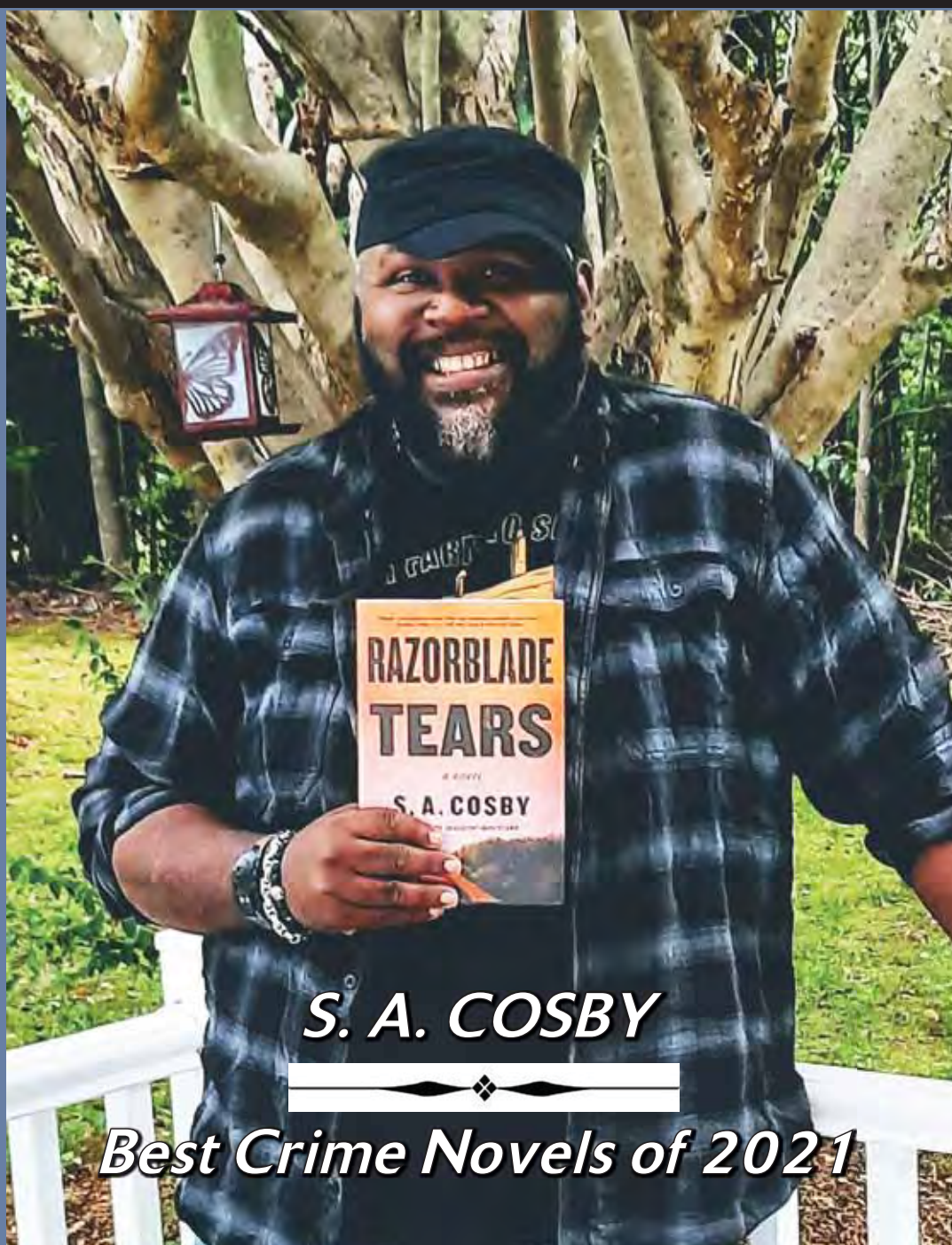


Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



S. A. COSBY

Best Crime Novels of 2021

S. A. Cosby

Razorblade Tears

S. A. Cosby

Shawn A. Cosby was born into poverty in southeastern Virginia, where he was raised in a trailer with no indoor plumbing.

Shawn studied English literature at Christopher Newport University, but dropped out to take care of his ailing mother. He worked at various jobs including assistant at a funeral home, forklift driver, landscaper, roadie, construction worker, bouncer as well as assorted jobs in the retail and fast food industries.

An uncle introduced him to Travis McGee and Mike Hammer at an early age, while an aunt lent him her Stephen King novels. When he would encounter an ending of a novel he didn't like, Shawn's mother would encourage him to re-write the ending.

Shawn's early writings were in the horror genre, but over time, he turned

to crime fiction and mystery. Further literary influences on Cosby were Walter Mosley, Ross Macdonald, Elmore Leonard, Chester Himes, David Goodis, Donald Goines and Agatha Christie.

His short story "The Grass Beneath My Feet" gave Cosby a wider exposure to mystery fiction fans. It is written from the point of view of a prisoner who is on temporary release to a funeral home in order to say goodbye to his dead mother one last time. The story won Cosby a 2019 Anthony Award.

After the publication of two novels (**BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLADE** and **MY DARKEST PRAYER**) by small publishers, his 2020 title, **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**, was published by Flatiron Books, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing. The book became a favorite of many critics and crime fiction fans and was the most lauded crime novel of 2020. It has gone into at least eight printings and first edition collectors are having difficulty finding first printings.

Cosby, whose life, according to his own statement, was marked by systemic disenfranchisement and racial hostility, often feels drawn to the side of the socially excluded and oppressed. Accordingly, in his literary work to date, it was inevitable that his personal worldview permeated his writing.

As a Black writer at a time of great social and political division, Cosby feels a deep sense of responsibility. "As an African American writer, your first charge is to tell the truth about your experience," says Cosby. He hopes that his own truth-telling will inspire others to do the same. "I would love for a little Black boy or girl to pick up my book and be like, 'Wow, man, this dude is doing this. If he is publishing, then I can do it,

too.'"

Shawn does gardening in his spare time, while playing chess and hiking are still among his hobbies.

Making the Story Earn It An Interview with S. A. Cosby

By Dawn Ius

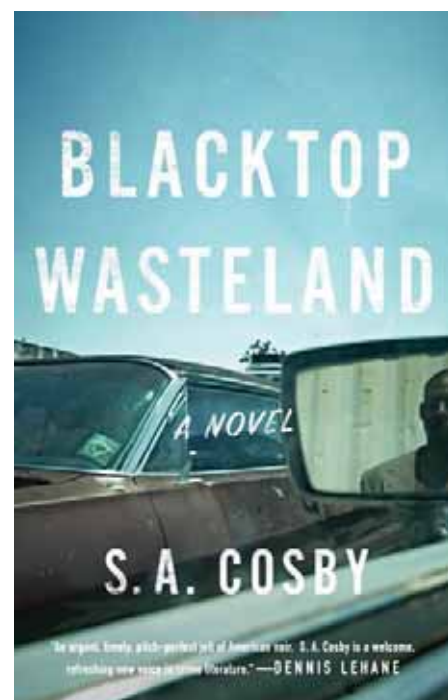
[This interview first appeared in the July, 2021 issue of *The Big Thrill*, produced by the International Thriller Writers and is printed here by permission.]

Though he's been picking away at short stories since the tender age of 12, S.A. Cosby recalls the exact moment he received what remains today his greatest piece of writing advice. During a Grade 11 English class, he raised his hand and asked, "What am I allowed to write about?"

The teacher called him aside afterward and imparted this infinite wisdom: "You can write about whatever you want, as long as your story earns it."

These empowering words have carried Cosby throughout his formative writing years, allowing him to write about topics that need addressing—even if that means making readers a little uncomfortable.

Though not his first book, Cosby skidded onto the bestseller list with last



year's **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**, a high-octane heist thriller that earned him critical acclaim and made the book industry stand up and take notice. With his lyrical, yet unflinchingly raw style, Cosby tackled heavy topics with fleshed-out characters that stick with you long after you turn the last page.

It's no surprise **BLACKTOP WASTELAND** earned the Southern writer numerous awards and nominations—he is up for this year's ITW Hardcover Award—accolades, movie deals, and a firm spot on the crime fiction circuit.

And perhaps even less surprising that this year's follow-up, **RAZORBLADE TEARS**, is primed to exceed **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**'s exceedingly high bar of success.

Boiled down to its simplest form, **RAZORBLADE TEARS** is the story of a Black man, a white man, their two murdered sons—and their quest for vengeance. But of course, it's so much more than that. Provocative, lyrical, and propulsive, it's a novel of bloody retribution, heartfelt change—and maybe even redemption.

In his first interview with *The Big Thrill*, Cosby shares more about the inspiration for this book and its memorable characters, what drives his passion to create, and the writing quirk that makes the most appearances in his work.

RAZORBLADE TEARS provides an unflinching look at a number of big topics—racism, vengeance, hatred... The list is long and in someone else's hands could have been unwieldy. What do you want readers to take away from this story?

I always want to talk about a lot of things. In **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**, I wanted to talk about the tragedy of toxic masculinity. With **RAZORBLADE TEARS**, I really wanted to talk about intolerance, and what that intolerance does.

Much of that intolerance—and its consequences—is addressed through the characters of Ike and Buddy Lee—two fairly unlikeable guys on the sur-

face who are vastly different but share a common grief: the loss of their sons, who were married and murdered. Can you share a little about their inception?

The idea for the book came from two places. The first was that I was talking to my friend, who is the same age as me—I'll be 48 this year—who for the longest time wouldn't come out to his family. When he did come out, it didn't go well. And I was very moved and saddened by his story—as an African American, he'd been raised in a family that talked a lot about equality. But that didn't seem to extend to him as a gay man.

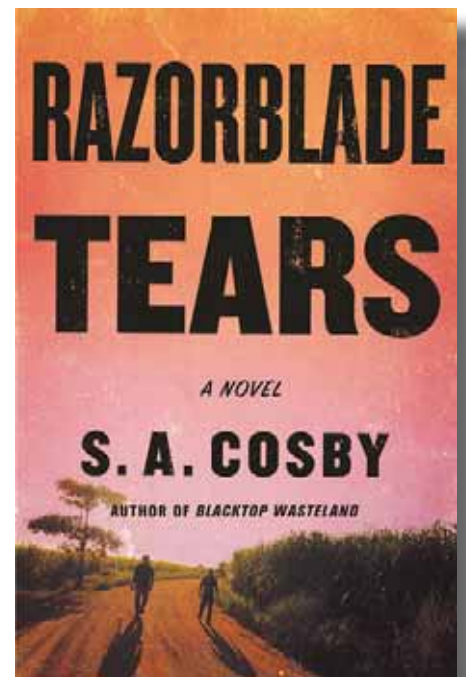
I was also having this conversation with a friend about these two tough-guy actors—Ron Perlman and Danny Trejo—and I thought, I'd love to write a story about these guys, these old guys that used to be hellcats.

Both Ike and Buddy Lee didn't understand who their sons were. I always wanted people to confront them about their beliefs. That's the way we have to have these conversations. We have to call people on their BS. Redemption is a constant work in progress. For the purposes of the book, it ends on page 308—but in reality, that's only the beginning.

Despite the heaviness of the topics, the writing is still nuanced—you're not hitting us over the head with a sledgehammer. Is that nuance something that takes several drafts?

Oh, yeah, that takes several drafts. I want the subtext to be nuanced. So, while you're looking over here at someone getting their head bashed in with a shovel, I don't want you to learn that you're caring about these characters.

If you can believe it, the first two drafts were way darker. I feel strongly about the issues I'm talking about, but sometimes I can get carried away. There were a couple of hardcore scenes in the first draft, and I had to learn that I don't necessarily need those scenes to get across what I'm trying to say.



I read in an interview about BLACKTOP WASTELAND that when you wrote the scene between Ronnie and Bug in the cornfield, that was the moment you thought you might have something really good on your hands. RAZORBLADE TEARS bleeds with exceptional scenes, but is there one for you that stands out?

Yeah, there's the scene in the gay bar where Ike acts out because someone has hit on him, and his reactions afterward. He has a sense of shame internally—and in his internal monologue he sees the way he has carried himself at the expense of other people. It was then that I thought maybe I was getting what I wanted out of the story.

Both BLACKTOP WASTELAND and RAZORBLADE TEARS are violent books—there's a lot of blood and death. And yet it's never gratuitous. How do you strike the balance of being authentic to the story while not turning readers off with "too much"?

I appreciate the visceral-ness of violence. I think pain and violence is universal. Even if you've never been in a fist fight, you can appreciate how things spiral out of control. If your story earns that violence, you gain currency with

your reader, and you get to use that currency when you need it. I really like shocking readers into being engaged in the story. Violence is ugly and messy. I want you to feel the bones splitting and feel the sweat and agony they're going through. I don't do sedate. I want to shove your face in it.

BLACKTOP WASTELAND is a staggeringly good novel—it received outstanding trade reviews, a movie deal, multiple awards. Many authors struggle with the next book after this kind of debut success. Was this a factor for you?

I think I had a lot of concern about following *Blacktop Wasteland*. I didn't expect the book to do the things it did at all. There was a moment I realized it was getting bigger than I had ever dreamed. It was terrifying in some ways. For all the subtext, it's a heist novel. **RAZORBLADE TEARS** slows down a lot in parts—I needed to give my characters time to breathe. And I guess a part of me worries people won't connect with it. But the only way out is through, and so I just pray and hope for the best.

My job is to tell a good story and make people think. Nobody wants a 300-page sermon. I did what I wanted to do with **RAZORBLADE TEARS**. Will people appreciate it? I hope so.

Your prose is mesmerizing. Could

you share a little about your writing process?

I love listening to music—it inspires me. I'm a huge fan of all genres. And I love to read. I do tend to skew a bit toward the purplish, but I have a great editor who's able to pull me back when I get carried away. I do think that has something to do with being a Southern writer though. There's a certain rhythm to Southern speech that if you can replicate it in fiction, it sets you apart from other writers.

Also, I'm addicted to similes. If you read my book and you think there are too many similes, you should have seen the first draft.

Did you always want to be a writer?

I think I did, I just didn't know it. I grew up around readers. My mom was a great reader of folklore and biographies. My grandmother loved trashy romance authors. The trashier the better. My uncle loved mysteries.

I started to read at a young age—my mom used to tell people I started reading at four, but I think that's a family legend. At one point, I started complaining about some of the stories, that I didn't like the way they ended. And my mom would say, "If you don't like the way a story ends, write your own." I used to think that was her encouraging me, but I think she was tired of me

talking about it.

I was about 12 or 13 when I started to write my first story. It was an over-the-top werewolf story. And I liked the feeling of completing a story. I knew it was horrible, but now I had the bug.

My mom was a realist about writing—she always told me to have something as back-up. But she never told me I couldn't do it. She would always bring home books for me, paperbacks she got from a used book store, and I would read everything.

I had to drop out of college because my mom was sick, and that's when I started writing seriously. I bought a bunch of books on writing craft. I really wanted to write horror, but basically, I couldn't sell it. I realized that even most of my horror stuff had a crime/noir feel to it. That's where I found my lane.

On Twitter, you revealed you're working on a secret project. I don't expect you to give us details on that one—but is there anything you can share about something you're working on?

There are actually two secret projects. It's a whole thing. What I will say is that I'm writing in a different medium for one, and a different genre for the other, which is both challenging and also very rewarding.

Review of **RAZORBLADE TEARS**

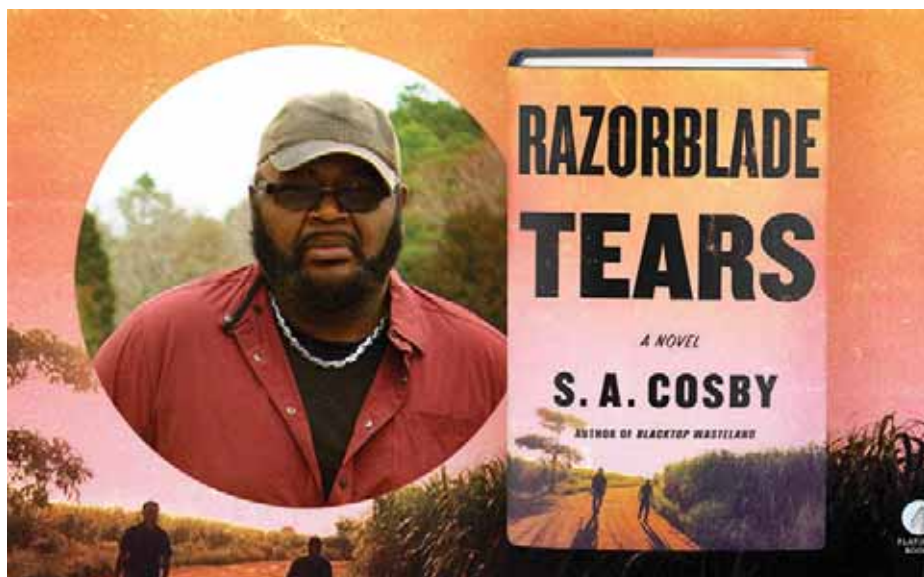
by S. A. Cosby

Flatiron Books, \$26.99, July 6, 2021

Rating: A+

Reviewed by Larry Gandle

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 is quite literary, while at the same time, entertains.

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. 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.

George's Take: Shawn Cosby said that "his job is to tell a good story and make people think." And that is exactly what he has done for me. A lot of the crime fiction I read is enjoyed by me as I'm experiencing it, but soon forgotten. That is not the case with **RAZORBLADE TEARS**. I find myself often reflecting on its powerful plot and message, asking myself if there is any part of me that is similar to Ike or Bobby Lee and what I should do about it. I look at this novel as a coming-of-age story of two middle-aged men as opposed to the usual one involving teenagers. We are never too old to change for the better.

Something else stood out to me as I read along: Shawn Cosby is a brilliant stylist. As I read -- especially in the early parts of the novel -- I found myself stopping and re-reading a certain sentence or paragraph to savor the beauty of the words and thoughts.

Thanks to Flatiron Books for bringing S. A. Cosby to the attention of a growing legion of fans who can appreciate his unique talents. **Rating: A+**

Best Mysteries & Thrillers So Far in 2021 Best Novels

While Larry Gandle and I agree that **RAZORBLADE TEARS** is the best crime novel that we have read so far this year, there have been other excellent 2021 mysteries, crime novels and thrillers that we and others on the *DP* staff have read. We suspect that many of these titles will appear on year end best lists, so we are giving you a heads-up. You should be able to find something that will tickle your fancy in the titles that follow. Good reading!

THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS
By Elly Griffiths

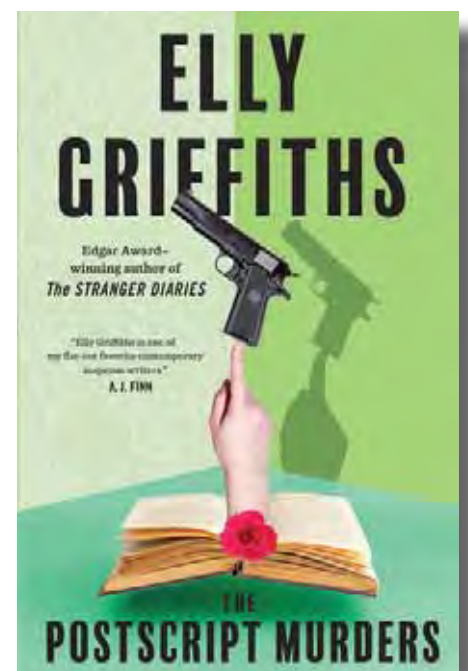
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt \$25.00,
March 2, 2021

Rating: A+

Reviewed by Kristopher Zgorski

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 Harbinder Kaur is a character



ter 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.

[For differing opinions on this novel, see Larry Gandle's and L. J. Roberts' review columns herein]

THE KILLING KIND

by Jane Casey

In U.S. Harper Collins, available on Kindle and Audio, but hardcover not out until September 21, 2021; in U.K. Harper Collins, £12.99

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Jane Casey's latest novel, **THE KILLING KIND**, is a first rate stand-alone novel that plays some clever variations on the usual serial stalker theme.

London barrister Ingrid Lewis thought that she had finally escaped

the attentions of former client and serial stalker John Webster, but when a colleague is run down on a busy road, Ingrid suspects that she was the intended victim. The police are not convinced, and when Webster turns up at Ingrid's door claiming that she is in danger, she does not know which way to turn.

This is a very carefully crafted and totally absorbing crime thriller. Jane gets the book off to a brisk start and then smoothly and succinctly weaves in the backstory to the plot. As the story moves forward with increasing threats to Ingrid's life, and other deaths, we are also drip fed details of what went before. Meanwhile, regularly interspersed anonymous, sinister text exchanges add a strong sense of trepidation to the novel.

As the story unfolds, Jane does a really good job of steadily ramping up the tension and adding a good cast of possible villains and suspects. The second half of the book hums with suspense and there is an exciting conclusion and several clever twists, most of which I did not see coming.

The characters, especially Ingrid and the enigmatic Webster, are nicely fleshed out and interesting, and there is a good deal of simple, convincing background detail on locations and legal procedure woven seamlessly into the story.

A thoroughly entertaining read.

WHO THEY WAS

by Gabriel Krauze

Bloomsbury, \$26.00, June 29, 2021

Rating: A

Reviewed by Larry Gandle

South Kilburn is a part of London no tourist would ever want to see. It is on the outskirts of the city and consists of concrete sidewalks and towers with poorly maintained apartments with dark and dangerous stairwells. Gabriel AKA Snoopz is a member of a gang who operate at the fringes of society. Crime and drugs are routine parts of everyday. Through Gabriel, we meet his friends, lovers, associates, family and his enemies. Knife fights occur for honor and robbing outsiders is done to buy a new pair of high end athletic shoes or Rolex watches. Gabriel is attending "uni" or-



the university to get a degree in English literature. He gets by with little effort as he is unusually bright. This is in stark contrast to the rest of his life.

WHO THEY WAS is a remarkable debut novel that was longlisted for the Booker Prize for literature. Gabriel Krauze lived this life and it is evident on the pages. He makes it all seem so very normal. What is truly unique about this book is the fact that it is written almost completely in British slang which the reader will eventually understand for the most part. He is, in essence, teaching the reader a new language. It is brilliant. Anthony Burgess did a similar thing in **A CLOCKWORK ORANGE** but that language was totally fictitious. There are scenes that are heartbreaking and the characters are tragic figures leading a very rough life. Gabriele Krauze is not writing crime fiction as we know it. The crimes in his books are so much more alive and real. Highly recommended for those readers who are willing to put a bit more effort into a read as it is a slow read due to the language but always fascinating.

THE UNWILLING

by John Hart

St. Martin's, \$27.99, February 2, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Larry Gandle

In the South during the Vietnam war, Gibby has grown up with two brothers affected by the war. His oldest brother was killed there and his other brother, Jason, came back a changed man. Jason is just getting out of prison after a couple of years for drugs. He is now out and wants to have some relationship with Gibby but their parents do not want him around. Their mother is overprotective of Gibby and their father is a local police detective who has written off his second son but feels conflicted over that. What sets off this compulsively readable plot is when a young woman is found brutally murdered and Jason is arrested for it. It seems someone in the prison is controlling things on the outside. Gibby decides to investigate and this leads him into danger that could threaten his life and the life of his best



friend, Chance.

There is so much to this brilliant novel- family loyalty, friendship, coming of age and the horrors of the Vietnam war. Characters are well thought out and for the most part realistic, but the villains are over the top. This book reminds me in various ways of Thomas Harris' **SILENCE OF THE LAMBS** in that the villain, X, is a brutal psychopath but, also, brilliant and very rich allowing him vast resources. Once it takes off, the plot is relentless, and the book is difficult to put down. My only complaint is that the action and situation is sometimes over the top especially in the climactic scenes. It is a fun read and will confirm John Hart as one of the best crime fiction writers working today. Just recall, this author is the only one to win two Best Novel Edgar Awards for two consecutive books, **DOWN RIVER** in 2008 and **THE LAST CHILD** in 2010 (for which he also earned a Barry Award for Best Novel). He is back in that rare form, once again. Highly recommended.

THE NAMELESS ONES

by John Connolly

Atria, \$28.00, October, 2021

Rating: A

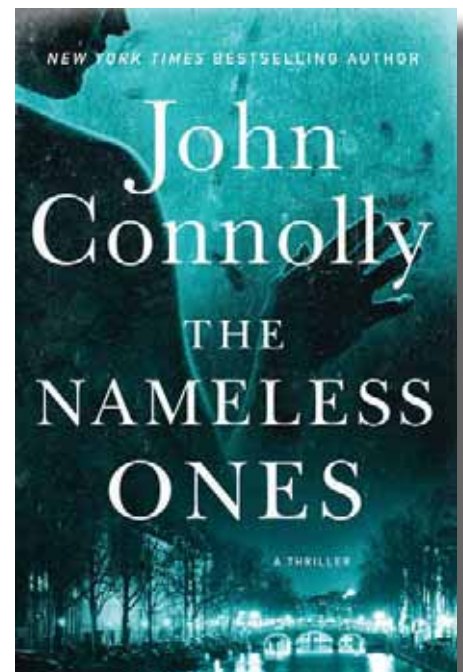
Reviewed by Jeff Popple
John Connolly's **THE DIRTY**

SOUTH was one of my favourite books of 2020. It was a rich, multi-layered novel, which served as a pre-sequel to Connolly's highly praised Charlie Parker series, and, in my view, was one of his best novels.

His latest book, **THE NAMELESS ONES**, also takes a break from the main arc of the Charlie Parker series, although it does wrap up some of the threads from earlier books. The focus of **THE NAMELESS ONES** is not on Parker, although he does appear briefly in the book in an important scene, but on his brothers in arms, the assassins Louis and Angel.

The book opens with the brutal murder of four people in a canal house in Amsterdam, including the infamous criminal fixer De Jaager, who is crucified. The massacre is perpetrated by the brothers Vuksan, notorious Serbian war criminals and leaders of an influential crime gang. The brothers believe that they are above the law and can do what they want. They confidently head back to their homeland, initially unaware that they are being pursued by someone far more dangerous than themselves.

De Jaager was a go-between, confidant and kind of friend to the killer known as Louis. When Louis hears of De Jaager's death he heads to Europe to hunt the killers down. Accompanied by



his partner in business and life, Angel, who is still recovering from cancer, he sets off after the five murderers, only to learn that there is a sixth killer, who is potentially more deadly than the others.

THE NAMELESS ONES is a terrific book. The seemingly straight forward plot is quickly made more complicated and richer by manoeuvrings between various Serbian crime factions, the actions of an Islamic terrorist group, the interest of figures in the American intelligence community and a hint of the supernatural. After the truly gruesome opening, the pace slows a little, as Connolly impresses with swathes of information on the horrors of the Balkan conflict and the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, before speeding up over the final fifty pages or so.

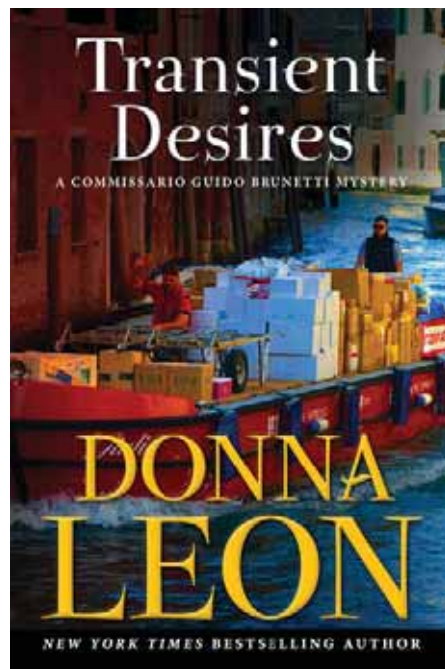
As usual, Connolly brings a poet eye to his story and there are some truly evocative passages, especially those set in Amsterdam and a small cemetery in Vienna. There are also some marvellously witty and humorous lines by Louis and Angel, particularly as they encounter agents from the FBI and CIA, and Connolly's own wry observations.

THE NAMELESS ONES is a slightly shorter book than Connolly's usual efforts, and a lot shorter than **A BOOK OF BONES**, and this shortness sits well with the book's pace and the essentially thriller nature of the story. As usual, there are a host of recurring characters, not of all whom fare well. This guest appearances will be welcomed by regular readers of the series, but newcomers may be less taken by these diversions and the detailed backstories **THE NAMELESS ONES** also has less supernatural overtones than some of his books, which will appeal to those crime readers who do not like ghosts and the like.

Overall, I really liked **THE NAMELESS ONES** and came away from it once more impressed with Connolly's beautiful writing and amazing grasp of history and detail.

TRANSIENT DESIRES

by Donna Leon – 30th in series
Atlantic Monthly Press, Mar 2021,
Rating: A+



Reviewed by L. J. Roberts

First Sentence: Brunetti slept late.

Two young American women were found injured and abandoned on the emergency dock of the hospital. A surveillance camera finally identified the boat and the men who left them there. But why dump the women if the injuries were caused by a boating accident? An investigation by Brunetti and his colleague, Claudia Griffoni, lead to far darker activities involving one of the men's uncle. Although Brunetti is uncertain how much he can trust them, he needs the assistance of the Carabinieri and the Guardia di Costiera against an enemy much greater than he imagined.

One of the best things about Brunetti is how real and normal he is. No superhero he. He procrastinates and indulges in self-pity as he feels the passage of years. His empathy for others and the inclusion of his home life makes him a fully developed character. Yet, one wonders whether Brunetti is suffering from ennui and thinking of retirement?

As usual, the magnificent Signorina Elettra saves the day by pointing him to a new case, but it's Leon's wry assessment of charity events, especially those for environmental issues where the attendees fly in on their private jets, that remind us how good Leon is at incorporating current issues into her stories including that while Brunetti is

appreciative of the women with whom he is in contact, he is also very aware of what is appropriate. The addition of Claudia Griffoni as Brunetti's second, and a Neapolitan demonstrates that bigotry comes in many forms. Still, she makes the point; it is often those who are invisible to others who see the most. There is so much packed into this story. Brunetti is always willing to grow and learn which adds to his strength as a character.

Leon expands the story in a logical manner, often with well-placed, but not overused, plot twists. She also increases one's knowledge of Italy's different law enforcement branches by including the Carabinieri, or the military branch, and the Guardia Costiera, which is equivalent to our Coast Guard. Including these branches expands the story and increases its suspense. There is nothing more effective or suspenseful than a setup where one thinks one knows how things will go, yet desperately hopes to be wrong.

TRANSIENT DESIRES is timely, relevant, and suspenseful. This ranks high among Leon's books; perhaps as her very best, with implications and an ending that is emotionally impactful.

THIEF OF SOULS

by Brian Klingborg

Minotaur Books, \$27.99, May 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Ted Hertel

Rural Police Inspector Lu Fei is called to the scene of a brutal murder in his small town of Raven Valley in northern China. A young woman, Yang Fenfang, has been eviscerated and her corpse sewn back together, joss paper stuffed in her mouth. A potential suspect, a young man obsessed with Fenfang, lives nearby and is arrested. After all, he works in a meatpacking plant with access to very sharp knives. Lu calls the Criminal Investigation Bureau in Beijing, which sends a team down to assist. But the man in charge believes the "boyfriend" is the likely killer and has little interest in much further investigation. Lu, however, has a different point of view and continues the search on his own. He discovers other similar

unsolved killings in China, which leads him to believe a serial killer is on the prowl.

Brian Klingborg, who has spent years living and working in Asia, has created a fascinating character in Inspector Lu Fei. The detective thinks and acts a professional who cares about justice and the victims of crime. The author has loaded the book with Chinese history, philosophy (quotations from Chairman Mao abound), politics, health care, media taboos, law, and even religion (!), but does not overburden the reader with any of it. Wry observations abound (e. g., “[Y]our average Chinese citizen regards the institution of law enforcement as equivalent to a pit of quicksand. A hazard that is largely avoidable—but if you are careless enough to step in it, you’re probably screwed.”)

With first-world status come first-world problems and among these are serial killers. But in a country where stability always takes precedence over public safety, officials are loath to provide information on the mounting problem of homicide, even to other branches of law enforcement. The country is rife with corruption, favoritism, nepotism, and fraud. Lu Fei muses that “corruption is as endemic to China as malaria is to a swamp.” In spite of these obstacles, the inspector must carry on to find a murderer who seems to be without conscience.

This is a fascinating examination of China and its legal procedure and process. Told with more than a touch of humor, action, and Lu’s perseverance in the face of tremendous odds against him, this is an author and a series definitely to put on your list of “must reads” for this year.

Best First Novels

SUBURBAN DICKS

by Fabian Niecieza
Putnam, \$27.00, June

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

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

Andie Stern seems like your typical suburban New Jersey housewife with

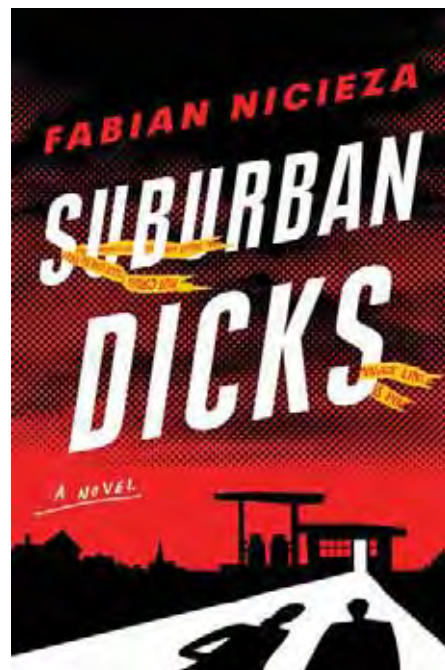
four rambunctious kids and one more on the way. Her days are spent carting her kids around from one activity to another – day after day of the same old, same old. Andie pines for her former career as a budding (and brilliant) FBI profiler, but those days are beyond the horizon in her rear-view mirror.

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.

STEEL FEAR

by Brandon Webb & John David Mann
Bantam, \$28.00, July, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

If you look at the cover art and combine it with the title STEEL FEAR, you might think that this novel is a war-action thriller. It is NOT. It is a murder mystery set on the modern-day U.S. aircraft carrier, the Abraham Lincoln.

The ship is at the near end of a months-long deployment and will shortly be sailing to San Diego. The morale of the crew is poor, due mostly to the inept leadership of Captain Eagleberg. And this is one of the first things that Navy SEAL sniper Finn (no last name, unless you count the X on his enlistment papers) notices as he comes on board for a ride home.

There is a mystery surrounding Finn’s orders and his failed attempts to reach his platoon and his best friend Kennedy. Why is he being sent home? And why didn’t they just put him on a plane? Haunted by gaps in his memory, Finn wonders what really happened to cause civilian deaths on his last assignment.

Finn is a first-rate soldier, but what he really excels in is observation – and the ability to make quick and accurate deductions from what he sees. To get the lay of the “land,” Finn spends his first few days roaming the huge ship and learning its layout to the very last detail.

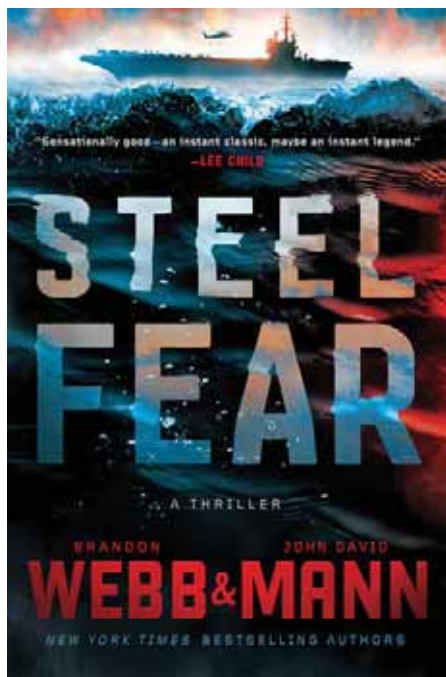
Most of the narrative is seen through Finn’s eyes, but there are two other main characters whose thoughts we are privy to: Monica Halsey, a helicopter pilot who is reeling from the death of a

close friend and fellow helicopter pilot; and Command Master Chief Robbie Jackson, a good man and a better officer, who feels compelled (against orders) to investigate the disappearance of two crew members, apparent suicides.

When more murders occur, Finn comes under suspicion.

Reading a mystery set on an aircraft carrier is something I've never experienced before and I found the setting fascinating. *STEEL FEAR* is a riff on the oft-used locked room puzzle. But what a huge locked room! And there are 6,000 people on board, which makes for an impossible number of suspects. However, the authors are up to the task and what we get is a very exciting and well-thought-out mystery. Webb & Mann have written a number of non-fiction works, but this is their first novel. What a great start!

There are a couple of chapters at the end of the book which serve as a preview of the next book in what will become a series. Can't wait to read it



Best Action/ Spy Thrillers

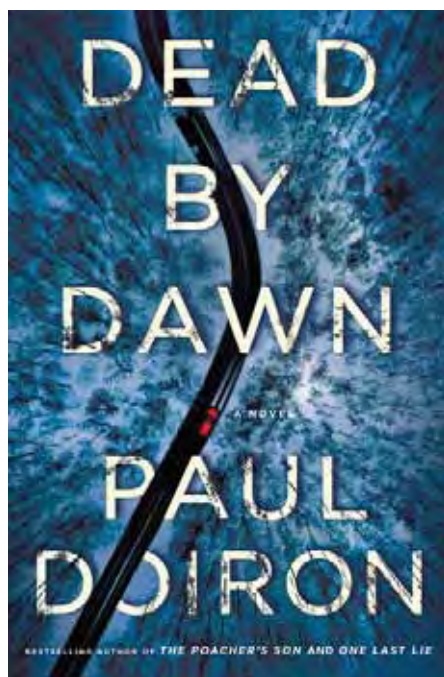
DEAD BY DAWN

by Paul Doiron

Minotaur, \$27.99, June

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter



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 alternate 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!

FALLING

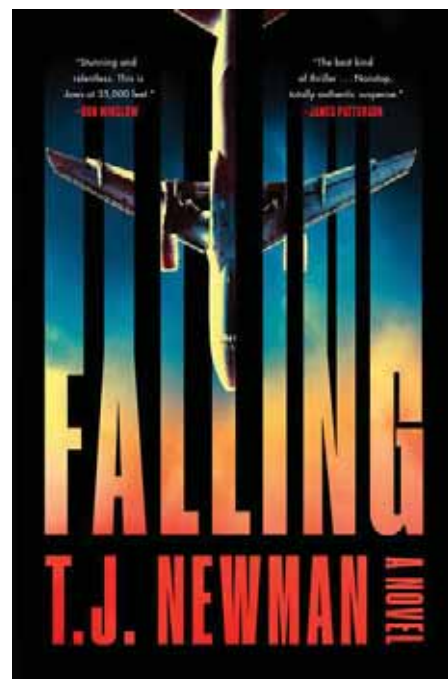
by T. J. Newman

Avid Reader Press, \$28.00

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

The plot of this thrilling novel is quite simple: Bill Hoffman is a pilot whose family is being held hostage. He hears this news after his plane is in flight and he is told that he will receive instructions to crash the plane near the



end of the flight. A photograph of his wife in an explosive vest is sent to his phone. In the meantime, he is to talk to no one. So the book is about how Bill goes about saving his passengers as well as his family.

The FBI catch wind of what is going on and we read of their attempts to save Bill's family, while Bill is handling his own challenges on the plane.

This is a what-happens-next thriller which is highly suspenseful. As each twist occurs, I kept wondering, "How is are they going to get out of this one?" I love novels about people who use their smarts to survive.

FALLING is the kind of book you either buy into and enjoy or you dismiss as too improbable to consider it entertaining. Larry didn't like it. (See his review in his review column herein.) I did. This is your chance to see whose opinion most closely mirrors your own. By the way, my wife Michele, whom I consider a tough critic, liked it a lot as well.

SLOUGH HOUSE

Constable Crime, \$27.95, 2021

Rating: A

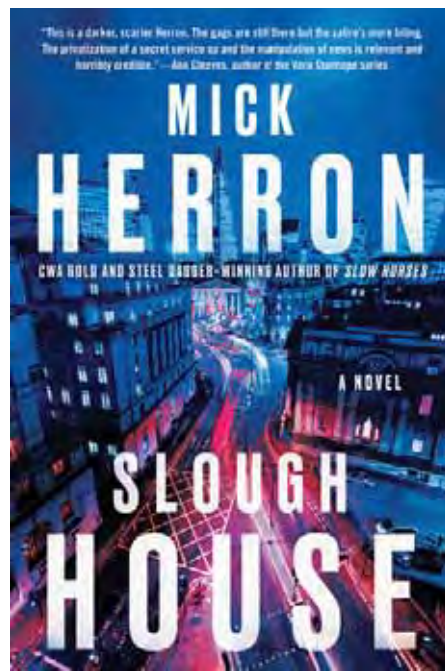
Reviewed by Jeff Popple

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, 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+

**Best Paperback
Originals**

BLACK CORAL

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

Rating: A+



Reviewed by L J Roberts

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.

Sloan 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 straightforward, 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.

SEARCH FOR HER

by Rick Mofina

MIRA, \$9.99, March 9, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

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.

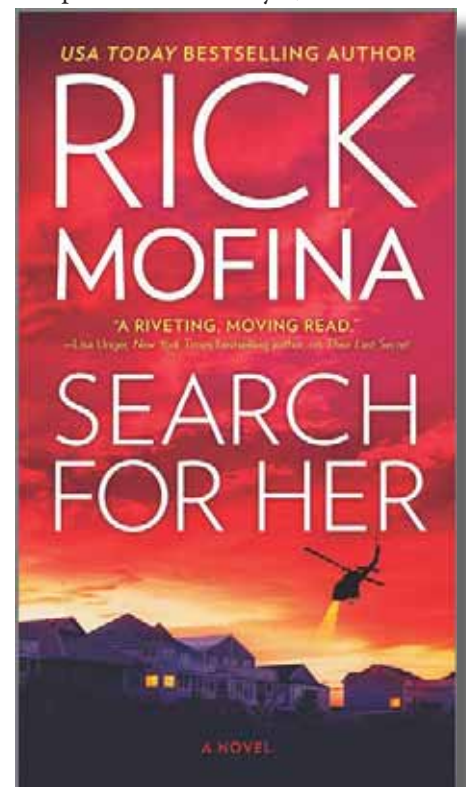
John has decided to move the family from San Diego to Pittsburgh for better employment and to give everyone a fresh start. Riley doesn't want to leave her boyfriend and is very resistant to the move. To make things a little easier,

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.

THE GOOD TURN

by Dervla McTiernan

Blackstone Publishing, \$16.99, August 31, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

It has taken almost two years for the latest in the Cormac Reilly series to make it to our shores, due possibly by a change in publishers. But it finally here and it's a dandy.

The good policeman fighting to do what's right, despite obfuscation from his bosses, is a common and very satisfying plot device in police detective novels. It immediately gets the reader on the side of the struggling detective. It is used to good effect in this, the third of the Galway series.

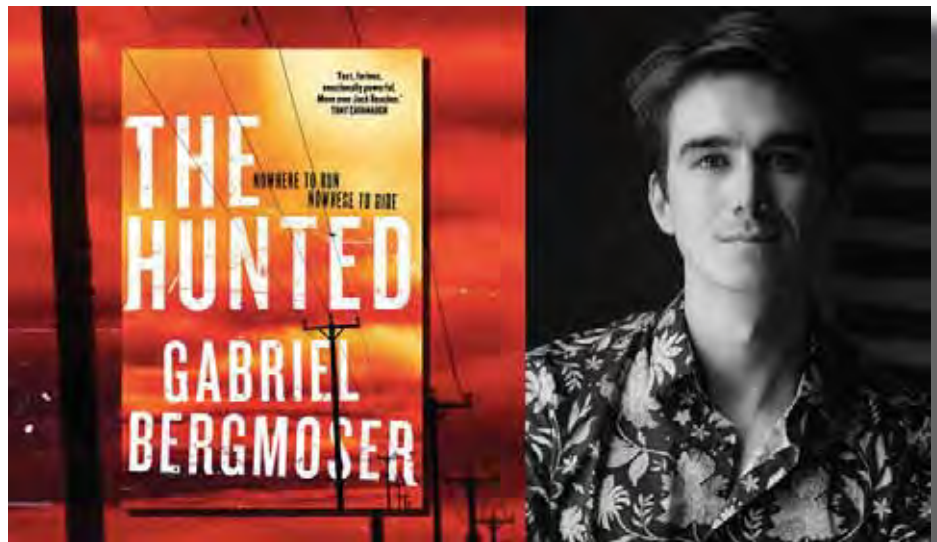
Detective Cormac Reilly is still trying to fit in with his Galway Garda comrades, but it's quite a closed bunch and he is still regarded as an "outsider." But of late, the situation is getting worse. Manpower is in short supply due to the big anti-drug task force enlistment of locals. Reilly reaches a boiling point when a young girl is abducted and his superior Brian Murphy refuses to give him any help. He can't believe the man's incompetence. Or is it a simple case of corruption?

Nevertheless, Reilly uses his skeleton crew to track down leads. One of his junior detectives, Peter Fisher, finds himself in a difficult position: he thinks he knows who the abductor is and where he is going, but he can't reach anyone for backup. So he goes alone to rescue the young girl and bad things happen.

To avoid prosecution for his actions (that he believes were justifiable -- but unwitnessed), Peter is sent to his home town of Roundstone to work with his estranged father, whom he detests.

While there, he starts digging deeper into the murder of two local farmers -- a case he is supposed to rubber stamp. But good detectives don't rubber stamp, they detect.

Meanwhile, Cormac Reilly has his own set of problems: enemies at work



who are trying to torpedo his career and the difficulty of maintaining a long-distance, romantic relationship. He is eventually suspended and forced to investigate on his own (to clear Peter's name), despite warnings to the contrary.

