after another makes for the most exciting thrill ride I've experienced with an action thriller in quite some time.

Once he enters the river, chapters al-

ternate between his attempts at survival and his earlier-in-the-day investigations. I can see why Paul Doiron structured the novel this way, but I found myself impatient to get through the investigative chapters to get to the survival chapters.

This will certainly be on my list for best thriller of 2021. But it's not just an action thriller. It's a pretty darn good novel of detection also. Great entertainment, Paul!

#### SHADOW TARGET

by David Ricciardi  
Berkley, \$27.00, June

**Rating: B+**

A little backstory is appropriate. This may contain spoilers for those who have not read this series. Zac Miller is a CIA desk-bound analyst who is suddenly called on to do dangerous field work in the first book in the series, **WARNING LIGHT**. He shows an unusually high aptitude for it, but it soon becomes evident that there are powerful forces (Iranian and otherwise) aligned against him, so his death is faked. A few months later, after some minor plastic surgery, he reappears as Jake Keller. The downside to this change in identity is that he has had to leave everything pertaining to his prior life behind, including the love of his life, Geneviève, an agent of the French intelligence service (DGSE).

Two years have passed since his identity switch and all this time Geneviève has thought Zac/Jake had died. But Jake is miserable and realizes that he has committed a major blunder by not communicating with her.

Fast-forward to the present and CIA agent Jake Keller is taking some well-deserved time off to go skiing in the French Alps. The small plane he is on crashes in the mountains and he is left the sole survivor. Jake narrowly escapes when others appear to finish him off. Subsequent attempts on his life convince him that he is on someone's hit list, so he engages friends for help – including Geneviève who gives him a very frosty reception, but later softens. Together they go in search of whomever is behind these attacks.

The smooth writing and action scenes are such that one can race lickety-split through **SHADOW TARGET**. But I didn't find this story line as realistically believable as his prior thrillers. Still good though. Good beach or airplane flight material.

#### Books Reviewed in Order of Preference

DEAD BY DAWN  
SUBURBAN DICKS  
SEARCH FOR HER  
HOUSE STANDOFF  
A MAN NAMED DOLL  
THE DEVIL'S HAND  
SHADOW TARGET  
AMERICAN TRAITOR  
BREAKOUT  
BASIL'S WAR

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### R.I.P.

**Jason Matthews**, an award-winning spy novelist who drew upon his long career in espionage and his admiration for John le Carre among others in crafting his popular "Red Sparrow" thrillers, has died at age 69. Matthews died from Corticobasal Degeneration (CBD), a rare, untreatable neurodegenerative disease. He graced the cover of *Deadly Pleasures* Issue # 82 (Winter 2018). A sad loss of an author who was just hitting his stride.





# L J Roberts

*It is purely my opinion*



## FROZEN

By Ann Cleeves - free e-shortstory  
Minotaur, 2020, 16 pp

**Rating A**

*First Sentence: Vera woke to a free day and an unexpected longing for exercise.*

It's her day off and DI Vera Stanhope takes the opportunity to visit a new bookshop located in a renovated chapel. What she was not looking for was a skeleton unearthed in a cellar baptismal font. Time for Vera to solve this long-cold case.

Cleeves' descriptions allow one to see places we've not been, in the present and the past—"Standing with her back to old stones, she imagined squads of legionnaires marching... they must have policed the region then, so she saw them as her forbears, as kindred spirits, and felt a connection across the centuries." Bringing us to the present, she carries forth that sense of timelessness with her wonderful imagery—"the building that had once been built to the glory of God, now celebrated the story in all its forms." Whereupon the mood is effectively broken, and the investigation begins.

Even though the books are separate from the television series, those who watch may clearly hear the voice of actress Brenda Blethyn as Vera. Rather than a negative, it adds a warmth and personal touch to the story. Still, this is not Vera's story alone, but one which includes her team, including Joe who is still her second in the books, and Holly in a scene that makes one smile. However, if one is looking for in-depth descriptions of the characters, or quantities of backstory, it's not here. This is a short

story, after all, and fits in after book 8 in the series.

What is here is atmosphere and Cleeve's creative use of the weather almost as another character. Nothing is lost in the construction of this fascinating short story. Suspects are identified, clues tracked down with twists and red herrings.

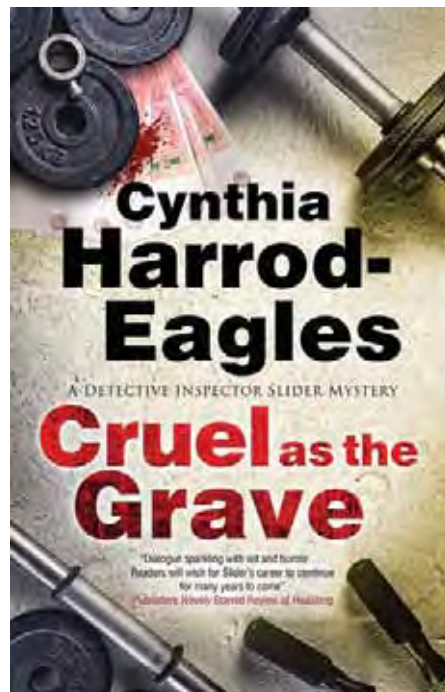
FROZEN may be a fairly simple story, but it is well-crafted and, if one has not previously read Ann Cleeves, this a perfect introduction to her writing and the Vera series.

## CRUEL AS THE GRAVE

By Cynthia Harrod-Eagles,  
22<sup>nd</sup> in series  
Severn House, Feb 2021, 256 pp

**Rating: B**

*First Sentence: Atherton was singing in his Dean Martin voice.*



Personal fitness trainer Erik Lingoss is found murdered in his flat by a young woman who fancied herself in love with him. A box full of cash in his closet, 700 pounds under his pillow, and his missing mobile phone indicates things may not be as indicated. The more Slider and his team investigate, the more suspects emerge. Under pressure to clear the case, they work to find the who and why of the murder.

Beginning a new book by Cynthia Harrod-Eagles is akin to being given one's favorite dessert. First, there is no prologue, not even one masquerading as a first chapter. The story begins on page one and continues to the end. Second, wonderful dialogue filled with wry humor—"Let he who is without sin bore the pants off everybody else." Last, the sense of time and place. Her evocative descriptions employ all the senses.

The characters are alive—"...Atherton stretched, catlike. Tall, elegant, sartor's plaything, he was as out of place at a dreary crime scene as an orchid in a vegetable patch." *The balance is Slider, not a Long-Ranger cop, but respected by a team where each has their role to play. The plot may initially present itself as straightforward, yet one knows it won't stay that way long—"Thirteen thousand pounds. ...Normal people don't keep large amounts of cash in the wardrobe."*

Including characters' families in the story adds humanity and dimension. Unlike the questionable stability of Atherton's relationship, Slider has an extended family of his wife, son and a child on the way, a daughter by his first marriage, a father and his partner. A wonderful hospital scene touches the heart.

The author's use of language, includ-

ing the chapter headings, is a pleasure. One small caution, or treat, is that it is very British, meaning there are numerous British terms and idioms. It can be confusing, but the meaning is easy enough to glean from the context—"The bathos almost made him smile." The use of malaprops—"Putting the cat before the horse, aren't you?"—and literary references are fun to spot. The banter between Slider and Atherton realistically reflects that of friends/colleagues who know each other well.

The plot focuses on the real police work of identifying the many suspects, following leads, and looking for evidence. What drives Slider as much as finding the killer is discovering the motive which is poignant.

**CRUEL AS THE GRAVE** is such a good read. Harrod-Eagles is a skilled writer who evokes empathy for the killer. It was truly the dessert's finishing touch.

#### CONSOLATION

By Garry Disher - 3<sup>rd</sup> in series  
Text Publishing, Nov 2020, 399 pp

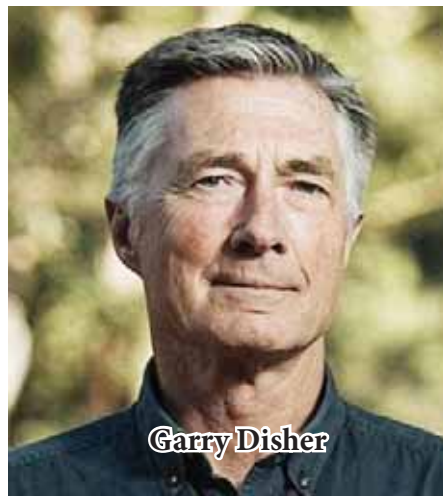
**Rating: B+**

*First Sentence: Did Hirsch own the town?*

Hirsch's territory covers a large area of not much in Tiverton, South Australia. It is up to him to keep the peace. Someone is stealing women's underwear. Although that seems a small thing, it is the sort of thing that can escalate. As the winter heat rises, so does the severity of the cases, exacerbated by a woman who has developed an obsession about Hirsch.

A very good introduction presents Constable Paul Hirschhausen "Hirsch" and the scope of his job, which is impressive in its scope and diversity. Issues range from the seemingly innocuous to the potentially dangerous. The jump from one incident to the next brings the residents into play. Hirsch isn't a cop who sits behind a desk, but spends his time walking the street, and driving the territory.

Disher is a wonderful wordsmith. One understands the works, and the



Garry Disher

meaning behind them. "Hirsch the mediator. He seemed to spend most of his time as father confessor, therapist, social worker, fixer and go-between. What he'd give for a plain old criminal and a plain old vanilla arrest."

It is not all serious. Hirsch's relationship with Wendy and her daughter provides normalcy, offset by his unwillingness to confront the woman who is stalking him as she becomes a threat. We see the openness of Northern Australia and the bone-chilling cold of summer.

As the story progresses Hirsch finds one should be careful of for what one wishes when things turn violent and deadly. "...his ABC of policing said: assume nothing, believe nothing, challenge everything."

**CONSOLATION** is a story of lives intertwined; the domino effect begun by the actions of one crashing into the lives of others. This is an author well worth reading.

#### FROM THE GRAVE

By David Housewright - 17<sup>th</sup> in series  
Minotaur, 2020, 312 pp

**Rating: B**

*First Sentence: The young woman who identified herself as a psychic medium moved with almost absentminded confidence among the fifty people who had paid forty dollars each for a seat in the community center lecture hall with the hope that she might help them connect with a dead mother or father, uncle*

*or aunt, a dead child—by no promises.*

From a friend who attended a psychic reading, former cop, Rushmore McKenzie, learns of a threat placed on his life by the spirit of Leland Hayes. McKenzie killed Hayes after Hayes escaped the scene of an armored car robbery leaving his son Ryan to take the fall. The money was never recovered. Now, more than 21 years later, a highly skeptical McKenzie becomes involved with two psychic mediums to find the money and, due to one of the mediums, to locate a missing woman.

To add a bit of light to the dark, McKenzie's partner, Nina owns a jazz club thought to be haunted. Nina's concern about the influence her late mother had her present actions gives both history and insight into the character.

Set in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, Housewright creates a strong sense of place, even for something as basic as Nina's condo. The interplay between the two characters is easy and natural—"I like your outfit." "Really? Last night you couldn't wait for me to take it off."—and a particular conversation between them provides good background and an explanation of their relationship. McKenzie's unpleasant neighbor provides a touch of normalcy. Mackenzie has an inner monologue that is used sparingly and effectively, often with a touch of humor. Housewright has also given him an excellent playlist.

It is always fun when an author references other authors. Because of the psychic aspect, he also references a number of popular paranormal investigation shows, but it is McKenzie's skepticism which keeps things grounded, until his skepticism is tested. Learning what goes on in the making of such shows is both interesting and demystifying without taking away from the possibility of actuality.

The other characters are well presented, with a couple of inside jokes. It is hard to say much about some of them, except that Housewright's approach to his characters is refreshing. There are several people out to find the missing

money. And some are what one might expect.

As the 17<sup>th</sup> book in the Rushmore McKenzie series, this book is somewhat lighter and less suspenseful than some. In this time of COVID-19 when many are having trouble concentrating, that's not a bad thing. Even so, the story does not lack for twists and red herrings.

**FROM THE GRAVE**, at its foundation, is a solid mystery, well-constructed and enjoyable. One may, or may not, accept the paranormal aspect, but it does provide an extra layer of creativity. However, best of all, is the ending that makes one smile.

### WHO SPEAKS FOR THE DAMNED

By C.S. Harris - 15<sup>th</sup> in series

Berkeley, 2020, 322 pp

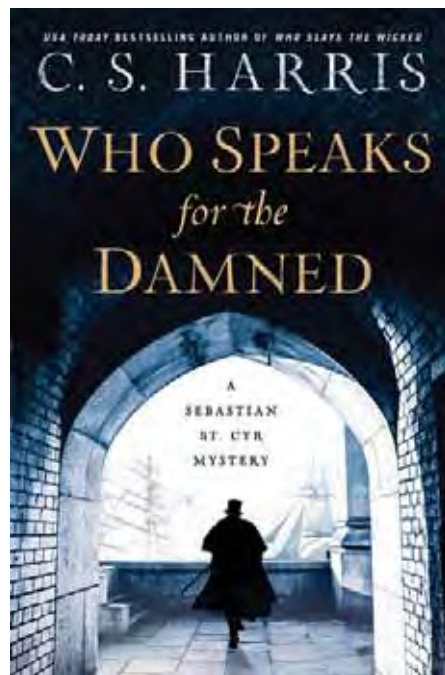
**Rating: A+**

*First Sentence: Alone and trying desperately not to be afraid, the child wandered the narrow, winding paths of the tea gardens.*

Nicholas Hayes, a son to the late Earl of Seaford, had been convicted of murder, transported to Botany Bay, and assumed dead. Instead, he returned to London and was murdered. An Asian child who had been with Hayes, finds the body and goes to Hayes' former friend James Calhoun, valet to St. Cyr. After which, the child disappears. It is now up to St. Cyr to find the child and uncover the murderer.

There is nothing better than a book that captivates your attention from the very beginning. One is introduced to several of the main and recurring characters, learns about their backgrounds, and is taken straight into the story.

Harris sets the story up beautifully, providing multiple motives and suspects. Nothing here is obvious. She also effectively conveys the fear felt by young Jai, alone in a foreign country. He is a character who touches the heart but also allows for an interesting look at China during this period. The historical information woven into the story is both informative and harshly factual. Harris makes no attempt to soften the image of



this time and confirms that bigotry has always existed.

Honorable characters have great appeal. When asked why Sebastian, a Viscount, after all, spends his time chasing murders, especially when the victims are despicable characters themselves, he responds: "Making certain a killer doesn't get away with what he has done is an obligation we the living owe to the dead—no matter how unsavory we consider them to be." ... "Am I not my brother's keeper?" ... "And because I believe we are all connected, every living thing one to the other, so that I owe to each what I would owe to myself." What a perfect definition of equal justice under the law.

The relationship between Devlin and his wife Hero is so well done. The intimacy is neither gratuitous nor salacious, and dialogue is very natural. Harris does involve Hero in the investigation, but in a way that makes sense for a woman of her time and rank.

This historical mystery set in 1814/Regency London, is well-plotted. It moves along at a good pace and presents twists at just the right points although one might wish authors weren't quite so predictable in their timing. That said, it is nice when one is surprised by a plot twist. The story grows with one revelation upon another. Rather than confusing, this adds to the intrigue of the

story. The inclusion of information on the forensics of the time adds veracity and interest.

Good dialogue makes all the difference, particularly when tinged with humor—"How precisely does one go about accosting a man in the middle of a ball in order to discuss the murder of someone who once ran off with his wife." "I don't know," said Sebastian. "But I'll think of something."

**WHO SPEAKS FOR THE DAMNED** is an excellent read. The mystery is well-plotted and solved with an ending that speaks to humanity and puts paid to all the ugliness caused by man. It draws one in from the start and keeps one engaged to the very end.

