

Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



T. J. Newman's
Stunning Thriller
DROWNING

T. J. Newman

Knows How To Thrill

T. J. Newman is representative of a new mini-wave of female action/spy thriller writers who are successfully being published in today's market. T. J. lives in Arizona and is a former bookseller and flight attendant whose first novel **FALLING** (see review below) was an instant *New York Times* best-seller. She has used her experience in the airline industry to write two exceptional action thrillers, the latest being **DROWNING**, which I recommend you read – but not while flying on an airplane. See Larry Gandle's review below to understand why I say that.

But first let's get to know T. J. a little bit better from her interview conducted by Craig Sisterson after the publication of T. J.'s first book.

Interview of T. J. Newman by Craig Sisterson

Who is your favorite recurring crime fiction hero/detective?

Nancy Drew. Reading those books as a little girl made a bigger impression on me than I think I ever realized.

What was the very first book you remember reading and really loving, and why?

There's a stack of picture books at my parent's house that were mine when I was a child. Books that they used to read aloud to me. And any time I pick one up now, I feel the sensation of being loved. I think I equated reading as an act of love since before I could even read.

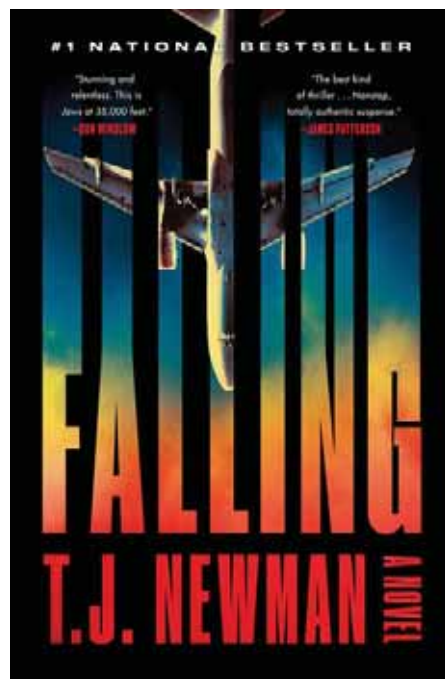
Before your debut crime novel, what else had you written (if anything) unpublished manuscripts, short stories, articles?

My hard drive is full of short stories and unfinished novels - most of which no one else has laid eyes on -- but **FALLING** is my first published work.

How did the idea of FALLING come to you?

One day at 35,000 feet, I was standing by the cockpit door and had the idle thought that all these passengers' and crew's lives were in the hands of the pilot. That thought turned into a "what if?" scenario. I asked the pilot what would he do if his family was taken hostage and he was told mid-flight that if he didn't crash, they'd be killed? With a terrified look on his face, he replied that he didn't know what he would do. In that moment, I knew I had the makings of my first novel.

Outside of writing and writing-related activities (book events, publicity),



what do you really like to do, leisure and activity-wise?

I love to travel. Watch and attend sporting events (especially baseball). Attend the theatre or the movie theatre. Hike and camp. And eat good food and drink good wine with those I love.

What is one thing that visitors to your hometown should do, that isn't in the tourist brochures, or perhaps they wouldn't initially consider?

Hike. Desert hiking is a unique experience. (Although it's probably written in all the travel brochures, too.)

If your life was a movie, which actor could you see playing you?

Carol Burnett. But I only say that because I would give anything to be like Carol Burnett.

Of your writings, which is your favourite or a bit special to you for some particular reason, and why?

I think no matter where my career goes from here, **FALLING** will always hold a tremendously special spot in my heart. "Firsts" tend to have that effect.

What was your initial reaction, and

how did you celebrate, when you were first accepted for publication? Or when you first saw your debut story in book form?

I drove to my parent's house and we stood in the kitchen and stared at each other in total disbelief. Then I started crying, we opened a bottle of champagne...and then sat down in the living room and continued to stare at each other in disbelief.

What is the strangest or most unusual experience you have had at a book signing, author event, or literary festival?

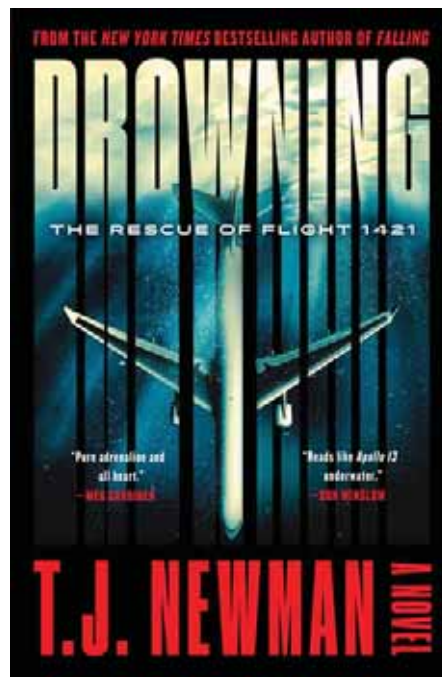
The fact that I have my first book signing on the calendar coming up is the most strange and unusual experience! I still can't get over the fact that people will want me to sign a book...a book that I wrote! It's just wild.



Here are two astute questions that T. J. was recently asked in an interview conducted by the website shereads.com.

Both FALLING and DROWNING have these incredible ticking clocks and action-packed claustrophobia. Do you feel that these short windows of time help create the fast pace your books are known for? Do you think writing within a short time span is more of a challenge or a helpful container for the story?

Those are great questions. With *FALLING*, I was limited to a timeline of a single flight because that was the whole idea: Captain Hoffman had to make a choice by the time the flight ended. With *DROWNING*, time (or lack thereof, a ticking countdown) was the villain. Neither were necessarily an active choice on my part as the author. They were merely the conditions these two stories needed. But for stories like these two—high conflict, big stakes, plot centered stories—I think that sort of constant ticking clock restriction does help amp up the pace, both for the story, and for the way the reader reads it. A consistent piece of feedback I get is my



books are read fast. I never made the correlation before, but maybe that's part of it. The condensed time period of the story may drive that fast read.

Recently we heard you discuss how you grew up with '90s thrillers which makes perfect sense. Your books feel like a contemporary update to that nostalgic action genre. What are some of your favorite thrillers from the 90s (books or movies)?

Michael Crichton hit it out of the ballpark every time. *JURASSIC PARK* (both the movie and the book) is one my all-time favorites. All the John Grisham classics: *THE FIRM*, *THE CLIENT*, *THE PELICAN BRIEF* The massive summer blockbusters I watched over and over: *Top Gun*, *Twister*, *Armageddon*, *The Rock*, all the *Mission: Impossible* films. I cannot get enough of that underdog, against-all-odds happy ending just in the nick of time fun. I love an escape, I love to be entertained. And taking the readers on that kind of ride is my primary goal with every book I write.

But I do think it's important to read across all genres. I read a ton of non-fiction. Juliette Kayyem's *SECURITY MOM* was vital research for *FALLING*. *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE* by Barbara Kingsolver is one of my favorite books of all time. Kiley Reid's

debut *SUCH A FUN AGE* was such a standout. Haruki Murakami's memoir *WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT RUNNING*. showed me how intimate the everyday can be. Like food, I really think it's important to have a balanced literary diet.

Reviews of T. J.'s Two Thrillers

DROWNING

by T.J. Newman

Avid Reader Press, \$28.00, May

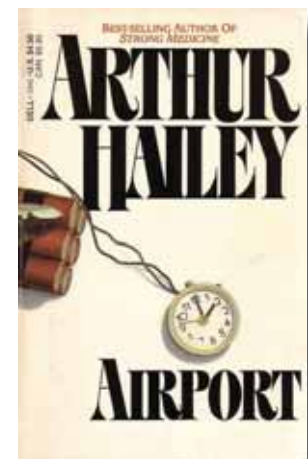
Rating: A

Reviewed by Larry Gandle

A commercial jetliner crashes into the ocean six minutes after takeoff and sinks with passengers alive and trapped inside. The clock is ticking on saving them. It will take great ingenuity to get them out before they run out of air. I will say no more about the plot for fear of ruining it for you.

The first twenty pages of this thriller are the most harrowing I have read in quite some time. The first sentence sets it off: "Will Kent opened his eyes just in time to see the engine explode." For the next fifty pages things go from bad to worse.

The author brilliantly sets up one nightmarish scenario after another to place the characters into increasingly dangerous situations. In a sense, this book reminds me of the disaster books and movies of the '60s and '70s. In books such as *AIRPORT* by Arthur Hailey or *THE POSEIDON ADVEN-*



TURE by Paul Gallico and movies like *The Towering Inferno*, there is the standard formula of placing the characters into danger where they must be rescued in a race against time. These books are exciting and fun.

The main characters, in this book, are well developed and are sympathetic to the reader. The plot rarely lets up and the length is perfect for one long sitting. This novel is not great literature but does what it intends to do quite admirably. It supremely entertains. It is the best thriller I have read so far this year. Highly recommended.

FALLING

by T. J. Newman

Avid Reader Press, \$28.00, 2022

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. By the way, my wife Michele, whom I consider a tough critic, liked it a lot as well. **Starred Reviews in Library Journal, Booklist & Publishers Weekly.**

Other Female Action/ Spy Thriller Writers

I always keep a keen eye out for action thrillers written by female authors and when I find them they are always considered in the Barry Thriller Award nomination process, although they are often outnumbered by excellent thrillers authored by male writers. In the past, we have had three female winners of the Barry Award for Best Thriller. They are Jamie Fivelletti, Taylor Stevens and Meg Gardiner. Karen Dionne won the Barry Best Mystery Award for **THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER** and that could have easily been also categorized as a thriller.

I'm old enough (by a long ways) to remember the days when thrillers were only written by men. Nowadays, female authors have seen more and more of their thrillers published. I just hope that the readers out there will support them. Men of my generation grew up reading male action thriller writers. I didn't know any women readers who liked that genre. Women mystery readers of my generation were more into amateur sleuth, great detective, traditional/cosy and psychological suspense mysteries. Times have changed, but I still wonder whether some male readers may still have a bias against thrillers written by women and whether female readers were raised to ignore thrillers in favor of other mystery subgenres. I hope that isn't the case and I sense that it isn't. If you are a male thriller fan who hasn't read many thrillers by women, you are missing out and should try some of the excellent choices mentioned in this article. If you are a female mystery reader who doesn't think that you would like a thriller, you should give at least one of the titles in this article a shot. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

There are more good thrillers written by women that have been published now than at any time in the past that I can remember.

Here are the thrillers in that category that my radar has picked up over that time period. I've divided them up between action thrillers, espionage

thrillers, and historical thrillers. I don't consider psychological/domestic suspense to be thrillers even though they are often called that.

Reviewed Action Thrillers

ZERO DAYS

by Ruth Ware

Gallery/Scout Press, \$29.99, June

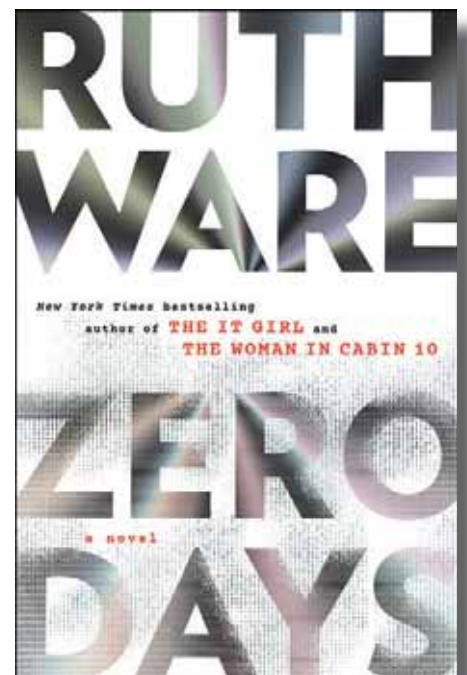
Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

Have you ever heard of a "pen tester?" It's someone hired by a company to test the weak spots of a building's security system. Jack (Jacinta) and her husband Gabe are pen testers. Jack is lithe, athletic and skilled in breaking-in techniques. Gabe is the computer whiz who tests the computer/security systems of companies and is the voice in Jack's ear to guide her through each building's maze. They're a good team and a loving couple. Every once in a while, Jack gets caught and arrested, but she always has a get-out-of-jail card from the company's owner explaining that what she was doing was approved by the company.

After one late-night incursion, Jack is arrested and doesn't arrive home until the wee hours of the morning – to find that Gabe has been murdered.

Soon it becomes evident that the po-



lice consider Jack the prime suspect and that someone is framing her for Gabe's murder. So she decides to go on the run to find out who killed her husband. The chase is on and it's quite a chase.

This is the first Ruth Ware novel that I've read. She is known for her psychological suspense and locked-room mysteries and those are two types of mystery fiction in which I have only a passing interest. But Larry Gandle practically raved about Ruth's last book **THE IT GIRL** and it appeared on a lot of year-end best lists, so I decided to give **ZERO DAYS** a whirl. It turned out to be a tried-and-true thriller with danger, deadlines and lots of action –the type of novel that brought me into reading mysteries in the first place and one that I have always enjoyed reading. The author also managed to weave into those elements a good whodunnit as well. I'm now a fan.

Jeff Popple's Take: ZERO DAYS bursts out of the blocks at a fast pace and maintains the momentum all the way to the end. Told in the first person, through the eyes of Jack, Ruth keeps the tension and the emotional drama at a high level throughout. There is a decent mystery around what happened to Gabe, although the killer is easy to work out, and a good amount of uncertainty as to where the book is heading. The details of Jack's efforts to keep one step ahead of the police are convincing and there are some solid twists and turns. I enjoyed Jack as a narrator, but had some questions in my mind about her actions early in the book. However, it is very easy to settle back and enjoy the race to the finish.

Rating: A-

SHIVER

by Allie Reynolds
Putnam, 27.00, 2021

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Set in an isolated ski lodge high up in the French Alps, Australian author Allie Reynolds provides an enjoyable and exciting twist on the classic crime plot of a group of characters trapped in a remote location and being killed off because of

some old secrets.

It is with some reluctance that Milla accepts an invitation to a reunion in the cosy Alp resort that saw the peak of her snowboarding career, but she is keen to see the charismatic Curtis one more time. She has not seen Curtis, or the other three invitees, since the tragic events ten years ago when the beautiful Saskia went missing during the finals of the snowboarding championships. When they get to the lodge, they find it deserted and their only way back down the mountain closed off. A series of nasty events open up old wounds and they soon realise that they do not know who has invited them there, or for what purpose. With a snowstorm approaching, and old secrets coming to the surface, the threats become more severe.

This is a very accomplished debut novel that quickly draws you in and keeps you interested and guessing all the way to the final dark twist. Allie makes good use of the alternating storyline, between the present and the events ten years ago, to ratchet up the suspense and the book steadily twists its way through several good surprises. The characters are nicely developed and the moving back and forth between the two timelines helps to flesh out them and allows the reader to see them grow and change. Milla is particularly well done, and she is an engagingly flawed narrator, who has her own parcel of secrets. She is a very nuanced character and Allie breathes real life into her and makes her interesting.

Allie is a former professional free-style snowboarder who spent five years competing in the Alps, and elsewhere, and she brings a good deal of credibility to the snowboarding scenes. She provides an interesting insider perspective on the atmosphere and tricks of a snowboard competition and skilfully portrays the various personalities involved. She also nicely captures the danger of being stuck in the snow and generates a good sense of foreboding as the snowstorm approaches the lodge.

A very enjoyable read. **Starred Reviews in Kirkus & Library Journal**



THE GIRL IN THE EAGLE'S TALONS

by Karin Smirnoff
Knopf, \$29.00, August
Lisbeth Salander #7

Rating: B+

Review by George Easter

A new author for the Millennium series results in a slightly better novel than those produced by David Lagercrantz, but one with nowhere near the emotional impact of the original series by Stieg Larsson.

Independent of one another, both Lisbeth Salander and Mikael Blomkvist head to the small northern Swedish town of Gasskas, now experiencing an economic boom due to its green energy possibilities. How convenient, you must be thinking – Mikael and Lisbeth in a small town together. What could go wrong?

Lisbeth has been named guardian of her teenaged niece Svala, a brilliant girl who exhibits some striking similarities to Lisbeth. Can you imagine someone less well equipped to be a child's guardian than Lisbeth Salander? But Svala's mother has disappeared and there is no one else to take care of her.

Mikael is going to attend the wedding of his daughter Pernilla, who is marrying Henry Salo, the mayor of Gasskas, whose life is being threatened by a ruthless business group. Henry

must produce signatures from reluctant landowners for a wind farm project to go forth.

I felt that Lisbeth's niece stole the show in this novel and that Lisbeth played second fiddle to her. I was a bit disappointed that we didn't see more of Lisbeth and her unusual skills until the exciting resolution. I have to say that the action scenes were quite well done. Good enough to read the next one.

ONE STEP TOO FAR

by Lisa Gardner

Dutton; \$17.00, 2022

Frankie Elkin #2

Rating: A

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: The first three men came stumbling into town shortly after ten a.m., babbling of dark shapes and eerie screams and their missing buddy Scott and their other buddy Tim, who set out from their campsite before dawn to get help.

Lisa Gardner's excellent thriller **ONE STEP TOO FAR** is the second book in her Frankie Elkin series. It works great as a stand-alone, too. This is a classic thriller with a beautifully realized female protagonist.

Frankie is a recovering alcoholic and a survivor of trauma. Like a female Jack Reacher, she has no home, no job, no family, few possessions. She has one absorbing passion: finding missing persons. She combs websites and newspapers for mentions of missing person cases, often years old. Sometimes, a case sticks with her and she researches it further. When she becomes obsessed, she goes on the hunt. Sometimes, she is successful. Usually, what she finds is a body. But she finds them.

Why does she do this? People often ask her. She has no good answer. Because no one else is looking, she sometimes says.

The case that has snagged Frankie's attention is a cold case in Wyoming. Five years ago a young man and his four best friends go camping in a large wilderness area for a bachelor party weekend. He disappears and his friends have no idea what happened. The im-

mediate search by professionals failed to turn up any trace. Eventually the search stopped. But every year the boy's father and the four young men who were his friends go to Wyoming for a week to resume the search. This year is to be the last time.

When Frankie turns up to join the search party, they refuse her help. She is a small, slight middle-aged woman with no law enforcement background, no forensics, no hiking skills, no wilderness experience. Her persistence wears them down and they reluctantly include her in the team. There is a local guide, a female search and rescue professional with a cadaver dog, a professed Bigfoot tracker, the four friends and the father.

As they trek through increasingly dangerous terrain and are plagued by a series of either misfortunes or sabotage, Frankie's lack of skills become her secret weapon. She knows little about the night the hiker went missing, so she encourages the four friends to talk and reveal their secrets. She knows nothing about wilderness searches so she looks in directions the others do not and notices things they take for granted. Her determination pays off as she puts together a complex explanation that helps reach their objective while putting them all at greater risk.

The pace of this thriller is fast and the surprises are many. It is man (and woman) vs. nature and ultimately, of course, man vs. man. Immensely satisfying. Highly recommended.

KILLING ME

by Michelle Gagnon

Putnam, \$28.00, May

Rating: B+

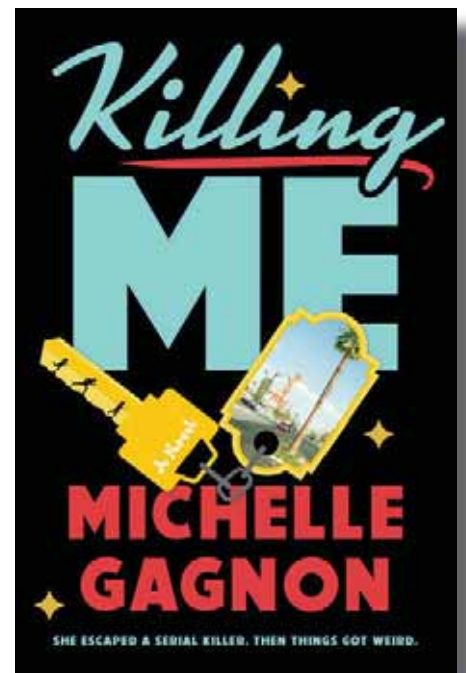
Reviewed by George Easter

This highly entertaining dark come begins with the following:

"The worst part was that I felt stupid. Well, that's not entirely true. The real worst part was that I was tied up in the back of a van with a hood over my head, and based on recent news reports, something truly horrific was about to happen.

But feeling stupid was definitely second worse."

The street-smart college student Am-



ber Jamison is amazed that the so-called Pikachu serial killer was able to grab her off the street. How could she have not seen it coming? Things get even weirder when she's miraculously saved by a mysterious woman...who promptly disappears. Who was she? And why is she hunting serial killers?

Amber is free but doesn't want to get involved with the police because of her prior life as a con woman. So she flees to Las Vegas, where she has been lead by cryptic messages from the woman who saved her.

There, more dangerous situations, leavened with dark humor, occur. Amber's snarky narration makes it a lot of fun to go on this perilous journey with her. **KILLING ME** has one of the best opening chapters I've read in years – and the rest of the novel is not too shabby either.

HOLLOW BEASTS

by Alisa Lynn Valdes

Thomas & Mercer; \$28.99, April

Jodi Luna #1

Rating: B+

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: Natalia had no paper and no pen.

Alisa Lynn Valdes' **HOLLOW BEASTS** is a fast-paced thriller that

centers around a New Mexico game warden, Jodi Luna, and involves a splinter sect of deadly but dim-witted white supremacists who kidnap young women for hunting practice while they make plans to blow up a small town.

Jodi has just taken over as county game warden when a local woman finds a hand in her garden. The good-old-boy sheriff shrugs it off but Jodi can't forget it, especially when the symbol burned into it is also found on some illegally set wolf traps. Jodi enlists the help of Ashley Romero, a young female deputy sheriff, also new to her job, and together they piece together the plot and set about to track down the domestic terrorists before they can kill their hostages and set off their bombs.

Marrying ripped-from-the-headlines border-state racism and wildlife conservation, the book rushes headlong through a complicated storyline marred by a few too many coincidences and this-time-it's-personal scenarios. But Jodi, Ashley and Jodi's daughter Mila are a powerful trio of kick-ass women. The series that follows will doubtless be worth pursuing.

HER NAME IS KNIGHT

Yasmin Angoe

Thomas & Mercer, \$24.95, 2021

Nena Knight #1

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

Stolen from her Ghanaian village as a child, Nena Knight has plenty of motives to kill. Now an elite assassin for a powerful business syndicate called the Tribe, she gets plenty of chances.

But while on assignment in Miami, Nena ends up saving a life, not taking one. She emerges from the experience a changed woman, finally hopeful for a life beyond rage and revenge. Tasked with killing a man she's come to respect, Nena struggles to reconcile her loyalty to the Tribe with her new purpose.

Meanwhile, she learns a new Tribe council member is the same man who razed her village, murdered her family, and sold her into captivity. Nena can't resist the temptation of vengeance – and she doesn't want to. Before she

can reclaim her life, she must leverage everything she was and everything she is to take him down and end the cycle of bloodshed for good. **Library Journal Starred Review**

KILLERS OF A CERTAIN AGE

by Deanna Raybourn

Berkley, \$27.00, 2022

Rating: B+

Barry Best Thriller Award Nominee

Reviewed by Larry Gandle

Four female assassins have been trained over forty years ago by a shadowy organization to kill bad people. They have made a very nice living and have just retired. While celebrating on a cruise ship, they soon make the discovery that all of them have been targeted for death by their own organization. The four of them will use their well-honed skills to get to and eliminate the individuals who have issued the contract on them.

This book is a tremendous amount of fun. Though the characters and the plot cannot truly be taken seriously, they are a clever bunch and it is compelling reading to witness how they work. The book is satisfying on many levels. There is a plot that doesn't let up – making it the type of book the reader cannot wait to get back to. The characters are sympathetic to the reader and often quite

humorous. The trade craft involved is not only fascinating but entertaining as well. There is a bit too much unrealistic exposition at the end, but, the conclusion remains quite satisfactory. Highly recommended for originality.

George's Take: I like clever characters and that's what you get with the quartet of protagonists in **KILLERS OF A CERTAIN AGE**. I also like thrillers that are fun to read. Ditto. **Rating: A Publishers Weekly, Booklist, Library Journal, Kirkus Starred Reviews and an Amazon Editor's Pick**

WINTER'S END

by Paige Shelton,

Minotaur, \$26.99, December, 2022

Alaska Wild #4

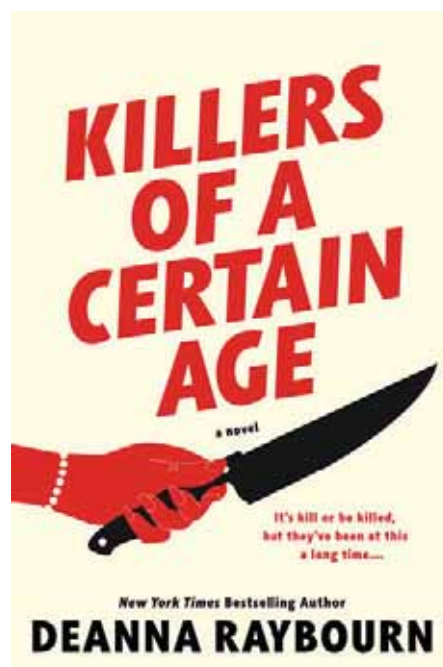
Rating: B+

Reviewed by Robin Agnew

In the fourth book featuring writer-in-hiding Beth Rivers, spring is coming, and tiny Benedict, Alaska, is preparing for their annual "Death Walk." When things thaw after winter, the whole community assembles for a head count, and anyone missing is tracked down. On this spring day, the missing include a very old man who lives alone in a remote cabin, a married couple, and the husband of Kaye, a woman Beth has been making friends with. Beth accompanies her buddy Orin, the town librarian (who also occasionally does some kind of special government ops) to check on the old man. When they find him, he's OK, but in bad shape, and Beth waits with him while Orin goes for help.

What follows is the kind of leisurely, wild storytelling Shelton excels at. She does a wonderful job of establishing this far-flung community, as well as depicting the beauty and raw power of nature – emphasizing the care that must be taken with it and the respect it must be given – while also providing a good story. Al, the old man, comes back down the hill but it's not Orin who turns up to help get him, it's the local law. Orin is now also missing.

Her friend Kaye, it turns out, was a member of a family in the midst of a long-standing feud. When Kaye



reaches out to the other family, all kinds of trouble follows. As Beth untangles the threads of Kaye's life, fearing for her friend (with good reason), she also learns about this vast and lengthy family feud.

Lots of secrets come out in this book, many of them about Beth's past, but some about other characters in the novel, notably Vi, Beth's landlady. Beth is insatiably curious and has a way of looking at and understanding a crime scene spatially. Her skill give the cops some reason to ask for her advice. But she also hares off on her own – not an unusual thing in Alaska – and ends up off in the wild by herself (also not unusual), winding up in some perilous situations.

These are really enjoyable books. The setting is wonderful, and the characters are rich, well drawn and memorable. I always look forward to spending time with Beth and everyone in Benedict. I did miss Orin, who is mostly absent, but the oddball characters that compose the feuding families in question more than make up for his absence, as does Al's arrival in town. The pacing of the stories is good, with revelations folding out naturally from each other, making the progression of the narrative an organic one. It seems almost like real life, but it's real life as depicted by a gifted storyteller.

THE CHASE

by Candice Fox
Forge, \$27.99

Rating: C-

**Reviewed by Larry Gandle
and George Easter**

600 inmates at Pronghorn Correctional Facility are set free in the Nevada desert due to a hostage situation. John Kradle, convicted of killing his family, is among them. Kradle knows he is innocent and is desperate to prove it. He needs to get back to his home to get answers. However, Homer Carrington, a vicious psychopathic killer has attached himself to Kradle and will not let him go off on his own.

In addition, Celine Osbourne, supervisor on death row is after him alone as she rates a man who kills his family to

be the worst prisoner on death row. Kradle must figure out a way to lose them so he will not have to return to prison for a crime he did not commit.

Also in the mix is Trinity Parker, a US Marshall, who hunts down the convicts -- especially Burke David Schmitz who is on a mission to shoot up a crowd and change the world order while slaughtering many innocents.

This thriller is incredibly unfocused. Characters are introduced throughout the book and are difficult to keep track of. If the author just focused on the Kradle story -- the most compelling of them all -- it would have led to a tighter plot. Instead the plot is difficult to follow. The characters are quite superficial and stereotypic. There is also a playful comedic sense which can be jarring considering the brutality of the story. The book is entertaining, but reality must be suspended throughout. Personally, I found it to be a silly waste of time.

George Easter's Take: I agree with Larry that **THE CHASE** jumps all over the place and tries to do too much. But early on, I decided to go along for the ride and I found the exciting action scenes to be rousing. **Rating: B-**

SECOND SHOT

by Cindy Dees
Kensington, \$27.00, May
Helen Warwick #1

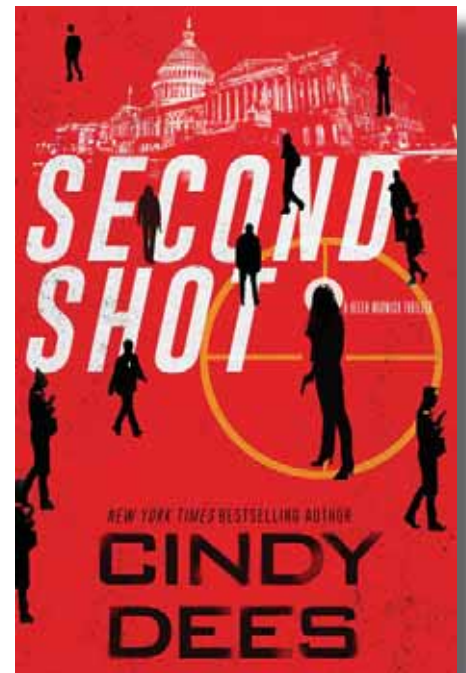
Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

Helen Warwick is a 55-year-old mother of three adult children who has recently been forcibly retired as a CIA assassin. Absent from her children's lives for much of her career, she is now trying to mend relationships, but that is proving somewhat difficult to do.

One night, as she is pet-sitting her son Peter's new puppy at his house, she comes under attack from armed men and barely escapes with her life. Who were these men and why was the house targeted? Were they after Peter or his boyfriend Liang who works for the NSA? Or has Helen's past come back to bite her?

Helen begins to investigate but is hampered by the limitations of her age



and her lack of recent physical training. Action heroines aren't generally 55 years old. But she's still a dead-eye marks-woman and fortunately the enemies she comes up against seriously underestimate what she can still do.

SECOND SHOT is full of exciting and dangerous twists and turns. For me it was such a fun read! Cindy Dees has a clear and pleasing writing style. This gets my vote for most entertaining thriller of the year. If you liked Deanna Raybourn's **KILLERS OF A CERTAIN AGE**, you'll love this one.

SCARE ME TO DEATH

by C.J. Carver
Bloodhound, £10.49, on amazon for
\$4.85, 2021

Rating: B+

**Reviewed by George Easter
and Jeff Popple**

Sixteen years ago a bomb brought an international flight down in Morocco, killing 214 people. Thirteen people survived the crash, including Kaitlyn Rogers whose murdered body has just been found in a London Airbnb. The police believe that she was killed by a new boyfriend, a nerdy accountant with some dodgy clients. However, DC Lucy Davies is not convinced, especially as evidence emerges that her death

is linked to the bombing sixteen years before. Enlisting the help of her friend, former MI5 agent Dan Forrester, Lucy begins to look into the circumstances around the bombing and finds a web of corruption reaching from Morocco to London.

This is an enjoyable thrill-a-minute action novel that races from the original plane crash to current day killings in Morocco and London, and a terrific climax. Carver is very good at this sort of free flowing thriller and she knows how to keep the plot moving and the action coming. The scenes in Morocco are evocative and exciting and there are plenty of surprises as the police investigation unfolds in London. It is fun and very readable, but after awhile the co-incidences begin to mount up. The story involves characters and relationships from Carver's previous three books about Forrester and Davies, and elements from these books add a complexity to the story that is not really needed.

I am a big fan of Carver's novels, especially her **THE SNOW THIEF**, but this one seemed a little rushed to me. I also thought that it would have worked better as a stand-alone novel, rather than being jammed into the Forrester and Davies series. There are some clever ideas and good reflections on how businesses manipulate crises, but a couple of the sub-plots seemed to be tacked on.

George's Take:

Like Jeff, I am also a fan of C. J. Carver's work going back to her CWA Debut Dagger-winner **BLOOD JUNCTION**, written under her full name Caroline Carver. Some of you may remember her from her appearances at Bouchercon some years ago.

I'm late to the Forrester and Davies series, but I've ordered the first two and hope to catch up soon. **SCARE ME TO DEATH** is very smoothly written and is a page-turning, easy read. Yes, there are some noticeable coincidences, but I didn't let them bother with my enjoyment of the story. **Rating: A-**

STATE OF TERROR

by Hillary Clinton and Louise Penny –
Standalone

Simon & Schuster / St. Martin's Press,
Oct 2021

Rating: A+

Reviewed by L. J. Roberts

First Sentence: Madame Secretary," said Charles Boynton, hurrying beside his boss as she rushed down Mahogany Row to her office in the State Department. "You have eight minutes to get to the Capitol.

Secretary of State Ellen Adams is flying back from the first diplomatic assignment of her term, a failed meeting in South Korea. Given no time to freshen up, she is summoned to the office of the President of the United States, a man who would love to see her fail at her job.

State Department employee Anahita Dahir receives a cryptic text which she originally dismisses as spam. A terrorist in London, suddenly makes the message clear to Anahita -- which sends the Secretary on an international diplomatic mission to stop a monster from destroying cities, and lives, around the world.

The sure sign of a good book is one a reader starts, intending to read only the first two pages but ending up continuing past midnight. That is a good book. Waking up at 4 a.m. and reading for several more hours, that makes a winner. So it was with **STATE OF TERROR**. The writing is wonderful in that one can hear the voices of both Clinton and Penny. There are classic touches of humor, and lines one wants to remember—"The true nature of terror is the unknown. The truly terrible thrives in silence."

How nice to have protagonists be women of a certain age who aren't young, gorgeous, and don't need a man to rescue them. They are strong, capable, smart, and very determined. At the same time, they are human; willing to question their own judgment, while trusting their own instincts and reason. In other words, these are women one would want to know and even better, be.

This is not a political book, but one of true suspense. It is a fascinating look at the role, albeit, we hope, somewhat exaggerated, of a Secretary of State. There is an excellent building of tension every step along the way. The inclusion

of a family member in danger could be trite but was not. For fans of Louise Penny, there are clever Easter eggs scattered along the way and crossover references to her Three Pines series. With each chapter, there's a new twist; with each page, the tension mounts.

STATE OF TERROR is an exciting, suspenseful roller-coaster ride with wonderfully done twists, and a compelling plot. Just when you think things may be okay, there is an intriguing hint of uncertainty, and a possible hint to a next book. One certainly hopes there is a next book. **STATE OF TERROR** is highly recommended.

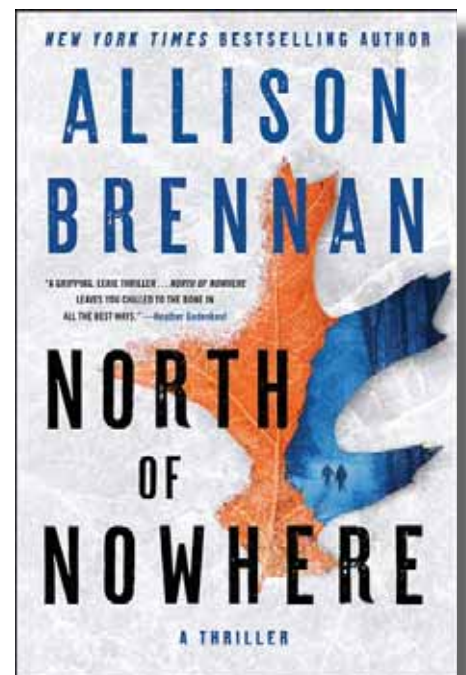
Unreviewed Action Thrillers

NORTH OF NOWHERE

by Allison Brennan

Minotaur, \$28.00, August, 2023

After five years in hiding from their murderous father, the day Kristen and Ryan McIntyre have been dreading has arrived: Boyd McIntyre, head of a Los Angeles crime family, has at last tracked his kids to a small Montana town and is minutes away from kidnapping them. They barely escape in a small plane, but gunfire hits the fuel line. The pilot, a man who has been raising them as his



own, manages to crash land in the middle of the Montana wilderness. The siblings hike deep into the woods, searching desperately for safety?unaware of the severity of the approaching storm.

Boyd's sister Ruby left Los Angeles for the Army years ago, cutting off contact in order to help keep her niece and nephew safe and free from the horrors of the McIntyre clan. So when she gets an emergency call that the plane has gone down with the kids inside, she drops everything to try save them.

As the storm builds, Ruby isn't the only person looking for them. Boyd has hired an expert tracker to find and bring them home. And rancher Nick Lorenzo, who knows these mountains better than anyone and doesn't understand why the kids are running, is on their trail too.

But there is a greater threat to Kristen and Ryan out there. More volatile than the incoming blizzard, more dangerous than the family they ran from or the natural predators they could encounter. Who finds them first could determine if they live or die.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE WILD

by Peggy Townsend

Berkley, \$28.00, November, 2023

It's summer in Alaska and the light surrounding the shipping-container-turned-storage shed where Liv Russo is being held prisoner is fuzzy and gray. Around her is thick forest and jagged mountains. In front of her, across a clearing, is a low-slung cabin with a single window that spills a wash of yellow light onto bare ground. Illuminated in that light is the father of her child, a man she once loved. A man who is now her jailor. Liv vows to do anything to escape.

Carrying her own secrets and a fierce need to protect her young son, Liv must navigate a new world where extreme weather, starvation, and dangerous wildlife are not the only threats she faces. With winter's arrival imminent, she knows she must reckon with her past and the choices that brought her to the unforgiving Alaskan landscape if she is ever going to make it out alive.

A story of survival in the wilds of

Alaska, *The Beautiful and the Wild* explores the question of whether we can ever truly know the person we love—or ourselves.

A KILLER'S GAME

by Isabella Maldonado

Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, June, 2023

FBI agent and former military codebreaker Daniela "Dani" Vega witnesses a murder on a Manhattan sidewalk. The victim is chief of staff for a powerful New York senator. The assassin turned informant is Gustavo Toro. His code: hit the target and don't ask questions. When Dani suspects a complex conspiracy, the only way to take down the mastermind is from the inside, forcing her to partner with Toro. Together they must infiltrate the inner circle at a remote facility.

Except it's a trap. For all of them.

Locked in a subterranean labyrinth and held captive by an unseen host, Dani, Toro, and others must fight for their lives. Now Dani must stay undercover, unravel a bizarre conspiracy, and survive lethal puzzles. But will Toro be friend or foe? Because in this killer's game, everything is real: the paranoia, the desperation, and the body count. And only one person can make it out alive.

Reviewed Espionage Thrillers

THE SPY COAST

by Tess Gerritsen

Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99,

November, 2023

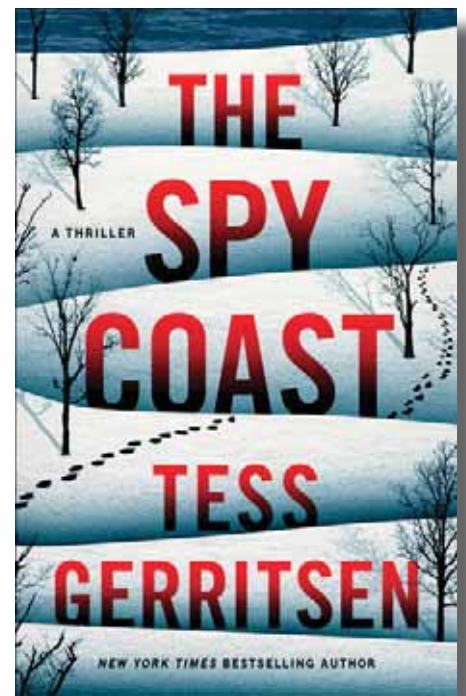
Maggie Bird #1

Rating: B+

Reviewed by George Easter

Veteran mystery writer Tess Gerritsen is trying something new – a spy thriller.

A handful of former CIA spies have chosen the seaside village of Purity, Maine to find peace in retirement. This includes Maggie Bird who lives on her chicken farm and has little contact with



the locals, except for her former colleagues and the girl who lives next door.

One day Maggie comes home and finds an intruder named Bianca in her kitchen. Bianca proceeds to tell Maggie that a former colleague, Diana Ward, has disappeared and that CIA files regarding a mission called Operation Cyrano have been hacked. Maggie's help in finding Diana Ward is solicited and quickly refused.

That night Bianca's body is dumped on Maggie's driveway while Maggie is away meeting with her former CIA colleagues.

Purity Police Chief Jo Thibodeau checks out Maggie's alibi but digs into her background because she senses something is "off" with her. Chief Thibodeau is also puzzled by Maggie's reluctance to share information.

It isn't long before someone tries to shoot Maggie with a rifle from long distance. The attempt is unsuccessful, but it does bring the other four former agents into the fray. And it isn't too long before they are way ahead of Chief Thibodeau's investigation.

The reader is privy to frequent flashbacks to the young Maggie Bird and those flashbacks culminate in a description of what happened to everyone involved in Operation Cyrano.