While all this is going on, the reader is privy to another story line of Anna and her young daughter Tilly who are fleeing some unknown trauma of the past. By coincidence (and it is a **big** coincidence --also described as such by the author), Anna and Tilly wind up in Roundstone where Anna has gotten a job caring for Peter's aging grand-

mother.

Dervla McTiernan's writing is so good that I read this in a flash. The promise Dervla showed with the publication of Barry Award-winning **THE RUIN**, continues to blossom and flourish. I will read every book she writes and I'm pretty sure I will enjoy the heck out of all of them. Call me "Predisposed."

THE HUNTED

by Gabriel Bergmoser

Harper Collins, \$16.99, September 7, 2021

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

One of my recent favorites for pure reading pleasure is Gabriel Bergmoser's outstanding piece of 'outback noir', **THE HUNTED**.

Frank runs a truck stop on a lonely highway in outback Australia. It is a solitary existence, which has only recently been broken by the arrival of his granddaughter, Allie, who has been sent to stay with him to fix her attitude. It is a fragile relationship, which is put under considerable pressure when an injured young woman arrives at the service station with a fired shotgun under the front seat of her car. Frank and a handful of customers tend to her wounds, but soon several cars turn up demanding that they hand over the woman. Suddenly the small group are thrust into a deadly stand-off, with no hope of rescue.

This is a fast paced and violent



novel that grabs you from the opening pages and does not let go until the final gunshot. The story alternates between the bloody confrontation at the truck stop and the equally violent backstory of the wounded girl, the tough and resilient Maggie, and the lead-up to her pursuit by a group of armed men and women. The viewpoint moves frequently between the various characters and Bergmoser skilfully uses it to ramp up the tension and occasionally surprise the reader.

As to be expected, most of the characters have dark shadows in their past and Bergmoser does a very good job of fleshing out his desperate cast and making them credible, especially the young British tourists who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The central characters of Frank, Allie and Maggie are also very well drawn, and it is interesting to watch them change and grow as the book progresses. Bergmoser's portrayal of the armed men in pursuit of Maggie also neatly showcases the toxic side of Australian masculinity.

While some Australian crime fiction creates an idyllic version of outback Australia, this is not the case here. The early chapters quickly establish the vastness and loneliness of the Australian outback, and the human dangers which lurk there, as well as the beauty and harshness of the countryside. Some of the events may seem to stretch credibility, but there is, unfortunately, a terrifying reality to them.

This is an outstanding debut and one of the most thrilling and visceral novels I have read this year. There are some minor concerns about the plot, but these are easily overlooked as the story races along to its blood-soaked conclusion. This is Jack Reacher for adults.

Best History Mystery

WEDDING STATION

by David Downing

Soho Crime, \$27.95, March 2021

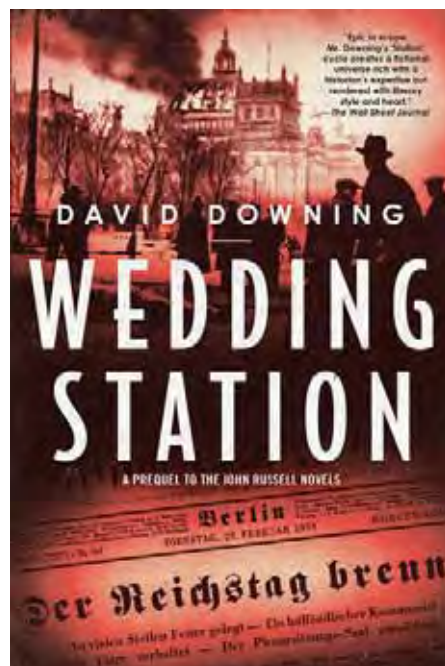
Rating: A

Reviewed by Ted Hertel

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 of 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.

Best British Crime Novels

(No Announced U.S.
Publication Date Yet)

DEAD GROUND

by M. W. Craven

Century, £16.99

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

Detective Sergeant Washington Poe has made some enemies in the past

and some have conspired to have him evicted from his beloved and isolatedcroft. He seems to have thwarted them – at least temporarily – by some fancy legal footwork performed by his partner in crime investigation – the socially awkward, but brilliant tech whiz Tilly Bradshaw.

While in court on this matter, Poe receives an urgent summons to attend a crime scene in Carlisle where a man has been brutally murdered with a baseball bat. Poe is puzzled because this is not the type of case he usually gets involved with. He is a serial killer hunter and this appears to be a random murder. But the “hush-hush” intelligence service types who have requested his presence, seem to believe that he is just the ticket – the right man to pursue this case. Too bad that they are not more forthcoming with vital information to solve the case – but that’s MI5 for you.

There is a high profile trade conference of international big-wigs about to take place and the murder victim is Oliver Bierman, a helicopter pilot for the event. In the ensuing investigation, Poe and Tilly are joined by FBI agent Melody Lee and MI5 agent Hannah Finch, who represent their country’s security interests in the trade conference.

Right off the bat, Poe notices inconsistencies such as the victim’s lack

of personal history and the mysterious removal of a small ceramic rat from the murder scene. A similar object was left during a failed bank heist some three years before. What possible connection could there be?

Just as one mystery is solved, another mystery pops up. And that happens over and over again until the last page is turned.

One has to admire Mike Craven’s talent for plotting intricate puzzle mysteries. And there is not a dull moment in the whole novel when you have such stellar characters as Poe and Tilly and their trademark humorous banter.

The year is still young but this is my second favorite mystery (after **RA-ZORBLADE TEARS**) of the seventy mysteries I’ve read so far this year. Unfortunately **DEAD GROUND** is not available yet in the U.S., but it is definitely worth seeking out. Try Book Depository. And if you haven’t read the first three novels in the series (the CWA Gold Dagger-winner **THE PUPPET SHOW**, **BLACK SUMMER** & **THE CURATOR**), they are all available in trade paperback on amazon.com. This has quickly become one of my all-time favorite series. (See reviews of two of these series book in the British Review column herein)

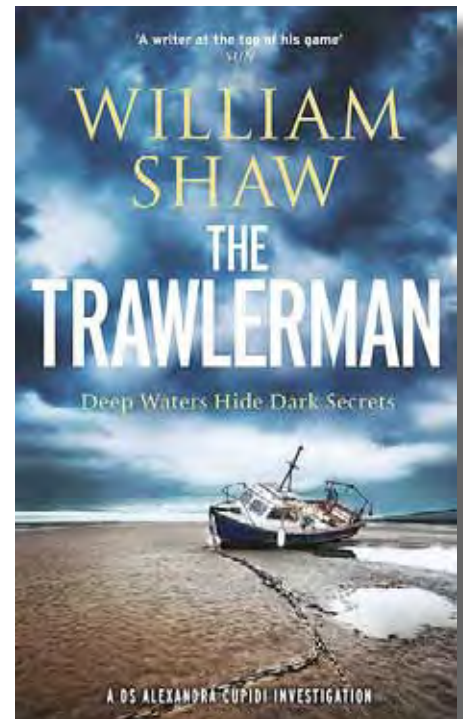
THE TRAWLERMAN

by William Shaw
Riverrun, £16.99

Rating: A

DS Alexandra Cupidi series #5
Reviewed by George Easter

Alex is home on sick leave having been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which exhibits itself with nightmares, panic attacks and overall anxiety. She has frequent premonitions that something bad is going to happen. On one occasion her premonition comes true and she is able to stop Mandy Hogben, a knife-wielding woman, from harming a bride whom she accuses of killing her son. Even though Alex isn’t supposed to do any police work, she can’t help digging deeper into that situation. The bride is Mandy’s former daughter-in-law and the

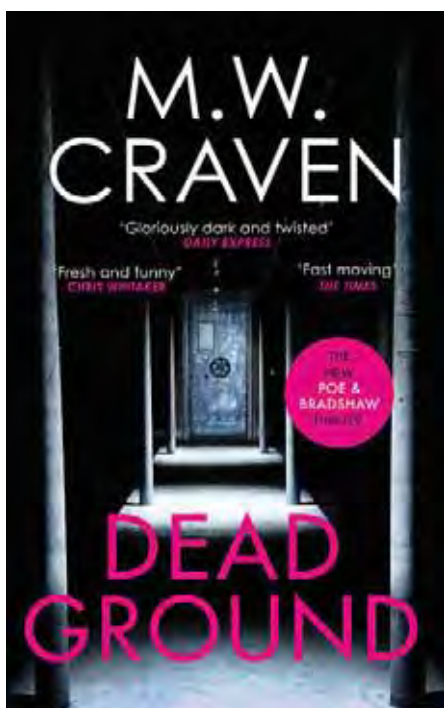


son was reported missing seven years ago when he apparently fell off the side of a trawler.

Soon after this incident there is a gruesome murder of a man and his wife and her curiosity is piqued when she hears details from her best mate on the force, Jill Ferriter. When Alex snoops around the edges of the case she is emphatically warned off by her superior. But she can’t let her curiosity slide when a homeless vet is arrested for the murder, Alex is sure that he is innocent and she goes into full Alex-mode to find what really happened.

What she finds in both of these cases will surprise you and what she does about her findings will perhaps shock you. But throughout it all you will be highly entertained.

The surroundings of Dungeness (in Kent) are evocatively described and provide a wonderful setting for William Shaw’s skillful storytelling. And he populates the stories with memorable characters such as Zoe, Alex’s teenage daughter, who spends her time volunteering with the local Wildlife Trust, caring for her mom and indulging in her passion for birdwatching, which she was introduced to in an earlier book, **THE BIRDWATCHER**. Then there is their neighbor Bill South, an ex-copper



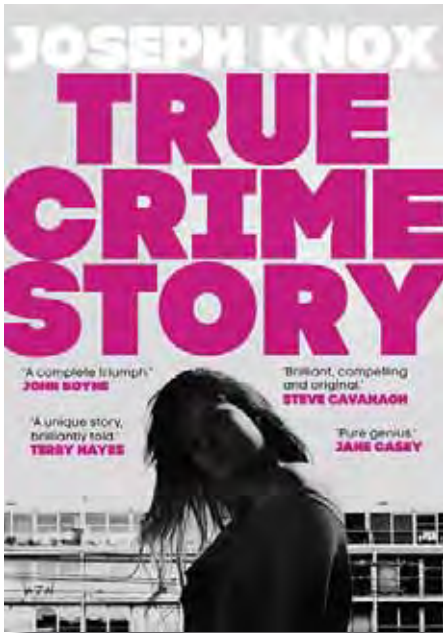
and convict with whom Alex has a complicated relationship.

If you read and enjoy this novel, be sure to try out his Breen and Tozer series set mostly in London during the late 1960s.

U.S. publishing often causes me to scratch my head and wonder who is running the show, bottom-line bean counters or talented editorial staff who know a great mystery when they see one. For some mysterious reason no one in the U.S. has published William Shaw's last three books. That's a crime!

TRUE CRIME STORY

by Joseph Knox
Doubleday U.K., £11.99
Rating:



Review by Martin Edwards

The idea of having a twin fascinates me. As an only child, I find it difficult enough to imagine having a sibling, but to have someone in your life from birth is something else again; it's bound to create an extraordinary bond and also, in some cases, extraordinary complications. Twins have naturally found their way into crime fiction, and Ronald Knox famously fulminated against the cliché of introducing an identical twin without adequate foreshadowing as a means of getting out of a tricky plot hole in his famous Decalogue. I've never actually written a story about twins, but maybe one of these days...

In the meantime, there's a brand new crime novel in which identical twin sisters play a leading part. This is *True Crime Story* by Joseph Knox (Doubleday). I've never met Joseph, but I became aware of him some years ago when he was mentioned to me as a bookseller with a great love of crime fiction. He made a very successful venture into crime writing with *Sirens*, which launched a series of three books. Now he has written this stand-alone.

It's appealing, quite apart from the presence of identical twins, for its structure. This is a novel firmly within the 'casebook' tradition - a branch of crime writing that I very much enjoy (although again I've never written a novel structured in this way - yet). The Moonstone remains a classic example, but there are plenty of other books which show the potential of this form of writing, including Sayers' *The Documents in the Case*, Robert Player's *The Ingenious Mr Stone*, and Vera Caspary's *Laura*. Here, Knox offers us not just one unreliable narrator, but a whole bunch of them.

The story deals with the vanishing some years ago of a Manchester student, Zoe Nolan, and the consequences of her sudden disappearance. The story is told as a sort of true crime narrative, which various people who were closely involved with Zoe interviewed by a writer called Evelyn. An added layer of complexity is created by the involvement of Knox himself in the material which surrounds the record of events. There is a long series of emails between Evelyn and Knox, often redacted, which heighten the air of mystery.

One of the dangers of this type of story is that the voices of the various viewpoint characters may not be adequately contrasted. Knox rises to this challenge very well indeed (the voice of one female character, now working in the HR, is especially well caught) and there are occasional touches of humour which are very welcome in a fundamentally bleak story. There are points when, perhaps, the endless ping-pong of witness statements might have been shortened, but the story gathers pace towards an unusual and intriguing climax. A very engaging novel by a writer of real

talent; you'll hear a lot more about him in years to come, I'm sure of that.

WHEN YOU ARE MINE

by Michael Robotham
Sphere, £17.99

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

After the success of his last two books, featuring troubled teen Evie Cormac and forensic psychologist Cyrus Haven, Michael Robotham strikes off in another new direction with his latest novel, *WHEN YOU ARE MINE*.

WHEN YOU ARE MINE features an interesting, fresh character in the form of promising young London police officer Philomena (Phil) McCarthy. Phil is a smart, university educated officer whose career has been hampered by her estranged father, a notorious London gangster. When she is called to the scene of a domestic dispute her career takes another hit. The bloodied victim, Tempe Brown, is the young mistress of a decorated police officer, whose powerful friends want the investigation shut down. As Phil fights pressure at work she becomes drawn to the enigmatic Tempe, who has a murky past. When murder strikes, Phil finds herself fighting for more than her career.

This is a richly written and absorbing crime novel. With a professional's eye for the telling detail, Robotham steadily adds interesting layers to his characters and lets them loose in a well-constructed plot that always keeps the reader on edge. All of the characters, even the minor ones, are nicely crafted, but Robotham really excels with the determined, but internally brittle, Phil. As Phil's relationship with Tempe grows, the tension mounts and Robotham expertly introduces new elements to keep the story interesting and heading in unexpected directions.

WHEN YOU ARE MINE deals sensitively and astutely with issues around domestic violence and obsessive relationships, and these themes are adroitly woven into the plot without over-burdening the storyline. They add texture to the story and along with Robotham's superior writing, clever plotting and credible characters, help elevate the



book into something more substantial than the usual crime novel.

The pacing is possibly a little slow at times, but the final third bristles with tension and Robotham subtly delivers his usual unexpected twists at the end. A high quality read that will add to Robotham's growing reputation as a leader in the crime fiction scene.

ISLAND REICH

by Jack Grimwood
Michael Joseph, £16.99

Rating: A

Reviewed by Steele Curry

Fun, fun, fun – here's a WW II thriller that rips along brilliantly mixing historical facts with inventive fiction to produce a marvelous tale of bravado and duplicity.

Starting off in May 1940, the action and intrigue moves quickly through France, Glasgow, Berlin, Madrid, Washington DC, Paris, Edinburgh and then mainly settles down in Alderney, the Chanel Island now occupied by the Nazis, apart from some latter scenes that take place in Portugal and Spain.

Two entirely different couples have the starring roles in **ISLAND REICH** – Bill O'Hagan, an ex-WW I UK Army infantry soldier and safe-cracker impersonating a British nobleman paired with that individual's actual American wife,

and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor who are vacillating between supporting Hitler and their loyalty to England. Secondary roles are performed by a young refugee girl orphaned in the invasion of France who ends up in Alderney and British Intelligence agent Ian Fleming, plus of course a number of Nazi villains. The outcome of O'Hagan's mission could determine whether England survives its struggle with Germany.

This is Jon Courtenay Grimwood's third thriller published under his pseudonym Jack Grimwood. His writing style is crisp, succinct and to the point. His characterizations are vivid and colorful. His plotting is brisk with no extraneous words. In short, **ISLAND REICH** is a pleasure to read, as are Grimwood's two earlier thrillers, **MOSKVA** and **NIGHT-FALL BERLIN**.



Larry Gandle wanted me to point out that two of the titles he reviews in his critique of the CWA Awards (see article herein) should be mentioned among the best of 2021 so far:

WE BEGIN AT THE END by Chris Whitaker (2021 in the U.S.) and **MID-NIGHT ATLANTA** by Thomas Mullen. (hopefully it will be published sometime in 2021 in the U.S.)

Agatha Award Winners

Best Contemporary Novel

ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE
by Louise Penny – Winner

Other Nominees

GIFT OF THE MAGPIE
by Donna Andrews
MURDER IN THE BAYOU
BONEYARD by Ellen Byron
FROM BEER TO ETERNITY
by Sherry Harris
THE LUCKY ONE
by Lori Rader-Day

Best Historical Novel

THE LAST MRS. SUMMERS by
Rhys Bowen – Winner

Other Nominees

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

MURDER AT THE MENA
HOUSE by Erica Ruth Neubauer –
Winner

Other Nominees

A SPELL FOR TROUBLE
by Esme Addison
WINTER WITNESS
by Tina deBelgarde
DERAILED by Mary Keliioa
MURDER MOST SWEET
by Laura Jensen Walker

Larry Gandle Critiques



CWA DAGGER AWARDS 2021 REVIEWS

GOLD DAGGER

This is, overall, a good list. All the books are very good to excellent except for one standout that is particularly forgettable, **THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS** by Elly Griffiths. This is a silly soft-boiled novel while the other books have something truly special about them. Some are unique historical novels and among them is probably one of the best and certainly the longest PI novel I have ever read. Several of the novels were nominated in more than one category, which is somewhat unusual.

The reading experience this year was a particularly good one and for that I am grateful.

BLACKTOP WASTELAND by S.A. Cosby (Flatiron Books, \$26.99). Rating: A-

Bauregard Montage, aka Bug, is a husband and father with three children. He comes from a background of violence as his father was a criminal who left him and his family because he brought them danger from his multiple crimes. However, Bug is very much like his father. He has been a driver or wheelman in multiple heists in the past. Now, with his mechanics shop on the verge of failure, he is drawn, once again, into a jewelry store heist with some untrustworthy characters. Things go wrong almost from the start leading to violence and death. With his family at risk, Bug must put his life at stake to save all those he loves.

BLACKTOP WASTELAND is a brilliant character driven noir crime

novel filled with odious characters rich in depth and nuances. Bug is a complex individual who is trying to do good but is inexorably drawn into his past life. The pacing of the plot is initially slow but gradually picks up steam until the last third part of the book which is impossible to put down. With this, his third novel, S.A. Cosby has emerged as a writer to keep a close eye on. I am definitely looking forward to what he will write at this point. This is one of the best crime fiction novels of the year and has generated quite a bit of buzz at awards time this year, as I predicted.

CITY OF GHOSTS by Ben Creed (Welbeck, 8.99). Rating: A

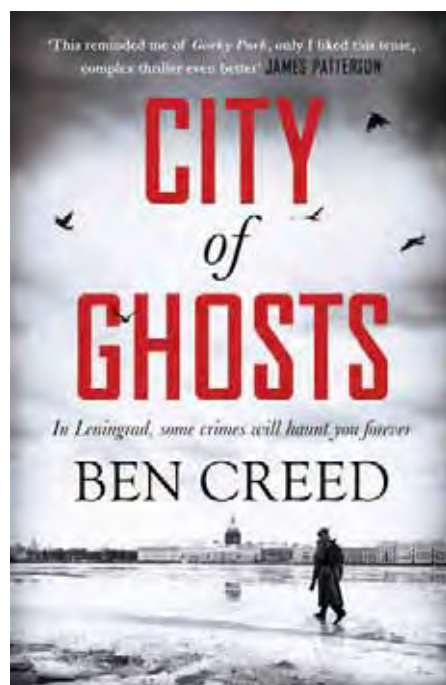
In Leningrad, 1951, Revol Rossel, a state militia cop is assigned the task of solving multiple murders. Five faceless corpses are found on a railroad track outside the city. They are arranged carefully between the rails but none are

arranged the same way. Discovering the identities will be a problem as they have no faces, no teeth or fingerprints. Rossel was once a virtuoso violinist who was arrested and severely beaten by the state authorities resulting in the loss of several fingers. Now, he must try to solve a crime that must be resolved before a large festival occurs. His progress is being watched by Stalin, himself. Rossel knows his life depends on him solving the crime. The state just wants a solution but Rossel wants the truth.

This is a unique work. It is an historical mystery that takes place in the Soviet Union. Communism, as it was practiced there under the Stalin regime, is a brutal system where one misspoken word or one occupational mistake could land an individual and their family into the Siberian labor camps. Life seems completely hopeless. Today, looking back, it seems surreal. Characters are realistic, overall, and the plot is quite compelling. This is not a setting a reader will want to spend a lot of time in. So, the length of the book is quite reasonable. This is the start of a new series with the second book, **TRAITOR'S HEART**, being released later this year. Highly recommended.

HOUSE OF CORRECTION by Nicci French (Morrow, \$27.99). Rating: B+

A bit of a silly premise sets up this otherwise compelling thriller. Tabitha is accused of murdering a man found dead in her shed in Okeham, England. She is arrested and put into jail. However, she has no memory of the pertinent time of the day the man was killed. It just so happens the man found dead was her teacher who, at thirty-five years old, carried on an affair with her when she was fifteen. Nonetheless, Tabitha is placed



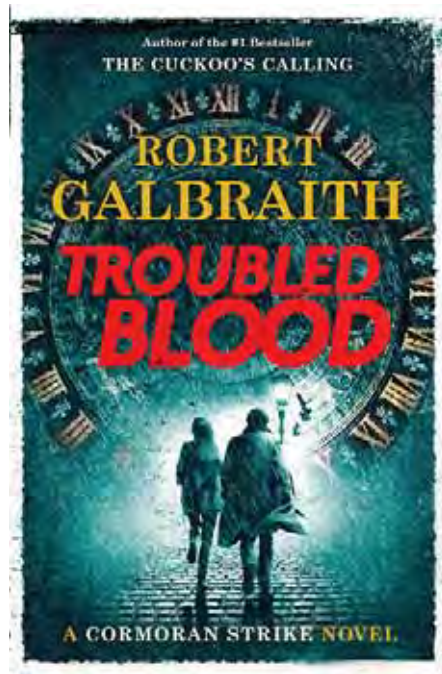
into a situation where she will defend herself in the British legal system. Her lack of memory of the time the victim was killed will always come back and haunt her. Can she successfully defend herself?

This is a contrived plot of convenient and inexplicable loss of memory allowing the story to proceed. The investigation is carried out by Tabitha while she is in prison. It is highly unrealistic to think a prisoner with no legal background whatsoever can even attempt to successfully defend herself. But the book works as pure entertainment as long as the reader suspends reality enough to accept Tabitha defending herself. The solution is both complex and quite clever. Characters are reasonably realistic and the plot moves swiftly enough to keep the reader's attention. This is a solidly entertaining novel and one recommended for the plane, beach or pool.

TROUBLED BLOOD by Robert Galbraith (Mulholland). **Rating: A**

British PI, Cormoran Strike, is approached by a woman while at a bar who asks him for help discovering what happened to her mother. Her mother, Margot Bamborough, a physician, disappeared after leaving her clinic forty years ago. She was thought to be another victim of a serial killer now jailed. Strike and his partner, Robin Ellacott are intrigued by the case in spite of the fact that they expect to be unsuccessful in solving it after so many years. They are given a year to solve it and what ensues is a very long plot filled with red herrings and blind alleys as they interview anyone who was possibly a witness to the case and is still alive to talk about it. They also hope to talk to the serial killer thought to be involved.

What can one say about a 945-page PI novel besides it was marvelous? It is no secret the Robert Galbraith is JK Rowling, one of the most successful novelists in history. When I think of writers in pop fiction who can create books filled with the most vivid characters, two writers come immediately to mind- JK Rowling and Stephan King. Both are known for writing very long



novels -- often overwritten but never boring because of the characters that inhabit them. The actual mystery is quite simple- find out what happened to a woman missing over forty years. The reason the novel is so much fun is how this case gets intertwined into almost every aspect of Strike and Robin's lives. We get to know these characters and all those that surround them quite well. Is the book overwritten? Of course. Personally, I am not a fan of PI novels. They are so formulaic and get so convoluted and complex. This one, however, is a pleasure to read and relatively simple and straightforward. Due to the length, if the book became too complex, few readers would persevere. In spite of the length, it is a quick read. I will admit that I only read the first Harry Potter book and didn't particularly care for it. I found it a bit too juvenile. Instead I listened to Jim Dale's incredible reading of the subsequent books. His voice brought every character to life. With this book I both read and listened to it. Robert Glenister did an excellent job at narrating it. I will approach any future Strike novels the same way. Highly recommended.

THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS by Elly Griffiths (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$25.00). **Rating: C+**

Peggy, a 90-year-old woman, dies,

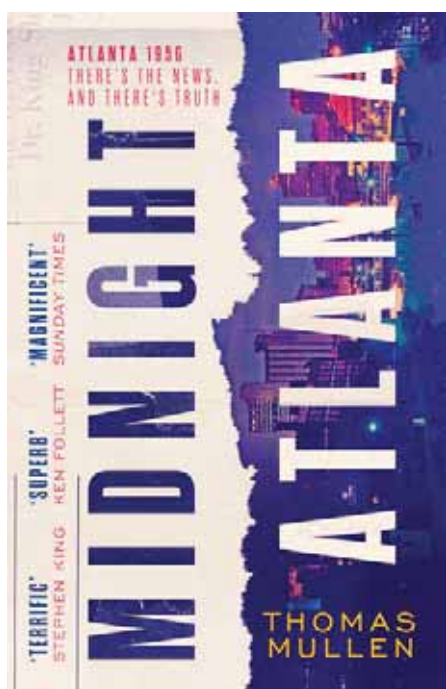
apparently peacefully, in an assisted living home. It seems to be a natural death but her caretaker, Nataalka, believes it is something more. When she discovers many crime fiction novels dedicated to Peggy thanking her for her help with the murders, Nataalka and her buddies, Benedict, an ex-monk who owns a local coffee shop on the beach and Edwin, an 80 year old gay man and friend of Peggy, feel that murder is a strong possibility. Detective Sargent Harbinder Kaur takes the bait and starts investigating especially when a masked gunman enters Peggy's apartment and steals a book.

THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS is a somewhat clever cozy mystery with some wacky characters. It is eminently forgettable and the fact that it was short-listed for the most prestigious crime fiction prize in England, the CWA Gold Dagger Award, is truly bewildering. The plot is unrealistic and totally silly. The characters are engaging enough but the reader would never consider them realistic. The dialogue is embarrassingly amateurish and the solution comes totally out of left field. Needless to say, I do not think much of this book. The CWA committee should be a bit embarrassed with this selection. Shame on them.

MIDNIGHT ATLANTA by Thomas Mullen (Little Brown UK, \$26.99).

Rating: B+

In Atlanta, 1956, Arthur Bishop, editor of the leading black newspaper, is shot and killed in his office. Tommy Smith, one of his reporters was sleeping downstairs and after calling in the shooting, is arrested for murder. Tommy is an ex-cop and once he is released, decides to investigate the murder on his own. As a black man and an ex-cop, he can get people to speak to him who would ordinarily slam the door in his face. Also attempting to solve the murder is Joe McGinnis, a white police sergeant in charge of a squad of black police officers. For some reason, the FBI, Communists and PIs are also involved in what appears to be a cover up. At the same time, black civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King are leading a bus strike in Birmingham and schools are slowly being integrated. There is a



lot of hate out there in the streets and this will place Smith, McGinnis and his squad into harm's way.

This is the third book in the Dark-town series referring to the black section of Atlanta. The author has written an intriguing book that combines a PI novel, police procedural, thriller and historical novel together into a very compelling read. Characters are well developed but they do get put through the ringer as racist cops and criminals surround them. With multiple points of view chapters, the pacing moves swiftly and the plot is never boring. This is a solid crime fiction novel unique for its historical perspective. It is a worthy member of the CWA shortlist for the Gold Dagger Award.

WE BEGIN AT THE END by Chris Whitaker (Henry Holt, \$27.99). **Rating: A-**

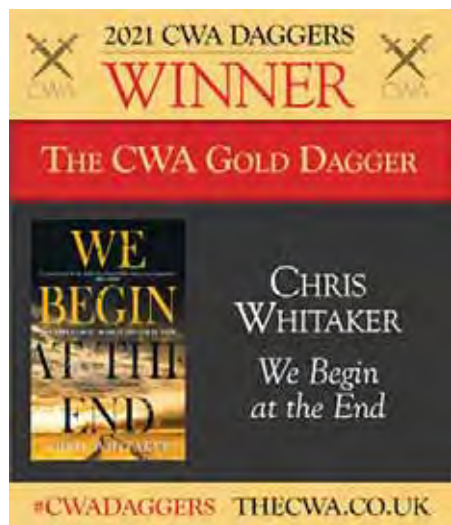
Duchess Day Radley is a very precocious thirteen-year-old living in a small California coastal community. She is fiercely protective of her five-year-old brother, Robin, while their mother, Star, is unable to take care of them due to her drinking and self-absorption. Walk is the local Police Chief who 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.

My pick: This is a tough one. I would probably select **TROUBLED BLOOD** by Robert Galbraith but would have absolutely no problem if **BLACKTOP WASTELAND** by S.A. Cosby (my new favorite author) won. I simply cannot make up my mind.

The winner: WE BEGIN AT THE END by Chris Whitaker



THE IAN FLEMING STEEL DAGGER AWARD

This is a solidly entertaining list of books. I recommend them all.

TROUBLED BLOOD by Robert Galbraith. **Rating: A**

Please see above in the Gold Dagger List. I really would not pick this one to win in this category as I don't consider it a thriller.

WHEN SHE WAS GOOD by Michael Robotham (Scribner \$26.00). **Rating: B+**

Evie Cormac is a fifteen-year-old girl who was found in a secret room of a house where a brutal crime took place several years before. Now, Evie is living secretly in a children's home as the fear is that she will be killed by whoever is responsible for the horrific slaying of the man in the house. Cyrus Haven is a forensic psychologist who is trying to find out who killed the man in the house in order to protect Evie. Yet, his investigation continues to bring danger to Evie.

This book is a follow up to the well-regarded **GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL** which won the CWA Gold Dagger in 2020 and was shortlisted for the Edgar Award, as well. I did not really remember the book and it took about 20% of this book before I could totally get into the plot. Once the background plot was left behind, the story moved swiftly with a totally compelling read difficult to put down. The characters are well rounded with some villainous caricatures. This book is a solid addition to the Fleming Dagger shortlist but I would recommend the two books be read simultaneously so the beginning of this book would not be so bewildering.

THE NOTHING MAN by Catherine Ryan Howard (Blackstone, \$24.99). **Rating: A-**

At twelve years old, Eve Black was the only member of her family to survive a serial killer slaughtering her whole family. The killer has never been found, but, it appears he has gone to ground for over fifteen years. She is now

an adult and has written a book about the serial killer named **THE NOTHING MAN**. Jim Doyle, a supermarket security man is avidly reading the book as he is the killer who has given up murder years ago. He becomes increasingly angry over his depiction in the book. It will soon become apparent that he will have to kill the author as vengeance and to strike fear into the community. Will he get away with it?

This book is told in a unique format. **THE NOTHING MAN** is a nonfiction book in this novel. It is the basis of the plot with Jim's story interspersed throughout so the reader will always know his thoughts. This keeps the plot moving swiftly as the alternating chapter form keeps the reader engaged. Characters are stereotypes and reality must be suspended at times. Yet, the reader will be treated to a compelling and completely entertaining work perfect for the plane or the beach. It is quite an excellent thriller and as such is a worthy addition to the Fleming Dagger shortlist.

ONE BY ONE by Ruth Ware (Gallery/Scout Press, \$27.99). **Rating: A**

The staff of the hugely popular internet startup, Snoop, decide to have their retreat at a luxurious ski lodge high in the French Alps. Soon after their arrival, with the first presentation in the morning, the fireworks start. The two co-founders, Topher and Eva, practically come to blows on whether to sell the company and pocket over a hundred million Euros. Topher does not want to sell while Eva insists on it. They each have their loyal supporters and decide on holding off on further discussions while they go skiing. One of them disappears in what appears to be a tragic accident until others in the group start dying one by one. Told by alternate chapter points of view between Liz, a shareholding outsider who is mousy and awkward and Erin, the young lady on the chalet staff who is responsible for them enjoying themselves, things get increasingly tense as everyone perceives danger all around.

This is an incredibly clever traditional murder mystery until it becomes a



compelling thriller in a cat and mouse format with a twist thrown in at the end. The book is incredibly fun and is hard to put down. Some reviewers describe this book as a modern version of **AND THEN THERE WAS NONE**. However, it is not that at all. It is two almost completely separate books in one-part traditional mystery and the last part a thriller. It is easily one of the best books of the year. The author has gotten so much more skilled a storyteller since writing **THE WOMAN IN CABIN 10** which I found unrealistically juvenile. Highly recommended.

THE DEVIL AND THE DARK WATER (Sourcebooks, \$26.99). **Rating: B-**

In 1634, a ship is leaving Batavia in what is now Jakarta, Indonesia bound for Amsterdam carrying spices for the Dutch East India Company. It is also loaded with many jewels and a secret device which is to be delivered to the board of the company. Aboard the ship is Samuel Pippis who loves to solve crimes (detectives did not exist then). He is in shackles as he has been accused of an unknown crime and is to be executed for it. With him is his trusted sidekick, Arent Hayes- a huge behemoth of a man who is his bodyguard. Also on-board are various dignitaries, their families and a vicious crew. Among them,

it seems, is a demon called Old Tom who wants to exact revenge on various passengers. The result is a tumultuous journey full of fatalities with a deadly storm thrown in for good measure.

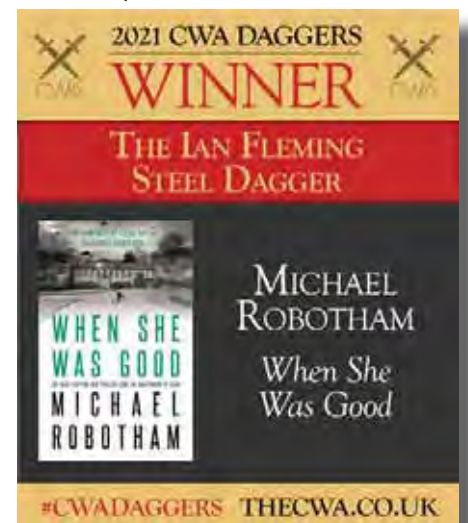
This is a huge book -- 500 pages long. It is a swashbuckling tale which will keep a reader's interest until it is realized the story is too long and repetitious. There are so many superfluous episodes. Throughout reality must be suspended and the payoff is a greater than over fifty pages long unsatisfying resolution with endless explanations one more bazaar than another. The story is compelling. The characters well drawn. The research of the sailing ships of that time appears to be thorough and there is a strong sense of locale and setting. It desperately needed editing and too be honest, the whole thing is just foolish nonsense. After spending so much time reading this book, I closed it with an unsatisfying sense that I just wasted a whole lot of hours. Bottom line -- best to avoid despite so much critical praise.

WE BEGIN AT THE END by Chris Whitaker. **Rating: A-**

See above with the Gold Dagger reviews.

My pick: ONE BY ONE by Ruth Ware.

The winner: WHEN SHE WAS GOOD by Michael Robotham



THE JOHN CREASEY

NEW BLOOD DAGGER

This is a solid list of debut novels. All of them are very good and recommended.

THE CREAK ON THE STAIRS by Eva Borg Aegisdottir (Orenda, 15.59).

Rating: B

A body of a woman is found at a lighthouse in the small Icelandic town of Akranes. Chief Investigating Officer Elma and her fellow officers will investigate. The dead woman used to live in that town. She had a lot of secrets from her past. The officers must investigate the woman's history, as well as, several of the townspeople to discover what happened decades ago that led to this murder.

This is another long, slow, dull, dreary character driven British style police procedural that I am typically not a fan of. I haven't read one in a while so I made it through this one. The investigation is tedious but the characters are engaging enough to keep the pages turning. This book is short listed for the CWA Creasey Dagger for best debut novel. For a first time author, the writing is seamless- she is quite skilled. This is certainly a superior Nordic style crime novel with alternating past event chapters with present day increasing suspense until the end where all becomes clear. The solutions are quite clever. This is an admirable book but just not to my particular taste.

CITY OF GHOSTS by Ben Creed.

Rating: A-

See above with the Gold Dagger Shortlist.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY by Egan Hughes (Sphere, 8.99) **Rating: B**

When Rob, Mia's ex-husband, is found dead on a boat, she is terrified that she will be the main suspect. It turns out that Rob is a conman who survives by parting vulnerable women from their money. His luck would run out at some time and now it looks like it did. But will Mia go down for the murder which she may or may not have committed? Through alternating chapters of

before the murder and after, we slowly learn what exactly happened and why.

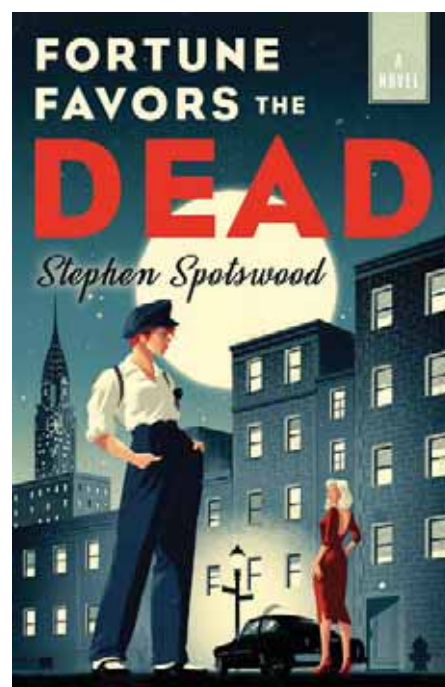
This is another psychological suspense novel shortlisted for the CWA Creasey Award. Thank goodness it was not another British police procedural novel. I would not have made it through it. This is a very good debut effort as a suspense novel but it simply goes on too long. Details are excruciatingly laid out both before and after the murder. There really are no jaw dropping twists or surprises here. The plot is certainly compelling enough. Characters are stock figures, overall. Spousal abuse is a real problem and the author covers this problem quite well. I would give it a mild recommendation. If the author can tighten up her plots, she will be someone to watch in the future.

THE BONE JAR by S.W. Kane (Thomas and Mercer, \$15.95). **Rating: B-**

The body of an elderly woman is found in Blackwater asylum, an abandoned psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of London. Detective Lew Kirby investigates. He must question anyone who knew the woman. Connie Darke, an urban explorer, whose sister died there, decides to help Lew look into the murder and the dark history of the asylum. As they get closer to the truth, things get considerably more dangerous.

I am not a fan of British police procedurals, overall. As such, I did not like this book at all and could not wait to finish it. However, many people like this subgenre so judging it without my own preconceptions, it is well done but highly forgettable. The characters are well thought out. Most are realistic. The plot ambles along becoming more complex. As we approach the climax, there are tunnels and an underground chamber all becoming increasingly unrealistic with some thriller elements thrown in. This becomes almost jarring as the previous part of the book is so slow and dull. Even if you like British police procedurals, I would give this book a mild recommendation.

FORTUNE FAVORS THE DEAD by Stephen Spotswood (Doubleday, \$26.95).



Rating: B

Willowjean Parker, who, as a fifteen-year-old, decided to run away from her abusive father and join the circus. She is taught many skills including how to handle a knife. She uses that skill to save the life of a famous PI, Lillian Pentecost. When Ms. Pentecost offers her a job as her assistant, Will accepts and the two of them proceed to solve crimes in Manhattan in the 1940s. Three years later they are hired to look into a case concerning the Collins family where Abigail Collins was found bludgeoned to death with a crystal ball in a locked room in her home while the room is on fire. The police have failed to solve the crime so they are hired by the family to solve it.

The backstory of Will Parker is quite fascinating and is perhaps the best part of this novel. There is a lighthearted air about it. Pentecost and Parker are an excellent PI duo and they certainly harken back to the noir novels of the thirties and forties. There are no truly deep characterizations and many of them are caricatures but they work well in this type of old-fashioned PI novel. The dialogue is realistic and the main characters quite likeable. The solution is clever and an astute reader can probably guess it. As a debut novel it is quite a good effort. A worthy member of the

CWA Creasey shortlist.

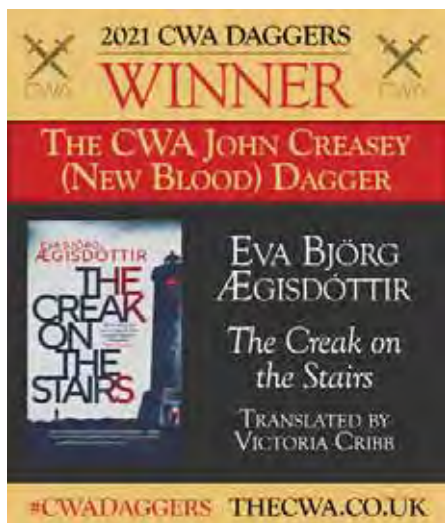
THREE-FIFTHS by John Vercher (Agora, \$24.99). **Rating: B+**

In Pittsburgh, 1995, Bobby Saraceno is a 22-year-old biracial man who has passed for white. He has a black father, whom he has never met as he has always been told that his father is dead. Aaron, who was Bobby's best friend while growing up, was recently released from prison—a white supremacist. On the first night they meet, upon his release, Aaron senselessly kills a black teen with a brick. Bobby realizes this places both of them in a precarious situation that can lead to prison for murder. Prison, however, is somewhere Aaron has sworn he will never go back to.

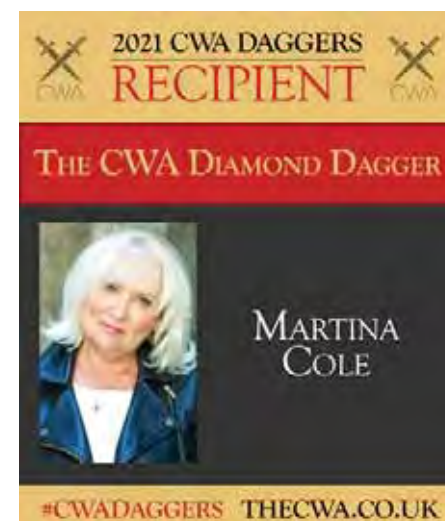
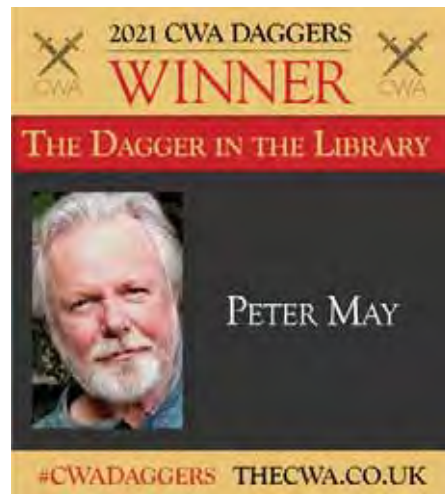
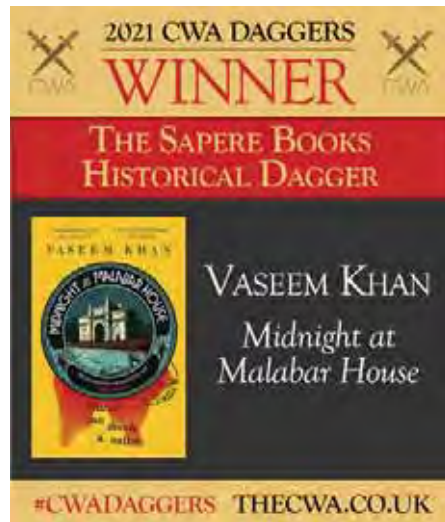
This debut is a bleak and depressing look back at the time in this country while the OJ trial and the LA riots were occurring. It is mostly a character study of two men caught in the aftermath of tragedy. It is very well written and for a first novel, it displays some inherent talent in this writer. The plot moves along swiftly, and the length is perfect for the story. There is a strong sense of realism and the ending perfectly fits the rest of the novel. This is a beautifully written literary noir novel and another excellent pick for the CWA Creasey Award shortlist.

My pick: CITY OF GHOSTS by Ben Creed

The winner: THE CREAK ON THE STAIRS by Eva Borg Aegisdottir



Other CWA Dagger Winners



Shamus Award Winners 2021

The Private Eye Writers of America have announced the winners for awards in private eye fiction.

Best Novel

BLIND VIGIL, Matt Coyle
– Winner

WHAT YOU DON'T SEE,
Tracy Clark
DO NO HARM, Max Allan Collins
HOUSE ON FIRE, Joseph Finder
AND NOW SHE'S GONE,
Rachel Howzell Hall

Best First Novel

THE MISSING AMERICAN,
Kwei Quartey – Winner

SQUATTER'S RIGHTS,
Kevin R. Doyle
DERAILED, Mary Keliikoa
I KNOW WHERE YOU SLEEP,
Alan Orloff
WINTER COUNTS,
David Heska Wanbli Weiden

Best Paperback Original

BRITTLE KARMA,
Richard Helms – Winner

FAREWELL LAS VEGAS,
Grant Bywaters
ALL KINDS OF UGLY,
Ralph Dennis
REMEMBER MY FACE,
John Lantigua
DAMAGED GOODS, Debbie Mack



Imitation Is Not Always Flattering

by George H. Madison



Rex Stout

Nero Wolfe is a multifaceted, complex character; one that does not easily lend himself to an honest translation by the freebooters that rule the entertainment industry. Few memorable literary characters survive intact in their transition from book form to the big or little screen – and Nero was not immune to the resultant carnage. Sherlock Holmes has fared much better.