### SHADOWS IN DEATH

By J.D. Robb - 51<sup>st</sup> in series

St. Martin's Press, 2020, 368 pp

**Rating: B+**

*First Sentence: As it often did since he'd married a cop, murder interrupted more pleasant activities.*

Lt. Eve Dallas, with her husband, Roarke, goes to the scene of a murdered woman. While on-site, Roarke sees a man he knew from his past in Ireland. Lorcan Cobbe, a contract killer, claims he is Roarke's father's actual and first son. Lorcan hates Roarke enough to kill him, and everyone he loves. Eve is certain the dead woman's husband hired Cobbe to perform the hit. Eve's first task to proving the husband a killer, then stop Cobbe before he kills Roarke.

There are times when one wants an entertaining, captivating read. With her 51st book in the Eve Dallas series, Robb succeeds in creating exactly that. Yes, the plots are somewhat predictable, but the world Robb has created is visual, and the characters are ones about whom readers' care.

What is remarkable is that the ...**IN DEATH** series began in 1995 with the first book set in 2058 and Eve being 30 years old, releasing two Dallas books/year, plus the occasional novella. Set in 2061; three years and 51+/- cases later, this brings Eve's clearance rate to ~17 cases per year, or once every three weeks. What police department

wouldn't love that?

Robb has a deft hand when it comes to dialogue, even creating slang that fits for the near-future time period. How clever to use an expression known to readers in the present but would be anachronistic to the period. There are some great lines, and her wry humor is always a pleasure. A discussion on the subtle differences between colors leads to an internal observation—"Pea-body turned a little green—perhaps celadon—and turned her head to stare hard at the wall." Robb carries thoughts through from one scene to another with great deliberateness and ease.

One learns more about Roarke's childhood and one must respect that Robb, even this far into the series, still has new information to impart. One small irritant is Roarke's references to Eve being "his," making her seem a possession. However, this is mitigated by the realization that Eve claims Roarke in the same manner and showing it is a manifestation of their commitment of care and protection, and not possessiveness, even including those around them. Yes, the scenes of lovemaking are hot, but they are more about emotion than sex.

Eve is not perfect which makes her more real. She has areas of discomfort and gaps in her knowledge for anything beyond her job or her city—"They look like cops...I need them to look like farmers. Irish farmers," Eve added. "Who are out there doing farm stuff."

There is an urgency and intensity to the investigation which gives the sense of needing to run to keep up. The action scenes are visceral, tense, exciting, and filled with twists. They provide excellent examples of Eve's leadership and authority, and the respect she has earned. Even so, it is not a perfect book. There were opportunities for danger and suspense not taken, and the ending seemed too quick with a final scene a bit silly, albeit satisfying.

**SHADOWS IN DEATH** is an excellent remedy to offset the stress and uncertainty of these times in which we live.



### BLACK CORAL

By Andrew Mayne – 2<sup>nd</sup> in series  
Thomas & Mercer, Feb 2021, 317 pp

**Rating: A+**

*First Sentence: Everyone is looking at me funny.*

The Underwater Investigation Unit is called out to a submerged van at Pond 59. The passenger has been recovered; but Detective Sloan McPherson, the team's top diver, needs to recover the driver. Rather than one, she finds three bodies in the van, and evidence of a fifth person having been involved. The investigation puts McPherson and the UIU on the trail of the serial killer, while also trying to catch a thief stealing millions of electronic equipment off mega-yachts.

Mayne has a great voice layered with wry humor—"If you have any questions, please contact us through our website," George concludes." ... "We have a website?" I ask in a whisper." He is a true storyteller who creates wonderful characters that play into one another. One wants to share passages of his writing with others. Not every male author writes women well. Mayne is one who truly does, and it is a pleasure to read.

Sloane is fully dimensional. There

is a nice injection of the character's personal life which adds to balance to the story, injecting light into the dark. There is realism in admitting no one is a perfect parent. one provides compelling She is introspective both about the case—"I see two different men in front of me. One is the monster. The other is the victim. The victim didn't make the monster, but it sure did nurture him.", and her life as a cop—"...where do I go from here? Catching the New River Bandits was a good thing, but in no way deeply fulfilling."

Having Sloan be an archeologist, as well as a diver and cop, brings dimension to the character and opens interesting doors. The plot is very well done and filled with surprises, yet none of them feel contrived. The things one learns are unusual.

Periodic references to events from the first book, don't distract from the current story, nor does the crossover reference to Mayne's Theo Cray series. This book stands nicely on its own merit.

Of the two cases, one is fairly straight forward, but the second takes one down a surprising, twisty path with some definite "Oh, my" moments. Although the main plot is about a serial killer, the

book is far more suspenseful than gory.

**BLACK CORAL** is an excellent read full of humor, suspense, wicked good twists, and a very unexpected ending.

### FINAL OUT

By Sheldon Siegel – 12<sup>th</sup> in series  
Sheldon M. Siegel, Inc., Jan 2021, 303 pp

**Rating: B+**

*First Sentence: The Honorable Robert J. Stumpf, Jr. scanned the empty gallery in his airless courtroom on the second floor of San Francisco's crumbling Hall of Justice.*

Jaylen Jenkins is arrested for the murder of prominent San Francisco sports agent Robert Blum. He is on video holding a baseball bat walking toward Blum, and then running away without the bat. Jenkins claims he is innocent. But is he? Without contradictory evidence, can attorney Mike Daley and the team of the San Francisco Public Defender's Office use the "SODDI" defense to convince the jury that some other dude did it?

The story begins with a soft case to introduce the principal characters in a casual, conversational manner. In little time, one is taken into the meat of the story and a case that couldn't be more timely. One of the benefits is learning something new. Siegel walks readers through every aspect of the case allowing one to experience exactly what is involved. He educates without lecturing or slowing down the plot. After all, who else is familiar with the legal term "wobbler"? It is impossible to conceive knowing one is innocent and while being told accepting a plea sentence of eight years is a "good deal," yet that happens to so many.

Through the principal character, Mike, an ex-priest turned lawyer, Siegel created an excellent ensemble cast of Mike's family and friends. They are wonderfully drawn; brought to life mainly though his skill with dialogue. Even Mike's internal monologues add dimension to the character and the story. One appealing aspect of the character is his realism. This isn't a strutting, overly-confident lawyer, this is one who recognizes he could lose his case.

Set in the San Francisco Bay Area, captured in perfect detail, Siegel brings

the region into focus. It is always fun having a book set in one's hometown, being familiar with the places visited by the characters. It is even more amusing when the author's description of a particular building echoes one's own thoughts—"The Salesforce Tower dominated the San Francisco skyline and dwarfed the Transamerica Pyramid. It's impressive in its size and technology, but it looks like an enlarged phallic symbol to me."

Siegel's style is one of short, tightly written chapters that read almost as vignettes. Each chapter compels one to continue reading straight through to the end.

**FINAL OUT** is well written and completely involving. The underlying theme is a sad, but important truth about our justice system.

### HUNTRESS MOON

By Alexandria Sokoloff– 1<sup>st</sup> in series  
Thomas & Mercer, Jan 2015, 386 pp

**Rating: A**

*First Sentence: FBI Special Agent Matthew Roarke is closing in on a bust of a major criminal organization in San Francisco when he witnesses an undercover member of his team killed right in front of him on a busy street, an accident Roarke can't believe is coincidental.*

Waiting for his undercover agent to cross a busy street, Agent Matthew Roarke's attention is captured by a woman standing behind the agent. Moments later, the agent is dead, and the woman has disappeared. As he tracks the woman, he discovers several deaths at which she was present. Is she that most rare of killers: a female serial killer? She is canny, and always one step ahead leaving bodies behind as Roarke begins to piece together her motive and her objective.

What an intriguing book, and one where readers are kept off-guard from start to end. It's also a hard book to review without spoilers. Matthew Roarke is a driven character who we come to know in small bits. He is intuitive, yet logical; a perfect balance for someone in his job. But it's the female character who keeps us going. Initially, we don't know the identity of the killer until the "ah-ha" moment, and the tension builds from

there.

Information on the main characters is provided in bits as the story progresses. It is that information which then provides motive for their actions. Damien Epps, Roarke's second, is the breath of fresh air.

That the story is told in days heightens the suspense. The story alternatives between Roarke and the woman, and it works. The introduction of a man and his 14-year-old child raises the stakes even higher. The author has an ability not only to set the scene, but to convey the underlying emotions of it—"He steps through the open doorway, past the carved wooden door, into the entry hall with its white painted brick walls and tiled floor. ... The terror has turned every cell in his body to ice; his feet can barely move him forward."

Just as Sokoloff has not given the investigators anything definite they can track, she leaves the reader directionless. It is clear the moon has significance, but what is unknown. However, evil, the sense of it, is a prevalent and effective theme.

As the story progresses, the killer takes on the identity first as "Huntress," and finally her name and background are revealed with a powerful twist. The author's skill is clear in the killer's progression. I don't recall another author being able to transition one's attitude toward a killer in the way Sokoloff does.

This is not a perfect book. There are some plot holes and weaknesses such as the description of the Tenderloin, which is not nearly as grim as portrayed. The primary thing which did not ring true is Roarke, an FBI Agent, seemingly surprised by the idea of a female serial killer. He just could not be that naïve. Another slight miss was the inference of a supernatural element which was not developed.

**HUNTRESS MOON**, the first in the series, is rather a first chapter in one long book with an arching theme: Evil. It is a page-turner and truly a popcorn book in that no one will be able to read just one. If you like the first, chances are you will want to continue.

### A FATAL LIE

By Charles Todd, 23<sup>rd</sup> in series

William Morrow, Feb 2021, 349 pp

**Rating:** – C-

*First Sentence:* On his sixth birthday, Roddy MacNabb was given a fishing pole by his pa, with promises to teach him how to use it.

Scotland Yard Inspector Ian Rutledge is sent to Northern Wales where a man's body was pulled from the River Dee by a young boy. It's first thought the man had fallen from the viaduct that spans high above the river, but there are no signs of a fall, no identification on the body, and no one claims to know him. Only a few clues lead Rutledge on a trail to identify the victim, recreate the man's recent travels, and uncover both the motive and the person responsible for the man's death, and those that follow.

Authors strive to create a good "hook," the opening which will compel the reader to keep turning the pages. Todd's opening does that very effectively.

Ian is a unique character. Shell shock: i.e., PTSD, from WWI has left him with the voice of Hamish, a soldier executed for desertion, in his head. We are reminded of the cost of war, not only in the number of the dead, but the lasting impact on the veterans and their families—"A fine soldier, liked by his men, he didn't suffer, and we must be proud of him, for he gave his life for his King and Country. That isn't terribly reassuring, is it?"

It is always fascinating to read about the forensics of the time. Todd weaves details of places, such as the operations of the aqueduct, and history, the Bantam Battalions, smoothly into the story. These create strong visual images and play into the fact that in the days before technology, police work was done by pulling the thread of clues, a lot of travel, and intuition.

One does need to keep track of who is where. Between the character names and Ian traveling from place to place, and back again, it can become confusing. Pulling up a map proves helpful. It is also a challenge to follow the timeline. There is a lack of clarity as to when things happened as there can be the impression of something happening in the past only to realize it is in the recent past. Follow the trail of bodies which are always one

step in front of Ian. Yet it seems to take a while before any real progress is made and then, after all the to-ing and fro-ing, there is the great and complete confession. Good grief.

**A FATAL LIE** is a good book, but not as good as usual. The dialogue was weak, the usual wry humor was completely lacking, and the book could have used some serious editing and simplifying. One wonders whether because of COVID, the authors had little to do but write, so they just kept putting things in. Here's hoping for a crisper, more involving book #24.

### SPITEFUL BONES

By Jeri Westerson - 14<sup>th</sup> in Guest series  
Severn House, 2020, 192 pp

**Rating:** B+

*First Sentence:* Nigellus Cobmartin stood in the courtyard of his family home – its garden walls crumbling, its arched windows overlooking the tired and weedy garden with its dead flowers and gnarled trees – and sighed.

The year is 1398, and Crispin Guest's house is filled with his assistant Jack, his wife Isabel, and their many children, as well as the satisfaction of watching grow and providing training for Christopher Walcote, the son he can never acknowledge. Into that tranquility comes John Rykener/Eleanor Cobmartin with an urgent summons. In restoring the home, he inherited, John's "husband's" workers uncover a body holding a precious relic. The body had been bound and sealed within a wall for 20 years. It is up to Crispin to discover the killer while protecting the secret of John's true identity.

One can appreciate when the author of an historical mystery, provides a section of "Notes About Characters," as well as a "Glossary." The sections are not only helpful but interesting in themselves.

No one stays the same age forever, having characters who age, and whose life circumstances change, adds realism to the story and, in the 14<sup>th</sup> book of this series, much has changed for Westerson's characters. Readers of the series will appreciate that, but even new readers are given a sense of how time has progressed.



**Jeri Westerson**

Westerson has a wonderful voice. Her dialogue is reflective of the period without being mired in it. She writes with a balance of humor and drama. It is interesting to see how, even in this period, forensic evidence was taken into account—"But it looks as if someone coshed him good. Aye, look at the wood of the uprights here. If he was still awake, there would have been scratches and scuffs from a struggle." One issue, however, is the frequent use of Latin phrases. While it is very appropriate to the period, an immediate translation of each phrase, as is often done by other authors, would not have been amiss. Still, there are lines which make one smile—"Sometimes, Jack, the Church, in all its wisdom, is lacking when it comes to compassion."

The relationships are enjoyable and add dimension yet don't overtake the plot. They provide richness and emotion. One becomes attached to the characters. There are times where one might question whether Crispin is too modern; too good, too noble. Yet, it is part of the development one has seen in the character and is part of what draws one back to the series.

**SPITEFUL BONES** presents an effective twist and an exciting climax. Historical mystery devotees will be pleased.

# Lookin' For A Few Good Books

Larry Gandle



## WIN

by Harlan Coben  
(Grand Central, \$29.00)

**Rating: B+**

Windsor Home Lockwood III was always a shadowy figure in the Myron Bolitar series. He was Myron's kung fu sidekick who could always provide some muscle to any situation. Harlan has now decided to devote a book specifically to Win.

Over twenty years ago, Win's cousin, Patricia, was abducted from her home and his uncle was killed. Two famous masterpieces were stolen, as well. Patricia escaped and her kidnappers were never identified or found. Now, a recluse is found murdered in an exclusive apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. In the apartment is one of the stolen paintings, as well as, a suitcase belonging to Win. The recluse was part of a domestic terror cell that bombed a

building, killing multiple people. He was never brought to justice. Now Win must discover why this man had his family's painting and his suitcase. In order to do that, he must solve the decades long crime that the FBI could not solve.

This is a clever, fun book and Harlan makes Win a unique character who is fun to be around. It is a welcome change from the dull, dreary and depressing PI novels that are so prevalent in the genre. Money is not a problem for Win, so he can fly anywhere at a moment's notice and never appears to be part of the minutia of daily life we all experience. Characters are well done. The pacing is brisk. The plot does get a bit convoluted requiring a very long exposition at the end. However, overall it is a recommended read.