A pleasant read that I'm told will be

followed by a sequel. I understand that Tess Gerritsen got the idea for this novel when she found out that there was an inordinate number of retired spies living in rural Maine, the state of her long-time residence.

BLACK WOLF

by Kathleen Kent

Mulholland Books, \$29.00, February

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

Melvina Donleavy has a special talent that only a handful of people know about. She is a “super recognizer” – she never forgets a face. So the CIA sends her on a mission to Bylorussia posing as a lowly secretary to a trade delegation. The delegation’s real objective is to see if Iran is trying to buy nuclear materials and Melvina (Mel) has memorized the faces of all known Iranian nuclear scientists and top officials.

The time is 1990 just as the Soviet Union is dissolving. One of its satellites, Bylorussia, is considering independence, but the KGB is still active and powerful there, especially the head of the KGB known as the “Black Wolf.”

A major subplot is the presence of a serial killer who is preying on the young women of Minsk.

Mel is trying to blend into the background but, unfortunately, she catches the eyes of the Black Wolf and also the serial killer. Danger abounds.

Even though there is lurking danger throughout **BLACK WOLF**, the pacing of the novel is quite slow until the very end. So I would categorize this as more of a spy novel than a spy thriller. Nevertheless, it is an excellent spy novel. The characters are fully fleshed out and the plot is highly engaging. I suspect that this is not the last that we will see of Melvina Donleavy and that’s a good thing.

THE HELSINKI AFFAIR

by Anna Pitoniak

Simon & Schuster, \$27.99, November, 2023

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

Some might feel that being a CIA agent with a posting in Rome, Italy would be a cushy assignment, but not Amanda Cole. She feels like her talents are being wasted there with mundane tasks. But one hot summer afternoon that all changes when in walks a low-level Russian bureaucrat. He has overheard plans for the imminent assassination of a U.S. Senator visiting Cairo. After an extensive interrogation, Amanda comes to believe what he says is true. But trying to convince her Rome Bureau chief proves futile and the information is not passed up the line. Sure enough, the Senator is assassinated and Amanda soon finds herself in the position of the new Rome Bureau chief with the assignment of “running” the Russian operative.

A parallel story line involves Amanda’s father Charlie, who is a burned-out CIA agent with a secret past that he sorely regrets and wants to make amends for. Through flashbacks, we see what a disastrous posting Helsinki, Finland turns out to be for Charlie – both personally and professionally.

The two plot lines eventually merge at an exciting climax to **THE HELSINKI AFFAIR**. Anna Pitoniak is an intelligent and talented writer and one I’m sure we’ll see a lot of in the years to come.

ALIAS EMMA

by Ava Glass

Bantam, \$27.00

Emma Makepeace #1

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

Emma Makepeace is a spy. It’s all she has ever wanted to do. Her motivation is revenge on the Russian regime that murdered her father for passing secrets to the West just prior the breakup of the Soviet Union. Emma’s pregnant mother was able to escape to England, where Emma was born.

Emma is highly skilled and ready for an assignment with some meat on its bones and her wish is fulfilled when she is asked to convince Michael Primalov, a

young doctor in London, to go into hiding. Michael is the son of two Russian defectors who are considered high value assets of the British intelligence service. Other defectors close to the Primalovs have recently been murdered in London and the security services have placed the Primalovs in a safe house. But they are fearful that the Russians will try to kidnap Michael to use as a staked goat to induce his parents out of hiding.

At first Michael rebuffs Emma’s attempts to coax him to safety. He’s a pediatric doctor who doesn’t want to leave his patients. But an attempt to kidnap Michael convinces him to go along with Emma. But things go wrong almost immediately when she asks for a pickup team. She’s told she’s on her own and that the surveillance cameras in London have been hacked by the Russians. So Emma has to figure out how to get Michael across London and the Thames River without being seen on any cameras. Oh, and by the way, taxis and buses have cameras that are part of the overall system.

Thus begins a thrilling chase sequence as Emma and Michael attempt to get to safety without being detected by the three Russian assassins on their trail.

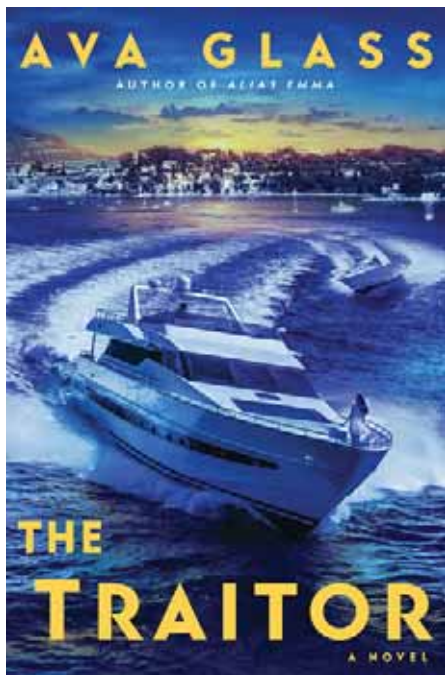
Emma is clearly the hero of this tale, but it was nice to see Michael step up and save her on a couple of occasions. I like a hero that is good, but not necessarily invincible.



Ava Glass

This exciting thriller is written with great skill and has already received a lot of kudos in the form of three starred reviews in the library journals and an Amazon Editors' Pick.

Ava Glass is a pen name for Christi Daugherty who has written YA thrillers and mystery novels under her own name.



THE TRAITOR

by Ava Glass

Bantam, \$16.99, September, 2023

Emma Makepeace #2

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

When an MI6 operative is found murdered in his apartment, Emma Makepeace and her boss Ripley are called in to figure out the intelligence ramifications, if any, of this murder. It doesn't take them long to find out that the dead spy had been investigating two Russian oligarchs suspected of selling illegal chemical weapons to rogue nation states. One of these oligarchs is currently traveling on his super-yacht and Emma is tasked with going undercover as a yacht employee so as to discover the oligarch's plans. Visiting places like the Côte d'Azur and Monaco would be nice work if it weren't for the danger involved.

When the oligarch hires her, it is

clear that he is very suspicious. He confiscates her cell phone thereby cutting off her means of communicating with her handler Ripley. And the oligarch's henchman keeps a sharp eye on her wherever she goes. But Emma is nothing if not courageous and resourceful, so she perseveres.

As Emma's work reveals secrets she'd be safer not knowing, the danger ratchets up. Is there a mole within MI6? If so, can Emma find out who it is before it is too late.

This is a story that should have universal appeal – a brave and intelligent protagonist pitted against seemingly insurmountable odds. What's not to like?

Unreviewed Spy Thrillers

RED LONDON

by Alma Katsu

Putnam, \$28.00, March

Red Widow #2

After her role in taking down a well-placed mole inside the CIA, Agent Lyndsey Duncan arrives in London fully focused on her newest Russian asset, deadly war criminal Dmitri Tarasenko. That is until her MI6 counterpart, Davis Ranford, personally calls for her help.

Following a suspicious attack on Russian oligarch Mikhail Rotenberg's property in a tony part of London, Davis needs Lyndsey to cozy up to the billionaire's aristocratic British wife, Emily Rotenberg. Fortunately for Lyndsey, there's little to dissuade Emily from taking in a much-needed confidante. Even being one of the richest women in the world is no guarantee of happiness. But before Lyndsey can cover much ground with her newfound friend, the CIA unveils a perturbing connection between Mikhail and Russia's geopolitical past, one that could upend the world order and jeopardize Lyndsey's long-time allegiance to the Agency. **Booklist Starred Review**

THE DEVIL'S BARGAIN

by Stella Rimington

Bloomsbury, £16.99, 2022

Standalone

THE DEVIL'S BARGAIN opens with the titular bargain. It is 1988, Harry Winslow is a junior Special Branch officer charged with making sure that foreign merchant seamen do not overstay in Britain. He is slowly led into a situation where he takes a bribe to allow one of them to stay. Fast forward to the present and Harry finds himself face to face with a local politician and realises it is the man he allowed to infiltrate the country all those years ago. At the same time, Manon Tyler, a young CIA operative has been transferred to London. Before she goes she attends a talk by a former KGB controller who lets slip that there may still be an "illegal" in the UK from a program he ran back in the Cold War. When that man, now known as Peter Robinson, becomes an MP the stakes suddenly get higher.

Written by the former head of Britain's Secret Service.

THE PEACOCK AND THE SPARROW

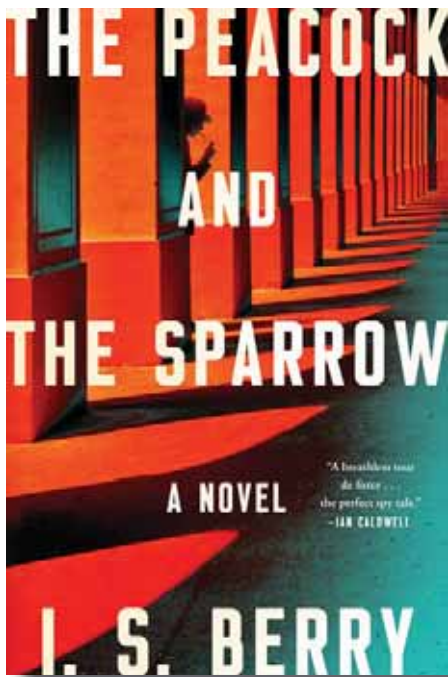
by I. S. Berry

Atria, \$28.00, May

Debut Novel

Shane Collins, a world-weary CIA spy, is ready to come in from the cold. Stationed in Bahrain off the coast of Saudi Arabia for his final tour, he's anxious to dispense with his mission—uncovering Iranian support for the insurgency against the monarchy. But then he meets Almaisa, a beautiful and enigmatic artist, and his eyes are opened to a side of Bahrain most expats never experience, to questions he never thought to ask.

When his trusted informant becomes embroiled in a murder, Collins finds himself drawn deep into the conflict and his growing romance with Almaisa upended. In an instant, he's caught in the crosshairs of a revolution. Drawing on all his skills as a spymaster, he must navigate a bloody uprising, win Almaisa's love, and uncover the murky border where Bahrain's secrets end and America's begin. **Publisher's Weekly Starred Review**



Reviewed Historical Thrillers

NIGHT FLIGHT TO PARIS

By Cara Black

Soho Crime: \$27.95, March

Kate Rees #2

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: Kate Rees slid into the Georgian mansion's salon and found herself staring into the shining eyes of a dead duck on a platter.

Fans of Cara Black's long and wonderful Aimée Leduc series that began with **MURDER IN THE MARAIS** and cycled through many of the arrondissements of Paris, trailing murders like a colorful scarf, will be pleased to know her new series promises similar frissons of danger and intrigue. Set during World War II and featuring a deadly female sniper and spy, Kate Rees, Black uses her encyclopedic knowledge of Paris but expands the action as Kate's mission takes her from England to Paris, and on to Cairo and more.

There is a lot of action, lots of characters, enough double crosses for a noir film festival, and some moments of warmth and heart. It's refreshing to

find a woman-centered spy caper in a period setting. Kate Rees, the protagonist, frequently references her pa back in Oregon who taught her a variety of survival techniques and rudimentary tradecraft in addition to marksmanship. His good advice works in the alleyways of occupied Paris or the souks of Cairo as well as it did in rural Oregon.

This new series is a nice departure for Cara Black, if not quite up to the caliber of the Paris-based Aimée Leduc books.

THE WHITE LADY

By Jacqueline Winspear

Harper, \$28, March

Rating B+

Reviewed by Robin Agnew

Jacqueline Winspear's **THE WHITE LADY** spans two wars. Despite this epic scope, the book has the feel of an intimate character study. Luckily, the character at the center of the novel, Elinor White, is well worth a look. As a little girl in Belgium with a British mother and a Belgian father, the book opens as the war begins and little Lini's father is gone. Somehow, even as a 10 year old, Elinor knows she will never see her father again, so she, her mother, and her older sister, Ceci, form a tight unit, a unit that becomes much tighter during the German occupation of their little village. When a strange woman asks them to help out, the two girls become a part of the resistance.

Winspear's careful laying of the groundwork of recruiting resistance fighters and putting them to work was an unusual detail, one I haven't seen in the war novels I've read. It's fascinating to see how Elinor takes to the work. She's able to push down her emotions and function - as she is taught - as a predator, with a healthy dose of fear. Ceci doesn't take to it quite as readily, and one of the puzzles of the book are the two different paths the girls eventually take.

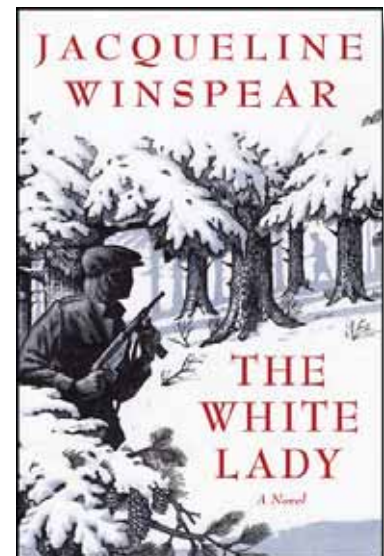
As the book goes back and forth timeline wise, we also encounter Elinor - now a seasoned agent - during WWII, as well as just post war, as London is struggling with gangs. The gangs were

another unusual detail, and the only recent literary echo is in Allison Montclair's excellent series set just post war. Elinor is drawn back into "the life" as she sees it affecting her neighbors, a hardworking mother and father with a sweet little girl. Elinor especially takes to the little girl and there's a secret there as well, one that's not unraveled until the end of the novel.

One of the things that really makes this novel stand out is the author's portrait of Elinor. We see Elinor as a young girl, a sponge, learning the lessons of war from an expert. We see her as an accomplished adult, fulfilling her task of organizing resistance in WWII Belgium. And we see her later, as a traumatized adult, sorting through the ways she's learned to live with the things she's done.

The other thread that caught me was the underestimation of women. It starts with Elinor as a young girl - no one would expect her to do the things she does. It's the women in the marketplace, fighting for a place in the breadline. It's a secretary. It's the sister of the gang leader. The true message of this novel might be: don't underestimate women. And Winspear provides the reader with concrete examples of why you shouldn't.

And of course, there's Winspear's trademark lovely prose, the kind of prose that leads to often reading with a lump in your throat. This is another indelible character from Jacqueline Winspear's talented pen.

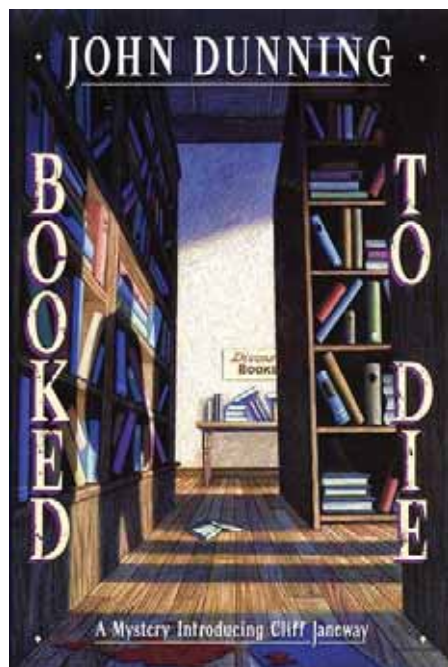


John Dunning

R.I.P.

Even though he had penned four novels in the 1970s and 1980s, John Dunning didn't "break out" until 1992 with the publication of his first Cliff Janeway novel, **BOOKED TO DIE**. The main character was a Denver policeman, but more importantly, an avid collector of first edition hardback fiction. It was a fine mystery, but it also taught the reader a lot about book collecting. I know I learned a lot from it and I looked at book collecting through different eyes from that point on. It proved to be one of the most influential crime novels of the last fifty years and was celebrated as such at the Dallas Bouchercon in 2019.

BOOKED TO DIE was a major, if not the major, influence in a collecting craze that was dubbed "hypermodern collecting" that was all the rage among book fans (especially mystery fiction fans) for the next 2-3 years following its publication. A lot of collectors wanted to get in on the ground floor before a newly published book rose substantially in val-



ue on the secondary market and that created a buying frenzy for some titles — especially an author's first novel or the first in a series. Warnings from sage fans that this would most likely be a bubble of excitement and not a good long-term investment strategy proved to be true.

John Dunning went on to write four more Cliff Janeway novels and have a successful career as a crime novelist while at the same time keeping his own bookselling business going along at a good clip.

Then in 2006, John was diagnosed with a brain tumor. After an operation to remove the tumor (only partially successful), he was not able to recover enough of his mental capacities to continue his writing career. Eventually the brain cancer caused an onset of dementia and a long period of decline which culminated in his death on May 23, 2023 at the age of 81.

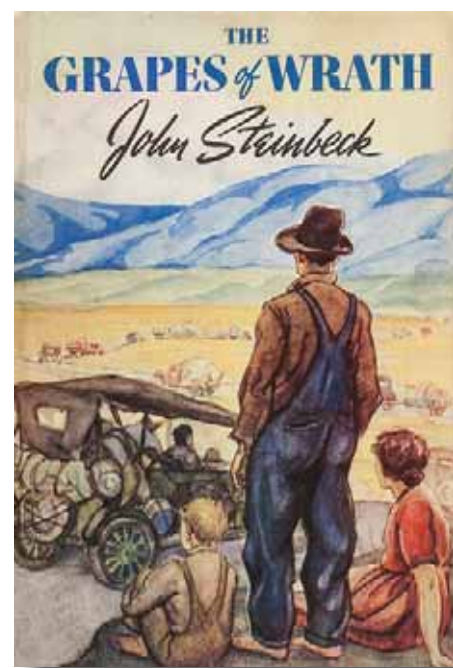
I had several personal encounters with John Dunning that were memorable to me. He was a man large in stature and strong in opinion. And above all, he loved books and that made him a kindred spirit.

One occasion was when we appeared together on a Bouchercon panel to discuss book collecting. I'll never forget his sage advice to booksellers, "Sell the book when the book is hot." Also, I remember him saying, "It's rarely the book you buy that you regret. It's the book you didn't buy (when you had the opportunity to do so) that comes back to haunt you."

Another occasion was when I



attended a book signing at Ken Sanders Rare Books in Salt Lake City. John showed everyone a mint copy of John Steinbeck's **THE GRAPES OF WRATH** that he found in a thrift store for a couple of bucks. He had a slipcase made for it and you could tell how much pride he had in owning that seminal work of



literature.

At another signing I brought my copy of **BOOKED TO DIE** which had been a review copy sent to me by the publisher Scribner. It has the publicity material in the front of the book and upon seeing that, he said, "Oh, this is a review copy. That adds 10% to the value of the book." I'm not sure if that is true today, but it just showed how much he knew about the book business.

His tombstone should read, "He loved books."

Larry Gandle Critiques



This year, my self-imposed assignment of reading all of the shortlists of the Gold, Steel and First Blood Daggers was especially daunting. As it turned out, I had not previously read any of the eighteen titles on these lists. Therefore, reading these titles consumed a good deal of my free time for two months. The one-thousand-page volume by Galbraith definitely did not help matters. I am ultimately glad I read them as so many of these authors are new to me and some of them are really good writers.

But there was one thing that marred this reading experience. One of the worse books I have read in years, **THE KINGDOMS OF SAVANNAH** by George Dawes Green, won the Gold Dagger. There is obviously a disconnect between myself and the Gold Dagger committee. Overall, I found the Gold Dagger list to be the weakest shortlist of the three that I read. It leads me to wonder exactly what I was missing. Did the committee find it literary? Did they find the writing to be so superior to the other books thereby granting it this esteemed elevation? In looking at their longlist, they included virtually no books widely considered the best of the year. Simply put, in my opinion, they blew it! The problem rests with them -- not me. (Or so I think.)

NOTE: In each shortlist, the books are listed in order of preference from best to least favorite.

THE GOLD DAGGER SHORTLIST

As explained above -- this is the weakest list overall of the three that I read. There are a couple of excellent crime novels ones here, a couple of good

ones and a couple of duds.

THE SILENT BROTHER

by Simon Van Der Velde
Northodox Press, \$9.99

Rating: A-

In Newcastle, Tommy Farrier grew up in hard circumstances. His mother is alcoholic, his stepdad is abusive and his little brother, Benji, is taken away by social services due to the awful living conditions he was being raised in. Tommy grows up with budding teenage gangsters and, eventually, heads into a life of crime- as that is the most profitable thing in his life. He becomes a drug dealer for the local Burns gang. However, he soon sees a young lady from his past also involved in the criminal life. He wants to bring them both out of this awful existence but doing so might cost him his life.

This is a dark, well thought out story told in a literary bent. The first third of the book reminded me of **SHUGGIE BAIN**, the Booker-winning novel of a boy living with an unreliable alcoholic mother. The second third is a coming of age novel involving the progression into a life of crime. The third part concerns Tommy's attempt to get out. The story is beautifully told with characters that are richly developed. The plot never wanes, is always interesting but does break down a bit at the end. There are elements of a thriller here so the plot does move swiftly at times but always breathes with realism. This is an excellent addition to the CWA Gold Dagger shortlist. Highly recommended.

THE CLOCKWORK GIRL

by Anna Mazzola
Orion, £8.99)

Rating: A-

In Paris, 1750, Madeleine Chastel, desperate to leave her mother's rancid brothel, accepts an assignment from Caille, a police officer, who promises her enough money to get away on her own with her young nephew. She is to spy on Dr Reinhart, a clockmaker -- one of the most famous in Paris. She will be hired as his daughter's maid and companion. She is to observe the clockmaker and his daughter and report any unusual behavior. She is under great pressure to do so as her future depends on it. Reinhart is known for creating intricate creations that seem to bring inanimate objects to life. At the same time, children are disappearing off the Parisian streets. Does the clever clockmaker have anything to do with that? Madeleine must discover the truth.

This is a very well written historical mystery. Once the plot is set up after the first 30-40 pages, the pacing takes off. Characters are overall well rounded and realistic. There is much historic detail reflecting the profound amount of research that the book required. The plot is brilliant and the author manages to pull off the surprising ending. I do wish the stereotypic scene of the villain telling all before killing the heroine was done differently. Nonetheless, the book is very entertaining and is very deserving of being on the CWA Gold Dagger shortlist.

THE WINTER GUEST

by W.C. Ryan
Arcade, \$26.99

Rating: B

In January, 1921, Ireland, an IRA ambush occurs outside the Kilcolgan



House. The ambush goes wrong and Maud Prendeville, the eldest daughter of Lord Kilcolgan, is killed. The IRA denies killing her and it seems that a separate gunshot was heard after the IRA left. They might be innocent of her murder. Captain Tom Harkin, an IRA intelligence officer, is called upon to investigate. He has personal ties to the victim in that, prior to the war, he was engaged to Maud. He must fight not only to discover the truth about Maud's death, but, to overcome the trauma and memories he has brought back from the

battlefields of the war.

This is a beautifully written, atmospheric novel. Having a sound knowledge of Irish history would help as I often found myself confused as to which side the character's allegiances fell on. The characters are well rounded creations with a few villainous stereotypes. The pacing is languid relying on the characters to drive the plot. The plot, itself, is a bit dull reflecting the lifestyle in this part of the world. There is, unfortunately, the cliché scene of the villain holding a gun on the hero

while divulging all and the silly climax scene. Recommended for those who like historical detective mysteries.

A KILLING IN NOVEMBER

by Simon Mason
Riverrun, \$35.00

Rating: B

In Oxford, two Detective Inspectors are tasked with solving a murder. Ryan Wilkins is the product of a disjointed family growing up in a trailer park. He is rough and crude and is easy to lose his temper. As a result, he always has one foot out the door. Yet, he has a prowess for noticing things and is a damn good investigator. His partner, DI Raymond Wilkins is a well-educated, well-mannered and well-dressed black man of Nigerian heritage. The two DI Wilkins do not get along. They must work together when a young woman is found murdered in the college. Nobody has any idea of her identity. They must discover who she is and why she was killed.

A British police procedural is usually not my type of book. At least the characters are not dull and dreary. They are actually quite interesting and there is occasional humor in their interplay with each other. Other characters are reasonably well rounded. The story never gets overly complicated and the solution is reasonably clever. If British police procedurals are to your taste, this book is recommended.

THE LOST MAN OF BOMBAY

by Vaseem Khan
Hodder and Stoughton, \$26.99

Rating: C

In 1950, a white man is found frozen at the foothills of the Himalayas. His identity is unknown. Also unknown is why is he there and, of course, who killed him. There is a clue as he has a notebook on him. He is called 'the Ice Man' by the press. Inspector Persis Wadia, the first female police inspector in Bombay, must investigate the case. Two more murders in Bombay may indicate a serial killer is on the loose.

This is the type of book that makes

reading the CWA shortlist every year a real effort. I would never have picked up this book otherwise. The book is overwritten and, at times, badly written. There are so many clunky passages that, as I was listening to the book in my car, I actually laughed out loud at some of the descriptions, "She was suddenly aware of the pungent smell of her own sweat. Her heart was pounding." "The blow caught her unawares, the butt of the gun cracking against the side of her head" There is quite a bit of cracking her head.

This author has written multiple books and there is no excuse for this. Yet, when writing about Persis' spirituality -- or lack thereof- his writing can be quite profound. It seems that the author had various historical events he wanted to include in this book. It is as if there is a line connecting these events. The line is a plot filled with Persis' personal relationships and the endless investigative questions. Going from one part of the puzzle to another is usually illogical. It takes a tremendous leap of faith to accept that Persis can figure it out based on what is known at the time. Forty percent of the book is character development, forty percent is investigative and twenty percent is historical information. Her colleague, Oberoi is a boorish caricature. There is no reason for that. There are not one but two very long exposition scenes in which the villain inexplicably tells all. This is the sign of a lazy writer.

Vaseem Khan appears to be everywhere in Britain -- every crime fiction festival and even starting his own. He is also the new President of the CWA -- the first person of color to do so. I wonder if this had anything to do with the selection of this book on the Gold dagger shortlist. I just don't see the merits of this novel otherwise.

THE KINGDOMS OF SAVANNAH

by George Dawes Green
Celadon Books, \$27.99

Rating: D-

In Savannah, a woman is kidnapped and her friend is murdered. It is up to the local PI Morgana Musgrove -- an

older woman and part of Savannah society -- to find her. Her grown children are enlisted to help out. Their investigation takes them into the position of having to uncover some of Savannah's unsavory hidden past.

This book commits the cardinal sin of a crime fiction book. It is exceedingly dull! Crime fiction books are supposed to be read for entertainment. The author seems to strive for some sort of southern literary novel. It is just slow, totally character driven, lacking any semblance of suspense or intrigue required to get the pages turning. The characters are stock figures that lack any true realism. Dialogue is endless. The pacing is languid to the point of somnolence. Needless to say, I, obviously would advise the reader to pass on this work. It is an awful choice for the CWA Gold Dagger shortlist. To think that this book actually won the Gold Dagger is truly inexplicable. This is the worst winning book that I can remember in any category.

IAN FLEMING STEEL DAGGER

Overall, I enjoyed reading this thriller shortlist. I do commend the committee for selecting books that actually belong in this category, that is, novels that are actually thrillers. I do wish they had not select the monumental **THE INK BLACK HEART**, but after having completed it, I am glad I did read it.

SEVENTEEN: Last Man Standing

by John Brownlow
Hanover Square Press, \$27.99

Rating: A

He is known only as Seventeen and happens to be the greatest assassin in the world. He gets paid for the jobs he is assigned by a shadowy organization. He cannot afford to ever fail or to show weakness. He is now given his toughest assignment yet. He must target Sixteen for death. Sixteen is every bit in his league. The reason for the assignment is unknown -- he just needs to carry it out. This will pit two of the world's best

assassins against each other. Who will be the last man standing?

This is an ingenious idea for a plot. As expected, the pacing never lets up as the two go after each other. There are some other characters brought in but their purpose is to humanize these two killing machines. The plot is so compelling, reading it almost demands a single sitting. This is the true definition of a thriller and fits in perfectly with the Fleming Steel Dagger shortlist. It could easily and deservedly win. Highly recommended. Great fun.

(Note: It did win!)

ALIAS EMMA

by Ava Glass
Bantam, \$27.00

Rating: A

Emma Makepeace is a new agent in the British secret service. She has completed very rigorous training and is now assigned her first major job. Her mission is to convince a young physician to accompany her to MI6 headquarters for protection against a whole host of Russian assassins in London. They must travel through London without being detected by the thousands of cameras located throughout the city as they have been hacked by the Russians who could see their every move. They cannot use any means of transportation as they are also compromised. So, their journey is to be by foot. Along the way they will encounter Russian assassins who will make the trip harrowing and deadly.

This is an excellent thriller in every sense of the word. Once the setup of the plot is established, the pace almost never lets up. It is one long and deadly chase. The characters of Emma and Michael are well rounded. Emma is a great thriller heroine -- well trained and cunning. The fact that the story takes place over one long night makes it nearly impossible to put down and the reader will feel compelled to read it in one long sitting. This is a highly recommended and fully entertaining novel. It is also an ideal member of the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger shortlist.

THE BOTANIST

2023 CWA DAGGERS
SHORTLIST

**THE IAN FLEMING
STEEL DAGGER**

Linwood BARCLAY
TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY

SEVENTEEN
LAST MAN STANDING
JOHN BROWNLOW

M.W. CRAVEN
THE BOTANIST

ROBERT GALBRAITH
The Thursday Murder Club
INK BLACK HEART
A FIVE-STAR REVIEW

ALIAS EMMA
AVA GLASS

ALAN PARKS
MAY GOD FORGIVE

Sponsored by
Ian Fleming
LONDON + PARIS

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by M.W. Craven
Constable, \$28.99
Rating: B+

Detective Sergeant Washington Poe has two cases to work on. His friend,

Estelle Doyle, has been arrested for the murder of her father. He was found in his home shot in the head. Estelle claims she found him and called the murder in. Snow on the ground indicates nobody else entered or left the house. Poe be-

lieves her innocent and must prove it.

There is also a serial killer on the loose. Repugnant individuals, about to be killed, are being sent a pressed flower and a poem which give clues as to which poison will be used to kill them. Poe and his crew must use all their considerable resources to outwit the killer who calls himself The Botanist.

For most of this book, the plot was direct -- not too complicated and moves at a swift pace. Characters are well rounded. Tilly Bradshaw, the analyst, reminds me of Holly Gibney of Stephen King's Mr. Mercedes trilogy.

I would consider this book to be a thriller rather than a staid, dull, dreary British Detective novel. My problem with the book is the plot became increasingly unrealistic toward the end and some of the conclusions reached by Poe were a definite stretch. Otherwise, this is a very entertaining, swiftly moving work and one which definitely belongs on the Steel Dagger shortlist.

TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY
by Linwood Barclay
Morrow, \$27.99
Rating: B+

Andrew Mason goes on a fishing trip with a friend leaving his wife, Brie, home for the weekend. She disappears for the next six years. Andrew finally moves on with his life, sells the house and is living with a new girlfriend. All that changes when a woman fitting Brie's description shows up at the site of the old house, with groceries. She is loudly inquiring what happened to the old house. She then drives off. Did Brie return? If so, where has she been all these years? Andy must find out the truth as his own life could be in danger.

As I was reading this very entertaining domestic noir thriller, I could not escape the thought that I was reading a Harlan Coben novel. Someone disappears then reappears years later. However, towards the end, the writing style changes into multiple character alternating chapters thereby increasing the pace as it races to the very clever solution. Characters are well rounded, overall. The book is very entertaining

and a worthy member of the Fleming dagger shortlist.

THE INK BLACK HEART

by Robert Galbraith
Little Brown, \$32.00

Rating: B

Edie Ledwell is one of two individuals who created a very popular internet cartoon called **THE INK BLACK HEART**. She comes to Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott's detective agency in a disheveled state begging Robin to help her discover the identity of Anomie, the pseudonym of an individual who is tormenting her on the internet. She is despondent and suicidal over the online abuse. Robin initially turns her down as they do not investigate cybercrimes. However, when Edie and her partner are attacked leading to Edie's murder, Cormoran and Robin are hired to discover the identity of Anomie, the confessed killer. The assignment takes them deep into the web and the sometimes dangerous individuals who inhabit it.

J.K. Rowling has written another monstrous sized book under the pen name of Robert Galbraith. Rowling has proved herself a master at characterizations. Cormoran and Robin are superb creations and, honestly, they kept me plodding through this bloated narrative. The internet trolls are integral to the story. As such there are many pages filled with internet dialogue. Ingeniously, it is through these texts that we meet the group playing the game based on the cartoon. We know one of them is a killer -- but who? Rowling was, herself, the victim of internet trolls. She made a comment that did not go over well in the LGBTQ+ community and was subjected to endless threats and criticism. In a sense, this is her take on the subject. There is also a passage in which Edie and her partner were being sued by someone who claimed to come up with the idea of the cartoon which was reminiscent of the writer who sued Rowling for the idea of Harry Potter. This book is just over 1000 pages. I desperately wanted to stop but found myself unable to put it down. I do love the characters. However, the author needs to be edited.

This book could have come in at half the length and would have been equally if not more effective with a tighter plot. The book is so long, I found myself forgetting who the huge cast of characters were even the actual villain at the end. For that reason, this book will never get a rating higher than a "B." I do recommend it for those who love long bloated books that will take a great deal of time to get through. A warning: once you start it, you won't be able to put it down. You will be totally drawn in like I was.

MAY GOD FORGIVE

by Alan Parks
Canongate, \$22.00, Europa in the U.S.

Rating: B-

In Glasgow during the 1970s, the city is in shock after the firebombing of a beauty shop which killed five people including young girls. Three youths are arrested and a mob shows up to demand their death. On the way to the prison, the van carrying them is rammed and the youths are kidnapped. One by one the youths are being killed and Detective Harry Banks is in a race against time to save them so the truth can be discovered. He must deal with the local crime bosses as it all appears to be a turf war. Of course, this places his life into jeopardy.

This is another dull, dreary Irish police procedural. There are some absurd coincidences that lead to breaks in the case -- such as Banks in a bar hearing noise of traffic similar to what was heard on a tape sent by the criminals leading to the discovery of where a victim is being held. Banks is like every other beaten down hardboiled Detective or PI -- fighting his private demons. The plot is relatively pedestrian but the book is short enough to not be too overwhelmingly depressing. Characters are well rounded as much of the book is character driven. If British/Irish/Scottish police procedurals are your type of book, you will like -- not love this one. It is definitely not a thriller and its inclusion on the Fleming shortlist is a bit perplexing.

JOHN CREASEY (NEW BLOOD) DAGGER

This category of first novels is possibly the best shortlist of them all. The fact that there are so many excellent new writers always bodes well for the future of the crime fiction genre.

DIRT CREEK

by Hayley Scrivener
Flatiron Books, \$27.99

Rating: A

Twelve-year-old, Esther, disappears from her small town, Durbin, Australia. As the book opens, her body is found buried on a local farm. The story goes back a week to a period of time just before the disappearance. We meet Esther's friends, Ronnie, her best friend, and Lewis. We also meet Esther's parents and other individuals from the town. Once Esther disappears, Detective Sarah Michaels arrives in town to attempt to discover what happened. The cast of characters is diverse. Suspects abound.

This is a superb novel on how the disappearance of a young girl can affect a small town. There have been many previous novels written to explore this theme but this one is one of the most compelling and insightful that I have read. Characters are rich creations, and the reader will get to know each one. The fact that Esther's death is revealed in the first few pages changes the reader's expectations. There is no need to wonder whether she will live -- just why she died and who did it. Everything is eventually revealed by a Greek chorus-like group of children. The death is truly tragic and so very sad. The book has a literary bent meaning the death is not the center of the tale but the characters' reactions to it steer the plot. The book is a brilliant first novel and deserves being on the Creasey Dagger shortlist, as well as, the Barry shortlist for best first novel of the year. (It won the Dagger!)

THE LOCAL

by Joey Hartstone
Doubleday, \$28.00

2023 CWA DAGGERS
SHORTLIST

THE ILP JOHN CREASEY
(NEW BLOOD) DAGGER

BREAKING
AMANDA CASSIDY

THE LOCAL
JOEY HARTSTONE

LONDON IN BLACK
JACK LIVER

DIRT TOWN
HAYLEY SCRIVENOR

COUNTRY FOR GIRLS
EMMA LITTLE

OUTBACK
PATRICIA WOLF

Sponsored by **ILP** International Library Properties

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Rating: A

In the small town of Marshall, Texas, the Federal courthouse of the Eastern District of Texas is located. It is a hotbed of Patent lawsuits as the town has a reputation of handing huge awards for patent infringement. James Euchre is a local attorney who is one of the best

patent lawyers in the town, and, therefore, the country. His new client is Amir Zawar, the CEO of a technical company who must defend his work against patent law infringement. When a murder occurs in the town, Amir is accused of murder and decides to hire Euchre to defend him. Euchre is in over his head

as he has never defended an accused murderer. Things get even tougher when it becomes obvious that Amir will be executed if he is found guilty. Euchre is convinced Amir is innocent, so he feels responsible for saving his life.

My favorite kind of crime novel is the legal thriller and this one is a good one. Though this is a first novel, the author has written two feature films and two seasons of a television legal drama. Therefore, he knows how to write a compelling drama. The legal tradecraft described is fascinating concerning patent law. Once it switches to a murder trial, the plot takes off and pacing becomes relentless. Much of the drama occurs in the courtroom which is where a legal thriller should spend a considerable amount of time. The main characters are well rounded but some of the lesser characters are stock figures. There are several twists which will push the reader to finish the book quickly. This book is perfect entertainment and one that fully deserves to be on the MWA Creasey shortlist.

OUTBACK

by Patricia Wolf
Embla Books, \$12.99
Rating: B+

Berndt and Rita are a German couple who are traveling through the Australian Outback to get to Rita's new job. They get into car trouble in the middle of nowhere and are soon assisted by a man who essentially holds them prisoner. To the rest of the world, they have disappeared without a trace. It is up to DS Lucas Walker to locate them. He has no leads. Rita's sister shows up to help. She is a detective with the Berlin CID. The two of them have to navigate the various personalities of the residents of this desolate location. They know they are in a race with time to locate them.

The strength of this debut effort is the depiction of the locale. Characters are well rounded creations -- especially the major players. The pacing takes off like a rocket from page one. Then it settles into the slower pace of a dull British style police procedural. The pacing picks

up once again as time is running out. Then the book reads much more like a thriller. The writing is sound and quite mature for a debut effort. This is an author to keep an eye on. It is a worthy member of the Creasey Debut Dagger shortlist. Recommended.

NO COUNTRY FOR GIRLS

by Emma Styles

Sphere, £9.99

Rating: B+

Charlie and Nao are an unlikely duo to be fleeing across the outback after accidentally killing a man. They have with them, a satchel of gold and a mutual mistrust of the other. They know they are being pursued by some unsavory types and realize their only chance of survival is to team up against their adversaries -- whoever they might be. Both of them have secrets which they will eventually reveal as they proceed into a life and death struggle.

This is an excellent debut thriller that simply went on too long. It is a bloated effort which could have been trimmed about one hundred pages which would have tightened up the plot considerably. The characters are generally stereotypes except for the main ones which do come off as more well rounded and realistic. The depiction of the locale is a major strength as is the pacing of the plot which gradually builds to a solid climax and resolution. Recommended

BREAKING

by Amanda Cassidy

Canelo \$23.00

Rating: B+

Dr Mirren Fitzpatrick, world famous oncologist from Ireland, is vacationing on an island off of Miami. Due to a fight with her husband, she is sitting in a bar, by herself, drinking when her five-year-old daughter goes missing on the beach. It is a mother's worst nightmare. The media gets involved and her whole family is put through a microscope. They immediately condemn Mirren as irresponsible at best or a suspect at worst. It is up to Rolle, the detective, to solve the case. He has his own demons to fight.

BREAKING is very good for a debut effort. The plot starts out at a breakneck speed but soon settles into a casual pace as background and current life situations must be established. The author does manage to capture the predatory style of the news media blaming those who are innocent. There is also a contrast between how disappearances are covered based on socioeconomic backgrounds. There are some major twists and turns -- some quite contrived and the final one a bit farfetched. Nonetheless, this book will serve you well on the plane or by the pool. Recommended.

LONDON IN BLACK

by Jack Lutz

Pushkin Vertigo, \$16.95

Rating: B-

In a dystopian novel of the near future, DI Lucy Stone's life was changed when terrorists unleashed a deadly nerve gas at Waterloo Station in London killing thousands of people. Unfortunately, the gas lingers and can kill certain susceptible people unless they get a booster. Lucy is susceptible and her life is focused on keeping her immunity level up. Unfortunately, two years later, copycat killers are setting off gas attacks and Lucy's losing the ability to absorb the booster and sustain the necessary levels in her body. There is rumored to be an antidote created but an important scientist who devised the immunity boosters. Unfortunately he is killed. Lucy must work the case and discover who killed the scientist and who might have the life-saving antidote.

The author had a great concept but it went on way too long. It takes awhile to catch onto what exactly is going on. The plot begins to pick up then goes pretty much nowhere for a hundred pages. Finally the plot kicks in again and the book ends as a true thriller. I liked the character of Lucy who reminded me of Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander in her unusual appearance and physical brutality. Other characters are generally well rounded with a few superficial stereotypes thrown in. Of course, there is the exposition scene while the villain holds the hero hostage and seemingly

about to be killed. The book is a mixed bag -- reasonably entertaining but really way too long. A mild recommendation.