Nero Wolfe rivals Sherlock Holmes as mystery literature's most notable creation. His debut novel **FER-DE-LANCE** in 1934 was an enormous success. The series ran until 1975 when Stout wrote his final installment, **A FAMILY AFFAIR**, at age 88. The 48 book series inspired the formation of a society, The Wolfe Pack, a cookbook, and his legion of fans continue to search for his elusive brownstone address on W. 35th St., New York City.

It has been said that civilization vanishes unless society is permeated through and through with routine.

Nero was clearly civilized and was superbly his own man, following a rigid schedule well known to his many admirers. His was a magical and masculine world also inhabited by his assistant, the phenomenal Archie Goodwin; a Belgian chef, Fritz Brenner; and a German gardener, Theodore Horstman.

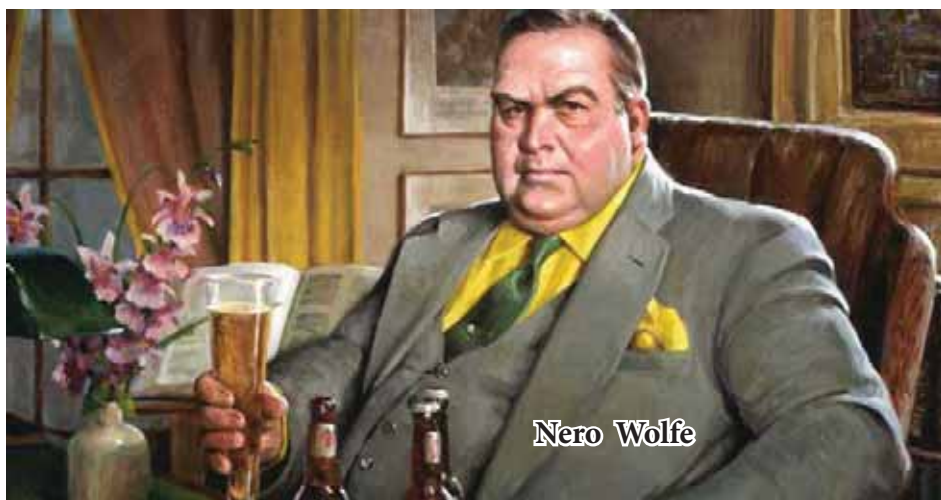
Left to his own devices, Nero would be content to eat like a king, drink beer (saving the bottle caps to keep count), read, and attend to his 10,000 orchids located in a greenhouse atop his fastidiously appointed brownstone. As a gourmet, he spends countless hours bickering with Fritz about recipes prepared from only the finest and freshest ingredients shipped from around the globe. In all things, Wolfe followed W. Somerset Maugham's dictum that if you demand only the very best, you will often get it.

The resultant financial duress created by this lavish lifestyle frequently prompted Archie to badger Nero into reluctantly accepting a case and then

only for an outrageously extravagant fee (although M.V. Heberden maintains that her detective, Desmond Shannon, commands the highest fees in NYC). These untimely annoyances were deeply resented by Nero, but Archie skillfully manipulated him into "action".

In Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout undoubtedly created a detective for the ages; albeit one who seldom left the comfort of his sanctum. Therefore, it became necessary to invent Archie Goodwin who, IMO, is detective fiction's finest second banana. His is a thoroughly developed, scene stealing character: witty, handsome, jaunty, engaging, athletic and insightful. Essentially, Archie does the leg work and aided by this astounding memory reports the results of his investigation to Wolfe verbatim. Nero then processes the morass of information and, by a series of brilliant deductions, reveals the culprit and collects the fee.

Stout, like famed film director Ernst Lubitsch, had a hatred of saying things



Nero Wolfe

in the obvious way. Therefore, Nero frequently used obscure words when expressing himself often requiring that a dictionary be handy. Reputedly, a Wolfe novel was usually written in 38 days sans revisions.

From this magnificent canvas, Hollywood could only manage to produce two feeble formula films. After viewing them, Stout cancelled their right to continue in their attempt to assassinate Nero Wolfe by film.



The first was *Meet Nero Wolfe* ('36) based in *FER-DE-LANCE*, screenplay by studio hacks. Edward Arnold was a passable Nero, but his frequent guffaws and generally jolly demeanor didn't ring true. The second effort, *League of Frightened Men* ('37), was based on the novel of the same name, with a pedes-



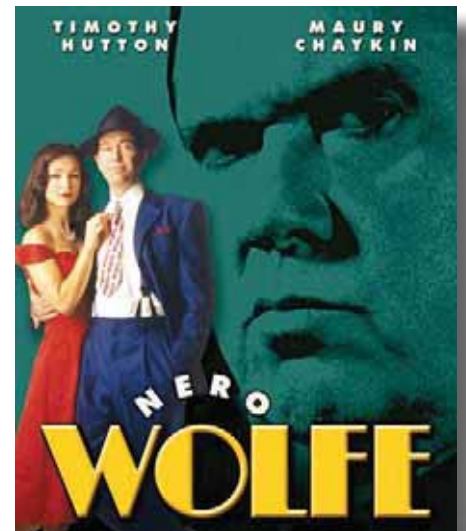
trian screenplay by studio journeymen. While Walter Connolly was a competent character actor, he was an odd and inappropriate choice to depict Nero and is not at all convincing. Columbia Studios planned a series with him, but the old "he is in poor health" excuse was employed to end it. More likely, all parties simply lost interest.

The fatal flaw in both, however, was in the casting of Archie. Somehow, the suave, competent ladies' man with superb memory found himself portrayed on screen as a thug like, mid-level moron by Lionel Stander. If Archie fails, so must Nero. What were they thinking?

Believe it or not, TV greatly improved the product. The initial effort was four years after Stout's death (1979). Written by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Frank Gilroy, *The Doorbell Rang* (1965) was an excellent pilot film. It featured Thayer David who was very satisfactory as Nero; however, David had the temerity to die shortly thereafter. Once again, the miscasting of Archie was a fatal flaw from which there was no recovery.



Fast forward to 1981 and to the ill-fated fourteen episode network series. William Conrad had some of the tonnage; nonetheless, his efforts as Nero seem forced, and his loveable, huggy bear persona was way off the mark. And kissing women? Some secondary



characters were poor, but it was Lee Horsely's miscasting as Archie that doomed the series. The clothing style didn't help either.

It took the remarkably good A&E series (2001-2002) to capture the essence of Rex Stout's books. All episodes are true to the spirit of Nero Wolfe and feature evocative sets, as well as the terrific ensemble casting of secondary characters. Maury Chaykin as Nero is perfect, and finally, Archie is well cast in the person of Timothy Hutton. The symbiotic relationship between them is fully captured through pithy dialogue and wonderful acting. Kari Matchett lights up the screen as Lily Rowan.

Curiously, my favorite Wolfe TV series is an Italian one, readily available through MHZ. Released in 2012, the subtitles do not detract from the enjoyment. Nero has relocated from the brownstone to Rome; a refugee from the FBI's vengeance after the *Doorbell Rang* conflict. It is perfection; a joyful experience in every way. Highly recommended!

Alas, I fear our Nero will not be revived on screen by this generation. There is simply no frame of reference for him in today's culture. Even his fabled homestead, allegedly located on the southside of 35th Street, is now a depleted structure that sadly stands alone in a barren wasteland and is currently used as a temporary residence for the homeless. It is no longer the beloved old brownstone. Or do I have the wrong address?

Editor's Message



The Barry Awards

In an ordinary year the winners of the Barry Awards would be announced during the Opening Ceremonies of Bouchercon at the end of August, 2021. But this year is no ordinary one and the recent flare-up of Covid cases due to the Delta Variant has caused **Bouchercon to be cancelled**. Hence, I see no reason to delay the announcement of the Barry Award winners here in the magazine and on www.deadlypleasures.com.

As always, we are greatly indebted to the expertise and reading of our Barry Award nominating committees. So I say a heartfelt "thank you" to you all. The process is an enjoyable one as we discuss our favorite reads of the year and come to some consensus. We all have "favorites" that don't win and that is perfectly o.k. We hope that the nominees that don't win also feel a certain pride in making a Barry Award shortlist. And thank you, our readers, for your Barry Award votes. You are the ones that choose the winners and you do a bang-up job every year!

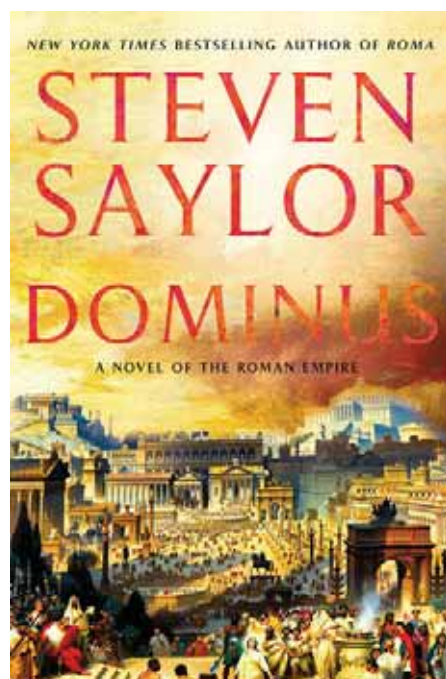
Steven Saylor and the Rome Series

One of the reasons that I've always enjoyed reading well-written and well-researched history mysteries is that one gets a good story and, as an added bonus, one learns a lot about a certain period of time in history.

In addition to history mysteries, there are the multi-generational family sagas that trace a family through different periods of history. One such excellent family saga follows the story of the Pinarius family as it maneuvers its way through various stages of Roman history from the creation of Rome to its Fall.

Steven Saylor started this ambitious

project back with the publication of **ROMA** in 2007. It was followed by **EMPIRE** in 2010. The epic story was unfinished, but there was no concluding volume until now in 2021, with the publication of **DOMINUS** on June 29, 2021.



I listened to audio versions of **ROMA** and **EMPIRE** and was highly impressed with those two volumes (and learned a heck of a lot about Ancient Rome). If you are a history buff, I would highly recommend that you consider this series. And if I were a history teacher with a class on Ancient Roman History, I would use these three books for the course texts. What a great way to learn history!

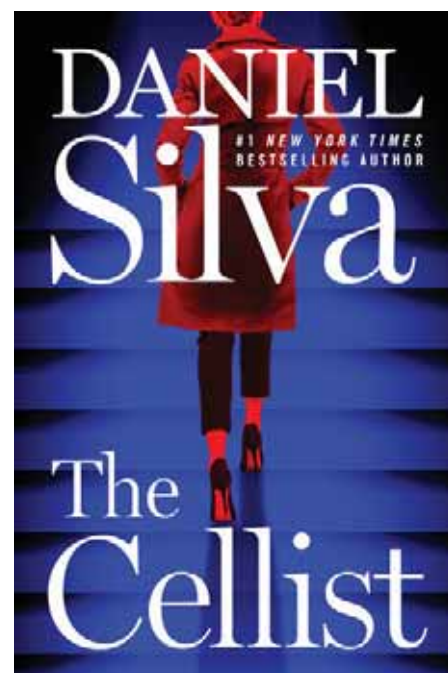
Among mystery fans, Steven Saylor is best known for his Gordianus the Finder series which began in 1991 with **ROMAN BLOOD** and is still highly collectible with fine copies going for around \$500.

Politics and Mystery Fiction

I have always kept my political views out of the pages of *Deadly Pleasures* and will continue to do so. Long-time readers of *DP* shouldn't have a clue as to my political leanings (or those of other *DP* contributors) and I intend to keep it that way. In my mind, mystery, crime fiction and thrillers are a "no politics zone." Apparently the recent political divide in the U.S. has raised emotions of readers who feel they must defend their positions in any forum in which they feel those positions threatened.

It is newsworthy that a couple of recent mysteries are being judged by some readers/reviewers more by their political issue content than by the merits of their plot, characterization and writing style. The two novels I've noticed getting this political treatment are **INSIDIOUS** by Brett Battles and **THE CELLIST** by Daniel Silva. See my reviews of these two novels in my review column in this issue.

What some readers objected to in **INSIDIOUS** was the author's brief mentions of the fact that inhabitants of a small town in Colorado were ignoring health warnings to wear masks. "Too politically correct for my taste," says one Goodreads reader. Another states, "...the author loses his critical thinking skills while trying to appear woke." They give the book bad ratings based



solely on what seems to be these political/public health issues.

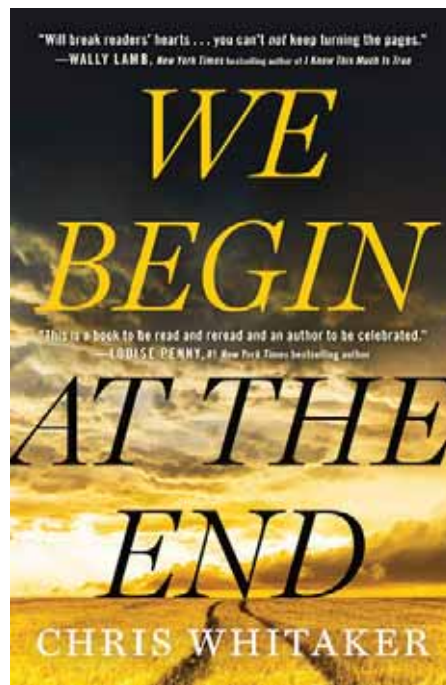
The same objection about mask wearing is found in many Goodreads fan reviews of **THE CELLIST**. Many faithful, long-time fans of Daniel Silva give him one star reviews and vow to never read another one of his novels. This is due in large part because of the last 50 or so pages where the author eviscerates the former president for among other things, the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol Building. (It should be noted that Daniel Silva's wife, Jamie Gangel, is a CNN reporter who covered January 6th events for CNN). Many, many negative reviews that appear on the Goodreads site, mirror this one: "Terrible – first half to 2/3 was great. But when it got to Washington it became pure propaganda. Silva has a severe case of Donald Trump derangement syndrome. Mr. Silva has deeply disappointed me."

Here is my view on reviews such as this. I read mysteries for entertainment and to have a talented author put me in a "zone" where I'm experiencing the plot along with the protagonists. If I learn something along the way that is an added plus. In the books that I read I encounter all sorts of lifestyles and opinions that don't match mine, but I try to never judge the merits of a book by whether the book represents my views on lifestyle, politics, religion or a myriad of other things.

So let's keep our reading of mystery fiction and our political views separate from each other. We need a place we can go to get away from all the madness we see in the media. If you find a novel is "too political," which I suspect means it "doesn't reflect my political views," then stop reading it and go on to other fiction. And authors would be wise to stay out of that arena also. Remember: don't kill any animals and keep your politics to yourself. Good advice.

British Crime Fiction Awards.

It looks like the British crime fiction crowd really, really liked Chris Whitaker's



er's **WE BEGIN AT THE END**. It won the CWA Gold Dagger for Best Crime Novel of the Year and the Theakston's Old Peculier Award for Best Crime Novel of the Year. Congratulations to Chris. The author revealed that he wrote the book after surviving a traumatic assault (a stabbing). **WE BEGIN AT THE END** is a 2021 title in the U.S. and our Barry Award Nominating Committee will be sure to give it a close look for a potential nomination. It has received starred reviews in *Kirkus* and *Publisher's Weekly* – as well as a very positive review in *DP*.

Stephen King Crime Writer

I must admit to not having read many Stephen King novels, principally because I'm not a fan of horror fiction. But I acknowledge his greatness and admire him for encouraging younger generations to read. Yet, I admit to being intrigued by his latest book entitled **BILLY SUMMERS**. I plan to get a copy as soon as I've sent this issue out. It involves a hit man who wants to retire -- after he completes just one more job. Things don't go well.

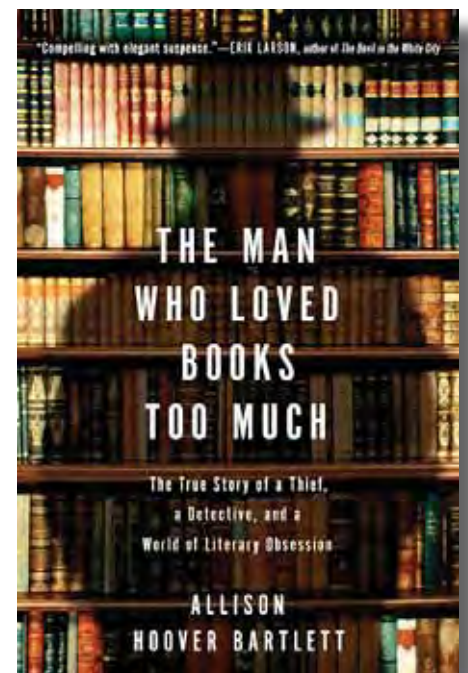
This sounds like a straight crime novel so I hope there is no woo-woo in it. Review in next issue.

A Non-Fiction Book for Book Lovers and Collectors

The space in this magazine is almost always reserved for reviews and articles that inform us about crime fiction. But every once in a long while, I feel it necessary to point out a non-fiction title that may be of interest to you.

THE MAN WHO LOVED BOOKS TOO MUCH by Allison Hoover Bartlett is not a new book, having been published in 2009. In hardcover it went into ten printings and also sold very well in trade paperback. A good friend of mine, Ken Sanders (of the Ken Sanders Rare Book Store in Salt Lake City and a contributor to the Antiques Roadshow TV program on PBS) has a prominent role to play in the book so I'm glad to finally get around to reading it.

It is the story of John Gilkey, a compulsive book thief, whom the author had occasion to interview on several occasions. It is a fascinating look into the rare book world and the mind of a thief, who apparently can't help himself. Gilkey gets caught, goes to prison, gets out, steals more books – wash and repeat. I stopped in at Ken Sanders store last week and asked him if he knew where Gilkey was right now. He said he didn't and he wasn't comfortable with that.



The 2021

Barry Award Winners

Best Novel

BLACKTOP WASTELAND, S. A. Cosby (Flatiron Books) – Winner



THE BOY FROM THE WOODS, Harlan Coben (Grand Central)
 THE LAW OF INNOCENCE, Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)
 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

WINTER COUNTS, David Heska Wanbli Weiden (Ecco) – Winner

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)
 DARLING ROSE GOLD, Stephanie Wrobel (Berkley)



Best Paperback Original

TURN TO STONE, James W. Ziskin (Seventh Street Books) – Winner

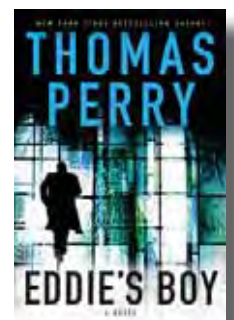


WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING, Alyssa Cole (Morrow)
 MONGKOK STATION, Jake Needham (HP)
 HIDE AWAY, Jason Pinter (Thomas & Mercer)
 BAD NEWS TRAVELS FAST, James Swain (Thomas & Mercer)
 DARKNESS FOR LIGHT, Emma Viskic (Pushkin Vertigo)

Best Thriller

EDDIE'S BOY, Thomas Perry (Mysterious Press) – Winner

DOUBLE AGENT, Tom Bradby (Atlantic Monthly)
 BLIND VIGIL, Matt Coyle (Oceanview)
 ONE MINUTE OUT, Mark Greaney (Berkley)
 THE LAST HUNT, Deon Meyer (Atlantic Monthly)
 THE WILD ONE, Nick Petrie



Assistant Editor's Message



First of all, I want to echo George's comments on politics in crime fiction novels. The authors really need to remember that their readers are not turning to these books for political discourse especially if it is an opposing viewpoint. Most recently Dan Silva put

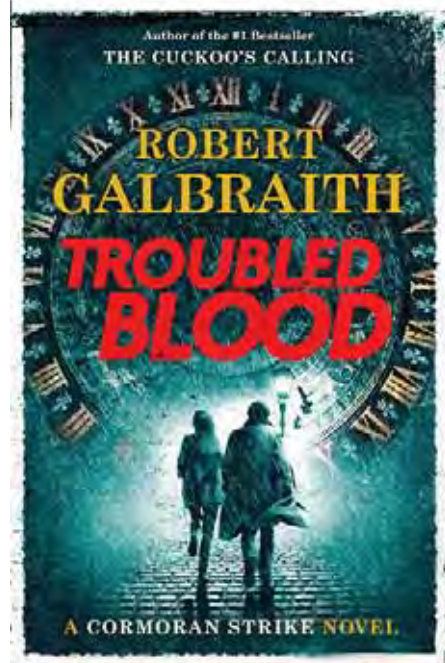


enough politics into his book, **THE CELLIST**, that he turned off hundreds of readers who vow never to read him again. Look at all the reviews on Amazon. Is that worth it to him? I am not saying I agree or disagree with the political viewpoint, I am saying it probably doesn't belong there. Might I also mention that readers of political and international thrillers tend to be a more conservative crowd. Greg Iles also does this. I just don't think it is helpful.

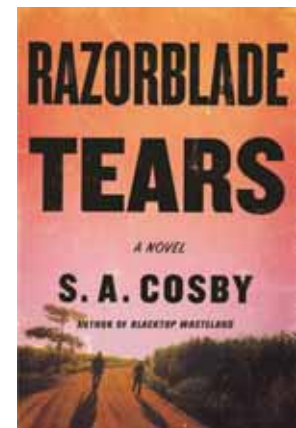
I want to commend the CWA award committees this year for selecting a particularly outstanding group of books. Though my selections of the winners were all incorrect, I can't fault the ones selected. I have said many times that the reason I take on the exercise of reading all the shortlisted books of the CWA Daggers or the MWA Edgars is that it forces me to read books I would not normally pick up thereby expanding my own knowledge of the genre today. I

heartily recommend doing it.

You may have noticed that I gave **RAZORBLADE TEARS** a rating of A+. The last time I gave a book that rating was in 2018 for Anthony Horowitz's **MAGPIE MURDERS** for the sheer originality of the plot. In 2016 it was Iain Reid's **I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS** -- one of the scariest books I have ever read. In 2013 it was **THE GOLDFINCH** by Donna Tartt. (I also gave an A+ to a literary book entitled **SHUGGIE BAIN** by Douglas Stuart which won the Booker Prize last year.) So, it is rare for me to rate a book with an A+. I read and reviewed **RAZORBLADE TEARS** before anyone else that I know of. I raved about it without knowing anyone else would agree with me. I was afraid that my review might be as outlandish as Ali Karim's overly exuberant and glowing review of **CARI MORA** by Thomas Harris. That book was truly awful and called into question Ali's sanity. But I did not have to worry for long. **RAZORBLADE** is the major hit of the year. Sometimes I love being right.



I will admit that George Easter and I quite often have wildly divergent taste in our reading preferences. His favorite books are dull, dreary British police procedural novels that are mind numbingly dull. Whereas I prefer well-written books with superb characters and a riveting plot. (Okay, I admit that I am exaggerating a little. George and I enjoy this banter.) So when we both agree that a book is great, you probably should pay attention. Recently, besides **RAZORBLADE TEARS**, we both raved about Robert Galbraith's **TROUBLED BLOOD**. When I realized I would have to read it for my CWA Daggers column, I was not reassured when George told me how good it was. I figured this was a 927- page, dull and dreary British PI novel. I can assure you it is anything but that. The book is great and we both agree. We are both looking forward to the next book in the series.



One thing has come to mind as I recently read and reviewed some of the top reviewed books of the summer. Books such as **THE PLOT**, **FALLING**, **THE MAIDENS**, and **THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER** (see my review column herein). They are incredibly stupid! I do indicate in my reviews why I consider this to be so. They are entertaining, but they offer nothing cerebral. Perhaps that is what summer reading is all about. Personally, I am looking forward to the Booker shortlist coming out July 27. This is a list of some of the best literary fiction of the past year, as well as, the soon to be published. . I hate to admit that I will read three or four of them, then dive back into crime fiction like it is a cool pool on a hot day.

The Mona Lisa

History & Mystery

by George Easter

You would think that a painting hanging on the wall of a museum would have quite a placid, peaceful life., even if crowds come to adore it. But not so for the what has become the most famous painting in the world – the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci – especially in the 20th Century.

Two major events rocked the Mona Lisa's quiet life in the 20th Century.

The 1911 Theft.

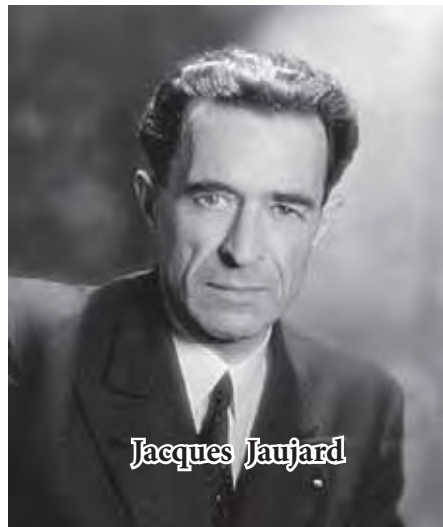
The first occurred in 1911 when the Mona Lisa was stolen by Vincenzo Perugia from the Louvre museum. At the time, the Mona Lisa, was not nearly as famous as it is today, but the theft brought it into the international lime-light and the French went to great efforts to get it back. Its absence was considered a national shame. Twenty-eight months later it was recovered when Vincenzo Perugia tried to sell it to an art dealer in Florence, Italy. The thief claimed he was only trying to return that which was stolen by Napoleon from Italy. He was sentenced to eight months in prison.

The 1939 Evacuation.

The second Mona Lisa event happened when Jacques Jaujard, director of France's National Museums, anticipated the German invasion of France (and the Nazi's thirst for stolen art) and came up with a plan to evacuate almost all of the Louvre's art, which included 3600 paintings.

On August 25, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union announced their Nonaggression Pact and Jaujard knew the

writing was on the wall. He closed the Louvre for three days (ostensibly "for repairs.") The Louvre staff, students and interested helpers took paintings out of their frames (when possible) and moved statues and other objects from their displays into wooden crates. All works were labeled with marks indicating their evacuation priority—yellow dots for most of the collection, green dots for the works of major significance, and red dots for the greatest treasures. The Mona Lisa was placed in a custom popular case cushioned with red velvet. The box was crated up and the crate marked with three red dots, the only work in the



Jacques Jaujard

entire collection with that rating.

To keep the Mona Lisa safe from interception, Jaujard made sure there was no indication on the crate of its contents. He gave the painting a code instead, writing the letters "MN" in black, without the department letters or the red number that was the standard



packing notation on other crates. Later, he wrote to the curator newly in charge of the piece to let him know which crate the masterpiece was in, and to add "L.P.0" in red to the code on the crate ("LP" stood for "Louvre Paintings"). The Mona Lisa arrived safely at the Château de Chambord, the largest château in the Loire Valley, along with the rest of the Louvre's collection. From there, the works would be sent to other rural châteaux, museums, and abbeys.

In November of 1939, the Mona Lisa was transported from Chambord to the château of Louvigny, the northernmost art depot where the large-format paintings were stored, to keep them out of reach of the advancing German army. The crate was on an ambulance stretcher again, this time in an armored van that was sealed shut to keep the humidity constant. A curator sat next to it in a state of cat-like readiness for the entire trip, and later reported the lack of air circulation almost suffocated him.

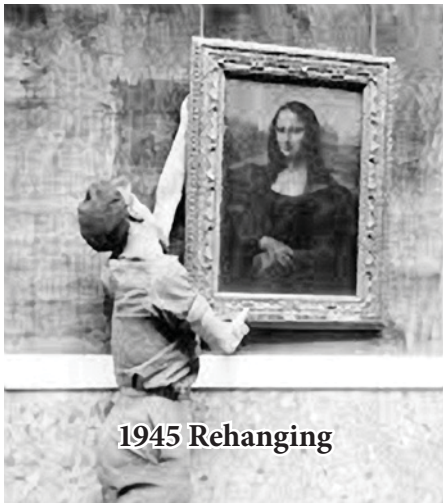
Safety was a tenuous concept in war-time France. Jaujard and other officials would juggle logistics and arrange additional moves at great personal risk for the duration of the war to keep France's cultural treasures out of Nazi hands, out of Vichy hands and, working directly with the French Resistance, out of range of Allied bombs. The Mona Lisa would be moved five more times to stay ahead

of possible danger.

In June of 1940, with the surrender of France imminent and floods of refugees from Belgium, Holland, and northern France clogging the roads south, many of the Louvre's works were moved out of the German-occupied north into what would soon become the southern "free zone" of the puppet Vichy government.

When Adolph Hitler arrived in Paris and found the painting gone, he was not happy.

The Mona Lisa was returned to Paris on June 16, 1945.



1945 Rehanging

Almost immediately after each of these two events, rumors started to fly that the Mona Lisa returned to the Louvre was not the Mona Lisa that left. Sound like the basis for a mystery plot?

Novels about the 1911 Theft

As you might imagine, these two fascinating events were too much for mystery writers to ignore. In 2011, on the 100th anniversary of the theft of the Mona Lisa, Carson Morton's **STEALING MONA LISA** (Minotaur, \$25.99) was published to critical acclaim. Plot: What happens when you mix a Parisian street orphan, a hot-tempered Spanish forger, a beautiful American pickpocket, an unloved wife, and one priceless painting?

The charming Eduardo de Valfierno makes a very respectable living in Argentina fleecing the nouveau rich – they pay him to steal valuable pieces of art, and Valfierno sells them flawless forgeries instead. But when Eduardo meets



the beautiful Mrs. Hart on his latest con, he takes a risk that forces him back to the city he loved and left behind – Paris. There he assembles his team of con artists for their final and most ambitious theft, one that will enable them to leave the game forever: The Mona Lisa.

But when a member of the team turns up missing, and Mr. Hart shows up in Paris, Valfierno and his crew must stay one step ahead of a relentless police inspector, endure a devastating flood, and conquer their own doubts to keep the priceless painting in play – and survive.

Now we come to two 2021 titles

THE LAST MONA LISA

by Jonathan Santlofer

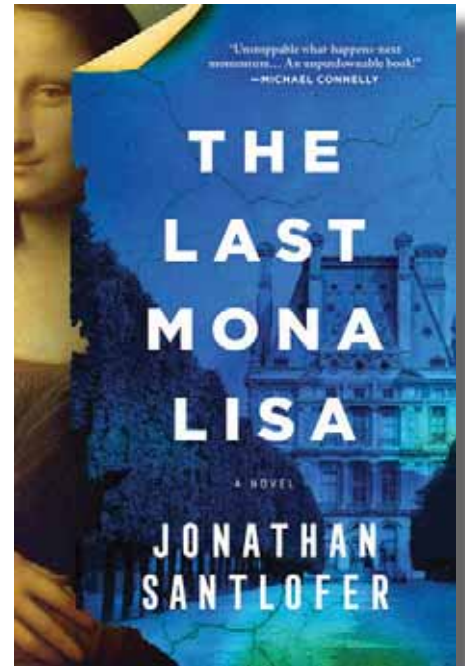
Sourcebooks, \$27.99 hardcover, \$16.99 trade paper, August, 2021

Rating: A-

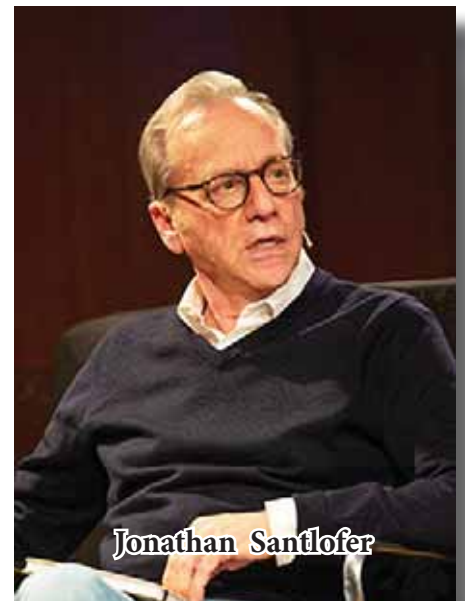
This narrative follows two tracks. In the present day one Luke Perrone, an art history professor from New York City, receives an email about the recently-found journal of his grandfather Vincent Peruggia, who stole the Mona Lisa in 1911 and was later caught and imprisoned for the crime. Luke has always been fascinated by the theft and the role that his grandfather played in it and is desperate to learn more. So

he travels to Florence, Italy to read the diary, which has been hidden in an exclusive and very secure library.

We the readers are privy to each chapter of the diary of Peruggia as his grandson reads along. What we discover are the dire circumstances under which Vincent Peruggia is living, as he works as a carpenter/handyman at the Louvre Museum. He is living in poverty with a sick, pregnant wife. The unscrupulous Eduardo de Valfierno eventually entices Vincent to steal the Mona Lisa.



Luke learns from the diary that Valfierno takes the painting to a brilliant but dishonest artist who forges



Jonathan Santlofer

five near-perfect copies of the famous painting, which are all eventually sold to dishonest, wealthy collectors. The “original” (or was it a copy?) of the Mona Lisa is returned to Peruggia and that is the painting that was found when Peruggia was arrested.

Luke Perrone reads in the diary that his grandfather found out there was an almost imperceptible clue that the forger put in each of his five copies and just when Luke thinks he will find out what it is, there is a missing page in the diary. Meanwhile, there are dangerous forces after the diary and its contents and a trail of bodies begins to emerge.

A novel about the movement of the Mona Lisa in World War II France

THE NIGHT GATE

by Peter May

Quercus, \$26.99, March, 2021

Enzo Macleod Series #7

Rating: A-

This narrative also follows two tracks. The first takes place in present-day Carennes, France where the skeletal remains of what appears to be a WWII Luftwaffe officer are discovered when a diseased tree falls over and is uprooted. While the police are trying to find out the identity of the German officer, the body of a prominent Parisian art dealer, this one much more recent, is found murdered in a nearby house. The discovery of two bodies in the same vicinity causes the overwhelmed local police to seek help from retired crime scene/forensic specialist Enzo Macleod, who reluctantly agrees to help out.

The other track goes back to the early days of World War II and the Fall of France. Georgette Pignal is a Frenchwoman living in England who is approached by the exiled Charles de Gaulle to go to France to protect the Mona Lisa from falling into the hands of the Germans. It has been removed from the Louvre and is being moved around to avoid war zones and the Germans. The two Nazis most interested in acquiring the Mona Lisa are Adolf Hitler and his henchman Herman Göring, who have each sent men to obtain the Mona



Lisa when the time is right. It can not appear that the Nazis have “stolen” the painting or world opinion will condemn the act. Those in charge of the art works moved from the Louvre also send an exact replica of the painting with the original Mona Lisa and Georgette is told to switch the paintings if the real Mona Lisa is ever in danger of being stolen or damaged..

The plot weaves back and forth between the 1940s and present day and as Enzo investigates, he is surprised to find that the link between the two victims is the Mona Lisa.



An interesting fact about Peter May. He discovered that a property he owns in France was used to store art treasures from the Louvre during World War II. How could he resist?

It is striking how similar in structure these two 2021 Mona Lisa mysteries are. They both contain two narrative tracks, one set in the past and one set in the present. The historical tracks of each novel call into question the authenticity of the Mona Lisa painting hanging today in the Louvre. In both books one or more near-perfect replicas of the painting have been made and it is conceivable that it was a copy and not the original that was returned to the museum in 1913 and in 1945.

I found both novels eminently readable and fascinating. Although based on historical fact, both novels take great literary licence to make the stories more interesting. Don't you just love a good art mystery?

Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year

WE BEGIN AT THE END, Chris Whitaker – Winner

Others on Shortlist

THE LAST CROSSING,
Brian McGilloway –
Highly Commended

DEATH IN THE EAST,
Abir Mukherjee

THE LANTERN MEN,
Elly Griffiths

THREE HOURS,
Rosamund Lupton

THE MAN ON THE STREET,
Trevor Wood



It's About Crime

Marv Lachman



The Short Stop

Barb Goffman is known for her humorous stories. In the January/February 2021 issue of *EQMM* her "That Poor Woman" gives us a complete change of pace, dealing with one of the most serious problems facing the U.S. today, and she does it well – and at two pages in length!

Also dealing with current issues is "Fake News" by Larry Light in the January/February 2021 issue of *AHMM*. This is a most readable story, but unfortunately Light has chosen to add some Orwellian elements that detract from the story's believability as a crime story.

I've recently been watching DVDs of



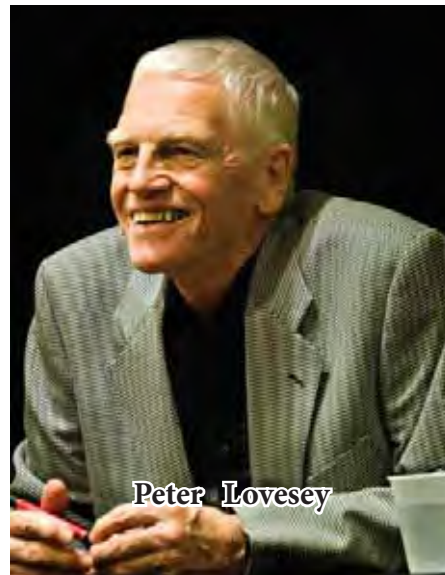
some of the episodes of *Rumpole of the Bailey*, that wonderful series with Leo McKern in the title role. Its author, John Mortimer, has written at least forty stories about Rumpole, and they are as satisfying as the television episodes were. I recently read the first, "Rumpole and the Younger Generation," which was printed in the collection **RUMPOLE OF THE**

BAILEY and also appears in the **FIRST RUMPOLE OMNIBUS**, which contains the first three books of Rumpole stories. All the humor is there as well as a bonus. The stories also provide an introduction to the English law system. As I read the story I couldn't help hearing the voice of McKern as Rumpole in my ears.

Novels Recently Read

I haven't read as many novels by Peter Lovesey as I should. However, close readers of this column are probably aware that I am trying to atone for that sin, which was caused by time spent writing about regional mysteries, crime plays, and a history of mystery fandom. I recently finished **UPON A DARK NIGHT** (1997), the fifth novel in his Peter Diamond series. Lovesey uses that old plot device -- amnesia, bringing it up to date and making it believable.

The woman who lost her memory is thrust into a relationship with characters who proceed to take the novel away

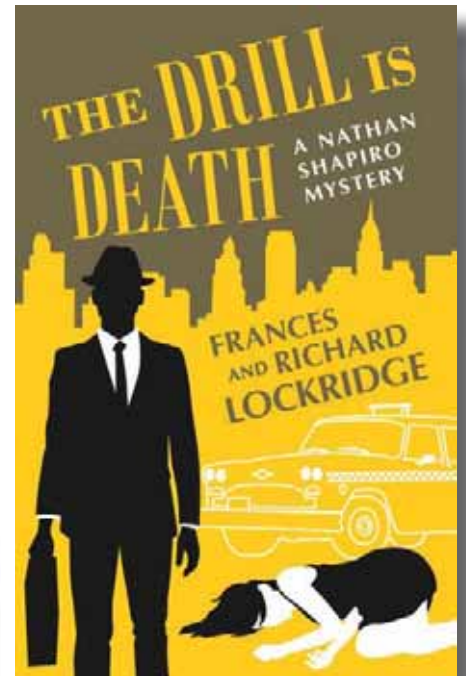


Peter Lovesey

from her too quickly for them to be easily identified, and the motive for murder is a trifle hard to accept. An exciting ending resolves things nicely, and a bonus is the well-drawn relationship between Diamond and Inspector Julie Hargreaves.

Readers of this column may also have noticed that I frequently review the mysteries of Frances and Richard Lockridge. It was 25 years ago that I finished reading all 26 of their Mr. and Mrs. North mysteries. However, they usually published at least two mysteries a year, so I have many books about their other series characters, and I've been reading them with considerable enjoyment.

THE DRILL IS DEATH (1961) is in the series about Nathan Shapiro, the quintessential New York City detective, if all New York detectives are always depressed and disappointed and read poetry as he does. The book has a splendid



opening as a scholar from England finds a surprise when he takes a cab to the college where he will lecture on poetry. The surprise sends the professor chasing all around New York City, and viewing the city, especially Riverdale, from an English viewpoint adds to the interest. The plot is simple but suspenseful. This is a Cold War mystery, but the motives of the communists are not totally convincing, though that does not at all prevent enjoyment of this book.

Doom with a View

Touch of Evil (1958) is a highly rated film. Leonard Maltin's book gives it four stars, and Eddie Muller has raved about it as one of the great "Noir" movies.

It's based on **BADGE OF EVIL**, a 1956 novel written by Robert Wade and Bill Miller under their joint pseudonym "Whit Masterson." Orson Welles, who directed and starred in the film, seemed to almost brag that he never read the book.

The setting for the movie is Los Robles, a fictional Mexican border town beset by drugs. Welles plays Quinlan, the sheriff who takes action against the drug importers, but is not above planting evidence, terrorizing the innocent, and murder. He is a hero to Menzies, his assistant, who worships him, the reason for this is not clear. Menzies is played by Joseph Calleia



who walks off with the film, one in which the supporting players (Calleia and Akim Tamiroff) share the acting honors. Welles is so grotesque and slovenly that I found it uncomfortable watching him. Charlton Heston plays Vargas, a Mexican police official whose slightly accented English seems to come and go. Janet Leigh is his wife and is excellent, showing the ability she displayed for MGM in *The Red Danube* and would show for Hitchcock in *Psycho*.

There are some fine directorial touches, especially the much lauded opening scenes, but the plot is often incoherent, and the background music by Henry Mancini, a combination of rock and Latin, is merely noise.

Touch of Evil is good and worth seeing, but not great.

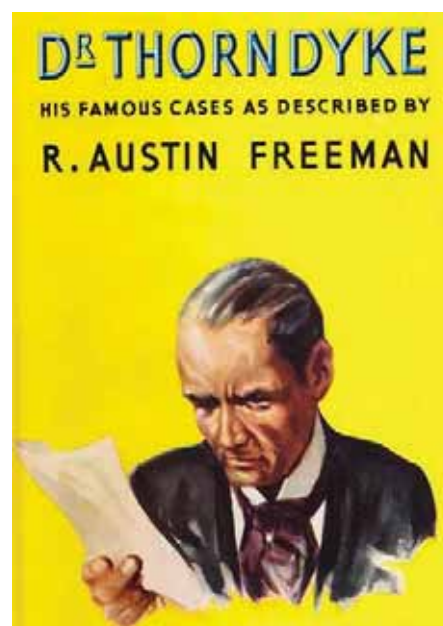
Books About the Mystery

Doctors have long been important in the mystery, but except for the occasional article and a 1970s book about R. Austin Freeman they have not been given much scholarly attention. Now we have **DOCTOR-DETECTIVES IN THE MYSTERY NOVEL** (2021) by Howard Brody, a physician, a Sherlockian, and a scholar. It has been published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

It is obvious that Dr. Brody has read widely in detective fiction. He discusses the similarities between the ways in which doctors diagnose their cases and the ways fictional mysteries are solved. He has a chapter on that staple of my reading, the fair play detective novel. Brody goes back into the 19th century for J. Sheridan Lefanu and Wilkie Collins, early writers who, though not having a major doctor-detective, often made medicine part of their plots, even Collins' major work **THE MOONSTONE** (1868). However, it is with a writer virtually forgotten today, L.T. Meade (Elizabeth Thomasina Meade), that Brody takes off, breaking new ground, discussing her many collaborators and her occasional use of weird medical devices, some of which seem like something out of Tom Swift.

A large portion of the book (over 50 pages) rightly belongs to the greatest of all fictional detectives: Dr. John E. Thorndyke, the creation of R. Austin Freeman, whose best work is as readable today as it was more than a century ago. Lest potential readers think that the book is only about the past, I can assure them that there are chapters about two current bestselling authors of medical mysteries: Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs, whose work is covered in considerable detail and evaluated objectively, including what Brody often refers to as their soap opera plots. Not forgotten are Aaron Elkins and Colin Cotterill, two popular writers of medical mysteries whom Brody recommends highly.

My favorite part of the book is what comes between Freeman and the current super stars. These are about writers in danger of being forgotten like Helen McCloy, creator of psychiatrist-detective Basil Willing, Josephine Bell, herself a doctor, and her Dr. David Wintringham, and H. C. Bailey and his Mr. Fortune. Fortune is a medical doctor but, following English



tradition, is called Mr. Fortune because he is a surgeon. There are many other doctor-detectives little known today, though Dr. Brody literally puts faces on them, by including pictures of writers as presently unknown as Theodora Du Bois, Lawrence Blochman, and Anthony Wynne. By the way, don't take the title of the book too seriously, since Brody does include short stories, even devoting an entire chapter to Freeman's short stories and many pages to the short stories of Bailey, Blochman, Rufus King, and George Harmon Coxe.

A minor point of controversy. To allow himself enough space to discuss authors' writing techniques and relevant medical portions of work discussed, Brody has issued a "GENERAL SPOILER ALERT." He discusses plots in detail and gives away some solutions. Being a lifelong (well, from the age of eleven when I started reading mysteries) avoider of giving away plot details as well as the identity of the culprit in my own writing, I was put in a quandry. Dr. Brody seems to be suggesting that readers postpone reading his comments on some books until they've read the book itself. That might allow them double pleasure as they read the book and then Brody's assessment. In my case, there were many books I had read but forgotten its solution. Reading about them proved enjoyable, sort of like seeing old friends again. As proof of greater flexibility on my part, I'm willing to try Brody's suggestion. Spoilers should not automatically cause anyone to miss this valuable book.

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

****FIND YOU FIRST** by Linwood Barclay (Morrow, \$27.99). Tech millionaire Miles Cookson has more money than he can ever spend, and everything he could dream of—except time. He has recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and there is a fifty percent chance that it can be passed on to the next generation. Two decades ago, a young, struggling Miles was a sperm donor. Somewhere out there, he has kids—nine of them. And they might be about to inherit both the good and the bad from him—maybe his fortune, or maybe something much worse.