**George's Take:** Win is more of an anti-hero than a hero and more of a fascinating character than a likeable one. His actions often veer in the direction of vigilantism and his reliance on his physical prowess and great wealth don't always protect him from serious bodily harm. Harlan Coben's forte' is his plotting and that skill is on evident display in **WIN**. It was a quick, enjoyable read full of moral ambiguity, but I preferred last year's Barry-Award-nominated **THE BOY FROM THE WOODS** to this one.  
**Rating: B+**

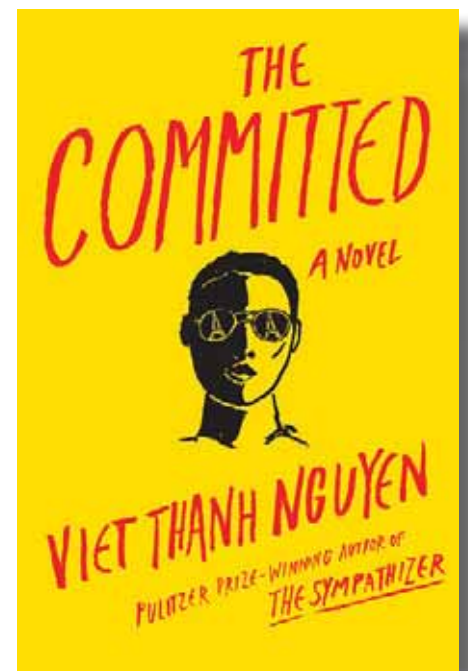
## THE COMMITTED

by Viet Thanh Nguyen  
(Grove, \$27.00)

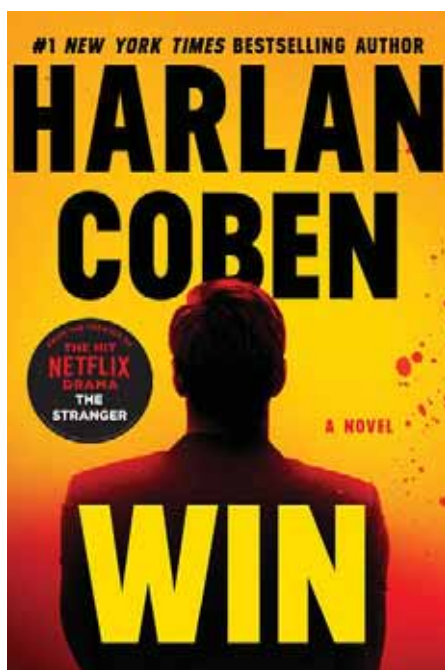
**Rating: B**

The unnamed narrator from **THE SYMPATHIZER** is back. He has traveled to Paris in the early 1980s which, as a Vietnamese, is his spiritual home. He is there with his best friend, Bon.

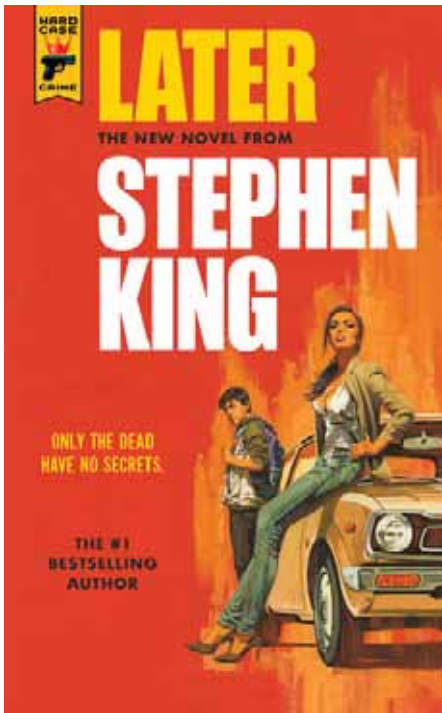
Together they get involved in a criminal enterprise selling drugs and running other 'errands' for the mobsters. He lives with his French Vietnamese 'aunt', a left wing radical, who along with her various lovers, have numerous intellectual discussions with the narrator about Viet Nam political ideology.



This is a book that is quite evidently well written and well thought out. Judging it as a crime fiction novel (which it is touted as), the book is a bit too meandering with the political ideology. It reads quite slowly as the reader must concentrate to clearly understand the multiple ideas that are discussed. Any action scenes are few and far between and it is only in these scenes that the pacing picks up and the plot becomes more interesting. The characters are well fleshed out and the research that went into this book is obviously extensive.



**THE COMMITTED** is a very good book but, unfortunately, I would look for anything else to do rather than sit down and read this book. The bottom line is that I admired the work but didn't particularly enjoy it. Recommendation for the reader wanting a more intellectual read.



### LATER

by Stephen King  
(Hard Case, \$14.95)

**Rating: B+**

Jaime Conklin tries to be an ordinary kid but he sees dead people. He discovered this at age six and Tia, his single mother is aware of his ability. When his mother's girlfriend, Liz, an NYPD detective asks for his help in solving a crime relating to a dead criminal, Jaime's life takes a more dangerous course as he must contend with some deadly demons.

Nobody can capture childhood characters as well as Stephen King. The narrator mentions multiple times that it is a horror story and, as such, the reader must accept that Jaime sees dead people and the stringent situation that the author makes up for that to occur. For example, the ghosts are around the dead body but can wonder off. They only last for a few days before they disappear. That is, until another demon takes

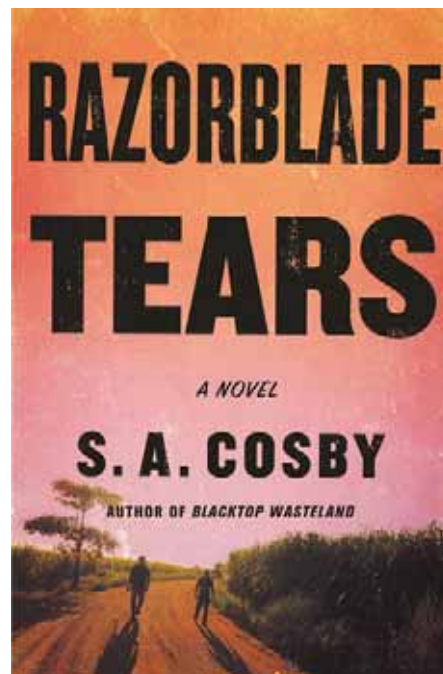
over a ghost. In other words, the author changes the rules as he sees fit. It is silly but the story is compelling and the length is relatively brief for a Stephen King novel. It is not his best effort, but recommended for the pool or the plane.

### RAZORBLADE TEARS

by S. A. Cosby  
Flatiron Books, \$26.99, June  
**Rating: A+**

Ike and Bobby Lee are attending their son's funerals. Their sons were married to each other and both were brutally killed- gangland style. Ike is an imposing black man who owns and runs a landscaping business and Bobby Lee is a racist redneck currently unemployed. Both of them are ex- cons and both of them treated their gay sons miserably. They were terrible fathers and feel remorse over their relationships with their sons. In an effort to assuage their guilt, they join forces in order to avenge their son's deaths even if it means they must sacrifice their own lives. The police have put the murder investigation on hold as they have no new leads. It is up to Ike and Bobby Lee to uncover the truth no matter how dangerous to themselves and, in Ike's case, his family.

The mystery community has been raving about **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**, in my mind, the best novel of



last year. Believe it or not, this book is even better. Now, I will admit that reality must be suspended at times. However, this book is not only an exciting thriller, there is much depth to the writing, as well.

Race, LGBT, class structure is all covered here. Ike and Bobby Lee form an unlikely pair who reminded me of Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier in the *Defiant Ones*. Both characters learn a lot about tolerance and respect from each other.

There is also much humor in some of their exchanges. Crime fiction is not necessarily about literary fiction. It is really about entertainment and how the particular story reflects reality. This book does both.

Michael Connelly is a close friend of mine. While reading one of his stories, I quoted one of his many truly literary passages so beautifully written to him. He told me that he was having a really good writing day when he wrote that. Well, Shawn had a lot of good writing days with this book.

The plot is totally compelling and the pacing is relentless, overall. I could not put it down. Well, after two superb books, I am really excited about this author. In fact, I will say that no other author has excited me as much about their work since Lee Child came on the scene. Highly, highly recommended.

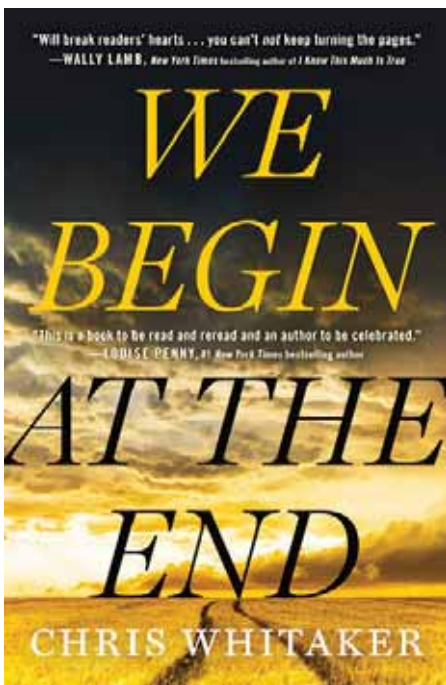
### WE BEGIN AT THE END

by Chris Whitaker  
Henry Holt, \$27.99

**Rating: A-**

Duchess Day Radley is a very precocious thirteen-year-old living in a small California coastal community. She is fiercely protective of her five-year-old brother, Robin, while their mother, Star, is unable to take care of them due to her drinking and self-absorption. Walk is the local Police Chief who grew up with Star and his best friend, Vincent King, who he helped convict for causing the death of Star's sister thirty years ago. Well, Vincent is getting out of prison and Walk will pick him up while, hopefully, aiding Vincent's return to freedom. Another death soon occurs which may put Vincent back behind bars but





Walk is convinced of his innocence and must now try to prove it.

This is, overall, a well written character driven regional mystery with some thoughtfully created characters. However, I could not buy into Duchess as a thirteen-year-old. She knows too much, is way too promiscuous and in no way thinks like a child. I am not convinced she is realistic, at all. Yet, she, along with Walk, are the central characters of this very long novel. Minor characters are superficial and stereotypic. The plot is quite compelling and there are plenty of twists and turns throughout. The story just seems to go on and on with some pointless episodes that serve no purpose other than to bulk up the book. There is enough emotional devastation, as well as, surprises along the way to raise this book above the ordinary. It is still highly recommended and one of the year's best.

### Books Reviewed in Order of Preference

RAZORBLADE TEARS  
WE BEGIN AT THE END  
WIN  
LATER  
THE COMMITTED

## Australian Crime Fiction

### SHORE LEAVE

by David Whish-Wilson  
Fremantle, \$A32.99

#### Rating: A

David Whish-Wilson is one of the best purveyors of gritty, credible, hard-boiled Australian crime fiction. His series about Perth detective Frank Swann in the 1980s is a stand-out and the latest entry, *Shore Leave*, maintains the high standard of its predecessors.

It is the summer of 1989 and the US aircraft carrier, the *USS Carl Vinson*, is docked in Fremantle and discharging hundreds of sailors keen for a good time. Things go sour very quickly, however, when there appears to be a link between the arrival of the ship and the murder of two women. US Navy Master-at-Arms Steve Webb approaches his old friend Frank Swann, now retired from the police, for assistance with the local law. Before long Swann, who is suffering from an undiagnosed debilitating disease, is caught up in the hunt for a killer and having to deal with the possible theft of a cache of M16s from the ship. Adding to Swann's problems, are an escaped con and the unwanted attention of a crooked cop from the Gold Squad.

It is a busy storyline, but Whish-Wilson keeps it well under control and pushes his plot along at a brisk pace, with hardly a wasted word. He skilfully shifts the viewpoint between an interesting cast of well-developed characters and takes the reader on a scary journey through the local 1980s milieu of biker gangs, drug dealers, crooked cops and white supremacists. The descriptions, characters and dialogue are spot-on and honest, and Whish-Wilson really captures the sense of the dark side of the city.

Overall, *SHORE LEAVE* is a very tense and enjoyable crime novel, that

builds to a good, if morally ambiguous, ending.

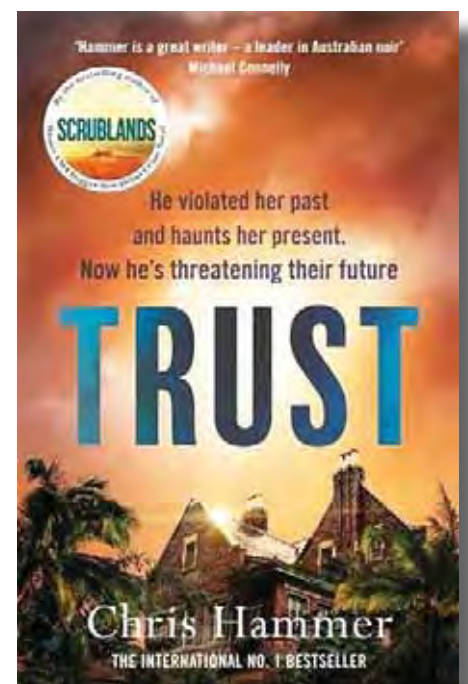
### TRUST

by Chris Hammer  
Allen & Unwin, \$A32.99

#### Rating: A-

After successful forays into outback noir and small town crime, Australian author Chris Hammer now turns his attention to big city corruption with his third novel, *Trust*.

Former journalist and successful true crime writer, Martin Scarsden is enjoying a peaceful time on the beach when a desperate phone call sends him rushing home to find an unconscious man sprawled on the floor and his partner, Mandalay (Mandy) Blonde, missing. It soon becomes clear that Mandalay has been kidnapped and that the reason for it lies in Sydney and her murky past with an apparent swindler, who years before stole millions from a bank before disappearing.



The discovery of a body causes a rethink of what happened five years ago, and Scarsden and Mandy suddenly find themselves in the centre of a bloody search for the missing millions. Meanwhile Scarsden's investigation into a large scale case of corruption takes him down some dangerous and unexpectedly tragic paths.

**TRUST** is a tightly constructed and well-paced crime thriller that smoothly moves along to a suitably surprising and bloody finale. It twists its way through several unexpected developments, and, despite its length, Hammer keeps the suspense at a high level and the final chapters are gripping and exciting.

As with the earlier books, **SCRUBLANDS** and **SILVER**, all the characterisations are astute, well developed and subtly drawn. The central pairing of Scarsden and Mandalay come across as credible characters with flaws and secrets who are trying to make the best of what life has given them. Scarsden is particularly well drawn and believably torn between his new life and the pull of being a journalist again.

There are also vivid descriptions of Sydney and sharp eyed comments on politics, corruption and the sense of economic unfairness that cloaks modern Australian society. Hammer also frequently takes aim at the superficiality of modern journalism and the "clickbait and frippery" of today's newspapers.

In all, **TRUST** is a terrific read that kept me enthralled from beginning to end. I enjoyed the plotting and the rich, evocative descriptions of **SCRUBLANDS**, but I think that **TRUST** is a stronger, more compelling and ultimately more thrilling crime novel.

### **TELL ME LIES**

by J. P. Pomare

Hachette, \$A24.95

**Rating: B+**

New Zealander J. P. Pomare, who now lives in Australia, attracted considerable praise for his first two novels, **THE CLEARING** and the award winning **CALL ME EVIE**. He has now followed them up with an enjoyable third novel, **TELL ME LIES**.

**TELL ME LIES** apparently started

life as an Audible Original, but has now been made available in book form. Set in Melbourne, it opens with a horrific incident at a train station, before backtracking to explore the events that led up to it. The focus of the story is psychologist Margot Scott who lives a seemingly pleasant life in the suburbs with her husband and two children. The easy flow of her life is disrupted when she takes on a new client, the enigmatic Cormac Gibbons. Margot knows that he is lying to her, but then all her clients do. What she does not know is whether he is behind an escalating series of attacks on her, or whether it is one of her other clients. As things unravel, she begins to even question aspects of her own past.



**TELL ME LIES** is a nicely paced psychological thriller, with a good rhythm to the story telling and a growing sense of unease. The back and forth between Margot and her clients would have worked well as an Audible book, and in written form it engages the reader and keeps them interested. The conversations are nicely balanced by Margot's increasing sense of anxiety and the increasing attacks on her.

The characters are well crafted and Pomare effectively uses his Melbourne backdrop to ground the story. The pacing increases as the story progresses and Pomare produces some good surprises. Some of the twists are predictable, but one took me totally by surprise.

In all a quick, enjoyable thriller that builds to a dark and thoughtful conclusion.



### **DOOM CREEK**

by Alan Carter

Fremantle, \$A32.99

**Rating: B+**

Alan Carter's **MARLBOROUGH MAN** introduced former British policeman Nick Chester who moved to a remote part of New Zealand to escape the Geordie gangsters who were after him. Having survived the dangers of the first book, Chester is back and trying to live a quiet life as a police sergeant in the almost idyllic Marlborough Sounds.

**DOOM CREEK** opens with Chester dealing with minor disputes between gold prospectors and the tensions caused by a bunch of trigger happy Americans looking to build a post-apocalyptic bolt-hole in a nearby valley. Things soon escalate, however, when a murder occurs and one of Chester's team is assaulted by a masked man. A bizarre cold-case murder investigation also adds to the pressure and Chester quickly finds himself caught up in a rapidly deteriorating situation, which is not helped by his own health concerns.