All in all, this has been a good reading experience this year -- with one glaring exception. I'm grateful for the opportunity to read works by fine up-and-coming authors (mostly British) whom I have not read previously -- Simon Van Der Velde, W. C. Ryan, Simon Mason, John Brownlow, Ava Glass, Hayley Scrivenor and Joey Harstone. Some of these author's works would have shown up on my Best of 2022 List if I had read them timely. I recommend them all to you.

If You Like Michael Connelly You Should Like These Authors

Michael Connelly is my favorite crime writer and his Harry Bosch series my favorite series. But once I've read the new Bosch in a couple of days, I have to wait a whole year for another one. So over the years I collected a short list of authors with series that remind me of Michael Connelly and Harry Bosch. No one is as good as Connelly is, but these series are, nevertheless, well written and have elements that compare favorably with the Bosch series. So if you are like me and a little impatient for the next Michael Connelly novel, here's some recommended series to while away the days with reading enjoyment.

Rozlan Mohd Noor's Inspector Mislan Series (5 books so far)
Bruce Robert Coffin's John Byron Series (4 books)
Lee Goldberg's Eve Ronin Series (4 books so far)
Robert Ellis' Lena Gamble Series (3 books)

I've read all 16 of these books and greatly enjoyed them. Let me know if you have other Connelly-Bosch lookalikes. -- George Easter

Stop! Don't Read That Book! – Read This One Instead!

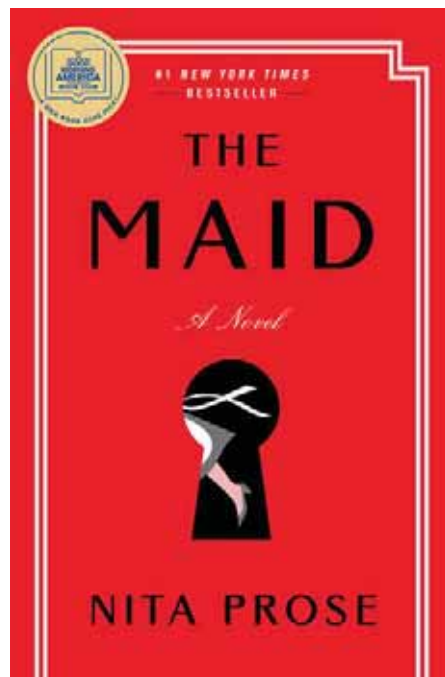
by Meredith Anthony

Shopping for books can be murder. **S**In the 1999 rom-com *Notting Hill*, Hugh Grant plays the owner of a London bookstore called The Travel Book Company. When a customer asks him if he has books by Dickens, he responds, “We’re a travel bookshop. We only sell travel books.” The customer considers, then asks, “How about the new John Grisham thriller?” Jerry Lenaz, proprietor of The Cloak and Dagger, a mystery bookstore in Princeton, says he can sympathize. The front of The Cloak and Dagger has additional signage announcing “A Mystery Bookshop.” Jerry told me that he had a customer who browsed for a while and then looked puzzled and asked, “You only sell mysteries here?” It’s happened more than once.

Although I love to imagine someone stumbling in to New York City’s venerable Mysterious Bookstore and asking Otto Penzler if he has a copy of Chaucer, I suspect that most mystery fans are generally a bit smarter and more focused. It’s funny, but it also raises the question, how do we shop for books? How do we decide what to read?

Mike Bursaw, proprietor of the famed bookstore, Mystery Mike’s in Carmel, Indiana, has been in the book trade for more than 57 years. Mike says that while about 50% of visitors to his store are looking for something specific and often bring lists, the other 50% are all over the map. Of course, some ask for recommendations. But browsers respond to other factors, too. “Book cover art work is surprisingly important,” he said. **Maybe You Can Tell a Book by its Cover.**

How do we choose a book? By its cover? Sure. Sometimes. I’ve done it. I loved the provocative keyhole peek on **THE MAID** by Nita Prose.



But there are many other factors that come into play when someone is choosing a book.

Some pick a book by its author. When Bill Clinton co-wrote **THE PRESIDENT IS MISSING** with James Patterson, I pounced. Or by its title. Who could resist the cleverly titled **EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY HAS KILLED SOMEONE** by Benjamin Stevenson?

I think we’ve all been swayed by a provocative one-line description on the cover? One of my favorites is, “She’s accused of four murders. She’s only guilty of three,” on the cover of **BLOOD**

SUGAR by Sascha Rothchild. [Editor’s note: This is the exact reason I read (and enjoyed) **BLOOD SUGAR**.]

There’s also usually a longer descriptive paragraph on the back cover of most books, specially written to draw us in.

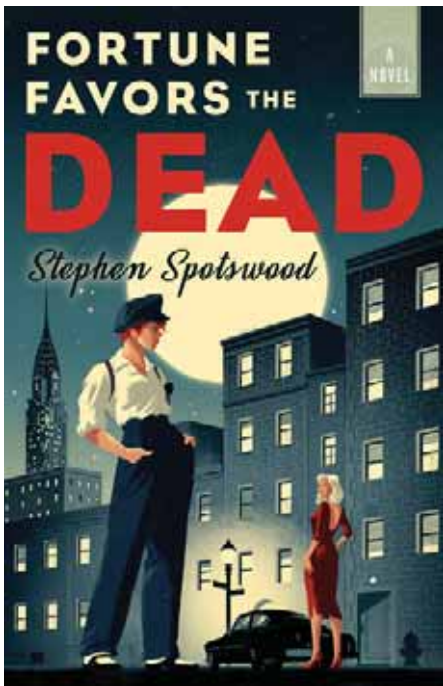
Some readers are influenced by blurbs, quotes from other authors, on a book cover. Once I was at a book party at The Black Orchid, New York’s fabulous and much-missed mystery bookstore on the Upper East side. Harlan Coben was there and someone mentioned blurbs. He got excited and rummaged through the shelves for a specific volume by an author we’d never heard of. He held it up with a big grin and demanded we read the cover quote. It said, “Better than Harlan Coben!”

Some readers choose a book by a recommendation from a friend or a bookstore employee. Years ago, I was in The Poisoned Pen, the legendary bookstore in Arizona. My husband had just published his first novel and I was browsing while he talked to Barbara Peters, the owner, about his reading/signing that night. I asked the guy behind the counter for ideas. What should I read? He asked me what authors I already read and liked. Then he suggested Craig Johnson. He held up a copy of **A COLD DISH**. I looked at the guy in the cowboy hat on the book cover and shook my head. “I don’t like westerns,” I said. He smiled. “You’ll like this one.” This startled me, so I bought the book, along with several more of his recommendations. I loved them all. I haven’t missed a Craig Johnson title since then and I watched every wonderful TV episode of “Longmire.”

Do we buy a book because it had a good review? Of course. Or because it’s a success, maybe appearing on a best-seller list? Yes.

I’ve chosen books in all these ways. Some of my rationales have been more sophisticated than others, but all methods are fine. None are bad.

But let's do a deeper dive. What about genre? If you're reading *Deadly Pleasures*, your book of choice is probably a mystery. But there are many sub-categories. Do you prefer a thriller? A cozy? A spy novel? A police procedural? A romantic thriller? Hard-boiled? Noir? Do you prefer books with big city settings? Foreign intrigue? Damaged heroes? Female cops? Adolescent detectives? Most readers of mysteries have favorite sub-genres. Preferences for amateur sleuths, female cops, spies or intrepid journalists. Psychological thrillers. War-time mysteries. Westerns. Legal or medical mysteries. Scandinavian noir.



In addition, many of us also have antipathies. We hate certain types of books. Historical fiction. Alternate histories. Sci fi/mystery crossovers. Horror/mystery crossovers. Dystopias. Political thrillers. Medical mysteries, action thrillers, or Westerns.

As a reviewer for *Deadly Pleasures*, which I feel is a big responsibility, a great pleasure, and also a job I take immense pride in, I find myself reading even more widely than ever. And I always had a pretty good range. I look for excellence in all kinds of sub-genres, and am constantly amazed at the astonishing array of choices readers have. I

still say I don't like westerns, but Craig Johnson is now not the only exception I make. I still claim not to read cozies, but I never miss an Alexander McCall Smith.

So, I have two suggestions for mystery readers. One is an idea to refresh your reading habits. The other is a real challenge. A game-changer. See what you think.

Take a Chance

The first idea is to stretch your tastes a bit further than usual. Get a little bit out of your comfort zone. First, think of your favorite authors. Then look for a newer author who writes in the same vein.

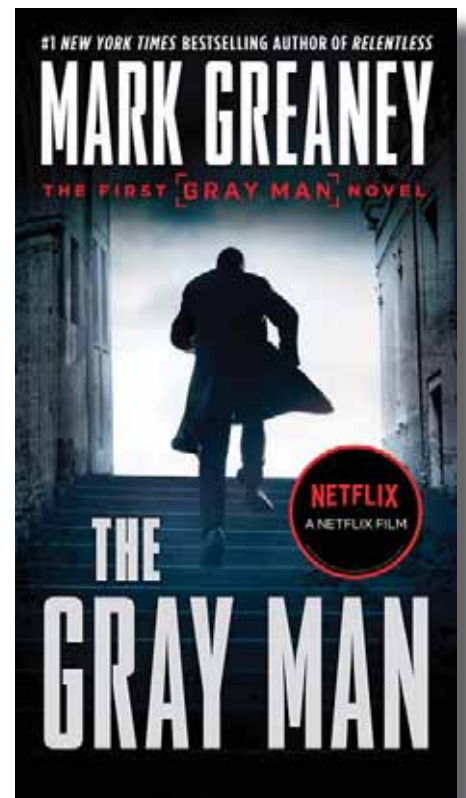
If you're a fan of legal thrillers, you probably read and maybe reread John Grisham, Scott Turow, and Michael Connelly's Lincoln Lawyer books. So, try the new generation of legal stylists like Steve Cavanagh or Robert Dugoni.

If you love the oldies, like Agatha Christie and Rex Stout, dip into Stephen Spotswood. Nero would pronounce it satisfactory. Spotswood's first book, **FORTUNE FAVORS THE DEAD**, harked so closely to the Nero Wolfe style that he was awarded their annual prize by the Wolfe Pack, a noted group of Rex Stout fanatics.

Or try Katharine Schellman's books set in the Roaring Twenties. Or take a look at an updated female amateur sleuth like the one in **SUBURBAN DICKS** by Fabian Nicieza. I think Agatha would love it.

If you love the hard-boiled masterpieces of Raymond Chandler, dig into the latest hard-boiled gem, **RAZOR-BLADE TEARS** by S. A. Cosby.

If you adore the spy novels of John le Carré or Tom Clancy, give Mark Greaney and *The Gray Man* a try. Or pick up an updated British spy novel by Mick Herron, author of the amazing Slough House series.



Go Nuts: the Mystery Reader Challenge

If you're willing to stretch even further, here's a challenge for you.

First, examine your reading habits, sort out the traits that make a book engaging.

Look at your browsing efforts, unpack your wants and needs, like and dislikes. Maybe take a look at the books you've read in the past year as a starting point. Or take a good hard look at your To-Be-Read pile. Do all that.

Then break the rules. Disrupt the ordinary. Do something crazy.

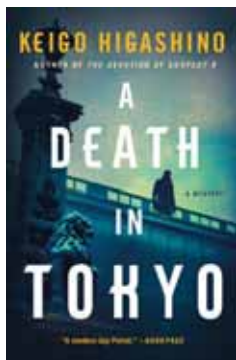
If you're a thriller person, read a cozy. Go ahead. Try **THE MURDER OF MR. WICKHAM** by Claudia Gray or **THE QUESTION OF THE MISSING HEAD** by E.J. Copperman and Jeff Cohen.

If you're a cranky old hawk who only reads Clive Cussler and W.E.B. Webb, tell the bookstore clerk you're buying a gift for a sick friend and take home the

Louise Penny-Hillary Clinton collaboration, **STATE OF TERROR**. (You can put a Lee Child cover on it so no one will know.) Or try **THE GATEKEEPER**, a fresh take on the ex-military vigilante with mad skills by James Byrne.

If you're hung up on Scandinavian noir, pick up a humorous caper. It's the perfect antidote. Maybe try Elle Cosimano's **FINLAY DONOVAN KNOCKS 'EM DEAD**. Or read **THE MOTION PICTURE TELLER** by Colin Cotterill. Get into Tim Hallinan's Junior Bender books. Or, if you can find them, the hilarious Kinky Friedman novels.

If you love the Paris-based novels of Cara Black, travel a little further afield. Try **TWO NIGHTS IN LISBON** by Chris Pavone, or **LAST SEEN IN LAPAZ** by Kwei Quartey, or **A DEATH IN TOKYO** by Keigo Higashino.



If you gravitate toward historical mysteries like those of Alan Furst or either of Charles Todd's two excellent series, break out a futuristic sci fi crossover. Try **THE MIMICKING OF KNOWN SUCCESSES** by Malka Older. Or curl up with **THE ANOMALY** by Hervé Le Tellier.

If you're a cozy reader, for god's sake, run out and buy a Lee Child!

Go nuts. I dare you.

It may not change your long-term reading habits. You may not even like it. But you'll have shaken off the cobwebs. And it may open a door to a whole new experience.



CRIMEFEST AWARDS

2023 WINNERS

WWW.CRIMEFEST.COM

Specsavers Debut Crime Novel 

A Flicker in the Dark by Stacy Willingham 

eDunnit Award

The Book of the Most Precious Substance
by Sara Gran

H.R.F. Keating Award

The Life of Crime: Detecting the History of Mysteries and Their Creators
by Martin Edwards

Last Laugh Award

Bryant & May's Peculiar London
by Christopher Fowler

Thalia Proctor Memorial Award for Best Adapted TV Crime Drama

Slow Horses (SEASONS 1 & 2) produced by See-Saw
based on the books by Mick Herron

Best Crime Novel for Children

The Good Turn by Sharna Jackson

Best Crime Novel for Young Adults

Five Survive by Holly Jackson



CrimeFest The international crime fiction convention www.crimefest.com







CRIME NOVEL OF THE YEAR
THE FINGERPRINT AWARDS

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WINNERS WILL BE ANNOUNCED LIVE AT CAPITAL CRIME
ON THURSDAY 31ST AUGUST



Reviewed to Death

THE RIVER WE REMEMBER

by William Kent Krueger
Atria Books, \$28.99, September

Plot Summary by Ted Hertel

Decoration Day, 1958. It's the first real celebration of spring for the hard-working farmers in the small town of Jewel, Minnesota. It was also, more or less, the last day of Jimmy Quinn's life. Found floating in the Alabaster River, half eaten by channel catfish, his body filled with buckshot, the town's most prominent citizen was generally hated by all who knew him.

Before the body can even be examined, and with no evidence whatsoever, just their own narrow-minded bigotry, the locals immediately suspect Noah Bluestone. He is Sioux, a World War I veteran who has recently returned home with a shy soft-spoken Japanese wife. Bluestone had just been fired by Quinn, who believed the "uppity Indian" had been stealing gas from Quinn's enormous farm holdings. Sheriff Brody Dern, a decorated war hero with physical and emotional scars of his own, must overcome the town's prejudice in his search for the truth. However, Bluestone refuses to say anything in his own defense, not even to his unwanted court appointed attorney, Charlotte "Charlie" Bauer. While the town might not be concerned about the facts, at least the sheriff seems to care. But why does Dern wipe down the crime scene before it can be investigated by anyone else?

This is William Kent Krueger's third book in his "companion novel" series, the earlier ones being the excellent **ORDINARY GRACE** and the equally solid **THIS TENDER LAND**. Each is a standalone but with common themes that run through them: family, guilt,

and the search for justice. However, unlike those two novels, which focused on young people, the story here is primarily centered on adults. Filled with pitch-perfect characterizations and capturing the essence of late 1950s' small town atmosphere, Krueger has fashioned another story that will grab the reader right from the start and won't let go until the final pages.

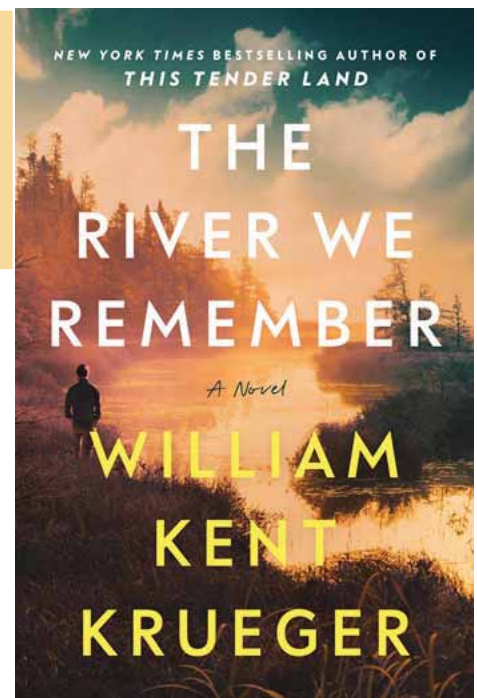
The first half of the novel is told mainly through the eyes of Brody Dern, while the second half is often carried by attorney "Charlie" Bauer's attempts to get Bluestone to help her craft his defense at the coming trial.

Sheriff Dern knows that he is not the man he seems to be, that his current life was just built on the lies he has told. But he's not the only one with secrets that will eventually come tumbling out. This is a story of families that are torn apart by their awful secrets, yet they are also achingly bound together by them so those secrets don't come spilling out. But above all, it is the story of two wounded people who are seeking redemption in their lives.

Poetically written, the novel is centered around the Alabaster River that runs through it, its own character starkly set out: "Our lives and the lives of those we love merge to create a river whose current carries us forward from our beginning to our end. Because we are only one part of the whole, the river each of us remembers is different, and there are many versions of the stories we tell about the past. In all of them there is truth, and in all of them a good deal of innocent misremembering."

Ted Hertel

This is one hell of a book written by one hell of a writer. It is a powerful



novel of life, death, family, prejudice and redemption. Do not miss it. **Rating: A+**

Meredith Anthony

First Line: "The Alabaster River cuts diagonally across Black Earth County, Minnesota, a crooked course like a long crack in a china plate."

William Kent Krueger's **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER** is a long, slow, old fashioned epic, detailed and full of life, and as stately and majestic as the river that runs through it. It is not my favorite kind of book. But Krueger is a master at hooking the reader and, although slow, the suspense builds and tightens and you suddenly realize you can't put it down.

The large cast of characters and their various flaws and secrets and motives are explored in depth. The history of the area and the attachment people have for the land is rendered in heartfelt detail.

The truth about Quinn's death, when it finally emerges, is both complex and yet somehow inevitable. But as fine a rural noir as it is, that is not why you should read **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER**.

Like Dennis Lehane in **SMALL**

MERCIES, Krueger has something more important to say. He is peeling back the layers in a small, isolated area to look at the roots of hate in America. Where does hate come from? Why is it so entrenched? What is the role of the family? The community? Law enforcement? And what—the crucial question—what can we do about it? Strangely, the race wars in Southie Boston and the jingoism of small town Minnesota are not so different. These are passionate books by thoughtful and accomplished authors. Read them and learn. Read them and weep. **Rating: A**

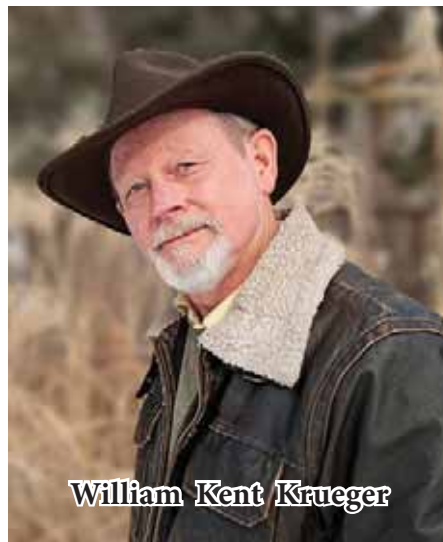
Hank Wagner

Kent Krueger's big, beautiful book is deep, dark, and often solemn, a celebration of the human spirit and endurance, but also a stunning condemnation of human pettiness, weakness, prejudice, and deceit. Recalling classics like Don Robertson's **PARADISE FALLS**, and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, it also brings to mind Harper Lee's **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**, chronicling a small town's reactions to overwhelming events, which force its denizens to deal with their troubled pasts to resolve life and death issues in the present.

By means of his elegant prose, Krueger maintains absolute control throughout, delivering generous portions of pathos, heartbreak, human frailty, and violence, offset by equally generous portions of love, courage, loyalty, and sweetness. Once you succumb to the spell he so carefully casts, you'll be reluctant to leave the confines of the small town of Jewel, even for a moment. **Rating: A**

George Easter

When you pick up a new book by Kent Krueger you know you're money is well spent and that you're in for a good time – beautiful prose, sympathetic characters, great plot and a wonderfully described setting. **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER** is a memorable read that will undoubtedly be considered one of the best mysteries of 2023. **Rating: A**



William Kent Krueger

Here's what the author, William Kent Krueger, says about his latest novel.

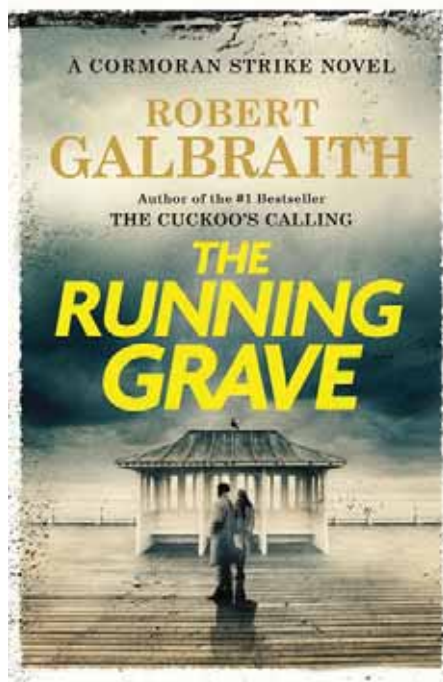
"In 2013, I published my standalone novel **ORDINARY GRACE**. At the time, I told audiences that I believed it was the book I'd been born to write, probably the best book I would ever write. Six years later, I published **THIS TENDER LAND**, which I love every bit as much as **ORDINARY GRACE**.

And once again, I found myself thinking that I would never write a book to compare to these two. Now I can't help but embrace the old adage "Never say never," because **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER**, the novel I'll publish on September 5th, I love every bit as much as the two earlier books.

In many ways, **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER** is a companion to the others. Like those earlier novels, it's set in southern Minnesota in an earlier time and deals with many of the same themes. The story opens on Memorial Day in 1958 when the body of Jimmy Quinn, Black Earth County's leading citizen, is found floating in the Alabaster River, nearly naked and dead from a shotgun blast.

This story is absolutely a compelling mystery; the question at its heart is who killed Jimmy Quinn. But it's so much more than just a mystery. It deals with the devastating effects of war on the human spirit. It explores the darkness of racism and bigotry. And maybe most important of all, it asks the question: How do we heal from the wounds delivered by the battles we fight in this life?"

Next Issue Cover Article



I've wanted to do a cover article on Robert Galbraith's Cormoran Strike/Robin Ellacott series for some time now, but the timing wasn't right. Now it is. **THE RUNNING GRAVE** comes out on September 26, 2023 and the next issue is due November 9th. That will give me time to read the 960-page book and create the article. There are no advance reading copies of her books.

THE RUNNING GRAVE centers around a religious cult, which is infiltrated by Robin in order to rescue a young boy from its clutches.

This is one of the best crime fiction series being written today and is one of my favorites. -- George Easter

Introducing ... *Inspector Mislan* by George Easter

Rozlan Mohd Noor is a retired police detective who served for eleven years in the Royal Malaysia Police. He began writing to please his young son Daniel (who is a character in the series) and he naturally turned to crime fiction because that is the genre with which he was most familiar and the one that fits his life experiences. In an interview in *Publishers Weekly*, Rozlan said, "Among other things, I wanted to highlight the shortcomings of the police and issues in Malaysia's current affairs, which I did in [the] books. **DUKE** talks about politicians reaping the country's resources, such as logging for timber and sand-mining, for personal gain. **UTUBE** addresses anti-LGBT activity and corrective rape in a politicized Muslim-majority country, and **SOULLESS** has to do with human trafficking, which the government denies is taking place. My newest novel in the series, **PHILANTHROPISTS**, touches on drugs, the pandemic, and Rohingya refugees."

I normally don't pay any attention to blurbs on book covers, but I have to admit that the one by Michael Connelly mirrors my own thoughts. He says, "With **21 IMMORTALS**, Rozlan Mohd Noor proves that a great character can be found anywhere on the globe. Undaunted and determined, Inspector Mislan Latif is my kind of detective. Harry Bosch would ride shotgun with him anytime."

Reading this series has been a highlight of my 2023 reading experience. I absolutely love the characters whom Rozlan has created. It is also fascinating to vicariously live the life of a Malaysian detective and experience the country's culture and mores. Fans of good police

detection and procedure should flock to this series, which is best read in order.

Some Things to Know About the Series

1. The novels are set in Kuala Lumpur, which is the capital of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur has a population of approximately 2 million, comprised mostly of Malaysians, Indians and Chinese, with a sprinkling of Thai and Myanmar peoples. One book in the series takes a diversion into Thailand.

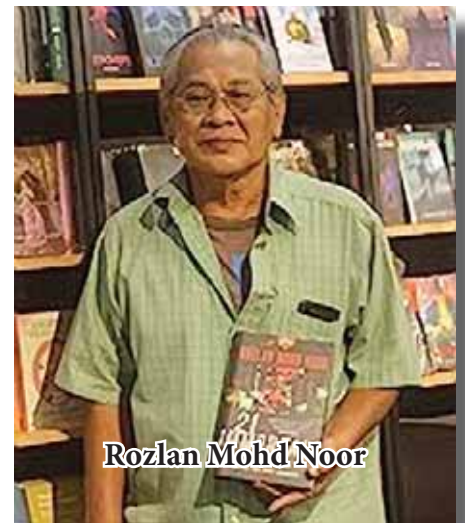


Kuala Lumpur

2. They all feature puzzling and fascinating crimes to solve.

3. The police in Kuala Lumpur are faced with the same issues and difficulties that are faced by any American large city police department. And the Kuala Lumpur police act in much the same way American police do. Although I did notice at least one exception: a suspect is not allowed to have a lawyer with him/her during the initial interview.

4. The protagonist Inspector Mislan is something of a foodie and knows all the best street stalls and restaurants. When food is mentioned (numerous times) the only items I recognized were pork, chicken and rice. The numerous



Rozlan Mohd Noor

local dishes sound like they would be tasty but I have no idea what they are comprised of.

4. The author writes the series in English and he has a fine command of the language. Rozlan says that he was educated in English and that he thinks in English. These are not translations.

Major Continuing Characters

Inspector Mislan Latif is a divorced detective with a young son of whom he has custody. He smokes too much and ignores orders when bosses try to steer him away from the path he knows he must follow to solve a case. He's an honest, dedicated cop and a very imperfect person.

Detective Sergeant Johan Kamaruddin is Mislan's loyal sidekick and something of a lady's man.

Superintendent Samsiah Hassan, head of Special Investigations, is Mislan's tough, but fair, boss. She often has to go to bat for him because of his maverick tendencies.

Senior Assistant Commissioner Baharuddin Mohd is a political appointee, a glory hound and Samsiah's immediate boss. He always favors the quick and easy solution as opposed to the difficult and correct solution to a crime.

Astro Awani, an investigative journalist with whom Mislan often shares tips in order to get otherwise unobtainable information germane to his cases.

Chew, the forensics supervisor at the Federal Crime Forensic Department.

Dr. Nursafia (Fie) is Mislan's go-to pathologist and eventual girlfriend.

If I were to give the series as a whole a rating, I would give it a straight A

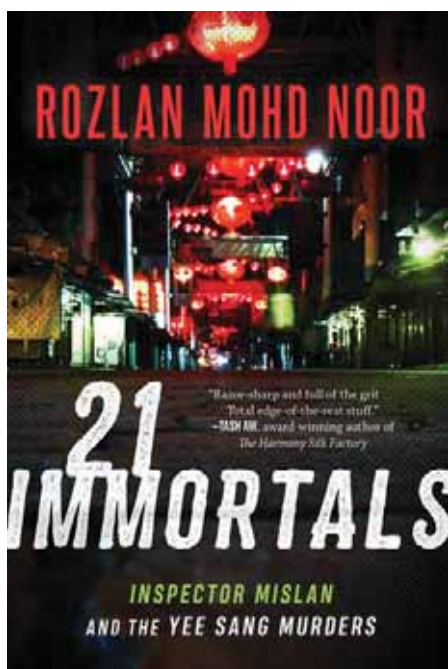
21 IMMORTALS: Inspector Mislan and the Yee Sang Murders

by Rozlan Mohd Noor

Arcade Crime Wise, \$25.99,

August, 2020

Publishers Weekly Starred Review



Inspector Mislan Latif's final case after a long night's shift could be his last. Called to a wealthy neighborhood of Kuala Lumpur, he finds a crime scene unlike any he has encountered before: pristine, the victims a family seated at dinner, Mona Lisa smiles fixed to their faces, frozen mid-gesture around the traditional Chinese New Year dish of yee sang, signifying prosperity, longevity, many good things—though it's not that time of year. It makes an eerie, chilling tableau of death, but signifying what? The celebrity of the father, fashion magnate Robert Tham, has already drawn a media throng, and soon the upper echelons of

the police have taken an interest, bringing pressure to solve the crime quickly.

But every clue points to another unknown. This isn't the primary scene so where is it? What are the motives of Tham's younger business partner, the attractive Miss Irene? What of his connections to an old-school criminal gang and the triads? With rival units of the police seeking to co-opt and, he suspects, bury the case, Inspector Mislan's investigation takes him to every level of this modern, multi-ethnic, American-pop-culture-influenced society, to where moneyed power and influence demand their say. Maverick, hard-boiled yet tender, a single father raising a young child, Mislan must rely on his team—and the politically savvy woman leading Major Crimes who is his boss—to support, protect him from the corruption above, and help find a way to ensure the course of justice.

DUKE: Inspector Mislan and the Expressway Murders

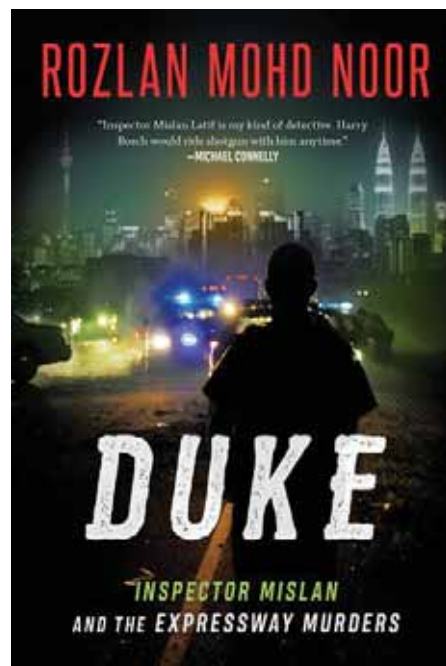
by Rozlan Mohd Noor

Arcade Crime Wise, \$25.99,

March, 2021

Publishers Weekly Starred Review

In the run-up to the Eid holiday, the police department is drained of staff and the DUKE expressway jammed



with vehicles, as many in Kuala Lumpur leave the capital to celebrate the end of Ramadan with their extended families. In the slow lane, a Mercedes E200 suddenly veers after several bright flashes and comes to rest against the guardrail. When the highway patrol arrives, what looked like a traffic accident turns out to be an apparent murder-suicide of the driver and his female passenger, both having suffered gunshot wounds.

Yet, called to lend a hand with the investigation, Inspector Mislan finds something else again. The dead man and woman, a wealthy, politically connected entrepreneur and his business associate, were by all appearances engaged in a long-term affair, seemingly in love, and the crime scene doesn't add up for suicide. But then, if these two successful people were murdered, why? And how, when the car was locked from the inside? And why does the political establishment want the case closed in such an awful hurry? Once again, Mislan must find a way—with the help of his team and his politically savvy boss—to withstand the pressure from above, solve an impossible mystery, and ensure that justice prevails.

UTUBE: Inspector Mislan and the Emancipatist Conspiracy

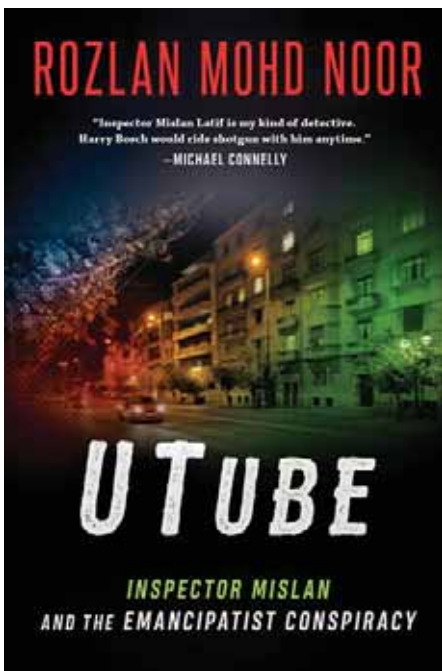
by Rozlan Mohd Noor

Arcade Crime Wise, \$25.99, July, 2021

Publishers Weekly Starred Review

In this new thriller, Mislan and Detective Sergeant Johan are called to the scene of an ongoing investigation by D11, the Sexual & Child Abuse Investigation Division, that involves a series of rapes of successful young women.

What immediately jumps out as D11's Inspector Sherry investigates the first case is that the attack was filmed with a video camera. The perpetrator, gloved and masked, had gained access to the victim's apartment and was there with a cameraman, standing over her, when she woke in her bedroom. When the video appears on UTube with the legend that it shows her "salvation," the shame of it drives her to suicide. The



second case involving the same M.O. has left a friend of the rape victim murdered at the scene, and that brings in the team from Special Investigations.

Forced by their superiors to combine efforts, with Sherry in the lead, Mislan struggles to rein in his maverick impulses. But the video of the second assault is posted online and then still another makes the news, leading to mounting public alarm. With pressure from above to close the case quickly, the two inspectors have no choice but to find the way to work together and uncover the trail that will lead them to the shadowy figure who calls himself the Emancipatist.

SOULLESS: Inspector Mislan and the Faceless Girl

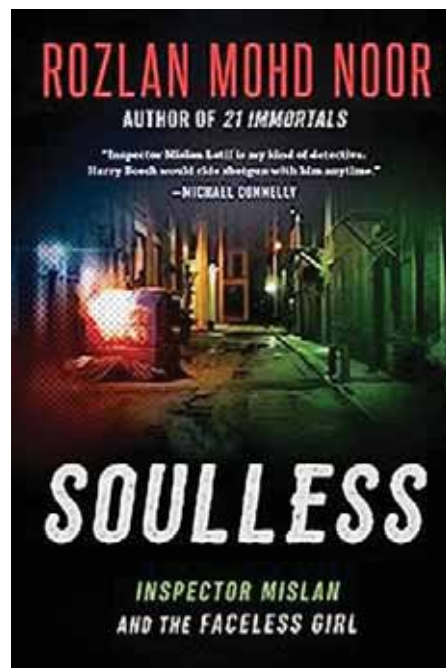
by Rozlan Mohd Noor
Arcade Crime Wise, \$25.99, July, 2022
Publishers Weekly Starred Review and an Amazon Editor's Pick

Early morning in Jalan Alor, one of the city's red-light and tourist hotspots controlled by the Triads. A junkie's scream of horror and the commotion that follows brings down the police, first a patrol car, and then, after what the officers see, Inspector Mislan and Detective Sergeant Johan from Special Investigations. The body in the

duffle bag had been dumped in a back alley. The junkie who found the bag thought he'd hit the jackpot. The rats probably thought the same. But it was acid that took the young woman's face and burned the flesh on her fingers, and something unknown caused the marks on her skin of what appears to be torture.

With no papers, no fingerprints, no face, and a body removed from the original crime scene, Mislan must build his case and find who committed this atrocity. The woman's body seems to have been a message. But by whom? For whom?

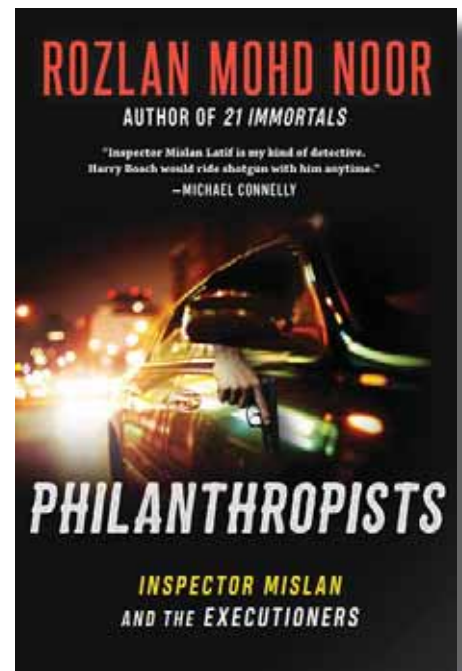
This unsettling case will take Inspector Mislan and his team from Kuala Lumpur to the Land of Smiles (Thailand), and from a dark alley to the dark web and a place where humans are made soulless.



PHILANTHROPISTS: Inspector Mislan and the Executioners

by Rozlan Mohd Noor
Arcade Crimewise, \$26.99, March
Publishers Weekly Starred Review

As the story opens, the city and country are just coming to grips with the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a challenging time to be a police detective.



It's been eight months since an assassination attempt nearly ended Inspector Mislan Latif's life. He is back on duty when he and his assistant DS Johan Kamaruddin get called out to a double murder. Two dark-skinned men have each been shot twice, execution style. It takes a while to identify the bodies as probable drug dealers. But if the murderer was also a drug dealer why was a large bag of drugs left at the scene of the crime?

About halfway through the book, the narrative takes a surprising turn.

It is best to read this series in order. Suggestion: get a hold of a copy of **21 IMMORTALS**, read it and decide it is your kind of book. Then seek out the rest.

Usually I read 5 or 6 books at a time, picking up one as suits my fancy, then putting it down after a few chapters and picking up another. (I know – it's a weird reading habit.)

One indication that this series was "my type" was that I read them straight through, without picking up another book along the way. Once I finished one, I picked up another. I couldn't get enough of Inspector Mislan. I hope you have the same reaction.

If you like these books, you may also like Jake Needham's Inspector Tay and Jack Shepherd series set in South Asia.

Editor's Message



Vaseem Khan Rises to New Heights



Vaseem Khan

One of my favorite authors, Vaseem Khan, has recently been elected the new chair of the British Crime Writers' Association, replacing the venerable Maxim Jakubowski in that role. The Guardian writes, "Khan is the first person of colour to take the role in the organisation's 70-year history." It adds that "Jakubowski will formally hand over the Creasey Bell—named in honour of the CWA founder [John Creasey]—to Khan at the annual Dagger awards on 6 July. The bell has been passed on from chair to chair for 70 years." Congratulations to Vaseem on this singular honor.

Vaseem Khan is the author of the Baby Ganesh Detective Agency crime novels and the award-winning historical Malabar House series. He and his buddy Abir Mukherjee host an entertaining podcast on crime fiction called The Red Hot Chilli Writers.

A Sad Passing

Long-time Bouchercon attendees will recognize the names of Tom & Enid

Schantz. Their tables in the bookrooms of mystery conventions had some of the best selections of mystery/crime fiction for attendees to buy. They were the owners of The Rue Morgue Mystery Bookstore in Boulder, Colorado and established their own press to publish their favorite mysteries from the 1930s-1960s that were hard to find in original editions. They also chaired a LeftCoast Crime Convention in Boulder and a Bouchercon in Denver. Enid passed away in 2011 and now Tom has followed her, having died on June 6th at 79 years of age. I have very fond memories of my association with them. Tom and Enid helped promote the careers of many successful mystery writers and they will be missed.

A Possible, Reasonable Alternative to Defunct Book Depository

For many of us fans of British crime fiction, the Book Depository was our go-to source for crime fiction not published in the U.S. It offered books at reasonable prices and there was no charge for postage. But when Book Depository closed down in April, it left many of us in the lurch. I've asked for any suggestions for an alternative source (with reasonable prices) and Mike Dillman told me about a British bookstore called Blackwell's from which he has been ordering books. His first order had free postage. So I decided to give Blackwell's a try and ordered four books. They arrived quickly, in great condition and there was no charge for postage. Here is a link for the store: <https://blackwells.co.uk>

The DP Style

Just a word about the formatting of this magazine. When I first started 30 years ago I got advice from a sage copy editor. She told me that I could adopt my own style rather than follow some other style as found in **THE CHICAGO**

MANUAL OF STYLE or Strunk and White's **THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE**. The important thing was to be consistent. So that is what I did. In particular I wanted to capitalize and bold the titles of books so that they would "pop" off the page at the reader.

Some of my contributors have a hard time with this because they have been trained to format in styles other than the *DP* Style. So I go through the magazine as it's being laid out and try to make the various columns have the same consistent style. I miss a bit here and there, but that is my intent. I hope this doesn't bug any of you readers. My intentions are pure.