As Miles begins to search for the children he's never known, aspiring film documentarian Chloe Swanson embarks on a quest to find her biological father, armed with the knowledge that twenty-two years ago, her mother used a New York sperm bank to become pregnant. When Miles and Chloe eventually connect, their excitement at finding each other is overshadowed by a series of mysterious and terrifying events. One by one, Miles's other potential heirs are vanishing—every trace of them wiped, like they never existed at all. **PW & LJ**

****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

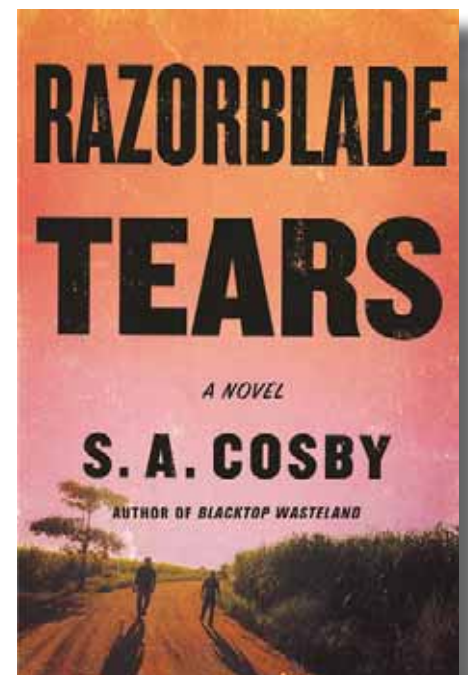
the two decades since the Good Friday Agreement, but they never really went away, and lately bomb threats, security checkpoints, and helicopters floating ominously over the city have become features of everyday life. As the news reporter requests the public's help in locating those responsible for the 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**

****FALLEN**, Linda Castillo (\$27.99). When a young woman is found murdered in a Painters Mill motel, Chief of Police Kate Burkholder is shocked to discover she once knew the victim. Rachael Schwartz was a charming but troubled Amish girl who left the fold years ago and fled Painters Mill. Why was she back in town? And who would kill her so brutally? Kate remembers Rachael as the only girl who was as bad at being Amish as Kate was – and those parallels dog her. But the more Kate learns about Rachael's life, the more she's convinced that her dubious reputation was deserved. As a child, Rachael was a rowdy rulebreaker whose decision

to leave devastated her parents and best friend. As an adult, she was charismatic and beautiful, a rabble-rouser with a keen eye for opportunity no matter who got in her way. Her no-holds-barred lifestyle earned her a lot of love and enemies aplenty – both English and Amish. As the case heats to a fever pitch and long-buried secrets resurface, a killer haunts Painters Mill. Someone doesn't want Rachael's past – or the mysteries she took with her to the grave – coming to light. As Kate digs deeper, violence strikes again, this time hitting close to home. Will Kate uncover the truth and bring a murderer to justice? Or will a killer bent on protecting a terrible past stop her once and for all –and let the fallen be forgotten? **BL & PW**

****THE NAMELESS ONES** by John Connolly (Atria, \$28.00). In Amsterdam, four bodies, violently butchered, are discovered in a canal house, the remains of friends and confidantes of the assassin known only as Louis. The men responsible for the murders are Serbian war criminals. They believe they can escape retribution by retreating to their homeland. They are wrong. For Louis has come to Europe to hunt them down: five killers to be found and punished before they can vanish into thin air. There is just one problem. The sixth. **DP** (so far)

****RAZORBLADE TEARS** by S.



A. Cosby (Flatiron, \$26.99). Ike Randolph has been out of jail for fifteen years, with not so much as a speeding ticket in all that time. The last thing he expects to hear is that his son Isiah has been murdered, along with Isiah's white husband, Derek. Ike had never fully accepted his son but is devastated by his loss. Derek's father Buddy Lee was almost as ashamed of Derek for being gay as Derek was ashamed his father was a criminal. Buddy Lee still has contacts in the underworld, though, and he wants to know who killed his boy. Ike and Buddy Lee, two ex-cons with little else in common other than a criminal past and a love for their dead sons, band together in their desperate desire for revenge. **Booklist, Kirkus & DP**

****DEAD GROUND** by M. C. Craven (Constable, £16.99, available only in the U.K. in June). Detective Sergeant Washington Poe is in court, fighting eviction from his beloved and isolated croft, when he is summoned to a backstreet brothel in Carlisle where a man has been beaten to death with a baseball bat. Poe is confused -- he hunts serial killers and this appears to be a straightforward murder-by-pimp - but his attendance was requested personally, by the kind of people who prefer to remain in the shadows. As Poe and the socially awkward programmer Tilly Bradshaw delve deeper into the case, they are faced with seemingly unanswerable questions: despite being heavily vetted for a high-profile job, why does nothing in the victim's background check out? Why was a small ornament left at the murder scene -- and why did someone on the investigation team steal it? And what is the connection to a flawlessly executed bank heist three years earlier, a heist where nothing was taken. **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**

****WEDDING STATION** by David Downing (Soho Crime, \$27.95). February 27, 1933. In this stunning prequel to the John Russell espionage novels, the Reichstag parliament building in Berlin is set ablaze. It's just a month after Hitler's inauguration as Chancellor of Germany, and the Nazis use the torching to justify a campaign of terror against their political opponents. John Russell's recent separation from his wife threatens his right to reside in Germany and any meaningful relationship with his six-year-old son, Paul. He has just secured work as a crime reporter for a Berlin newspaper, and the crimes which he has to report—the gruesome murder of a rent boy, the hit-and-run death of a professional genealogist, the suspicious disappearance of a Nazi-supporting celebrity fortune-teller—are increasingly entangled in the wider nightmare engulfing Germany. **BL & DP**

****THE KING OF INFINITE SPACE** by Lyndsay Faye (Putnam, \$27.00). Meet Ben Dane: brilliant, devastating, devoted, honest to a fault (truly, a fault). His Broadway theater baron father is dead--but by purpose or accident? The question rips him apart. Unable to face alone his mother's ghastly remarriage to his

uncle, Ben turns to his dearest friend, Horatio Patel, whom he hasn't seen since their relationship changed forever from platonic to something...other. Loyal to a fault (truly, a fault), Horatio is on the first flight to NYC when he finds himself next to a sly tailor who portends inevitable disaster. And who seems ominously like an architect of mayhem himself. A retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. **PW & BL**

****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 UNWILLING** by John Hart (St. Martin's, \$27.99). Jason won't speak of the war or of his time behind bars, but he wants a relationship with the younger brother (Gibby) he hasn't known for years. Determined to make that connection, he coaxes Gibby into a

day at the lake: long hours of sunshine and whisky and older women. But the day turns ugly when the four encounter a prison transfer bus on a stretch of empty road. Beautiful but drunk, one of the women taunts the prisoners, leading to a riot on the bus. The woman finds it funny in the moment, but is savagely murdered soon after. Given his violent history, suspicion turns first to Jason; but when the second woman is kidnapped, the police suspect Gibby, too. Determined to prove Jason innocent, Gibby must avoid the cops and dive deep into his brother's hidden life, a dark world of heroin, guns and outlaw motorcycle gangs. **BL & DP**

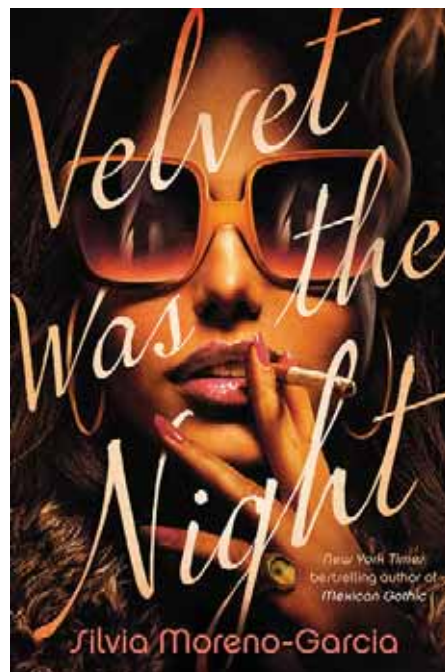
****THE PLOT** by Jean Hanff Korelitz (Celadon, \$28.00). Jacob Finch Bonner was once a promising young novelist with a respectably published first book. Today, he's teaching in a third-rate MFA program and struggling to maintain what's left of his self-respect; he hasn't published anything decent in years. When Evan Parker, his most arrogant student, announces he doesn't need Jake's help because the plot of his book in progress is a sure thing, Jake is prepared to dismiss the boast as typical amateur narcissism. But then . . . he hears the plot. Jake braces himself for the supernova publication of Evan Parker's first novel: but it never comes. When he discovers that his former student has died, presumably without ever completing his book, Jake does what any self-respecting writer would do with a story like that. He writes and publishes it.

In a few short years, all of Evan Parker's predictions have come true, but Jake is the author enjoying a wave of fame and wealth. Then an e-mail arrives, the first salvo in a terrifying, anonymous campaign: You are a thief, it says. **PW**

****THE MAIDENS** by Alex Michaelidis (Celadon, \$27.99). Edward Fosca is a murderer. Of this Mariana is certain. But Fosca is untouchable. A handsome and charismatic Greek tragedy professor at Cambridge University, Fosca is adored by staff and students alike—particularly by the members of a secret society of female students known as The Maidens. Mariana Andros is a

brilliant but troubled group therapist who becomes fixated on The Maidens when one member, a friend of Mariana's niece Zoe, is found murdered in Cambridge. **PW & BL**

****VELVET WAS THE NIGHT** by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (DelRey, \$28.00). 1970's Mexico City. Maite is a secretary who lives for one thing: the latest issue of *Secret Romance*. While student protests and political unrest consume the city, Maite escapes into stories of passion and danger. Her next-door neighbor, Leonora, a beautiful art student, seems to live a life of intrigue and romance that Maite envies. When Leonora disappears under suspicious circumstances, Maite finds herself searching for the missing. Meanwhile, someone else is also looking for Leonora at the behest of his boss, a shadowy figure who commands goon squads dedicated to squashing political activists. Elvis is an eccentric criminal who longs to escape his own life: He loathes violence and loves old movies and rock 'n' roll. But as Elvis searches for the missing woman, he watches Maite from a distance—and comes to regard her as a kindred spirit who shares his love of music and the unspoken loneliness of his heart. Now as Maite and Elvis come closer to discovering the truth behind Leonora's disappearance, they can no



longer escape the danger that threatens to consume their lives, with hitmen, government agents, and Russian spies all aiming to protect Leonora's secrets—at gunpoint. **BL, Kirkus, PW & LJ**

****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 KILLING HILLS** by Chris Offutt (Grove Press, \$26.00). Mick Hardin, a combat veteran now working as an Army CID agent, is home on a leave that is almost done. His wife is about to give birth, but they aren't getting along. His sister, newly risen to sheriff, has just landed her first murder case, and local politicians are pushing for city police or the FBI to take the case. Are they convinced she can't handle it, or is there something else at work? She calls on Mick who, with his homicide investigation experience and familiarity with the terrain, is well-suited to staying under the radar. As he delves into the investigation, he dodges his commanding officer's increasingly urgent calls while attempting to head off further murders. And he needs to talk to his wife. **PW & BL**

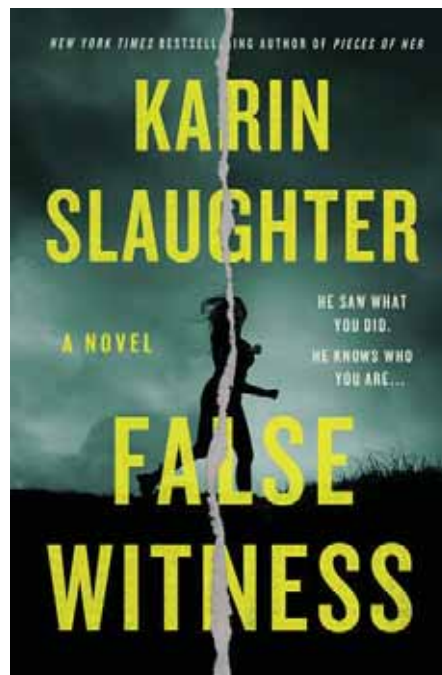
****THE ART OF VIOLENCE** by S. J. Rozan (Pegasus, \$25.95). Former client Sam Tabor, just out of Greenhaven prison after a five-year homicide stint, comes to Bill Smith with a strange request. Sam is a colossally talented painter whose parole was orchestrated by art world movers and shakers, but Sam's 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**

****THE LAST MONA LISA** by Jonathan Santlofer (Sourcebooks Landmark, \$27.99 and \$16.99). August, 1911: The Mona Lisa is stolen by Vincent Peruggia. Exactly what happens in the two years before its recovery is a mystery. Many replicas of the Mona Lisa exist, and more than one historian has wondered if the painting now returned to the Louvre is a fake, switched in 1911. Present day: Art professor Luke Perrone digs for the truth behind his most famous ancestor: Peruggia. His search attracts an Interpol detective with something to prove and an unfamiliar but curiously helpful woman. Soon, Luke tumbles deep into the world of art and forgery, a land of obsession and danger. **PW & BL**

****GONE FOR GOOD**, Joanna Schaffhausen (Minotaur, \$27.99). The Lovelorn Killer murdered seven women, ritually binding them and leaving them for dead before penning them gruesome love letters in the local papers. Then he disappeared, and after twenty years with no trace of him, many believe that he's gone for good. Not Grace Harper. A grocery store manager by day, at night Grace uses her snooping skills as part of an amateur sleuth group. She believes the Lovelorn Killer is still living in the same neighborhoods that he hunted in, and if she can figure out how he selected his victims, she will have the key to his identity. Detective Annalisa Vega lost someone she loved to the killer. Now she's at a murder scene with the worst kind of *déjà vu*: Grace Harper lies bound and dead on the floor, surrounded by clues to the biggest murder case that Chicago homicide never solved. **PW & BL**

****FALSE WITNESS**, Karin Slaughter (\$28.99). Leigh Collier has worked hard to build what looks like a normal life. She's an up-and-coming defense attorney at a prestigious law firm in Atlanta, would do anything for her sixteen-year-old daughter Maddy, and is managing to successfully coparent



through a pandemic after an amicable separation from her husband Walter. But Leigh's ordinary life masks a childhood no one should have to endure ... a childhood tarnished by secrets, broken by betrayal, and ultimately destroyed by a brutal act of violence. On a Sunday night at her daughter's school play, she gets a call from one of the firm's partners who wants Leigh to come on board to defend a wealthy man accused of multiple counts of rape. Though wary of the case, it becomes apparent she doesn't have much choice if she wants to keep her job. They're scheduled to go to trial in one week. When she meets the accused face-to-face, she realizes that it's no coincidence that he's specifically asked for her to represent him. She knows him. And he knows her. More to the point, he may know what happened over twenty years ago, and why Leigh has spent two decades avoiding her past. **BL & PW**

****THE PROJECT** by Courtney Summers (Wednesday Books, \$18.99). Lo Denham is used to being on her own. After her parents died in a tragic car accident, her sister Bea joined the elusive community called The Unity Project, leaving Lo to fend for herself. Desperate not to lose the only family she has left, Lo has spent the last six years trying to reconnect with Bea, only to be met with radio silence. When Lo's given the per-

fect opportunity to gain access to Bea's reclusive life, she thinks they're finally going to be reunited. But it's difficult to find someone who doesn't want to be found, and as Lo delves deeper into The Project and its charismatic leader, she begins to realize that there's more at risk than just her relationship with Bea: her very life might be in danger. **Kirkus, BL & DP**

****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 (Harp-er; \$). 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 & DP**

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 & DP**

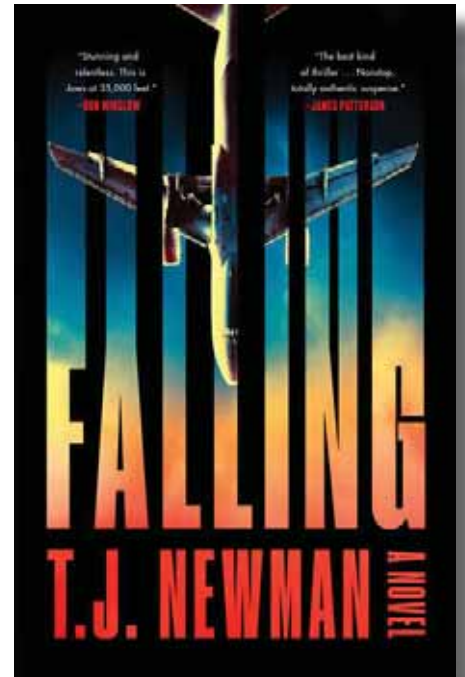
****THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE** by L. R. Dorn (Morrow, \$27.99). Claire Griffith has it all, a thriving career, a gorgeous boyfriend, glamorous friends. She always knew she was destined for more than the life her conservative parents preached to her. Arriving in Los Angeles flat broke, she has risen to become a popular fitness coach and social media influencer. Having re-branded herself as Cleo Ray, she stands at the threshold of realizing her biggest dreams. One summer day, Cleo and a woman named Beck Alden set off in a canoe on a serene mountain lake. An hour later, Beck is found dead in the water and Cleo is missing. Authorities

suspect foul play, and news of Cleo's involvement goes viral. Who was Beck? An infatuated follower? Were she and Cleo friends or lovers? Was Beck's death an accident . . . or murder? **PW & LJ**

****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 villainized 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**

****THE OTHER BLACK GIRL** by Zakiya Dalila Harris (Atria, \$27.00). Twenty-six-year-old editorial assistant Nella Rogers is tired of being the only Black employee at Wagner Books. Fed up with the isolation and microaggressions, she's thrilled when Harlem-born and bred Hazel starts working in the cubicle beside hers. They've only just started comparing natural hair care regimens, though, when a string of uncomfortable events elevates Hazel to Office Darling, and Nella is left in the

dust. Then the notes begin to appear on Nella's desk: **LEAVE WAGNER. NOW.** It's hard to believe Hazel is behind these hostile messages. But as Nella starts to spiral and obsess over the sinister forces at play, she soon realizes that there's a lot more at stake than just her career. **PW, BL, Kirkus, LJ & DP**



****FALLING** by T. J. Newman (Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, \$28.00). You just boarded a flight to New York. There are one hundred and forty-three other passengers onboard. What you don't know is that thirty minutes before the flight your pilot's family was kidnapped. For his family to live, everyone on your plane must die. The only way the family will survive is if the pilot follows his orders and crashes the plane. Enjoy the flight. **LJ, BL & PW**

****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**

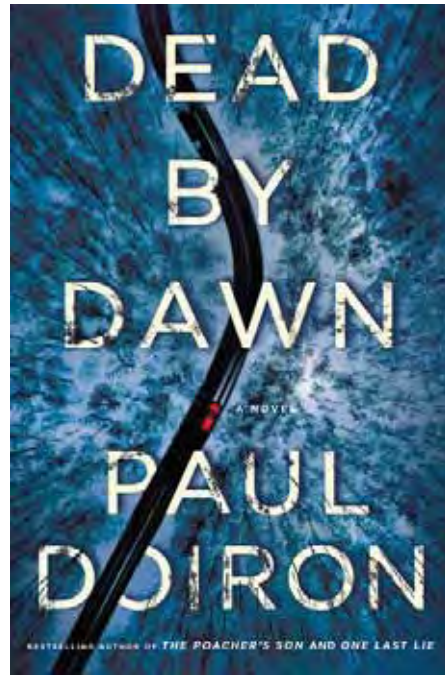
****NORTHERN HEIST** by Richard O'Rawe (Melville House, \$26.99). Nobody robs banks in Belfast without the IRA getting a cut -- not even former Provo James 'Ructions' O'Hare. But when word gets around O'Hare may be up to something, the pressure from the IRA begins.

Ructions' trusts his crack squad of former paramilitary compadres, and has full confidence in his audacious plan: To literally empty the biggest bank in Belfast by kidnapping the families of two employees - known as a "tiger" kidnapping -- in order to force them to help Ructions and his crew get into the bank's vault. But keeping the plan -- and the money -- from the IRA is another plan entirely, one requiring all Ruction's cunning and skill. **PW**

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**



****DEAD BY DAWN** by Paul Doiron (Minotaur, \$27.99). Mike Bowditch is fighting for his life. After being ambushed on a dark winter road, his Jeep crashes into a frozen river. Trapped beneath the ice in the middle of nowhere, having lost his gun and any way to signal for help, Mike fights his way to the surface. But surviving the crash is only the first challenge. Whoever set the trap that ran him off the road is still out there, and they're coming for him. **BL, PW & DP**

****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

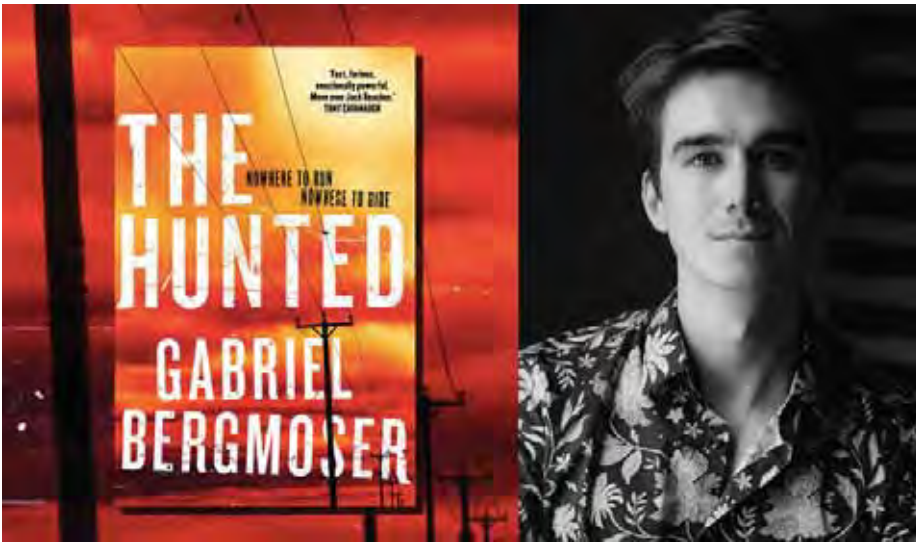
and the slow horses are in a fight for their lives. **BL & DP**

****THE OLD ENEMY** by Henry Porter (GroveAtlantic, \$26.00). Paul Samson is living in London, picking up extra work for a private security company tailing a mysterious employee of a powerful environmental NGO, when he is suddenly the target of more than one clumsy assassination attempt. As Samson works to figure out who is trying to kill him and why, he learns of other assassination attempts carried out on two of his former partners: legendary former spy Robert Harland has been murdered in a remote corner in Estonia; and the billionaire Denis Hisami has been poisoned with a nerve agent while testifying before Congress. With his life in danger, Samson goes on the run and tries to piece together what he, Harland, and Hisami could possibly know that's enough to get them killed. **BL & DP**

****STEEL FEAR** by Brandon Webb & John David Mann (Bantam, \$28.00). The moment Navy SEAL sniper Finn sets foot on the USS Abraham Lincoln to hitch a ride home from the Persian Gulf, it's clear something is deeply wrong. Leadership is weak. Morale is low. And when crew members start disappearing one by one, what at first seems like a random string of suicides soon reveals something far more sinister: There's a serial killer on board. Suspicion falls on Finn, the newcomer to the ship. After all, he's being sent home in disgrace, recalled from the field under the dark cloud of a mission gone horribly wrong. He's also a lone wolf, haunted by gaps in his memory and the elusive sense that something he missed may have contributed to civilian deaths on his last assignment. Finding the killer offers a chance at redemption . . . if he can stay alive long enough to prove it isn't him. **BL & PW**

Best Paperback Originals

****THE HUNTED** by Gabriel Bergmoser (Harper Collins, \$16.99). Frank is a service station owner on a little-used Australian highway who just wants a quiet life. His granddaughter has been



sent to stay with him to fix her attitude, but they don't talk a lot. When a badly injured young woman arrives at Frank's service station with several cars in pursuit, Frank and a handful of unsuspecting customers are thrust into a life-or-death standoff. But who are this group of men and women who will go to any lengths for revenge? And what do they want? Other than no survivors ...? **DP**

****THE LOST GIRLS** by Jessica Chiarella (Putnam, \$17.00). It's been more than twenty years since Marti Reese's sister, Maggie, disappeared. Only eight-years-old at the time, Marti can't remember what happened, just that Maggie got into a car and never returned. After years of grief and countless false leads, Marti is coping as best she can: abandoning her marriage, drinking to forget, and documenting her never-ending search via a true-crime podcast. But when the podcast becomes an unexpected hit and Marti thinks she's finally ready to put it all behind her, a mysterious woman calls with new information that could lead her down a dangerous path.

For years, Ava Vreeland has been fighting to overturn her brother's murder conviction. After finding strange similarities between the two cases, Ava is certain there's a connection between the murder and Maggie's disappearance, one that could prove her brother's innocence. **PW & LJ**

****THE GRANDMOTHER PLOT** by Caroline B. Cooney (Poisoned Pen

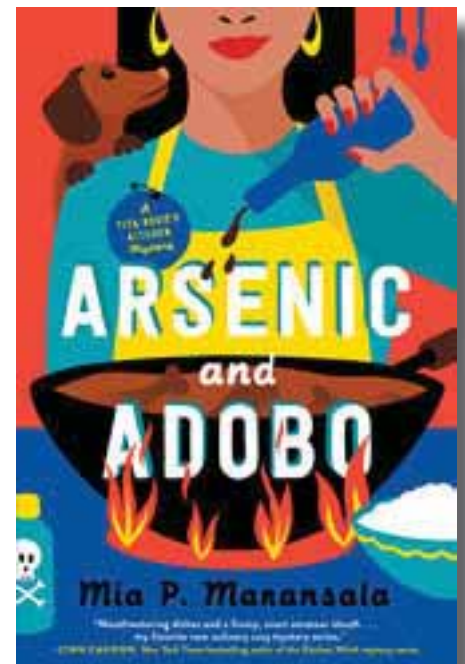
Press, \$16.99).

A stoner glass blower and a gossip-mongering collector meet in a nursing home. Freddy and Laura make up two impossibly different sides of the exact same coin. Freddy leads a life of little responsibility; he's an affable bro who's fumbled into some shady side hustles to bolster his artistic ambitions. He's caring for grandma since everyone else in the family has a real job. Laura's doing right by Aunt Polly to make up for mom dying alone. You know, floating through life one day at a time. That is, until a fragile old woman, already close to death, is murdered in the room next door. Freddy freaks out and Laura starts snooping. **PW**

****BAD MOON RISING** by John Galligan (Atria, \$17.00). Sheriff Heidi Kick has a dead body on her hands, a homeless young man last seen alive miles from the Bad Axe. Chillingly, the medical examiner confirms what Sheriff Kick has been experiencing in her own reoccurring nightmares of late: the victim was buried alive. As the relentless summer heat bears down and more bodies are discovered, Sheriff Kick also finds herself embroiled in a nasty reelection campaign. These days her detractors call her "Sheriff Mommy"—KICK HER OUT holler the opposition's campaign signs—and as her family troubles become public, vicious rumors threaten to sway the electorate and derail her investigation. Enter Vietnam veteran Leroy Fanta, editor-in-chief

of the local paper who believes Heidi's strange case might be tied to a reclusive man writing deranged letters to the opinions section for years. With his heart and liver on their last legs, Fanta drums up his old journalistic instincts in one last effort to help Heidi find a lead in her case, or at least a good story... **Kirkus & DP**

****THE PERFECT FAMILY** by Robyn Harding (Gallery, \$16.99). Thomas and Viv Adler are the envy of their neighbors: attractive, successful, with well-mannered children and a beautifully restored home. Until one morning, when they wake up to find their porch has been pelted with eggs. It's a prank, Thomas insists; the work of a few out-of-control kids. But when a smoke bomb is tossed on their front lawn, and their car's tires are punctured, the family begins to worry. Surveillance cameras show nothing but grainy images of shadowy figures in hoodies. And the police dismiss the attacks, insisting they're just the work of bored teenagers. Unable to identify the perpetrators, the Adlers are helpless as the assaults escalate into violence, and worse. And each new violation brings with it a growing fear. Because everyone in the Adler family is keeping a secret—not just from the outside world, but from each other. And secrets can be



very dangerous. **PW & BL**

****ARSENIC AND ADOBO** by Mia P. Manansala (Berkley, \$16.00). When Lila Macapagal moves back home to recover from a horrible breakup, her life seems to be following all the typical rom-com tropes. She's tasked with saving her Tita Rosie's failing restaurant, and she has to deal with a group of matchmaking aunties who shower her with love and judgment. But when a notoriously nasty food critic (who happens to be her ex-boyfriend) drops



dead moments after a confrontation with Lila, her life quickly swerves from a Nora Ephron romp to an Agatha Christie case. **LJ, PW & BL**

****BLACK CORAL** by Andrew Mayne (Thomas & Mercer, \$15.95). Sloan McPherson and the Underwater Investigation Unit have discovered a van at the bottom of a murky Florida pond. Sealed inside the watery tomb are the bodies of four teenagers who disappeared thirty years ago after leaving a rock concert. To authorities, it looks like a tragic accident. To Sloan, it looks like murder. Every piece of evidence is starting to connect to a string of cold case vanishings throughout Florida. Clue by clue, Sloan navigates the warm, dark waters where natural predators feed, knowing that the most dangerous one is still above the surface – nesting and dormant. **Kirkus & DP**

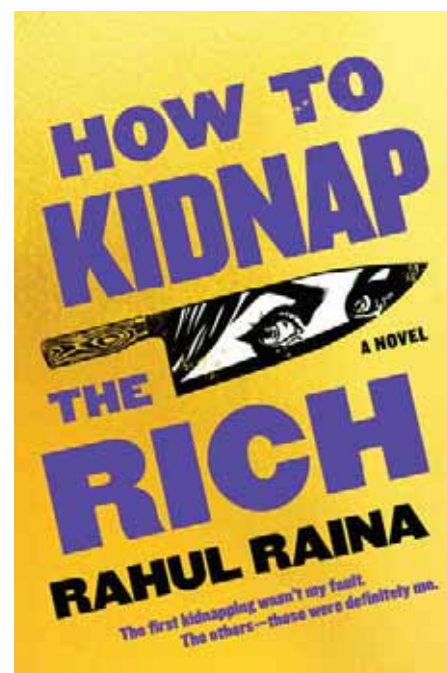
****A GOOD TURN** by Dervla McTiernan (Blackstone, \$16.99). While Detective Cormac Reilly faces enemies at work and trouble in his personal life, Garda Peter Fisher is relocated out of Galway with the threat of prosecution hanging over his head. But even that is not as terrible as having to work for his overbearing father, the local copper for the pretty seaside town of Roundstone. For some, like Anna and her young daughter, Tilly, Roundstone is a refuge from trauma. But even this village on the edge of the sea isn't far enough to escape from the shadows of evil men. **DP**

****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**

****HOW TO KIDNAP THE RICH** by Rahul Raina (HarperPerennial, \$17.00). Brilliant yet poor, Ramesh Kumar grew up working at his father's tea stall in the Old City of Delhi. Now, he makes a lucrative living taking tests for the sons of India's elite—a situation

that becomes complicated when one of his clients, the sweet but hapless eighteen-year-old Rudi Saxena, places first in the All Indias, the national university entrance exams, thanks to him.



Ramesh sees an opportunity—perhaps even an obligation—to cash in on Rudi's newfound celebrity, not knowing that Rudi's role on a game show will lead to unexpected love, followed by wild trouble when both young men are kidnapped. **BL & DP**

****BOUND** by Vanda Symon (Orenda Books, \$15.95, November, 2021). The New Zealand city of Dunedin is rocked when a wealthy and apparently respectable businessman is murdered in his luxurious home while his wife is bound and gagged, and forced to watch. But when Detective Sam Shephard and her team start investigating the case, they discover that the victim had links with some dubious characters. The case seems cut and dried, but Sam has other ideas. Weighed down by her dad's terminal cancer diagnosis, and by complications in her relationship with Paul, she needs a distraction, and launches her own investigation. And when another murder throws the official case into chaos, it's up to Sam to prove that the killer is someone no one could ever suspect. **DP**

L J Roberts

It is purely my opinion



ONE LAST LIE

by Paul Doiron – 11th in series
Minotaur Books, Jun 2020, 320 pp.

Rating: B+

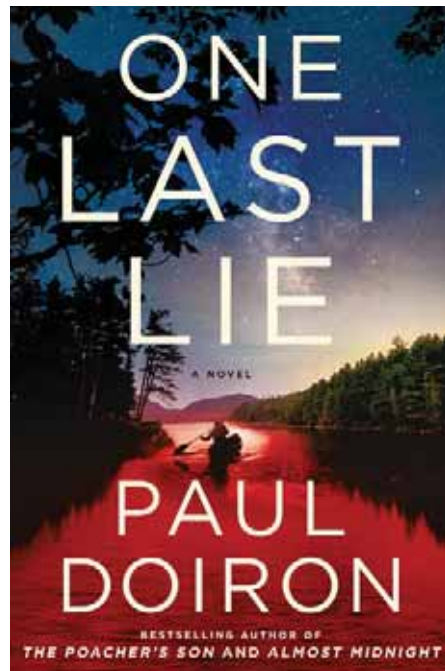
First Sentence: Before I left for Florida, my old friend and mentor Charley Stevens gave me a puzzling piece of advice.

Retired Game Warden Charley Stevens has been mentor, friend, and father figure to Mike Bowditch since early in his career. Disappearing from his wheelchair-bound wife Ora, is enough to bring Mike back from Florida. When he finds Charley didn't take his seaplane and left a note for Mike instructing him not to search, it's an automatic dog whistle for Mike to do everything he can to find Charley.

A book should open with a compelling hook: goal accomplished. The Florida sense of place is distinct—"Never had I encountered nature in such glorious, riotous abundance. An eye-popping, caterwauling carnival of life." This is followed by another good life lesson—"A small fish came up to snap at it. A bigger fish rose from the depths to swallow the smaller fish whole. There's always someone bigger, someone hungrier."

Having strong characters makes all the difference. Eleven books in, Mike is only 31 with that combination of hard experience, intelligence, and skills, yet offset with youthful arrogance, occasional overconfidence, and romantic cluelessness. The women in Mike's world are bright, tough, and intelligent. Not a lot of time is spent on backstory. Instead, the author lets the story fill in the blanks so one never has the sense of coming in at the middle of the series.

Maine is a state most people think they know from photos of the coastline. The author's Maine is one of vast wooded areas, lakes, self-reliant, often dangerous people, and drugs. The action scenes happen fast and there are plenty of them. They are visual and heart-stopping, with barely a pause of relief before one crisis moves to the next. The plot follows Mike's investigation step-by-step, and place to place, which avoids one becoming confused. The inclusion of an investigation report adds realism to the story. However, along with Mike, one must always question who can be trusted.



ONE LAST LIE is a literary mystery of many different elements brought together through intelligent writing and a complex protagonist. Mike may be a game warden, but this is a case where the threats come from animals with two legs. Doiron and Mike are unique. One

cannot help but want to read more of this exceptional series.

SECRET MISCHIEF

by Robin Blake – 7th in series
Severn House, May 2021, 256 pp

Rating: D

First Sentence: It was on a breezy Monday in April 1746 that I received a letter from a townsman of Ormskirk.

A letter from a townsman of Ormskirk sends County Coroner Tit Cragg, and his friend Dr. Luke Fidelis, to the farm of Richard Giggleswick. There they find Geoffrey, the farmer's potent boar, has been shot. Several days later, they are asked to return but now it is Giggleswick who is dead; murdered. They discover Giggleswick was one of six people involved in a Tontine; an agreement where each member contributed an amount of money to be claimed by the last surviving member. The one person who did not join was attorney Ambrose Parr.

One learns about a great deal about the legal system of the 18th century. This was a time when the accused had no right to subpoena witnesses, have their lawyers argue the case for them, or testify on their own behalf. This was not a time when justice was served, especially for the poor. The period is presented in stark and painful accuracy.

There are a fair number of characters, several of whom, though relevant, are dead before the story even begins. One that had the potential for being interesting, Giggleswick's daughter, is shuffled off almost immediately. Of our two protagonists, Titus comes across as weak and rather incompetent. He leaves his judgment up to the intuition

of his clerk. Rather than conducting a full investigation, he is influenced by the opinion of others until it's too late. Fidelis, especially for a doctor, is bigoted and judgmental, willing to cost a life.

The period is well conveyed, from the descriptions to the dialogue which has a sense of the time without being uncomfortable. In general, a plot involving a tontine can be suspenseful, but the author waited late into the story before creating any real sense of grave danger. Although there are several twists, they aren't effective enough to save the story.

SECRET MISCHIEF is a muddled, rather unpleasant take on Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None" with the protagonists being annoyingly weak, and the ending patently absurd.

AN EXTRAVAGANT DEATH

by Charles Finch – 14th book in series
Minotaur Books, Feb 2021, 277 pp

Rating: B

First Sentence: It was a sunny, icy late morning in February of 1878, and a solitary figure, lost in thought, strode along one of the pale paths winding through St. James's Park in London.

British Enquiry Agent, Charles Lennox, solved a case that brings down Scotland Yard with the three top men headed to trial. Prime Minister Disraeli determines it best that Lennox is not in England during the trial and sends him to the United States with the Queen's Seal on a tour of the East Coast law enforcement agencies. 1878 Newport, Rhode Island; a place of extreme wealth and self-indulgence. A place of new money, and a focus on marrying well. The murder of a young woman of the first diamond doesn't fit into this scenario. Lennox's help is requested.

Finch does an excellent job of providing a summary of Lennox' background, folding in that of his wife, Lady Jane, in the process. However, it is confusing that the case for which Lennox is being lauded falls into a huge gap: When did Lennox and Jane have a second child? When did Polly and Dalington, Charles' partners in the agency, get married? And most of all, what was the case that brought down Scotland

Yard? Either this reviewer blanked out this information, or Finch and/or his publisher just decided to skip a book and these annoying little details.

In Lennox getting to know New York, Finch presents the stark contrast between the wealthy and the laboring class very well, demonstrating compassion but not dismissiveness or pity. Lennox's excitement is tangible as he crosses the border from New York to Connecticut, consulting his little book of maps showing the thirty-eight states, until one learns the origin of the word "shrapnel," and later the term "I heard it through the grapevine." Those small bits of information lend richness to the story.

Just as with the contrast in settings, Finch displays the contrasts in characters and their lives with the working class and merchants of the town, to the very wealthy "cottage" owners such as the Vanderbilts and Mrs. Astor. As is often true, some of the most interesting characters are those of ex-soldier James Clark, and Fergus O'Brian, the Irish valet.

It is interesting to see Lennox dogged determination and attention to detail as he investigates every aspect and every possible suspect. The details of how and why Lily, the victim, was killed are laid out perfectly and done in a scene of edge-of-seat suspense rather than the more pedestrian style of Christie. The final chapters are heart-warming, especially the requests he makes on behalf of others.

AN EXTRAVAGANT DEATH is just shy of being excellent, in part due to a scene at the end. The mystery is well done with some secondary characters nearly stealing the show. It will be interesting to see where the series goes from here.

THE CUSTOM HOUSE MURDERS

by Ashley Gardner – 15th in series
JA/AG Publishing, Nov 2020, 309 pp.

Rating: A+

First Sentence: I pondered the package that reposed on the dining-room table for a long time.

Retired Army Captain Gabriel Lacey has a complicated tit-for-tat relationship



with James Denis, ruler of London's underworld. Instructed by Denis to deliver a package containing a White Queen chess piece, to competitor and nemesis Harlow Creasy, Lacey must comply. Waylaid by an old Army friend, Major Miles Eden, newly arrived from Antigua, they, along with bodyguard Brewster, confront Creasy landing Lacey in the middle of a dangerous turf war. Afterward, Eden asks for Lacey's help clearing him of a murder charge.

The first thing one notices is Gardner's voice. She has captured the formality and speech of the period without it being ponderous or disruptive—"Barnstable, who would never profess interest in a gentleman's correspondence, had discreetly departed."—while also differentiating the speech of the classes—"Then it could mean anything, guv."

It is the relationships that hold one to the story. With Lacey at the nucleus, he respects and is respected by those at all levels. He believes in helping if he can but is not gullible. With a leg lamed during the war, he knows his physical limitations and resents them as anyone would. The relationship with his family is lovely, with scenes of intimacy done behind closed doors. When disaster comes, introduced with a wicked twist, you feel his anguish and fear, offset by a determination to make things right. The inclusion of chess is wonderfully done.

Gardner knows how to keep a story moving and the reader involved. The pacing is brilliantly done, alternating between peaceful family scenes, and those of investigation followed by extreme risk. The addition of Eden

allowed a perspective of slavery that was realistic and thought-provoking without overshadowing the overall plot while Eden's case is one of no one being who they seem.

At the core, Gardner writes about relationships, even eliciting some sympathy for Denis—"I did not consider him a friend. Until this moment, when I realized that if Denis were killed, I'd be sorry." In turn, Lacey is flummoxed by those who consider him their friend—"I'm damned if I know why. I have a foul temper." Eden studied me in amusement. 'You intrigue people with your honesty. They never know what to make of it.'" Ashley Gardner, whose real name is Jennifer Ashley, writes under other pseudonyms as well and is an incredibly prolific author. In an interesting way, her writing reminds me of Louise Penny.

THE CUSTOM HOUSE MURDERS is a terrific entry to a series that only gets better with each book. It is atmospheric, emotional, exciting, catches your breath, and warms your heart. One appreciates not having an abrupt ending, but one where the ends are neatly tied up and the door opened to the next book.

THE BOY FROM THE WOODS

by Harlan Coben – Standalone
Grand Central Publishing, Mar 2020,
370 pp
Rating: F

First Sentence: How does she survive?

Thirty years ago, Wilde was found living nearly feral in the woods with no memory of his past or his family.

This will be short. Harlan Coben's early books were fun to read. Now, it seems, he is writing to be televised because that's where the real money is made. They are filled with stereotypical television characters. We have the sad, outcast girl; the mixed-race teen who wants to do the right thing but isn't strong or brave enough; the outspoken, older woman full of snarky quips; the outcast girl's suspicious father; the super-wealthy father protecting his super-bully, over-indulged kid; the nice cop who wants to help but doesn't want

to piss off the super-wealthy guy. Most importantly, we have the tall, strong, gorgeous, former ranger hero who can take on the bad guys with a pea while being desired by every woman. Did I miss anyone?

The story is total escapism and requires a huge suspension of disbelief, including, as was pointed out by a fellow reader, Wilde having an iPhone with a data plan when he's paranoid about security and privacy, and the ending makes no sense at all.

THE BOY FROM THE WOODS may be acceptable airplane book if one is into Jack Reacher-type superheroes, and desperate for something to read. It would hold one's interest for the length of the flight but is then left on the plane, never to be thought of again. The book is pure entertainment, but without any substance.

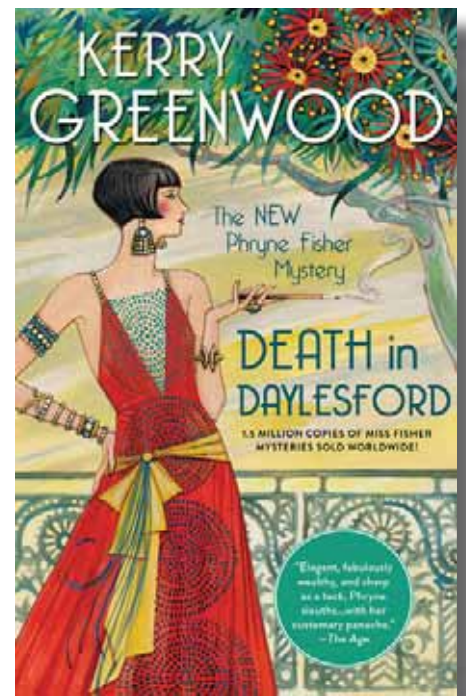
DEATH IN DAYLESFORD

by Kerry Greenwood – 21st in series
Poisoned Pen Press, Jun 2021, 318 pp
Rating: A

First Sentence: It was a lazy, late summer's morning in St. Kilda.

Miss Phryne Fisher and her ever-loyal maid, Dot, are off to visit the Spa at Hepburn being run for shell-shocked veterans of the Great War. Their visit coincides with the Highland Games, but it is not much of a celebration as people begin dying. And what about the women who have been disappearing? With Phryne away, her two adopted daughters, Jane and Ruth, along with handyman Tinker, join forces with DS Hugh Collins to solve the murder of the girl's classmate.

Ah, the joy of the Honorable Phryne Fisher of 221B The Esplanade in Melbourne, Australia in this multi-plot story where all the characters are fully developed and wonderfully realized. Phryne is a strong, independent, character with a view of relationships that is more traditionally male, yet completely accepting—"Phryne made a mental note to the effect that medical opinions



stating that women who were same-sex attracted must be neurotic were so much ill-informed drivels.'

Those new to the series are introduced not only to Phryne and learn of her family history but meet her current family and those who are associated with her. With the secondary characters, Greenwood cleverly and oh-so-subtly includes a *soupçon* of doubt as to their honesty.

Greenwood begins each chapter with an excerpt from a poem or literature, adding a certain grace to the story. She paints verbal pictures; places, things, and most of all, people become three-dimensional through her words. "A generalized sense of doom hung in the atmosphere... 'I don't know how this farm strikes you, Dot, but it's a little bit too Thomas Hardy for my liking.'"

This is not a book to read when hungry as even the simplest meal leaves one salivating--"fish, beef, and chicken pies."—and-- "broccoli has a sauce made of lemon juice, garlic and butter, and the carrots have fresh ginger, sesame seeds and honey. Oh, and butter." Alternatively, one appreciates Phryne admitting that Dot a lesson in camouflage.