**DOOM CREEK** is a very well written crime novel that steadily draws you in and catches you up in the dramas faced by Chester and his team. The plot proceeds in a logical manner and there some good surprises along the way to the taut and tense finale.

Carter brings a nice hard edge to the story telling and there are also some good humorous touches. Chester is a well-fleshed out and credible character and the rest of the cast are also nicely defined and believable, especially the marvellous Constable Latifa Rapata. Carter nicely captures the feel and concerns of small town New Zealand and the descriptions of the countryside are rich and evocative.

There are a couple of sluggish places, but otherwise this is a well-paced and accomplished crime novel.

# What's New in the U.K.



**THE CROCODILE HUNTER**, Gerald Seymour (Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99, April). In the office at MI5 where he works, they call Jonas Merrick 'the eternal flame'. It isn't a compliment. It's because he never goes out. He never goes undercover, never does surveillance, never goes with the teams that kick down the doors or seize the suspects off the street. But Jonas has qualities the hot-shots fail to notice: a steely concentration, a ruthless ability to focus and find the enemy hiding in plain sight. Hearing of a British Jihadi returning from Syria with murderous plans, Jonas decides to dig deeper..

**MISSING PIECES**, Tim Weaver (Michael Joseph, £12.99, April). Rebekah Murphy has been missing for five months. Why is no one looking for her?

**THE ROYAL SECRET**, Andrew Taylor (HarperCollins, £14.99, April). Two young girls plot a murder by witchcraft. Soon afterwards a government clerk dies

painfully in mysterious circumstances. His colleague James Marwood is asked to investigate – but the task brings unexpected dangers.

**FORFEIT**, Barbara Nadel (Headline, May). In the early hours of the morning, Turkish TV star Erol Gencer is found dead at his home on the outskirts of Istanbul. Beside him lies a Syrian refugee whose stomach has been split open. Did Gencer kill his guest before committing suicide, or are they victims of a sinister double murder? The dead Syrian is soon identified as Wael Al Hussain, whose wife, Samira, is in prison for attempting to kill Gencer a year ago.

**LEFT YOU DEAD**, Peter James (Macmillan, May). With his wife Eden gone without a trace, Niall is arrested on suspicion of her murder. When DS Roy Grace is called in to investigate, it doesn't take long to realize that nothing is quite as it seems – and this might be his most mysterious case yet.

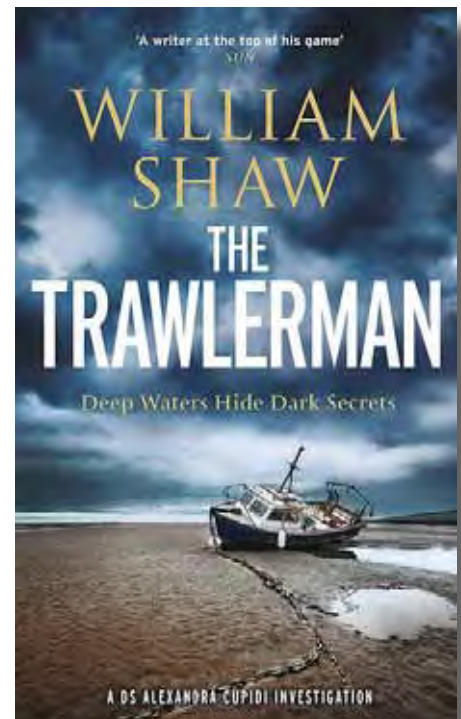
**THE PACT**, Sharon Bolton (Trapeze, May). A golden summer, and six talented friends are looking forward to the brightest of futures - until a daredevil game goes horribly wrong, and a woman and two children are killed. 18-year-old Megan takes the blame, leaving the others free to get on with their lives. In return, they each agree to a 'favour', payable on her release from prison.

Twenty years later Megan is free.

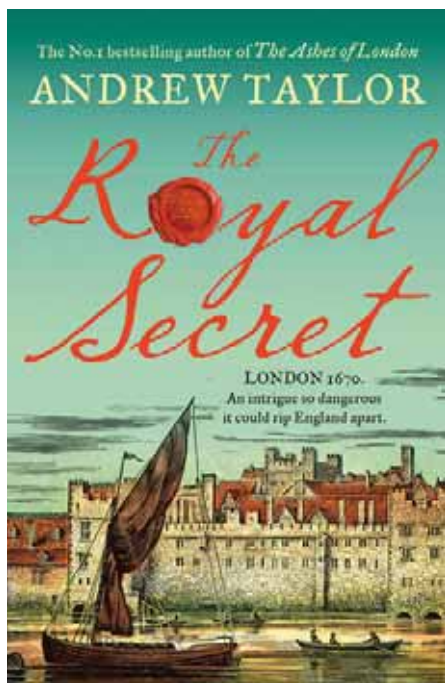
**THE WIDOWER**, Christobel Kent (Sphere, May). When bossy, loving, sensible Kate dies suddenly, her little sister Rose dutifully returns from a carefree life abroad to help Kate's widower and the two children Rose has never met. But she is unsettled to see no trace of her warm-hearted sister in the remote, dilapidated house, nor in Kate's cold, distant partner, Evan.

After stumbling across a message that only her sister could have left for her, Rose's unease around the circumstances of Kate's death turns to open suspicion.

**A QUIET MAN**, Tom Wood (Sphere, May). The assassin known as Victor is hiding out in a small motel in Canada after a job across the border. A few days laying low and he'll be gone and leave no trace behind. He doesn't count on getting to know a mother and her boy who reminds him of his own troubled childhood. When both vanish, only Victor seems to notice. Once he starts looking for them, he finds himself at odds with the criminals who own the town.



**THE TRAWLERMAN**, William Shaw (Riverrun, £16.99, May). The naked corpses of Aylmer and Mary Younis are discovered in their home. The only clues are a note written in blood and an eerie report of two spectral figures departing the crime scene. Officer Jill Ferriter is charged with investigating the murders while her colleague Alex Cupidi is on leave, recovering from post-traumatic stress. Despite being in counselling and receiving official warnings to stay away from police work Cupidi finds herself dragged into the case.



## Reviews from the U.K.



### Jeff Pople Reviews

#### MR CAMPION'S COVEN

by Mike Ripley  
Severn House, £20.99

**Rating: B+**

Mr Campion's Coven is the eighth book in Mike Ripley's seamless and enjoyable continuance of the Albert Campion novels by Margery Allingham and once more features Mike's marvelous sense of humour and his love for archaeology and history.

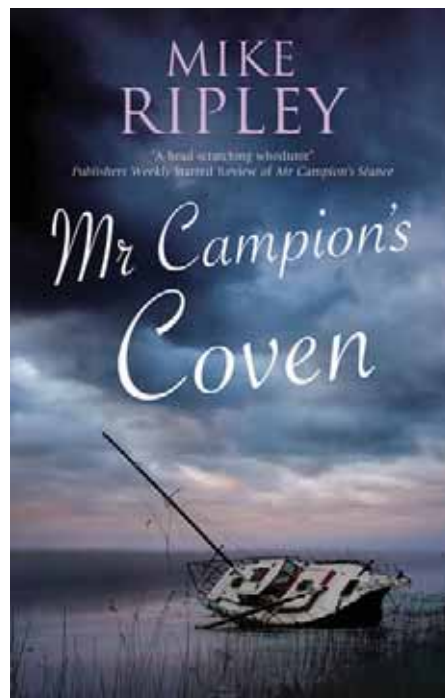
After a brief interlude in 1963, the book moves to 1971 and finds the ageing, but still active, Campion involved in the search for a missing dog on the mudbanks near the remote Essex coastal village of Wicken-juxta-Mare. The dog had become lost following the beaching of a luxury yacht owned by the famous British actress, Dame Jocasta Upcott, who is anxious to get him back. Campion finds the dog, but also becomes caught up in the suspicious death of the yacht's captain. Campion has no excuse to become involved in the investigation, but his interest is piqued, and he soon has a new reason to look into the strange activities of the very small village, when he plays host to a visiting Harvard student, who is writing a thesis on a group of settlers who travelled to America from Wicken 300 years ago.

**MR CAMPION'S COVEN** is a well plotted and enjoyable murder mystery, but as usual the real pleasure comes from Campion's amusing asides and the fascinating background information on the fictional village of Wicken, consisting of a handful of thatched cottages and "no post office or any other retail establishment, no telephone box, no street lights, no pubs, a stone build-

ing which might be chapel of sorts, and certainly no sign welcoming visitors to Wicken and asking them to drive carefully."

You get the sense that Ripley has enjoyed himself in creating the local history to Wicken, and the detail of the ship voyage to America in the late 1690s, and this historical detail adds great texture to the story. His description of present day Wicken and the local area is also enjoyable and relevant to the unfolding of the plot.

The pacing is leisurely, but is aided by lots of wry humour, obscure cultural references and the occasional nod to British crime writing and reviewing in the 1960s and 70s, including a possible-meeting between Campion and Inspector Morse. Propelling the story along is a clever and original mystery plot and the book builds to a good climax on the Essex mudbanks.



In all, an enjoyable read that will be much appreciated by fans, both new and old, of the original Campion stories by Allingham and the more recent ones by Ripley.

#### NEMESIS

by Anthony Riches  
Head of Zeus, £8.99

**Rating: B**

**NEMESIS** is the first foray into modern thriller fiction by well-regarded historical writer Anthony Riches, who is best known for his exciting Roman Empire adventure novels.

**NEMESIS** features Mickey Bale, an elite close protection officer who is usually assigned to the Minister of Defence. Outwardly Mickey is a calm professional, but underneath that veneer he is troubled by the death of his younger sister from drugs. Determined to take revenge on the dealers who gave his sister the lethal ecstasy pill, Mickey launches a personal war on a powerful London gang family. Meanwhile his job as a bodyguard becomes more dangerous as relations between China and Britain deteriorate.

This is an enjoyable action thriller, with a brisk plot, some good scenes of violence and nice dose of moral ambiguity. The story starts quickly, and Riches keeps it bubbling along with a couple of unexpected developments and the regular infusion of tough violence. The international elements add extra tension and give the story some meat. Holding the two storylines together is the flawed and morally compromised Bale, who manages to be sympathetic while carrying out some wild acts of violence.

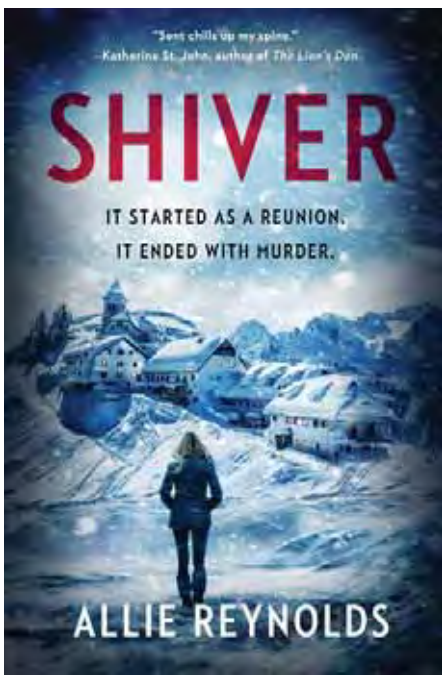
In all, an enjoyable thriller with a neat final wrap-up and a couple of good twists.

#### SHIVER

by Allie Reynolds  
Headline, £12.99

**Rating: A-**

Set in an isolated ski lodge high up in the French Alps, Australian author Allie Reynolds provides an enjoyable and exciting twist on the classic crime plot of a



group of characters trapped in a remote location and being killed off because of some old secrets.

It is with some reluctance that Milla accepts an invitation to a reunion in the cosy Alp resort that saw the peak of her snowboarding career, but she is keen to see the charismatic Curtis one more time. She has not seen Curtis, or the other three invitees, since the tragic events ten years ago when the beautiful Saskia went missing during the finals of the snowboarding championships. When they get to the lodge, they find it deserted and their only way back down the mountain closed off. A series of nasty events open up old wounds and they soon realise that they do not know who has invited them there, or for what purpose. With a snowstorm approaching, and old secrets coming to the surface, the threats become more severe.

This is a very accomplished debut novel that quickly draws you in and keeps you interested and guessing all the way to the final dark twist. Allie makes good use of the alternating storyline, between the present and the events ten years ago, to ratchet up the suspense and the book steadily twists its way through several good surprises. The characters are nicely developed and the moving back and forth between the two timelines helps to flesh out them and allows the reader to see them grow and change.

Milla is particularly well done, and she is an engagingly flawed narrator, who has her own parcel of secrets. She is a very nuanced character and Allie breathes real life into her and makes her interesting.

Allie is a former professional free-style snowboarder who spent five years competing in the Alps, and elsewhere, and she brings a good deal of credibility to the snowboarding scenes. She provides an interesting insider perspective on the atmosphere and tricks of a snowboard competition and skilfully portrays the various personalities involved. She also nicely captures the danger of being stuck in the snow and generates a good sense of foreboding as the snowstorm approaches the lodge.

A very enjoyable read.

### CAGES

by David Mark  
Severn House, £20.99

**Rating: B+**

David Mark is probably best known for his DS McAvoy series of police novels, but he has branched out over recent books into the realm of quirky, stand-alone chillers and has produced a couple of gems in the form of **THE MAUSOLEUM** and **A RUSH OF BLOOD**.

**CAGES** is his latest stand-alone novel and is a very tense tale that goes down some dark alleys. Rufus Orton once wrote a highly praised literary novel, but his writing career has been downhill ever since, and he is forced to accept a job teaching creative writing at a prison to earn some money. The teaching role was organised by one of his few remaining fans, prison officer Annabeth Harris. Annabeth is keen to improve the lives of the prisoners that she is responsible for, but she also has a dark secret that threatens to destroy her life. Joining the writing class is sex offender Griffin Cox who is suspected of being a child killer, although no remains have ever been found. Cox is a master manipulator who sees the class as an opportunity to escape and sets about conniving his way to freedom.

This dark tale takes a little time to

get underway, but the pace picks up as the story gradually unfolds and the final third of the book is very suspenseful. Mark is an adroit plotter, and he carefully slots the various elements of his story into place and skilfully draws the strands together as it moves to an unexpected and shocking conclusion.

The writing is literate and witty and there are nice flashes of dark humour, and some clever lines that bring a smile. Mark is also very good at creating interesting, nuanced characters that develop and change with the story. The central trio are well crafted, but so are the minor characters, especially the detective who is trying to bring Cox to justice.

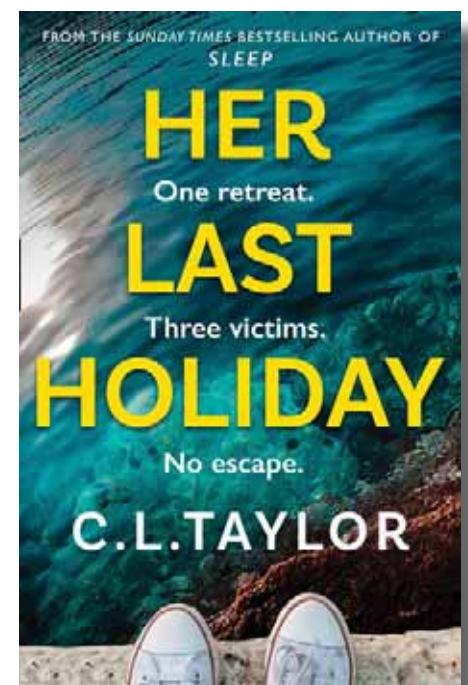
Overall **CAGES** is a grim, but quietly entertaining tale.

### HER LAST HOLIDAY

by C. L. Taylor  
Avon, £12.99  
**Rating: B+**

C. L. Taylor's novels seem to sit somewhere between murder mystery and psychological suspense, and usually feature unfashionable and slightly fragile female protagonists who move out of their comfort zone in order to solve a mystery.