Health of DP Contributors

I'm happy to report that L J Roberts is on the mend and has a review column in this issue, for which we are grateful. But at the same time I'm not happy with the news from Ali Karim that he suffered a series of heart attacks and was hospitalized for a stretch. He was released from the hospital to attend his daughter Sophia's wedding and is now on the mend. He says that he is "in reasonably good condition." Ali, our prayers and best wishes are with you.



Sophia & Proud Father

Best Mysteries of the Year So Far -- A Reminder

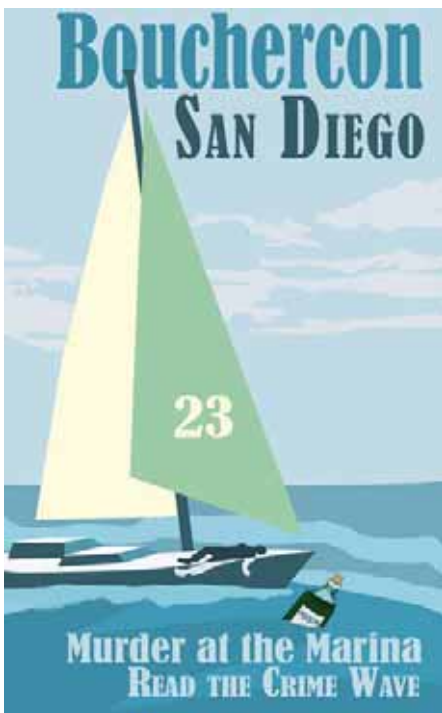
Many of the *DP* Reviewers/Contributors have cumulative lists of their “Best of the Year So Far” on www.deadly-pleasures.com under the link at the top of the home page called “Year’s Best.” Those lists are regularly updated. You’ll also find the Deadly Pleasures Best of 2023 list there as well, which is updated between the publication of each issue. We are dedicated to informing you about the “best” so that you can make wise reading choices depending on your own individual tastes.

Happy 100th Issue of DP!

I was planning on doing something special to celebrate the 100th Issue of *DP*, but the time to do that just wasn’t there this summer. And you will notice that this is a pretty big issue without that. I’ll keep my ideas on the back burner and may come up with something at a later date.

Needless to say that I’m very grateful to every contributor and every subscriber over the years. You’ve enriched my life and I hope that *Deadly Pleasures* has enriched yours.

Now onward and upward to Bouchercon in San Diego which starts on August 30th. See you there!



Associate Editor's Message



I finally figured out how to read a PI novel. It is one of my least favorite of the subgenres in crime fiction due to its highly formulaic style. I always find myself forgetting who the various characters are and how they each fit into the story. I refuse to take notes as I am reading these books for fun, supposedly. It seems the only time I will pick up a PI novel is if it is on an awards shortlist that I am reading. The way to read a PI novel, I have discovered, is to read it as quickly as possible. The faster you read it, the more you will recall and the more the story will make sense. (Unless, of course, the PI novel is over 1000 pages. In that case, characters will undoubtedly be forgotten.) I found this helped with some of the books on the CWA Dagger shortlist.

I love reading books on a list such as the Edgar and CWA shortlists. The books are preselected for me and, often, they will include some of the best books of the last year. I will admit the most enjoyable list of award nominees I have ever read was that of the Barry Award which I read several years ago so as to compare them with the Edgar Award nominees of that year. As a member of the Barry Award nominating committee I admit to a little bias, but I think we choose some outstanding books each year as Barry Award nominees.

When I am faced with a period of time when I am not reading a list of books, I almost feel lost. However, I do have a pile of books I am looking forward to reading and will do so before the Booker Award longlist is announced on August 1. Then I will sink into my annual reading of the best literary books of the year.

Bouchercon will be soon upon us. This year it starts at the end of August.

As long as the weather holds up with no hurricanes, I plan to attend my first one since Covid. I am very much looking forward to it for the sole reason of seeing so many of my friends whom I haven’t seen for years.

Interestingly, I was told that my panel (which I am to moderate) will have a time change to 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, August 30th. First of all, I was never told I was on a panel. Second, I had no idea what I was doing on the panel -- ie. moderating or a panelist. Third, I do not recall any panels on the Wednesday before in any of the past Bouchercons. I fear this is a ploy to get as many authors on panels as they can. The organizers of Bouchercon want to attract authors. I say they should attract the right kind of authors -- those currently being published by real publishers. The problem with putting every author on a panel means the panels will be diluted with so many virtually unknown authors, and, as a result, the panels will provide little interest to attendees. For example, self-published authors should not be on a panel (or have their own panel). Get published the traditional way. Authors should have a book published within the last year. I have two authors on my panel who were last published in 2015 and 2017. I just don’t get it. My expectation is that, on the Wednesday before Bouchercon, there will be more people on the panel than will be in the audience. Then we will be talking to ourselves. Perhaps I will be surprised. We shall see.

Update: I now found out I will be on another panel -- with fellow reviewers. I always enjoy talking about favorite books and the ins and outs of reviewing.

It will be on Thursday, Aug 31st from 12:45 to 1:30 p.m.

Deadly Pleasures Best of 2023



Titles listed garnered starred reviews in one or more of the four library journals (*Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist* and *Library Journal*), an Amazon Editors' Choice, and/or a glowing review in *Deadly Pleasures* as indicated. Many of the books listed herein will be found on year-end Best of 2023 lists and some will be nominated for our Barry Awards. All sub-genre's of the mystery/crime fiction and thriller world are represented.

Best Mystery/ Crime Novel

****BEWARE THE WOMAN**, Megan Abbott (Putnam, \$28.00, May). And Jacy felt like she finally did. Newly married and with a baby on the way, Jacy and her new husband, Jed, embark on their first road trip together to visit his father, Dr. Ash, in Michigan's far-flung Upper Peninsula. The moment they arrive in the cozy cottage in the lush woods, Jacy feels bathed in love by the warm and hospitable Dr. Ash, if less so by his house manager, the enigmatic Mrs. Brandt. But their Edenic first days take a turn when Jacy has a health scare. Swiftly, vacation activities are scrapped, and all eyes are on Jacy's condition. At the same time, whispers about Jed's long-dead mother and complicated family history seem eerily to be impeding upon the present. As the days pass, Jacy begins to feel trapped in the cottage, her every move surveilled, her body under the looking glass. But are her fears founded or is it paranoia, or cabin fever, or—as is suggested to her—a stubborn refusal to take necessary precautions? The dense woods surrounding the cottage are full of dangers, but are the

greater ones inside? **BL & PW**

****THE HOUSEMATE**, Sarah Bailey (Polis, \$27.99, April). Three housemates. One dead, one missing and one accused of murder. Dubbed the Housemate Homicide, it's a mystery that has baffled Australians for almost a decade. Melbourne-based journalist Olive Groves worked on the story as a junior reporter and became obsessed by the case. Now, nine years later, the missing housemate turns up dead on a remote property. Olive is once again assigned to the story, this time reluctantly paired with precocious millennial podcaster Cooper Ng. As Oli and Cooper unearth new facts about the three housemates, a dark web of secrets is uncovered. The revelations catapult Oli back to the death of the first housemate, forcing her to confront past traumas and insecurities that have risen to the surface again. **DP (2)**

****THE LIE MAKER**, Linwood Barclay (Morrow, \$30.00, May). Your dad's not a good person. Your dad killed people, son. These are some of the last words Jack Givins' father spoke to him before he was whisked away by witness protection, leaving Jack and his mother to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives as best they could. Years later, Jack is a grown man with problems of his own. He's a talented but struggling author, barely scraping by on the royalties from his moderately successful first book. So when the U.S. Marshals approach him with a lucrative opportunity, he's in no position to turn them down. They're recruiting writers like Jack to create false histories for people in witness protection—people like Jack's father. The coincidence is astonishing to Jack at first, but he soon realizes this may be a chance to find his dad. Only

there's one problem—Jack's father hasn't made contact with his handlers recently, and they have no idea where he is. He could be in serious danger, and Jack may be the only one who can find him. **PW & DP**

****HELL BENT**, Leigh Bardugo (Flatiron, \$29.99, January). Find a gateway to the underworld. Steal a soul out of hell. A simple plan, except people who make this particular journey rarely come back. But Galaxy "Alex" Stern is determined to break Darlington out of purgatory – even if it costs her a future at Lethe and at Yale. Forbidden from attempting a rescue, Alex and Dawes can't call on the Ninth House for help, so they assemble a team of dubious allies to save the gentleman of Lethe. Together, they will have to navigate a maze of arcane texts and bizarre artifacts to uncover the societies' most closely guarded secrets, and break every rule doing it. But when faculty members begin to die off, Alex knows these aren't just accidents. Something deadly is at work in New Haven, and if she is going to survive, she'll have to reckon with the monsters of her past and a darkness built into the university's very walls. **PW, BL, AZ and Kirkus**

****THE WRITING RETREAT**, Julia Bartz (Atria/Emily Bester, \$27.00, February). Alex has all but given up on her dreams of becoming a published author when she receives a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: attend an exclusive, month-long writing retreat at the estate of feminist horror writer Roza Vallo. Even the knowledge that Wren, her former best friend and current rival, is attending doesn't dampen her excitement. But when the attendees arrive, Roza drops a bombshell—they must all complete an entire novel from scratch

during the next month, and the author of the best one will receive a life-changing seven-figure publishing deal. Determined to win this seemingly impossible contest, Alex buckles down and tries to ignore the strange happenings at the estate, including Roza's erratic behavior, Wren's cruel mind games, and the alleged haunting of the mansion itself. But when one of the writers vanishes during a snowstorm, Alex realizes that something very sinister is afoot. With the clock running out, she's desperate to discover the truth and save herself.

Kirkus, BL & AZ

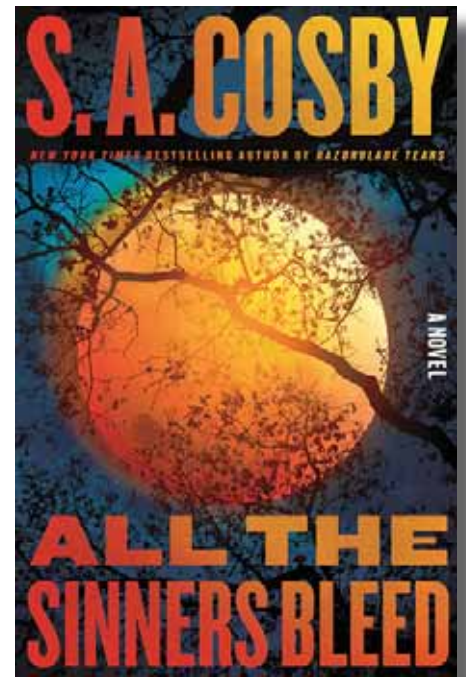
****THE LAST DANCE**, Mark Billingham (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.00). Maverick sleuth Declan Miller is back at work following the murder of his wife (and amateur ballroom dancing partner) Alex. Working with new partner and heavy metal enthusiast DS Sara Xiu, he is tasked with investigating the double killing of gangland family scion Adrian Cutler and IT consultant Barry Shepherd at the Sands Hotel. Initial evidence suggests a hired gun and a botched job. The search for the hitman begins and Miller begins to reconnect with his old network—his ballroom dancing friends, homeless informant Finn, and even the ghost of his wife who keeps showing up in his kitchen. The fact Alex had been investigating the Cutler family prior to her death complicates things, and as Miller gets closer to the truth, he realizes the danger is walking right up to his doorstep. **PW, AZ & DP**

****STORM WATCH**, C. J. Box (Putnam, \$29.00, March). When a prominent University of Wyoming professor goes missing, authorities are stumped. That is, until Joe Pickett makes two surprising discoveries while hunting down a wounded elk on his district as an epic spring storm descends upon him. First, he finds the professor's vehicle parked on a remote mountainside. Then Joe finds the professor's frozen and mutilated body. When he attempts to learn more, his investigation is obstructed by federal agents, extremists, and Gover-

nor Colter Allen. Nate Romanowski is rebuilding his falconry company—and financing this through crypto mining with the assistance of Geronimo Jones. He's then approached by a shadowy group of local militant activists that is gaining in power and influence, and demanding that Wyoming join other western states and secede from the union—by force, if necessary. They ask Nate to throw in with them, but he's wary. Should he trust them, or is he being set up? As a storm of peril gathers around them, Joe and Nate confront it in different ways—and maybe, for the first time, on opposite sides. **PW, AZ & Kirkus**

****I WILL FIND YOU**, Harlan Coben (Grand Central, \$30.00, March). David Burroughs was once a devoted father to his three-year-old son Matthew, living a dream life just a short drive away from the working-class suburb where he and his wife, Cheryl, first fell in love—until one fateful night when David woke suddenly to discover Matthew had been murdered while David was asleep just down the hall. Half a decade later, David's been wrongly accused and convicted of the murder, left to serve out his time in a maximum-security prison—a fate which, grieving and wracked with guilt, David didn't have the will to fight. The world has moved on without him. Then Cheryl's younger sister, Rachel, makes a surprise appearance during visiting hours bearing a strange photograph. It's a vacation shot of a bustling amusement park a friend shared with her, and in the background, just barely in frame, is a boy bearing an eerie resemblance to David's son. Even though it can't be, David just knows: Matthew is still alive. David plans a harrowing escape, determined to achieve the impossible – save his son, clear his own name, and discover the real story of what happened. But with his life on the line and the FBI following his every move, can David evade capture long enough to reveal the shocking truth? **AZ & DP**

****ALL THE SINNERS BLEED**, S. A. Cosby (Flatiron, \$27.99, June). Titus Crowne is the first Black sheriff in the



history of Charon County. A former FBI agent and security expert, Titus came home to take care of his father and look out for his troubled younger brother. He ran for Sheriff to make a difference, especially in the Black community which has so often been treated unfairly by the police. But a year to the day after his election, a school shooting rocks the town. A beloved teacher is killed by a former student, and as Titus attempts to deescalate and get the boy to surrender, his deputies fire a fatal shot. In the investigation, it becomes clear that the student they shot had been abused by the dead teacher, as well as by unidentified perpetrators. The trail leads to buried bodies - and dark secrets. As Titus tries to track down a killer hiding in plain sight, while balancing daily duties like protecting Confederate pride marchers, he must face what it means to be a Black man wearing a police uniform in the American South. **PW, LJ, AZ & DP**

****OZARK DOGS**, Eli Cranor (Soho Crime, \$26.95, April). After his son is convicted of capital murder, Vietnam War veteran Jeremiah Fitzjurls takes over the care of his granddaughter, Joanna, raising her with as much warmth as can be found in an Ozark junkyard outfitted to be an armory. He teaches her how to shoot and fight, but there

is not enough training in the world to protect her when the dreaded Ledfords, notorious meth dealers and fanatical white supremacists, come to collect on Joanna as payment for a long-overdue blood debt. Headed by rancorous patriarch Bunn and smooth-talking, erudite Evail, the Ledfords have never forgotten what the Fitzjurls family did to them, and they will not be satisfied until they have taken an eye for an eye. As they seek revenge, and as Jeremiah desperately searches for his granddaughter, their narratives collide in this immersive story about family and how far some will go to honor, defend—or in some cases, destroy it. **BL & DP**

****A KILLING OF INNOCENTS**, Deborah Crombie (Morrow, \$30.00, February). On a rainy November evening, trainee doctor Sasha Johnson hurries through the evening crowd in London's historic Russell Square. Out of the darkness, someone jostles her as they brush past. A moment later, Sasha stumbles, then collapses. When Detective Superintendent Duncan Kincaid and his sergeant, Doug Cullen, are called to the scene, they discover that she's been stabbed. Kincaid immediately calls in his detective wife, Gemma James, who has recently been assigned to a task force on knife crimes which are on the rise. Along with her partner, detective sergeant Melody Talbot, Gemma aids the investigation. But Sasha Johnson doesn't fit the profile of the task force's typical knife crime victim. Single, successful, career-driven, she has no history of abusive relationships or any connection to gangs. Sasha had her secrets, though, and some of them lead the detectives uncomfortably close to home. **LJ & DP**

****SCORCHED GRACE**, Margot Douallhy (Gillian Flynn Books, \$27.95, February). When Saint Sebastian's School becomes the target of a shocking arson spree, the Sisters of the Sublime Blood and their surrounding New Orleans community are thrust into chaos. Patience is a virtue, but punk rocker turned nun Sister Holiday isn't satisfied to just wait around for officials

to return her home and sanctuary to its former peace, instead deciding to unveil the mysterious attacker herself. Her investigation leads her down a twisty path of suspicion and secrets, turning her against colleagues, students, and even fellow Sisters along the way. And to piece together the clues of this high-stakes mystery, she must at last reckon with the sins of her own past. **PW & AZ**

****RED QUEEN**, Juan Gomez-Jurado (Minotaur, \$27.99, March). Antonia Scott – the daughter of a British diplomat and a Spanish mother – has a gifted forensic mind, whose ability to reconstruct crimes and solve baffling murders is legendary. But after a personal trauma, she's refused to continue her work or even leave her apartment.

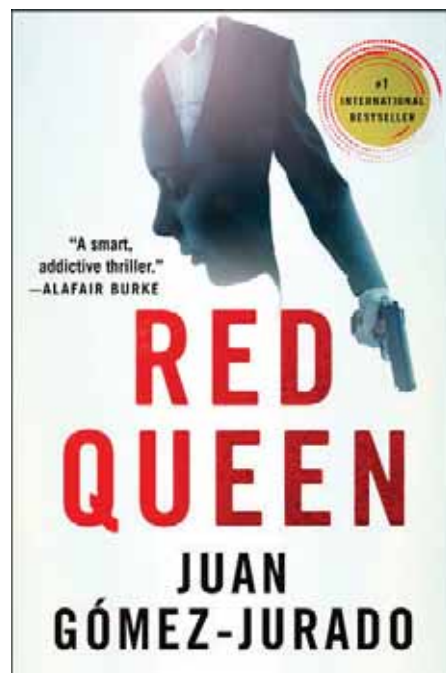
Jon Gutierrez, a police officer in Bilbao – disgraced, suspended, and about to face criminal charges – is offered a chance to salvage his career by a secretive organization that works in the shadows to direct criminal investigations of a highly sensitive nature. All he has to do is succeed where many others have failed: Convince a recalcitrant Antonia to come out of her self-imposed retirement, protecting her and helping her investigate a new, terrifying case.

The case is a macabre, ritualistic murder – a teen-aged boy from a wealthy family whose body was found

without a drop of blood left in it. But the murder is just the start. A high-ranking executive and daughter of one of the richest men in Spain is kidnapped, a crime which is tied to the previous murder. Behind them both is a hidden mastermind with even more sinister plans. And the only person with a chance to see the connections, solve the crimes and successfully match wits with the killer before tragedy strikes again...is Antonia Scott. **DP & AZ**

****THE TWYFORD CODE**, Janice Hallett (Atria, \$27.00, January). Forty years ago, Steven "Smithy" Smith found a copy of a famous children's book by disgraced author Edith Twyford, its margins full of strange markings and annotations. When he showed it to his remedial English teacher Miss Iles, she believed that it was part of a secret code that ran through all of Twyford's novels. And when she disappeared on a class field trip, Smithy became convinced that she had been right. Now, out of prison after a long stretch, Smithy decides to investigate the mystery that has haunted him for decades. In a series of voice recordings on an old iPhone from his estranged son, Smithy alternates between visiting the people of his childhood and looking back on the events that later landed him in prison. But it soon becomes clear that Edith Twyford wasn't just a writer of forgotten children's stories. The Twyford Code holds a great secret, and Smithy may just have the key. **PW & AZ**

****EXILES**, Jane Harper (Flatiron Books, \$27.99, January). Federal Investigator Aaron Falk is on his way to a small town deep in Southern Australian wine country for the christening of an old friend's baby. But mystery follows him, even on vacation. This weekend marks the one-year anniversary of Kim Gillespie's disappearance. One year ago, at a busy town festival on a warm spring night, Kim safely tucked her sleeping baby into her stroller, then vanished into the crowd. No one has seen her since. When Kim's older daughter makes a plea for anyone with information about her missing mom to come forward, Falk



and his old buddy Raco can't leave the case alone.

As Falk soaks up life in the lush valley, he is welcomed into the tight-knit circle of Kim's friends and loved ones. But the group may be more fractured than it seems. Between Falk's closest friend, the missing mother, and a woman he's drawn to, dark questions linger as long-ago truths begin to emerge. What would make a mother abandon her child? What happened to Kim Gillespie? **BL, PW & DP**

****THE VILLA**, Rachel Hawkins (St. Martin's Press, \$28.99, January). As kids, Emily and Chess were inseparable. But by their 30s, their bond has been strained by the demands of their adult lives. So when Chess suggests a girls trip to Italy, Emily jumps at the chance to reconnect with her best friend. Villa Aestas in Orvieto is a high-end holiday home now, but in 1974, it was known as Villa Rosato, and rented for the summer by a notorious rock star, Noel Gordon. In an attempt to reignite his creative spark, Noel invites up-and-coming musician, Pierce Sheldon to join him, as well as Pierce's girlfriend, Mari, and her stepsister, Lara. But he also sets in motion a chain of events that leads to Mari writing one of the greatest horror novels of all time, Lara composing a platinum album--and ends in Pierce's brutal murder. As Emily digs into the villa's complicated history, she begins to think there might be more to the story of that fateful summer in 1974. That perhaps Pierce's murder wasn't just a tale of sex, drugs, and rock & roll gone wrong, but that something more sinister might have occurred--and that there might be clues hidden in the now-iconic works that Mari and Lara left behind. Yet the closer that Emily gets to the truth, the more tension she feels developing between her and Chess. As secrets from the past come to light, equally dangerous betrayals from the present also emerge--and it begins to look like the villa will claim another victim before the summer ends. **Kirkus, AZ & BL**

****MURDER YOUR EMPLOYER**, *The McMasters Guide to Homicide*,

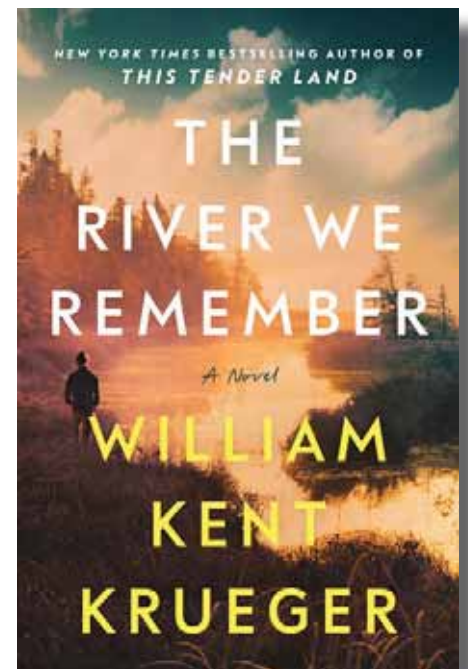
Rupert Holmes (Avid Reader, \$28.00, February). Who hasn't wondered for a split second what the world would be like if a person who is the object of your affliction ceased to exist? But then you've probably never heard of The McMasters Conservatory, dedicated to the consummate execution of the homicidal arts. To gain admission, a student must have an ethical reason for erasing someone who deeply deserves a fate no worse (nor better) than death. The campus of this "Poison Ivy League" college--its location unknown to even those who study there--is where you might find yourself the practice target of a classmate...and where one's mandatory graduation thesis is getting away with the perfect murder of someone whose death will make the world a much better place to live. **LJ & AZ**

****DON'T FEAR THE REAPER**, Stephen Graham Jones (Gallery/Saga Press, \$27.99, February). Four years after her tumultuous senior year, Jade Daniels is released from prison right before Christmas when her conviction is overturned. But life beyond bars takes a dangerous turn as soon as she returns to Proofrock. Convicted Serial Killer, Dark Mill South, seeking revenge for thirty-eight Dakota men hanged in 1862, escapes from his prison transfer due to a blizzard, just outside of Proofrock, Idaho. Dark Mill South's Reunion Tour began on December 12th, 2019, a Thursday. Thirty-six hours and twenty bodies later, on Friday the 13th, it would be over. Might be considered horror. **PW, Kirkus & AZ**

****AGE OF VICE**, Deepti Kapoor (Riverhead Books, \$30.00, January). New Delhi, 3 a.m. A speeding Mercedes jumps the curb and in the blink of an eye, five people are dead. It's a rich man's car, but when the dust settles there is no rich man at all, just a shell-shocked servant who cannot explain the strange series of events that led to this crime. Nor can he foresee the dark drama that is about to unfold. In the shadow of lavish estates, extravagant parties, predatory business deals and calculated political influence, three lives become danger-

ously intertwined: Ajay is the watchful servant, born into poverty, who rises through the family's ranks. Sunny is the playboy heir who dreams of outshining his father, whatever the cost. And Neda is the curious journalist caught between morality and desire. Against a sweeping plot fueled by loss, pleasure, greed, yearning, violence and revenge, will these characters' connections become a path to escape, or a trigger of further destruction? **BL, PW, LJ & AZ**

****AN HONEST MAN**, Michael Koryta (Mulholland Books, \$29.00, July). Israel Pike was a killer, and he was an honest man. They were not mutually exclusive. After discovering seven men murdered aboard their yacht - including two Senate rivals - Israel Pike is regarded as a prime suspect. A troubled man infamous on Salvation Point Island for killing his own father a decade before, Israel has few options, no friends, and a life-threatening secret. Elsewhere on the island, 12-year-old Lyman Rankin seeks shelter from his alcoholic father in an abandoned house only to discover that he is not alone. A mysterious woman greets him with a hatchet and a promise: "Make a sound and I'll kill you." As the investigation barrels forward, Lyman, Israel, and the fate of the case collide in immutable ways. **PW**

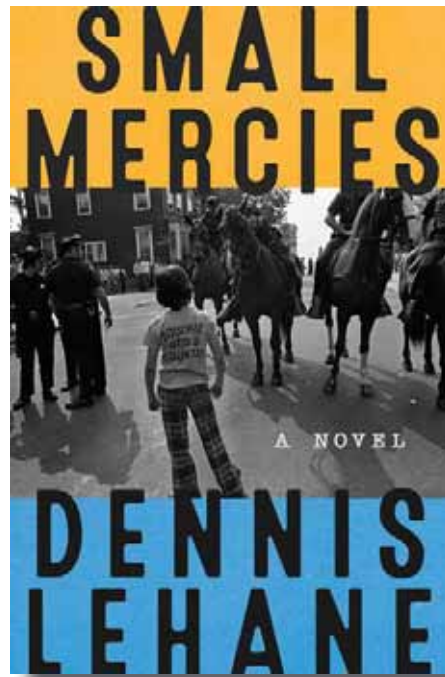


****THE RIVER WE REMEMBER**, William Kent Krueger (Atria, \$28.99, September). On Memorial Day, as the people of Jewel, Minnesota gather to remember and honor the sacrifice of so many sons in the wars of the past, the half-clothed body of wealthy landowner Jimmy Quinn is found floating in the Alabaster River, dead from a shotgun blast. Investigation of the murder falls to Sheriff Brody Dern, a highly decorated war hero who still carries the physical and emotional scars from his military service. Even before Dern has the results of the autopsy, vicious rumors begin to circulate that the killer must be Noah Bluestone, a Native American WWII veteran who has recently returned to Jewel with a Japanese wife. As suspicions and accusations mount and the town teeters on the edge of more violence, Dern struggles not only to find the truth of Quinn's murder but also put to rest the demons from his own past. **DP**

****MOSCOW EXILE**, John Lawton (Atlantic Monthly, \$28.00, April). Charlotte is a British expatriate who has recently settled in the nation's capital with her second husband, a man who looks intriguingly like Clark Gable, but her enviable dinner parties and soirées aren't the only things she is planning. Meanwhile, Charlie Leigh-Hunt has been posted to Washington as a replacement for Guy Burgess, last seen disappearing around the corner and into the Soviet Union. Charlie is soon shocked to cross paths with Charlotte, an old flame of his, who, thanks to all her gossipy parties, has a packed pocketbook full of secrets she is eager to share. Two decades or so later, in 1969, Joe Wilderness is stuck on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, held captive by the KGB, a chip in a game way above his pay grade—but his old friends Frank and Eddie are going to try to spring him out of the toughest prison in the world. All roads lead back to Berlin, and to the famous Bridge of Spies. **BL, AZ & DP(2)**

****SMALL MERCIES**, Dennis Lehane (Harper, \$30.00, April). In the summer of 1974 a heatwave blankets Boston and Mary Pat Fennessey is

trying to stay one step ahead of the bill collectors. Mary Pat has lived her entire life in the housing projects of "Southie," the Irish American enclave that stubbornly adheres to old tradition and stands proudly apart. One night Mary Pat's teenage daughter Jules stays out late and doesn't come home. That same evening, a young Black man is found dead, struck by a subway train under mysterious circumstances. The two events seem unconnected. But Mary Pat, propelled by a desperate search for her missing daughter, begins turning over stones best left untouched—asking questions that bother Marty Butler, chieftain of the Irish mob, and the men who work for him, men who don't take kindly to any threat to their business. **Kirkus, LJ, BL, AZ & DP(4)**



****PROM MOM**, Laura Lippman (Morrow, \$30.00, July). Amber Glass has spent her entire adult life putting as much distance as possible between her and her hometown of Baltimore, where she fears she will forever be known as "Prom Mom"—the girl who allegedly killed her baby on the night of the prom after her date, Joe Simpson, abandoned her to pursue the girl he really liked. But when circumstances bring Amber back to the city, she realizes she can have a second chance—as long as she stays away from Joe, now a successful com-

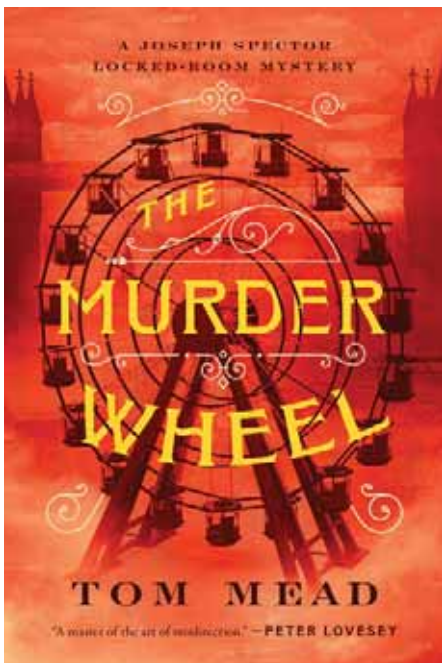
mercial real estate developer, married to a plastic surgeon, Meredith, to whom he is devoted. The problem is, Amber can't stay away from Joe. And Joe finds that it's increasingly hard for him to ignore Amber, if only because she remembers the boy he was and the man he said he was going to be. Against the surreal backdrop of 2020 and early 2021, the two are slowly drawn to each other and eventually cross the line they've been trying not to cross. And then Joe asks Amber to help him do the unthinkable. **BL & DP**

****PARIS REQUIEM**, Chris Lloyd (Pegasus Crime, \$27.00, February). Paris, 1940. As the city adjusts to life under Nazi occupation, Detective Eddie Giral struggles to reconcile his job as a policeman with his new role enforcing a regime he cannot believe in, but must work under. He's sacrificed so much in order to survive in this new world, but the past is not so easily forgotten. When an old friend—and an old flame—reappear, begging for his help, Eddie must decide how far he will go to help those he loves. **PW, AZ & BL**

****I HAVE SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU**, Rebecca Makkai (Viking, \$28.00, February). A successful film professor and podcaster, Bodie Kane is content to forget her past—the family tragedy that marred her adolescence, her four largely miserable years at a New Hampshire boarding school, and the murder of her former roommate, Thalia Keith, in the spring of their senior year. Though the circumstances surrounding Thalia's death and the conviction of the school's athletic trainer, Omar Evans, are hotly debated online, Bodie prefers—needs—to let sleeping dogs lie. But when the Granby School invites her back to teach a course, Bodie is inexorably drawn to the case and its increasingly apparent flaws. In their rush to convict Omar, did the school and the police overlook other suspects? Is the real killer still out there? As she falls down the very rabbit hole she was so determined to avoid, Bodie begins to wonder if she wasn't as much of an outsider at Granby as she'd thought—if, perhaps, back in 1995, she

knew something that might have held the key to solving the case. **BL, AZ & PW**

****THE MURDER WHEEL**, Tom Mead (Mysterious Press, \$26.95, July). “Can you solve the Ferris wheel murder case?” When a sensational killing rocks 1938 London, local newspaper ads offer a hefty sum to the person who can say whodunnit. A man has been shot dead at the top of a Ferris wheel, and his wife? the only other person in their carriage? insists on her innocence. But who else could have fired the deadly bullet and escaped unseen? The sheer implausibility of the claim is enough to whip the press into a frenzy and, for young and idealistic Edmund Ibbs, the lawyer representing the accused, that frenzy may be his only hope at discovering the truth of the mysterious murder. As he digs into the case, Ibbs unwittingly enters a shadowy web of conspiracy and murder, soon finding himself implicated in not one but two seemingly impossible crimes. First, a corpse appears out of thin air during a performance by a famed illusionist, then a second victim is mortally wounded in a locked dressing room backstage. Edmund is in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time, attracting the suspicion of Scotland Yard inspector George Flint. His only hope at freedom comes in the form



of retired stage magician Joseph Spector, a man steeped in the art of misdirection, who happens to be in the audience for the deadly show. Spector’s mastery of illusion is capable of piercing the veil of deceit, but will his deductive powers be strong enough to explain this utterly confounding series of crimes? **PW & AZ**

****THE STOLEN COAST**, Dwyer Murphy (Viking, \$27.00, July). Jack might be a polished, Harvard-educated lawyer on paper, but everyone in the down-at-the-heels, if picturesque, village of Onset, Massachusetts, knows his real job: moving people on the run from powerful enemies. The family business—co-managed with his father, a retired spy—is smooth sailing, as they fill up Onset’s holiday homes during the town’s long, drowsy off-season and help clients shed their identities in preparation for fresh starts. But when Elena, Jack’s former flame—a dedicated hustler who’s no stranger to the fugitive life—makes an unexpected return to town, her arrival upends Jack’s routine existence. Elena, after all, doesn’t go anywhere without a scheme in mind, and it isn’t long before Jack finds himself enmeshed in her latest project: intercepting millions of dollars’ worth of raw diamonds before they’re shipped overseas. **PW & Kirkus**

****MURDER UNDER A RED MOON**, Harini Nagendra (Pegasus, \$26.95, March). When new bride Kaveri Murthy reluctantly agrees to investigate a minor crime to please her domineering mother-in-law—during the blood moon eclipse, no less—she doesn’t expect, once again, to stumble upon a murder. With anti-British sentiment on the rise, a charismatic religious leader growing in influence, and the fight for women’s suffrage gaining steam, Bangalore is turning out to be a far more dangerous and treacherous place than Kaveri ever imagined—and everyone’s motives are suspect. Together with the Bangalore Detectives Club—a mixed bag of street urchins, nosy neighbours, an ex-prostitute, and a policeman’s wife—Kaveri once again sleuths in her sari and hunts for clues in her beloved

1920s Ford. But when her life is suddenly put in danger, Kaveri realizes that she might be getting uncomfortably close to the truth. **PW, DP & BL**

****PHILANTHROPISTS: Inspector Mislan and the Executioners** by Rozlan Mohd Noor (Arcade Crimewise, \$26.99, March). Eight months after the assassination attempt that nearly ended his life, Inspector Mislan Latif is back on twenty-four-hour duty with his assistant, Detective Sergeant Johan Kamaruddin, when the call comes in: double murder in a house in the police district of Sentul. The two dark-skinned men were killed identically, execution-style. In the master bedroom of the rental, in plain sight on the bed, is almost three pounds of drugs, while no identifying documents, wallets, phones, and the like are to be found. No shots were heard, or the neighbors won’t admit to hearing them, but someone called the killings in to notify the police. In the area, drugs are rampant and also foreign nationals, legal and illegal. If the vics were foreign, without papers, where do they start? **PW & DP**

****STRANGE SALLY DIAMOND**, Liz Nugent (Gallery/Scout Press, \$27.99). Reclusive Sally Diamond causes outrage by trying to incinerate her dead father. Now she’s the center of attention, not only from the hungry media and police detectives, but also a sinister voice from a past she does not remember. As she begins to discover the horrors of her early childhood, Sally steps into the world for the first time, making new friends, big decisions, and learning that people don’t always mean what they say. But who is the man observing Sally from the other side of the world, and why does he call her Mary? And why does her new neighbor seem to be obsessed with her? **PW, AZ & DP**

****48 CLUES INTO THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MY SISTER**, Joyce Carol Oates (Mysterious Press, \$26.95). Marguerite, a beautiful woman, has disappeared from her small town in Upstate New York. But is foul play involved? Or did she merely take an op-

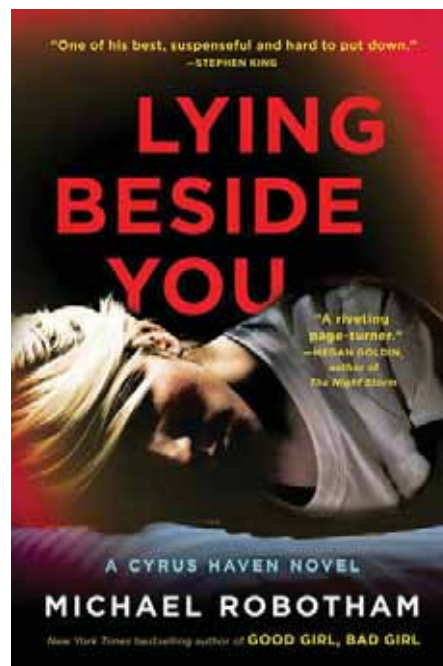
portunity to get away for fun, or finally make the decision to leave behind her claustrophobic life of limited opportunities? Her younger sister Gigi wonders if the flimsy silk Dior dress, so casually abandoned on the floor, is a clue to Marguerite's having seemingly vanished. The police examine the footprints made by her Ferragamo boots leaving the house, ending abruptly, and puzzle over how that can help lead to her. Gigi, not so pretty as her sister, slowly reveals her hatred for the perfect, much-loved, Marguerite. Bit by bit, like ripping the petals off a flower blossom, revelations about both sisters are uncovered. Subtly, but with the unbearable suspense at which Joyce Carol Oates excels, clues mount up to bring to light the fate of the missing beauty. **PW, BL & AZ**

****MY FATHER'S HOUSE**, Joseph O'Connor (Europa Editions, \$27.00, February). September 1943: German forces have Rome under their control. Gestapo boss Paul Hauptmann rules over the Eternal City with vicious efficiency. Hunger is widespread. Rumors fester. The war's outcome is far from certain. Diplomats, refugees, Jews, and escaped Allied prisoners flee for protection into Vatican City, the world's smallest state, a neutral, independent country nestled within the city of Rome. A small band of unlikely friends led by a courageous Irish priest is drawn into deadly battle of wits as they attempt to aid those seeking refuge. **BL, PW, AZ, DP & Kirkus**

****CODE OF THE HILLS**, Chris Offutt (Grove Press, \$27.00, June). Mick Hardin is back in the hills of Kentucky. He'd planned to touch down briefly before heading to France, marking the end to his twenty-year Army career. In Rocksalt, his sister Linda the sheriff is investigating the murder of Pete Lowe, a sought-after mechanic at the local racetrack. After another body is found, Linda and her deputy Johnny Boy Tolliver wonder if the two murders are related. Linda steps into harm's way just as a third body turns up and Mick ends up being deputized again, uncovering evidence of illegal cockfighting, and

trying to connect all the crimes. **Kirkus, LJ, AZ & DP(2)**

****SING HER DOWN**, Ivy Pochoda (MCD, \$28.00, May). Florence "Florida" Baum is not the hapless innocent she claims to be when she arrives at the Arizona women's prison – or so her ex-cellmate, Diosmary Sandoval, keeps insinuating. Dios knows the truth about Florida's crimes, understands the truth that Florence hides even from herself: that she wasn't a victim of circumstance, an unlucky bystander misled by a bad man. Dios knows that darkness lives in women too, despite the world's refusal to see it. And she is determined to open Florida's eyes and unleash her true self. When an unexpected reprieve gives both women their freedom, Dios's fixation on Florida turns into a dangerous obsession, and a deadly cat-and-mouse chase ensues from Arizona to the desolate streets of Los Angeles. **PW & DP**



****LYING BESIDE YOU**, Michael Robotham (Scribner, \$27.99, February). As a boy, Cyrus Haven survived a family massacre and slowly pieced his life back together. Now, after almost twenty years, his brother is applying to be released from a secure psychiatric hospital—and Cyrus is expected to forgive Elias and welcome him home. Elias is returning to a very different world.