No light, fluffy cozy is this. The mur-

ders are numerous, the issues, whether related to the crime being solved by the group in Melbourne, or by Phryne and Dot, are stark. Greenwood makes it clear that issues of today are not new but were relevant in the 1920s as well.

DEATH IN DAYLESFORD is chock full of mysteries all of which are solved in the coziest of manners. There are numerous characters to keep straight, so it's best to keep each mystery separate in one's mind. No matter what, it is wonderful to have Phryne and the gang back again.

THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS

by Elly Griffith – 2nd in series
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Mar 2021,
336 pp.
Rating: C-

First Sentence: The two men have been standing there for eighteen minutes.

Peggy Smith is 90-years-old so her death isn't startling, except to her caregiver Nataalka Kolisnyk. It is not the number of crime novels in Peggy's room that was surprising, but that almost all of them were dedicated to Peggy. When a masked gunman breaks in and steals a book Nataalka and café owner Benedict were packing up, it's determined Peggy's death wasn't so natural, and DS Harbinder Kaur is assigned to the case. Joined by Peggy's elderly neighbor, Edwin Fitzgerald, Nataalka, Benedict, and Harbinder join forces to undercover Peggy's killer.

Griffiths has a huge following of loyal fans. That makes it hard to be an outlier, but there was too much about this book that just did not work.

Setting aside the alternating voices; a device some don't mind while others find irritating, the plot was improbable, the coincidences were overwhelming and unrealistic. To have a police officer put his partner's life in jeopardy causing extreme harm, and not be punished for it stretched credulity. The portents were clumsy and obvious removing any opportunity for surprise or suspense.

Griffiths does do a good job introducing the characters, and one learns of their background, as each appears. They

are interesting and nicely developed, even those who are not particularly likable. One appreciates the friendships and camaraderie which develops. The team of four amateurs is the only thing that works in this book. Harbinder much less so and her partner is unpleasant to the point of being a caricature of male chauvinism.

Setting part of the book at a mystery conference provides a nice look into the world of publishing. However, there were too many threads, red herrings, and twists—yes, there can be too many intentionally timed twists—portents with predictable outcomes, and an ending that came from nowhere. Each death is projected, which removes any sense of surprise.

By far, the strength of this book lies in the characters, particularly the four who become friends. Their diversity adds dimension to the story, and one appreciates there being an epilogue for each character at the end. A cozy at its heart, this is a story of how the most unlikely of people can become friends.

THE POSTSCRIPT MURDERS is much different from Griffith's other books. The plot is overly complicated, filled with coincidences, and becomes boring at times. It feels, and perhaps was meant to be, as though this is a send-up of detective fiction. Yet it seemed rather demeaning to the genre.

NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

by Jane Haddam, 1st in series
Mysterious Press, 1990, 320 pp

Rating: C

First Sentence: "Listen," Myra said, as soon as the phone was picked up, without waiting to find out who had answered it.

Gregor Demarkian, a retired profiler for the FBI "...the most Irish Catholic organization in the U.S. government" is asked for a special favor by his good friend, Father Tibor. Philadelphia Main Line millionaire Robert Hannaford has offered the priest \$100,000 for his crumbling church if Gregor will have Christmas dinner at "Engine House," the Hannaford estate. What Gregor finds is a house with every inch decorated for Christmas; a group of siblings who don't

like themselves or one another, some of whom are in financial and or legal trouble, and a matriarch crippled with Muscular Sclerosis who never leaves her room. Shortly after arriving, Hanniford is found in his den where a marble bust accidentally fell, killing him. Was it an accident? Gregor doesn't think so.

Haddam's voice is one that captivates. With a heading of "PART ONE SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18-SATURDAY DECEMBER 24 THE FIRST MURDER," it's clear there's an interesting story ahead. And it is nice that a floorplan of the house is included at the beginning of the book. The story is filled with subtle, often dialogue-driven humor. There is a cynicism and sharpness to her voice that causes frequent chuckles—"No intelligent psychopath had to murder a dozen little old ladies to get his kicks. He would wreak far more havoc by going into government work." After that, it is the character of Gregor and his friend Father Tibor who are the hook. We learn of Gregor's past and about life within an Armenian community.

As for the family/victims, they are a mess. It is hard to work up a whole lot of sympathy for them. It makes one glad to not be wealthy, or at least, overly entitled.

As for the plot, in the end, aren't all motives really quite basic? The family Gregor is investigating is filled with unpleasant characters, and none more so than the father. As the investigation proceeds, it is understandable why he was murdered.

One point of interest is that each of Haddam's 30 books, is set against the background of a holiday. This somehow truly fits with her sense of humor.

NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING is a familial version of Agatha Christie's "And Then There None." The has a strange, obscure plot of even stranger, mainly unsympathetic people other than those surrounding Gregor. However, what it really has is a delightful voice, eminently quotable lines, and a lot of smoking: one forgets how prevalent smoking was in 1990. This was one of those books where you feel as though you should have figured it out, but didn't. It's also a book that makes

one really want to continue the series.

WHAT DOESN'T KILL US

by David Housewright – 18th in series
Minotaur Books, May 2021, 345 pp.

Rating: B+

First Sentence: I was shot in the back at close range by a .32-caliber handgun yet did not die, at least not permanently.

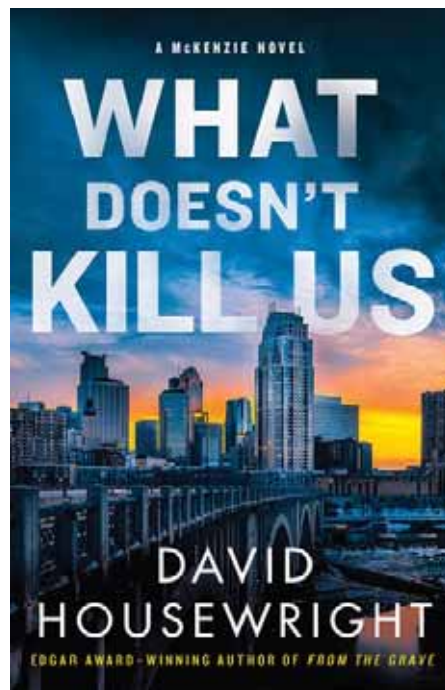
Rushmore "Mac" MacKenzie is a former cop now spending his time doing unofficial private investigations for his friends, some more law-abiding than others. It all starts when his friend Deese takes a genealogy-site DNA test and learns his father is not his father. But is that what led to Mac being shot in the back? Now lying in a medically-induced coma, it is up to Mac's friends to do a favor for him to track down his would-be killer.

What a unique premise. While the solving of the crime is left up to his diverse and fascinating assortment of friends with incidents shown from their perspective, the story is told, by post coma, by Mac. This gives a somewhat out-of-body feel to the narration. The book does mention COVID-19, although it was clearly written at the very beginning of the pandemic.

Housewright has compiled a fascinating collection of characters. Many are recurring characters that add to the overall series. Some, such as Detective Shipman, are new and add a touch of vinegar to the story. That Nina, Mac's wife, confesses being jealous of Shelby, the wife of Mac's best friend, is perfectly written and exemplifies how women almost never realize their own worth or successes.

The story segues into various relevant topics are insightful and add a layer to the story beyond the basic investigation. Rather than being intrusive or slowing the pace, they add a layer of significance.

Housewright is an eminently quotable author. Whether talking about emotional pain—"It reminds me of that old Skeeter Davis song. *I wake up in the morning and I wonder why everything's the same as it was.*"—or



referencing Shakespeare to impart a facial expression—"I need you to do something for me," she said. The way Smith and Jones glanced at each other yet again somehow reminded Shipman of Shakespeare's Richard III – *I am not in the giving vein today.*"—or a t-shirt meme—"YOU MATTER unless you multiply yourself by the speed of light squared...then you energy."—his words are relatable.

Unconventional twists are sometimes so cleverly done as to make one smile. The story of Deese and the unintended result of taking the DNA test is one that could serve as a caution. But there is also a well-done twist that circles the plot back to the motive.

WHAT DOESN'T KILL US is a well-done, non-stop read. The plethora of characters can be confusing, but collectively they consolidate the notes into a melody line that makes the story sing.

THE DROP

by Dennis Lehane – Standalone
William Morrow, 2014, 208 pp.

Rating: A+

First Sentence: Bob found the dog two days after Christmas, the neighborhood gone quiet in the cold, hungover and gas-bloated.

Bob Saginowsk's life revolves

between the house in which he grew up, the Catholic Church he has always attended, and the bar in which he works which is now owned by Chechen mobsters, and managed by his cousin Marv. Things change when he rescues a small dog and meets Nadia. Bob's life is looking up until two gunmen walk into the bar.

Lehane has a way of writing that draws you into his world. It is a world of people few of us know but recognize they are real. Bob is a character who tugs at your heart, while Marv, his cousin, who once owned the bar and is desperately trying to succeed at something again—"a successful man could hide his past, but an unsuccessful man spent the rest of his life trying not to drown in his."

The best writers are those whose phrases make one stop and consider, perhaps even reread. One doesn't do this for clarity, but out of consideration for what was said. One wants to make note of them to share them with others. Yet Lehane's world is a harsh one filled with violence and cruelty—"Cruelty is older than the Bible. Savagery best its chest in the first human summer and has kept beating it every day since." Even so, it's not unrelenting. There are elements of self-realization and bright spots with Nadia, a puppy, and surprisingly, Detective Evandro Torres, the cop, who is still trying to solve a ten-year-old cold case.

How does one quantify Lehane's writing? It is brutal but somehow impersonal; detached so one doesn't feel shocked by it. He surprises one but makes one feel they should have seen it coming. He is dark and not for everyone, but those who do read him cannot help but feel slightly in awe.

THE DROP began life as a short story, became a screenplay, and is now a short novel. One need not know any of that to appreciate the quality, the level of suspense, the twists, particularly at the end.



Central Booking

Kristopher Zgorski



ARSENIC AND ADOBO

By Mia P. Manansala

Berkley \$16.00

Rating: B

While it is not the work for which she received the William F. Deek-Malice Domestic Grant for unpublished writers, Mia P. Manansala's **ARSENIC AND ADOBO** feels so authentically from her soul, readers will recognize how this is the novel Manansala was destined to write – as only she could.

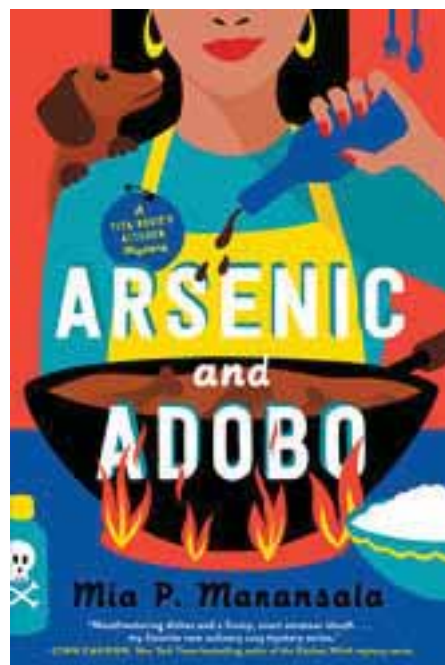
ARSENIC AND ADOBO falls squarely into the cozy mystery tradition with all the beloved tropes and expectations that come along with that designation, however, the focus on Filipino culture brings a fresh, new perspective readers will not have seen before – especially in the crime fiction genre.

Our main character – and eventual amateur sleuth – is Lila Macapagal, who has returned to Shady Palms, Illinois after a particularly difficult break-up only to be challenged with helping to save her Tita Rosie's Kitchen, which is a family-run restaurant suffering a downturn in traffic. When one particularly vicious food critic – who also happens to be Lila's ex-boyfriend – dies in the restaurant, Lila's bad times suddenly get even more complicated. Fortunately for Lila, Filipino families stick together; no one is going to leave her out in the cold for a crime she didn't commit. And Lila is not going to let the Kitchen close!

Lila's family and friends are people readers will want to spend more time with. Notice that this did not say characters, and that is because Mia P. Manansala has that elusive gift that allows her to truly bring her fictional creations to life – as though they are occupying the house next door. Particular-

ly delightful is the bantering, yet loving nature exhibited by the trio of April, Mae, and June (the Calendar Crew), the reciprocated loyalty of her best friend, Adeena, and the "required for a cozy" pet, the endearing doggie, Longganisa. Manansala could have easily settled on the diversity that the Filipino family brings to the table, but instead she populates her world with a rainbow's worth of varied individuals representing many backgrounds and experiences. Sort of like the real world, huh?

Mia P. Manansala also respects the intelligence of her audience. When she uses terms that may be unfamiliar to readers, she finds clever ways to get the meaning across without having to spoon-feed each definition to her audience. The descriptions of the food alone are going to have readers seeking out the nearest Filipino restaurant for dinner... which they will eat without putting the book down. **ARSENIC AND ADOBO** is a fast and fun read, with a mystery



that plays fair without being too obvious and just enough romantic tension to offset the murder. Readers will be clamoring for their next meal at Tita Rosie's Kitchen, so anticipation for the next in this series will be high.

THE HOUSE UPTOWN

By Melissa Ginsburg

Flatiron Books \$26.99

Rating: B

Melissa Ginsburg's debut novel, *Sunset City*, was released in 2016 to great acclaim and amassed a cult following of fans who can still recall the joys of discovering a skilled wordsmith at the dawn of her crime writing career. It has been a hot minute, but 2021 has brought us another gem from Ginsburg, **THE HOUSE UPTOWN**.

Just as she did for Houston in the earlier novel, **THE HOUSE UPTOWN** allows New Orleans to come alive, almost as a character itself. The atmosphere of this truly unique city permeates every page of this novel. Melissa Ginsburg's background in poetry is also fully on display once again. Every word choice in **THE HOUSE UPTOWN** is considered and strategic, designed to elicit the perfect emotional response from the reader. And Ginsburg is not so much interested in the larger, grand emotions, but instead wants to dig deep for the more nuanced reactions, those tiny tells and held breathes, which serve to make humans such complex entities.

THE HOUSE UPTOWN is the story of fourteen-year-old Ava and her Grandmother, Lane. Between these two is the ghost of Louise – mother and daughter to these formidable females, respectively. Though not a literal ghost, Louise's presence is felt throughout the novel, affecting every decision – sometimes willfully guiding and at other times an unexpected impediment.

Ava has come to live with her Grandmother who is a celebrated painter. Lane possesses all those stereotypical qualities one might associate with artist types: aloofness, substance abuse, and perfectionism; but Lane is also losing her grip on reality, suffering confused moments and reliving long-ago mem-

ories as though they were yesterday. One particularly persistent incident is one involving Lane's lover and his son – something that happened back in 1997 when Louise was but a child still.

Lane wants to make a connection with Ava, her last surviving family member, but the girl is dealing with the trauma of losing her mother and having to relocate to an unfamiliar place. As with any teenager, Ava's rebellious nature and independent streak are strong, but is that too much for Lane to deal with given her mental state?

Circling Lane and Ava are two men who will alter the course of their lives. Oliver is the gay man who serves as a pseudo-caretaker for Lane. He carries his own burdens and must fight off the resentment of having Ava appear out of nowhere to upset the previously placid household. Lastly, there is Arthur Guidry, a man running for city council, who just might hold the key to the past for Lane and thereby be the answer to the future for Ava.

There is a crime (or crimes) at the center of **THE HOUSE UPTOWN**, but this novel is very much a character study about the long-term affects of trauma, healing the scars of the past, and understanding the complexities of human nature. How one decision made can have effects that reverberate long past the formative moment. Melissa Ginsburg's streamlined writing style keeps this book under 250 pages – almost making it a direct infusion into the reader's brain. For the brief time it takes to consume **THE HOUSE UPTOWN**, readers are wholly-invested in each character and when the inevitable tragic end is upon them, they will hurt (and heal) just as the characters do.

Melissa Ginsburg may not be the fastest writer in the crime fiction field, but if she continues with output this strong, readers will gladly wait years for each new novel.

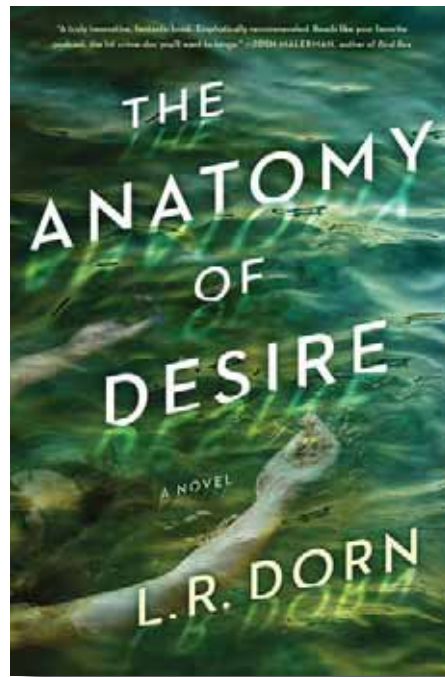
THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE

By L. R. Dorn

William Morrow \$27.99

Rating: A-

Experimental narratives have



long been part of the literary tradition, which also means they have made their way into the crime fiction realm. Recent books like Janice Hallett's *The Appeal* (told entirely via email communications) or modern classics like JJ Abram/Doug Dorst's *S* (using handwritten marginalia and loose ephemera to expand the narrative) and the Edgar-Award-winning Young Adult novel, *SADIE*, by Courtney Summers (which incorporates a multi-voice podcast between the singular voice of the book's protagonist) all prove that there are countless ways to alter the traditional novel format in order to tell the most compelling story possible. The writing team using the moniker L. R. Dorn will most certainly be added to this list with their debut, **THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE**.

THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE is presented as a transcript to a true crime documentary with the speaker of each monologue or statement clearly identified, followed by what that person actually had to say. These statements range in size from a mere sentence to longer diatribes. There are longer sections that transcribe what happens in the courtroom, but again only via the use of dialogue. Since it is immediately clear that the novel serves as the foundation for a fictional docuseries, readers are conscious of the fact that the writer/

director Duncan McMillan is manipulating the proceedings by choosing what is revealed and when it is disclosed to the audience in order to elevate the tension in his finished product.

At the heart of the story is Cleo Ray, a young woman who was raised in a strict, conservative environment by ultra-religious parents. After asserting her independence, she has established herself as a fitness expert and has risen in the ranks to become one of the world's most famous social media influencers. When a leisurely canoe excursion in Inyo County, California (an extremely conservative location) ends with Cleo on the run and Rebecca Alden – the friend she was with – drowned, that perfect life begins to crumble to dust.

The docuseries transcript highlights key moments in the narrative from Cleo's arrest to the public outcry, the trial – with both the prosecution and defense case presented, and finally the resolution and aftermath. The courtroom aspect of the novel works well to keep readers flipping the pages anxious to know what the verdict will be. Reader's loyalty will no doubt shift multiple times throughout the exposé. Since there is no exposition in **THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE**, L. R. Dorn expects the reader to do the work of building the scenes in their mind, imagining how they unfold, and ultimately drawing their own conclusions. The two authors that make up L. R. Dorn both have backgrounds in screenwriting, which serves them well here. They have the skills necessary to bring characters fully to life with only the use of their spoken words and dialogue. Readers may find it a bit disconcerting at the start, but it is not very long before one could identify each speaker without even needing the provided attribution tags.

THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE is inspired by Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Readers familiar with that classic work will notice similarities in names and set-pieces from that earlier work, but L. R. Dorn is intent on making this a tragic morality tale for the modern age, so topics like the power of social media, celebrity idolatry, fluid sexuality, and the clash

between conservative ideals and liberal freedoms are forefront.

THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE would be a success even for a veteran author, but the fact that this is a debut is quite astonishing and portends for greater things in the future. There are certain to be many fans anxious to see what comes next from this inventive writing duo.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

By Mary Dixie Carter
Minotaur \$27.99

Rating: B-

Photographs are virtually ubiquitous in all of our lives; we want to document those special moments – even sometimes the mundane ones – so that we can look back on them and reminisce. However, unless it is a selfie or a photograph we have taken ourselves, one rarely thinks about the person behind the camera lens. Mary Dixie Carter has written **THE PHOTOGRAPHER** to show us what a huge – and potentially deadly – mistake that lack of acknowledgement could potentially be.

Delta Dawn (yes, she was named for the Tanya Tucker song) makes a living by photographing the special events of others. Her specialty is children's birthday parties, where she seems to have an uncanny knack for capturing the most

random candid shot that completely expresses the emotions of the moment. As **THE PHOTOGRAPHER** opens, Delta is working for Amelia and Fritz Straub, hired to document their daughter Natalie's eleventh birthday. While roaming their gorgeous home, Delta cannot help but marvel at the sophisticated and privileged life this family leads. It is a life she would do just about anything to obtain for herself.

Fortunately for Delta – and for Delta only – Amelia feels a kinship with this talented artist. After inviting Delta to babysit at the last minute, the two women begin a friendship that eventually exposes their most heartfelt struggles. The more Amelia begins to rely on Delta, the clearer it becomes that there may be an agenda at play here that far exceeds sharing chardonnay after a busy day.

Mary Dixie Carter is laser-focused on the narrative about Delta and the Straub family. She keeps this book streamlined and addictive by doing away with almost anything that does not deal directly with this main plot. The lack of multiple subplots will surprise some readers, but as they read the reason becomes all too clear. This is an author who wants to immerse her reader in Delta Dawn's obsessive mind so completely that even as we watch her do horrible things, it is impossible to look away. **THE PHOTOGRAPHER** only succeeds if the reader connects with Delta Dawn, however, that connection can take many forms – curiosity, empathy, abhorrence, sympathy, fear, fascination, or possibly even for some, admiration (now that is a scary thought!) Whatever that bond is for each reader, that is what carries this narrative along to its shocking conclusion.

In crime fiction, the unstable and obsessive character is often a male stalker of some sort. By simply switching the gender, Mary Dixie Carter is able breath new energy into a trope that could easily have seemed dated and rehashed. But rest assured, that while Delta Dawn has many traits we have seen in other characters in the crime fiction canon, Mary Dixie Carter has somehow made her feel fresh, unusual, and utterly dangerous.

Every page turn is like another detour around crazy town.

Mary Dixie Carter's **THE PHOTOGRAPHER** is a fast read that consumes the mind of the reader until the final page is turned. The truly scary realization is that after witnessing this snapshot into the mind of an obsessive narcissist, the reader may never look at a simple photograph the same way again.

BATH HAUS

By P. J. Vernon
Doubleday \$26.95

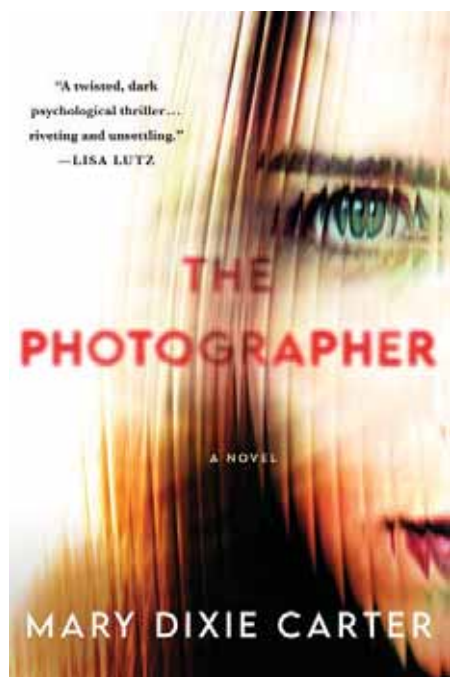
Rating: A

It requires a unique talent to take what amounts to long-standing tropes of a particular genre then bend them ever so subtly in such a way whereas to end up with something that feels totally fresh and innovative, however that is exactly what P. J. Vernon has accomplished with **BATH HAUS** – an Own Voices mystery that could be classified as DOMestic SUBspense, if that were not trying just a little too hard to be witty and clever.

BATH HAUS is the story of Oliver and Nathan, a couple who seem on the verge of having it all. Despite their differences – Oliver is younger and a recovering addict, while Nathan is more mature and a successful surgeon – their life around Washington DC seems comfortable and content, albeit perhaps just a tad humdrum. All that changes when Nathan is called away on a business trip.

While Oliver knows it is a horrible idea, he simply cannot resist the temptation to visit Haus, a gay bathhouse notorious for providing steamy action and easy hook-ups far away from prying eyes. It is there that he encounters Kristian and follows the sexy man into a private room – a decision that will have devastating consequences. Locked in a room the size of a closet with a stranger, Oliver realizes his mistake too late. Kristian's aura of sadomasochistic roughness suddenly turns dangerous when he attempts to strangle Oliver.

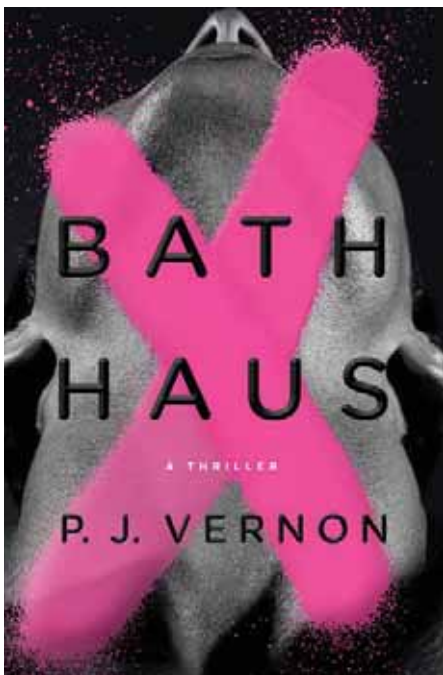
Barely escaping with his life, Oliver must now face a daunting decision: does he go to the police and risk having his cheating escapade exposed to his



loving husband or does he keep quiet, suffering the post-traumatic stress of such a horrific incident alone? Turns out he might not have a choice. When Kristian begins taunting and threatening Oliver from afar, the only way to stay alive might be to come clean about his indiscretion. And even that might not be enough.

Each of the five sections of the novel is titled after a stage of asphyxiation which is fitting as the novel is in a constant state of tightening the noose leading to the reader's breathless consumption of the action at hand. At times, things get so intense that some readers might long for a safe word to give them a breather from the onslaught.

P. J. Vernon's coup d'literature is his ability to make readers care for Oliver – a character flawed in so many ways. While Oliver is constantly making bad choices, readers are encouraged to root for him because of the surrounding cast. The power dynamics in the Oliver/Nathan relationship place Oliver in the under-dog position, while at the same time juxtaposing him with a truly evil character like Kristian makes Oliver's transgressions seem like simple mistakes. No one is going to let Oliver off the hook completely – he did walk into Haus willingly – but perhaps death is too high a price to pay for such a colossal lapse in judgement.



P. J. Vernon's debut, **WHEN YOU FIND ME**, forecasted a successful crime fiction career for this new talent, but it is **BATH HAUS** that cements it. The combination of sexy and dangerous is something that few readers can resist, so Vernon capitalizes on that while staying true to himself – and in doing so he might just cause a seismic shift in the crime fiction genre itself.

WHAT DONE IN DARKNESS

By Laura McHugh
Random House \$27.00

Rating: A

Laura McHugh has made a career of writing literary mysteries set in atmospheric locations, but with **WHAT DONE IN DARKNESS** she stakes her claim as the queen of rural noir. *What's Done in Darkness* is a tightly-coiled narrative with the venomous bite of a rattlesnake. By distilling the action down to its emotional core, McHugh gifts readers with a gem of a novel that resonates profoundly and lingers in the mind long after the final page is turned.

WHAT DONE IN DARKNESS begins on the day that seventeen-year-old Sarabeth Shepherd is abducted from a roadside farm-stand in rural Arkansas. This first chapter oozes with ambience and unease. Readers will be impressed that such a brief chapter conveys so much valuable information – all in exquisitely crafted prose – before culminating in a cliffhanger ending that requires the reader continue.

From here, the narrative begins its alternating structure of present-day action interrupted by scenes from the past. In the present Sarah now works at an animal rescue. She has dropped the “beth” from her name in an effort to leave behind her traumatic past. It is not very long before readers learn that Sarabeth was found on the roadside, left for dead, one week after her abduction. She's been “free” for five years, but Sarah has never fully dealt with the scars of that week in captivity. She thought by fleeing the Ozarks she could start over, but then Nick Farrow finds her.

Nick is investigating a series of abductions that are eerily similar to



Sarah's experience; he is hoping that she will answer a few questions that might benefit the investigations. What starts as a conversation eventual leads to Sarah returning to her hometown, unprepared to face the truths that still cause her nightmares. Sarabeth's ultra-religious family, and the community in which they live, have secrets that hide in the darkness, ready to consume Sarah (and others) once again.

Laura McHugh pulls no punches with documenting the aftereffects of trauma and the differing paths to recovery. Her prose is hypnotic, lulling readers into a sense of security, yet always aware there is danger lingering beyond each page turn. Sarah's bond with her sister roots the story in family, even as readers get the sense that this community is full of fractured households. When the foundation is built on secrets, any revelation can lead to the destruction of the whole.

WHAT DONE IN DARKNESS is only about 250 pages, so the quick reading time allows for immersion far beyond what is commonly found. Readers get to know Sarah (and Sarabeth) on such an intimate level, that at times the desire to just give her a hug is overwhelming. She is not a character that will be forgotten anytime soon.

There is little doubt that **WHAT DONE IN DARKNESS** deserves to be the book that makes Laura McHugh a household name, but she has released a string of exceptional works that readers can now explore as they wait for her next masterpiece.

RAZORBLADE TEARS

By S. A. Cosby

Flatiron Books \$26.99

Rating: A+

With **MY DARKEST PRAYER**, his debut novel, S. A. Cosby leapt onto the literary landscape of crime fiction by showing himself to be a true word-smith dedicated to crafting exquisite sentences and revelatory metaphors. Cosby followed this up with his breakthrough novel, *Blacktop Wasteland*, which proved his ability to craft complex characters readers care about whilst throwing them into exciting and adventurous plotlines. Now with his third novel, **RAZORBLADE TEARS**, Cosby has written the masterpiece he was destined to produce – combining all



these elements amidst a story that shows true empathy, compassion and understanding. **RAZORBLADE TEARS** is a novel that wears its heart on its sleeve and never pulls punches; because of that it manages to elicit honest reflection and genuine change from the reader.

When Isiah and Derek – a married, mixed-race, gay couple residing in Richmond, Virginia – are murdered, it brings their fathers together in completely foreign and unexpected ways. Ike Randolph and Buddy Lee could not be more different, and yet they share an identical, metaphorical scar – neither of these macho men was able to accept that their sons were homosexual. As it becomes clear that the local police have no interest in seeking justice for their kin, these two men join forces to exact revenge on those that shattered their family unit(s).

The bond between Ike and Buddy is

tenuous to say the least. Cosby repeatedly places them in a car together, traveling to investigate another thread of this case, with nothing to do but converse with each other. It is here that they begin to understand that despite all their differences, they are more similar than either could have anticipated. They are two fathers coming to terms with their grief, while learning about each other and themselves. Their interactions are a kind of dance – one where neither participant knows the song or the steps, but they are unable to leave the floor until the music stops and their goal achieved.

Cosby fills the narrative with discussions of complex and unsettling topics, but does so in a way that never feels pedantic. Almost every chapter contains examples of micro-aggressions related to race, economics, age, gender, ethnicity, and more. By doing so, Cosby is able to show that these missteps are not the sole domain of any one group of people – each of us can fall into these traps and it is not until we hear the tales of others that we begin to sympathize and understand that life is a journey for everyone and it does not need to be a competition to see who has the more challenging road, but rather should involve finding ways to help each other over the rough patches.

RAZORBLADE TEARS is not all doom and gloom. Cosby has a knack for blending humor and pathos in such a way as to bring about laughter, followed by tears, followed by healing. Reading Cosby's prose makes one feel smarter...well, honestly, it makes the reader smarter and makes them feel, thereby making them better humans – all without ever realizing that their World View may be shifting as they follow Ike and Buddy on their path. Each scene becomes a revelation. Take, for example, a brief stop at a gay bar where neither of these men is within his element. Cosby turns this piece into one of the most illuminating moments in the entire novel and one that readers will never forget.

In **RAZORBLADE TEARS**, S. A. Cosby shows that just a “little bit” of insight can make a world of difference. Here, the murder investigation is just the impetus for the growth journey of

these two men. By allowing the reader to ride shotgun on this excursion, Cosby graces us all with the gift of self-reflection. Keep the tissues handy, you are going to need them. Following up what is sure to become a seminal novel in the crime fiction canon is going to be difficult, but S. A. Cosby has shown that his talent knows no bounds, so readers will wait with baited breath for what comes next.

R. I. P.

The crime fiction world was surprised and saddened by the death of **Mo Hayder** at age 59. She had been suffering from a motor neuron disease.



Hayder rose to fame following the publication of her first novel **BIRDMAN** (2000), which featured Detective Inspector Jack Caffery, who would appear six more times in her novels.

RITUAL (2009), her fifth novel, was nominated for a Barry Award. Mo published 10 novels in all – her seventh, **GONE**, won the Edgar Award and her 10th, **WOLF**, is being adapted by the BBC. She won the Crime Writers' Association Dagger in the Library award for an outstanding body of work in 2011.

I only met her once at a Bouchercon. My memory is that I was last in a signing line and she seemed in a rush because Harlan Coben was standing there waiting impatiently for her to finish so that they could go somewhere. She was an interesting person and I wish that I had gotten to know her better. -- George Easter

From The Waterfront

Ted Hertel



ROCK PAPER SCISSORS

by Alice Feeney

Flatiron Books, \$27.99, September 2021

Rating: A-



Alice Feeney

Adam Wright is a successful screenwriter, mainly of adapting novels to the movies. However, he has been unsuccessful in getting his own screenplay, “Rock Paper Scissors,” sold. Adam suffers from prosopagnosia, or face blindness, prohibiting him from recognizing anyone visually, including his wife, Amelia. At a staff Christmas raffle, she has won a winter weekend getaway to an isolated property in the Scottish Highlands. Their marriage is less than perfect; they love each other but maybe don’t like each other all that much. Each has a secret that may destroy their marriage as the weekend finds them at increasing odds with each other. If this isn’t enough, someone with less than honorable intentions is watching their every move.

I’ve kept the description relatively brief because to say any more could give away too much of the carefully crafted plot. Alice Feeney, whose previous novel was the suspenseful *His &*

Hers, has fashioned another tense tale, this one examining whether a person really knows their life partner. Adam and Amelia are realistic characters, each with their own deep-seated fears and hopes, yet they do not fit together particularly well as a couple. Each year Adam’s wife writes him a letter on their anniversary, revealing her early joy as it slowly breaks down over the years with Adam’s increasing obsession with a writer whose mystery novels Adam has successfully turned into well-received movie scripts.

The story is told not only from the points of view of the two main characters, but also from the mysterious lurker’s viewpoint. None of these people is particularly likeable but, in the context of this novel, that approach works perfectly. They tell lies and keep secrets. Each of these three has a part of the answer to the complex riddle that is this story. The Scottish setting on a loch is atmospheric and occasionally frightening, even more so when a blizzard howls around the couple and the electricity fails.

This book is filled with misdirection and twists that only the most careful reader might catch. Lies are exposed and lives are in danger. The lies we tell ourselves are always the most dangerous. On the other hand, sometimes a lie is the kindest truth you can tell a person, including yourself. In this case the lies and the secrets will keep you reading right to the very end. Ask yourself this: how well do you *really* know your spouse? Entertaining and grippingly suspenseful on every page, this is a book not to be missed.

DEAD OF WINTER

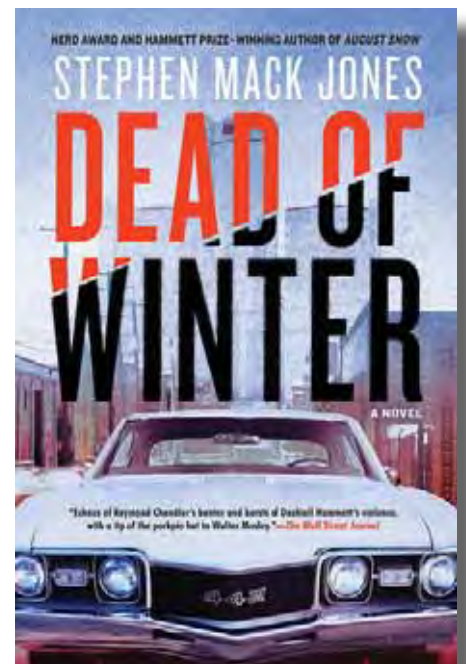
by Stephen Mack Jones

Soho Crime, \$27.95, May 2021

Rating: B

Ex-Detroit cop August Snow’s godmother asks him to meet with Rolando Ochoa, owner of Authentico Foods, who has a business proposition for Snow. Ochoa has been approached by a real estate speculator representing an unnamed someone who wants to acquire and then demolish the property in Detroit’s Mexicantown where Snow lives. The land would then be developed as a boutique “ethnic destination” shopping mall. There’s a touch of blackmail involved in the developer’s offer, so Snow decides to investigate in an effort to discover who is threatening the neighborhood. But the investigation takes a brutal turn, leaving Snow entangled with ruthless developers, drug kingpins, and money launderers out to kill him and those he loves.

This is the third of Stephen Mack Jones’ well-received August Snow novels, which are also in development for a television series. Don’t be concerned if you haven’t read the prior novels, as this works well as a standalone. Snow, a multi-millionaire as a result of a wrongful discharge settlement paid by the Detroit Police Department, suffers from moderate PTSD as a result of his Afghanistan service. His ability to withstand and dish out violence stems in large part from these factors. So put



on your seatbelt and buckle down as some truly gripping, stomach-turning, over-the-top vicious events play out here.

There is much to admire about this series and this novel in particular. Snow is biracial (African-American father, Mexican-American mother) and the story is rich with that heritage, with its culture and foods. Jones imbues his tale with a wonderful sense of place and enhances it with themes of racial justice, effects of gentrification, and the horrific effect on Snow of increasing violence committed by him. But the author doesn't let that get in the way of the action. When Snow's best man is taken down early, he finds that he must go it alone in the face of ever increasing danger. As his girlfriend tells him, "There's an old German saying. ... A hero is just a dumbass who doesn't know when to quit." Snow won't quit until the last villain is buried.

PALACE OF THE DROWNED

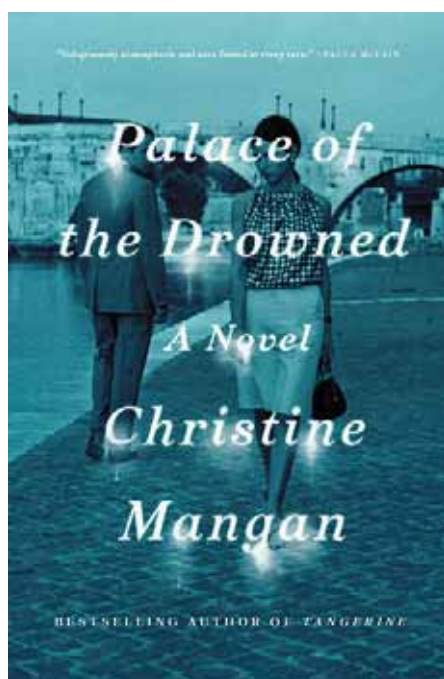
by Christine Mangan

Flatiron Books, \$27.99, June 2021

Rating: A-

It's 1966 and Frankie Croy has spent years attempting to live up to the promise of her first novel. Unfortunately, she has continued to fall short not only in the eyes of her fans and editor but also in her own eyes. A devastating review of her latest novel has sent her over the edge, culminating in a brutal attack on a woman at a party Croy is attending. In an effort to escape her problems and rejuvenate herself, she accepts an invitation to stay at a friend's vacant palazzo in Venice, Italy. In the city she encounters Gilly, a young woman who is a fan of Frankie's writing and claims to know her. In spite of Frankie's initial misgivings about Gilly, their friendship grows until tragedy overtakes them in a catastrophic flooding of Venice.

This character study of a novel raises the question of what constitutes madness. Is Croy's breakdown at the party merely the first step in delusional thinking? Later, the question becomes more pressing as pages she believes she has written in her next novel disappear and others appear in their place. She can't



ever recall previously meeting Gilly, so are her suspicions of the woman valid? Are there secrets from the past being kept from her? As Gilly tells her, "I think there's a danger in always looking behind, into the past." Is Frankie paranoid or is she being gaslighted? As she makes a harrowing decision, Frankie wonders what the truth is and whether she would ever come to know herself. In her second novel, following her 2018 debut *Tangerine*, author Christine Mangan gives no easy answers to these questions, even down to the final pages of this engrossing novel.

This is one of the most atmospheric novels I've ever read. Filled with the sights, sounds, smells, gloom and fog, beauty and menace of the City of Bridges, the moody broodings of the characters, the deep dive into their thoughts, suspicions and feelings, the reader comes away with the chilly sense of claustrophobia that envelopes everyone in the novel. By the time the flood buries the city in water and death, one of the characters' early prophecies has come true: "We shall never be as we were."

Perhaps this can also be read as a cautionary tale for reviewers: the effect that our words have on authors and the potential consequences of being too careless about the things we say (and

how we say them) in relation to the writing and feelings of others.

DREAM GIRL

by Laura Lippman

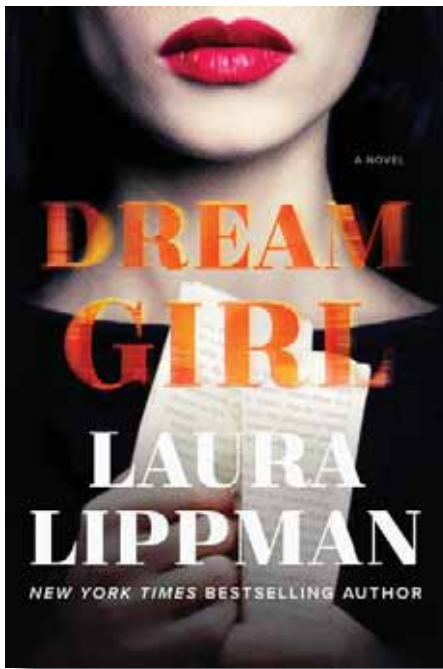
William Morrow, \$28.99, June 2021

Rating: B

After a serious fall novelist Gerry Anderson finds himself confined to bed. Helped by an assistant during the day and a nurse at night, and loaded up with painkillers, Anderson begins to have problems distinguishing real life from delusion. So when he starts receiving threatening late night telephone calls, purportedly coming from Aubrey, a fictional character in his very successful novel, *Dream Girl*, he thinks he may be losing his grip on reality. Further feeding his befuddled mind is that the nurse has never heard the phone ring and there are no notations of the calls on the phone's log. An annoying ex Anderson can't seem to be rid of shows up (or does she?) in his apartment several times. Then someone winds up dead on his floor.

While Laura Lippman, in an epilogue, says she considers this a work of horror (and both she and the publisher have compared it to Stephen King's *Misery*, which does neither that novel nor this one any favors), it is really more psychological suspense than anything else. And it is well done psychological suspense. However, it is not as in depth or as complex in the writing as many of Lippman's other books are. Timelines flash back and forth at the speed of light, giving the reader just enough background information when it is needed to understand present day motivations. Still the author sustains high tension, along with a few surprises, as the book progresses to the final pages. Along the way there are humorous observations on writing and pop culture.

Anderson, through whose eyes the story is told, is a very unlikable sort (and that's exactly the way the author meant him to be). He is a misogynist, a braggart, and a narcissist, so it is difficult to sympathize with him and his predicament, but that's his character. We can't root for him but we probably shouldn't, either. All we have to do is follow his



story. That story is entertaining – and frightening – enough that it will compel you to read to the end. The #MeToo Movement plays a big role here and Anderson is not equipped to handle it.

There is also a welcome but all too brief appearance of Lippman's series private investigator, Tess Monaghan. She's there to help but believes she can't do anything. I would have thought that suggesting adding a few cameras in Anderson's apartment could have helped things along but that would have spoiled the murder aspect, so from the standpoint of the story Tess couldn't recommend that.

As an aside, I read *Palace of the Drowned* and *Dream Girl* back-to-back and was struck by their similar threads. Both Frankie Croy and Gerry Anderson are writers who have had one successful novel under their respective belts. Both find themselves in situations where they are basically alone in unusual circumstances, Croy in Venice and Anderson confined to bed. Both are having problems completing another novel. Both have a conflict with reality/delusion: are either or both being gaslighted by someone or is what is happening in their minds actually real? In *Palace* Gilly has told Frances that there's a danger in looking into the past. In *Dream Girl*, much of what Anderson does is look back to his past for possible

danger. Both protagonists face the sudden, violent death of someone close to them. A flood of concerns sweeps over Anderson, while a literal flood deluges the Venice of Frankie's life (okay, that comparison is a bit of a stretch perhaps). Both Mangan and Lippman have taken their character's stories in totally different directions, of course, each fine reading in its own way. I just thought it was interesting how similar threads can lead in such different directions.

RAZORBLADE TEARS

by S. A. Cosby

Flatiron Books, \$26.99, July 2021

Rating: A

Ike Randolph, a Black man out of prison for fifteen years and with a clean record since then, and Buddy Lee Jenkins, a drunken white racist, have nothing in common except this: their sons were married to each other and both were slain execution style. When the cops halt their investigation because no one will talk to them and then Ike and Buddy Lee's sons' gravestones are vandalized, the two fathers reluctantly band together to seek retribution for the killings. Neither of them had been able to accept that their sons were gay, but that won't stop them from setting out on a non-stop trail of vengeance that will endanger themselves and those around them.

S. A. Cosby's look at the pervasive race issues that divide families, cities and the country propels the novel at a relentless pace. Ike and Buddy Lee let nothing -- including vicious biker gangs, corruption, and betrayals -- stand in the way of their efforts to obliterate the killers of their sons. Cosby has created two compelling and deeply flawed characters in his protagonists. Their relationship is tentative at first, trust taking a long time to build, until one of them destroys that trust when a lie he told is exposed, shattering their fragile relationship.