Taylor proved in a previous novel, **SLEEP**, that she can make good



use of the old plot device of isolating a bunch of strangers in a remote location with secrets and murder, and in **HER LAST HOLIDAY** she has now applied those skills to two drama-drenched wellness retreats.

Over two years ago, Fran's sister Jenna disappeared whilst on a wellness retreat at the Malta resort of Gozo. The retreat went terribly wrong and Tom Wade, the infamous figure behind Soul Shrink Retreats, was held responsible for the disaster that happened and was sentenced to jail. Wade has now just been released from prison after serving his sentence for the deaths of two people, but he has never let on what happened to the third victim: Jenna. Determined to find out the truth, Fran books herself onto his upcoming retreat in a remote part of Wales – the first since his release – and finds herself face to face with the man who might hold the key to her sister's disappearance. Will she find out the truth or face the same fate as her sister?

**HER LAST HOLIDAY** is a bit of a slow burn thriller. Alternating the viewpoint between the socially clumsy and outspoken Fran and Tom Wade's manipulative wife, Kate, Taylor gradually sets the scene for the retreat in Wales and introduces the reader to the various participants. The story also regularly flashes back to the original retreat in Gozo two years before, and we learn through Jenna's eyes what really happened then. Gradually the two plotlines come together in a surprising and tense climax.

Taylor is very good at creating credible, flawed characters who extrude doubt and uncertainty, but are able to rise above their fears when they need to. Her portrayal of the drab, but determined, Fran is very convincing, and the minor characters are also well crafted. It takes a little while to come to terms with the shifting timelines and the large cast of characters from the two retreats, but Taylor steadily guides the reader through it and towards the end creates a nice sense of foreboding. Family relationships, especially between sisters and between mothers and daughters, play an important part in the novel and there is a lot of relationship angst and reflection

for those who enjoy that sort of thing.

Some parts of the book do not ring true, but overall it is an enjoyable mix of mystery and domestic suspense and there are some very good twists and unexpected developments at the end.

## George Easter Reviews

### **BOUND**

by Vanda Symon

Orenda., £8.99, March

in U.S., \$15.95, September 1, 2021

**Rating: A-**

This is the fourth in the fine Sam Shepard series. Sam is short, pretty and newly appointed as a detective Dunedin, New Zealand. Late one night she is called to a crime scene where John Henderson has been shot in the face with a shotgun and his wife Jill tied up and gagged to the point of near suffocation. Their teenaged son Declan arrives home late to find one parent dead and the other almost.

Sam's work colleagues couldn't be more different from each other. Her boss, DI Johns, is a misogynist who rides her pretty hard, whereas Detective Paul Frost is her lover and is attentive to her every need and seemingly the perfect match for her. Sam is similar to other female police detectives in crime

fiction in that she is obsessed with proving herself and breaking through the barriers of the male-dominated police clique.

Cleverly collected DNA evidence points to two well-known criminals who have previously escaped the clutches of the police. Especially galling is that these two are suspects in the murder of a police colleague. Before they are arrested however, the two disappear and the search is on.

The police higher-ups believe the case is solved and its just a matter of apprehension, but Sam suspects otherwise and digs deeper.

This is my first experience with Vanda Symon's work and I am very impressed. **BOUND** has one of the best surprise endings I've encountered in quite a while. The writing is sound and the characters are fascinating. Just another example of the excellent writing coming nowadays from the Kiwi-Aussie Connection.

### **PROOF OF LIFE**

by R. J. Ellory

Orion, £20.99

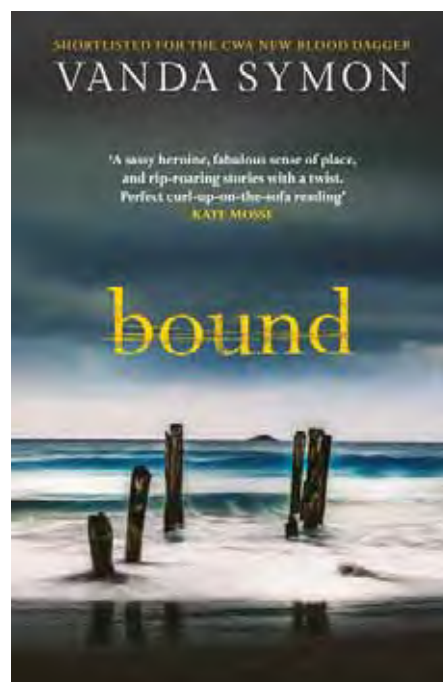
**Rating: B+**

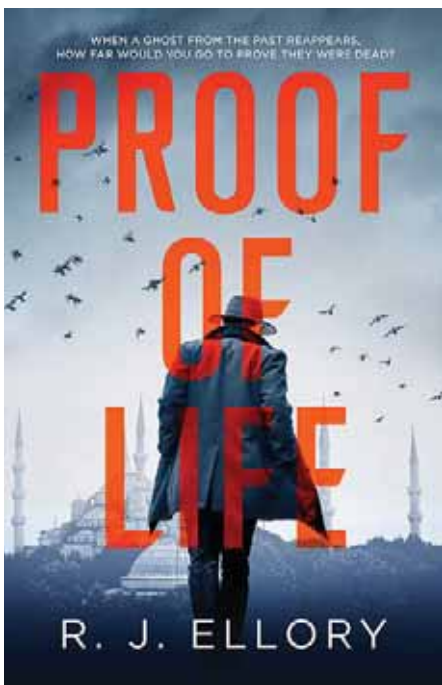
Stroud is a world-weary, former war photographer who is going from one small job to another, barely scraping by. He suffers from the mistakes he made in his past that caused his marriage to break up and his daughter to be permanently estranged from him.

Six years ago his best friend and mentor, Vincent Raphael, was killed in an explosion in Jordan.

Now (in the mid-1970s), a former colleague is offering him a large sum to delve into rumors that Raphael didn't die and has been seen recently. Stroud is very skeptical, but accepts the assignment because he is desperate for the money offered.

Stroud's search starts in Turkey and then takes him all over Europe. In each stop, his quest is stymied by men he suspects are intelligent agents from various countries. What is it about Raphael's death or disappearance that is of such importance that so many people are intent on blocking his investigation?





Stroud is totally puzzled by the whole affair, but he has the bit between his teeth and can't help pushing forward, despite the danger he finds himself in.

The last 50 pages (and especially the last paragraph) picks up the pace and made the slogging through the first 350 pages worth the while. There is an inordinate amount of soul-searching on the part of Stroud and that got tiresome after a while.

Although there are some tangential espionage elements to the storyline, **PROOF OF LIFE** is a novel of detection.

Roger Ellory's style is more literary than that of most authors I read. I'm one who tends to skip the descriptive passages and get to the meat of the story. In **PROOF OF LIFE** the storyline is interesting and the descriptive passages, of which there are many, are beautifully written but slow down the pacing of the story. That is my only complaint. Otherwise, this is a book that is a recommended read.

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### When A Subtle Knife Won't Do

It has long been the philosophy of this august magazine [Ezine, you old fool. - Ed.] to recommend goodcrime novels to its many readers worldwide, rather than rubbish those which offer up derivative plotting, cardboard characters, inadequately-researched settings and flavourless prose. (It is rare to find one which demonstrates all four flaws, but it is not unknown, and indeed those can occasionally be found at the top of the bestseller lists.)

I will therefore neither name nor shame a new debut crime novel which threatens to be the first of a series, but within the first sixty pages, it commits - not once, but twice - a cardinal sin in my book by getting local newspaper coverage of a murder so badly wrong. When a gruesome murder is committed and a body part removed from the victim, the details are never immediately released to the media and no newspaper would print them anyway, no matter how much it helped the plot along.

I can forgive a crime-writer fudging police procedure, because the most effective police procedure is usually painstakingly dull. (Colin Dexter always used to say he didn't 'do' police procedure because he didn't know any.) But it should not be beyond the wit of the would-be crime writer to read a newspaper now and then to see how it should be done.

This month's debutant is by no means the first to strain disbelief when featuring newspaper reporting of a murder and certainly won't be the last. I did

enjoy one aspect of the book, however, as the author, clearly seeking inspiration for the names of two subsidiary police officers glanced up from the keyboard and ran an eye along a convenient bookshelf stocked with much-loved paperbacks:



And thus the characters of DCI Deighton and DS Gardner were born. Oh, come on, we've all done it.

### Comfort Reading

One unsung consequence of the current plague is that due to staff shortages, the postman only calls at Ripster Hall once every eight days, which has meant a dearth of new books thudding on to the driveway from a speeding red van. This has resulted in several lulls - often far too short - in the crowded reading schedule forced upon me by publishers and publicists.

I have used these brief moments of quietude to reading authors whose work I have long regarded as comfort food, in that their books are easy to digest and usually leave me warm and satisfied. And so I turned to a previously unread Victor Canning, **THE CHASM**, from 1947.

By that time, Canning (1911-1986) had published a dozen or so picaresque

novels pre-war and a war story during, but as he resumed his writing career after military service, he took a different turn towards the thriller. Not that **THE CHASM** was a conventional thriller, in that it clearly started out as a reflection on the aftermath of war, then morphs into a romantic novel before, in the last quarter becoming a suspenseful revenge thriller. Although something of a mish-mash, publisher Hodder gave it a first print run of 15,000 such was Canning's reputation, despite the fact that it was his first book for several years. It was a book where Canning seems to have been experimenting with the thriller and, finding the genre to his liking, he then produced a slew of them in the 1950s (and beyond), many of which were filmed.

The setting is Florence and northern Italy immediately after the end of WWII; an area in which Canning had served in his army days and which he describes lovingly through the eyes of a depressed ex-army officer called Burgess, who is drinking too much whilst working for UNRAA, the United Nations relief agency. (The initials must have been well-known at the time as Canning never bothers to explain them.) Burgess mooches around a superbly-evoked war-damaged Florence and then heads off to a tiny village in the mountains as winter sets in quicker than expected. Cut off by a collapsed bridge, he discovers love-at-first-sight, finds an old enemy and makes a new one. At this point, Canning the thriller writer kicks in.

**THE CHASM** is by no means the best Canning, but it is an interesting one, showing a writer, after his wartime experiences, switching to a tougher, more suspenseful style. It also references the work of American novelist Joseph Hergesheimer and uses the word *herisson*, neither of which I had ever seen before in a popular thriller. Details of Canning's life and work can be found on the exhaustive dedicated website curated by John Higgins at <http://canning.marlodge.net/> and for lovers of trivia, the literary estate of Victor Canning is controlled by his godson Charles Collingwood, the actor best known for

playing Brian Aldridge in *The Archers*.

I am not, I see, alone in this nostalgic bent, as in recent weeks I have read articles by noted media personalities waxing lyrically on how they have enjoyed revisiting novels by Ira Levin (the outstanding **A KISS BEFORE DYING**, a book as old as I am but which has held up far better), **PORTERHOUSE BLUE** by my former history tutor Tom Sharpe, and the novels of that master storyteller Nevil Shute.

### Inspector Bucket and Sergeant Cuff

I am not sure whether it was a dark and stormy night when Irish mystery writer Cora Harrison had the idea of teaming up Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins as detectives in her Gaslight Mysteries series. As they created two of the nineteenth-century's earliest fictional detectives (Bleak House and The Moonstone if you have to ask), surely they would be a dream team at solving crime.

In Harrison's third 'Gaslighter' *Summer of Secrets*, out now from Severn House, the pair are at Knebworth House for a special event. No, not an early incarnation of Led Zeppelin, but a performance by the house guests of a play written by the owner Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, whose best-selling prose took, as one of the characters admits, quite an effort 'to wade through'.



Bulwer Lytton, still famous for coining the phrase 'The pen is mightier than the sword' for the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [Are you sure? - Ed.] and, of course, the most cringeworthy opening line in fiction, turns out to be a bit of a cad, at least in the way he treats his wife (and dogs) and is surely ripe to be murdered. After all, we have a country house, a closed circle of unpleasant suspects all with suitable motives and the presence of two literary detectives. It can only be a matter of time before a shot rings out, and it does in suitably theatrical fashion. The victim, though, is not Sir Edward, but should it have been?

Step forward Bucket and Cuff, or rather their alter egos, to solve the case.

### In Remembrance of Time Teams Past

In my days as an archaeologist, the words 'Night Hawks' were always preceded by a very rude adjective, but in the latest addition to Elly Griffiths' crowd-pleasing Dr Ruth Galloway series, they appear to be a fairly respectable society of metal-detectorists operating in North Norfolk.

I remain to be convinced, as although many a metal artefact now graces a museum thanks to the metal detector, many archaeological sites have been wrecked (usually at night) by unscrupulous 'treasure hunters'. But in **THE NIGHT HAWKS** [Quercus] the detectorists are the plot generators as their activities (on the coast at night) looking for Bronze Age treasure, lead to the finding of a body - one which has certainly not been dead for two thousand years and Dr Galloway is, once again, called in to help the police.

She is hampered rather than helped by a new recruit to the University of North Norfolk who is at times so obnoxious that he deserves a slap, the sort of archaeologist who sees a fragment of old metal and immediately assumes it is from a spear and therefore grave goods and immediately starts thinking of facial reconstruction on a skull (or even a grave) not yet found.



Ruth Galloway, however, has her head screwed on and realises she must do the right thing and apply for an official Licence For the Removal Of Human Remains. These are real things and I still have the last one I worked under when excavating graves dating from Roman Britain.



They are issued by the Home Office and mine was signed by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett. Ruth Galloway's licence will presumably come signed by Priti Patel, and if she doesn't frighten off the illegal night hawks, nothing will.

### Books of the Last Few Months

If anything is going to put people off going on an ocean cruise apart from the threat of a virus or having to sit through after dinner lectures by crime writers, then it will be **PASSENGER 23** by Sebastian Fitzek [Head of Zeus] despite the protestations of the author who says he really likes them.

**PASSENGER 23** basically suggests that the reason 23 people disappear each year from cruise ships is because there may be a serial killer or two on board. When one 'victim' disappears only to reappear in a catatonic state two weeks later, who better to send to investigate

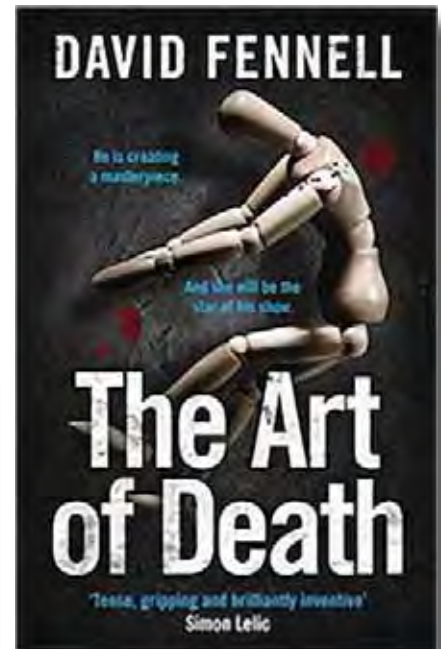
than Martin Schwartz, an undercover German cop with a bit of a death-wish, following the disappearance of his wife and son from - you guessed - a cruise liner some years before. Our hero uncovers an incredibly twisted tale of murder, torture and sexual abuse (and be warned, some bits are graphic) along with a transgender theme which I am not going to comment on. There is even, in a coda to the main plot, an example of cosmetic surgery of the most extreme kind.



The whole thing is bloody, breathless, deliberately discomfiting and outrageously gripping. It was back in 2008 when I tipped German author Sebastian Fitzek for great things after his chilling debut thriller **THERAPY** appeared in English and this could be his year, with other translated titles, **SEAT 7A** and **THE SOUL BREAKER**, appearing in April and August.

The thing that's always amazed me about (fictional) serial killers is where do they find the time? Not to do the killing, but to elaborately arrange their victims as ghastly trophies. A prime example of this was shown, tongue in cheek (well, somebody's tongue...), in the television series *Hannibal* where we were treated to an over-the-top portrait of the serial

killer as a sort of psychopathic Raymond Blanc.