Cyrus is now a successful psychologist, working with the police, sharing his house with Evie Cormac, a damaged and gifted teenager who can tell when someone is lying. Evie has gone back to school and is working part-time at an inner-city bar, but she continues to struggle with authority and following rules. When a man is murdered and his daughter disappears, Cyrus is called in to profile the killer and help piece together Maya Kirk's last hours. Police believe she was drugged and driven away from the same bar where Evie is working. Soon, a second victim is taken, and Evie is the only person who glimpsed the man behind the wheel. But there's a problem. Only two people believe her. One is Cyrus. **Kirkus, AZ & DP(3)**

****HOW CAN I HELP YOU**, Laura Sims (Putnam, \$27.00). No one knows Margo's real name. Her colleagues and patrons at a small-town public library only know her middle-aged normalcy, congeniality, and charm. They have no reason to suspect that she is, in fact, a former nurse with a trail of countless premature deaths in her wake. She has turned a new page, so to speak, and the library is her sanctuary, a place to quell old urges. That is, at least, until Patricia, a recent graduate and failed novelist, joins the library staff. Patricia quickly notices Margo's subtly sinister edge, and watches her carefully. When a patron's death in the library bathroom gives her a hint of Margo's mysterious past, Patricia can't resist digging deeper—even as this new fixation becomes all-consuming. **AZ, LJ & PW**

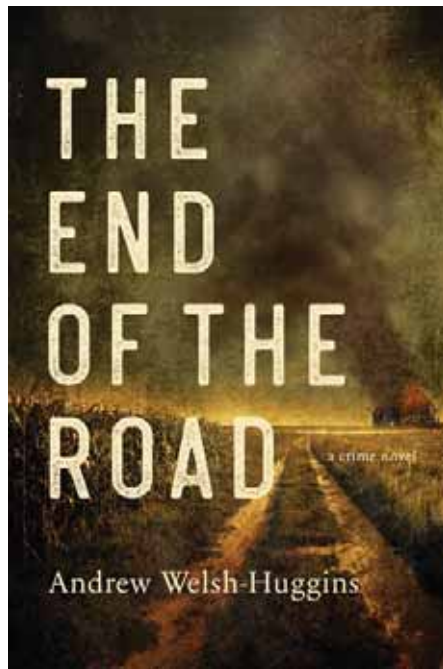
****EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY HAS KILLED SOMEONE**, Benjamin Stevenson (Mariner, \$30.00, January). Everyone in my family has killed someone. Some of us, the high achievers, have killed more than once. I'm not trying to be dramatic, but it is the truth. Some of us are good, others are bad, and some just unfortunate. I'm Ernest Cunningham. Call me Ern or Ernie. I wish I'd killed whoever decided our family reunion should be at a ski resort, but it's a little more complicated than that.

Have I killed someone? Yes. I have. **PW, AZ & DP(3)**

****PLAYING IT SAFE**, Ashley Weaver (Minotaur, \$28.00, May). As the Blitz continues to ravage London, Ellie McDonnell – formerly a safecracking thief, but currently determined to stay on the straight and narrow to help her country – is approached by British Intelligence officer Major Ramsey with a new assignment. She is to travel under an assumed identity to the port city of Sunderland and there await further instructions. In his usual infuriating way, the Major has left her task as vague and mysterious as possible. Ellie, ever-ready to aid her country, heads north, her safecracking tools in tow. But before she can rendezvous with the major, she witnesses an unnatural death. A man falls dead in the street in front of her, with a note clutched in his hand. Ellie's instincts tell her that the man's death is connected in some way to her mission.

Soon, Ellie and the major are locked in a battle of wits and a race against time with an unknown and deadly adversary, and a case that leads them to a possible Nazi counterfeiting operation. **BL & PW**

****THE END OF THE ROAD**, Andrew Welsh-Huggins (Mysterious Press, \$26.95, April). Myles's courtroom testimony should have put Pryor, their one-eyed ringleader, behind bars after the bank robbery gone wrong, yet somehow Pryor got off scot-free while Myles served time. Now, upon his release, Myles decides he is done with his life of crime—a change that will only be possible if he can kill Pryor and turn over a new leaf. Pryor has other ideas, and the collision between these two deadly forces soon leaves the ex-con in critical condition, clinging to life in a hospital bed. With Myles in recovery, it's up to his girlfriend Penny to avenge her lover and salvage their chance at normalcy. As Pryor and his cronies prepare for their biggest score yet—stealing the legendary fortune said to be hidden in a farmhouse outside their small Ohio town—Penny is hot on their heels. But is she prepared for the carnage Pryor will



gleefully wreak on the path to his prize? **DP**

****ALL THE DANGEROUS THINGS**, Stacy Willingham (Minotaur, \$27.99, January). One year ago, Isabelle Drake's life changed forever: her toddler son, Mason, was taken out of his crib in the middle of the night while she and her husband were asleep in the next room. With little evidence and few leads for the police to chase, the case quickly went cold. However, Isabelle cannot rest until Mason is returned to her – literally. Except for the occasional catnap or small blackout where she loses track of time, she hasn't slept in a year. Isabelle's entire existence now revolves around finding him, but she knows she can't go on this way forever. In hopes of jarring loose a new witness or buried clue, she agrees to be interviewed by a true-crime podcaster—but his interest in Isabelle's past makes her nervous. His incessant questioning paired with her severe insomnia has brought up uncomfortable memories from her own childhood, making Isabelle start to doubt her recollection of the night of Mason's disappearance, as well as second-guess who she can trust... including herself. **BL & AZ**

****CITY OF DREAMS**, Don Winslow (Morrow, \$30.00, April).

Hollywood. The city where dreams are made. On the losing side of a bloody East Coast crime war, Danny Ryan is now on the run. The Mafia, the cops, the FBI all want him dead or in prison. With his little boy, his elderly father and the tattered remnants of his loyal crew of soldiers, he makes the classic American migration to California to start a new life. A quiet, peaceful existence. But the Feds track him down and want Danny to do them a favor that could make him a fortune or kill him.

And when Hollywood starts shooting a film based on his former life, Danny demands a piece of the action and begins to rebuild his criminal empire. Then he falls in love. With a beautiful movie star who has a dark past of her own. As their worlds collide in an explosion that could destroy them both, Danny Ryan has to fight for his life in a city where dreams are born. Or where they go to die. **BL & AZ**

****THE WHITE LADY**, Jacqueline Winspear (Harper, \$30.00, March). A reluctant ex-spy with demons of her own, Elinor finds herself facing down one of the most dangerous organized crime gangs in London, ultimately exposing corruption from Scotland Yard to the highest levels of government. The private, quiet "Miss White" as Elinor is known, lives in a village in rural Kent, England, and to her fellow villagers seems something of an enigma. Well she might, as Elinor occupies a "grace and favor" property, a rare privilege offered to faithful servants of the Crown for services to the nation. But the residents of Shacklehurst have no way of knowing how dangerous Elinor's war work had been, or that their mysterious neighbor is haunted by her past.

It will take Susie, the child of a young farmworker, Jim Mackie and his wife, Rose, to break through Miss White's icy demeanor—but Jim has something in common with Elinor. He, too, is desperate to escape his past. When the powerful Mackie crime family demands a return of their prodigal son for an important job, Elinor assumes the task of protecting her neighbors, especially the bright-eyed Susie. Yet in her quest

to uncover the truth behind the family's pursuit of Jim, Elinor unwittingly sets out on a treacherous path—yet it is one that leads to her freedom. **LJ, BL, DP & Kirkus**

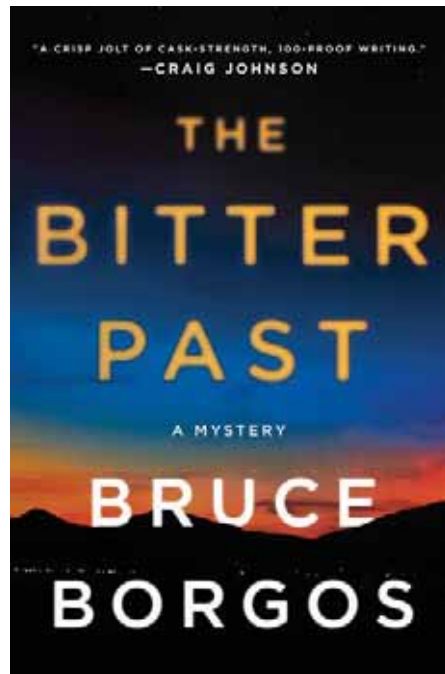
Best Debut Mystery/ Crime Novel

****LOCUST LANE**, Stephen Amidon (Celadon, \$28.00, January). On the surface, Emerson, Massachusetts, is just like any other affluent New England suburb. But when a young woman is found dead in the nicest part of town, the powerful neighbors close ranks to keep their families safe. In this searing novel, Eden Perry's death kicks off an investigation into the three teenagers who were partying with her that night, each a suspect. Hannah, a sweet girl with an unstable history. Jack, the popular kid with a mean streak. Christopher, an outsider desperate to fit in. Their parents, each with motivations of their own, only complicate the picture: they will do anything to protect their children, even at the others' expense. **BL, AZ & DP**

****BETTER THE BLOOD**, Michael Bennett (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, January). A tenacious Maori detective, Hana Westerman juggles single motherhood, endemic prejudice, and the pressures of her career in Auckland CIB. Led to a crime scene by a mysterious video, she discovers a man ritualistically hanging in a secret room and a puzzling inward-curving inscription. Delving into the investigation after a second, apparently unrelated, death, she uncovers a chilling connection to an historic crime: 160 years before, during the brutal and bloody British colonization of New Zealand, a troop of colonial soldiers unjustly executed a Maori Chief. Hana realizes that the murders are utu—the Maori tradition of rebalancing for the crime committed eight generations ago. There were six soldiers in the British troop, and since descendants of two of the soldiers have been killed, four more potential murders remain. Hana is thus hunting New Zealand's first serial

killer. **Kirkus, AZ, PW & DP**

****THE BITTER PAST**, Bruce Borgos (Minotaur, \$28.00, July). Porter Beck is the sheriff in the high desert of Nevada, north of Las Vegas. Born and raised there, he left to join the Army, where he worked in Intelligence, deep in the shadows in far off places. Now he's back home, doing the same lawman's job his father once did, before his father started to develop dementia. All is relatively quiet in this corner of the world, until an old, retired FBI agent is found killed. He was brutally tortured before he was killed and clues at the scene point to a mystery dating back to the early days of the nuclear age. If that wasn't strange enough, a current FBI agent shows up to help Beck's investigation. In a case that unfolds in the past (the 1950s) and the present, it seems that a Russian spy infiltrated the nuclear testing site and now someone is looking for that long-ago, all-but forgotten person, who holds the key to what happened then and to the deadly goings on now. **LJ & DP**



****HOW I'LL KILL YOU**, Ren DeStafano (Berkley, \$27.00, March). Sissy has an...interesting family. Always the careful one, always the cautious one, she has handled the cleanup while her serial killer sisters have carved a path

of carnage across the U.S. Now, as they arrive in the Arizona heat, Sissy must step up and embrace the family past-time of making a man fall in love and then murdering him. Her first target? A young widower named Edison—and their mutual attraction is instant. While their relationship progresses, and most couples would be thinking about picking out china patterns and moving in together, Sissy's family is reminding her to think about picking out burial sites and moving on. Then something happens that Sissy never anticipated: She begins to feel protective of Edison, and before she can help it, she's fallen in love. But the clock is ticking, and her sisters are growing restless. It becomes clear that the gravesite she chooses will hide a body no matter what happens; but if she betrays her family, will it be hers? **PW, LJ, AZ & BL**

****STONE COLD FOX**, Rachel Koller Croft (Berkley, \$27.00, February). Like any enterprising woman, Bea knows what she's worth and is determined to get all she deserves—it just so happens that what she deserves is to marry rich. Filthy rich. After years of forced instruction by her mother in the art of swindling men, a now-solo Bea wants nothing more than to close and lock the door on their sordid partnership. When Bea chooses her ultimate target in the fully loaded, thoroughly dull and blue-blooded Collin Case, she's ready to deploy all of her tricks one last time. The challenge isn't getting the ring, but rather the approval of Collin's family and everyone else in their 1 percent tax bracket, particularly his childhood best friend, Gale Wallace-Leicester. Going toe-to-toe with Gale isn't a threat to an expert like Bea, but what begins as an amusing cat-and-mouse game quickly develops into a dangerous pursuit of the grisly truth. Finding herself at a literal life-and-death crossroads with everything on the line, Bea must finally decide who she really wants to be. **PW, Kirkus, AZ & LJ**

****THE GOLDEN SPOON**, Jessa Maxwell (Atria, \$27.00, March). Every summer for the past ten years, six awe-struck bakers have descended on

the grounds of Grafton, the leafy and imposing Vermont estate that is not only the filming site for “Bake Week” but also the childhood home of the show’s famous host, celebrated baker Betsy Martin. The author of numerous bestselling cookbooks and hailed as “America’s Grandmother,” Betsy Martin isn’t as warm off-screen as on, though no one needs to know that but her. She has always demanded perfection, and gotten it with a smile, but this year something is off. As the baking competition commences, things begin to go awry. At first, it’s merely sabotage—sugar replaced with salt, a burner turned to high—but when a body is discovered, everyone is a suspect. **PW, Kirkus & LJ**

****A DISAPPEARANCE IN FIJI**, Nilima Rao (Soho Crime, \$25.95, June). 1914, Fiji: Akal Singh, 25, would rather be anywhere but this tropical paradise—or, as he calls it, “this godforsaken island.” After a promising start to his police career in Hong Kong, Akal has been sent to Fiji as punishment for a humiliating professional mistake. Lonely and grumpy, Akal plods through his work and dreams of getting back to Hong Kong or his native India. When an indentured Indian woman goes missing from a sugarcane plantation and Fiji’s newspapers scream “kidnapping,” the inspector-general reluctantly

assigns Akal the case. Akal, eager to achieve redemption, agrees—but soon finds himself far more invested than he could have expected. Now not only is he investigating a disappearance, but also confronting the brutal realities of the indentured workers’ existence and the racism of the British colonizers in Fiji—along with his own thorny notions of personhood and caste. Early interrogations of the white plantation owners, Indian indentured laborers, and native Fijians yield only one conclusion: there is far more to this case than meets the eye. **BL, PW, AZ & DP**

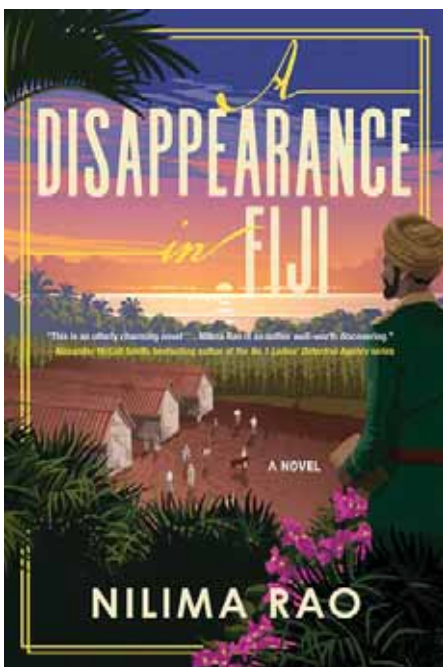
****A MOST AGREEABLE MURDER**, Julia Seales (Random House, \$27.00, June). Feisty, passionate Beatrice Steele has never fit the definition of a true lady, according to the strict code of conduct that reigns in Swampshire, her small English township—she is terrible at needlework, has absolutely no musical ability, and her artwork is so bad it frightens people. Nevertheless, she lives a perfectly agreeable life with her marriage-scheming mother, prankster father, and two younger sisters—beautiful Louisa and forgettable Mary. But she harbors a dark secret: She is obsessed with the true crime cases she reads about in the newspaper. If anyone in her etiquette-obsessed community found out, she’d be deemed a morbid creep and banished from respectable society forever. For her family’s sake, she’s vowed to put her obsession behind her. Because eligible bachelor Edmund Croaksworth is set to attend the approaching autumnal ball, and the Steele family hopes that Louisa will steal his heart. If not, Martin Grub, their disgusting cousin, will inherit the family’s estate, and they will be ruined or, even worse, forced to move to France. So Beatrice must be on her best behavior . . . which is made difficult when a disgraced yet alluring detective inexplicably shows up to the ball. Beatrice is just holding things together when Croaksworth drops dead in the middle of a minuet. As a storm rages outside, the evening descends into a frenzy of panic, fear, and betrayal as it becomes clear they are trapped with a killer. **AZ, PW & Kirkus**

****THE BANDIT QUEENS**, Parini Shroff (Ballantine, \$28.00, January). Five years ago, Geeta lost her no-good husband. As in, she actually lost him—he walked out on her and she has no idea where he is. But in her remote village in India, rumor has it that Geeta killed him. And it’s a rumor that just won’t die. It turns out that being known as a “self-made” widow comes with some perks. No one messes with her, harasses her, or tries to control (ahem, marry) her. It’s even been good for business; no one dares to not buy her jewelry. Freedom must look good on Geeta, because now other women are asking for her “expertise,” making her an unwitting consultant for husband disposal. And not all of them are asking nicely. **BL, LJ & AZ**

****CITY UNDER ONE ROOF**, Iris Yamashita (Berkley, \$27.00, January). When a local teenager discovers a severed hand and foot washed up on the shore of the small town of Point Mettier, Alaska, Cara Kennedy is on the case. A detective from Anchorage, she has her own motives for investigating the possible murder in this isolated place, which can be accessed only by a tunnel. After a blizzard causes the tunnel to close indefinitely, Cara is stuck among the odd and suspicious residents of the town—all 205 of whom live in the same high-rise building and are as icy as the weather. Cara teams up with Point Mettier police officer Joe Barkowski, but before long the investigation is upended by fearsome gang members from a nearby native village. **Kirkus, PW, AZ, DP & LJ**

Best Paperback Original Mystery/Crime Novel

****DEATH IN FINE CONDITION**, Andrew Cartmel (Titan, \$16.95, June). Cordelia knows books. An addict-turned-dealer of classic paperbacks, when she’s not spending her days combing the charity shops and jumble sales of suburban London for valuable collec-

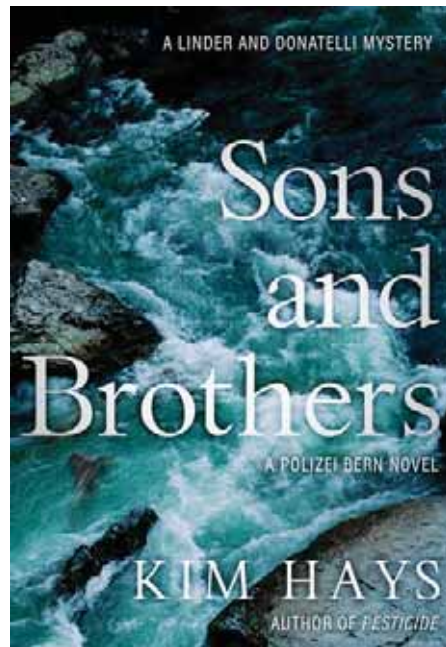


tor's items, she's pining for the woman of her dreams and nimbly avoiding her landlord's demands for rent. The most elusive prize of all, her white whale, has surfaced — a set of magnificent, vintage Sleuth Hound crime novels. Gorgeous, and as rare as they come. Just one problem. They're not for sale. Still, that won't stop a resourceful woman like Cordelia... One burglary later, the books are hers. Unfortunately, the man she's just robbed turns out to be one of London's most dangerous gangsters, and now he's on her trail and out for blood.
PW & AZ

****HIDE**, Tracy Clark (Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, January). When a young red-haired woman is found brutally murdered in downtown Chicago, one detail stands out: the red lipstick encircling her wrists and ankles. Detective Harriet Foster is on the case, even though she's still grieving the sudden death of her partner. As a Black woman in a male-dominated department, Foster anticipates a rocky road ahead acclimating to a new team—and building trust with her new partner isn't coming easily. After another victim turns up with the same lipstick markings, Foster suspects she's looking for a serial killer. Through a tip from a psychiatrist, Foster learns about Bodie Morgan: a troubled man with a twisted past and a penchant for pretty young redheads with the bluest eyes. As Foster wades into Morgan's sinister history, the killer continues their gruesome assault on Chicago's streets.
DP

****THE BENEVOLENT SOCIETY OF ILL-MANNERED LADIES**, Alison Goodman (Berkley, \$16.99, May). Lady Augusta Colebrook, "Gus," is determinedly unmarried, bored by society life, and tired of being dismissed at the age of forty-two. She and her twin sister, Julia, who is grieving her dead betrothed, need a distraction. One soon presents itself: to rescue their friend's goddaughter, Caroline, from her violent husband. The sisters set out to Caroline's country estate with a plan, but their carriage is accosted by a highwayman. In the scuffle, Gus accidentally shoots and

injures the ruffian, only to discover he is Lord Evan Belford, an acquaintance from their past who was charged with murder and exiled to Australia twenty years ago. What follows is a high adventure full of danger, clever improvisation, heart-racing near misses, and a little help from a revived and rather charming Lord Evan. Back in London, Gus can't stop thinking about her unlikely (not to mention handsome) comrade-in-arms. She is convinced Lord Evan was falsely accused of murder, and she is going to prove it. She persuades Julia to join her in a quest to help Lord Evan, and others in need—society be damned!
LJ & AZ



****SONS AND BROTHERS**, Kim Hays (Seventh Street Books, \$17.95, April). Walking his dog along Bern's Aare river on an icy November night, a surgeon in his seventies is hit in the face and thrown into the river to drown. When his bruised corpse is found, his watch is missing. A mugging gone wrong? The more Swiss police detective Giuliana Linder and her assistant Renzo Donatelli learn about Johann Karl Gurtner, the more convinced they are that his death was not random. Talking to Gurtner's family raises as many questions as it answers, but one thing becomes clear: the surgeon's relationship with his middle son, Markus, was

grim. Tracking others who might have had reason to hate Gurtner, Giuliana and Renzo find themselves once again dealing with their attraction to one another and their ambivalence about having an affair.

Behind their investigation, another story has been unfolding. During the year leading up to Gurtner's death, his son Markus became friends with a former classmate of his father's from the village where the two men grew up. Unlike the privileged young Gurtner, Jakob Amsler was forcibly removed from his mother at nine and contracted to live and work on a village farm. From Jakob, Markus learns that his father's early life contains some very odd secrets—secrets that Giuliana and Renzo are now trying to uncover. **DP**

****EVERY THING SHE FEARED**, Rick Mofina (MIRA, \$18.99, April). When a teen falls while taking a selfie at the edge of a cliff, the last thing she sees before plummeting to her death is Katie Harmon, the nine-year-old girl she was babysitting, looking down at her. Investigators gather at the scene, and Katie's mother, Sara, rushes to comfort her daughter. Yet there's a small, secret ping of alarm in Sara's heart that she cannot share—though rookie detective Kim Pierce senses it. For years, others have tried to unravel this secret. From true-crime podcasters to a haunted journalist searching for a killer who vanished after being released from prison several years ago. And now, with detectives tightening the focus of their investigation, Sara is consumed by her darkest fear—that the babysitter's death was not an accident. **AZ**

****BLACK RIVER**, Matthew Spencer (Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, June). During a stifling summer in Sydney, the body of a chaplain's daughter is found wrapped in black plastic on the deserted grounds of an elite boarding school. Is it the work of the killer who's been stalking the privileged neighborhoods along the Parramatta River? Gut instinct tells Detective Sergeant Rose Riley something even more devious might be at play. Eager to find the so-called Blue

Moon Killer before he strikes again, Riley forms an uneasy alliance with Adam Bowman, a journalist with a valuable, and unsettling, link to the school's history. As Riley's investigation takes her deep into the secret lives of Sydney's prominent citizens, Bowman delves into the darkest places of his own childhood for answers. When their paths converge, Riley must use every bit of her cunning to stop another murder. **DP**

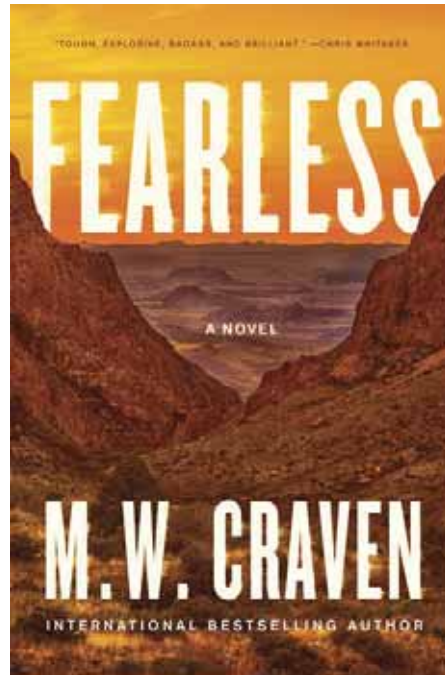
Best Thrillers

****NIGHT FLIGHT TO PARIS**, Cara Black (Soho Crime, \$27.95, March). October 1942: it's been two years since Kate Rees was sent to Paris on a British Secret Service mission to assassinate Hitler. Since then, she has left spy-craft behind to take a training job as a sharpshooting instructor in the Scottish Highlands. But her quiet life is violently disrupted when Colonel Stepney, her former handler, drags her back into the fray for a risky three-pronged mission in Paris. Each task is more dangerous than the next: Deliver a package of forbidden biological material. Assassinate a high-ranking German operative whose knowledge of invasion plans could turn the tide of the war against the Allies. Rescue a British agent who once saved Kate's life—and get out. Kate will encounter sheiks and spies, poets and partisans, as she races to keep up with the constantly shifting nature of her assignment, showing every ounce of her Oregonian grit in the process. **AZ**

****THE VICAR**, A. J. Chambers (Blackstone, \$26.99, September). Terry Nolan, an off-the-books MI5 operative known as The Vicar, has been officially dead for the past thirty years. But when Nolan is attacked in Boston, it becomes clear his cover is blown. Even worse, his Parishioners – the network of spies who work under The Vicar – have all been compromised.

Nolan races to New York to try and find his last remaining agent, Shae, whom he personally recruited years ago. Instead, he finds Kristen, a young civilian who is determined to save Shae, too – and who may know more than she's

letting on. In the search for his missing agent, Nolan intercepts intelligence that indicates weapons of mass destruction are on their way to Britain's four largest cities. **DP (2)**



****FEARLESS**, M. W. Craven (Flatiron Books, \$27.99, July). Ben Koenig used to head the US Marshal's elite Special Operations Group. His team hunted the bad guys – the really bad guys, and he could find anyone. Then one day Koenig himself disappeared. Koenig has been on the run for six years. Now suddenly his face is on every television screen in the country and his cover is blown. A woman has gone missing, and her father will do anything to find her. He wants Koenig to discover what happened, no matter the cost. The trail leads Koenig to a small town in the burning heat of the Chihuahuan Desert, where some people have a secret they'll do anything to protect. But Koenig has a secret of his own: a unique condition that makes him unable to feel fear. Now Koenig is coming for them. And they should be afraid. **DP & AZ**

****KILLING ME**, Michelle Gagnon (Putnam, \$28.00, May). Amber Jamison cannot believe she's about to become the latest victim of a serial killer—she's

savvy and street smart, so when she gets pushed into, of all things, a white windowless van, she's more angry than afraid. Things get even weirder when she's miraculously saved by a mysterious woman...who promptly disappears. Who was she? And why is she hunting serial killers? You'd think escaping one psychopath would be enough, but Amber's problems are just beginning. Her close call has law enforcement circling a past she's tried to outrun. So she flees across the country, ending up at a seedy motel in Las Vegas with a noir-obsessed manager and a sex worker as her unlikely companions...and danger right behind. She's landed in the crosshairs of the world's most prolific killer, caught up in a deadly game that's been going on for years. To survive, she's forced to dust off her old playbook and partner with someone she can't trust. **AZ & DP**

****THE TRAITOR**, Ava Glass (Bantam, \$17.00, September). An MI6 operative is found dead, locked in a suitcase inside his own apartment. Despite an exhaustive search, no fingerprints are found at the scene. Emma Makepeace and her handler, Ripley, know an assassination when they see one, and such an obvious murder can mean only one thing: Someone is sending a message. As she digs into his past, Emma discovers that the unfortunate spy had been investigating two Russian oligarchs based in London. He'd become obsessed with the idea that the two were spies, aided by a third man—whose identity he had yet to uncover. When he shared his findings within MI6 in the weeks before he died, the response came back fast and clear: Drop the investigation and move on. Had he uncovered a secret that cost him his life? To pick up where he left off without ending up in a suitcase of her own, Emma goes undercover on one of the oligarch's million-dollar yachts, scheduled to set sail from the Cote D'Azur to Monaco. Under other circumstances, this would be a dream vacation. But if Emma's real identity gets discovered, it's a death sentence. **DP**

****BURNER**, Mark Greaney (Berkley,

\$29.00, February). When you kick over a rock, you never know what's going to crawl out. Alex Velesky is about to discover that the hard way. He's stolen records from the Swiss bank that employs him, thinking that he'll uncover a criminal conspiracy. But he soon finds that he's tapped into the mother lode of corruption. Before he knows it, he's being hunted by everyone from the Russian mafia to the CIA. Court Gentry and his erstwhile lover, Zoya Zakharova, find themselves on opposites poles when it comes to Velesky. They both want him but for different reasons. That's a problem for tomorrow. Today they need to keep him and themselves alive. **PW, AZ & DP**

****THE BULLET GARDEN**, Stephen Hunter (Atria/Emily Bester, \$28.99, January). July, 1944: The lush, rolling hills of Normandy are dotted with a new feature—German snipers. From their vantage points, they pick off hundreds of Allied soldiers every day, bringing the D-Day invasion to its knees. It's clear that someone is tipping off these snipers with the locations of American GIs, but who? And how? General Eisenhower demands his intelligence service to find the best shot in the Allied military to counter this deadly SS operation. Enter Pacific hero Earl Swagger, assigned this crucial and bloody mission. With crosshairs on his back, Swagger can't trust anyone as he infiltrates the shadowy corners of London and France for answers. **BL & AZ**

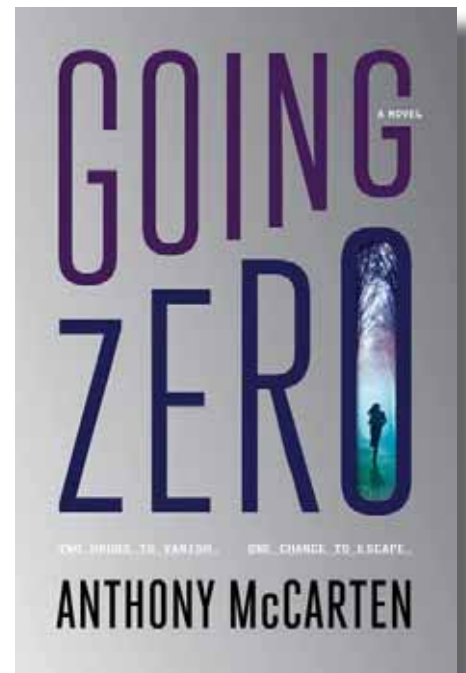
****RED LONDON**, Alma Katsu (Putnam, \$27.00). After her role in taking down a well-placed mole inside the CIA, Agent Lyndsey Duncan arrives in London fully focused on her newest Russian asset, deadly war criminal Dmitri Tarasenko. That is until her MI6 counterpart, Davis Ranford, personally calls for her help. Following a suspicious attack on Russian oligarch Mikhail Rotenberg's property in a tony part of London, Davis needs Lyndsey to cozy up to the billionaire's aristocratic British wife, Emily Rotenberg. Fortunately for Lyndsey, there's little to dissuade Emily

from taking in a much-needed confidante. Even being one of the richest women in the world is no guarantee of happiness. But before Lyndsey can cover much ground with her newfound friend, the CIA unveils a perturbing connection between Mikhail and Russia's geopolitical past, one that could upend the world order and jeopardize Lyndsey's longtime allegiance to the Agency. **BL & AZ**

****BLACK WOLF**, Kathleen Kent (Mulholland, \$29.00, February). It is 1990 when Melvina Donleavy arrives in Soviet Belarus on her first undercover mission with the CIA, alongside three fellow agents—none of whom know she is playing two roles. To the prying eyes of the KGB, she is merely a secretary; to her CIA minders, she is the only one who can stop the flow of nuclear weapons from the crumbling Soviet Union into the Middle East. For Mel has a secret; she is a “super recognizer,” someone who never forgets a face. But no training could prepare her for the reality of life undercover, and for the streets of Minsk, where women have been disappearing. Soviet law enforcement is firm: murder is a capitalist disease. But could a serial killer be at work? Especially if he knew no one was watching? As Mel searches for answers, she catches the eye of an entirely different kind of threat: the elusive and petrifying “Black Wolf,” head of the KGB. **PW, AZ & DP**

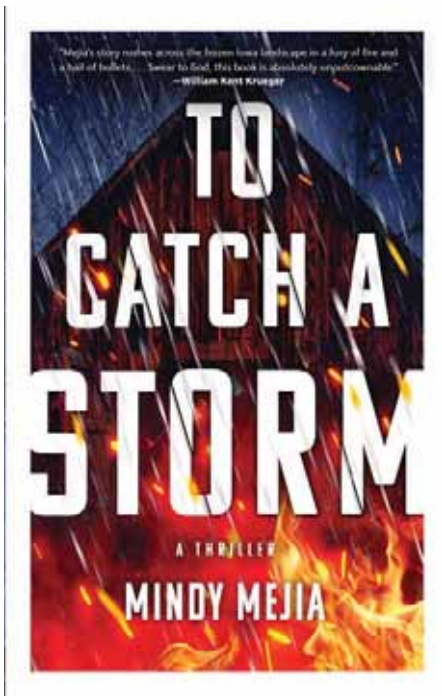
****ALLIGATOR ALLEY**, Mike Lawson (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$27.00, February). When Andie Moore, a 23-year-old working in the DOJ's Inspector General's Office, is murdered in cold blood in Florida's Everglades, it falls on DeMarco to get to the bottom of things. Paired with Emma, an enigmatic, retired ex-spy with seemingly endless connections in the military and intelligence communities, they venture south to the scene of Andie's murder: Alligator Alley. DeMarco and Emma waste no time in identifying two suspects—a pair of crooked, near-retirement FBI agents named McIntyre and McGruder. But as they keep digging, it becomes clear that these FBI agents weren't acting alone, and that this goes much deeper than just

the murder of an innocent 23-year old woman. **BL, PW, AZ & DP**



****GOING ZERO**, Anthony McCarten (Harper, \$30.00, April). **TWO HOURS TO VANISH** Ten Americans have been carefully selected to Beta test a ground-breaking piece of spyware. Pioneered by tech-wunderkind Cy Baxter in collaboration with the CIA, **FUSION** can track anyone on earth. But does it work? Each participant is given two hours to 'Go Zero' – to go off-grid and disappear – and then thirty days to elude the highly sophisticated Capture Teams sent to find them. Any Zero that beats **FUSION** will receive \$3 million. If Cy's system prevails, he wins a \$90 billion-dollar government contract to revolutionize surveillance forever. For one contestant, an unassuming Boston librarian named Kaitlyn Day, the stakes are far higher than money, and her reasons for entering the test more personal than anyone imagines. Kaitlyn needs to win as badly as Cy needs to realize his own ambitions. They have no choice but to finish the game and when the timer hits zero, there will only be one winner. **BL, AZ & DP(2)**

**** TO CATCH A STORM**, Mindy Mejia (Atlantic Monthly, \$28.99, August). When her husband's car is found abandoned and on fire—in the

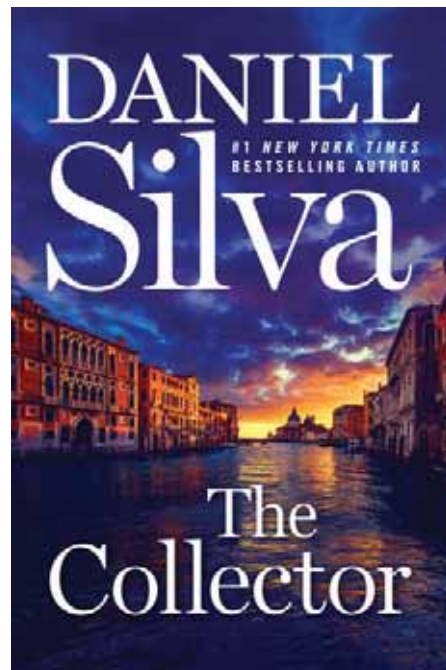


middle of a rainstorm—Eve Roth becomes the police's number one suspect. After all, her husband was suspended from the University of Iowa for inappropriate conduct with a student, and who else but an atmospheric physicist could incinerate a car in a downpour? But Eve has no idea why her husband disappeared. She's desperate to find him, both for herself and her beloved, disabled father-in-law. Jonah Kendrick appears on their doorstep with a theory. He's seen Eve's husband, bound and bleeding in a barn. Claiming to be a psychic detective who dreams of the lost, Jonah has helped find missing people his entire life. He dreamed about a young woman trapped in the same barn months ago, and she's still missing. As a firm believer in the laws of nature, Eve rejects anything to do with psychics, but their investigations soon collide. As the temperature drops and Iowa turns to ice, Eve and Jonah race across the state to discover what happened to the people they've lost. But the truth is more deadly either of them expected, and the physicist and the psychic must learn to believe in each other if they want to escape this storm alive. PW & AZ

****DROWNING**, T. J. Newman

(Avid Reader/Simon & Schuster, \$28.00, May). Six minutes after takeoff, Flight 1421 crashes into the Pacific Ocean. During the evacuation, an engine explodes and the plane is flooded. Those still alive are forced to close the doors—but it's too late. The plane sinks to the bottom with twelve passengers trapped inside. More than two hundred feet below the surface, engineer Will Kent and his eleven-year-old daughter Shannon are waist-deep in water and fighting for their lives. Their only chance at survival is an elite rescue team on the surface led by professional diver Chris Kent—Shannon's mother and Will's soon-to-be ex-wife—who must work together with Will to find a way to save their daughter and rescue the passengers from the sealed airplane, which is now teetering on the edge of an undersea cliff. There's not much time. There's even less air. **Kirkus**, LJ, AZ & DP

****THE COLLECTOR**, Daniel Silva (Harper, \$32.00, July). Legendary art restorer and spy Gabriel Allon joins forces with a brilliant and beautiful master-thief to track down the world's most valuable missing painting but soon finds himself in a desperate race to prevent an unthinkable conflict be-



tween Russia and the West. DP

****ZERO DAYS**, Ruth Ware (Gallery/Scout Press, \$29.99, June). Hired by companies to break into buildings and hack security systems, Jack and her husband, Gabe, are the best penetration specialists in the business. But after a routine assignment goes horribly wrong, Jack arrives home to find her husband dead. To add to her horror, the police are closing in on their suspect—her. **BL**, AZ & DP

****BLIND FEAR**, Brandon Webb & John David Mann (Bantam, \$28.99, July). By day, AWOL Navy SEAL Finn is hiding out on Vieques, a tiny island paradise off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, living in a spare room behind a seafood restaurant owned by a blind local. By night he scours the dark web, hunting for the rogue officer responsible for the crimes he is accused of committing. But Finn's world is about to be turned upside down by a new nightmare, when his employer's two grandchildren go missing. To find them, he'll have to infiltrate the island's dangerous criminal underbelly and expose a shadowy crime network known as La Empresa—even if it means exposing himself in the process. **DP**

****THE PARTISAN**, Patrick Worrall (Union Square, \$17.99, April). Summer 1961: The brutal Cold War between East and West is becoming ever more perilous. Two young prodigies from either side of the Iron Curtain, Yulia and Michael, meet at a chess tournament in London. They don't know it, but they're about to compete in the deadliest game ever played. Shadowing them is Greta, a ruthless Lithuanian resistance fighter who is hunting down some of the most dangerous men in the world. Men who are also on the radar of Vassily, perhaps the USSR's greatest spymaster. A man of cunning and influence, Vassily is Yulia's minder during her visit to the West, but even he could not foresee the consequences of her meeting Michael. When the world is accelerating towards an inevitable and catastrophic conflict, what can just four people do to prevent it? **PW & DP (2)**

Letters



Melanie LaFave

I live in Northern Michigan. Before we retired "up north," I regularly visited Aunt Agatha's in Ann Arbor, a wonderful mystery bookstore. As I'm sure you know, since the store closed, Robin Agnew has continued to send out a newsletter. A couple months ago, she advised that she was to be a columnist for *Deadly Pleasures*, and told readers how to subscribe. I am delighted I did, have now received my second issue, and have found many new books and series to try. Thank you.

I sent an e-mail to Robin with a **question about an author I am trying to remember**. She said I had stumped her, and recommended the Stop, You're Killing Me website and you as sources for an answer. I have tried to remember everything I can about this author and his books, and did search that site to no avail.

I hope you don't mind if I pick your brain. In the series I read, the location is England, and I believe the period is either slightly before or after World War I, but it could be later. The main character is an author himself, but he also solves mysteries. His girlfriend, later fiancée, is French, and works for his publisher. That publisher is a gay man, who, in one of the books, is arrested because of his homosexuality and sent to prison. I read only two or three books in the series, and I don't know if there are more.

If you have any ideas about who this author might be, or other resources I might check, please let me know.

Thank you so much for any help you can give. [*I'm also stumped. Perhaps one of our readers can help. Send solution to george@deadlypleasures.com.*]

[In a later email Melanie writes]

I am just writing again to thank you for your recommendation of Chris Offutt and the Mick Hardin series. I just finished **THE KILLING HILLS**. Man, the guy can write! I'm a fan of P.D. James, Deborah Crombie, and the like, and also read many historical mysteries. Like you, I also love Dick Francis. So **KILLING HILLS** was different for me, but I can't wait to read the next in the series. I've recommended the book to my husband and brother.

Offutt is by no means the only new author that *Deadly Pleasures* has led me to, so I'm most grateful to you.