Cosby refuses to take the easy way out at any point of the novel. Set in the context of the deeply divided rural South, nothing is simple here, from the initial meeting between the Black man and the white racist to the struggles of the fathers to understand and love their

sons now that it is too late to let the dead men know.

The best book of last year, unbelievably overlooked for an Edgar nomination, was Cosby's **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**. This book comes very close to that one in its drama and brutality. It is an excellent examination of the problems of race, class, and LGBTQ+ issues in America today. Told with touches of humor, more than a few flashes of extreme violence, realistic dialogue, unrelenting pacing, and insight into just what's wrong in the world, let's hope that this book receives the recognition it deserves from the Edgars this time around. In any event you should not miss it.

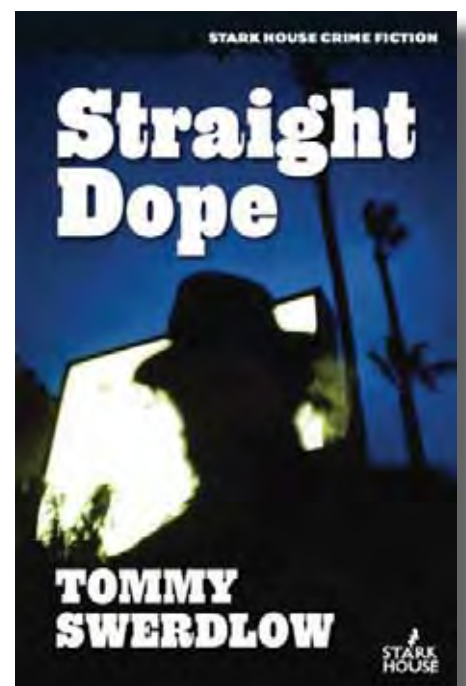
STRAIGHT DOPE

by Tommy Swerdlow (

Stark House Press, \$15.95, July 2021)

Rating: B+

When former successful screenwriter and recovering addict Bobby Zorn gets a call from Angie, an ex-girlfriend, it's not to get back together. Instead, she wants Bobby to find Kyle, the man who was with her sister Carla when she overdosed. In spite of the fact that he's a writer, not a bloodhound, Bobby decides to help her. Bobby was Kyle's AA sponsor and one-time friend. Angie claims she just wants to recover a family



heirloom Carla had with her when she died. Naturally, there's much more behind the search than merely that. Zorn gets dragged down into the muck and mire of Hollywood and addiction as he searches for the truth.

This is a sharply written story, filled with authentic dialogue and a compelling pursuit of answers in a world composed of little other than lies and distortion. The desperate life of drugs and violence, the search for success in a town built on failure, is all brought to life in print by Tommy Swerdlow, the director and co-writer of the movie *A Thousand Junkies* (2017). How can one man battle his demons when the only way in is to immerse himself once again in the drug culture of pills, booze, and coke that pervades Movie Town USA?

This is Swerdlow's first novel and it is not always easy to read about the depths of addiction suffered by its characters. But as Zorn fights his way through the senseless ramblings of other addicts, can he discover the strength to find his way past his own addiction and the lies of his "client" in order to make sense of Carla's death? Along the way he learns the terrible lesson that while god wants us to walk to him, the devil will send a limo to get us.

BODIES ARE DUST

by P.J. Wolfson

Staccato Crime, \$12.99, June 2021

Rating: C

Inspector Buck Safiotte is a mean, crooked, hulking, hard-drinking, womanizing, racist cop who does whatever and whoever he needs to in order to get what he wants. If a suspect or a cop gets in his way, he has no qualms about setting someone up to catch a bullet or pulling the trigger himself. Set in 1931, the year it was first published, Safiotte is the sort of cop you'd cross the street in order to avoid. Officer Friendly he is not. This novel is basically a "slice of life" story of about one year of Buck's life and crimes (both committed and solved). For example, someone's let loose a load of counterfeit tickets to a boxing match. Safiotte's main concern seems to be what his share of the take will be.

This is an odd book, since it really meanders through the protagonist's life, from an early illness to some police work to family problems with his wife and baby. It is deeply noir, punishing and at times surprising in its violence as Safiotte stumbles through his life until he sets his sights on a woman he can't get off his mind, with terrible consequences for everyone. There are many interesting touches of the '30s throughout the novel: a fluoroscope machine (remember those from shoe stores?), doctors making house calls, running boards on cars, the use of the word "keen" five times in four consecutive sentences, and so on.

However, it is difficult to get past the frequent racist slurs and Buck's rape of a woman who very unrealistically then falls in love with him. The cover lists this as a "Jazz-Age Noir Classic." It is an extremely dark novel, not for everyone, and while it is set in the so-called "Jazz Age," there's no jazz in it until it's finally mentioned in the final two paragraphs. It's more of a curiosity of its time but one has to wade through a lot of repulsive aspects to get to the core of the story.

Author P. J. Wolfson (1903-1979) wrote four novels during the 1930s, of which this is the first. From there he quickly moved on to Hollywood, writing, producing, and even directing one film. His fifth and final novel, *How Sharp the Point*, was published in 1959.

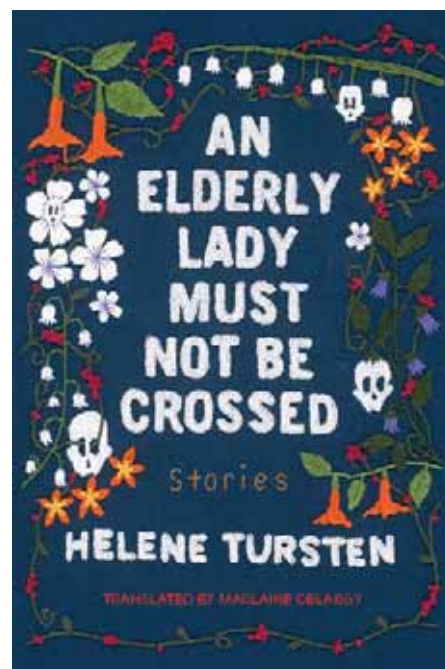
AN ELDERLY LADY MUST NOT BE CROSSED

by Helene Tursten

Soho Crime, \$14.99, October 2021

Rating: B

Eighty-eight years old and counting, Maud comes across as anything other than her age. Well, except when she's denying a killing or two that she's been involved in. Then to throw the cops off track, she's just a doddering old fool. Her family is long dead. She has no apparent friends. All she has is an apartment in downtown Gothenburg, Sweden, that she has lived in her entire life. This is a follow-up collection to the equally entertaining *AN ELDERLY LADY IS UP TO NO GOOD* (2018). In



the new volume, told in five short stories and a novella, Maud both looks back on her life and plans for her future.

After a follow-up visit from Helene Tursten's series detectives, Irene Huss and Embla Nyström, who are still investigating a death from the end of the previous collection of stories, Maud joins a tour to South Africa. While on the plane, she reminisces about problems she's solved in her earlier days. Those two bullies, for example, who were harassing her mentally challenged sister. Or the teacher whose position Maud coveted and who had suffered a tragic accident when a block of ice fell on her head. And the mooching son whose gambling problems threatened to drive his mother into the poorhouse and out of Maud's life. Sad how so many people around her were inconvenienced or died in mysterious circumstances.

These six mildly humorous tales make for a very pleasant change of pace from some of the darker novels we get from the Scandinavian writers these days. The novella (primarily a human interest tale with a crime added), which ends the book however, struck me as perhaps uncharacteristic of Maud, but you'll have to decide that for yourself. Still this is a thoroughly entertaining collection, one that would make a great stocking stuffer (and it *would* fit into a stocking at the book's 4" x 6" size!) or a

gift for anyone who enjoys humor sprinkled with a touch of homicide. Plus it contains cookie recipes at the back of the book, for those interested in such things.

George's Take. These two small short story collections about a loveable old lady who uses extreme measures to solve life's problems are an absolute delight to read. After all, her victims seem to deserve what she dishes out. Try the **ELDERLY LADY** books for a change of pace and a rollicking good time.

Hey Grownups! COMICS!!

This time around, the ol' spinner rack brings us two new graphic novels from writer Ed Brubaker and artist Sean Phillips. These two have collaborated many times before on such terrific collected series as *Criminal* and *The Fade Out*. The difference this time is that they have published two complete original stories (each about 150 pages long) between two covers rather than in twelve or more monthly issues.

RECKLESS (Image Comics, \$24.99, January 2021) **Rating: B**

Los Angeles 1981. Former FBI agent Ethan Reckless, undercover as a 70's radical, got out of the business after a

bomb blast by his own underground revolutionaries injured him and killed everyone else in the group. Eventually he turned to helping people who couldn't seem to get any help from the cops when they were in trouble. The reader first meets Ethan when he is up to his neck in blood and dead bodies. Flashback to Ethan being approached by Rainy, a former girlfriend from those radical days. Someone owes her a hundred thousand dollars, her share from a robbery, and they won't pay up. Ethan gets sucked into helping her with horrible consequences for everybody.



FRIEND OF THE DEVIL (Image Comics, \$24.99, May 2021) **Rating: A-**

The story moves to 1985. Ethan is helping find a man who supposedly died five years earlier. In his search he meets Linh, the daughter of an American G.I. and a Vietnamese woman. While watching a movie together, Linh sees a woman who looks like her long-lost step-sister in the film. Ethan volunteers to try to track her down – helping people is his job, after all – though he holds out little hope of finding her alive. His search leads him to the horrors of Hollywood, where people are chewed up and spit out in great numbers. He gets caught up in the world of cults and snuff films.

Just from those brief descriptions, you can tell that these are very violent,

hard-boiled noir tales where misery and death are dealt out in great quantities. But both stories are well-written, hard-hitting, and gripping with appropriately shadowy artwork that reflects all of that. They are worth reading if you like your stories told from the dark corners of the human psyche. A third volume in the series, *Destroy All Monsters*, is due in October.

And Now For Something Completely Different

First off, a **DISCLAIMER**. I am currently the parliamentarian for Mystery Writers of America. As such, I am an officer of the organization and involved in its monthly board meetings. I've been on the board for nine years at this point, so you might think that there may be some bias in what I'm reviewing here. However, I assure you that I am looking at this book from the viewpoint of a reviewer and a writer (of both published short stories and unpublished novels). But in the interest of full disclosure you need to know my connection with the organization that created the book.

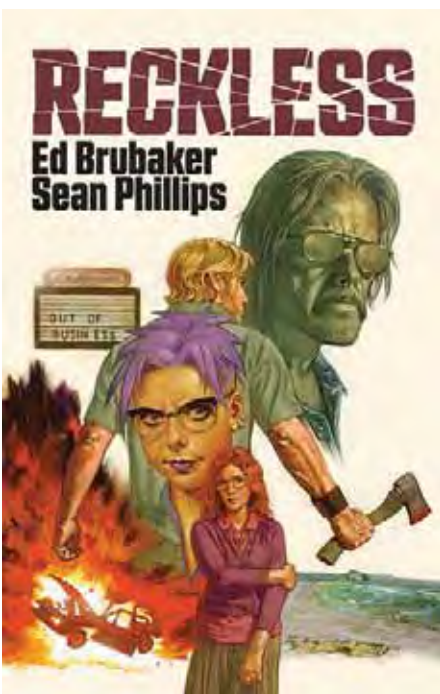
HOW TO WRITE A MYSTERY: A Handbook from Mystery Writers of America,

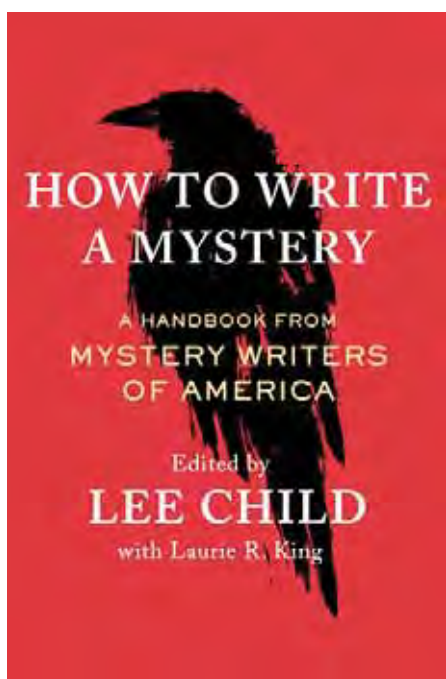
Edited by Lee Child with Laurie R. King
Scribner, \$27.00, April 2021

Rating: A

Not everyone wants to write a mystery, but for those that have the desire, the time and the patience for it, this book provides a very useful guideline – packed into about 300 pages – of just about everything a novice could want to know about getting a book written and potentially published. The collection examines questions about character, plot, genre, and the writing process, but it also tackles topics new to the current century's rapidly changing worlds of writing, reading, and publishing.

So Meg Gardiner explains the nine things a writer's thriller needs to keep the story exhilarating. Alex Segura explores writing noir and its characters. Interested in writing a historical





mystery? Jacqueline Winspear can help with time and place. Don't plan to write a novel? Art Taylor talks about writing the short story. There's Daniel Stashower on true crime stories. And it's Jeffery Deaver (always!) versus Lee Child (never!) on outlining. Deborah Crombie lets you in on plotting, while Allison Brennan discusses the protagonist and T. Jefferson Parker crafts a piece on villains. There are articles on setting (William Kent Krueger), supporting characters (Craig Johnson) and dialogue (Greg Herren). In other words, just about every aspect of writing is covered. After the writing is finished, there are articles on self-publishing (Liliana Hart), self-promotion (Louise Penny) and even legal considerations (Daniel Steven). And so much more.

Advice from four MWA Grand Masters, fifteen Edgar Award winners, and forty-eight Edgar finalists make this is a book that anyone with an interest in writing should have in their library.

The Old-Timer In The Corner

Willard Huntington Wright, under the pseudonym S. S. Van Dine, wrote a dozen novels about affluent, snobbish amateur sleuth Philo Vance. His first

three Vance novels (*The Benson Murder Case* (1926), *The Canary Murder Case* (1927), and *The Greene Murder Case* (1928)) made him one of the bestselling authors in the United States. A number of very popular films, along with radio shows, were made about him and his cases. But as times and tastes change, the latter half of his Philo Vance novels declined in quality and sales, and today he is almost forgotten. [Julian Symons](#) in his history of detective fiction, *Bloody Murder*, says: "The decline in the last six Vance books is so steep that the critic who called the ninth of them one more stitch in his literary shroud was not overstating the case."

Having said that, I took up the challenge of reading one of those final six novels, **THE GRACIE ALLEN MURDER CASE** (1938), the eleventh in the series. This one was originally prepared as a screenplay for Wright's friend Gracie Allen and her husband George Burns. When the studio decided that they wanted more Gracie and less Philo, Wright used the screenplay as the basis for the novel. The film (1939) went ahead without the participation of Burns.



In the book Gracie is a worker in the In-O-Scent Corporation perfume factory, while George is a perfume mixer and scent-tester. Narrated by Van Dine in

the first person, the novel involves an escaped prisoner seeking revenge against Vance's close friend D.A. Markham, who put him away some time back. But when Gracie's brother Philip is murdered in a nightclub, Vance sets out to find the killer with a bit of "help" from Gracie, whether he wanted it or not (in this case, *not!*).

There is so much odd with this book that it would take pages to describe it all. One example: the cops, newspapers, and even Gracie's mother all agree not to tell Gracie (or the world, for that matter) that it is her own brother who is dead. And another: as a joke Vance has stupidly told Gracie that he had killed a man. Naturally, Gracie eventually accuses Vance of being a murderer. Then things get even worse. Gracie, who was always hilarious on screen, comes off in the book as bland and humorless. Burns fails no better.

Here's an example of the sort of "Vance-speak" we get throughout the novel: On the second page of the story (no time wasted there!), Vance is reflecting on the case to Van Dine: "If ever you should embalm the case in print, please place the credit where it rightfully belongs....My word, what an astonishing girl! The goddesses of Zeus' Olympian ménage never harassed old Priam and Agamemnon with the éclat exhibited by Gracie Allen in harassing the recidivists of that highly scented affair. Amazin'!" "Embalm" does seem to be the right choice of word for this book. Imagine reading stuff like that for a few hundred pages.

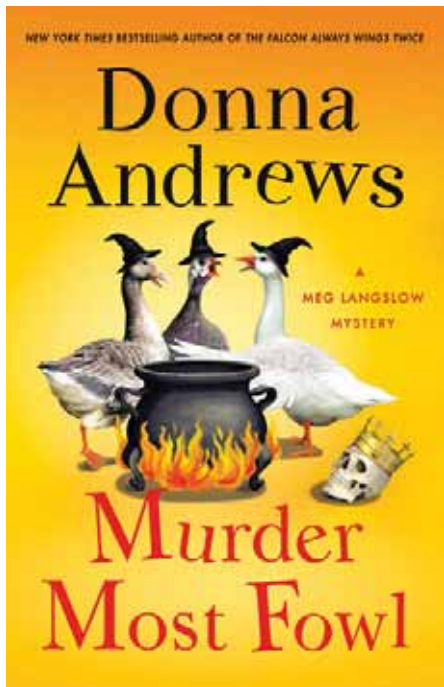
Is it any wonder Ogden Nash famously quipped, "Philo Vance / Needs a kick in the pance"

BOOKS REVIEWED IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE

Razorblade Tears
Rock Paper Scissors
Thief of Souls
Palace of the Drowned
Dream Girl
An Elderly Lady Must Not Be Crossed
Dead of Winter
Straight Dope
Bodies Are Dust

Maggie's Cozy Mystery Cafe'

Mary Mason



MURDER MOST FOWL

by Donna Andrews
Minotaur, \$26.99

Twenty-ninth in the Meg Langslow series #29

Rating: A

Most mothers would be hysterical if their children report finding a dead body, but Meg Langslow has the ability to take things like that in stride. Sure enough, the "fingers" sticking out of the ground are but a fungus that does indeed look like human hands. It's summertime, and the living is NOT easy.

Meg's husband, Michael is a drama professor at the local college, and is directing MacBeth. Their sons, Josh & Jamie, have small roles and the large family home and grounds are being used to house most of the cast & crew. To make matters much more complicated, a group of reenactors have created

a military camp, though it's not true to history, with huts falling down and food that could not be considered edible. It's no surprise that they invade the Drama group territory.

The head of the reenactors is a despicable man who sets a bad example of how to endear a group to people who are allowing them to stay on their property. There is also a filmmaker who has caused many problems, with noise and disregard for common courtesy. Theft of animals is just the icing on the cake. There has also been vandalism in the house and just general nastiness.

After Damien Goodwin shows film clips of the groups, there is an uproar. He has not tried to show the best of people, and has in fact provided evidence of law breaking that will help the police. One woman was especially angered by the film of her being sick. Goodwin leaves quickly, and when Meg goes to his trailer the next morning to obtain a copy of the film, he's gone and the trailer trashed. Later his body is found, and Meg is among the many people helping the police figure out the crimes.

Andrews is, I believe, incapable of writing a dull book. She makes the weirdest things seem almost normal, and her characters are believable, though many I'd hope never to meet. I might have to check Ancestry to see if I might be part of Meg's very extended and warm loving family.

DOG EAT DOG

by David Rosenfelt (Minotaur, \$27.99)
Andy Carpenter series #23

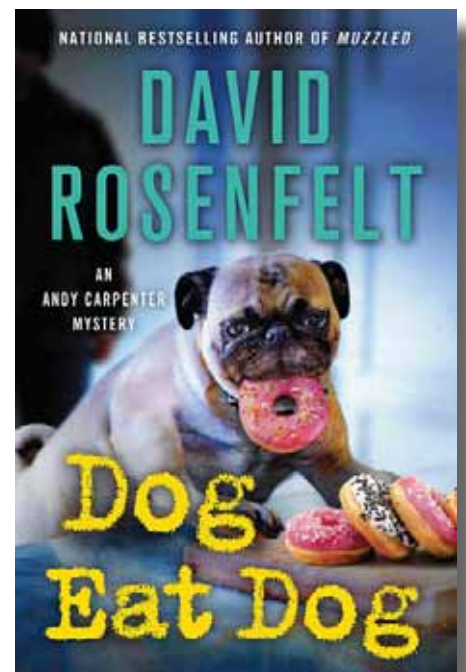
Rating: A

Attorney Andy Carpenter and his wife Laurie are walking their canine family when they see a man abusing his

dog. Before they can rescue the dog, another person steps in, attacking the abuser. Police are called and both the abuser and rescuer are arrested. Not surprisingly, it's the rescuer, not the owner, who asks the Carpenters to take care of the pooch.

A sad turn of events happens when the police ID the rescuer as Matthew Jantzen. Jantzen is wanted for murder in Maine. He surely knew that the police would be aware of this, but still rescued the dog. He proclaims his innocence, and Andy offers to assist him get counsel in ME., as Andy is not licensed to practice law there.

Coincidentally, young Ricky Carpenter is going to summer camp, so Andy is free to travel to ME. and assist Matt with selecting a local attorney. It turns out that Andy is going to do more than that. He will actively help the local attorney, and the K team, investigators that include Laurie, Marcus, an army in



one man, and ex cop Corey Douglas and his K-9 partner Simon Garfunkle.

The team conducts an investigation that reaches far into the criminal realm of Maine. The odds seem overwhelming, but Andy & Company are up to any challenge. They definitely beat the odds, and put up a devastating (to the prosecution) defense.

This is a favorite series of mine, and while I love all the characters, I feel Andy Carpenter needs to learn to appreciate fine mystery writers, as he wasn't enthusiastic over meeting a writer living nearby (David Rosenfelt). I would caution you, if you have access to good lobster rolls, to have at least one handy when you read this. I'm now looking forward to having some in an upcoming trip to Maine. I'm already anticipating the next Rosenfelt book, as I enjoy both the K team and Carpenter series. They can't be published often enough for my taste.

THE HOLLYWOOD SPY

by Susan Elia Macneal (Bantam, \$27)

Maggie Hope series #10

Rating A

Maggie Hope has been assigned to a case in Hollywood Calif., which may come as a bit of a culture shock. The



sunshine is welcome, and meeting the famous and infamous inhabitants of one of the world's most famous cities can be both exciting and daunting.

Maggie's former beau, John Sterling, has asked for her help. His fiancée was found dead in a swimming pool at a very posh hotel. Maggie will try to get to the truth of the death of Gloria Hutton. The police feel it was an accident, but John believes it may be murder.

Maggie's friend, Ballerina Sarah Sanderson, has been hired to work in a film choreographed by George Balanchine. They are staying at the Chateau Marmont hotel, and enjoying the scenery and weather.

A sub plot features the LAPD investigation of a KKK threat to the security of the war effort and safety of many of the citizens in L.A.

It's a race against time to find the truth of Gloria's death, and thwart a threat to the safety of many people. Maggie views first hand the racist treatment of minorities and learns about a lifestyle that has to be kept underground due to small minded people.

I loved this book, both for the setting, and "meeting" some of the Hollywood elite. That Maggie is able to solve the death of Gloria and avert a catastrophe shows how essential she and others like her are to the war effort, and how prejudice is something to be eradicated ASAP. I had my heart in my mouth, so to speak, for many scenes. I didn't want the book to end, so I found myself reading more slowly than usual.

If Maggie could stay in California a bit longer, I'd like that, but I'm sure Britain needs her for important work. Highly recommended.

ROAD OF BONES

by James R. Benn
Soho, \$27.95)

Billy Boyle series #16

Rating A

Fighting a war is bad enough, but having to deal with allies who are very unhelpful is something Billy Boyle sadly has to contend with. Unfortunately, Billy & Big Mike have been sent to a Ukrainian base when a Soviet and US



intelligence agents have been murdered. Kaz is still recuperating from surgery, and the plane Big Mike was travelling in was shot down.

Billy now has 2 goals: solve the murders and convince the Russians to let him search for Big Mike. He's been given a Russian assistant, someone he has crossed paths with before, not always pleasant for either man. During the investigation, Billy is transported by air. The pilot, a young woman who is one of the Night Witches, impresses him with her skills and ability to deliver him safely. Billy served as her navigator and even earned a medal for his assistance.

Billy has to be careful in whatever he says or does, due to the Russian distrust of even their allies. There is certainly much to be suspicious of, and it's not the Yanks. Billy does manage to find Big Mike, though he's suffered an injury that impedes his mobility. Kaz makes the scene, and his language skills are very helpful due to the lack of accurate translation by the Russians.

A smuggling operation is discovered to be the cause of the murders, and with no small danger to our heroes, they do solve the case and bring some justice. Billy even manages to smuggle some morphine to the local hospital. He also is able to save an innocent Russian from a fate worse than death.

Billy has certainly grown in this series. He was pretty much a smart rookie in the first book, but he has honed his skills, and the team of Billy, Big Mike and Kaz prove very formidable. When WWII ends, I hope it is not the end of the series. Certainly there will be need for peace time investigations, and even the Korean War could provide more cases.

Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



HOW TO KIDNAP THE RICH

by Rahul Raina

Harper Perennial, \$17.00

First Novel

Rating: A-

Ramesh Kumar, the son of an odious tea seller, grows up in dire poverty in Old Delhi, India. But he is taken under the wing of a kind French Catholic nun, Sister Claire, who sees intelligence and potential in the young Ramesh and strives to give him a good education. Though it's challenging, Ramesh is succeeding with his schooling until Claire dies with the job unfinished. But Ramesh has learned enough so that as a young adult, he establishes his own business as an education consultant to the rich. But what he really does is take the national educational exams for wealthy, but lazy or stupid young men, so they can get into prestigious schools.

Things go awry when one of his lazy young men, Rudi, places first among

10,000 examinees of the All India exams. The results open up untold opportunities for both Rudi and Ramesh.

Before you know it, Rudi has been snatched up to host a national quiz show and Ramesh goes along as his executive assistant (the power behind the throne). They both become wealthy, but neither one is very happy. Rudi just wants someone to love him for himself and not his fame. Ramesh wants to escape his world of lies and deceit and become the good person that Sister Claire wanted him to be. And how can Ramesh hope to capture the heart of an attractive assistant producer whom he has a crush on?

Then, out of the blue, Rudi and Ramesh are kidnapped and held for ransom. That's when things get really interesting.

There is a lot of humor in this narrative. But as Raina is telling Ramesh's story, he is shoveling in loads and loads of social commentary on all sorts of Indian cultural issues such as pervasive corruption in education, politics and the police, the entertainment industry, and most of all the almost impossible upward movement from one's caste and social station. I don't understand all of his allusions, but it doesn't matter because Raina's rapid-fire style of storytelling propels the narrative at such a pace that I didn't care if I wasn't getting everything. (I'm curious as to how this novel was received in India.)

I will be recommending **HOW TO KIDNAP THE RICH** to our Barry Award Nominating Committee for consideration for the Best Paperback Original Barry Award. If you are looking for a fresh voice and something apart from what you usually read, I recommend you give this a try.

I've been on a kick lately reading Indian authors or authors with Indian roots, such as Abir Mukherjee and Vaseem Khan (recent winner of the CWA Historical Dagger), two of my all-time favorites. It shouldn't come as any surprise that these are writers of great talent who have risen to considerable heights in the world of crime fiction. Look for a cover article on writers with roots in the Indian subcontinent sometime in the future. I've got a few more Indian writers than I need to sample to do such an article justice.

GONE FOR GOOD

by Joanna Schaffhausen

Minotaur, \$27.99, August, 2021

Detective Annalisa Vega Series #1

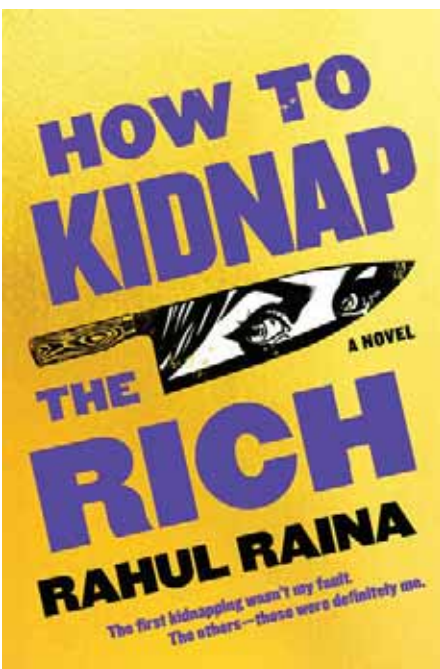
Rating: A-

A little background: Annalisa Vega is a detective and the daughter of a cop. She is a Chicago girl through and through, having been raised in a friendly neighborhood by a loving family of father, mother and three brothers. That is, until 20 years ago when her boyfriend's mother is murdered by the Lovelorn Killer. Colin Duffy, Anna's boyfriend, leaves for parts unknown after his father passes away a few months later and she hasn't seen him since. A few years later, Anna enters into an ill-advised marriage with Nick Carelli, who has trouble living up to his marriage vows. The marriage ends quickly and Nick goes off to Florida to work as a cop.

Now Nick is back in Chicago and has been assigned to Anna as her partner, a fact she is none too happy about. But he seems subdued and humbled and tries to be a good partner so she starts coming around.

Then they catch a murder with all of the characteristics of a Lovelorn Killer murder. Is he back killing after a 20-year hiatus or is there a copycat out there emulating his modus operandi? Anna finds Colin Duffy's contact information and informs him that the Lovelorn Killer may be active again and Colin flies to Chicago to follow the case.

In a short matter of time Annalisa starts receiving cryptic phone calls she suspects are coming from the Lovelorn





Killer. He seems to have her in his sights.

This is pretty standard serial killer fare, except for possibly the shocking ending. What sets it apart from other similar novels is the deft characterization and excellent prose. Remember this name: Joanna Schaffhausen. You'll be hearing more of her in future days.

THE CELLIST

by Daniel Silva

Harper, \$28.99, July, 2021

Gabriel Allon Series #21

Rating: B

The continuing Russian campaign to destabilize the West has its latest victim, the disaffected Russian oligarch Victor Orlov, who just so happened to be a close associate of Gabriel Allon, the head of Israeli intelligence. Victor had been working closely with Nina Antolova, an anti-Kremlin reporter who was particularly adept at digging up dirt on the Russian political hierarchy. One night Nina delivers some papers obtained from a secret source in an unopened envelope to Victor's palatial London mansion. Neither Nina nor Victor are aware that the envelope had previously been opened by Russian agents and the papers therein sprinkled with a highly deadly nerve agent.

Upon hearing of Victor's death, Allon rushes to London to find out what happened. Eventually he and his team find Nina Antolova, who has been in hiding and her source (Isabel Brenner, a financial mole within the world's dirtiest bank – also an accomplished cellist) with the incriminating evidence on Russian officials that Victor was interested in.

Gabriel Allon is always someone who likes to think big, as in big scams played on unsuspecting villains. Many of the Daniel Silva books contain elaborate scams that are devised by Israeli intelligence. (The movie *The Sting* with Paul Newman and Robert Redford must be required viewing in Tel Aviv.) With information derived from his sources, Allon enlists help from influential colleagues to devise a scheme to "take down" some of Russia's most wealthy and powerful elite, who are looting the Russian treasury and laundering their ill-gotten gains through dirty European banks.

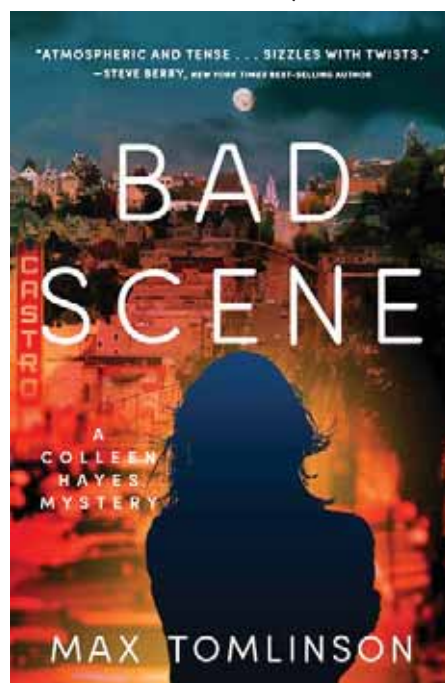
The plot is somewhat predictable. Perhaps the author should take a break from his Gabriel Allon series, which has become somewhat hit-or-miss of late.

BAD SCENE

by Max Tomlinson

Oceanview, \$26.95, August, 2021

P.I. Colleen Hayes #3



Rating: B+

The time is 1978 and the place is San Francisco. Colleen Hayes is scraping a living doing bottom-feeder cases (mostly outing cheating spouses) when one of her street contacts tells her of a possible assassination attempt on the mayor of San Francisco. Her investigation leads to a strange cult (was there any other kind in 1978 San Francisco?), which may also have some connection to her wayward and elusive daughter. Colleen's search for her is a continuing story line that runs through the whole series.

Then her street contact – a newspaper vendor – is seriously beat up and eventually dies in the hospital. Was it because he came to know too much about the assassination attempt? Now Colleen has his murder to look into as well.

She calls on her friends to help her infiltrate the cult, with dangerous results, as one would expect.

I've spotlighted this series in *DP* issue #89 and greatly enjoy this writer and his series character. That said, I did not warm up to this plot as much as prior ones. Perhaps it was the distasteful cult, that brought to mind times that I'd sooner not think about (not personal times). Otherwise this is a fine entry in a praiseworthy series. If you haven't read any yet, start with the first one, **VANISHING IN THE HAIGHT**.

AGAINST THE LAW

by David Gordon

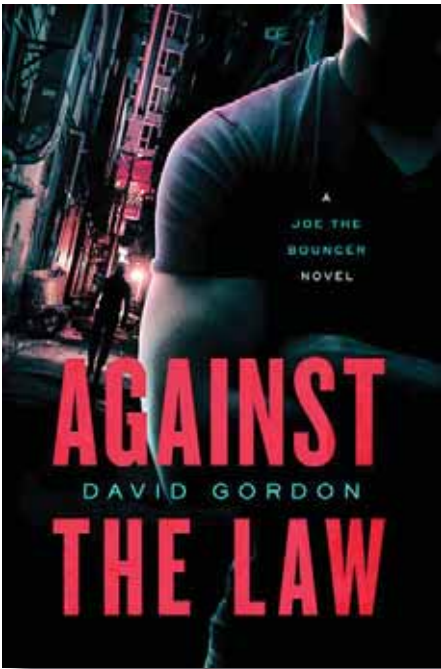
Mysterious Press, \$25.95, May, 2021

Joe the Bouncer #3

Rating: B+

Ex-special forces operative Joe, now in civilian life, chooses to associate with people from the lower levels of society, not the least of which is Gio Caprisi, a childhood friend, who is a mob boss. Ostensibly Joe works as a bouncer in one of Caprisi's night clubs, but over the course of this three-book series (so far), he has worked his way up the totem pole to become a trusted advisor and fixer for one of the most powerful crime families in town.

There is some new competition for



the mob's vast drug dealing empire. It's called White Angel, a powerful new iteration of heroin that is very popular on the street right now. Joe is sent to remove the supplier of White Angel – a man by the name of Zahir – from the scene and to restore the natural order. But that proves more difficult when Joe discovers that Zahir has a powerful connection with private military contractors. It looks like an all-out turf war is in the offing – not a bad thing necessarily from the standpoint of law enforcement. Bad guys fighting bad guys might lessen the law enforcement load – assuming no innocents get hurt in the crossfire.

Then there is the low-level FBI agent Donna, who has what can only be described as a conflicted relationship with Joe – but one that she skillfully uses to her advantage (while Joe is likewise making the relationship a win-win for himself and his interests).

A lot of high-speed fun ensues – for the reader, that is. Those involved may have a differing opinion. The whole gang from the previous two books are here: Yelena, Blaze, Juno, Nero, Liam and Josh flesh out the narrative with their select skills and quirky personalities.

This is a mildly entertaining diversion. A quick and easy read. But to

compare David Gordon's writing to Donald E. Westlake and Elmore Leonard, as some have done, is a step too far. Good but not great

CITY ON THE EDGE

by David Swinson

Mulholland Books, \$28.00

Rating: B+

The plot and pacing of **CITY ON THE EDGE** came as quite a surprise to me after reading the author's hard-edged trilogy about the drug-addicted, former policeman Frank Marr (excellent, by the way). This novel has a much softer tone to it – that is until you get to the climactic scene.

The story centers around 12-year-old Graham Sanderson and his family, comprised of mother, father, little brother Tommy, their dog Buster and local maid Micheline. The father works for the State Department and has been transferred to Beirut, Lebanon, much to the displeasure of his wife. There had been a daughter/sister Dani, but she had died in a car accident a couple of years before and the mother has not recovered from that event and spends a lot of her time in a bottle. The family rents an apartment that sits on a hill overlooking the sea.

Graham quickly forms a relationship with Roddy and Lenny, two boys his same age, and despite family rules and

an occasional government curfew, they manage to find ways to have fun. One such way is the building of a secret, well-hidden fort from which they can survey their surroundings with the aid of Graham's binoculars.

The story is told through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy so the prose style is simple and direct. Most of the book is taken up with Graham's mundane daily activities and how he manages his family's dynamics, with parents who are heading for a divorce.

Then suddenly, one day while alone in his fort, he witnesses a murder. He doesn't see the face of the murderer and is able to escape without being harmed. But he doesn't tell his dad about it because he wants to get avoid getting into trouble and being grounded forever. But Graham is reluctant to leave the body there so he figures out a way for the authorities to be alerted. And that leads to a dangerous chain of events.

The time is 1972-1973 when there are disturbing forces bubbling up in Lebanon and one of the family's greatest concerns is to keep their children safe.

The phrase "coming of age" springs readily to mind when one is reading **CITY ON THE EDGE**. I suspect that it is the author's homage to his own coming of age as the son of a diplomat and one who lived in Lebanon as a child.

The story is beautifully written and brought to mind how different my own "coming of age" was to that of Graham's. The mystery elements are pretty thin on the ground and quite predictable. Even the identity of the murderer doesn't come as much of a surprise. **CITY ON THE EDGE** is an enjoyable read, despite its depiction of a family disintegrating before our eyes, but it lacks the impact and tension of the author's Frank Marr series.

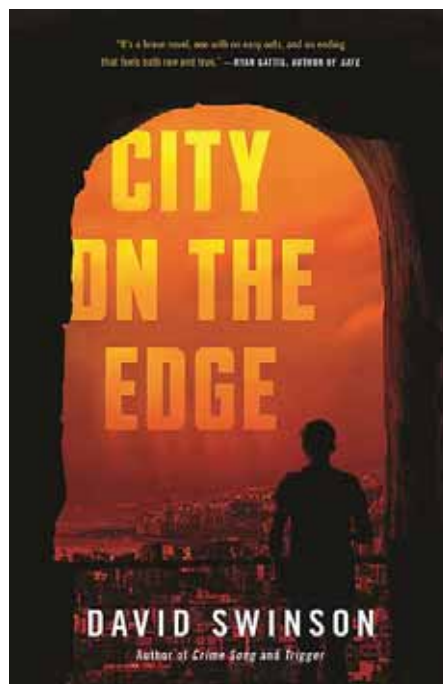
LIGHTNING STRIKE

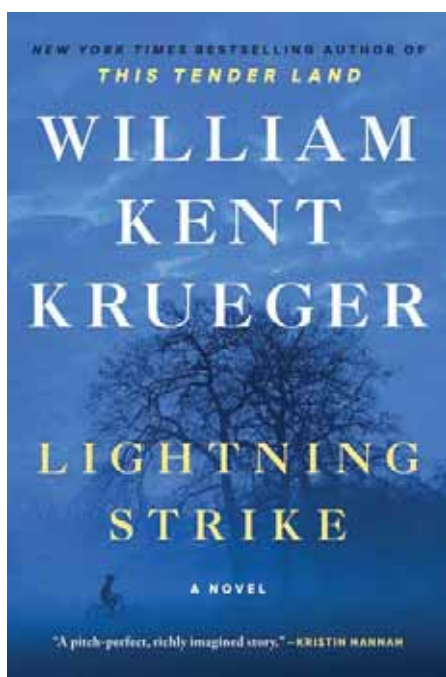
by William Kent Krueger

Atria, \$27.00

Rating: A-

Readers who have read all or most of the previous seventeen novels in Kent's Cork O'Connor series are going to love **LIGHTNING STRIKE**, which takes us





back to when Cork is 12-years old and his father Liam is the sheriff.

Cork is living a somewhat idyllic life as a young boy approaching his teen years when he suddenly comes across the body of Big John Manydeeds, a large Native American (whom he admired), hanging from a tree in an abandoned logging camp. It appears to be a suicide, but the more Cork and especially his father find out, it may have been a murder. Inhabitants of the local rez, including Cork's grandmother, are adamant that Big John wouldn't do such a thing. So Cork keeps his eyes and ears out for any clues (or "a trail of crumbs" as Henry Meloux, an Ojibwe wise man calls them) that would lead to the resolution of this, his first "case."

Suspicion eventually falls on the town's wealthiest man, but coming up with proof is another thing. Meanwhile, Sheriff Liam O'Connor is caught in the middle between the local Native American population, which includes his wife, mother-in-law and many friends, and the white population, each accusing him of favoring the other.

Kent Krueger does a masterful job with this coming-of-age mystery which also explores, with great insight, the long-standing tension between whites and Native Americans. His reverence for the beliefs and ways of the Ojibwe culture is touching. And to top it all

off, the mystery is a corker (sorry, I couldn't resist).

One of the advantages of **LIGHTNING STRIKE** is that it gives the reader, who has not experienced this series before, a good place to start. Please jump in. Iron Lake is warm and inviting!

STRIKING RANGE

by Margaret Mizushima

Crooked Lane, \$27.99, September, 2021

Timber Creek K-9 Series #7

Rating: B+

Deputy Mattie Cobb is nervous about her upcoming meeting with John Cobb, the man who recently tried to kill her and who may have killed her father some 30 years ago. Cold case detective Jim Hauck (from California) has set up an interview which is to take place in a Colorado prison, Cobb's current abode. When they arrive at the prison, they are shocked to find that Cobb has just been found murdered in his cell. A search of his belongings unearths what could possibly be a clue to what was on Cobb's mind: it is a map that features areas around Mattie's town of Timber Creek and specifically Redstone Ridge.

Mattie and her dog Robo travel to the Ridge and begin exploring the burned forest they find there. But they are called away to investigate the death of a young woman found in a campground being used primarily by elk hunters. An autopsy discloses that the young woman recently gave birth, but there is no indication of what happened to the baby.

A search for the baby turns into a search for the killer. Then Mattie's boyfriend Cole (the local vet) goes missing in the high country during a blizzard. She thinks Cole is with the person who is behind the murder of the young woman and her missing baby so Mattie's in a race against time to find Cole before something awful happens to him.

Margaret Mizushima has provided us with another solid mystery (I've read them all). I just wish that this one had more of Robo doing his thing and less of everyone else.

THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

by Richard Osman

Pamela Dorn/Viking, \$26.00, September, 2021

Thursday Murder Club #2

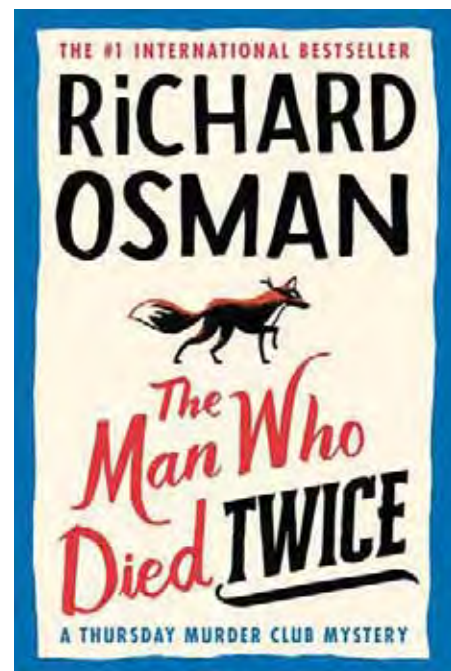
Rating: A-

Fresh of the huge success of **THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB**, Richard Osman offers up another delicious tale involving the same four septuagenarians (Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron and Ibrahim—the Thursday Murder Club) who so endeared themselves to us mystery readers over the course of a single book.

Elizabeth (of the murky foreign intelligence background) receives a letter from a former colleague in the service asking for her help. He is being accused of stealing \$20 million in diamonds from a wealthy criminal middle-man. Now he is the target of some violent men who want the diamonds back. He claims that he doesn't have them, but Elizabeth doesn't believe him. Nevertheless, she agrees to help him, despite their long and checkered history. And, of course, she enlists the help of her close friends at Cooper's Chase, their posh retirement village.

The local police (Chris and Donna) also get pulled into the plot, as well as the local fixer Bogdan, who plays a pivotal role in the resolution.

A side case for the crew is the seeking of justice for Ibrahim who was mugged



and had his cell phone stolen by a miscreant who has seemingly escaped due punishment.

It wouldn't be much of a mystery without a body and a corpse shows up in due time. And then another. Our fearless four, using their combined skills and intellect, save the day and in doing so, treat us to a delightful, charming and entertaining mystery.

See if you can figure out who the "man who died twice" is before the end of the book. I didn't. Very clever title on the part of the author.