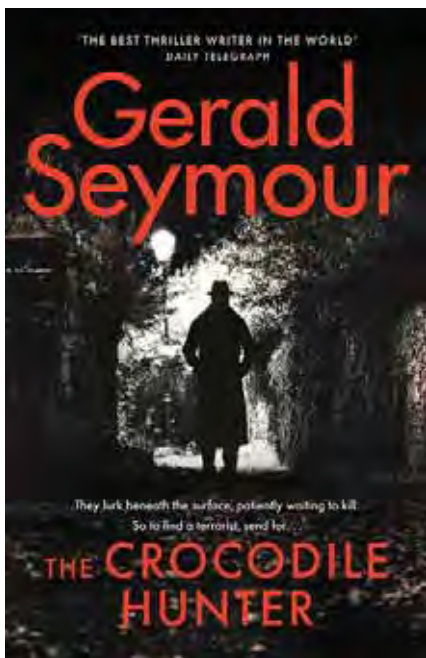


In David Fennell's **THE ART OF DEATH** [Zaffre] the serial killer is a sort of psychopathic Banksy, leaving gruesome examples of his work as art installations all around Central London, not giving a fig for the Congestion Charge, and, perhaps not surprising in London, only when someone starts screaming are they noticed.

Just when you thought the serial-killer thriller had gone as far as it could, David Fennell attempts to breathe new life (okay - poor choice of words) into the genre, though by calling his police detective protagonist Inspector Grace Archer, he is bound to raise the hairs on the necks of dedicated Radio 4 listeners of a certain age.

Veteran thriller writer Gerald Seymour changes tack from his usually exotic and invariably dangerous locations to set his new novel **THE CROCODILE HUNTER** [Hodder] almost entirely in comfortable southern England. The plot line is, however, uncomfortably topical.

When young British jihadi fighters begin to drift back from the Middle East after fighting under the black flag of Isis, bent on a final act of violence, the Security Service refers to them as 'crocodiles' because they lurk beneath the surface waiting to strike. To track, trace



and catch them, a crocodile hunter is required, and the one created by Gerald Seymour is Jonas Merrick, a methodical, desk-bound, unflashy operative nearing retirement who was known (behind his back) as 'the Eternal Flame' until a close encounter with a suicide bomber earns him a reprieve from retirement and the title 'Wobby' - Wise Old Bird.

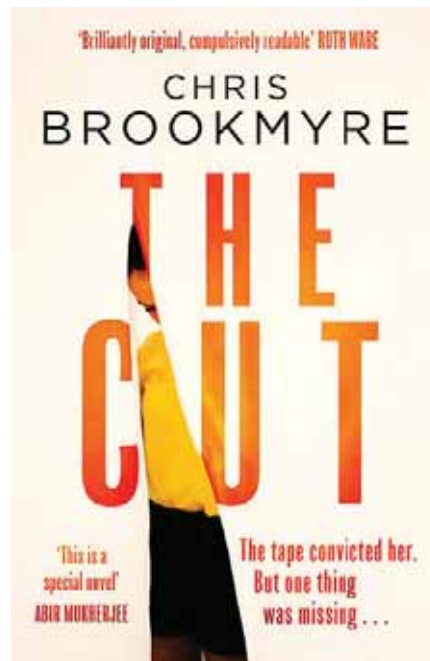
Merrick, with his flask, sandwiches, suburban routine and caravan holidays is so unlikely a spy, he's probably the perfect one, everything about him seems so mundane. As a fictional hero he is a world apart from George Smiley and a universe away from James Bond, but when the final showdown comes with a dangerous lone fanatic who has made it back from Syria by crossing the Channel with a party of illegal immigrants, Merrick proves to be just as resourceful and just as brave.

A septuagenarian ex-jailbird, having served a 25-year sentence for murder, and a young film studies student with a talent for petty thievery make for an unlikely pair of heroes in a road trip of a thriller which rocks and rolls from Glasgow to Paris to Rome to the ruins of Pompeii in Chris Brookmyre's **THE CUT** [Sphere]. En route to the final justice being sought by former film make-up artist Millie who was, of course, framed for the murder, the couple are pursued by corrupt policemen

and assorted gangsters, and discover a cover-up with political implications in the bowels of the Italian horror film industry in the days when films went straight to VHS.

Chris Brookmyre, being Chris Brookmyre, has lots of fun with this scenario, which revolves around a 'lost' (and therefore cursed) Italian horror epic and with his student hero's obsession with t-shirts promoting Heavy Metal music - 'the whitest form of music known to man'. The humour is mostly on the dark side, and spiked with needles of Scots vernacular - I can make a case for why I hit the guy with a hammer, but I cannot claim I yeeted his body into the river in self-defence.

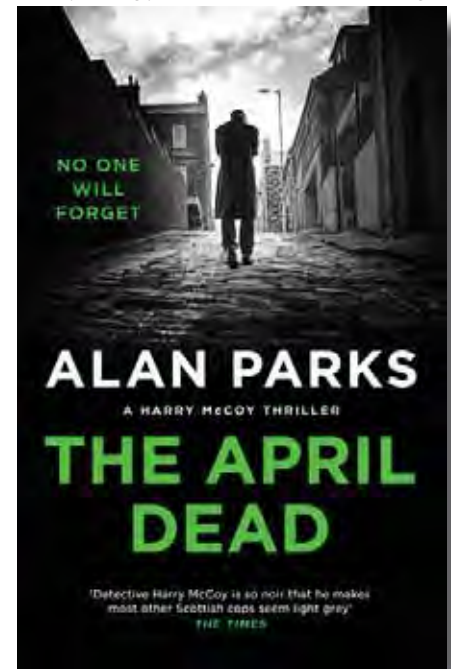
(Spoiler alert: the 'yeeting' of a dead body off a bridge doesn't exactly go to plan.)



**THE CUT** sees Brookmyre on top sarcastic form tilting at many a windmill and managing to skewer most of them.

Glasgow, 1974, when HMP Barlinnie had the reputation for being the most environmentally-friendly prison in Europe (because all the lead from its roof had been removed), and was where even hardboiled police detectives like Harry McCoy can't stand the sight of all the blood.

With **THE APRIL DEAD** [Canongate], Alan Parks has given us an absolute belter of a crime novel with a multi-layered plot and a police hero who could, one day, be ranked up there with Laidlaw and Rebus. Harry McCoy may be a tad squeamish, and have too many dodgy friends from the wrong



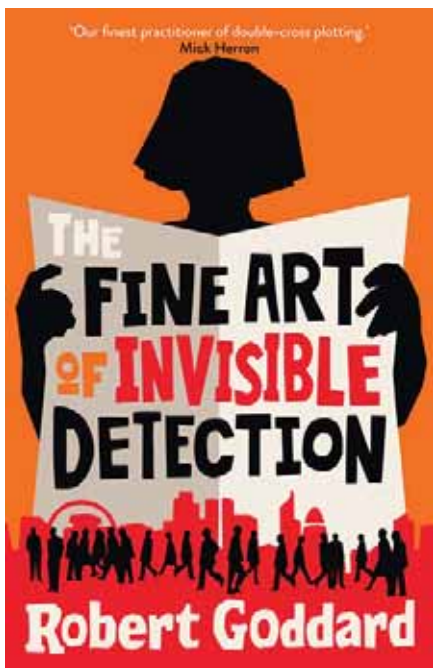
side of the legal tracks, but his heart is in the right place and his creator imbues his story with the dry self-deprecating wit which made the audiences at the Glasgow Empire notorious.

In a burst of Good Samaritanism, McCoy gives a visiting American, after a trans-Atlantic flight, a lift to Aberdeen and they stop at a roadside café for breakfast. The American orders freshly-squeezed orange juice, pancakes with maple syrup and a side order of crispy bacon. He is served with a sausage sandwich and a can of Fanta. Welcome to Scotland.

In **THE FINE ART OF INVISIBLE DETECTION** [Bantam], Robert Goddard plumps for an unlikely protagonist, a quiet, middle-aged Japanese widow working as a secretary for a Tokyo private detective. Umiko Wada actually has no ambition to becoming a detective herself, but fate doesn't leave her much choice and the mousey

Umiko has to adapt to something of a jet-set life as the investigation more or less dropped on her, involves travel to London, Exeter, New York and Iceland where she has to prove she can take care of herself when things turn violent.

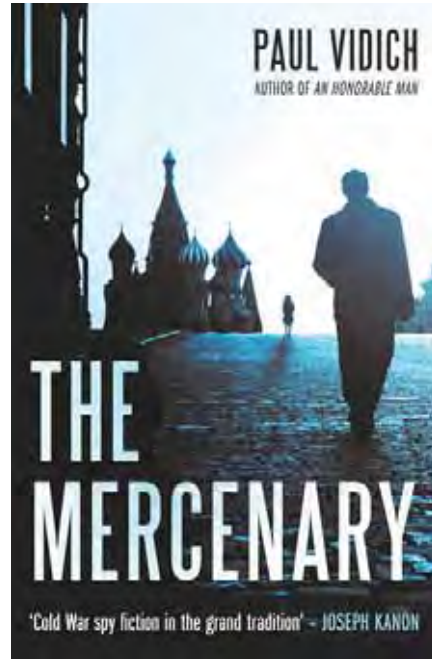
Robert Goddard is a thriller writer who is never content with one plot-twist when three will do and reveals more about the development of Sarin gas than I was comfortable knowing. He also cannot resist the necessity, by all foreign writers, to comment on the weather in Iceland: Sunday in Reykjavik was no less bleak than Saturday,



with drizzle, sometimes intensifying into rain, drifting across the grey city.

In my university days several centuries ago, I met a fellow undergraduate who hailed from Ormskirk in Lancashire. I mention this simply because I cannot recall having been conscious of Ormskirk in the years since, until now. **SECRET MISCHIEF** by Robin Blake [Severn House] begins with the murder of a prized pig in Ormskirk, no doubt a very serious crime in 1746, but which is quickly overshadowed by the murder of the pig farmer and the investigative duo of County Coroner Titus Cragg and Dr Luke Fidelis are soon on the case.

When the murdered man is found to be part of a seven-person tontine - whereby the last man standing scoops the pool of this rather bizarre non-life insurance wager (probably invented by the French) - there is no shortage of suspects among the other tontine subscribers, who have each invested £500, a staggering sum in 1746. The investigation undertaken by Cragg and Fidelis leads them into a particularly violent cricket match (this is Lancashire



after all) as well as some very dubious drinking dens and alehouses where the favourite tippie, I learn, was something called bumbo -- an explosive rum-based cocktail.

**THE MERCENARY** by Paul Vidich [No Exit Press] is a vintage piece of spy fiction set in the bad old days of 1985, with a reluctant CIA agent sent to Moscow to ex-filtrate a defecting KGB officer. Naturally, in this kind of tale, Moscow Rules apply and Vidich plays it straight when it comes to the suspicion, fear and double-dealing as the opposing spies battle it out 'old school'.

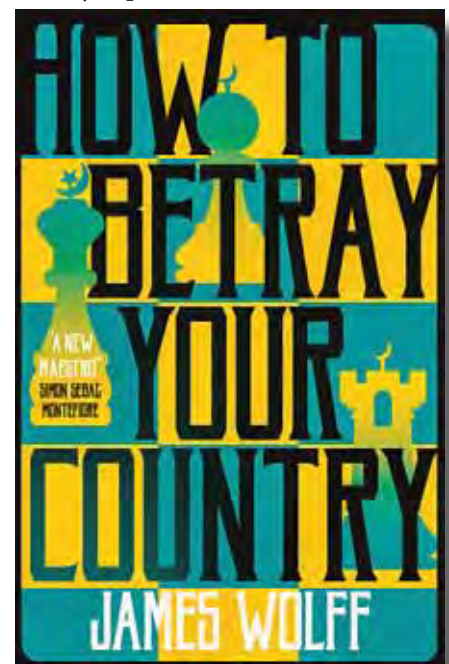
That **THE MERCENARY** is something of a throwback in terms of style and subject matter is not to disparage it in any way. In fact, if I told you just how good this spy story was, I'd probably have to kill you.

When **BESIDE THE SYRIAN**

**SEA**, the debut novel of 'James Woolf' appeared in 2018, I wrote: from the start this has a ring of truth to the plot, tradecraft and setting (Ambler and Kim Philby country) and I suspect has been written by someone who has been there, done that and got the t-shirt, though of course never wears it.

Now comes **HOW TO BETRAY YOUR COUNTRY** [Bitter Lemon] and I am in danger of repeating myself, especially in the reference to the setting, Istanbul - classic Eric Ambler territory.

August Drummond is a spy on the edge of cracking up following the death of his wife. Thrown out of MI6 and heavily dependent on alcohol, he decamps to Istanbul and even before he gets off the aeroplane is embroiled in an ISIS-inspired plot which may be mercenary rather than ideological. The local MI6 officials, more concerned with office in-fighting than external threats, seem oblivious to any danger and only an intelligent Turkish intelligence officer (more shades of Ambler, though female this time) seems remotely capable.



The narrative unfolds in the third person, the first person and in extracts from documents and reports, which all point to the story being one long suicide note for the risk-addicted, much-troubled August Drummond



who goes to his fate with aplomb.

For legal reasons I missed Alison Bruce's new stand-alone **THE MOMENT BEFORE IMPACT** when first published last year, it is, however, now out in paperback [Constable] and I am glad it has caught up with me.

A horrific car accident (or was it?) involving a group of young students after a boozy picnic of the banks of the River Cam leaves Nicci Waldock, the driver, scarred in more ways than one. Three years and a prison sentence later, Nicci returns to her old stomping ground in Cambridge - not a part of the city familiar to tourists - and tries to pull together her life and her memory with the aid of a former journalist, only to discover things were not what they seemed.

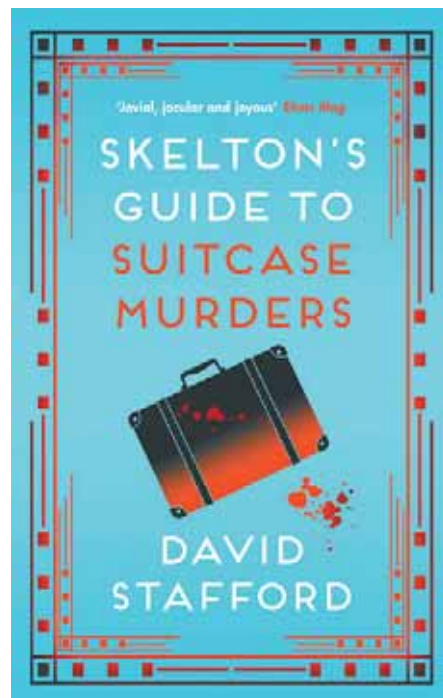
**THE MOMENT BEFORE IMPACT** is an engrossing tale, sparingly but sympathetically told and Alison Bruce once again captures Cambridge the town rather than the gown brilliantly. She even manages a plug for Anglia Ruskin University (known as the College of Arts & Technology when I was there in the last century), where she now teaches creative writing.

Arthur Skelton is a barrister, he has a gloom-merchant of a legal clerk

called Edgar, the year is 1929 and there's a dismembered body in a suitcase in a quarry near Wakefield. That's all you really need to know. Don't bother trying to guess whodunit, just immerse yourself in the infectiously jovial atmosphere generated by David Stafford in **SKELTON'S GUIDE TO SUITCASE MURDERS** [Allison & Busby].

It is the worlds which mild-mannered Skelton inhabits, both domestic and professional, which appeal here, often hilariously, from the highest law courts to his Yorkshire homeland to the epistolary contribution from Skelton's cousin whilst on a religious mission to Scotland. There are some great gags at the expense of the Scots, the north/south divide (including a mention of a legendary Yorkshire figure called Joe Soap) and recalcitrant children, not to mention a cameo for an up-and-coming actor called Laurence Olivier.

Populated with a host of minor characters which could have stepped out of Wodehouse, you may not learn much about suitcase murders (though you might) but you will certainly find much to enjoy.



## Agatha Award Nominees

The Agatha Awards will be presented during **MORE THAN MALICE**, an online virtual crime festival coming this July, 2021.