Harvey Glastein

George, I am a long time subscriber and I often find my tastes parallel yours. Well, you recommended a procedural by Rozlan Mohd Noor, whose setting is Malaysia. I was intrigued by this, so I purchased the books and am reading them in series order. They are terrific. Just the kind of book I enjoy. You have much better connections than I, but I did find a 6th book, in e-book format, for sale on Google play for a couple of bucks. It's called **POSTHUMOUS CHILD, INSPECTOR MISLAN AND THE PLAYGROUND MURDER**. I could find no other reference to this title anywhere. I haven't read that title yet, but I pass this info along if you are interested in his complete works in English. Keep the good work going, the magazine is the highlight of my day. [See the Introducing... column herein.]

Susan Rube'

Thank you so much for your wonderful publication! My husband and I really enjoy it and have read many of the books your staff recommends.

I uses to "comb" websites trying to find good books to read. I even made a spreadsheet one year – hours of work. You have saved me the trouble now. Thanks.

Meredith Anthony

(A report on Thrillerfest and her participation on a panel.)

Good conference this year. Well attended. Well organized. My Book Review panel was moderated by the charming Jon Land. He asked us all to name our favorite book this year. I said **SMALL MERCIES** by Dennis Lehane. Also mentioned were Laura Lippman's **PROM MOM** and Eleanor Catton's **BIRNAM WOOD**.

Jon also asked me how important first lines, first chapters, and prologues are in a novel. I said first lines and chapters: very. But I made a case for ending prologues. I hate them. I said they were outdated and old-fashioned and the mark of an insecure author. If you can't sprinkle the backstory or historical significance throughout your novel you shouldn't be writing one. That caused a bit of a furor.

We were also asked about negative reviews. Most panelists said they only wrote about books they like. I was the contrarian. And I explained that George gave me lots of room in **DP** and I felt my responsibility was to our audience of dedicated mystery readers: to tell them what to buy and read and what NOT to buy and read. Larry [Gandle], you would have loved it!

Mary Doon

I sent an email to David Heska Wanbli Weiden, author of **WINTER COUNTS**, asking him to use footnotes for Lakota words like Michael Bennett did (with Maori terms) in **BETTER THE BLOOD**.

He emailed back the next day and said he is thinking of using a glossary with the next book.

Must be a lovely person.

A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



PROM MOM

By Laura Lippmann

William Morrow; \$30.00, July

Rating: A-

First line: The lights were off in the bathroom, but the door was ajar and sunlight had begun seeping into the room.

PROM MOM by Laura Lippman is a long, slow burn of a domestic revenge mystery. Like so many mysteries these days, it has two timelines: 1997 and 2019-2021. In 1997, a Baltimore high school book nerd named Amber has been tutoring a handsome, popular jock named Joe. The tutoring comes with benefits. Her only demand is that he take her to prom, a request made feasible since his longtime girlfriend has dumped him. At prom, Amber has stomach pains when Joe dances with his ex, for old time's sake. In the morning she wakes up in the hotel bathroom with a dead infant and a lot of blood loss. The tabloids called her Prom Mom and the court gave her a couple of years in juvie. She moves away and eventually settles in New Orleans where she works in an art gallery.

In 2019, Amber returns to Baltimore after the death of her stepfather and decides to stay for a while. And she is curious about Joe. Joe, meanwhile, has married a gorgeous plastic surgeon named Meredith. His real estate business seems to be thriving. The attractive couple has no children by agreement. Joe claims to be happily married but he cheats on Meredith with a sexy real estate agent named Jordan.

The exposition detailing the circumstances and character of Joe and the three beautiful women who can't

get enough of him is almost crushingly long. But never bet against Laura Lippman. She knows what she's doing. Bit by bit the noose tightens. You can feel it incrementally close in as the three lovely women orbit the hapless charmer, Joe.

Lippman is also a generous author. During the novel, Meredith's book club reads one of her favorite books, *CIRCE* by Madeline Miller. Her character's take on the novel is apt and telling: Why, Meredith wonders, do powerful goddesses fall in love with feckless mortal men who break their mighty hearts. Since *CIRCE* is also one of my favorite novels, I loved this big-hearted shout-out to a fellow investigator of domestic strife.

Beautifully written, confidently controlled, Lippman is a terrific writer at the top of her game. Strangely, she rushes the ending. It's almost as if she doesn't trust you to stay with her while she sticks the landing.

But **PROM MOM** is a must read if you're a fan of domestic terror and don't mind the glacial pace of the beginning—or the abrupt end.

THE CLEMENTINE COMPLEX

By Bob Mortimer

Scout Press; \$17.99, September

Debut Novel

Rating: A

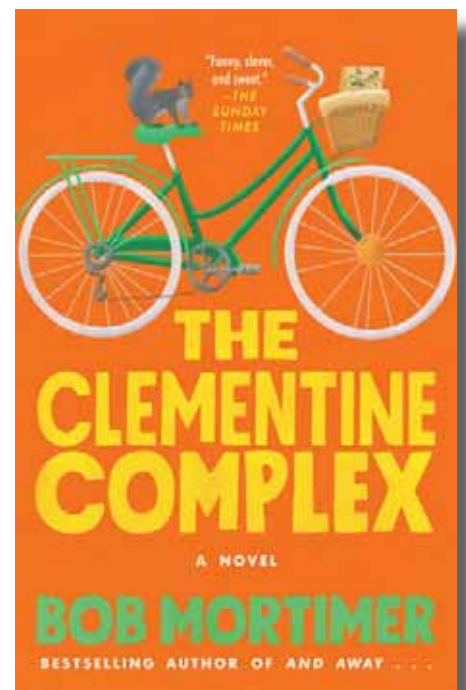
First line: My name is Gary.

British comedian Bob Mortimer's **THE CLEMENTINE COMPLEX** is a welcome diversion—a dark thriller populated by sweetly silly characters. The off-kilter humor is balanced by the gathering threat of serious mayhem.

The self-deprecating protagonist, Gary Thorn, is a legal assistant in Lon-

don who talks to squirrels with ease, but has trouble chatting up a woman in a pub. The woman, who he calls Clementine since she's reading a book with a clementine on the cover, disappears before he can get her name. She leaves the book. She is pretty and way out of his league since he describes himself as a short man with a very large nose, but Gary persists in tracking her down and, in the process, becomes entangled in a dangerous plot.

The story, told mainly in the first person from Gary's droll point of view, occasionally offers glimpses into Clementine (her real name is Emily), too. The humor relies most on odd juxtapositions, and takes some getting used to. You'll either love it or hate it. Give it a try.



PORTRAIT OF A THIEF

By Grace D. Li

Tiny Reparations Books; \$18.00, 2022

Rating: A

First line: State your name for the record, please.

Grace D. Li's *PORTRAIT OF A THIEF* is a great art heist thriller. gorgeously written, it manages to be both meditative and exciting, at the same time. Slow, and yet, suspenseful.

Five college students, all Chinese American, three girls and two boys, come together to rob five of the world's most important art museums with a view to returning priceless looted artifacts to China. A Chinese billionaire will pay them \$10 million each, plus costs, to deliver these treasures, a set of bronze zodiac figures, to her in Beijing.

In lush prose, Li describes the five protagonists, Will, the leader and his beautiful sister, Irene, are from a well-to-do family. Their neighbor, Daniel, the thief, is a little in love with both of them. Alex, a girl from a close-knit but struggling family, is the hacker. Her computer skills have landed her a lucrative job in Silicone Valley. Lily is from a poor family in Texas and her reputation as a fearless street racer makes her their driver. Their circumstances and families, and their hopes and dreams are lavishly detailed. Each yearns to please their families and to do credit to their Chinese heritage.

CENTRAL PARK WEST

By James Comey

Mysterious Press; \$30.00, April

Rating: B

First Line: The doorman barely glanced up as she breezed past, bright blonde hair spilling from under her navy blue Hermès scarf, fancy Jackie O sunglasses on even at night, Prada gabardine raincoat.

Former FBI director James Comey turns to fiction in his debut legal thriller, *CENTRAL PARK WEST*, a serviceable but slightly dumbed-down Grisham wannabe. It's not without its charms. Slow at first, heavy on the exposition, it develops a better pace as it

hits its groove. The legal details lend it authenticity, leveraging Comey's years as a New York mob prosecutor for this tale of a disgraced former governor with mob ties and the angry and ambitious wife who may or may not have killed him.

The plot is suitably twisty but the writing, particularly at the beginning, seems more suitable to a deposition than to a crime novel. The dialogue is particularly weak, trying to make conversations more human by using dated shorthand and phraseology. The defense attorney is particularly awkward with an insistence on intentional mispronunciations that are repeated much too often.

The two trials minutely chronicled in this book give it an overload of courtroom detail. But the suspense is good enough to keep you reading. The prosecutors are described more carefully, and in more detail, than the two defendants. Comey seems to be reluctant to get in the heads of his targets, possibly to keep from giving anything away. He will probably show more confidence in his next outing.

MALIBU BURNING

By Lee Goldberg

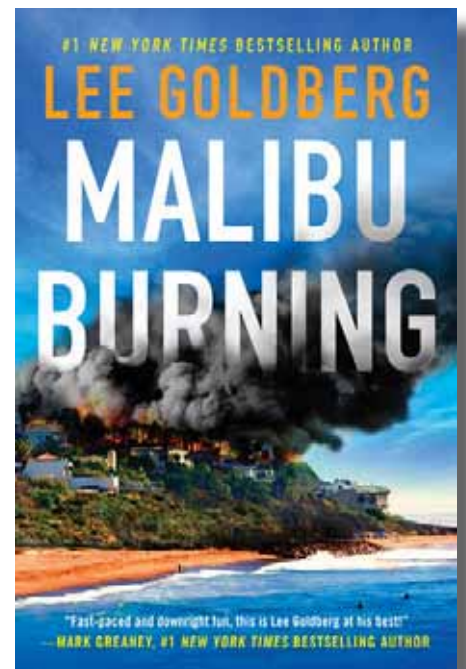
Thomas & Mercer; \$28.99, June

Rating: A

First line: Two federal law enforcement agents, one from the FBI and one from the DEA, were coordinating the stakeout of the Golden State Bank in Ventura, California.

I love Lee Goldberg. The easy breezy style. The charming, quirky characters. The pitch-perfect dialogue—banter honed by his years of writing for television. The crazy plots. The wit, the humor and the violence. I love *MALIBU BURNING*.

Danny Cole, a thief and a con man, is a memorable protagonist. Blessed with intelligence, dishonesty, and cursed only with a conscience and a heart of gold, Danny pulls off the perfect con, only to end up in jail when he stops to help save a life. Now free again, Danny has new skills from spending his prison time



fighting California's wildfires in a unit of convict firefighters who choose hard work and physical danger over the slow torture of hard time. When it comes down to it, you might say they choose incineration over incarceration.

Danny puts together a crew of like-minded souls to pull off a daring heist during wildfire season and incidentally get revenge on the wealthy bastard responsible for a friend's death. Pursued by arson investigators Walker and Sharpe, who are the law enforcement equivalent of Danny's rogue crew, the question is, will Danny and his friends get ridiculously rich? Or will Danny's soft side get the better of him again?

Hilarious and touching, exciting and endearing. Highly recommended.

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

By Joseph O'Connor

Europa Editions; \$27.00

Rating: A

First line: Grunting, sullen, in spumes of leaden smoke, the black Daimler with diplomatic number plates noses onto Via Diciannove, beads of sleet fizzling on its hood.

MY FATHER'S HOUSE is a gorgeous, lush, and absolutely unforgettable

novel set in Rome during World War 2. The Nazis have taken over but Vatican City remains unscathed. Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, an Irish priest serving in the Vatican, leads a small resistance group that includes an Irish diplomat's wife, an Italian Contessa, three Brits, and a blue-collar Italian. Meeting regularly as an impromptu choir, they rehearse sacred music while they secretly plot to hide Jews and other Nazi targets in the vast warren of religious buildings in the Vatican and eventually smuggle them out of Rome. Based on the true story of Father O'Flaherty, **MY FATHER'S HOUSE** is a fictionalized account of one of his biggest missions, on Christmas Eve, 1943. It is told in the voices of the participants—and what voices they are. The writing is lavish and the accounts of the various conspirators sing out from the pages like music. The events of that Christmas Eve, supplemented by accounts more than twenty years later, are utterly absorbing.

The vicious Gestapo boss, Paul Hauptmann, has heard from his superiors in Berlin that too many prisoners and refugees have escaped through Rome. He is under pressure to stop the exodus and will go to any length to do so. He has begun to suspect the Irish priest. The plot for the night's mission is complex and the scrutiny by the Nazis is intense. Then one of the key players is rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. The suspense builds dramatically.

Highly recommended for fans of WW 2 historicals and lovers of heroism.

THE LOCK-UP

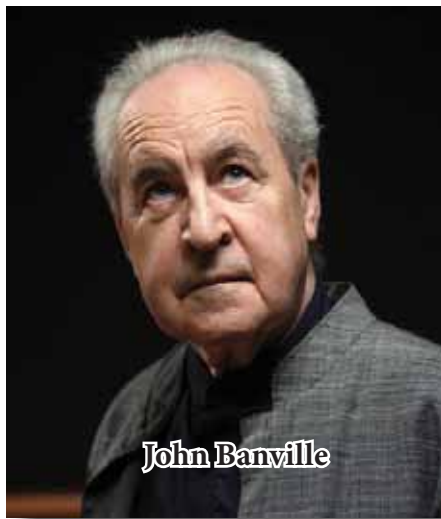
By John Banville

Hanover Square Press; \$30.00, March

Rating: A

First line: Brother Damian stood with a hand held up to shield his eyes against the sun and watched the man, still far off, making his slow way up the steep track towards the monastery.

John Banville's **THE LOCK-UP** is a compelling Irish police procedural about a young woman's apparent suicide and the investigation by a Dublin detec-



tive and a determined pathologist who painstakingly uncover the murderer behind it.

Strangely constructed, **THE LOCK-UP** actually concentrates more on the investigators than on the killer. We are used to reading a little about the private lives and personal obsessions of this police officers who pursue killers. But this book seems to upend the usual order of things, putting the detective and the doctor at center stage and their strange partnership at the forefront. They have some intriguing connections and a love/hate relationship. The pathologist's wife was killed in Spain during an investigation that went badly. The detective managed to kill the attacker but not in time to save the doctor's wife. Now, years later, back in Dublin, he is dating the doctor's daughter. The doctor is dating the sister of one of the victims.

And I haven't even begun to mention the Nazis....

No doubt about it. This is one strange book. I loved it.

NOTES ON AN EXECUTION

By Danya Kukafka

William Morrow; \$27.99, 2022

Rating: C

First line: You are a fingerprint.

Danya Kukafka's **NOTES ON AN EXECUTION** is a highly acclaimed portrait of a psychopathic killer and the women in his life. Prize-winning and well-reviewed, the novel promised to

be a great read. So, I am sorry to report that I didn't care for it.

NOTES ON AN EXECUTION has much to recommend it, starting with a great concept: a 12-hour countdown to an incarcerated killer's lethal injection. It focuses on the killer, of course, but also on each of his victims, the bereaved survivors, the investigator who pursued him, and many others in his orbit.

For the first third, it seemed to be a textbook description of a psychopath. Abusive father. Check. Victimized, inadequate mother. Check. Childhood head injury. Killing of small animals. Voices in the head. Check, check, check. Exposition so slow and painstaking that I nearly quit reading. But there are undoubtedly occasional flashes of brilliance. An apt phrase, a genuine emotion, a desire for understanding or for closure.

The writing is ornate. There are no single adjectives, only groups of three. Every clause has echoes. Every sentence bears repeating. It's tiresome writing. And I'd bet the Thesaurus toolbar was never switched off.

NOTES ON AN EXECUTION is definitely an interesting book. Just not a great one. Would you like it? Take this simple test. Read this (mercifully) brief section:

The night was an open sore. The heart was an organ that beat on and on. The trees creaked their ominous sorrow.

If this passage, one of her best, moved you, if it tugged at your heart, then, fine, go for it. But if this passage struck you as pretentious and annoying, then don't bother.

LUDA

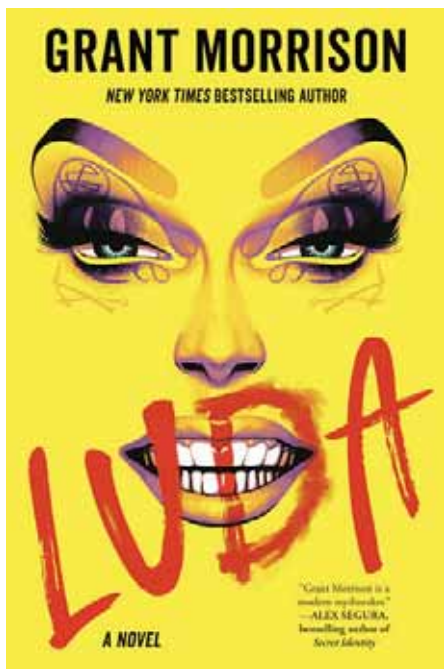
By Grant Morrison

Del Rey, \$28.00, 2022

Rating: A

First line: Where to begin?

I'm late catching up with Grant Morrison's **LUDA** but wanted to remind readers who have not yet had the pleasure of reading it, that **LUDA** is the First Great Drag Epic! Growing numbers of writers have written eloquently or humorously or both about the LGBTQ



experience. Many of them have done it well. But to my mind, no one has captured the crazy joy of drag like Morrison does with **LUDA**.

Aging drag queen, Luci LeBang, is working in Glasgow doing Pantomime, the lowest form of theatre, when she meets new castmate Luda, a boy playing a girl playing a boy! Gorgeous and mysterious, Luda is a young version of Luci herself and Luci is smitten. But when castmates start dropping like the theatre's flies, well, you can imagine that mayhem really ensues!

From boys playing girls in Shakespeare to Craig Russell's evocative movie *Outrageous*, to John Waters and Divine, to Billy Porter and *Pose*, the story of drag has always been with us. One theory about the origin of the term "drag" says it was a Shakespearean script note, "dress as a girl." Now we have RuPaul with more than a dozen Emmy nominations! But the gender dysmorphia, the coming out story, the friends who help the rent-boy morph into the glamour-puss, are still the underpinnings of drag today. **LUDA** is the latest whistle-stop on this long route to now.

In **LUDA**, the writing itself is a form of drag—heightened and ornate, a caricature and a sumptuous indulgence. Every paragraph, sometimes every

sentence contains word play, allusions, innuendos, double entendres, cultural references, cheeky asides and other embellishments too numerous to mention. This is either fabulous or unbearable, depending on the reader's appetite.

LUDA is a long book. It is the quintessential drag novel. It is also a Proustian memoir, a coming of age story, a backstage theater saga, and a murder mystery, all layered like a drag queen's makeup. The prose is thick, the atmosphere turgid, the action fragmented, the characters—well, it's difficult and definitely overwritten—it's also a must read. Where else can you get step-by-step instructions for reshaping your lips, along with allusions to the Fibonacci spiral and the golden ratio. I loved it, but even I flagged now and then. Read it if you have the stamina. Kick your *Kinky Boots* off and read it if you dare.

ALL THE SINNERS BLEED

By S. A. Cosby

Flatiron Books; \$27.99, June

Rating: A

First line: Charon County was founded in bloodshed and darkness.

S.A. Cosby's **ALL THE SINNERS BLEED** is a brilliant Southern gothic police procedural. The voice is so authentic and the setting so well-described that you are immediately grounded in rural Virginia where a well-educated Black man with an FBI background has, through a series of strange occurrences, been elected County Sheriff.

Titus Crown has come home to Charon County, ostensibly to take care of his widowed father, and he was as surprised as everyone else when he became the area's top law enforcement officer. He brings some baggage from his FBI past but he is determined to do his best to serve his community. When a school shooting leaves a beloved teacher dead, as well as the shooter, a former student, Titus digs in. But as he looks into the crime, he uncovers the town's horrifying secrets and sets off a string of grisly crimes as he pursues the killer.

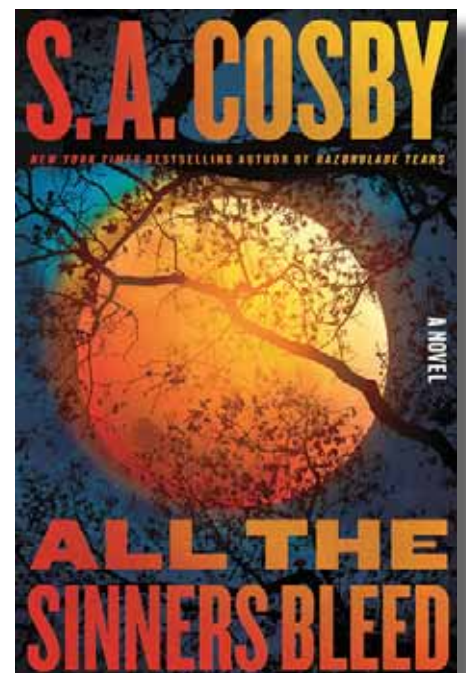
The pace is phenomenal. Suspense builds as Titus puts together the clues.

The narrative is so propulsive that it demands your complete attention.

The subtext also pulls the reader in. The racial divide which is particularly appalling in the rural South looms large. The role of family also stands out. As does the religious context. There are 21 churches in Charon County. They range from relatively affluent white congregations to largely Black Southern Baptist flocks. One church is run by a fringe cult of snake handlers. The pastors of the churches have as much power as any politician.

The plot has some strange gaps. Cosby fails to delineate the suspects sufficiently. When the reveal comes, it seems somewhat random. It would have been easy to remedy. But I suspect he did this for a reason. And the reason may be that he's interested in more than whodunnit.

As crime fiction, **ALL THE SINNERS BLEED** is an excellent example of its kind. But it is more than that. Like Dennis Lehane and William Kent Krueger, Cosby is interested in much more than crime and justice. He's obsessed with the origins of hate and its intractable hold on individuals, families and communities. This is where he transcends genre fiction and edges into psychological and political realism. This is where the important work happens. This book advances the narrative. A must read.



Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith



Yeah, it's me again... wading my way through the swamp of crises both real and imagined, to bring you a few more private eye (or at least private eye adjacent) things to chew on.

For years, Lawrence Block has made a pretty good living, fictionalizing the adventures of New York private detective Matthew Scudder, who has—so far—appeared in novels, short fiction, a graphic novel and two feature films. But Block, who has admitted he occasionally tells lies for fun and profit, may have not always told the whole truth. Which is where **THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MATTHEW SCUDDER** comes in.

Not that Mr. Scudder is here to set the record straight. Or, not exactly. He's more or less content with the poetic and dramatic license with which Block has embellished his colourful career. What's he's more interested in is more along the lines of trying to make some sense of his own life, as a form of self-therapy, dutifully recalling his past in daily installments.

Purportedly in his own voice (although that eternal conniver Block has his name on the cover), Scudder becomes a sometimes reluctant chronicler of his own life, scribbling away, not even sure why, occasionally balking at details, while at other times diving deeply into facets of his life he thought he'd forgotten. He moves back and forth in time, but he keeps on writing. He skips over major parts of his life, shrugging them off as inessential or already covered by Block, or just as something he didn't feel like talking about.

The *Autobiography* also serves as a sort of sequel to the series, covering only the first thirty-five or so years of his life, figuring there's already a "sufficient printed record" of the years since *The Sins of the Fathers*. It wanders along, meandering here and there, a conversation not so much read as overheard.

"Look, I'm an old man," Scudder—more or less the same age as Block—warns. "My mind's like an old river, turning this way and that, and in no particular hurry to get where's going."

But where it goes is delightful, and probably essential for anyone who's loved the series. This is a book without any big drama (Scudder studied Latin in school?) or reveals (Regrets? He's had a few), beyond one man's life and times, the things that happened to him, a few random thoughts and reminisces about

family, friends, etc. No big drama, no murders, no shootouts, no serial killers, no Big Apple whack jobs or any of that stuff, except in passing. Those, Scudder reasons, were already covered in the books.

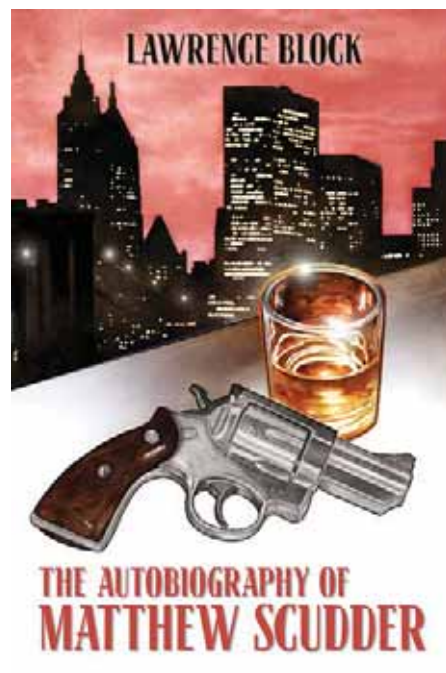
Truth is, I couldn't put it down—it was like listening to an old, beloved friend's late night confession over a few drinks; a dangling, conversational summing up of a well-traveled life.

"Regrets. Yes, of course. There are things I could have done better," Scudder confesses at the book's conclusion. "But no bitter regrets, not really, because I truly like where I am. And the trip that got me here has had its moments."

I think readers will like where Scudder is, as well.

Much like the lost souls he's hired to track down, the books featuring Eric Leclere's Lombard series are sometimes hard to find. Or purchase.

The first in the series, **THE LOST SON** (1999), introduced semi-shady private investigator Xavier Lombard, a French ex-pat living in London, but eventually displays some admirably true grit when he tackles an international kiddie prostitution ring. It was a blast of pure, if wordy noir, and was soon adapted into film, starring French movie star Daniel Auteuil in his first English-speaking role, who pulled off the world-weary gumshoe thing pretty well—chain-smoking Gitanes, in desperate need of a shave, and full of plenty of dark, rumped Gallic charm.



I thought both the book and the film were pretty good—no lost classics, perhaps, but certainly engaging stabs at an unpleasant subject, delivered with a slow-burn, noirish fury.

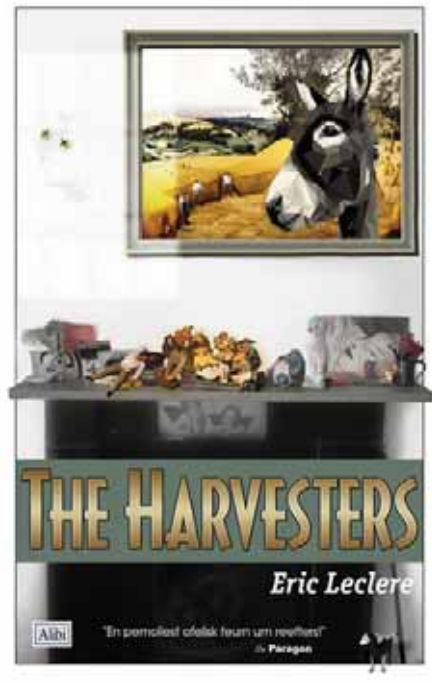
But what do I know? The author, who had co-written the original screenplay with his wife, Margaret, hated the film. Loudly, and publicly. Nor was he particularly pleased with the massed hordes' overwhelming rejection of the book that had inspired it. In fact, he would eventually become so dissatisfied that he gave the book away online through his own Alibi Press.

An eventual sequel of sorts, **A PLACE OF GARDENS AND LILIES** (2005), featured Lombard only in passing; a mere voice on the other end of a phone call, and instead focused on Alan Winston, a good-looking but hapless young man who stumbles into an ill-conceived dognapping scheme. The book likewise failed to engage the public, further enraging the author.

But now, almost two decades after his “catastrophic brush with the film industry,” the author has published **THE HARVESTERS**, which he considers “a literary novel (doubling) as a heavyweight Private Detective mystery novel, that deals with the excesses of the modern world with the utmost seriousness.”

And hoo-boy, he ain't kidding. Leclere (and Lombard) take themselves very seriously indeed, their bile unchecked, delivering venomous assessments of everything from political correctness and cancel culture to the mass media and the intelligence (or more precisely, the lack of it) of much of the world's population.

He wasn't kidding about it being heavy, either. Weighing in at well over 160,000 words, this isn't some quickie read, as Lombard broods about questions of morality and mortality. Sure, the constant carping may remind one of Raymond Chandler, another world-



class crank with literary intentions who often used his novels to vent, but Philip Marlowe was both fun and funny, with Chandler peppering his fiction with wisecracks, outrageous similes and various men coming in various doors with various guns.

Leclere and Lombard aren't having any of that silliness. Unrelenting in its somber bleakness, the book grinds on, as the ostensibly retired Lombard lives a minutely detailed life of quiet displeasure in a mostly peaceful London mews, content to let the world go by, “steering his own path” and dwelling “beyond the world of grievances or the need to visit his woes upon deities or humanity.”

Although he does visit them upon his readers...

Eventually, reluctantly, the ex-pat party pooper does get drawn into a couple of cases, much against his will: the inexplicable suicide of his former secretary's husband, and the sudden reappearance of Alan Winston, the less-than-master criminal of the previous book, who is now a fugitive, inexplicably wanted for the murder of a journalist.

There is much waffling, as Lombard tries to avoid committing himself to either, but eventually Lombard finds

himself swept along by events both tragic and mundane, and reluctantly back in the Shamus Game.

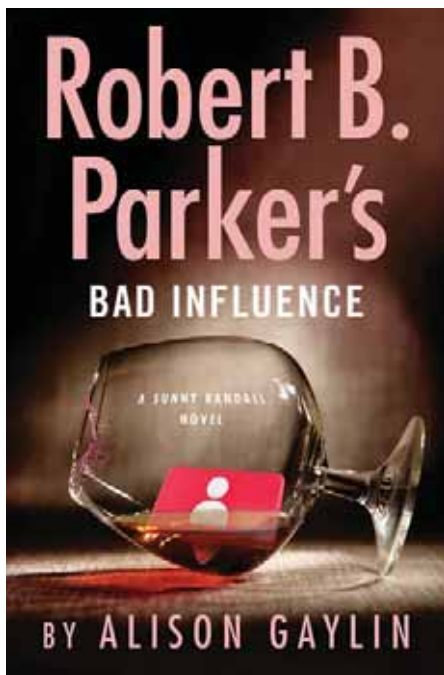
The prose is thick and served straight up, mostly unleavened by levity or wit, the text tiny and the pages numerous, but we should be grateful we are spared first person narration—Lombard's dour contempt is ponderous enough in third person. As the twin plot lines slowly unfold, the pace does gradually accelerate—although action junkies may find the beats too few and too far between. This is no beach read, but rather a somber meditation on one man's life and his worth—to others and more importantly, to himself. It's a journey, readers may find, best taken in small doses.

Not surprising, then, that I found this gloomfest, so long, bleak and unsparing, jammed with barbed asides and sharp-edged digressions and gawd-awful pretensions, quite difficult to read for more than a few pages at a time. Yet I also found it compelling, provocative and difficult to leave alone, like a bowl of breakfast cereal that's “good for you,” and that you feel compelled to finish.

I did, and ended up in awe of the author's ambitious audacity. I just wish it had been a little more fun.

There's no such “fun” problem with Alison Gaylin's **BAD INFLUENCE**, her first stab at taking over the reins of the late Robert B. Parker's Sunny Randall series. This book snaps, crackles and pops.

One thing about Parker—whether he was writing about Spenser or Jesse Stone or six-gun packin' Virgil Cole and Everett Hitch or whoever, no matter how grim life may get—his books were fun to read, and his heroes were able to enjoy life and its various pleasures, be it love or sex or food or baseball games or whatever. Sunny Randall, for all her worries about her family, her job, her personal life or her art, isn't afraid to



love and treasure her dog Rosie, her independence and her ex, Richie. They were what makes life worth living. Gaylin has picked up on that, and that joy is contagious.

Still, I worry about the publishing business. Parker has been dead for over thirteen years, and it's taken whoever's in charge this long to figure out that maybe, just maybe, it's time to have a woman write the series? Really?

Not going to go all Own Voices crazy on you, but I have to wonder why it never occurred to these guys, so busy milking the cash cow of Parker's legacy, that his only female series lead, originally written as a possible vehicle for actor Helen Hunt (a friend of the Parkers), might be better suited for a female writer?

Well, it's been a long time coming, but a change has finally come. Oh, Parker deserves props for creating Sunny, and Mike Lupica certainly held his own with his four contributions, but let's face it—they were dudes. There was always something—no matter how well-intentioned—that felt a little off. Sunny never seemed quite, uh, “female” to me, or quite right—she was created over twenty years ago, and despite her

dalliances with Jesse Stone and the fleeting acknowledgment of time marching on—she's always felt frozen in some sort of limbo, still irritatingly in love with her ex.

Not that Gaylin cuts that particular cord, but there's an acknowledgment that this prolonged Hallmark Moment is rapidly nearing its expiry date, with both Richie and Sunny (whom Gaylin describes as now 39, “divorced and sex-positive”) realizing the shit-or-get-off-the-pot decision is coming up.

And so Gaylin rinses off the aspic and welcomes Sunny (and her BFF Spike, whose restaurant and bar is struggling to recover its mojo after COVID) to 2023, and to social media in all its various concoctions. Oh, the fiercely independent gumshoe isn't suddenly going to become the Twitter Tec (she's far too private a person for that), but it's good to have her acknowledge that social media actually exists—especially since her newest client, Bethany Rose, is a “media concierge” who makes good money managing a couple of dingaling young Instagram influencers, promoting everything from fitness programs to energy drinks, and, if it works out, Spike's bar.

It's also a good opportunity for Sunny and Spike to bring on the snap and the snark. Blake James is a “twenty-one with the personality of an eleven year-old,” while his girlfriend Alena Jade is a moody Bosnian immigrant who Sunny tags as a Gen Z beauty with a “soul as old as the dawn of time.” Seems Blake has been receiving death threats and Bethany wants to know where they're coming from—and how to stop them.

Sunny rolls up her sleeves and goes to work, investigating the bright, shiny world of social media influencers, and lifts the lid to discover a world crawling with lies, deception, secrets both old and new, and even possible mob ties. And then their client disappears...

It's a hoot, a slight-but-welcome

change of gears for the series, and hopefully a harbinger of more to come. Welcome back, Sunny.

Oh, that the television were as rewarding. The only really enjoyable PI-adjacent viewing over the last few months was Peacock's *Poker Face*, with Natasha Lyonne as Charlie Cale, a human lie detector wanted for murder (she didn't do it!) who's arguably television's most trouble-prone fugitive since Richard Kimble. It's a delightful show, like a modern-era Columbo with its inverted mystery formula. We know from the start whodunnit—it's how the croaky-voiced, conniving Charlie figures it out and sees that “justice” of some kind is served that makes the show such a hoot. Unfortunately, Charlie isn't really a P.I. She doesn't take cases—she's at best an amateur sleuth who falls into them on a weekly basis, making her more shit magnet than shamus.

A couple of other new shows currently streaming that feature actual private eyes don't fare as well. Both sounded promising, each tapping into that whole Leonardesque gonzo noir vibe of dumb criminals making dumb choices amid a swirl of sex and drugs and rock'n'roll attitude. Both follow



not-quite-right private eyes who get wrapped up in murders that invariably find them confronting long-simmering family problems.



Florida Man (Netflix) comes closer, aided and abetted in no small part by the Sunshine State setting, and a few plays “borrowed” from the Carl Hiaasen playbook. It’s enjoyable enough, full of guns, a humungous sinkhole, occasional gators, a hand grenade, and even a crazed out-of-state cop wandering Skink-like in and out of the action, and it’s a hoot seeing the hapless but affable hero, ex-cop and former Florida native Mike Valentine (Édgar Ramírez) reluctantly returning home on the orders of his boss, an unstable young would-be Philadelphia gangster with major daddy issues. Seems the wannabe wants Mike, who has daddy issues of his own, to bring back his runaway girlfriend. Murder and alleged hilarity ensue, as well as the promise of a giant score, with Mike’s crooked father (Anthony LaPaglia) and rival factions all trying to get in on the action, but ultimately it never quite reaches the level of crazy this sub-genre needs to work. If you’re gonna go big, go BIG.

High Desert (Apple TV) doesn’t even try to go big. Purportedly set in the western Mojave Desert of Southern



California, an area whose sun-bleached boundaries vary depending on who’s doing the considering. And the show is equally gauzy and ill-defined. It’s billed as a comedy, though the guffaws are few and far between, and the supposedly outrageous characters often seem more pathetic and sad than hilarious, invoking more pity than belly laughs (leaking breast implants, anyone?). It stars Patricia Arquette as Peggy Sullivan, a

blowsy, convicted drug dealer just out of the hoosegow who decides to make a fresh start after the death of her beloved mother with whom she lived in the sun-bleached town of Yucca Valley. Not that she’s actually planning to straighten up and fly right, mind you—she may have made a life-changing decision to become a private investigator mostly because she sniffs an easy score—much to the dismay of Bruce (played by Brad Garrett), the actual P.I. who reluctantly hired Peggy, thinking she’d bring in some much-needed new business. Instead, the eternal scammer plans on staging a self-written musical at the pioneer village tourist trap where she works, selling a forged painting, finding a missing woman for the reward, making peace with her dead mother, keeping the family home from being sold, popping pills, having sex, etc. Like the show, she’s a mess, and not even a particularly hot one.

Well, that’s it for now. You can email me at kvnsmith@thrillingdetective.com, or visit me at thrillingdetective.com. Or at Bouchercon this year. If you want me, I’ll be in the bar.



The Plot Thickens

Robin Agnew



WRONG POISON

by Nikki Knight
Charade Media, \$14.99, July
Grace the Hit Mom #1

Rating: A-

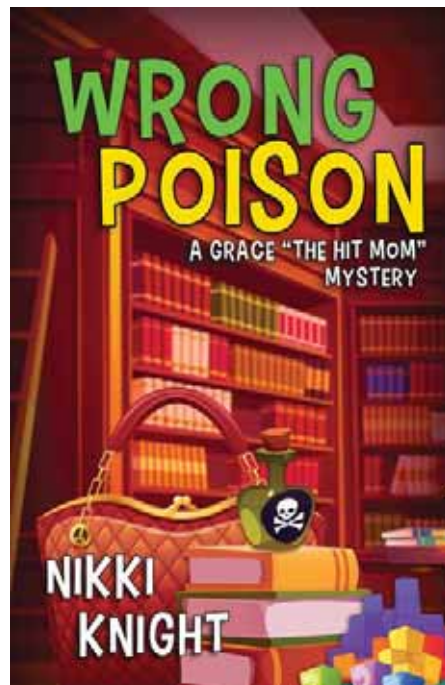
There's a certain feeling you get when a book is just right, and everything in it hits the mark just as it should. As a reviewer, a book that's "just right" earns my highest praise, and in the case of Nikki Knight's **WRONG POISON**, that's very good indeed. Nikki Knight, the nom de plume of Kathleen Marple Kalb, has also written an interesting historical series featuring a "trouser diva" (a female singer who sings male parts) under that name and an (unfortunately) single book series featuring a Vermont radio DJ under the Nikki Knight moniker. Knight's take on things is always a different and interesting one, and this kick off to a new series is no exception.

With a fine and well-honed eye for suburban mom-dom, Knight delineates Grace's life as the busy mother of a six-year-old, wife of a busy attorney, and part time editor and book whisperer. You may think that Grace already has plenty on her plate, but she was also chosen, way back in law school, to join a sisterhood of assassins who use untraceable poisons to put a few selected, terribly behaved men permanently out of commission. When an unpleasant town council member falls dead at the annual library sale, Grace and her buddy move in to perform CPR, but Grace notices a telltale sign of a unique poison which no one outside their sisterhood should know about.

The game's afoot when it comes out that the "book" containing the poison recipe was probably sold at the library sale. The dead woman was widely hated

all over town, for one unconscionable thing, threatening to slash the library budget and eliminate positions there. Even her husband doesn't seem to mourn this unpleasant individual, and it's soon obvious he was having an affair. Grace tries to discover stealthily just what happened to the book – she's under threat of death herself from her sisterhood if she doesn't locate it and find out who used it.

Knight's writing has the kind of intelligent, funny snap perfected back in the day by authors like Donald E. Westlake and Lawrence Sanders. She makes this whole storytelling, character creation thing look easy, and she does it with panache and some great one liners. (The description of the perfect beige twin set worn by the annoyingly perfect PTO president is a case in point). The book catches the reality of suburban life in one way, but it also heightens it, making the stakes bigger and more import-



ant. It even has an old school feel in that it's nice and short – a brief 200+ pages. It's newer in its cultural references and behaviors, of course – it's 2023, not 1973 after all – but this well thought out story is timeless.

KILLINGLY

by Katherine Beutner
Soho Crime, \$27.00, June

Rating: B+

It's refreshing to open a novel and have no expectations. Katherine Beutner's elegiac, melancholy **KILLINGLY** fictionalizes the true story of the disappearance of Mt. Holyoke student Bertha Mellish in 1897. Recounted from the point of view of Bertha's older sister, Florence and her closest friend, Agnes, the puzzle of her disappearance is both confounding and heartbreaking. To the general Mt. Holyoke student population, Bertha and Agnes were what we would recognize today as "grinds," living for their studies and not socializing.

It becomes clear as you read that both young women were exceptionally smart – and Agnes' intelligence and intellectual curiosity so great that reading her texts literally puts her into another universe. There's an undercurrent through the book of young female sexuality – the other girls have what they refer to as "crushes" for other girls, and spend much of their time on picnics and at parties. Even if no one else did, Bertha and Agnes understood one another, and Agnes' complicated feelings for Bertha certainly include love.