ECHOES OF THE DEAD

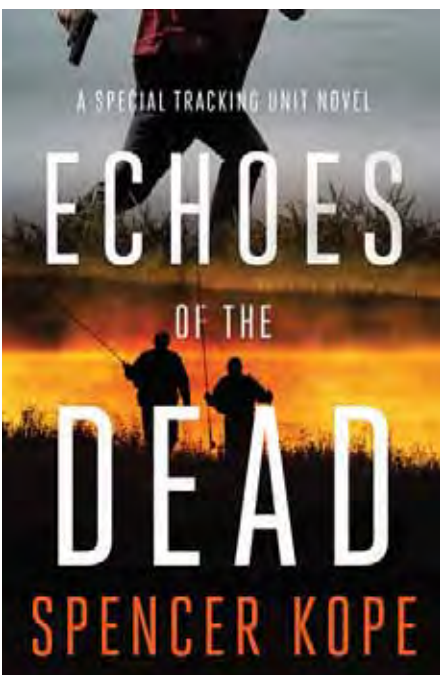
by Spencer Kope

Minotaur, \$28.99, September, 2021

FBI Special Tracking Unit #4

Rating: B+

Magnus "Steps" Craig, along with his partner FBI Special Agent Jimmy Donovan, make up a Special Tracking Unit of the FBI. Known only to Jimmy and their boss at headquarters is Steps' unusual ability to see a person's unique "shine," which is left behind in footsteps and on things that the person may have touched. Steps suffers from a type of synesthesia that came about from a childhood injury. Can you imagine how helpful such an ability would be to a crime scene analyst?



And it is, but it isn't the type of evidence that can ever be used in a court of law. So Steps and Jimmy have to keep that investigative technique under wraps and use a healthy dose of good, old-fashioned detection to find missing people and prove crimes. Steps' ability is helpful but not all-powerful, so a reader's inclination to cry "not fair," is definitely tempered as the reader progresses through one of the novels.

Steps and Jimmy are often called in to find missing people and they have landed a doozy of a case. Four men who have been friends since college (and who are now highly successful in their careers) are on their annual fly-fishing vacation in the Sierra Nevada range when they all vanish. The locals are baffled so they call in the big dogs. Then the body of one of the four shows up, an obvious victim of murder.

The suspense of three lives hanging in the balance, puts the team into overdrive and with vital information provided by their office teammate Diane, they have a fighting chance.

I've been an ardent supporter of this eminently readable series since its inception (**COLLECTING THE DEAD** – 2016). Something a little bit "different" is always appreciated by someone like me who reads a lot of stuff that follows a formula. In this series I never have a clue where the author will take me. Somewhat surprisingly, in **ECHOES OF THE DEAD**, it's solid detection and not Steps' special talent, that wins the day. Good stuff. Keep 'em coming, Spence.

BLOOD GROVE

by Walter Mosley

Mulholland, \$27.00

Easy Rawlins #15

Rating: A-

It's 1969 and while there is unrest in the country, things are going pretty well for one Easy Rawlins. He has a successful private detective agency with competent employees, some money put away, a palatial home in a gated enclave (99-year lease), a wonderful, teenaged

daughter in Feather and a yellow Rolls Royce in which to drive around.

But into everyone's life some rain must fall and in this case, the rain is in the person of a war-damaged Vietnam vet named Craig Killian. Craig comes to Easy's office with a crazy story of a fight that he got into in a citrus grove when he came upon a woman being mishandled by a black man with a knife. Craig and the black man (named Alonzo) fought and Alonzo was seriously injured with the knife. Then someone hit Craig over the head. When he woke up the next morning, he was alone and there was no blood nor signs of a struggle. The young vet wants Easy to find out if he killed a man and what happened to the woman. Ordinarily he would refuse the case but Easy is touched by the bond he feels – vet to vet – and agrees to look into the matter.

It soon becomes apparent that there is more to the story than was told to him by his client. The "more" being a lot of money that several gangsters are interested in getting. All roads seem to lead to a certain, beautiful woman whom Craig Killian was seeing. What's an Easy Rawlins' novel without a gorgeous femme fatale? In this case she appears in the person of Donata Delphine, who leaves a trail of dead men behind her.

There is a large cast of characters that flit in and out of the story, so it's best to keep a pad and pencil next to where you like to read. Easy's networking skills are on full display with his employment of a host of friends and their talent bases. We are reacquainted with Mouse, Jackson Blue, Fearless Jones, Melvin Suggs, Jewelle Blue and many others from Easy's circle.

I've read this entire series and over the years I've noticed that, in an Easy Rawlins crime novel, the mystery is always secondary to the world and the language of Walter Mosley's imagination. In other words, it is the reader's journey that is the highlight and not necessarily how the plot is wound up.

Lookin' For A Few Good Books

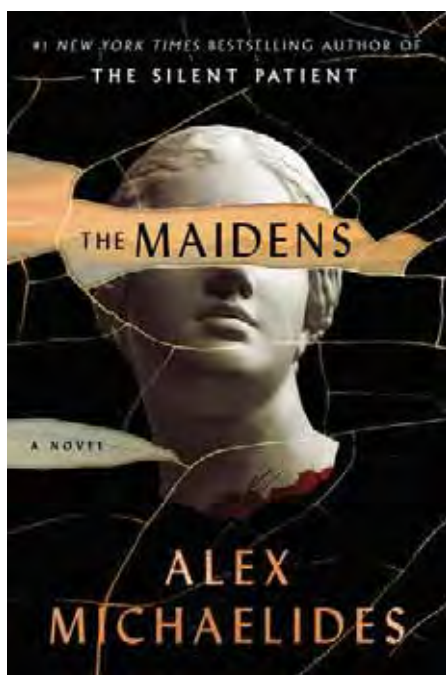
Larry Gandle



THE MAIDENS

by Alex Michaelides
Celadon Books, \$27.99

Rating: B



Mariana, a group therapy psychologist, is called back to Cambridge University when her niece, Zoe, asks her to come back after her best friend is missing. When she turns up dead, it seems there is a serial killer at work who targets the so-called maidens- a group of beautiful young women, students of Professor Fosca, a dynamic classics teacher. Mariana is convinced that he is the killer and with an obviously incompetent police force, she feels she must solve the crime while placing herself and possibly Zoe in harm's way.

This is a silly but overall entertaining novel that is okay to read on a hot summer afternoon when the reader wants to turn off the brain cells. There is

no reason for Mariana to think that she can do better than the police. She does accomplish that but if the police were not stereotypic imbeciles, they would work the crime better than depicted here. The pacing of the story is reasonably quick, so the pages do turn. The solution is clever but with the superficial characterizations, it is difficult to recommend.

THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER

by Bill Clinton and James Patterson
Little Brown, \$30.00

Rating: B+

Matthew Keating is a former one term President and Navy SEAL. A terrorist enacts his revenge on the President by kidnapping his daughter. This, obviously, places Matt back into the game again and, by calling in favors, manages to assemble a team to rescue her. The problem is- where is she? It is a race against the clock to find her and save her.

Clinton and Patterson are a great team. Patterson writes the story (with some help from Brendan Dubois, I

think) and President Clinton fills in the technical details. The book is incredibly long at 608 pages but reads like a much shorter work. The plot moves very fast and, though reality must be suspended throughout, it is a fun read. Personally I read over 300 pages in one sitting. This is the type of book that is perfect for summer- great mindless entertainment. I really feel there is an art to writing this type of book successfully. These two seem to hit it off each time as their last book was just as good. Recommended.

FALLING

by T.J. Newman
Simon & Schuster, \$28.00

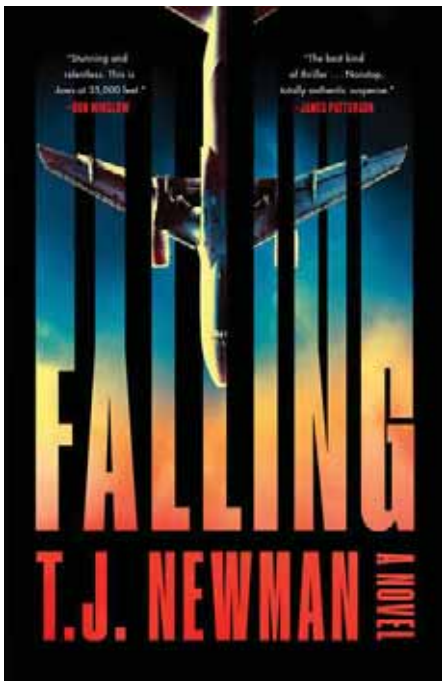
Rating: B-

Bill Hoffman is a commercial airline pilot. After boarding a plane bound for JFK from Los Angeles, he receives a message to either crash the plane or his family will die. Somehow, he must save the passengers, as well as his family.

This is one of the hot – bestselling books of the summer. It is also one of the worst written books I have ever read with superficial characters and one of



James Patterson & Bill Clinton

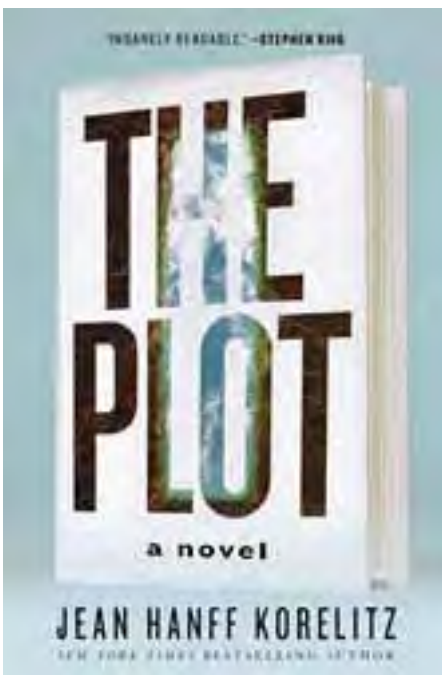


the dumbest plots I have read in years.

However, I, inexplicably, could not put it down and finished it in one sitting even while yelling, "This is so stupid!" multiple times throughout. It is entertaining but only in the most mindless way. I guess I was in the mood for "mindless."

THE PLOT

by Jean Hanff Korelitz
Caladon Books, \$28.00
Rating: B+



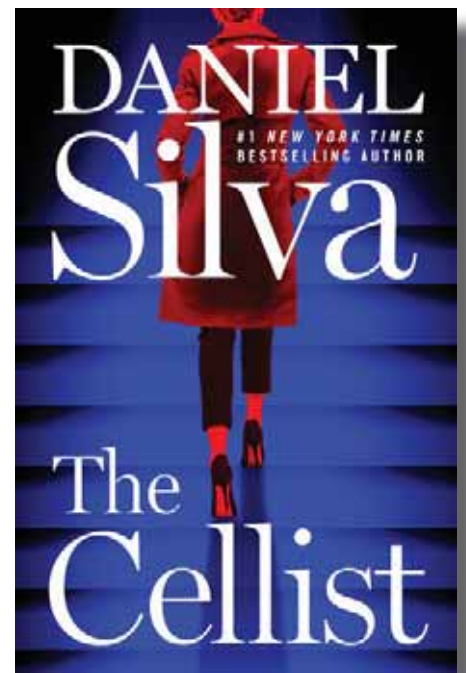
Jake Finch Bonner was tagged a promising young writer with his first novel. Years have passed and he has not written another book since then. He is teaching at an MFA seminar. One of his students, Evan Parker, has, in his head, a plot that he feels will be a sure fire hit and, as a book, will write itself. Jake feels Evan is a talented writer and once Evan reveals the plot to him, Jake agrees it will be a huge bestselling book. Several years pass and Jake realizes he never saw Evan's book. He discovers that Evan has died without ever being published. He decides to write the book himself and it becomes the huge hit he thought it would. Life is great for Jake until he receives an e-mail stating, "You are a thief."

The problem I had with this otherwise very clever and entertaining novel is that no plot can write itself. Why would Jake feel threatened? He wrote the book. He obviously wrote it well enough to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Yet, the e-mail sent him into a downward spiral. If most of us are given a surefire plot, I would hardly think we would have the ability to write a novel. The author actually mentions this in the narrative and essentially attributes it to Jake's obsessive personality. His persistence to discover who sent him the e-mail seems to me way over the top. In fact, I might have stopped reading the novel if the previous reviews I read had not been so favorable. The plot twist at the end is clever. I do recommend it in spite of my reservations.

THE CELLIST

by Daniel Silva
Harper, \$28.99
Rating: B-

Victor Orlov, a rich Russian businessman and frequent critic of the current Russian regime, is living in exile in London. He is found dead- poisoned- in his home. Gabriel Allon owes his life to Orlov and takes on the investigation to discover the truth. The path leads through a Swiss banker who just so happens to be a beautiful cellist. By following the money, Gabriel looks higher and higher into the Russian hierarchy to the Russian



President himself. This, of course, places Gabriel into grave danger.

The book is really a bore until the last 50 pages. Politics plays a huge role and this will disenfranchise many readers. There is so much detailed financial descriptions that the book reads more like a textbook than a thriller. The characters are well depicted and actually save the book. It is true that Silva is calling attention to the Russian hierarchy stealing money from it's own people and there isn't any better way of making a plot based on finances exciting. The last part of the book is the most satisfying as a thriller but also the most unrealistic. This is another disappointment from an author I read every time a new book comes out. I think I need to be more selective.

Order of Preference of 2021 Books Reviewed in This Issue

RAZORBLADE TEARS A+
WHO THEY WAS A
WE BEGIN AT THE END,
Chris Whittaker A-
THE UNWILLING, John Hart A-
THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER B+
THE PLOT B+
THE MAIDENS B
FALLING B-
THE CELLIST B-

Action Thriller Corner



George Easter Reviews

TOM CLANCY: TARGET ACQUIRED

by Don Bentley
Putnam, \$29.00

Rating: B+

Jack Ryan, Jr. (son of the U.S. President Jack Ryan) is on loan from the Campus (an “off the books” intelligence organization that takes on tasks for the U.S. President that government agencies cannot do) to the CIA. The easy assignment of observing a training mission in Israel turns into something else when Jack rushes to the aid of a woman and her young autistic son who are under knife attack in an open-air market. Jack foils the attack, but is taken by Israeli Shin Bet officers for interrogation. They suspect that Jack is a foreign intelligence agent acting in Israel without Israeli permission. They are right but can’t prove it so they

strongly suggest that he get on the next plane out of the country. Jack has every intention of doing so, but finds that he has in his possession the superhero action figure that the young boy seemed to worship. He befriended a similar boy when he was that age and knows how attached someone on the “spectrum” can be to objects such as this. So he decides to return it to the boy on the way to the airport.

Jack finds mother and son at their hotel beachfront and returns the action figure only to foil another knife attack on the mother. What is going on here? It turns out that she is a renowned scientist who has discovered something with desired military implications and her discovery is wanted by many nations. The Israelis decide to put her and her son on a plane back to their home in the U.S. and on the way to the airport the small convoy is attacked and the mother and son are kidnapped.

But some prescient Israeli had put a tracker in the boy’s action figure so they know where the mother/son have been taken and it’s not good news: Lebanon.

Jack talks his way onto the rescue team and they are quietly inserted into Beirut, but someone is waiting for them and they are ambushed. Jack finds himself on his own and with a seemingly impossible mission to rescue the kidnapped woman and child.

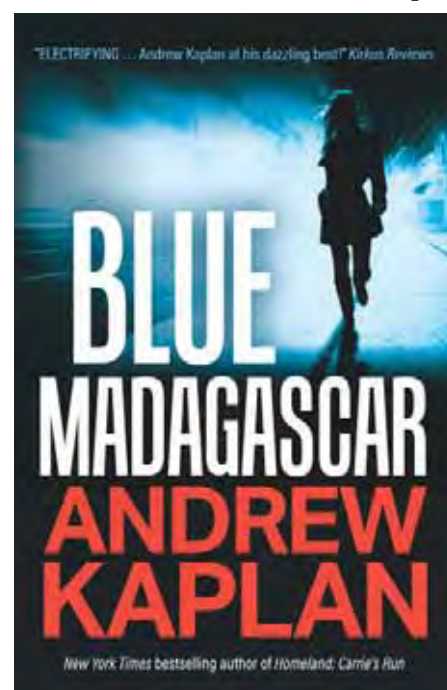
I confess to not being an active reader of this series so I can’t comment on how this book fits in with the other Jack Jr. novels. But I can evaluate it on the basis of plot and action. Thrillers such as this work for me if the author is successful in putting me in a reading “zone,” where I am carried along by the plot and concentrate only on what is

happening. After I finish a thriller like this, I generally reflect for a bit to analyze my experience and if it worked for me. **TARGET ACQUIRED** worked for me. It was full of well-described action scenes. But like most novels of this kind, the reader is forced to suspend disbelief here and there.

BLUE MADAGASCAR

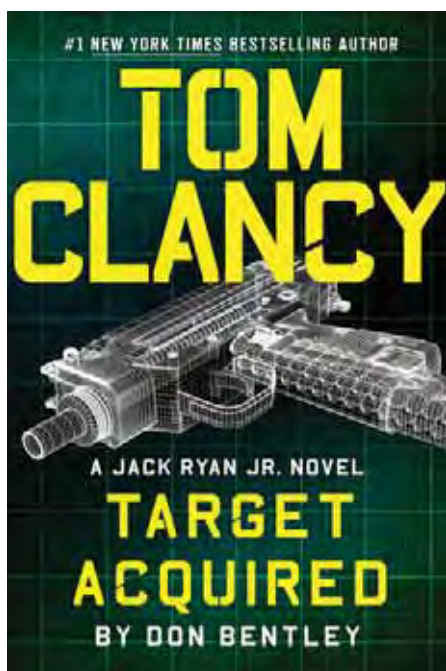
by Andrew Kaplan
Smugglers Lane Press, \$16.99,
June, 2021
Rating: A-

BLUE MADAGASCAR opens



with reporters just finding out about the death by suicide of a candidate for the U.S. Presidency who was leading in the polls just days before the November election. Everyone is mystified.

Then the narrative takes a very sharp turn and we don’t return to the events of the opening chapter until very late in the novel. The reader’s attention is drawn to a botched robbery on the French Riviera, in which an American is killed. Identifying the man becomes problematic and then there is the security footage that shows the young woman who accompanied the American asking the burglars to take her with them. ???



Enter Homeland Security Agent Casey Ramirez, a hard-charging Latina from Los Angeles who is assigned to work with the French police to figure out who the American was and if he was involved in anything illegal. And who is the young woman who fled with the burglars and what was her reason for doing so?

When the American's identity is eventually revealed it leads to other mysteries and long-hidden secrets, especially one known as the Blue Madagascar, which has an unhealthy mix of thugs and spooks feverishly looking for it.

Andrew Kaplan is an old pro at this type of thriller, having written some twelve of them over a 40-year period. He writes with great intelligence and insight and certainly is a master at provided us with plots with a lot of forward thrust. A thriller that thrills.

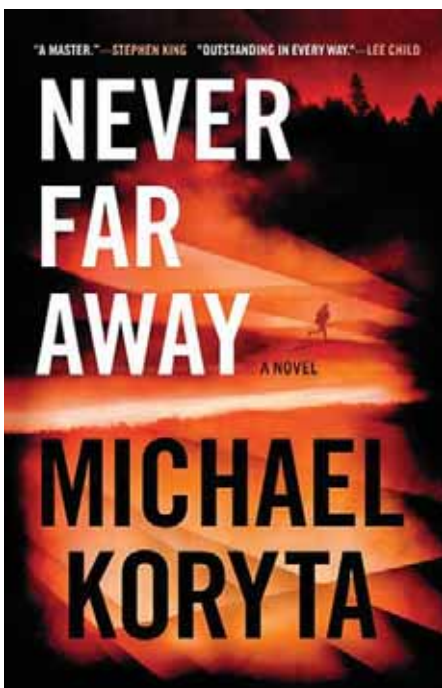
NEVER FAR AWAY

by Michael Koryta

Little, Brown, \$28.00, February, 2021

Rating: B+

Nina Morgan's bloodstained car was found a decade ago on a lonely Florida road. Forensic evidence suggested she'd



been murdered, although her body was never found. Her disappearance left her infant children to the care of their father. She is put into witness protection (a very powerful man whom she testified against would kill her otherwise) and uprooted from the Midwest to the northern reaches of Maine, where she reinvents herself as Leah Trenton.

Then the unthinkable happens. Her husband dies in a tragic car accident and she is forced to step in, as the children's "long-lost" aunt, to finish the job of raising them. Needless to say, the transition doesn't go smoothly for either Leah or her children.

The big-shot who wants to kill Nina/Leah has put trip wires in place in case she ever shows up alive. One of them is tripped and she and the children must go on the run. The rest of the novel is the chase and how it is resolved.

When I read Michael Koryta's last novel, **IF SHE WAKES**, I was introduced to an intriguing character in the person of Dax Blackwood, a supremely talented and charismatic young hitman who just exudes confidence. Lots of authors create intriguing characters such as Dax and then never use them again, so I was really glad when Dax makes an appearance again as a main component in **NEVER FAR AWAY** – even though his motivation for helping Leah is somewhat murky and not all that believable. Dax is the kind of character who "steals" every scene he is in and I hope to see more of him in the future.

Overall, this thriller kept me turning the pages to find out the fate of the sympathetic characters. Good, but not as good as his last one, **IF SHE WAKES**. But well worth reading, if only for Dax.

MERCY

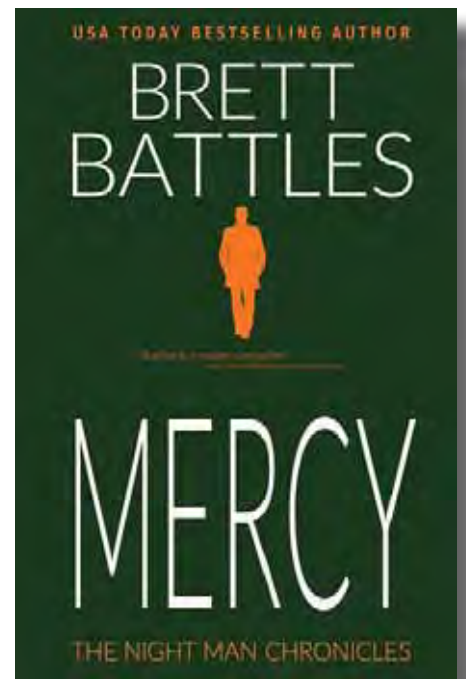
by Brett Battles

Independently published, \$15.99

Night Man Chronicles #3

Rating: B

A little background – Nate is the



sidekick to Jonathan Quinn in the excellent and long-standing series involving "cleaners" who clean up after assassinations and bungled ops. Barry Award-winner Brett Battles has created a spin-off series that involves Nate's new hobby – doing good deeds at the behest of his deceased girlfriend Liz. Nate hears her voice and can't tell if he is going crazy as a side-effect of his grief and loneliness – or if she is really communicating from beyond. Whatever is going on, Nate decides to follow Liz's promptings. After all, he has a lot of down time in his job, and doing good things helps with his depression. **MERCY** is the third book in this spin-off series, following the impressive **NIGHT MAN** and **INSIDIOUS**. Nate is helped in his good deeds by Jar, the computer whiz, who has chosen to leave her cocoon and join Nate "in the field."

Temporarily suspended from their day jobs, Nate and Jar have decided to become tourists and take in some of the sights that one or both of them have never seen.

While at the Grand Canyon, they hear a cry for help and find a young teenaged boy hanging precariously just over the edge of a precipice. With their skills, the rescue is a piece of cake. But while interacting with the Evan's

father, they get a distinct bad vibe and wonder if he is an abuser. So they decide to put a tracker on the family's RV and to follow them. The journey eventually leads them to the family's home in Mercy, Colorado, where the dad owns a car dealership.

The family is comprised of the cowed, submissive mom, the controlling/abusive dad, the teenaged Evan and the younger brother who is somewhere on the autistic spectrum.

Jar and Nate put bugs everywhere in the house, the RV and the car dealership, but fail to come up with any evidence that could be used against the dad, despite the fact that on several occasions the dad displays suspicious behavior.

There have been a spate of farm house fires in the outskirts of town and Nate and Jar wonder if the dad is involved in them. To find out, they snoop around those arson cases.

Brett Battles' stories are always smoothly told and enjoyable reads but I have to admit that, for me, **MERCY** was not as exciting as the last two in the series. There was a lot of what I call to-ing and fro-ing that didn't accomplish a heck of a lot. If you are fans of the series, I'd give it a shot. If not, go back and read the first two series en-



tries **NIGHT MAN** and **INSIDIOUS**.

SLEEPING BEAR

by Connor Sullivan

Atria/Emily Bester, \$27.00, July, 2021

Rating: A-

Still reeling from the untimely death of her young husband, Cassie Gale decides to travel from her home in Montana to the wilds of Alaska, taking only her dog for company. She needs some alone time to heal. Soon after she arrives at a nice camping area, a quick series of mysterious events occur and she is rendered unconscious. When it is obvious that she has disappeared, her father, James Gale, her sister and friends come from Montana to search for her and her faithful dog.

It turns out that Cassie isn't the only camper to go missing in this area of the Alaskan panhandle. And once her father finds himself on the right track, he calls in a whole bunch of government assets to help him.

Meanwhile, Cassie wakes up and finds herself in a Russian prison (yes, a Russian prison!). If you don't buy that premise, you can stop reading right there. I bought it, so I continued on. She is being held for nefarious reasons, one of which is a sort of Russian Hunger Games that top Russian officials bet on. When high-ranking General Sokolov sees her picture, he immediately orders her to be returned to safety and held until he can get to the prison. He has a long-held grudge against Cassie's father whom he blames for his son's death. The General has recognized the strong family resemblance.

Events come to a crisis point when old enemies confront each other in this exciting thriller by new author Connor Sullivan. I see good things ahead for this writer.

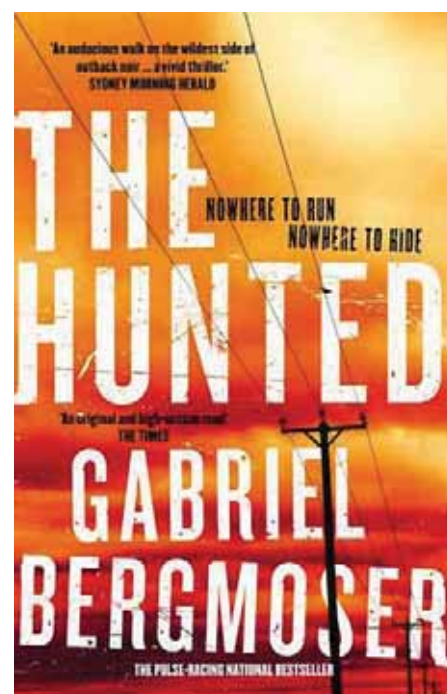
THE HUNTED

by Gabriel Bergmoser

HarperCollins, \$16.99, July

Rating: A-

This debut thriller caused quite a



stir when it was published last year in Australia. Our reviewer, Jeff Pople, gave it such high praise that I got a copy of the Australian edition to read. It packs quite a wallop. If you are bothered by high body counts, pass on this. If you like to read about good people in desperate situations and how they handle them, this is your kind of novel.

The main characters are the taciturn Frank, who owns an out-of-the-way service station, and his granddaughter, Allie, who is sent to stay with him. Also, we soon become acquainted with Simon, an idealistic young man who is traveling remote areas of Australia in his van, and a wastrel (with secrets) named Maggie, whom Simon picks up along the way. Together they encounter a remote village of misfits and find themselves in an extremely dangerous situation, which Maggie handles much better than Simon.

Matters come to a head when the village occupants descend on Frank's gas station in search of Maggie.

This is a book for those who like taught suspense and are immune to ultra violence. I found myself taking frequent breaks from the tension. The author is an expert in ratcheting things up. **THE HUNTED** is a promising start to what I hope is a long career.

What's New in the U.K.



When she discovers a home-grown terrorist threat, Allie comes up with a plan to infiltrate the group and make her name. But she's a woman in a man's world . . . and putting a foot wrong could be fatal.

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE by Steve Cavanagh (Orion, £12.99, August). They call him the King of Death Row. Randal Korn has sent more men to their deaths than any district attorney in the history of the United States. When a young woman, Skylar Edwards, is found murdered in Buckstown, Alabama, a corrupt sheriff arrests the last person to see her alive, Andy Dubois. It doesn't seem to matter to anyone that Andy is innocent. Hot shot New York lawyer Eddie Flynn travels south to fight fire with fire. He plans to destroy the prosecutors case, find the real killer and save Andy from the electric chair.

THE NAMELESS ONES by John Connolly (Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00, July). In Amsterdam, four people are butchered in a canal house, their remains arranged around the crucified form of their patriarch, De Jaager: fixer, go-between, and confidante of the assassin named Louis. The men responsible for the murders are Serbian war criminals. They believe they can escape retribution by retreating to their homeland. They are wrong. For Louis has come to Europe to hunt them down: five killers to be found and punished before they can vanish into the east. There is only one problem. The sixth.

DEAD GROUND by M. W. Craven (Constable, £19.99, June). The tech company Public Square believes in 'doing well by doing good'. It's built a multi-billion dollar business on this philosophy and by getting to know what people want. They know a lot. But who else can access all that information and what are they planning to do with it? Reporter William Carver is an analogue man in a digital world. He isn't the most

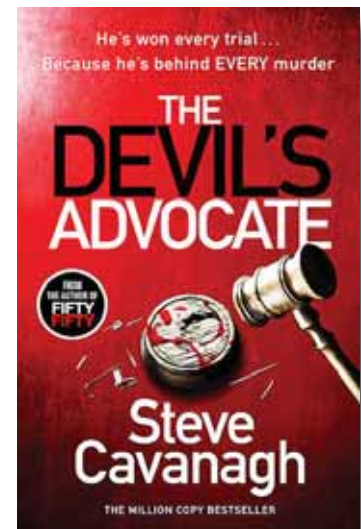
tech-savvy reporter, he's definitely old school, but he needs to learn fast - the people he cares most about are in harm's way. From the Chilean mines where they dig for raw materials that enable the tech revolution, to the streets of Hong Kong where anti-government protesters are fighting against the Chinese State, to the shiny research laboratories of Silicon Valley where personal data is being mined everyday

A CURSED PLACE by Peter Hainington (Two Roads, £14.99, July). The tech company Public Square believes in 'doing well by doing good'. It's built a multi-billion dollar business on this philosophy and by getting to know what people want. They know a lot. But who else can access all that information and what are they planning to do with it? Reporter William Carver is an analogue man in a digital world. He isn't the most tech-savvy reporter, he's definitely old school, but he needs to learn fast - the people he cares most about are in harm's way. From the Chilean mines where they dig for raw materials that enable the tech revolution, to the streets of Hong Kong where anti-government protesters are fighting against the Chinese State, to the shiny research laboratories of Silicon Valley where personal data is being mined everyday

1979 by Val McDermid (Little, Brown, £20.00, August). Allie Burns is chasing her first big scoop. There are few women in the newsroom and she needs something explosive for the boys' club to take her seriously. Soon Allie and fellow journalist Danny Sullivan are exposing the criminal underbelly of respectable Scotland. They risk making powerful enemies - and Allie won't stop there.

THE HUNT AND THE KILL by Holly Watt (Raven Books, £12.99, July). When acclaimed undercover journalist Casey Benedict is asked to interview a young woman with a life-limiting genetic condition, the patient's doctor alerts her to an alarming rise in antibiotic-resistant infections, tipping her off about a potential new wonder drug. If the rumours are true, this new antibiotic could save millions of lives, but no one seems to know if the drug even exists. Then tragedy unexpectedly strikes and Casey begins to suspect a cover-up. But she is not prepared to let the story drop, no matter how much danger she - or those she loves most of all - are put in.

SAWBONES by Stuart MacBride (HarperCollins, £10.99, June). They call him Sawbones: a serial killer touring America kidnapping young women. The FBI's investigating - but getting nowhere. The latest victim is Laura Jones. Sixteen years old. Pretty. Blonde. And the daughter of one of New York's most notorious gangsters. Laura's Dad doesn't care about the law. What he wants is revenge. And he knows just the guys to get it. This time, Sawbones picked on the wrong family...



Reviews from the U.K.



L.J. Roberts Reviews

TO THE DARK

by Chris Nickson – 3rd in series
Severn House, Feb 2021, 238 pp.

Rating A

First Sentence: She sensed him there, behind her in the fog.

Simon West, with his assistant Jane and wife Rose, is a thief-taker. When petty thief Laurance Poole, who robbed Alderman Sir Matthew Fullbrook, is found dead, Simon is worried he may be arrested. Instead, he is surprised to be hired by Constable Williams to find the killer. After Simon finds a notebook written in code, he is drawn into the dangerous job of exposing those behind a rash of burglaries. It is up to Simon, Jane, and Rose to keep a priceless item safe, find a killer, and stay alive.

It is always a relief when an author draws new readers into a series yet

makes them feel right at home, especially when there is suspense from almost the first page. Even better is when it is the third book in the series, and one feels no lack for not having read the previous two. Nickson sets the tone with his descriptions of Leeds, a city he calls home and whose history he knows extremely well. He depicts an industrial-age city chocked by smoke, dirt, and grime all in the name of progress—"I don't think Leeds will ever be clean again,..."

This is not a book set in genteel drawing rooms, but in the homes, streets, and alleys of the working, and non-working class, just trying to survive as best they can—"He had no one to look after his mother while he was gone. No money to pay for a companion for her. He had no choice but to tie her in the chair to stop her from wandering." Yet the author's voice conveys caring and compassion.

Nickson's characters are alive and fascinating. One learns their backgrounds, often through memories, fleshing them out but still leaving a shadow around them, especially the character of Martha. An unreliable character always heightens the suspense. Watching how the three main characters use their contacts to track the clues, one step at a time, adds a sense of constant tension. Nickson's female characters are anything but minor characters or ones waiting for a man to rescue them. Jane gives as good, if not better than she gets. She is somewhat feral and works on grit. Rose, Simon's wife, is his partner in life and in craft. She depends on guile, intellect, and having the right wardrobe.

As the story progresses, suspense builds at a heart-stopping pace, aided by excellent plot twists, and an unanswered

question at the end. One really can't help but wonder why this very prolific author is not better known than he is.

TO THE DARK is an exciting book filled with twists and climax after climax, but still leaving questions unanswered at the end. With female characters as clever and capable as the men, the author created a tense, suspenseful tale in a city he so obviously loves.

THE PUPPET SHOW

by M.W. Craven – 1st in series
Constable, Jun 2018, 352 pp

Rating: A+

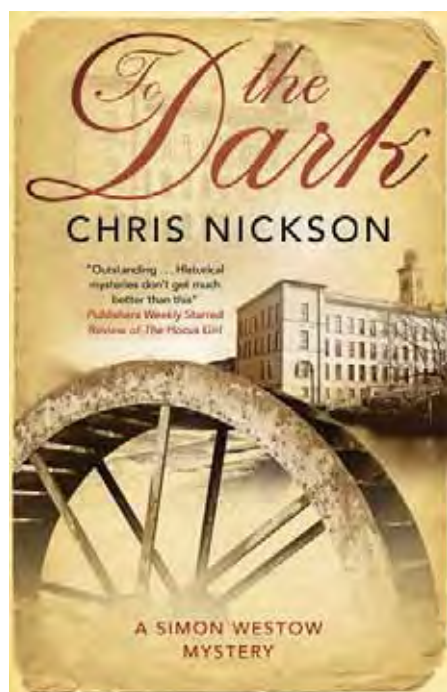


Mike Craven

First Sentence: The stone circle is an ancient, tranquil place.

Serial killer, the "Immolation Man," leaves the remains of each victim within one of the stone circles of Cumbria. Each victim is an elderly man who has been disfigured and burned; no other connection has been found. What sets the latest killing apart is that Poe's name has been carved in his chest. Director of Intelligence Edward van Zel has lifted Detective Washington Poe's suspension from the Serious Crimes Unit but has made DI Stephanie Flynn the new head of the National Crime Agency (NCA), Poe's old post. Tilly Bradshaw has a personality disorder, lives with her mother, never leaves the office, is bullied by others, and is a brilliant data analyst assigned to work with Poe. The challenge is for Poe and Tilly to stop the "Immolation Man" before he kills again, and again.

Readers: Be warned -- this book is dark, with descriptions and themes that become increasingly so as the story



progresses.

Craven begins by turning a place usually thought of as magical, into one of fear and horror, constantly increasing the tension throughout very well-timed plot twists and a red-herring or two. The fascinating forensic and analytic work described moves the story forward at a breath-catching clip. Craven's writing is compelling. Even at the darkest parts, one never wants to stop. There is always that sense of wanting to know more; seeing where the path leads; whether justice will be done, and even questioning what constitutes justice.

What truly makes this book work is the characters. Yes, they are rather stereotypical, but one doesn't care. Poe, the rule-breaker with a soft heart, will do whatever it takes to solve the case. Tilly, the brilliant, clever, possibly autistic sidekick, is genuinely appreciated for the first time in her career, is given a chance to spread her wings and show her talents. As a team, they are quirky, delightful, and you cheer for them every step of the way.

The trail Craven lays for Poe and Tilly to follow is fascinating, wonderfully atmospheric, and exciting. It is filled with a plethora of interesting information along the way. It includes a side path with the history of Poe's name which one assumes will have more relevance later in the series. One small point: a glossary of all the acronyms would have been helpful.

THE PUPPET SHOW is dark, twisty, suspenseful, filled with great characters, and one of the most gratifying endings of late. However, the best part is knowing there are four Poe and Tilly books yet to be read.

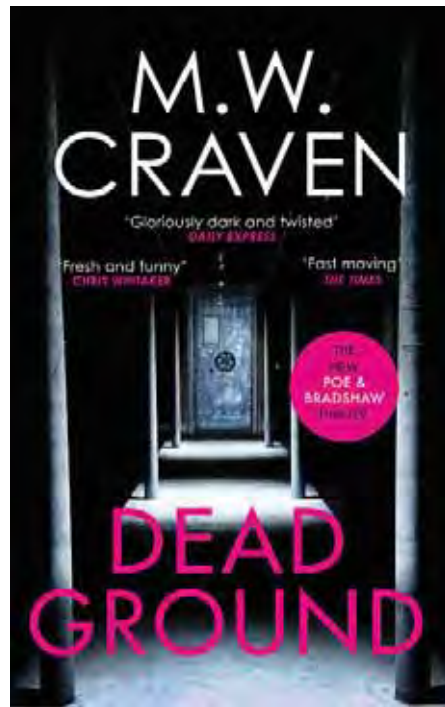
DEAD GROUND

by M.W. Craven – 4th in series
Constable, Jun 2021, 428 pp.

Rating: A+

First Sentence: The man wearing a Sean Connery mask said to the man wearing a Daniel Craig mask, 'Bertrand the monkey and Raton the cat are sitting by the fire, watching chestnuts roast in the hearth.'

Detective Sergeant Poe and analyst



Matilda "Tilly" Bradshaw are part of the Serious Crimes Analysis Section (SCAS) of the National Crimes Agency. They hunt serial killers and serial rapists. Investigating the murder of a man found in a pop-up brothel is not their function. However, the victim was the co-owner of a private helicopter company transporting bigwigs, including the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, to a trade summit which means MI5 and the FBI are involved. Poe and Bradshaw are assigned to solve the murder and determine whether it is safe for the Secretary to attend.

Although it is always good to read a series from the beginning, Craven provides enough structure that one may jump straight in due to an effective opening that then takes one into the story where he introduces many of the major players along the way. He is also clever in making the victim someone other than the top official while making the importance of the summit clear and leaving the plot plenty of scope to travel down other paths. He writes very short chapters. Each is a scene that keeps the story moving forward.

Craven also understands that some of the major elements so critical to a good story are humor—"From *Harry Potter* to prostitutes in three easy

moves—that was quite a turnaround."; dialogue which is quick and crisp; and relationships, not only is Poe protective of Tilly, but she is of him as well. The partnership is also an excellent way of including detailed information which is understood by Tilly and enables her to explain it to both Poe and to the reader. Where Tilly is logic, Poe is emotion and determination. While some of the technology is fascinating, it is also terrifying as some of it is real.

The plot is original and brilliant. This is not a story one can predict. Characters are often not who one thinks they are. The revelations are not only surprising but occasionally shocking and cleverly constructed. As each occurs, one feels they should have seen it coming but didn't because the story is so absorbing. The masterful twists and red herrings continue to the very end. The tension of the climax is gripping, the final resolution well done, and the very end a perfect lead-in to subsequent books.

DEAD GROUND is an excellent read. The depth and excitement of the rapid-paced plot, causes non-stop reading, and puts Craven's name on the list of "must-read" authors.

Jeff Popple Reviews

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

by Steve Cavanagh
Orion, £12.99

Rating: B+

New York defence lawyer Eddie Flynn heads to Buckstown Alabama in Steve Cavanagh's latest legal thriller **THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE**.

When a young woman, Skylar Edwards, is found murdered, the local sheriff arrests the last person to see her alive, Andy Dubois. Andy is innocent of the murder, but with the help of the corrupt District Attorney, Randall Korn, enough evidence is manufactured to have him taken to trial. Everyone in Buckstown assumes that Andy is guilty, and when the local defence attorney assigned to him disappears, he has no chance of getting a fair trial.

Eddie Flynn is pressured into taking the case, and flies to Alabama to help. His presence is not taken kindly by the locals and as the trial date nears the violence increases and Eddie finds that he has to fight fire with fire in order to win, and to stay alive.

This is another fast moving, twisty crime novel by the always entertaining Steve Cavanagh. The story kicks off quickly and Cavanagh expertly guides his plot through a succession of surprises and enjoyable side stories to the exciting conclusion. The courtroom scenes are engrossing, and Eddie is his usual engaging self. The story is helped along by some truly nasty villains and Cavanagh's passionate swipes at racism, the death penalty and conservative American politics gives the book a good boost of energy.

On the negative side, the characterisations could be more nuanced, and I suspect that Alabamians may take issue with how their state is portrayed. The writing, however, is fresh and crisp and it is very easy to settle back, suspend your disbelief and be thoroughly entertained by Cavanagh and Eddie Flynn. An enjoyable romp.

THE NIGHT SHE DISAPPEARED

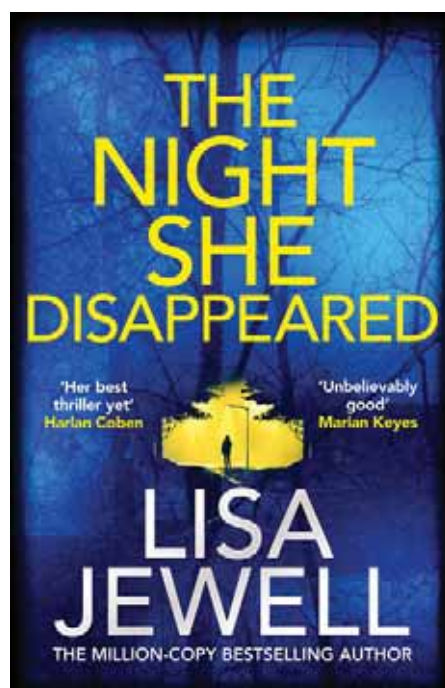
by Lisa Jewell

Century, £14.99 (in U.S., September, 2021, \$28.00)

Rating: B

Popular British author Lisa Jewell skirts around the edges of domestic suspense and murder mystery in her latest **THE NIGHT SHE DISAPPEARED**.

In June 2017 teenage mum Tallulah Murray goes missing, along with the father of her child, Zach, following a date night at a local pub and a spontaneous pool party at a friend's home. Tallulah's mother is distraught and certain that something has happened to her daughter, but the police are less convinced. They conduct a search of the woods near where the party occurred, but find no evidence of foul play. A year later and there is still no sign of the couple, when cosy mystery author Sophie Beck moves into the area. She is accompanying her boyfriend, who has landed



the job as head teacher at the boarding school that Tallulah used to attend, and their new home is a cottage on the edge of woods where the couple went missing. Sophie has only been there a couple of days when she sees a note stapled to a fencepost on the boundary of the woods, with the words **DIG HERE** on it and an arrow pointing to the ground. When Sophie digs, she uncovers something that throws fresh light on the night that Tallulah and Zach disappeared.

This is a tightly structured novel with dual timelines and shifting point of views, that steadily draws the reader into what happened to Tallulah and Zach. The opening chapters are slow, but the tension steadily increases as the two timelines draw together. The sections set in 2018 have more of an investigatory feel to them, while those set in 2017 are firmly in the domestic suspense camp and deal with Tallulah's obsessive relationship with the enigmatic Scarlett.

Overall, the story unfolds smoothly and, although some patience is required, it builds to a clever and surprising conclusion. I had anticipated some of the twists, but Lisa weaves several good red herrings into her plot and the final denouement took me by surprise. I struggled with the likelihood of some of the events in the book, but not enough

to stop me from reading.

A solid mystery that will particularly appeal to readers who enjoy domestic suspense thrillers and a lot of teenage angst.

THE DISAPPEARING ACT

by Catherine Steadman

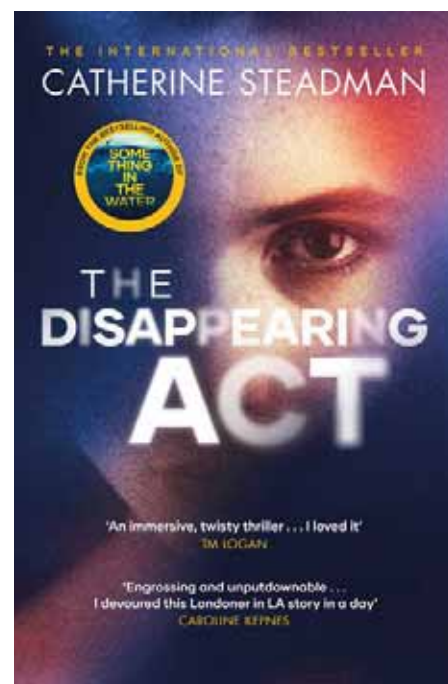
Simon & Schuster, £14.99 (in U.S., June, 2021 \$28.00)

Rating: A-

THE DISAPPEARING ACT opens with a brief, clever prologue, that nicely sets the scene for the rest of the book with its chatty, amusing tone and final hint of menace. It is probably the best prologue I have read in a long time.

The good news is that the rest of the book also lives up that opening promise and **THE DISAPPEARING ACT** is a witty, lively and totally beguiling thriller that really hooks the reader in. The story revolves around a British actress who travels to Los Angeles to audition during the chaotic 'pilot season' and finds herself caught up in a mysterious disappearance.