### Best Contemporary Novel

- GIFT OF THE MAGPIE**  
by Donna Andrews  
**MURDER IN THE BAYOU**  
**BONEYARD** by Ellen Byron  
**FROM BEER TO ETERNITY**  
by Sherry Harris  
**ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE**  
by Louise Penny  
**THE LUCKY ONE**  
by Lori Rader-Day

### Best Historical Novel

- THE LAST MRS. SUMMERS**  
by Rhys Bowen  
**FATE OF A FLAPPER**  
by Susanna Calkins  
**A LADY'S GUIDE TO MISCHIEF AND MURDER** by Dianne Freeman  
**TAKEN TOO SOON**  
by Edith Maxwell  
**THE TURNING TIDE**  
by Catriona McPherson

### Best First Novel

- A SPELL FOR TROUBLE**  
by Esme Addison  
**WINTER WITNESS**  
by Tina deBelgarde  
**DERAILED** by Mary Keliikoa  
**MURDER AT THE MENA HOUSE**  
by Erica Ruth Neubauer  
**MURDER MOST SWEET**  
by Laura Jensen Walker



# Sneak Previews

## Upcoming Mysteries



**D**isclaimer: with the Covid-19 crisis, many publishers have modified their publishing schedules. This information is the best I could come up with, but there may be changes from the dates for publication that I am not informed about.

### May, 2021

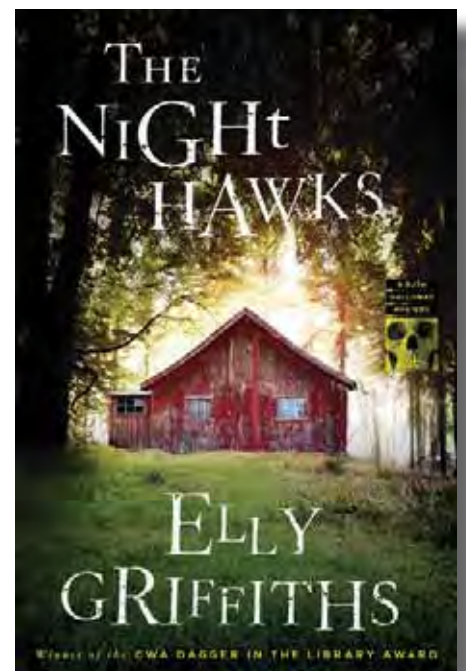
- 1 Quentin Bates, **BETRAYAL**
- 4 Stephen Mack Jones, **DEAD OF WINTER** (August Snow)
- 4 Stephen Hunter, **BASIL'S WAR** ( WWII)
- 4 Linwood Barclay, **FIND YOU FIRST**
- 4 Ragnar Jonasson, **THE GIRL WHO DIED**
- 4 A. J. Cross, **DEVIL IN THE DETAIL** (Will Traynor)
- 4 Brian Klingborg, **THIEF OF SOULS** (Inspector Lu Fei)
- 11 Jeffrey Deaver, **THE FINAL TWIST** (Colter Shaw)
- 11 R. H. Herron, **HUSH LITTLE BABY**
- 11 David Ricciardi, **SHADOW TAR GET** (Jake Keller)
- 11 Ashley Weaver, **A PECULIAR COMBINATION** (Electra McDonnell)
- 11 Steven Konkoly, **SKYSTORM** (Ryan Decker)
- 11 Kylie Logan, **A TRAIL OF LIES** (Jazz Ramsey)
- 11 Brett Battles, **MERCY** (Nate and Jar)
- 18 Ben H. Winters, **THE QUIET BOY**
- 18 Mary Kubica, **LOCAL WOMAN MISSING**
- 18 Carolyn Haines, **INDEPENDENT BONES** (Sarah Booth Delaney)
- 18 David Fisher, **THE EXECUTIVE ORDER**
- 25 David Housewright, **WHAT DOESN'T KILL US** (McKenzie)
- 25 Martin Walker, **THE COLDEST**

- CASE** (Bruno)
- 25 Mettie Ivie Harrison, **THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER** (Linda Walheim)
- 25 David Gordon, **AGAINST THE LAW** (Joe the Bouncer)
- 25 David Swinson, **CITY ON THE EDGE**
- 25 Mary Dixie Carter, **THE PHOTO -GRAPHER**
- 25 James Wolff, **HOW TO BETRAY YOUR COUNTRY**

### June, 2021

- 1 Sujata Massey, **THE BOMBAY PRINCE** (Perveen Mistry)
- 1 Nelson DeMille, **THE MAZE** (John Corey)
- 1 Eric Van Lustbader, **THE KOBALT DOSSIER** (Evan Rider)
- 1 A. J. Tata, **CHASING THE LION**
- 1 Spencer Quinn, **TENDER IS THE BITE** (Bernie Little/Chet)
- 1 J. A. Jance, **UNFINISHED BUSINESS** (Ali Reynolds)
- 1 Peter Steiner, **THE CONSTANT MAN** (Willi Geismeyer)
- 1 John McFetridge, **EVERY CITY IS EVERY OTHER CITY**
- 8 Allison Montclair, **A ROGUE'S COMPANY** (Right Sort of Marriage Bureau)
- 8 Catherine Steadman, **THE DISAPPEARING ACT**
- 8 Henry Porter, **THE OLD ENEMY** (Paul Samson)
- 8 Andrews & Wilson, **SONS OF VALOR**
- 8 Iris Johansen, **THE BULLET** (Eve Duncan)
- 8 Eric Redman, **BONES OF HILO** (Kawika Wong)
- 8 Tracy Gardner, **RUBY RED HER RING** (Avery Ayers)

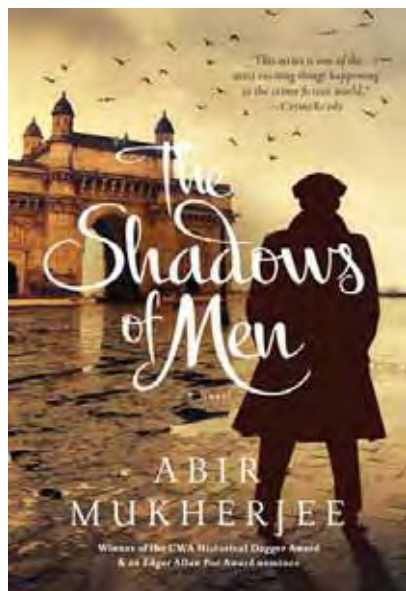
- 8 Laura Jensen Walker, **DEADLY DELIGHTS** (Bookish Baker)
- 8 Victoria Gilbert, **RESERVED FOR MURDER** (Booklover's B&B)
- 8 Terrie Farley Moran, **MURDER SHE WROTE: KILLING IN A KOI POND**
- 9 Charles Todd, **AN IRISH HOSTAGE** (Bess Crawford)
- 10 Trevor Wood, **ONE WAY STREET** (Jimmy Mullen)
- 15 Alex Michaelides, **THE MAIDENS**
- 15 John McMahon, **A GOOD KILL** (P. T. Marsh)
- 15 James Ellroy, **WIDESPREAD PANIC**
- 15 Leonard Goldberg, **THE ABDUCTION OF PRETTY PENNY** (Daughter of Sherlock)
- 15 Taylor Adams, **HAIRPIN BRIDGE**
- 15 David Ricciardi, **SHADOW TARGET** (Jake Keller)
- 22 Sarah Stewart Taylor, **A DISTANT GRAVE** (Maggie D'arcy)
- 22 Brad Thor, **BLACK ICE** (Scot Harvath)
- 22 Laura McHugh, **WHAT'S DONE IN DARKNESS**
- 22 Nicci French, **WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES**
- 22 Laura Lippman, **DREAM GIRL**
- 29 Paul Doiron, **DEAD BY DAWN** (Mike Bowditch)
- 29 Elly Griffiths, **THE NIGHT HAWKS** (Ruth Galloway)



- 29 Jeffrey B. Burton, **THE KEEPERS**  
(Mace Reid K9)
- 29 Riley Sager, **SURVIVE THE NIGHT**
- 29 Steven Saylor, **DOMINUS** (Pinarius Family)
- 29 John Galligan, **BAD MOON RISING**  
(Bad Axe)
- 29 Tracy Clark, **RUNNER**
- 29 Khurram Rahman, **HOME GROWN HERO** (Jay Qasim)

## July, 2021

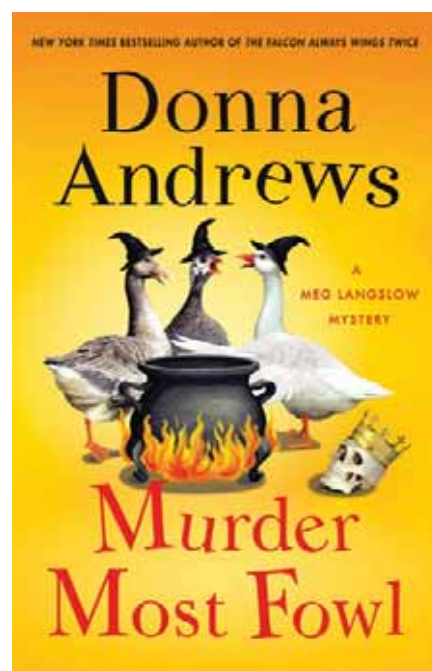
- 6 Connor Sullivan, **SLEEPING BEAR**
- 6 Megan Abbott, **THE TURNOUT**
- 6 S. A. Cosby, **RAZORBLADE TEARS**
- 6 Dan Fesperman, **THE COVER WIFE**
- 6 Jeff Abbott, **AN AMBUSH OF WIDOWS**
- 6 Linda Castillo, **FALLEN** (Kate Burkholder)
- 6 David Rosenfelt, **DOG EAT DOG**  
(Andy Carpenter)
- 6 Liv Constantine, **THE STRANGER IN THE MIRROR**
- 6 Mick Finlay, **ARROWOOD AND THE MEETING HOUSE MURDERS**
- 6 Kathy Reichs, **THE BONE CODE**  
(Temperance Brennan)
- 6 David Bell, **KILL ALL YOUR DARLINGS**
- 6 Jennifer Ashley, **DEATH AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE** (Below Stairs)
- 6 Abir Mukherjee, **THE SHADOWS OF MEN** (Sam Wyndham)



- 6 Susan Elia MacNeal, **THE HOLLY-WOOD SPY** (Maggie Hope)
- 7 James Carlos Blake, **THE BONES OF WOLFE**
- 13 Ace Atkins, **THE HEATHENS**  
(Quinn Colson)
- 13 B. A. Paris, **THE THERAPIST**
- 13 Oliver Harris, **ASCENSION** (Elliot Kane)
- 13 Gabriel Bergmoser, **THE HUNTED**
- 13 Daniel Silva, **THE CELLIST**  
(Gabriel Allon)
- 13 Jonathan Maberry, **RELENTLESS**  
(Joe Ledger)
- 13 Megan Miranda, **SUCH A QUIET PLACE**
- 13 Kris Lackey, **BUTCHER PEN ROAD**  
(Maytubby & Bond)
- 20 Owen Matthews, **RED TRAITOR**
- 20 Bracken MacLeod, **CLOSING COSTS**
- 20 Trevor Wood, **ONE WAY STREET**  
(Jimmy Mullen)
- 20 S. C. Perkins, **FATAL FAMILY TIES**  
(Ancestry Detective)
- 20 Louise Candlish, **THE OTHER PASSENGER**
- 20 Hansjörg Schneider, **THE BASEL KILLINGS** (Inspector Hunkeler)
- 20 Samantha Downing, **FOR YOUR OWN GOOD**
- 20 Karin Slaughter, **FALSE WITNESS**
- 27 Lindsey Davis, **A COMEDY OF TERRORS** (Flavia Albia)
- 27 Glen Erik Hamilton, **ISLAND OF THIEVES** (Van Shaw)
- 27 Karin Slaughter, **FALSE WITNESS**

## August, 2021

- 3 Mark Billingham, **RABBIT HOLE**
- 3 Max Tomlinson, **BAD SCENE**  
(Colleen Hayes)
- 3 Chevy Stevens, **DARK ROADS**
- 3 James Swallow, **SHADOW** (Marc Dane)
- 3 Alafair Burke, **FIND ME**
- 3 Taylor Moore, **DOWN RANGE**  
(Garrett Kohl)
- 3 Claire Douglas, **THEN SHE VANISHES**
- 3 Naomi Hirahara, **CLARK AND DIVISION**
- 3 Karen Rose, **SAY GOODBYE**
- 3 Johanna Mo, **THE NIGHT**

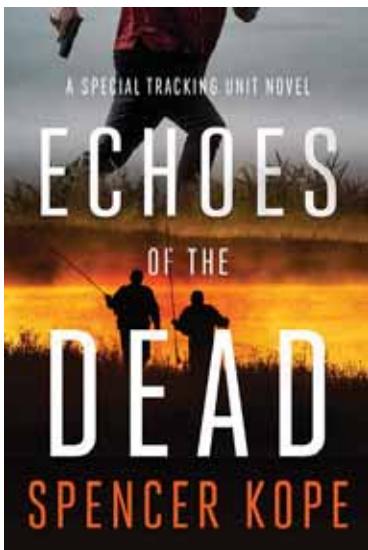


- SINGER**(Island Murders)
- 3 Donna Andrews, **MURDER MOST FOWL** (Meg Langslow)
- 3 Stuart Woods, **CLASS ACT** (Stone Barrington)
- 10 Joanna Schaffhausen, **GONE FOR GOOD** (Annalisa Vega)
- 10 Lyndsay Faye, **THE KING OF INFINITE SPACE**
- 10 Sarah Warburton, **YOU CAN NEVER TELL**
- 10 Marcia Muller, **ICE AND STONE**  
(Sharon McCone)
- 10 Mary Daheim, **LADY MacDEATH**  
(B&B)
- 10 David Peace, **TOKYO REDUX**
- 10 Joy Fielding, **CUL-DE-SAC**
- 17 Arnaldur Indridason, **THE DARK -NESS KNOWS** (Konrad)
- 17 Catherine Ryan Howard, **56 DAYS**
- 17 Ben Coes, **THE ISLAND** (Dewey Andreas)
- 17 Hannah Dennison, **DANGER AT THE COVE**
- 17 James Rollins, **KINGDOM OF BONES** (Sigma Force)
- 17 Jonathan Santlofer, **THE LAST MONA LISA**
- 17 Ted Bell, **SEA HAWKE**
- 17 James Lee Burke, **ANOTHER KING OF EDEN**
- 17 Megan Collins, **THE FAMILY PLOT**
- 17 Sandie Jones, **THE GUILT TRIP**
- 17 Preston & Childs, **BLOODLESS**

- (Pendergast)  
 24 Louise Penny, **THE MADNESS OF CROWDS** (Gamache)  
 24 William Kent Krueger, **LIGHTNING STRIKE** (Cork O'Connor)  
 24 Sheila Connolly, **THE SECRET STAIRCASE** (Kate Hamilton)  
 24 Michael Laurence, **THE ELIMINATION THREAT**  
 31 Karen Cleveland, **YOU CAN RUN**

### September, 2021

- 1 Rachel Howzell Hall, **THESE TOXIC THINGS** (Thos.&Mercer)  
 7 Allen Eskens, **THE STOLEN HOURS**  
 7 Mike Lupica, **Robert B. Parker's STONE'S THROW** (Jesse Stone)  
 7 James R. Benn, **ROAD OF BONES** (Billy Boyle)  
 7 Stuart Neville, **THE HOUSE OF ASHES**  
 7 Alice Feeney, **ROCK PAPER SCISSORS**  
 7 Nell Pattison, **THE SILENT SUSPECT**  
 7 Ann Cleeves, **THE HERON'S CRY** (Two Rivers)  
 7 Margaret Mizushima, **STRIKING RANGE** (Timber Creek K-9)  
 14 Julia Dahl, **THE MISSING HOURS**  
 14 Vince Flynn, **ENEMY AT THE GATES** (Mitch Rapp)  
 14 Tori Eldridge, **THE NINJA BETRAYED** (Lily Wong)  
 21 Spencer Kope, **ECHOES OF THE DEAD** (Special Tracking Unit)