Bertha's sister, Florence, is almost unhinged with grief, and finds herself confined and often shut out by the men around her – her father, Bertha's hometown suitor, Dr. Hammond, and the detective the family hires to try and find her. When someone turns up in a Boston hospital that might be Bertha, her father and Dr. Hammond head there to see if it really is, refusing to let Florence accompany them. After discovering it's not Bertha after all, Mr. Mellish suffers a stroke, layering onto Florence's grief the now added responsibility of caring for her father while still trying to find her sister.

An underlying theme of this novel is the lack of choices many of the women have. Florence herself left college after a year because of an illness, and ended up teaching in her hometown of Killingly while still caring for her parents. Her mother is a little mentally out of it, and at first Florence and her father don't even reveal the news of Bertha's disappearance to her. The depiction of this strait jacket of a home life, where Florence is hemmed in not just by family but by grief for her sister's loss, makes for harrowing reading, in part, I think, because it is so real.

Agnes is grieving as well, of course. Bertha was her only friend, a true soul mate, and now she is now left to make her own solitary way in the world. Agnes plans to become a doctor, which in 1897 was pretty close to revolutionary. Many of the other girls are at Mt. Holyoke for the putative purpose of an education, certainly, but with the actual ultimate destination of marriage. Agnes is not left in peace to study, either, as Bertha's hometown suitor, Mr. Hammond, leans on her for answers, as does the hired detective, while she and Florence have more sympathy for one another.

Beutner invents a solution to this mystery, one that seems to stand apart from the reality of whatever may have happened to the actual Bertha Mellish, who remains missing. However, Beutner's story bears an emotional truth that honors the real story. As Agnes moves ahead, spending the next summer as a companion to a wealthy woman, she thinks to herself: she "hated feeling so beholden. But from the first, from Miss Kelly recommending her to the college, she had been pulled up the ladder of women as surely as if she had stepped from one cupped bridge of hands to another." The sisterhood of women is the one positive in this story.

Beutner also writes of the violence of women's lives, their lack of agency, and their frustration and heartbreak. Overall, it's a shattering picture with Bertha Mellish at the center, but she's certainly not the whole canvas, which unfolds in an unexpected and original way. This is a powerful and heartbreaking read.

HOT POT MURDER

by Jennifer J. Chow
Berkley, \$8.99, June
L.A. Night Market #2

Rating: B+

The first book in this series, **DEATH BY BUBBLE TEA**, was the set up for a real standout series, with an unusual setting, a foodie backdrop, and two cousins getting to know each other, one plain, one fancy. Yale Yee lives in LA near her family restaurant, Wing Fat, which her father manages while she runs their night market stand, selling bubble tea and other delicacies. Her cousin Celine, who arrived from Hong Kong in the last book, is everything Yale is not, into her appearance, into her social media profile (she's a food-stagrammer), and living a life of leisure, family money ensuring she can spend much of her time pursuing her favorite hobby, shopping. The two are now roommates, complementing each other without being cardboard caricatures, their relationship assuming the stature of a partnership.

As the book opens, Yale's father has arranged a hot pot Thanksgiving feast at his restaurant, inviting everyone in their small restaurant association. Like any small organization, it's rife with politics, and when their president is electrocuted at the dinner, it's all cooks in the kitchen (mostly Yale and Celine) to solve the crime.

Much of the backstory was established in the first book, and this already feels like a comfortable series entry. One thing Yale is still working through is the death of her mother; she blames herself and is reluctant to even enter her childhood home. The memories the restaurant summons can be rough too, though her night market stall has restored some of her joy in cooking.

Two threads are extremely strong in this novel – family and food. While Yale and Celine investigate, their sleuthing takes them to many, many mouthwatering restaurants. This allows the author to delineate the various members of the restaurant association, people who also work alongside Yale at the night market, and who she thinks of as her communi-



ty. We as readers might simply think of them as "suspects."

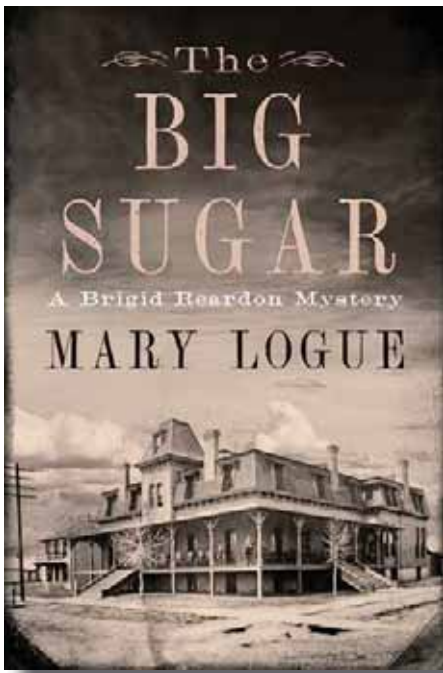
Celine is raising the profile of their stall through relentless Instagram posts and the creation of a selfie photo backdrop next to the night market stall. (The market seems to be based on the 626 Market in LA – which includes entertainment, games, and tons of food. It's a wonderful and vivid setting for the books.) The characters of Yale and Celine play into their detective skills, making them a good team and they do indeed help solve the case.

There's family drama as well, as Celine's fancy parents, the hilariously named Sunny and Cher, descend from Hong Kong, bent on taking Celine back and reconnecting with Yale's father, Sing, as well as Yale herself who doesn't know them all that well. They mostly make Celine uncomfortable as she doesn't want to return home, and Yale is surprised to find herself also hoping her cousin will stay.

This gently paced and well assembled mystery has nice character development, an unusual setting, and a sure sense of story. Jennifer Chow is aware of the elements required to tell a good and entertaining tale, and I anticipate this being the second step in a long and successful series run.

THE BIG SUGAR

by Mary Logue
University of Minnesota Press,
\$22.95, May
Brigid Reardon #2



Rating: B+

I loved the first book in this historical mystery series, **THE STREEL**, and have been a longtime fan of Mary Logue's brisk yet poetic writing style. This second installment, set in 1881, is as lively, disturbing and memorable as the first, with heroine Brigid Reardon heading to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Brigid made the crossing from Ireland with her brother Seamus and a friend, Padric, and the three of them ultimately wound up in Deadwood. Seamus fled to Cheyenne after some trouble in the last book and is now working as a cowboy. Having sold a mine in Deadwood, Brigid and Padric are headed out to Cheyenne to meet Seamus and share the proceeds.

That's the setup, covered in the first chapter or two in brief Logue style. Arrival in Cheyenne comes with many hurdles – the money can't be claimed without Seamus, and they have yet to find him. Their new town seems just as lawless and violent as Deadwood, and there's a new social order to adjust to. Brigid, hoping to feel at home somewhere at last, is not sure she will find that home either in Cheyenne or with Padric. They have been traveling as brother and sister but there seems to be something more developing between them.

Brigid and Padric nevertheless manage to establish a homestead after a tip from the Irishman who owns their hotel and wants his fellow countrymen to succeed in the new land. They obtain a tract of land with a sod house, and the attempt to make it feel like home brings Brigid to the brink of loneliness and despair. One bright note is her closest neighbor Ella, a tough as nails woman who runs cattle about a half hour's walk from their homestead.

There are two things that make this novel a memorable standout. One is the lynching of Ella (it opens the book, so this is not a spoiler), and the other is Brigid's horse, Grian. When Brigid visits the ranch of Seamus' employer (the "Big Sugar" of the title), she sees his men attempting to "break" a horse and knows they are doing it wrong. She ends up with the horse and, through kindness and patience, builds trust with her. It's by far the sweetest relationship in the book.

Ella's lynching is another matter altogether. Brigid demands the sheriff look into it, and when she finds another body, he wonders what is up with this feisty lass. Brigid is a mere 18 years old, but she's far more mature and practical in some ways than many of our contemporary 18-year-olds, even without a smartphone. She's certainly smart, brave, and persistent, all the qualities that make for a perfect mystery heroine.

Logue paints a portrait of life on the frontier that illuminates the loneliness but also the grandeur and wildness of the landscape. In the middle of it all there's Brigid herself, figuring out if she wants Padric or a life closer to civilization. The mystery part of the novel is straightforward, but the actual lynching is heartbreaking, and as Logue mentions in a postscript, sadly accurate. I will definitely tune in to see what's next for Brigid.

THE BONES OF THE STORY

By Carol Goodman

William Morrow, Hardcover \$29.99/
Paperback, \$18.99, July

Rating: A

Most writers have certain themes that echo over the course of their work, a sort of throughline that creates both familiarity with and a deeper understanding of the subjects that fascinate them. To me, this is one of the joys of following a favorite author through the years. Carol Goodman's novels reveal a recurring fascination with individuals who are discovering or searching for their identity in a compressed or restricted location. Often her books are told in dual timelines, as **THE BONES OF THE STORY** is, one strand set during the period the characters are in college, and the other following up twenty five years later. In the former, young Nell Portman heads to Briarwood as a student, intimidated by all the old money students and their mysterious traditions. A work study student, she attempts to be inconspicuous, and even agrees to take the smallest room in her assigned suite. She's quickly bowled over by her charismatic roommate, Laine Wilder, who sweeps her up into the traditions of the college. Both women aspire to become writers, and soon become enmeshed in the local literary clique.

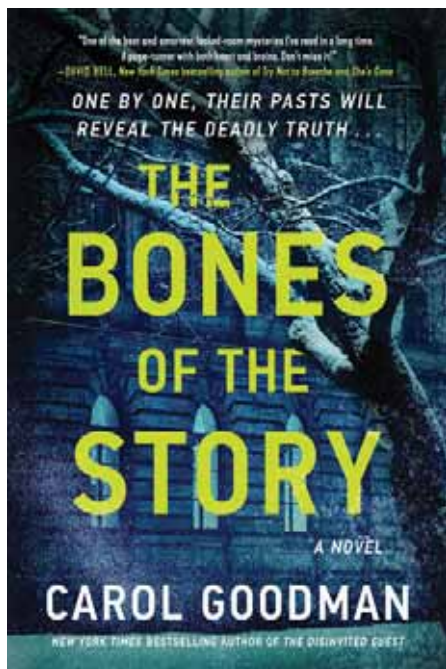
Twenty-five years later the grown Nell is Dean of Students at Briarwood, and looking forward with apprehension to a planned weekend honoring alums who are writers (many of whom are also former classmates), culminating in the inauguration of a new dedicated writers program, complete with a writer in residence. The nominal star of the show is scheduled to be none other than Laine Wilder, the most successful of all of them.

Both the past and the present carry a heavy overlay of secrets and undiscovered backstage machinations on the part of virtually every character. Some of the traditions in the past involve ice caves in the hill (or "Tor") behind the school, a subject of much speculation. Campus legend has it that anyone who died in the caves will come back to take their revenge on the living. When bones are discovered during a traditional ascent up the Tor (a student actually falls in a crevasse and lands on them), the secret of who they might belong to casts a dark

shadow over the proceedings. The skeleton's identity seems to be no mystery to Nell and friends, however.

The weekend progresses, but Laine never turns up, just as the campus is hit with a massive snow and ice storm. The group finds themselves cut off from the world as, almost inevitably, members of it begin to die mysterious deaths one by one. Goodman's fascination with Christie's **AND THEN THERE WERE NONE** could not be more clear. Much like her references to Poe (the college writing society is known as "The Raven"), the Christie references only deepen the atmosphere of dread and suspicion.

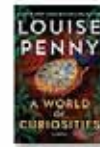
Goodman is both great at plots and character driven as a writer, and the various personalities of Nell and her former classmates ultimately determine the story, mixed with an excellent twist, and in true Goodman style, a bitter dash of moral ambiguity. (As a reader, you might often find yourself wondering what you would have done in a similar situation.) She's a mistress of doubt and dread – but in an ultimately entertaining way. The story is vivid and fast paced and the set up is one Goodman has made all her own, with her telling academic details, her vivid characters, and her evocative sense of setting. I still feel cold after reading it! This is a wonderful book.



ANTHONY AWARD FINALISTS BEST HARDCOVER



LIKE A SISTER
KELLYE GARRETT
(MULHOLLAND BOOKS)



A WORLD OF CURIOSITIES
LOUISE PENNY
(MINOTAUR BOOKS)



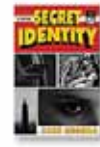
THE DEVIL TAKES YOU HOME
GABINO IGLESIAS
(MULHOLLAND BOOKS)



THE MAID
NITA PROSE
(BALLANTINE BOOKS)



THE BULLET THAT MISSED
RICHARD OSMAN
(PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS)



SECRET IDENTITY
ALEX SEGURA
(FLATIRON BOOKS)

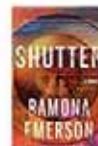
ANTHONY AWARD FINALISTS BEST FIRST NOVEL



DON'T KNOW TOUGH
ELI CRANOR
(SOHO CRIME)



DEVIL'S CHEW TOY
ROB OSLER
(CROOKED LANE BOOKS)



SHUTTER
RAMONA EMERSON
(SOHO CRIME)

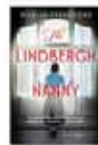


THE MAID
NITA PROSE
(BALLANTINE BOOKS)



**THE BANGALORE
DETECTIVES CLUB**
HARINI NAGENDRA
(PEGASUS BOOKS)

ANTHONY AWARD FINALISTS BEST HISTORICAL



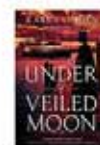
THE LINDBERGH NANNY
MARIAH FREDERICKS
(MINOTAUR BOOKS)



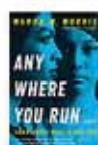
ANGER ON THE ATLANTIC
ERICA RUTH NEUBAUER
(KENSINGTON)



IN PLACE OF FEAR
CATRIONA MCPHERSON
(MOBIUS)



UNDER A VEILED MOON
KAREN ODDEN
(CROOKED LANE BOOKS)



ANYWHERE YOU RUN
WANDA M. MORRIS
(WILLIAM MORROW & COMPANY)



LAVENDER HOUSE
LEV AC ROSEN
(FORGE)

From The Waterfront

Ted Hertel



ALL THE SINNERS BLEED

by S. A. Cosby

Flatiron Books, \$27.99/eBook \$14.99,

June

Rating: A-

Former FBI agent and now the first Black sheriff of Charon County, Virginia, Titus Crown is called to the scene of a school shooting of a seemingly harmless and very popular teacher. The suspect, a former student at the school, is shot and killed by deputies in front of Crown. The investigation eventually leads to the bodies of seven tortured young people, buried in a field. Phone video shows three men, including the teacher, former student, and a masked third person, involved in the hideous deaths. It's up to Crown and his small band of deputies to find the third man, who at all times seems to be one step ahead of them. In addition he has to contend with both a right-wing group who wants to keep "the lie of antebellum honor" alive and a "bunch of racist loony tunes [holy roller] sons of bitches."

Two-time winner of the Barry Award and an Edgar nominee S. A. Cosby presents a law-enforcement officer as a protagonist for the first time (although his debut novel, **MY DARKEST**

PRAYER, had a former deputy as an investigator). While in his previous three books his principal characters, from criminals to ordinary people in difficult circumstances, have generally acted on their own, here Sheriff Titus Crown wears a badge, one that hides a terrible secret. Many in his county see him as the enemy only because of the color of his skin. He is a man whose faith has long since died. But he does believe that "[e]vil is rarely complicated.

It's just f***** bold."

Cosby explores serious issues of race and racism against the backdrop of a divided county in the divided South of a divided country. Throw in the "Forget? Hell NO!" mentality of people who still use the phrase "The War of Northern Aggression" and the author has put together a tale of a powder keg just waiting to explode. With murderous pedophiles and long-buried nightmares-bursting to the surface, is it any wonder that the sheriff believes that the devil is just the name given to the terrible things people do to each other? Because, as Joseph Conrad said, "men alone are quite capable of every wickedness."

The South doesn't change, Crown tells us. Just the names and the dates and the faces. This dark and gripping novel, with descriptions of torture and death that may be too difficult for some to read, will chill you to the bone.

SLEEPLESS CITY

by Reed Farrel Coleman

Blackstone Publishing, \$26.99

Rating: B+

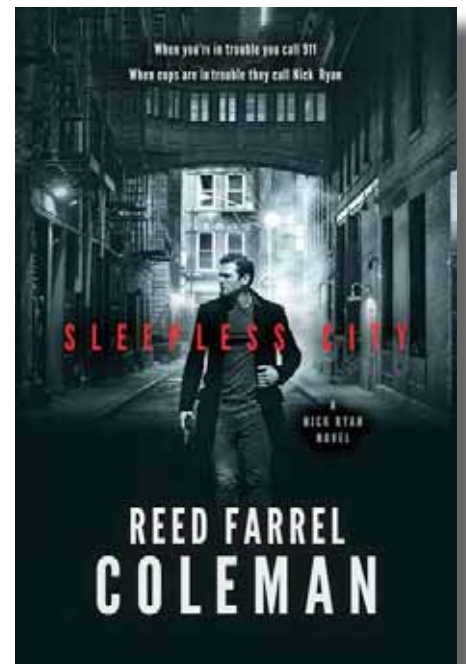
New York City is filled with corruption, much of it centered in its police department. Nick Ryan's policeman's father had stood up to it, testifying against the bad cops in his precinct.

Nick, a cop himself, decides to hunt down and kill a dangerous pedophile that had beaten the charges against him. But before he can pull the trigger, someone else does so and tells Nick to leave. Days later a man who calls himself "Joe" meets with Nick. He wants Nick to undertake jobs that others cannot do. He'll be provided with all the resources he needs, both within and outside of the

police department. At first he is reluctant to proceed, but he comes to learn that there is such a thing as "justice" and then there is "right." He may have to do something considered "wrong" in order to make everything else "right." When he is faced with a situation that could tear the city apart, can he stand aside or will he give in to "Joe" and his organization?

This is Reed Farrel Coleman's first novel is several years and it's good to see him back. He has created a protagonist that isn't afraid to face overwhelming odds. Like the old pulp character, The Shadow, Ryan puts together a small team of people who think as he does (or at least will help him where needed). He's far from perfect, thank goodness, as he has own emotional problems that haunt him, from the difficulties his father created to his willingness to take the law into his own hands. His actions may make him a vigilante but that's just fine in this fictional context.

The novel may require quite a suspension of disbelief. But, on the other hand, in this day and age of conspiracy theories, it's not too difficult to think that there are plenty of people who are pulling strings behind the scenes, people in positions of power who are manipulating truth into lies and lies into truth. "Someone always has the juice," Ryan believes.



While I thoroughly enjoyed the novel, I did miss the introspection of Coleman's earlier Moe Prager books. This new series concentrates on the action rather than the human condition.

Nothing wrong with that at all. While this is a dark tale, I just didn't find "the poet of the noir" here.

The darkest theme of noir, according to the book itself, is "the truth never makes anything better and usually makes everything worse." Nick Ryan is a new man going down those dark streets of New York City, trying to make everything better. Join him. It's well worth the trip.

THE LAST DROP OF HEMLOCK

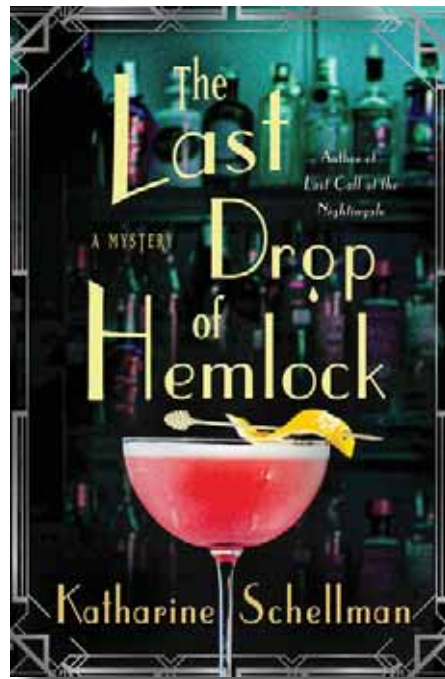
by Katharine Schellman

Minotaur Books, \$28.00, June

Rating: B

Vivian Kelly, a working-class woman in Prohibition-era New York, is a server and dancer at the Nightingale speakeasy. All seems well until her friend Bea's bouncer uncle Pearl is found dead, believed to have been a suicide. But an unconvinced Bea knew her uncle hid secrets, including connections to a mob boss. Vivian, knowing better, decides to help Bea find the underlying truth anyway. When rumors surface of a mysterious letter writing blackmailer, Vivian and her sister Florence get in way over their heads. Vivian finds herself acceding to a written threat, causing her to commit a crime in order to save her and her sister's lives. Why is a blackmailer stealing only from the poor? Vivian must dig deep into the past of a dead man in order to crack open a case that the cops don't even begin to understand.

This is Katharine Schellman's sequel to her well-received **LAST CALL AT THE NIGHTINGALE**. She has created a Jazz Age setting that rings true, with its illegal speakeasies and free-flowing booze, cops on the take, the rise of organized crime, and the struggles of poor white Irish, Chinese, and Blacks. This racially diverse cast is one of the highlights of the book. The Nightingale's illicit smoking, dancing, and drinking are the order of the day in this atmospheric novel. With its straightforward plot, this



entertaining novel moves along swiftly to its conclusion.

But the author's strength lies in her characters. Vivian is resourceful but realistic about her abilities. She is not afraid to lean on others for help when needed. Both she and her sister

Florence want to create better lives for themselves. They must rely on each other for protection, sometimes straining their relationship. Vivian is fortunate enough to be liked by her female boss, who is willing to put her neck on the line for a woman for whom she clearly has affection (and perhaps more). Meanwhile, Vivian's romantic inclinations switch among a few different people, including that employer. All these elements come together for this historical novel set in the fascinating era of jazz, liquor, poverty, class divisions, and changing sexual mores.

FEARLESS

by M. W. Craven

Flatiron Books, \$27.99/eBook \$14.99,

July

Rating: B

Ben Koenig, former U.S. Marshal, has been on the run for six years when his cover is very publicly blown. The director of the Marshals Service wants to locate him in order to find the director's

kidnapped daughter, returning her (or her dead body) to him. The trail eventually leads Koenig to a small town in the blazing heat of Texas where he discovers secrets that people will kill to keep hidden. Koenig's own secret is that he has a medical condition that makes him incapable of fear—and that makes him a very dangerous man indeed.

This book has all the necessary ingredients to make it a solid thriller. You've got the brave protagonist going up against terrible odds. His boss warns him that "I'm damning you to hell [by sending you on this mission]." There's danger everywhere Koenig turns. The villains are despicable. He and the woman he's working with hate each other. M. W. Craven puts these components together to create a page-turning, stomach-churning tale, that while entertaining, offers little that is new to the thriller genre.

Koenig early on tells the reader "I know lots of useless stuff" and proves it over the course of the novel. ("Queue... is one of the few words...with four consecutive vowels. And the only one...where the last four letters were redundant." Useless, but nonetheless interesting.) The reader is also given incredible detail about weapons, tactical maneuvers in the field, plenty of exposition on strategy, fighting techniques, human anatomy, and more. This is all pretty standard thriller fare, but Craven manages to impart it in a way that keeps the story moving without being terribly disruptive.

In other words, if you are a fan of thrillers, this one will be exactly what you are looking for. It is suspenseful, written with a great deal of accuracy. While some of it could be considered a bit over the top (as most thrillers apparently need to be), it has plenty of action and a protagonist who does not always play by the rules. But as U. S. Army officer and journalist Colonel David Haskell Hackworth once said, "If you find yourself in a fair fight, you didn't plan your mission properly." You'll find that Ben Koenig planned his mission just right.

SATAN IS A WOMAN/

13 FRENCH STREET

by Gil Brewer

Stark House, \$19.95, July

Rating: B

First off, I don't make up these titles – I just review them. So here we go from one of the most misogynistic titles in noir fiction to one that could not be any blander (for more reasons than one, as you will see shortly). Yet both novels in this collection of Gil Brewer's first two books from Gold Medal Books in 1951 are strikingly similar in terms of pace, style, and theme. Both involve stories of gorgeous duplicitous women and morally-challenged men. What could possibly go wrong with that combination?

SATAN IS A WOMAN (the book was actually titled by Gold Medal over Brewer's choice of **SATAN'S RIB**) posits the question "How does one get rid of a body without getting caught?" Tad Cole has been sent up the river for the murder of some hoods that were out to murder him. Tad enlists his brother Larry's help to hire an attorney to spring him on appeal. Unfortunately, Larry has had his heart stolen by the stunning Joan, giving him little time (or, for that matter, inclination) to help. Larry needs money for the lawyer and Joan needs to knock over the local country club so she can live the life she to which she wants to become accustomed. Larry tries to say "no," but Joan isn't listening. Murder gets in the way and things spiral out of control. As Larry says at the outset, "It would have been far simpler for her just to kill me. I sometimes wish she had."

Alex Bland (remember what I said above about "blander") reunites with his old army buddy Verne at 13 French Street. Verne is married to the drop dead gorgeous Petra, who takes an immediate liking to Alex, since Verne is no longer the same man he was in the service. While Verne's away on business, Petra comes on to Alex in no uncertain terms. After all, Verne has "shot his bolt," as she tells Alex. There's just one problem: Verne's old mother lives with them, sneaking around to spy as they begin their affair. When Petra shoves dear old mom out the window, she thinks all their problems are solved.

Except for the fact that a nosy neighbor happens to see the whole thing – and for a very high price (and not just money) says he won't call the cops.

Both books maintain a high level of "how are they going to fix this mess" style suspense. In particular there is a very well done scene in Satan where Larry and Joan undertake to dispose of a body at sea during a violent storm. But in **13 FRENCH STREET** Bland has no legal way to ward off the blackmailer. Filled with hinted-at sex, the books read just like what they are: sexy hard-hitting noir tales from the 1950s. The men aren't the stars of their own stories, even though their actions are driven by their own base cravings. The credit here belongs to the two females, Joan and Petra. Both women have a burning desire to get what they want, no matter what price needs to be paid, no matter who stands in their way, no matter who has to die.

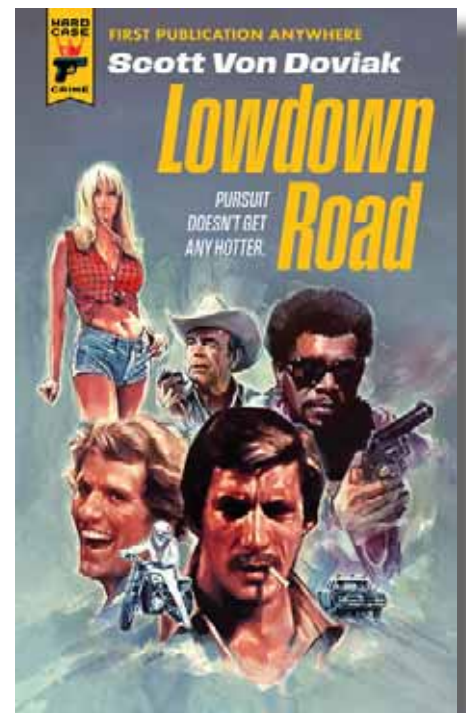
LOWDOWN ROAD

by Scott Von Doviak

Hard Case Crime, \$15.95, July

Rating: A-

Texas. Summer 1974. Dean Melville and his lowlife cousin Scott are on the run from just about everybody they know. After killing the wife of a deputy sheriff, Scott has stolen a truckload of marijuana. He's talked Dean into helping him unload it for about a million dollars in Idaho. Why Idaho? That's where daredevil Evel Knievel plans to jump the Snake River Canyon on his rocket-powered motorcycle. With the crowds there, it shouldn't be a problem to sell 250 pounds of weed, right? But the dealer who owns the dope has other plans in mind. So does the crooked Texas sheriff whose deputy has also been killed (by his wife before she died). So do the drunk bikers Scott angered in the bar they stopped in along the way. So does the alien abductee they have a close encounter with. Not to mention the hippies, the moonshiners, and assorted rednecks they manage to really annoy. Will they get to Snake River Canyon alive? Will they sell their MJ? Will they leave Snake River Canyon alive?



The answer to all of these questions is "Who cares?" After all, it's the journey that counts. And this is one hell of a journey. I've reviewed a lot of books over the years but this is one of the all-time most flat-out fun stories I've read in a long time. There is no deep philosophical theme here, no search for humanity's soul, no buried secrets to unearth, just plain old murder and mayhem for the sake of, well, murder and mayhem. It's fast, it's funny, loaded with plenty of '70s pop culture references, and the story never takes a moment's break from the disasters that lie ahead of the cousins on their way to make a killing – of both the monetary and human types.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book (in case you couldn't tell). I plan to take a look for Scott Von Doviak's first novel, **CHARLES GATE CONFIDENTIAL**, and will keep an eye out for whatever he writes next. So go sit in your easy chair, grab a cold one, and get ready for a non-stop ride. There's no slow down on the Lowdown Road.

EVERGREEN

by Naomi Hirahara

Soho Crime, \$27.95, August

Aki Ito Nakasone #2

Rating: B+

Aki Nakasone (formerly Ito) has eagerly returned to Los Angeles from Chicago, where she is joined by her husband Art. She doesn't realize that the 1946 city she has arrived in has changed beyond all recognition. Her family home, confiscated during WWII, now belongs to someone else. Japanese community gardens were gone, buried by schools and the city.

When Shinji "Babe" Watanabe, an old war buddy of Art's (and the best man at their wedding), shows up at the hospital where Aki is working, she is surprised. He is bringing in his father, who appears to have suffered some physical abuse. Is Babe responsible? Later, when the father is found murdered in his shabby hotel room, Babe has disappeared. After the cops come around to her home, Aki tries to find him. But that does not stop the violence that has entered her married life.

This is Naomi Hirahara's sequel to her award-winning novel, **CLARK AND DIVISION**. It is a telling and often frightening examination of life of the Nisei and Issei after the conclusion of World War II. As with the prior novel, the author has meticulously researched the era and the lifestyles of the Japanese population. The reader sees the discrimination and hardships they faced as they sought to return to the lives they once knew. After all, in spite of their Japanese ancestry, they were good Americans. Many had served in the war, yet were still despised because of the color of their skin. No one cares about the Nisei soldier now that the war is over. Aki feels as if her whole being was diminishing, that she was not a part of this post-war Los Angeles.

Yet Aki's human emotions still want her to get involved. No one was there for Mr. Watanabe when he died, so she stands in for him. Yet she will come to learn that not everyone is who they seem to be. Could this include her husband, Art, from whom she is keeping secret her efforts on the dead man's part? And what about Art's lies to her that she discovers? Is there no one who can be trusted?

This is a no-holds-barred look at horrors of life for some of the down-

trodden poor in filthy living conditions, with its lack of food and medical care. Aki cares but often that caring is dangerously thrown back in her face as she searches for Babe from one end of what is becoming Little Tokyo to the other. After all, as someone tells her, a woman who doesn't know her place is called "a dead woman." She needs to prove not only to others, but also to herself, that she does matter, that she can make a difference in people's lives. This absorbing novel will hold you through to the end as Aki learns that one person can make a difference.

The Old Timer in the Corner

Some issues back this sub-column took a look at Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason novels. While Gardner, an attorney himself, is most famous for Mason's stories, he also wrote a lot of other things over the years, starting with the pulp magazine tales that he cranked out in the 1920s. The speed with which he wrote those gave him the stamina to publish an unheard of today four full-length novels a year. But he didn't always write under his own name. His best known pseudonym was A. A. Fair, under which he told many stories about private investigators Bertha Cool and Donald Lam beginning in 1939.

A lot of the books I have talked about in this part of my column may be a bit difficult to find, but here's one that is not.

FOOLS DIE ON FRIDAY

by Erle Stanley Gardner

writing as A. A. Fair

Hard Case Crime, \$14.95, February

Rating: B+

Private investigators Bertha Cool and Donald Lam accept a \$500 retainer from Beatrice Ballwin. She claims that her Uncle Gerald is going to be poisoned by his wife Daphne. She wants round-the-clock protection for him, which Lam sets up while Bertha keeps track of the money. This is the usual way things go in the agency. But Lam

is immediately suspicious of Beatrice since the initials on her cigarette case don't match up with her name. So he decides to investigate her, as well. His bizarre plan involves buying a carton of anchovy paste and creating a fake national advertising scheme for the brand. When this blows up in his face, murder and suspects follow, to the point that Lam himself comes under suspicion. The cops are used to Lam's frequent skirting of the law, one of them ultimately warning Lam that he will end up "in a nice big house with lots of rooms [and] bars on the window." But as usual, Lam manages to pull a rabbit out of the hat, even if at first it looked like the hat didn't have any rabbits in it.

Originally published in 1947, this is the twelfth novel in the series (including the second novel, **THE KNIFE SLIPPED**, which was held back from publication, and only first issued in 2016 by Hard Case Crime). I wondered how Cool and Lam could put two men a day on Beatrice and spend money and other time investigating for a mere \$500. But of course that was in 1947 dollars, which today is the rough equivalent of \$6,900. So, yeah, plenty of money.

As always it's fun to watch the two private eyes going at each other over money and investigative methods. At one point Lam even asks Bertha why she didn't go to work on the case herself instead of complaining about his work. She screams back at him, "I was working on it.... I boosted the ante from two hundred and fifty to five hundred eighty-five smackers.... If you think that isn't work, try it sometime." Plus, you've got to love her ocean-based variety of expressions, like "Fry me for an oyster" and "Kipper me for a herring."

This is just the kind of book I like – tightly written, fast-moving, funny in the right places, and entertaining from page one right to the end. Plus it's not one of those bloated five hundred page heavily padded novels that are so prevalent today. You can't go wrong picking it up or any of the other Cool & Lam novels being re-issued by Hard Case Crime.

Maggie's Cozy Mystery Cafe'

Mary Mason



FLOP DEAD GORGEOUS

by David Rosenfelt
Minotaur, \$28.00, July
Andy Carpenter #27

Rating: A

Andy Carpenter is a successful attorney against his will. He's ready to retire, but keeps getting pulled back by cases needing his special skills and persistence. Helping a Hollywood star, Jenny Nichols, is a no brainer. Andy dated Jenny briefly in high school, and when she's accused of murder he steps in to help.

Jenny is in the area filming her latest movie, and staying in the home she bought her late mother. Andy and wife Laurie host a party for Jenny, which is sadly crashed by her co-star Ryan Griffith. Jenny & Ryan had a relationship that didn't end well, due to his cheating and erratic behavior. When he crashes the party and threatens Jenny, he's promptly dealt with, as are his body guards.

Sadly, Jenny wakes up the next morning to find his corpse in her home, with a knife in his back. Forensic evidence shows nothing to incriminate anyone else, and Jenny is arrested. Andy is happy to help her, and enlists the aid of his "crew" of talented professionals. Jenny's dog Mamie is introduced to Andy's dogs and family and adds to the cast of great characters, both 2 and 4 legged.

The case takes off on a tangent that could be expected. A new movie streaming service is going to be the next big thing, and Ryan would have been a big part of that. Knowing Jenny couldn't do this, and providing an alternate suspect is something Andy needs to do. Having been with Andy from his first book, I know he's going to prove

victorious, but the way he gets the right answer is always something I look forward to and never see coming. This is no exception. One of my favorite series.

MRS. PLANSKY'S REVENGE

by Spencer Quinn
Forge Books, \$26.99, July
Mrs. Plansky #1

Rating: B+

Loretta Plansky is a widow living in Florida and is financially secure. She can help her children when needed, and not have to watch her pennies. She and her late husband had a successful business, manufacturing a toaster knife. Living in Florida at a very lovely retirement facility, she's able to do what she wants.

Things change rapidly, as a telephone call from her grandson needing money turns out to be a scam. Woken in the middle of the night, she gave her

"grandson" access to her bank for bail money. Sadly, all her accounts use the same password, and her accounts are quickly emptied.

Not one to accept what happened lying down, Loretta contacts her financial advisor and the FBI. She finds that the culprits are in Romania, and promptly sets off to see what can be done. She does the impossible, with the help of a reporter, and surprisingly one of the culprits.

This could be a wake up call for many elderly people in danger of being scammed, thought few would be plucky enough to act as Loretta did. The events leading up to her success are well thought out for the most part, and luck and pluckiness help her succeed. I enjoyed this book, and hope I never have to emulate Mrs. Plansky. I was surprised that she was younger than I am. Although I don't want her to go thru this again, I'd like to see her off on another adventure, maybe helping someone else in a similar mess.

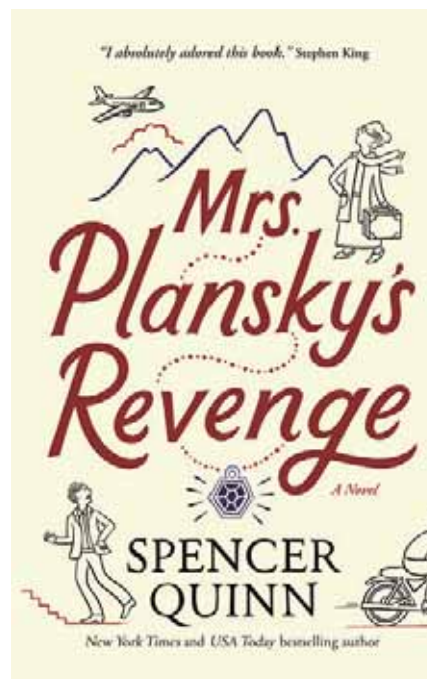
BIRDER, SHE WROTE

by Donna Andrews
Minotaur, \$28.00, August
Meg Langslow #33

Rating: A

Just when Meg Langslow has a chance to relax from her busy life, she's called on to help her father with a beehive installation in her yard. She's happy to help but was trying to figure out how to deal with a bully hummingbird who has taken over one of the feeders they have. The new beehive installation is made more difficult by the absence of the local bee expert, Edgar Bortnick who hasn't been heard from.

Besides that, she's called on by the Caerphilly, Va. mayor to help placate the



wealthy folks who live in McMansions in a ritzy new development. NIMBY's for the most part, they didn't realize moving to the "country" could result in being neighbors to real farmers, and all the odors and other things that entails.

To make a much fuller day, she and her Grandmother Cordelia have offered to help a local church Deacon search for a long lost cemetery. The cemetery dates back to before the civil war, and records have been lost. Slaves and descendants of slaves are interested in finding and honoring their families. They have enlisted the help of newly trained search and rescue pommeranians. Also causing grief is Britni, a reporter who is interviewing Cordelia for a magazine. She didn't dress for a search in the woods and is complaining about everything non stop.

While the graveyard search was successful, it was a bit too successful, due to finding a fresh corpse. The body is of one of the worst NIMBY's Wally the Weird Inman. That is a relief as the team was worried about the missing Edgar. Cause of death is murder, and Edgar may be a suspect due to his interactions with Wally. Meg saves the day, by figuring out what happened. Edgar is found safe, and all is right for now in the charming, yet unusually active small town of Caerphilly.

I enjoy this series not only for the characters but for the opportunity to learn about new things, this time bees. Andrews research is very comprehensive, and she makes it easy for this city girl to understand life in the country.

FEEL THE BERN

by Andrew Shaffer

Ten Speed Press, \$16.99, December, 2022

Rating: B

Crash Robertson is a student hoping to have a career in politics. She's obtained an internship with Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont. Crash is a Vermont native, and is assigned to assist the senator on a trip to her home town of Eagle Creek Vt. It's the annual Champion Days festival, celebrating the local legend of a sea monster, Champ,



perhaps kin to Nessie.

Sadly, the town is not doing well economically, the blame some attach to "Big Maple," a large conglomerate that buys small maple farms to make what can be considered industrialized syrup and other items. Crash may have obtained her position as she was able to bring to her interview a now scarce type of maple syrup, unlike everyone else who brought mass produced stuff.

The body of the local banker, despised by most everyone, is found and a local maple farmer, and old friend of the senator, is missing. While on "Bernie Watch" Crash gets involved in the investigation, helping an old boyfriend who's now a cop. Crash and Bernie save the day, and Crash is even saved by Champ, or was she?

This was an interesting and eye opening book. Sad to learn about the plight of the maple syrup industry, and how climate change is changing the area that can produce maple products. I'm a fan of Senator Sanders, and this book made a reference to his mittens, reminding me of the memes of him sitting at the inauguration of President Biden, which took him many places, from with the Beatles to sporting events. I'm guessing he's a good sport.

I also enjoyed the recipes at the back of the book. The one I would probably

try is Bud's "Special" Cannon Cove Brownies.

On George's Nightstand

Here are some of the books I'm reading or about to read. No guarantee I'll finish any particular one. But if I finish one of these books, odds are I will review it in the magazine.