Seen through the eyes of actress Mia Eliot, **THE DISAPPEARING ACT** gets the balance of mild humour, witty observation, mystery and suspense just right, and the book races along to a tense and poignant climax



that is totally unexpected. To detail the plot here would do a disservice to the various twists and turns that Catherine elegantly introduces into her narrative, other than to say that the story never goes where you are suspecting. Mia is a terrific narrator, and her easy flowing storytelling quickly catches the reader up in its thrall, as she tries to find out what happened to the mysterious Emily.

The clever plotting is also enhanced by the fascinating insights that Catherine Steadman, herself a well-known actress, brings to the story and her descriptions of the chaos and shallowness of the 'pilot season' in Hollywood. It is a fascinating portrait of Los Angeles and the movie/television industry.

The plot probably does not withstand close scrutiny, but it is good fun and I eagerly devoured in a couple of sessions. A good holiday read.

DEAD GROUND

by M. W. Craven
Little Brown, £16.99

Rating: A-

The fourth novel in M. W. Craven's popular series is another clever, engaging crime novel that grips from the opening pages.

DEAD GROUND features Craven's usual twisted plotting and unexpected developments. Craven reminds me of Robert Goddard in his ability to take a simple opening premise and take it down a path you would never expect, and the storyline in **DEAD GROUND** certainly goes in some unpredictable and beguiling directions.

As with the earlier books in the series, there is a load of fascinating information on a whole range of things from ancient artefacts to the conduct of military investigations to housing regulations, all of which is delivered succinctly and interestingly, without slowing the pace of the story. Craven's characterisations are finely tuned and engaging, and it is nice to be reacquainted with characters from the earlier books. The relationship between Tilly and Poe may be a little too cute at times, but this is very a minor quibble and easily overlooked as you become caught

up in the story.

As usual, there is a good pace to the narrative and the book builds to a nicely orchestrated climax, which delivers all the requisite suspense and surprises. It may not be quite as gripping as the ending to Craven's sublime last book, **THE CURATOR**, but it is still very good.

George Easter Reviews

THE BLOOD DIVIDE

by A. A. Dhand
Bantam Press, £16.99

Rating: B+

Jack Baxi is a Sikh by heritage, but lapsed in its religious practices. As a happily married young man his future shows lots of promise but against his best instincts and his upbringing, he starts dealing in the black market with his partner Habib. They make a lot of money together and things are going fine until Jack is arrested and put in prison for three years. Habib goes on to fame and fortune and, once released, Jack loses his wife -- who he thinks is dead (but isn't), and settles into a miserable life as store owner on a run-down housing estate.

One night at 2 a.m. Jack hears an urgent knock on his door and finds Detective Kuldeep Singh asking puz-

zling questions such as, "Have you ever heard of Benedict Cave?" The said Mr. Cave was a victim of assault earlier in the night and he had a paper with Jack's phone number and address in his pocket. The last thing Jack Baxi expected when the detective rang his doorbell in the middle of the night was that he'd be tortured and left for dead, with a young woman he's never met before.

They escape the fire set by the detective and are now on the run. The young girl, Aisha, turns out to be a Muslim medical student and neither she nor Jack can figure out what is going on.

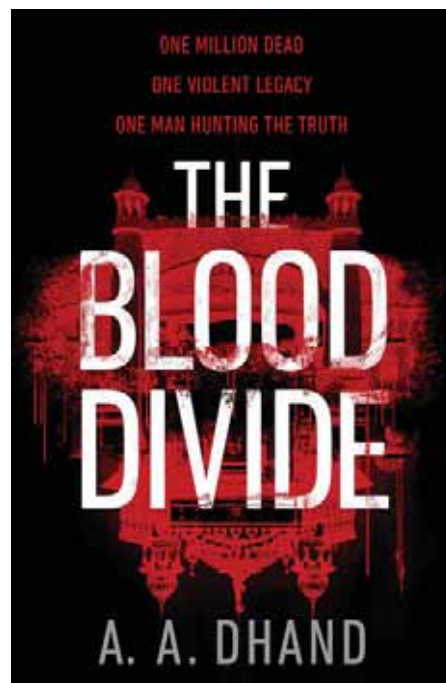
Their hunt for answers takes them back to Jack's early life and even as far back as the brutal atrocities committed during the Partition between India and Pakistan.

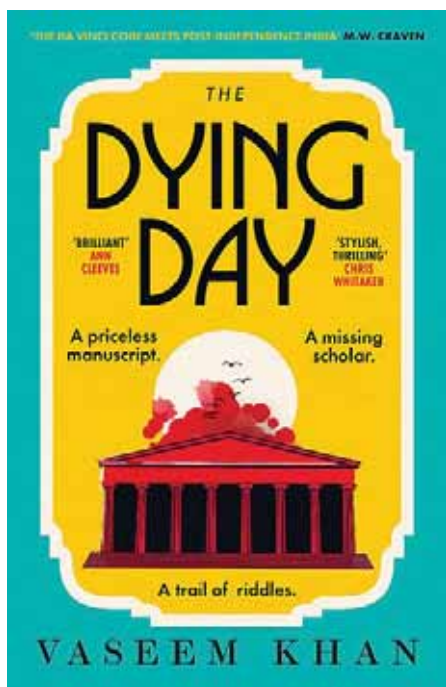
This is quite a departure from the author's Detective Harry Virdee series which I found to be outstanding. Amit Dhand's purpose here seems to be to shine a light on a time in Indian history that is either largely unknown to us in the West or has been almost entirely forgotten by the world. For the most part it works although I had a couple of quibbles with the narrative. The character of Jack is not all that likeable, but Aisha is and I was shocked at her fate in the story. Also, the sinister worldwide Sikh organization, which is revealed late in the story, struck me as a bit too James-Bondish and unrealistic (Just when I say that, I'll probably find that it is based on a real organization). But those are minor distractions and the story overall is quite entertaining and informative.

THE DYING DAY

by Vaseem Khan
Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99
Malabar House/Persis Wadia Series #2
Rating: A-

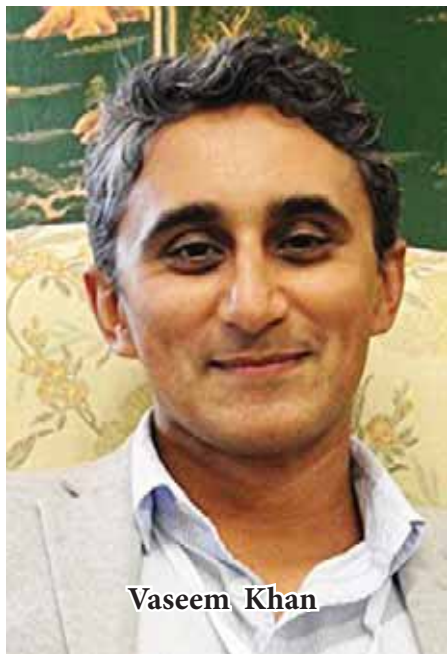
Persis Wadia is the first female police detective in Bombay and she has had to deal with all sorts of backlash from the extremely male police service in post-Partition India of the early 1950s. Her first case is chronicled in the CWA's Sapere Books Historical Dagger-winning **MIDNIGHT AT MALABAR HOUSE**.





Persis' latest case involves the theft of the 600-year-old copy of Dante's *THE DIVINE COMEDY* from the well-guarded Asiatic Society Building in Bombay, India. John Healy is a British scholar and war hero who was studying the manuscript and he apparently was the one to remove it from the premises. The only problem with that is that Healy has also disappeared.

Enlisting the aid of her friend Archie Blackfinch, a forensic scientist, Persis pursues the case with the tenacity of a bull dog. She finds a series of complex



Vaseem Khan

riddles, written in verse by Healy, that she believes are meant to be clues as to Healy's motives and the rare book's whereabouts.

The world of books is very familiar to Persis because she grew up in a bookstore owned by her father. But what is unfamiliar to her are the lengths that some people will go to in order to obtain a treasure such as Dante's manuscript.

Soon a body appears and then another and the case morphs into a homicide one as well as one involving theft.

Vaseem Khan writes excellent traditional mysteries, but no one should mistake this novel as being a cozy. I would characterize it as medium-boiled, and as such, one that could be recommended to any reader of mysteries. I've read all of his books and greatly enjoyed them all. He is a fine writer who enlightens me as to the ins and outs of Indian culture and its history. Fascinating stuff. His books have become must-reads for me. If you haven't read him yet, I hope you give him a try. He's here to stay and over time will become more and more well known and appreciated.

LAST FLIGHT TO STALINGRAD

by Graham Hurley
Head of Zeus, £18.99

Rating: B+

This World War II story is told from the perspective of Werner Nehmann, a journalist at the Promi – the Ministry of Propaganda. He is a protégé of the all-powerful Joseph Goebbels, a master at shaping the will of the German people. Nehmann knows his survival (and the survival of others close to him) depends on him continuing to prove useful to Goebbels and he has a clear-eyed view of what that involves. As a fall-back position Nehmann has a compromising letter written by Goebbels that he will use as leverage if a time comes when he needs it. But as Goebbels knows that he has it, and that is proving to be problematic. Nehmann goes along to get along...until he falls in love with a woman who has Jewish heritage. Now there is skin in the game.

Part of the novel finds Nehmann

spending a lot of time on the Russian Front experiencing war up close and personal – bombing raids over Stalingrad, life in military camps close to the front and even catching wind of SS atrocities aimed at intimidating the enemy.

LAST FLIGHT TO STALINGRAD is a very introspective view of the Third Reich, especially at a critical point in its blessedly short history – the Siege at Stalingrad.

Some might call this a “thriller” because of its war background, but don't read it expecting a lot of action and danger. What you should expect are many insights into what it is like to be a German reporter responsible for putting the best spin on any war occurrence, outright lying if necessary. Talk about “fake news!”

All in all a very thought-provoking novel. My only complaint was its snail pacing. There were points along the way, when I wanted to shout, “Let's get on with it!” However, if you want to know how it was for people from different walks of life to live through the events of WW II, this is the series for you.

This is the fifth of Graham Hurley's Wars Within series depicting the lives of people caught up in the happenings of World War II in Europe. The sixth, *KYIV*, will follow later this year.



Getting Away With Murder

Mike Rypley

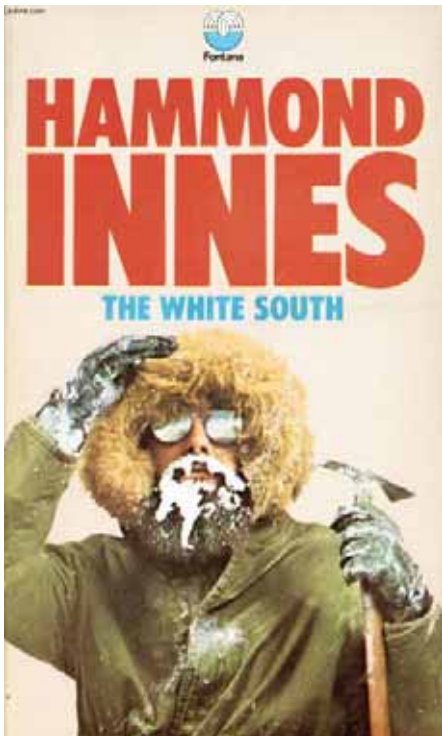


[Printed by permission of the author and SHOTS Magazine (<http://www.shotsmag.co.uk/>)]

Due South

I have had a long and rather strange relationship with Antarctica via crime fiction, though in latitude, I have never been nearer to that continent than New Orleans, where the adjective 'frozen' tended to refer only to strawberry daiquiris.

On the publication of my mini-history of British thrillerdom, **KISS KISS BANG BANG**, I was asked in an interview what was the first proper thriller I had read and after some deep memory diving, I felt it must have been Hammond Innes' *The White South* which was the first book I took out of the Adult Section (and, no, it doesn't mean that) of the local library, at the age of nine.



It was an adventure thriller of good men (and a woman) struggling against bad men and the ferocious elements of Antarctica which I thought jolly exciting and once I began to collect paperbacks at the age of 13, it was one of the first I bought even though it was about commercial whaling, which I found distasteful then, as now.

In the 1970s I discovered, as a reader, that multi-talented Australian novelist Thomas Keneally and raved about his Antarctica-set (in 1911) detective novel *A Victim of the Aurora* long before Schindler's Ark (or Schindler's List if you're American and don't know what an ark is) made him internationally famous.

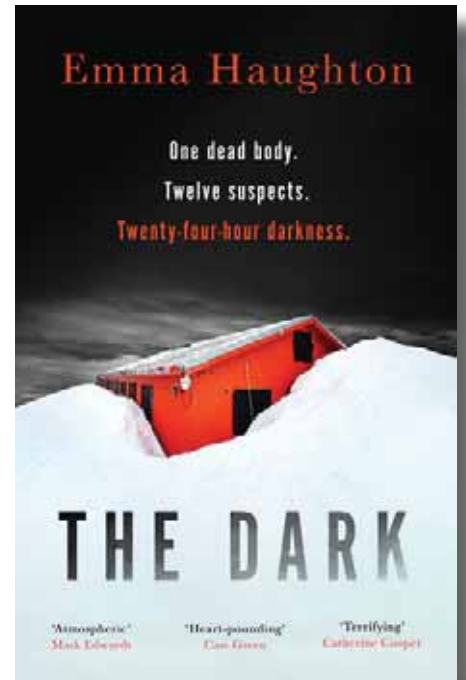


In 2002, I discovered that one of my favourite writers of spy fiction, Brian Freemantle, had turned his hand to a global eco-thriller, where, thanks to global warming, a deadly virus has been released in, you've guessed it, Antarctic.

And then, in 2007, I found myself presenting 'An Evening With Morse and Lewis' in a sell-out Chelmsford Civic Theatre, alongside author Colin Dexter and my old chum Ted Childs, the producer of the television series. At the pre-event dinner, Ted Childs arrived late, missing the first course, his excuse being that he had only just returned from holiday that morning. 'Go anywhere nice?' I asked politely. 'Antarctica,' he replied

casually without word of a lie.

And now comes **THE DARK** by Emma Haughton [Hodder] which features a young, female doctor parachuted (not literally) into a United Nations research station at the start of the Antarctic winter, after the station's doctor has died out on (or in) the ice.



It is the classic locked-room scenario: a suspicious death, twelve suspects, nowhere for them to go and twenty-four hour darkness surrounding them. Our doctor heroine is perhaps not best suited to the task as, apart from fleeing from her own personal tragedy, she is addicted to pill-popping tranquilisers and is morbidly afraid of the dark. She does, however, retain all her feminine instincts and on arrival at the ice station, in the middle of a fierce snow storm, she is helped from the plane by a figure covered head to foot in cold weather gear, huge reflective goggled obscuring his eyes, but nevertheless thinks Even so, I can tell he's good-looking...

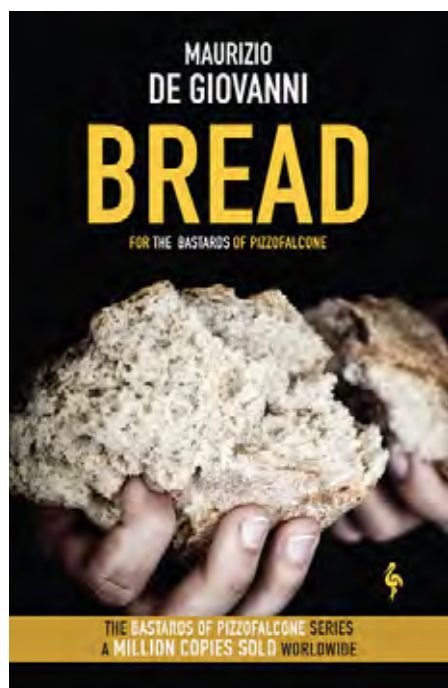
See Naples and...

Some years ago, having just checked in to a hotel in Florence, I asked the receptionist (in my best rudimentary Italian) where can I get a good pizza? Without looking up from his computer

screen or batting an eyelid, the receptionist replied simply: Napoli.

I cannot help but think of that incident whenever I read a new novel by Maurizio De Giovanni, a proud native of Naples - and fanatical supporter of Napoli football club - a place which he describes as a 'churning, dangerous lava flow of a city' in the latest of his police procedurals to be published in English.

BREAD, or to give it its full title, **Bread for the Bastards of Pizzofalcone**, was first published in Italy in 2016 but now appears here in translation from Europa Editions. The 'Pizzofalcone' series has been adapted for television in Italy, but I am not aware that it has been shown elsewhere, which is a pity as it could only boost awareness of this most excellent set of contemporary crime novels.



When I met Maurizio de Giovanni some years ago, at the Italian Institute in London, it was to talk mainly about his earlier Commissario Ricciardi books - atmospheric, slightly spooky, historical thrillers set in Fascist Italy (in Naples, of course), but he was keen to explain his then new fictional venture based around the neglected police precinct of Pizzofalcone. Geographically surrounded by distinctly different districts of Naples (rich and smug, poor and deprived, downright criminal) the precinct was

found to be ninety percent corrupt and, after internal cleansing, now only attracts the police who are either odd-ball loners or simply don't fit into other departments. Surprisingly, this bunch of misfits get along and turn out to be rather good at their jobs.



BREAD revolves around the murder of an artisanal baker which looks, far too conveniently, to be a local Mafia hit, but the 'bastards of Pizzofalcone' are not convinced. Anything which interferes with giving a Neapolitan his daily bread has got to be taken seriously.

One other thing I learned from meeting Maurizio was his admiration for the 87th Precinct novels of Ed McBain, which has clearly influenced his Pizzofalcone series. Indeed, *Bread* is dedicated to Ed McBain -- 'the greatest of them all' -- and probably has nothing at all to do with the fact that McBain's real name (before he changed it to Evan Hunter) was Salvatore Alberto Lombino, though whether his ancestors came from Naples I do not know. I'd like to think so and I'm sure Maurizio would.

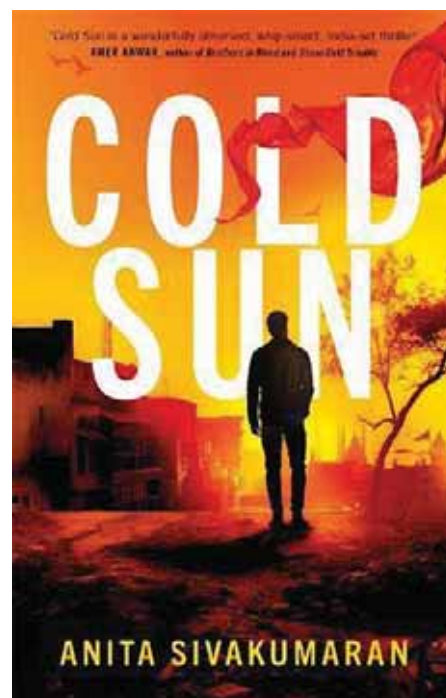
Competition

Only last month I thought I had found my ideal female Indian police detective in the character Persis Wadia as created by Vaseem Khan (most recently in **THE DYING DAY**, but already Persis has competition for my admiration.

In Anita Sivakumaran's lively debut thriller **COLD SUN** [Dialogue Books], the main detective hero is actually DI Vijay Patel 'of Scotland Yard', whose grandparents might have come from Gujarat and his parents Uganda, but he was born and raised in Leicester, which

makes him a fish-out-of-water when he is seconded to Bengalura (Bangalore to old fogeys like me) in southern India to 'consult' on a series of baffling murders. Patel has been to India before, but only briefly during a cricketing career cut short by injury, and is not looking forward to the experience.

For a start, he has trouble obtaining a vital supply of Eno's before embarking [for younger readers, Eno Fruit Salts were a proprietary antacid medicine invented in the 19th century, the main market for which is now India] because he is unsure of the food he might have to sample, and once there is totally disorientated by the fact that although everyone is speaking English, the locals cannot understand his Leicester accent. In addition he has to acclimatise himself to the terror of local traffic and cavalier driving styles and familiarise himself with local crimes such as 'cow vigilantism', all of which is fascinating, often irreverently funny, stuff and Patel is a worthy enough hero.



But the stand-out character for me is Assistant Commissioner Chandra Subramaniam, the straight-talking and occasionally foul-mouthed, Indian detective he is 'advising' and I was terribly worried that something nasty was going to happen to her. It did, but in the end she and Patel come through, not least

because of Patel's cricketing skills.

The Scandi Variant

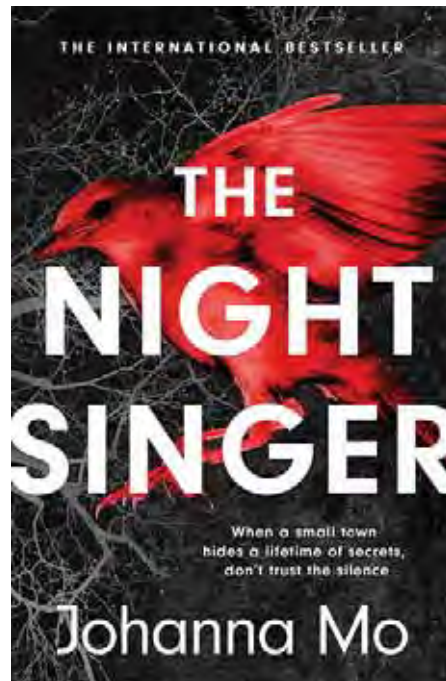
In those far-off days before face-masks, social distancing and lockdowns, I was invited to private luncheon with the crime fiction editor of a major publishing house and asked if I thought the enthusiasm for Scandinavian crime fiction was on the wane, for surely it had run its course. My advice at the time was that by all logic the market for gloomy 'Nordic noir' was on its way to being swamped by gloomy 'domestic noir' - but what did I know? By my crude calculation, Scandinavian (including Iceland) imports now account for around 4% of the crime fiction in the UK, despite Covid and Brexit, to blame but two things at random and surely that percentage was much higher five years ago, wasn't it? It certainly felt like it, but I cautioned against writing off the sub-genre too soon as there was plenty of life in those frozen corpses still.

At least in that I have been proved right, with two titles this month which both herald forthcoming series.

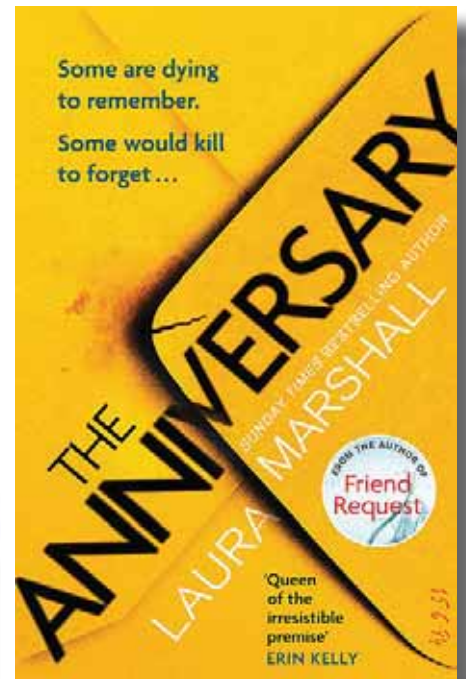
In **HELL AND HIGH WATER** [MacLehose Press] Christian Unge's protagonist is hospital doctor Tekla

Berg, who has a photographic memory and an unfortunate predilection for amphetamines. (The second fictional doctor this month to have a pill-popping habit.) Mind you, given the manic workload of the emergency unit in which she works, you can hardly blame her. With added pressure from biker gangs, corrupt cops and Uzbek mafiosi, it makes 24 Hours in A&E look really quite restful.

There have been numerous crime novels set on the Swedish islands



of Öland and I remember one from decade ago where the translation was clearly slapdash even to a non-Swedish speaker as the islanders alternated between using metric and imperial measures with gay abandon and several characters eventually turned out to be ghosts. Nevertheless, Öland is clearly a wild and lonely place and just the sort of setting where crimes can be hidden, if not forgotten. In **THE NIGHT SINGER** by Johanna Mo [Headline] has her police detective Hanna Dunker posted from Stockholm to the island where she was brought up, the only snag being that her dead father had been convicted of murder and the islanders have long memories.



Books of the Month

Twenty-five years ago, a lone gunman goes on the rampage in a small English town with an 'automatic rifle' and plenty of ammunition (though nobody seems to ask where he got them) and shoots eleven people dead before killing himself. As the anniversary of the event approaches, a female journalist and single mother, whilst researching the story, befriends a child survivor of the massacre, herself now a single mum with a very fractious baby in tow. (Literally, the baby goes everywhere with her.)

Key witnesses to the killings are either missing or suffering from dementia, most male characters are either unsavoury or violent control-freaks and most females are constrained, one way or another, by their children. Were the killings all that random and why is someone trying to frighten the survivor away from the truth?

At one point Laura Marshall's **THE ANNIVERSARY** [Sphere] looks like a homage to Agatha Christie's plotting at its most convoluted, at another it is reminiscent (for those of a certain age) of Philip MacDonald's **THE LIST OF ADRIAN MESSENGER** but it remains true to itself and delivers suspense and



tension at great pace. And even if the climax of the action is a little overstaged and not all that credible, there is a deliciously shocking final twist. This is superior 'domestic noir' which deals with single motherhood, early-onset dementia, battered wives and coercive control, as well as the aftermath of an appalling crime which we would like to think couldn't possibly happen here but we know it has.

The writer of a long-running series featuring popular recurring characters always has a problem (tell me about it) when starting a new book to balance the expectations of regular readers with the need to bring new ones up to speed. It is not surprising then that Louise Penny, with her seventeenth rural Canadian mystery **THE MADNESS OF CROWDS** [Hodder], introduces her detective hero, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache and sixteen other regular characters in the first two chapters, plus a dog called Henri, a duck called Rosa and a 'ratmunk' (no, me neither) called Gracie.

All this is necessary because in the village of Three Pines, Louise Penny has successfully created an award-winning (yet another Agatha Award this year) universe in microcosm where, this time, the rural idyll is shattered

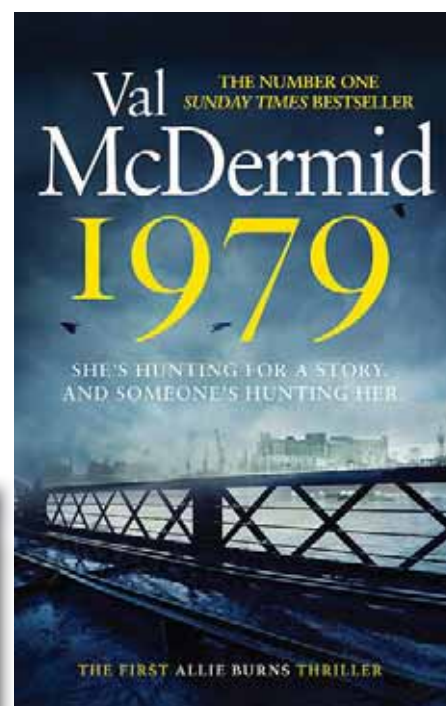
by a controversial lecture at the nearby university by a female statistician who has turned the recent pandemic's death toll into a case for euthanasia, making it hardly a surprise when someone takes shot at her. Gamache has a duty to defend the right to free speech as well as maintain public order, though his extended family gives him very good grounds for loathing the visiting lecturer's message.

As we are in Quebec, we get a few native words, such as tuque (a woollen



hat) and a smattering of basic French which will delight regular fans and are common enough not to discourage any nouvelles arrivées to the series. There is also the priceless incident when a character uses a real obscenity in mixed company and has to apologise with: 'Excuse my English'.

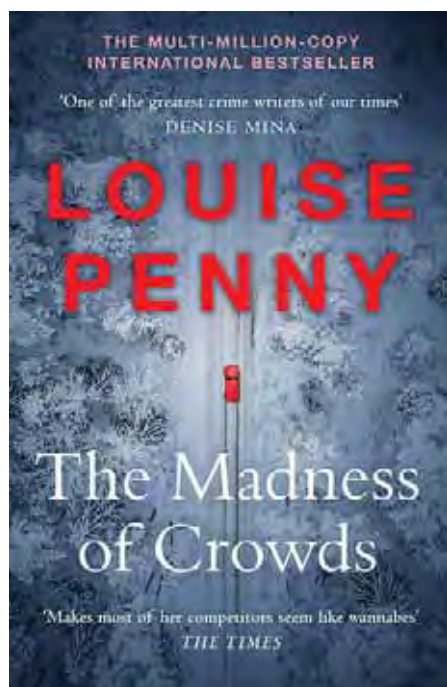
If you fancy a flashback to a (multiple) murder mystery of the 14th century, you are in safe, velvet-gloved hands with S.D. Sykes and her Oswald de Lacy series set on the manorial estate of Somershill. And in **THE GOOD DEATH** [Hodder] much of the action is told in flashback, from the years 1370 (when Oswald is lord of the manor) to 1349, when a young Oswald is contemplating taking orders and joining



the local Benedictine monastery, just as the Black Death reaches Kent.

His involvement there in the death of a young village girl is set to both threaten and change his life and haunt his conscience as Oswald shows himself yet again to be a gentle, sympathetic hero and a worthy banner-man for the 'Medieval Mystery' sub-genre of British crime-writing which Edith Pargeter (as Ellis Peters) launched with her Brother Cadfael stories in 1977. Sarah Sykes and Oswald de Lacy may not yet be as well-known a double-act as Ellis Peters and Cadfael, but they are on their way.

Val McDermid goes back to the future in her latest novel **1979** [Little Brown] which launches a new series featuring young, female, Oxbridge-educated journalist Allie Burns, one of the few women working on a Glasgow news desk. Any similarities with Val's own journalist background are probably coincidental, as are comparisons with her first crime fiction series thirty-odd years ago featuring journalist Lindsey Gordon, my personal favourite of her fictional creations (though Manchester private eye Kate Brannigan comes very close).



A PAPERBACK CONFIDENTIAL

PROFILE -- Dan J. Marlowe

by *Brian Ritt*

Dan J. Marlowe (also wrote as Dan Marlowe, Jaime Sandaval, Albert Avelano, Gar Wilson, Rod Waleman, Major D. Lawn, Mande Woljar, Alma Werdon). Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1914. Died in Tarzana, California, 1986.

Dan J. Marlowe wrote heist novels so realistically, and understood the mechanics of criminous activities so accurately, you'd think he knew a real-life thief. He did.

More on that later.

On the surface, there was nothing in Dan Marlowe's life to indicate he would end up writing some of Gold Medal's most relentlessly hardboiled crime novels during the 1960s. He had earned an accounting degree from the Bentley School of Accounting and Finance in Boston. He had worked in bookkeeping, insurance and public relations. He loved crossword puzzles and the theater. He was a member of the Rotarian Club and

served on the City Council of Harbor Beach, Michigan. He even *looked* like an accountant: he wore a well-tailored suit, had developed a double chin and slight paunch and had slicked back, thinning, gray-white hair.

But his wife's death in 1956 changed all that. Marlowe had toyed with writing while his wife was still alive, but her death left him in a state of shock. He walked out on his job and his home in Washington, D.C. and moved to New York with the intention of becoming a full time writer.

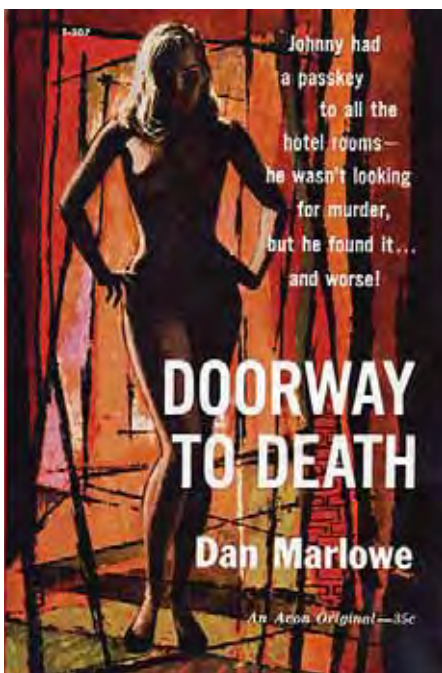
His first novel was published by Avon in 1959, **DOORWAY TO DEATH**. It was the first of a five novel series featuring hotel dick and private detective Johnny Killian. The other four are **KILLER WITH A KEY** (1959), **DOOM**



Dan J. Marlowe

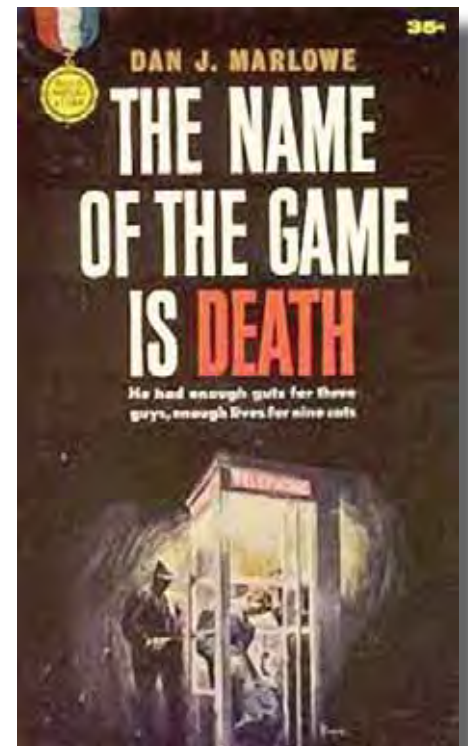
partner stage a bank holdup, and when Arnold is wounded, he and his partner split up, and Arnold travels cross-country in search of his partner and his share of the loot.

Mystery writer and historian Bill Pronzini has called **GAME** a "masterpiece." Bill Crider, also a respected mystery writer and historian, wrote that the book, "is just about as good as origi-



SERVICE (1960), **THE FATAL FRAILS** (1960) and **SHAKE A CROOKED TOWN** (1961). Killian was reminiscent of the hardboiled PI's of the era: buffed, rough and tough; he was handy both with a wisecrack and with the ladies.

In 1962, Marlowe scored with his book **THE NAME OF THE GAME IS DEATH**, published by Gold Medal. The story is about Chet Arnold, who works part time in the seemingly harmless occupation of a tree surgeon. But beneath Arnold's nature-loving mask lies a ruthless, amoral, cold-blooded bank robber and killer. Arnold and his



nal paperback writing can get.” Stephen King dedicated his book **THE COLORADO KID** as follows: “With admiration, for Dan J. Marlowe, author of **THE NAME OF THE GAME IS DEATH**: Hardest of the hardboiled.”

Now comes the strange twist in Marlowe’s life story.

Twenty-seven year old Al Nussbaum, a real life bank robber and expert at making pipe bombs, read *Game* while in hiding from the FBI. Nussbaum was so impressed with the criminous aspects of the novel, he telephoned Marlowe (using a fake name) to praise the book and to ask for advice about how he might get his own writing career started. Soon after, Nussbaum was captured but he and Marlowe continued communicating by letter (Marlowe, by this time, knew who Nussbaum was), and Marlowe even visited Nussbaum in prison.



Marlowe and Nussbaum began collaborating, with Nussbaum sharing his knowledge of weapons, ballistics, locks, safes, vaults and alarm systems. When Marlowe began using Nussbaum’s information in his novels, he actually had to leave out certain details so the books wouldn’t become “how to” manuals for criminals. These novels include **STRONGARM** (1963), **FOUR FOR THE MONEY** (1966), **THE VENGEANCE MAN** (1966) and **ONE ENDLESS HOUR** (1969, a sequel to **GAME**), among others. All were published by Gold Medal. Marlowe helped

Nussbaum eventually obtain his parole, and Nussbaum went on to have his own successful writing career.

In the early ’70s, the “Chet Arnold” character from **GAME** was turned into a series character and his name was changed to Earl Drake. The character was changed as well. Drake was now a secret agent working for the government. The titles of these books all started with the word “Operation,” such as **OPERATION BREAKTHROUGH** (1971), **OPERATION STRANGLEHOLD** (1973) and **OPERATION HAMMERLOCK** (1974).

Dan J. Marlowe led a life filled with twists and turns. He once wrote, in a column for the *Harbor Beach Times*, “My agent says I’m living proof that stories don’t care who writes them.”

Further Reading:

Johnny Killain series (complete):

DOORWAY TO DEATH (1959)

KILLER WITH A KEY (1959)

DOOM SERVICE (1960)

THE FATAL FRAILS (1960)

SHAKE A CROOKED TOWN (1961)

Earl Drake series:

THE NAME OF THE GAME IS DEATH (1962; as **OPERATION OVERKILL**, 1973)

ONE ENDLESS HOUR (1969; as **OPERATION ENDLESS HOUR**, 1975)

OPERATION FIREBALL (1969)

OPERATION BREAKTHROUGH

(1971)

OPERATION CHECKMATE (1972)

OPERATION DRUMFIRE (1972)

OPERATION STRANGLEHOLD

(1973)

OPERATION WHIPLASH (1973)

OPERATION OVERKILL (1963)

OPERATION HAMMERLOCK (1974)

OPERATION ENDLESS HOUR (1975)

BACKFIRE (1961)

STRONGARM (1963)

NEVER LIVE TWICE (1964)

DEATH DEEP DOWN (1965)

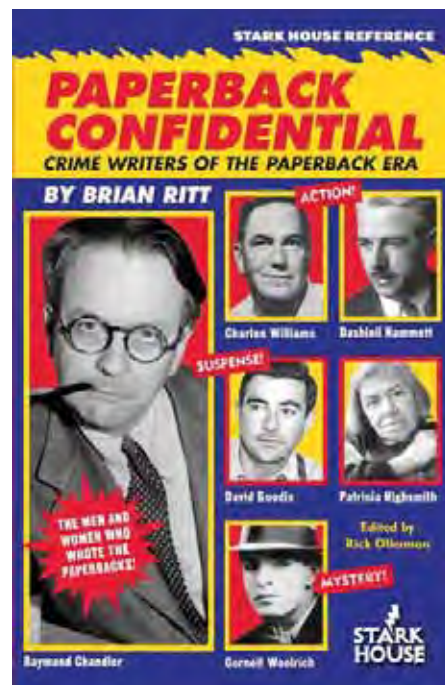
FOUR FOR THE MONEY (1966)

THE VENGEANCE MAN (1966)

If you like Dan J. Marlowe, you

might like: Lionel White, Richard Stark (pseudonym of Donald E. Westlake).

If you like Thomas B. Dewey, you might like: William Campbell Gault, William Ard, Bill Pronzini



This is the eighth in a series of articles about the crime writers from the 1940s to the 1960s, as found in **PAPERBACK CONFIDENTIAL** by Brian Ritt (Stark House, \$19.95, 2013). This volume is highly recommended to those who collect vintage mystery/thriller paperbacks, especially Gold Medals. Reprinted by permission of Stark House and the author.



Sneak Previews

Upcoming Mysteries



Disclaimer: 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.

August, 2021

- 3 Mark Billingham, **RABBIT HOLE**
- 3 Max Tomlinson, **BAD SCENE** (Colleen Hayes)
- 3 Donna Andrews, **MURDER MOST FOWL** (Meg Langslow)
- 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 Stuart Woods, **CLASS ACT** (Stone Barrington)
- 3 Alan Parks, **THE APRIL DEAD** (Harry McCoy)
- 5 Brandon Webb & John David Mann, **STEEL FEAR** (Finn)
- 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**
- 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)
- 7 Sean Parnell, **LEFT FOR DEAD** (Eric Steele)

- 7 S. D. Sykes, **THE GOOD DEATH** (Somershill Manor)
- 7 Rory Clements, **A PRINCE AND A SPY**
- 7 Matthew Hart, **ICE ANGEL**
- 7 Lisa Jewell, **THE NIGHT SHE DISAPPEARED**
- 14 Julia Dahl, **THE MISSING HOURS**
- 14 Vince Flynn, **ENEMY AT THE GATES** (Mitch Rapp)
- 14 Tori Eldridge, **THE NINJA BETRAYED** (Lily Wong)
- 14 Hank Phillippi Ryan, **HER PERFECT LIFE**
- 14 Beverly McLachlin, **DENIAL** (Jilly Truitt)
- 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)
- 21 Jonathan & Jesse Kellerman, **THE BURNING** (Clay Edison)
- 21 Anne Perry, **A DARKER REALITY** (Elena Standish)
- 21 Don Winslow, **CITY ON FIRE**
- 28 Richard Osman, **THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE** (Thursday Murder Club)
- 28 Archer Mayor, **MARKED MAN** (Joe Gunther)
- 28 Max Seleck, **THE ICE COVEN** (Jessica Niemi)
- 28 Loren D. Estleman, **CUTTHROAT DOGS** (Amos Walker)
- 28 Craig Russell, **HYDE**
- 28 Rip Rawlings, **THE KILL BOX**
- 29 Tamron Hall, **AS THE WICKED WATCH** (Jordan Manning)

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 Ellie Alexander, **THE CURE FOR WHAT ALES YOU** (Sloan Krause)
- 5 John Copenhaver, **THE SAVAGE KIND**
- 5 Eric Rickstad, **I AM NOT WHO YOU THINK I AM**
- 5 David McCloskey, **DAMASCUS STATION**
- 5 Rhys Bowen, **GOD REST YE, ROYAL GENTLEMEN** (Royal Spyness)
- 5 Tami Hoag, **COLD COLD HEART**
- 5 Tess Little, **THE LAST GUEST**
- 5 Ben Sanders, **SOMETIMES AT NIGHT** (Marshall Grade)
- 5 Xiaolong Qiu, **INSPECTOR CHEN AND THE PRIVATE KITCHEN MURDER**
- 5 Rosemary Rowe, **A DREADFUL DESTINY** (Libertus)
- 7 John Banville, **APRIL IN SPAIN** (Quirke)
- 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)
- 12 Angela Marsons, **LOST GIRLS** (Kim Stone)
- 13 Alice Henderson, **A BLIZZARD OF POLAR BEARS** (Alex Carter)
- 14 John le Carre', **SILVERVIEW**
- 19 Anthony Horowitz, **A LINE TO KILL** (Hawthorne & Horowitz)
- 19 Jeffrey Archer, **OVER MY DEAD BODY**
- 19 James Kestrel, **FIVE DECEMBERS** (WWII – Hawaii)
- 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

- 1 Yasmin Angoe, **HER NAME IS KNIGHT**

- 2 William Boyle, **SHOOT THE MOON LIGHT OUT**
- 2 Kathleen Kent, **THE PLEDGE** (Detective Betty Rhyzyk)
- 2 Dirk Cussler, **CLIVE CUSSLER'S THE DEVIL'S SEA** (Dirk Pitt)
- 2 Joseph Knox, **TRUE CRIME STORY**
- 2 Anne Perry, **A CHRISTMAS LEGACY**
- 2 Jenn McKinlay, **KILLER RESEARCH** (Library Lover)
- 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 RETURN OF THE PHARAOH** (Sherlock Holmes)
- 11 Abir Mukherjee, **THE SHADOWS OF MAN** (Sam Wyndham)
- 16 Martin Limon, **WAR WOMEN** (Sueno & Bascom)
- 16 Kjell Eriksson, **THE DEATHWATCH BEETLE** (Ann Lindell)
- 16 Thomas Perry, **THE LEFT-HANDED TWIN** (Jane Whitefield)
- 16 John Lescroart, **THE MISSING PIECE** (Dismas Hardy)
- 16 Max Allan Collins, **QUARRY'S BLOOD**
- 16 Shelley Noble, **A SECRET NEVER TOLD** (Lady Dunbridge)
- 23 Ely 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?**
- 30 Jeffrey Deaver, **THE MIDNIGHT LOCK** (Lincoln Rhyme)

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** (Natalie Lockhart)
- 7 Paige Shelton, **DARK NIGHT** (Alaska Wild)
- 7 Christopher Fowler, **LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN**
- 7 Victoria Thompson, **CITY OF SHADOWS** (Counterfeit Lady)
- 14 Jane K. Cleland, **JANE AUSTEN'S LOST LETTERS** (Josie Prescott)
- 14 Keigo Higashino, **SILENT PARADE** (Detective Galileo)
- 28 Charlie Donlea, **TWENTY YEARS LATER**
- 28 Darby Kane, **THE REPLACEMENT WIFE**
- 28 Allison Brennan, **THE SORORITY MURDER**

January, 2022

- 4 Nita Prose, **THE MAID**
- 4 Rachel Hawkins, **RECKLESS GIRLS**
- 11 Elizabeth George, **SOMETHING TO HIDE** (Lynley/Havers)
- 11 T. Jefferson Parker, **A THOUSAND STEPS**
- 11 Laura Joh Rowland, **GARDEN OF SINS**
- 18 Sulari Gentill, **WHERE THERE'S A WILL** (Rowland Sinclair)
- 18 C. J. Tudor, **THE SIXTH**
- 25 Lisa Lutz, **THE ACCOMPLICE**
- 25 Erin Young, **THE FIELDS**
- 25 Lisa Lutz, **THE ACCOMPLICE**
- 25 Joanna Schaffhausen, **LAST SEEN ALIVE** (Ellery Hathaway)

February, 2022

- 8 Jonathan Kellerman, **CITY OF THE DEAD**
- 15 Adrian McKinty, **THE CHASE**
- 22 Rob Hart, **THE PARADOX HOTEL**

March, 2022

- 1 Marit Weisenberg, **THIS GOLDEN STATE**
- 8 Kellye Garrett, **LIKE A SISTER**
- 15 Harlan Coben, **THE MATCH**

Recent Paperbacks of Note



Softboiled to Mediumboiled

Alexander, Ellie. **MOCHA SHE WROTE** (St Martins \$8.99).
 Allen, Meri. **THE ROCKY ROAD TO RUIN** (St Martins \$7.99).
 Andrews, Donna. **THE FALCON ALWAYS WINGS TWICE** (\$7.99).
 Axelrod, Steven. **NANTUCKET PENNY** (Poisoned Pen \$15.99).
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