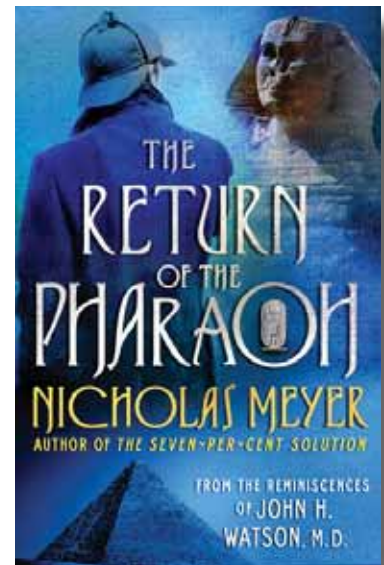
- 21 Barry Eisler, **THE CHAOS KIND** (Rain & Livia Lone)  
 21 Jane Casey, **THE KILLING KIND**  
 21 Craig Johnson, **DAUGHTER OF THE MORNING STAR** (Longmire)  
 21 Andrea Camilleri, **RICCARDINO** (Montalbano)  
 28 Richard Osman, **THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE** (Thursday Murder Club)  
 28 Archer Mayor, **MARKED MAN** (Joe Gunther)

### October, 2021

- 5 Helene Tursten, **AN ELDERLY LADY MUST NOT BE CROSSED**  
 5 Romy Hausmann, **SLEEPLESS**  
 5 L. Alison Heller, **THE NEIGHBOR'S SECRET**  
 5 John Banville, **APRIL IN SPAIN** (Quirke)  
 5 Keigo Higashino, **SILENT PARADE** (Galileo)  
 5 Ellie Alexander, **THE CURE FOR WHAT ALES YOU** (Sloan Krause)  
 12 David Rosenfelt, **BEST IN SNOW** (Andy Carpenter)  
 12 Donna Andrews, **THE TWELVE JAYS OF CHRISTMAS** (Meg Langslow)  
 12 Peter Lovesey, **DIAMOND AND THE EYE** (Peter Diamond)  
 19 Anthony Horowitz, **A LINE TO KILL** (Hawthorne & Horowitz)  
 26 Kimi Cunningham Grant, **THESE SILENT WOODS**  
 26 M. C. Beaton/R. W. Green, **DOWN THE HATCH** (Agatha Raisin)  
 26 Lee Child & Andrew Child, **BETTER OFF DEAD** (Jack Reacher)  
 26 Alexander McCall Smith, **THE JOY AND LIGHT BUS COMPANY** (No.1 LDA)

### November, 2021

- 9 Michael Connelly, **THE DARK HOURS** (Renee Ballard & Harry Bosch)  
 9 Simon Gervais, **THE LAST PROTECTOR** (Clayton White)  
 9 Ken Follett, **NEVER**  
 9 Nicholas Meyer, **THE RE**



- TURN OF THE PHARAOH** (Sherlock Holmes)  
 16 Martin Limon, **WAR WOMEN** (Sueno & Bascom)  
 16 Kjell Eriksson, **THE DEATH WATCH BEETLE** (Ann Lindell)  
 16 Thomas Perry, **THE LEFT-HANDED TWIN** (Jane Whitefield)  
 16 John Lescroart, **THE MISSING PIECE** (Dismas Hardy)  
 23 Elly Griffiths, **THE MIDNIGHT HOUR** (Brighton)  
 23 Tom Rosenstiel, **THE DAYS TO COME** (Rena & Brooks)  
 30 Hannah Morrissey, **HELLO, TRANSCRIBER**  
 30 Sarah Strohmeier, **DO I KNOW YOU?**

### December, 2021

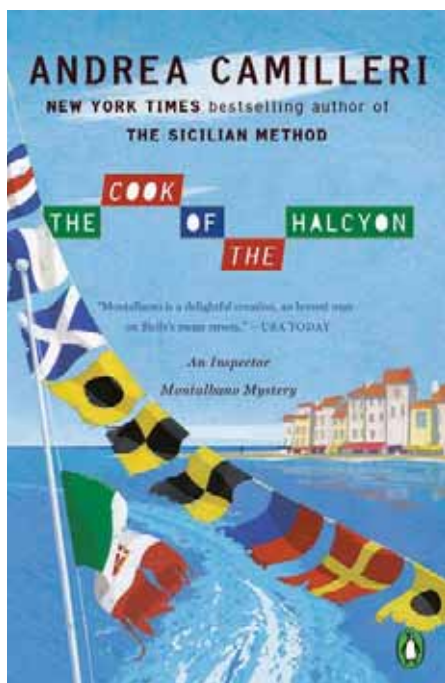
- 7 Stephen Spotswood, **MURDER UNDER HER SKIN** (Pentecost/Parker)  
 7 Teresa Dovalpage, **DEATH UNDER THE PERSEIDS** (Havana)  
 7 John Straley, **SO FAR SO GOOD** (Cecil Younger)  
 7 Mick Herron, **DOLPHIN JUNCTION** (Short stories)  
 7 Alice Blanchard, **THE WITCHING TREE**  
 7 Paige Shelton, **DARK NIGHT** (Alaska Wild)  
 14 Jake K. Cleland, **JANE AUSTEN'S LOST LETTERS** (Josie Prescott)

## Recent Paperbacks of Note



### Softboiled to Mediumboiled

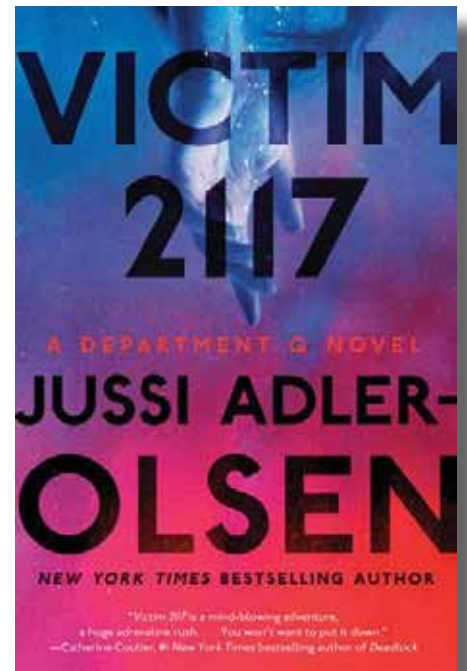
- Adams, Ellery. **MURDER IN THE COOKBOOK NOOK** (\$8.99).  
 Archer, Winnie. **DEATH GONE A'RYE** (\$8.99).  
 Calder, Eve. **A TALE OF TWO COOKIES** (\$7.99).  
 Camilleri, Andrea. **THE COOK OF THE HALCYON** (\$16.00).



- Carl, Joanna. **THE CHOCOLATE SHARK SHENANIGANS** (\$7.99).  
 Carlisle, Kate. **THE GRIM READER** (\$7.99).  
 Cass, Laurie. **CHECKING OUT CRIME** (\$7.99).  
 Chien, Vivien. **FATAL FRIED RICE** (\$7.99).  
 Collette, Abby. **A GAME OF CONES** (\$16.00).  
 Coyle, Cleo. **THE GHOST AND THE HAUNTED PORTRAIT** (\$7.99).  
 Davis, Krista. **BIG LITTLE SPIES**

- (\$7.99).  
 Davis, Krista. **THE DIVA SPICES IT UP** (\$15.95).  
 Day, Maddie. **MURDER AT THE TAFFY SHOP** (\$8.99).  
 Doyle, Carrie. **DEATH ON BULL PATH** (\$8.99).  
 Duncan, Emmeline. **FRESH BREWED MURDER** (\$15.95).  
 Ehrhart, Peggy. **KNITTY GRITTY MURDER** (\$8.99).  
 Elliott, Lauren. **UNDER THE COVER OF MURDER** (\$8.99).  
 Fletcher, Jessica. **MURDER SHE WROTE MURDER IN SEASON** (\$7.99).  
 Flower, Amanda. **LEMON DROP DEAD** (\$8.99).  
 Gates, Eva. **A DEATH LONG OVER DUE** (\$9.99).  
 Haines, Carolyn. **DEVIL'S BONES** (\$7.99).  
 Innes, Louise R. **DEATH AT THE SALON** (\$8.99).  
 Logan, Kylie. **THE SECRETS OF BONES** (\$7.99).  
 MacRae, Molly. **THISTLES AND THIEVES** (\$16.95).  
 Meyer, Deon. **THE LAST HUNT** (\$16.00).  
 Ness, Lucy. **PHANTOMS AND FELONIES** (\$7.99).  
 Penney, Elizabeth. **BODIES & BOWS** (\$7.99).  
 Perkins, S C. **LINEAGE MOST LETHAL** (\$7.99).  
 Shelton, Paige. **STOLEN LETTER** (\$7.99).  
 Wilton, Traci. **MRS. MORRIS AND THE SORCERESS** (\$8.99).  
 Young, Kate. **SOUTHERN SASS AND A BATTERED BRIDE** (\$8.99).

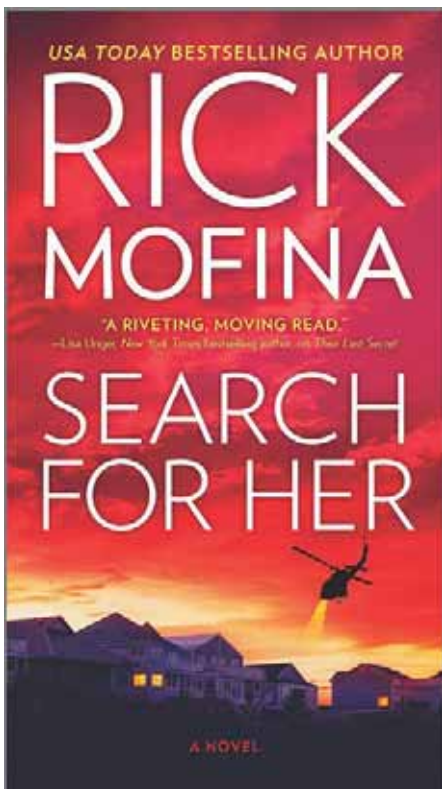
### Mediumboiled to Hardboiled



- Adler-Olsen, Jussi. **VICTIM 2117** (\$16.00).  
 Bannalec, Jean-Luc. **THE KILLING TIDE** (\$17.99).  
 Barron, Laird. **WORSE ANGELS** (\$9.99).  
 Berenson, Laurien. **GAME OF DOG BONES** (\$8.99).  
 Blacke, Olivia. **KILLER CONTENT** (\$16.00).  
 Bokur, Debra. **THE FIRE THIEF** (\$8.99).  
 Boyd, Damien. **BEYOND THE POINT** (\$15.95).  
 Boyle, William. **CITY OF MARGINS** (\$16.95).  
 Burgess, Doug. **DARK CURRENTS** (\$15.99).  
 Bush, Nancy. **THE GOSSIP** (\$8.99).  
 Carcaterra, Lorenzo. **PAYBACK** (\$9.99).  
 Cha, Steph. **YOUR HOUSE WILL PAY** (\$17.99).  
 Connelly, Michael. **FAIR WARNING** (\$16.99).  
 Connelly, Michael. **THE LAW OF INNOCENCE** (\$16.99).  
 Constantine, Liv. **THE WIFE STALKER** (\$16.99).  
 Deaver, Jeffery. **THE GOODBYE MAN** (\$9.99).  
 De Castrique, Mark. **FATAL SCORES** (\$15.99).  
 Downing, Samantha. **HE STARTED IT** (\$17.00).



Dugoni, Robert. **IN HER TRACKS** (\$15.95).  
 Engel, Amy. **THE FAMILIAR DARK** (\$16.00).  
 Feeney, Alice. **HIS AND HERS** (\$16.99).  
 Gentry, Amy. **BAD HABITS** (\$14.99).  
 Gilly, Alex. **DEATH RATTLE** (\$9.99).  
 Griffin, Laura. **FLIGHT** (\$7.99).  
 Hallinan, Timothy. **STREET MUSIC** (\$16.95).  
 Hendricks, Greer. **YOU ARE NOT ALONE** (\$16.99).  
 Jones, Darynda. **A BAD DAY FOR SUNSHINE** (\$17.99).  
 James, Rebecca. **THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR** (\$16.99).  
 Jones, Stephen Graham. **THE ONLY GOOD INDIANS** (\$16.99).  
 Leon, Donna. **TRACE ELEMENTS** (\$17.00).  
 Longworth, M L. **THE VANISHING MUSEUM ON THE RUE MISTRAL** (\$16.00).  
 Luna, Louisa. **THE JANES** (\$16.00).  
 Macmillan, Gilly. **THE NANNY** (\$9.99).  
 McBride, James. **DEACON KING KONG** (\$17.00).  
 Mofna, Rick. **SEARCH FOR HER** (\$9.99).



Neville, Kim, **THE MEMORY COLLECTORS** (\$17.00).

Palmer, DJ. **THE NEW HUSBAND** (\$16.99).  
 Panowich, Brian. **HARD CASH VALLEY** (\$17.99).  
 Paris, B A. **BREAKDOWN** (\$9.99).  
 Parks, Alan. **BOBBY MARCH WILL LIVE FOREVER** (Europa \$17.00).  
 Robotham, Michael. **GOOD GIRL BAD GIRL** (\$9.99).  
 Sandford, John. **MASKED PREY** (\$17.00).  
 Spencer Fleming, Julia. **HID FROM OUR EYES** (\$17.99).  
 Stabenow, Dana. **NO FIXED LINE** (\$14.95).  
 Swanson, Peter. **EIGHT PERFECT MURDERS** (\$16.99).  
 Viskic, Emma. **DARKNESS FOR LIGHT** (Steerforth \$14.95).  
 Walker, Martin. **THE SHOOTING AT CHATEAU ROCK** (\$16.95).  
 Wallace, Kali. **DEAD SPACE** (\$17.00).  
 Walker, Wendy. **ALL IS NOT FORGOTTEN** (\$9.99).  
 Weisel, Frederick. **THE SILENCED WOMEN** (\$16.99).  
 Wrobel, Stephanie. **DARLING ROSE GOLD** (\$17.00).

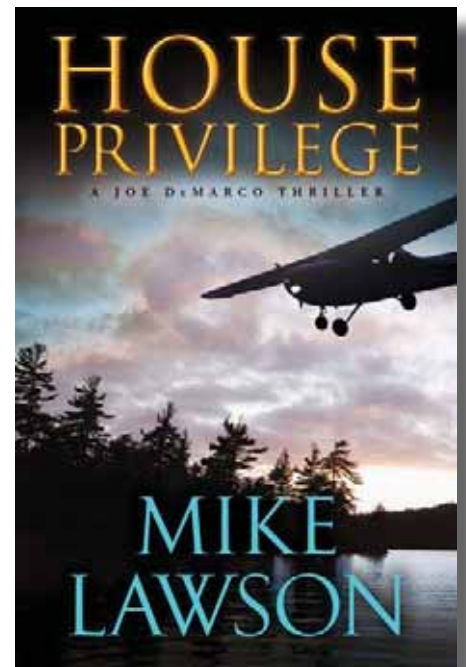
### History

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## Table of Contents

Mick Herron	2
Recent Espionage Novels	11
Conversation w/ Bryan Christy	16
Larry Gandle on Edgars	19
Edgar Award Winners	23
Bouchercon 2021	24
Barry Award Nominees 2021	25
Editor's Message	26
Assistant Editor's Message	27
He Ran For Gold, George H. Madison	29
It's About Crime	
by Marvin Lachman	30
Introducing...Steph Broadribb	32
DP List 2021	35
Mason Collins Series,	
Still Going Strong!	37
Reviews	
Kristopher Zgorski	40
Ted Hertel, Jr.	45
Mary Mason	51
George Easter	53
L. J. Roberts	57
Larry Gandle	63
Australian Mystery	65
R.I.P.	56
News and Reviews From the U.K.	
New Books	67
Reviews	68
Mike Ripley Column	71
Agatha Award Nominees	76
Sneak Previews	77
Recent Recommended Paperbacks	80



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