HERO

Thomas Perry

PREY FOR THE SHADOW

Javier Cercas

ASSASSIN EIGHTEEN

John Brownlow

THE CONSPIRATORS

G. W. Shaw

TRAITOR'S GATE

Jeffrey Archer

THE PEACOCK AND

THE SPARROW

I. S. Berry

THE SPIDER

Lars Kepler

MOSCOW EXILE

John Lawton

DEATH IN FINE CONDITION

Andrew Cartmel

--and when I get it

THE RUNNING GRAVE

Robert Galbraith

Already read for the next issues -

BLOOD LINES

Nelson De Mille and Alex Demille

THE HOUSE OF LOVE

AND DEATH

Andrew Klavan

PAST LYING

Val McDermid

ODYSSEY'S END

Matt Coyle

THE PRICE YOU PAY

Nick Petrie

DEADLOCK

James Byrne

Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



LYING BESIDE YOU

by Michael Robotham

Scribner, \$27.99, February

Cyrus Haven & Evie Cormac #3

Rating: A

This series centers around two psychologically damaged individuals. Cyrus Haven is an eminent forensic psychologist who is called on by the police to aid in their investigations. When he was a child, Cyrus' older brother Elias (a paranoid schizophrenic) killed his parents and younger twin sisters. Cyrus has suffered from that trauma ever since. In the first book of the series, **GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL** (Gold Dagger winner, Edgar nominee), Cyrus takes Evie Cormac under his wing. She was abandoned, abused and neglected as a child and Cyrus understands her pain and has great empathy for her. He also wants to protect her from the world because she has a unique gift/talent – she can tell if a person is telling the truth or not. She is a walking lie detector and she and Cyrus go to great lengths to keep that secret from the world. The two have formed a big brother–little sister relationship and it seems to be working – even when Evie's brash personality gets her into frequent trouble.

As this story opens, Elias Haven has been in a secure psychiatric facility for the last 20 years and is about to be released into his brother's care. Cyrus is willing to forgive his brother and accept him into his home, but wants to see Elias prove that he can be trusted. Evie is not so willing and has reservations.

Cyrus crosses paths with the recently released Mitch Coates who was imprisoned for six years for sexual assault. Taking pity on Mitch, Cyrus hires him to do some handyman projects around

his house. There, Mitch encounters Evie and they eventually strike up a friendship, which is unusual in itself because Evie doesn't have friends. When he tells Evie that he is innocent of the act that he was sent to prison for, she (with her innate ability) can tell that Mitch is telling the truth. Evie then goes on a mission to find proof of his innocence so he can be exonerated of the crime.

On another front, Cyrus is called in on a police investigation by Detective Superintendent Lenny Parvel, in which a 67-year-old father, Rohan Kirk, has been brutally murdered, and his daughter, Maya, has disappeared, feared abducted..

Soon, a second victim is taken, and Evie is the only person who glimpsed the man behind the wheel.

I've grown to love this series with its fascinating characters and exciting situations. The last 50 pages were so intense for me that I had to put the book down a few times to regain my composure. Michael Robotham is a master at what he does. This series combines psychological suspense and detection in a most pleasing way. I'm hoping for a long-running series.

THE BITTER PAST

by Bruce Borgos

Minotaur Books, \$28.00, July

Porter Beck #1

Rating: A-

Move over Sheriff Longmire, there's a new sheriff in town! This highly entertaining first novel by Bruce Borgos introduces us to a new talent that portends to be with us for many years.

Parallel narratives involve an attempted theft at a Nevada nuclear testing site in the early 1950s and a murder

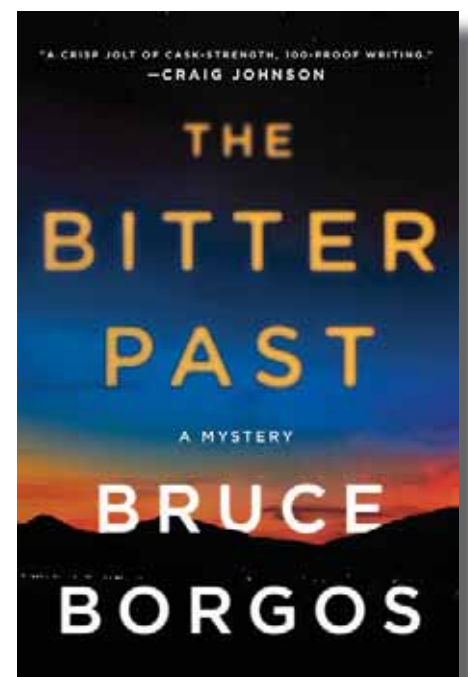
in modern-day rural Nevada, just north of Las Vegas.

Porter Beck is the Lincoln County sheriff, having recently retired from a career in Army intelligence to take over the job from his father. The county is sparsely populated so it is a surprise that he is called to investigate the murder of a reclusive, retired FBI agent.

He is joined in his investigation by FBI agent Sana Locke, who is a strikingly beautiful mid-thirty year old. Beck's first thought upon meeting her is, "I'm still examining her, making mental notes, certain she knows I'm contemplating where our wedding should take place." That got a laugh out of me. Yes, there is palpable chemistry between the two and the banter between them is full of sharp-edged humor and worth the price of the book alone.

The link between the past and the present seems to be a Russian sleeper agent in the 1950s who gained access to nuclear testing facility in Nevada – but was never caught. That is who the murdered FBI agent was investigating on his own.

THE BITTER PAST is eminently readable, with great characters, clear writing, fast pacing and sizzling dialogue. This debut is a winner and certainly worthy of award consideration.



DEATH ON THE BEACH

by Steph Broadribb

Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, July
Retired Detectives Club #3**Rating: B+**

The Retired Detectives Club is comprised of a married couple – former CSI Lizzie and her husband, former DCI Philip, who have left England to retire in Florida. Their marriage hit a rough patch in book 2 of the series (**DEATH AT PARADISE PALMS**) and is on the mend in book 3. Moira (former English police detective who is living under a false name to hide from corrupt policemen in England who mean to do her harm) and Rick (former DEA agent – the only American of the group) have started to test the romantic waters, but that has been put on hold when a young woman carrying a baby appears on Rick's doorstep and is not happy to find him with another woman (Moira).

Rick is approached by the father of a young female realtor (Jessie Beckton) who fell to her death from a penthouse suite of the brand-new Shimmering Sands retirement community. Police have ruled it a suicide but her parents don't agree.

One look at the location of where the body was found convinces Lizzie that Jessie was held upside down and dropped from the penthouse balcony. It's a murder and the game is afoot.

These mysteries are pleasant, easy reads and once you get to know the main characters, you will want to know what is happening to them in each episode. This one ends on a bit of a cliff-hanger, so I will be compelled to read the next one to find out the hanging plot line's resolution. But I would read it anyway.

The author (British) will be at this year's Bouchercon and I look forward to meeting her.

THE LAST DANCE

by Mark Billingham

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.00, July
Detective Declan Miller #1**Rating: A-**

Detective Declan Miller is still re-

covering from the murder of his beloved wife (also a police detective). But sitting at home on compassionate leave, with nothing to do, is driving him up a wall, so one day he just shows up at work.

He is assigned a new partner, DS Sara Xiu, who has been forewarned about Miller's maverick and eccentric tendencies. And almost as if foreordained, Miller catches a juicy murder case that first day back. Two men, in adjoining hotel rooms, are found with bullet holes in their heads. One is a by all accounts a straight-arrow businessman and the other an organized crime leader -- Adrian Cutler, who happens to be someone Miller's wife was investigating at the time of her death. The job appears to be a professional hit, so Miller and Xiu go in search of possible culprits. And while doing so, Miller reconnects with his old network of friends (his ballroom dancing friends, two of whom are retired police), his homeless informant Finn and even the ghost of his wife who keeps showing up in his kitchen.

On another front, Miller is being kept completely out of the investigation into the murder of his wife and to make matters worse, he is not even being informed as to any progress in the case (apparently none). But he can't resist snooping around the edges.

Miller's frequent humorous and sometimes sarcastic quips add delicious leavening to what otherwise might be a downer of a story. This character reminds me a bit of Reginald Hill's Dalziel who was known for his outrageous incorrectness. I admit to a soft spot in my heart for characters such as this.

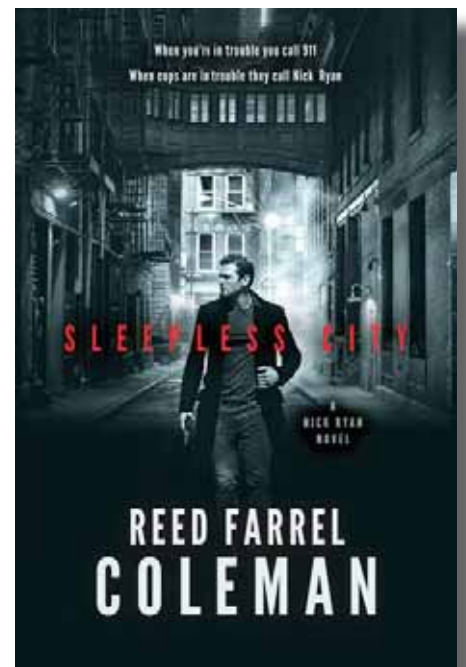
THE LAST DANCE was a thorough enjoyment. All aspects of good crime writing are in abundant evidence. I'll be waiting anxiously in line for the next Detective Miller crime novel.

SLEEPLESS CITY

by Reed Farrel Coleman

Blackstone Publishing, \$26.99, July
Nick Ryan #1**Rating: A-**

Nick Ryan is the type of NYC cop more interested in doing what is right than in following the rules of his profes-



sion. He's also wicked smart. And this has come to the attention of the NYC powers-that-be who enlist him to be a problem solver for them and give him unlimited resources to carry out his mandate.

His first task is to handle a racially sensitive case so the city doesn't erupt in flames of protest. The second is to find out who is behind the bombing of a cop hangout just minutes after he left it.

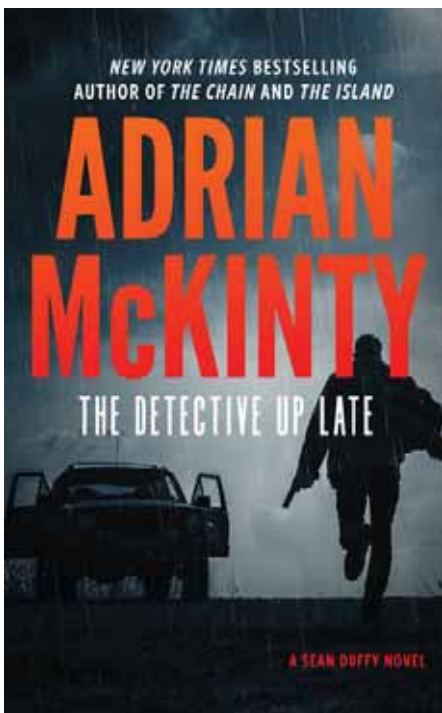
Sounds like a police procedural, doesn't it? It has a little bit of that, but I'd categorize it as an action thriller and a good one at that.

Veteran crime writer Reed Farrel Coleman has been missing in action during the Pandemic. Now he returns in a blaze of glory. Nick Ryan is a character worth following long into the future. It was a fun and exciting read for me. Ryan is a vigilante whose actions seemed totally justified to me and, hence, I was a member of Team Ryan right from the get-go. The clever schemes that Ryan comes up with only enhanced the narrative of this excellent thriller. I look forward to this becoming a series.

THE DETECTIVE UP LATE

by Adrian McKinty

Blackstone, \$26.99, August
Sean Duffy #7**Rating: A-**



The “Troubles” were not a good time to be a Catholic cop in Northern Ireland and Sean Duffy has seen more than his share of danger to himself and his partner Beth. It’s not for nothing that he checks the engine and undercarriage of his car every time he uses it. Now that they have an adorable little girl, it’s time to move to safer climes in Scotland. Sean still wants his pension so he’ll return by ferry to Carrickfergus RUC for seven days a month until he can retire with full benefits.

Sean also wants to leave his successor a clean slate so when the police are notified of the disappearance of a 15-year-old girl, he puts in maximum effort to solve the case, even as his colleagues, Crabbie and Lawson, dismiss it as just a tinker girl who probably has run off. Duffy urgently tries to uncover what happened to the girl, while at the same time managing a high profile asset in the IRA, who will be a continuing responsibility.

In what looks like Sean Duffy’s last case, the author has generated a riveting police procedural, infused with worldly wisdom, slightly off-kilter humor and empathetic characters. This series is such a pleasure to read.

THE DETECTIVE UP LATE seemed to wrap everything up well

and I thought that Adrian McKinty was done with this series and that Sean Duffy would ride off into the sunset. But McKinty has announced on his blog that there will be two more titles in the Sean Duffy series. Hurray! They are **HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER** and **THE GHOSTS OF SATURDAY NIGHT** – both titles of Tom Waits’ songs.

Jeff Popple’s Take: **THE DETECTIVE UP LATE** contains all the elements we have come to expect from a McKinty novel. The writing is first rate, the characters well crafted, the historical detail convincing, and the story commands attention from the opening pages. The plotting is tight, and the action is ably balanced between the current missing persons case and the over-riding tension of managing an asset double crossing the IRA. There is plenty of reflection on the past, but the pacing rarely lags, and there are some very exciting set-pieces. Underlining it all is a good twisty storyline about the missing girl, that bristles with poignancy and offers a few neat surprises. **Rating: A**

AFTER THAT NIGHT

by Karin Slaughter

Morrow, \$32.00, August

Will Trent #11 (also has Sara Linton)

Rating: B+

Sara Linton is on call in the hospital ER when the battered Dani Cooper is brought in. Sara uses all the means available to keep Dani alive, but eventually Dani succumbs. But before Dani passes away she names her attacker, Tommy McAllister, who is the son of a prominent doctor with whom Sara went through medical school.

Dani’s death brings back to Sara’s mind the terrible incident in her own history when she was raped fifteen years ago. That event changed everything in Sara’s life and, because of it, she is unable to have children. However, she has been able to find happiness in her life and is engaged to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Special Agent Will Trent.

The police aren’t able to bring a case against Tommy McAllister but Dani’s family has sued him in civil court for

wrongful death and Tommy is finally brought to trial three years after the event.

Will and his partner Faith continue to investigate the circumstances surrounding Dani’s death below the radar and come to believe that there were other victims connected to Tommy’s father and some of his friends.

It’s impossible to read a Karin Slaughter novel without encountering something disturbing and **AFTER THAT NIGHT** is certainly no exception. Slaughter is a master at turning over rocks to see what’s hidden beneath them. What is discovered is often something that polite society would prefer to remain unseen. The villains are despicable human beings and I despair that there are people in real life just like them. This is a disturbing read, but an excellent one nevertheless.

THE SECRET HOURS

by Mick Herron

Soho Crime, \$27.95, September

A Slow Horses Spinoff/Prequel

Rating: A

There are three plot lines in **THE SECRET HOURS**, two in present-day England and one in early 1990’s Berlin.

It all starts with the opening scenes which depict the attempt to kidnap or kill a retired asset of the secret service



named Max. Although Max has been living a life of quiet solitude in a rural setting, he has maintained his vigilance and is able to escape the clutches of his attackers. But questions remain in his mind: Who sent them and why?

The scene shifts to an enquiry entitled *Monochrome*, which was launched at the behest of a vengeful Prime Minister to investigate the “historical overreaching” of the British secret service. Two civil servants (Griselda and Malcolm) are seconded to this project along with a committee of bigwigs, but they soon find that they don’t have the power implied by their mandate and their efforts are thwarted at every turn by MI5’s formidable First Desk.

An old MI5 case file is anonymously dropped in Malcolm’s shopping cart and the *Monochrome* committee decides to take a closer look at the file.

Through the testimony of one of the operatives in Berlin at the time, Alison Dean, one is given a vivid picture of the goings-on at Berlin Station in the early 1990s and its driving force Brinsley Miles.

THE SECRET HOURS is billed as a standalone, but those of you who have read the *Slow Horses* series will soon recognize settings and characters from the *Slow Horses*’ world. I would categorize this fine novel as a spin-off, not a standalone. Three characters in particular (one that is never identified by name and the other two going by different names than we are used to) are easily identified by the fans of the *Slough House* novels.

All of Mick’s books start slow for me and gradually build with surprising revelations until I reach my inevitable “Wow” exclamation as I turn the last page. His witty and sarcastic prose and dialogue continue to delight me at every turn. He is a master in his prime.

EXPECTANT

by Vanda Symon

Orenda, \$16.99, September

Sam Shephard #5

Rating: A-

The latest murder to hit the New Zealand city of Dunedin is the brutal slaying of a heavily pregnant woman. And to make matters worse, her baby, ripped from the womb, is missing.

This case hits very close to home for Detective Sam Shephard, who is herself near the end of her first pregnancy. She wants a major role in the investigation, but her misogynist boss assigns her to desk duty. Of course Sam is resourceful enough to get around her boss’ roadblock.

What follows is a wonderful example of good police detection.

The brilliant New Zealand writer Vanda Symon has quickly found a place among my favorite authors. She writes with such zest and clarity that I have put her on my “must read” list. Please give her a try. You’ll thank me.

DARK RIDE

by Lou Berney

Morrow, \$30.00, September

Rating: A-

This character-driven storyline centers on 21-year-old Hardy “Hardly” Reed, who is happy with his easy-going life. Smoking pot and working a dead-end job are fine with him. Until...

One day at the county offices, Hardly is extending the time to pay a parking ticket and notices a young boy and a girl sitting on a bench outside of one of the offices. He’s close enough to see that they each have recent marks on the bodies that could only have been caused by a lit cigarette. The thought of these children being abused lights a spark and then a fire within and Hardly finds that purpose in life that he has been missing.

The first order of business is to find out who the kids are and then secondly what kind of a situation they are living in. In the process, Hardly discovers to his surprise that he’s a pretty good detective. Unfortunately he’s not as good at keeping out of trouble.

DARK RIDE is full of good storytelling, engaging characters and

human kindness (and the opposite). I liked it a lot, but not as much as Berney’s **NOVEMBER ROAD** (Barry Award winner), which is his masterpiece – so far.

THE LAST DEVIL TO DIE

by Richard Osman

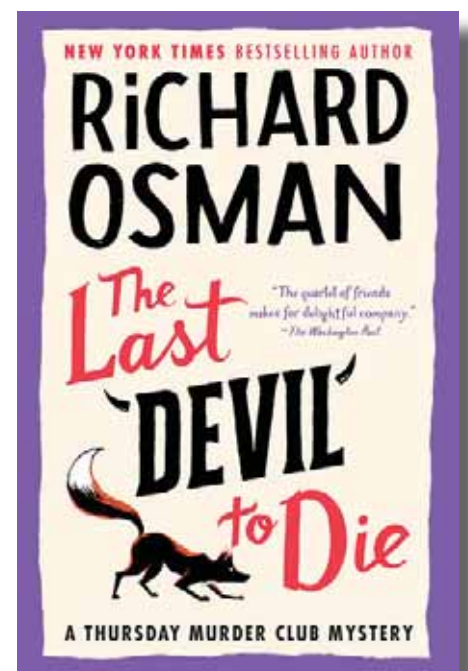
Pamela Dorman, \$29.00, September

Thursday Murder Club #4

Rating: A-

Richard Osman has certainly tapped into a rich vein of gold with his Thursday Murder Club series, which has become a worldwide phenomenon. There have been many other series featuring senior sleuths, but Osman’s combination of fascinating continuing characters, great plots and scintillating (and humorous) dialogue, have been delicious treats for a reading public obviously hungry for such fare.

This episode starts out with the Club members finding out that Ibrahim’s old friend, an antique dealer, has been found murdered. Their local friends on the police force are told to stand down in favor of the national police, but they are none too happy about that. When the police investigation seemingly goes nowhere, the Club decide to step in. They soon find links



to local drug rings.

The backdrop to this investigation is the accelerating dementia of Elizabeth's husband Stephen so Elizabeth takes somewhat of a back seat to Joyce, Ibrahim and Ron as they take on more active roles that they are used to.

The issue of dementia in one's golden years is dealt with quite tenderly in this novel. Not everyone will be happy with the resolution of that issue, but it is nicely handled – as is everything in this delicious treat of a mystery.

SAVING EMMA

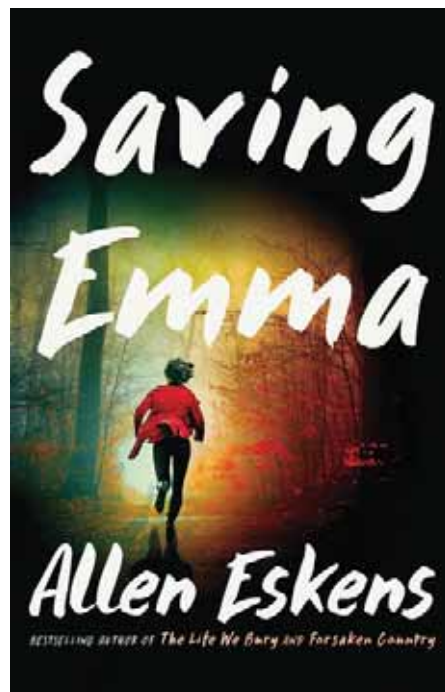
by Allen Eskens

Mulholland Books, \$28.00, September

Rating: A-

Lawyer and law professor Boady Sanden and his wife Dee are the guardians of fourteen-year-old Emma, the daughter of a deceased colleague. Emma has an aunt who has tried to get custody of Emma, but the court awarded it to the Sandens. But the Sandens generously have allowed Emma to visit her aunt, Anna Adler, and the aunt has taken advantage of that situation to poison Emma's opinion of the Sandens. Now the Sandens are facing losing Emma unless they can prove that the aunt is really not interested in Emma's welfare, but wants control over Emma's 51% majority interest in a large corporation.

Boady also takes on cases for the Innocence Project, which tries to get prison releases for convicts who were wrongly convicted. His new case involves Elijah Matthews who considers himself a prophet of God and has been locked up in a psychiatric hospital for the past four years, convicted of brutally murdering the pastor of a megachurch. Once Boady delves into the case and meets with Elijah several times, he comes to believe that Elijah was an easy target and that someone else may be responsible for the pastor's murder. Boady is working against the clock as Elijah is scheduled to have electric shock treatment soon and Boady doesn't feel that an innocent



man should be subjected to that life-altering procedure.

There is a spiritual element to this novel. The agnostic Boady often clashes with the spiritually-minded Elijah, who is early prescient.

It is nice to witness the warm relationship of husband and wife exhibited by Boady and Dee. Here is one tender passage of note:

I asked Dee, "Back when we first

started dating, did you ever think we'd be in such a mess?"

She thought for a bit and then placed her hand on top of mine, which rested on the console between us. "Boady, a fairy tale is easy to start. It's the happily-ever-after that's hard. It may not happen, but we'll do everything we can to get there."

Both plot lines draw the reader in as suspense is slowly ratcheted up.

Allen Eskens is a must-read for me. He has always delivered a wonderfully-crafted mystery and has never disappointed.

BOOMTOWN

by A. F. Carter

Mysterious Press, \$17.95, September

Delia Mariola #3

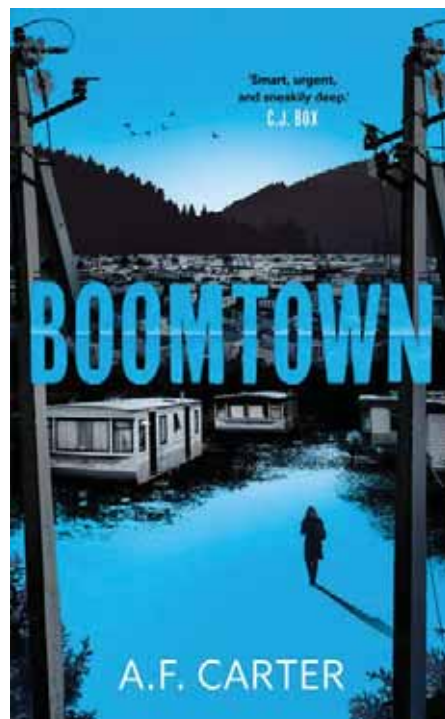
Rating: B+

In *DP* Issue #97 I wrote a column about the mysterious A.F. Carter and his new series (**THE YARDS** and **THE HOSTAGE**), which take place in the depressed Rust Belt town of Baxter.

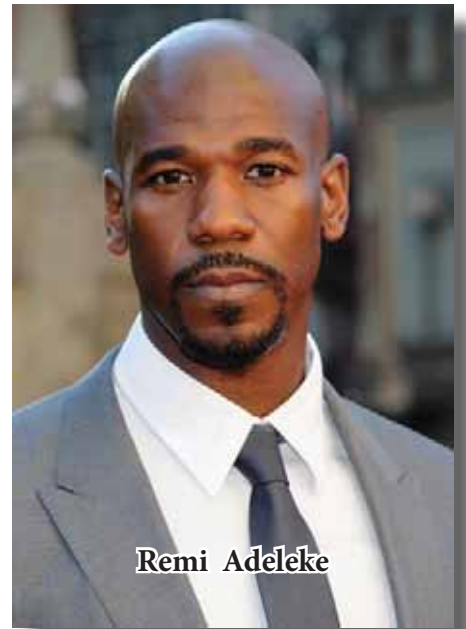
At the start of **BOOMTOWN** we find that things are looking up for the town of Baxter. A new Nissan plant is being built and the influx of construction workers has created a bit of a "boomtown" atmosphere and a needed boost to the local economy. But it has also created a shantytown called Boomtown outside of the Baxter city limits and out of the jurisdiction of police captain Delia Mariola. Crime is rampant in Boomtown and the country sheriff is not willing to go in and clean things up.

But when the body of a dead prostitute (who was pregnant) is found, Mariola uses it as an excuse to get her foot into Boomtown to find out who the murderer is and also clean out some of the criminal element present there – especially a criminal boss with ties to organized crime on the East Coast.

I really like this series and especially the character of Delia Mariola. But **BOOMTOWN** was the weakest of the three so far. That will not deter me, however, from reading future episodes.



Action Thriller Corner



Remi Adeleke

George Easter Reviews

THE COLLECTOR

by Daniel Silva
HarperCollins, \$32.00, July
Gabriel Allon #23
Rating: A-

Gabriel Allon has worn two hats for most of his adult life. One is that of an Israeli assassin/spy and the other as a gifted painter/art restorer. He has retired as head of Israeli intelligence and is now living a peaceful and rewarding life in Venice with his wife and two young children.

But a visit from General Cesare Ferrari, the commander of the Italian Art Squad, puts a temporary “pause” to all of that. Allon is gently blackmailed into finding the world’s most valuable stolen painting – The Concert by Johannes Vermeer, which was stolen in 1990 from the Gardner Museum in Boston.



While on this quest, his path crosses with that of a beautiful young Dutch woman named Ingrid Johansen, who

just so happens to be a world-class thief. Ingrid is also an eco activist and gives away most of her ill-gotten gains to environmental causes she supports. Allon enlists Ingrid’s help and his intuitive trust in her skills and instincts proves prescient.

Allon discovers that the Vermeer painting has changed hands as part of a secret transaction involving the Russians to obtain an unfinished nuclear weapon built in South Africa many years ago. Apparently the Russians intend to use the nuclear weapon as part of a false flag operation to blame the Ukrainians for setting it off. That will give Putin a “valid” excuse to respond with Russian tactical nuclear weapons.

So, suddenly Allon finds himself in the midst of a highly dangerous international crisis. To deal with it, he gathers his former team together to defuse the situation in classic Allon style.

I’ve always enjoyed a good art mystery and a good spy thriller so you can imagine that I was delighted with **THE COLLECTOR**. For me, the introduction of the fascinating character of Ingrid Johansen was the highlight of the novel. She is a natural scene-stealer and I expect her to re-appear in future Silva novels. There is a bit of Silva formula to the novel (a carefully orchestrated sting on a powerful and wealthy antagonist), but it didn’t detract from what is one of Daniel Silva’s best thrillers.

CHAMELEON

by Remi Adeleke
Morrow, \$30.00, July
Kali Kent #1

Rating: A-

Have you ever heard of Black Box? No, neither had I, nor has anyone out-

side of a few governmental insiders. It is a secret CIA special operations branch, comprised of highly skilled agents who perform in a number of specialized ways. There are the chameleons who are artists at disguise and can act in many different roles. Then there are the ghosts who are skilled in surveillance and deception. Wind operatives are the transportation experts and aberration agents are sent into deep cover – sometimes for years at a time.

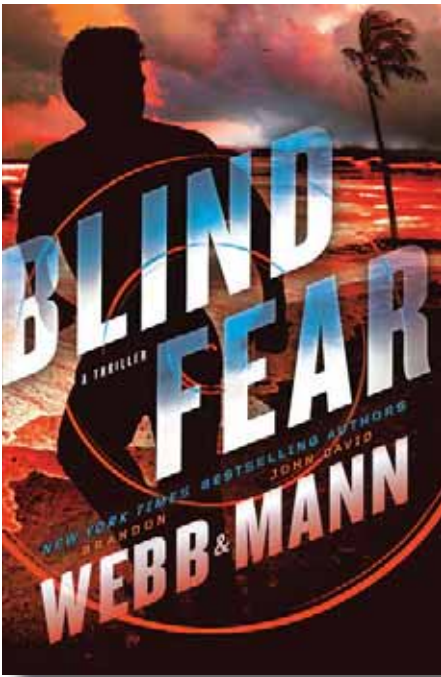
When former South African commando Lucas Van Groot begins kidnapping wealthy hostages all over the world, Black Box is asked to step in. It appears that Van Groot is not only interested in the ransom money, but in influencing worldwide stock markets.

Heading up the hunt for Van Groot is Kali Kent, a Nigerian-born Chameleon who seems to possess every skill necessary to perform such a job. He is surrounded by equally impressive colleagues.

This debut thriller is written with the aplomb of a veteran writer. The former Navy SEAL is especially good with his action scenes. A welcome addition for fans of Jack Carr, Mark Greaney and Nick Petrie.

BLIND FEAR

by Brandon Webb &
John David Mann
Bantam, \$28.99, July



Finn #3
Rating: A-

AWOL Navy SEAL Finn has a little bit of the Gray Man in him. He is unjustly being hunted by the FBI for trumped-up war crimes, yet still manages to travel the world righting wrongs. In **BLIND FEAR**, Finn has been hiding out on Viequest, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico. He's working for the blind owner of a seafood restaurant and is helping raise the owner's two grandchildren.

But he hasn't forgotten why he's on the run and he uses the Internet to search for clues as to whom is responsible for his dilemma.

Then the unthinkable happens: the two grandchildren go missing. Apparently they've seen something they should have seen and criminal elements are chasing them to silence them.

Finn is using every detective skill he has to find the children but his efforts are hampered by a hurricane that is battering Puerto Rico and its environs.

This is one of my favorite thriller series and it seems to get even better with each additional novel in the series. Terrific action scenes ratchet up the tension to near breaking point.

DEAD FALL

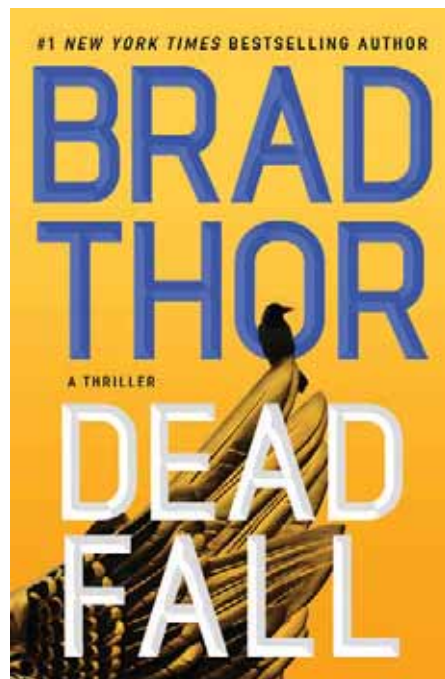
by Brad Thor
 Atria/Emily Bester Books, \$29.99, July
 Scot Horvath #22
Rating: A-

Scot Horvath has just wrapped up a successful mission that resulted in the death of a high-value Islamic terrorist and has planned for some down time in Poland, where he is set to meet up with Solvi, a Norwegian intelligence officer and Scot's fiancée. But at the last moment Scot is called away by Nicholas ("the Troll") to go to Ukraine. The Wagner Group is committing war crimes at an astonishing rate and has kidnapped Anna Royko, a young American woman who was helping at an orphanage. Scot is tasked with trying to rescue Anna, if she is still alive, and wreak some vengeance on the Wagner Group for their war crimes.

But Scot isn't allowed to bring his team of battle-hardened operators with him. He is allotted four American soldiers who are fighting alongside the Ukrainian Army.

First challenge: get to the area where a particular unit of the Wagner Group is operating and then hone in on their present location.

Second challenge: fight this unit of the Wagner Group with limited resources and far too few men to help.



Another exciting tale that treats the current war in the Ukraine with insight and compassion. I generally read five or six books at the same time, but this one I read cover to cover without looking at another book. A book like **DEAD FALL** that commands my sole attention is a book that I can only describe by that time-worn phrase "page-turner."

RICOCHE
 by Taylor Moore
 Morrow, \$30.00, August
 Garrett Kohl #3
Rating: B+

Events chronicled in the first two novel of this series have left Garrett Kohl deep in debt and trying to hold on to his fire-damaged Texas ranch.

On top of that, he is approached by an employee of a nearby nuclear weapons plant who is being blackmailed and intimidated by Iranian operatives. Garrett uses his experience as a deep cover narcotics agent and former Green Beret to come up with a plan to thwart the Iranians. But before he has put the plan in play, the Iranians highjack a train with nuclear weapons.

Garrett gathers a crew of misfits to go on the offensive against the Quds Force agents with dramatic results.

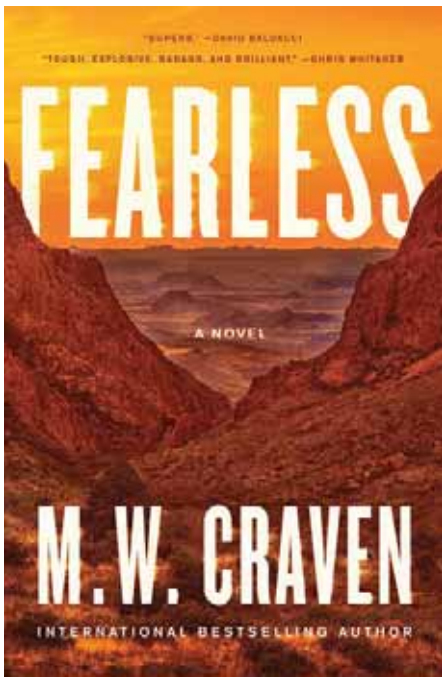
There is more than just a shoot-em-up thriller going on here. While chaos rages all around him, Kohl is also dealing with serious personal and family issues.

A good, but not great, thriller.

FEARLESS
 by M. W. Craven
 Flatiron Books, \$27.99, July
 Ben Koenig #1
Rating: B+

This novel marks quite a departure for Mike Craven from his fabulous Poe and Tilly British detective series. For one, it is an action thriller and for two, it is set in the United States. Also it is his first novel published in the United States. The first of many more to come.

Ben Koenig used to head the US Marshal's elite Special Operations Group. Then one day Ben faked his own



death and hasn't been seen since. Until now. In a selfless act, he saves someone's life and his actions are caught on video by a bystander who uploads it to the internet. The video goes viral and those who have been searching for him (with bad intent) now have a trail.

Koenig's former boss locates him first and asks him to find his daughter Martha. Martha's disappearance and the death of a Georgetown professor of hers have something to do with the research she was doing into a mysterious solar energy company in Texas' Chihuahuan Desert. So off he goes and you'll have to read the book to find out the rest.

One other note though. Ben Koenig has a rare condition that makes him unable to feel fear. Take that Jack Reacher!

This is a good thriller with an engaging main character, but it suffers a bit in comparison with the author's brilliant Washington Poe series. I wanted to like it more than I did.

LETHAL RANGE

by Ryan Steck

Tyndale House, \$26.99, August
Matthew Redd #2

Rating: B

When the first thriller in this series, **FIELDS OF FIRE**, ended, there were lingering issues that our hero Matthew

Redd has to deal with in **LETHAL RANGE**. One is that the eco-terrorist Anton Gage escaped and has been in hiding ever since and he hasn't stopped plotting how to reduce the world's population. The other is that Matt got on the wrong side of a motorcycle gang and they have come back to harass and torment Matt's wife Emily and their small baby.

Then there is the mounting debt on his beloved ranch and keeping his head above water is getting increasingly difficult.

Ryan Steck (of the Real Book Spy website) writes a technically sound thriller. The action scenes are well described and the problems Matt Redd faces immediately get the reader on his side. My issue with this series is that I have never warmed up to the character who seems a bit cardboardish. And I've never been a big fan of "destroy the world" thrillers. His work is quite similar to Taylor Moore's – same type of characters and settings – and I sometimes get them confused.

THE VICAR

by A. J. Chambers

Blackstone, \$26.99, September

Terry Nolan #1

Debut Novel

Rating: A-

Terry Nolan worked as an undercover MI5 agent known as The Vicar in Northern Ireland. The agents he recruited to work with him were known as the Parishioners. When his cover was blown some thirty years ago he faked his death but continued his work for MI5.

Now in present day Terry gets a message from one of his Parishioners, Shea, who sends him a message from New York City that her cover is blown. As Terry check up on his other Parishioners, he finds that they have all been killed.

So Terry races to New York to see if he can save Shea. Narrowly escaping death, Terry discovers that terrorists have managed to build four dirty bombs that are being sent by cargo ship to be placed in four major English cit-

ies.

This exciting thriller has all the elements that one looks for: danger, a deadline, a capable protagonist and an important cause. I recommend **THE VICAR** to anyone who likes well-written action thrillers. **THE VICAR** by A. J. Chambers and **CHAMELEON** by Remi Adeleke signal two new bright lights in Thriller Fiction and will certainly be considered for awards at the end of the year.

THREE FIRES

by Denise Mina

Pegasus, \$22.00, August

A Novella (135 pages)

Rating: A

In just a few pages Denise Mina has done a stunning job of fictionalizing the life of the powerful Dominican monk and religious zealot Girolamo Savonarola. His sermons led to the infamous Bonfire of the Vanities in Florence, Italy, where huge fires were lit to burn up anything that caused people to sin: playing cards, lavish clothing, make-up and works of art. Boticelli became a follower of Savonarola and gave some of his paintings over to be burned. I cringe just thinking about that. Boticelli went on to paint only religious scenes.

Mina's depiction of the complex personality of Savonarola shows good traits on the one hand such as his championing of the poor and their interests against the wealthy ruling class of Florence, and his forceful denunciation of the corruption of the Popes and the Church at that time. But on the other hand, he exhibited traits that would not be tolerated in today's world, at least by fair minded people: anti-semitism, anti-gay culture and misogyny.

The fascinating story bears some comparisons to modern day culture and politics: the rise of populism and its dangers, culture wars and cancel culture, just to name a few. The story is powerful and will cause you to think about your own values and the values of today's world.

This is not a mystery. It is historical fiction written by a major crime writer. **THREE FIRES** is an amazing story.

Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



BREAKNECK

by Marc Cameron

Kensington, \$27.00, April

Arliss Cutter #5

Rating: A

Several cases/assignments converge in the fifth book of Marc Cameron's Arliss Cutter series when the Supervisory Deputy U.S. Marshal and his colleague, Lola Teariki, at first trying to track down a fugitive con man who has fled to Alaska, eventually find themselves becoming embroiled in a deadly conflict with a Russian mobster intent on taking revenge against a Supreme Court Justice who will be attending a judicial conference in Fairbanks. In a story that begins near the banks of the Yukon River, and ends in a pitched battle aboard the famous Glacier Discovery train, the Deputy Marshals attempt to balance the challenges of their frequently dangerous jobs with the outsize demands of their

complex personal lives.

As stated above, this is the fifth book in the series; for this first-time reader, it was evident that this novel is only a small part of a larger, ongoing story, with many moving parts. Thus, it is to Cameron's great credit that the book is so accessible, requiring little effort to get in the swing of things, and to pick up on the threads established in prior installments. Cameron understands action, as well as the importance of compelling characters, and delivers both in spades. The story moves along like, well, a speeding train, building towards a frenetic and explosive conclusion that wraps up most of the current action, even as it promises even more exciting developments to come.

CALICO

by Lee Goldberg

Severn House, \$31.99, November

Rating: B+

What connection could events occurring in the thriving mining town of Calico, CA in the late eighteenth century have to events occurring in deathly quiet, lowkey Barstow, CA, in 2019? I won't go into too much detail, for fear of ruining the myriad surprises veteran scribe Lee Goldberg has in store for readers in this gripping standalone novel, which are slowly unveiled over the course of the book's opening chapters. Suffice it to say that what begins as police procedural set in modern times blossoms into a tale that spans decades, and that, at least in this case, the past is most assuredly prologue to the future. Goldberg's entertaining tale is told on two distinct tracts which eventually connect in a logical and meaningful manner. The main characters are great stand ins

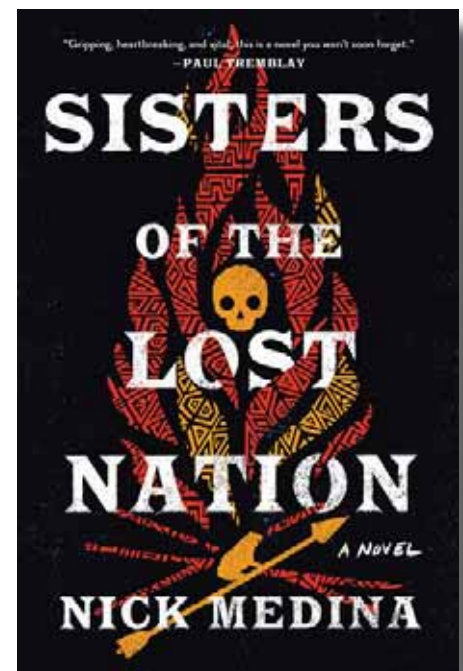
for readers, "everyperson" types who allow one to wonder how they would react if they found themselves in similar circumstances.

SISTERS OF THE LOST NATION

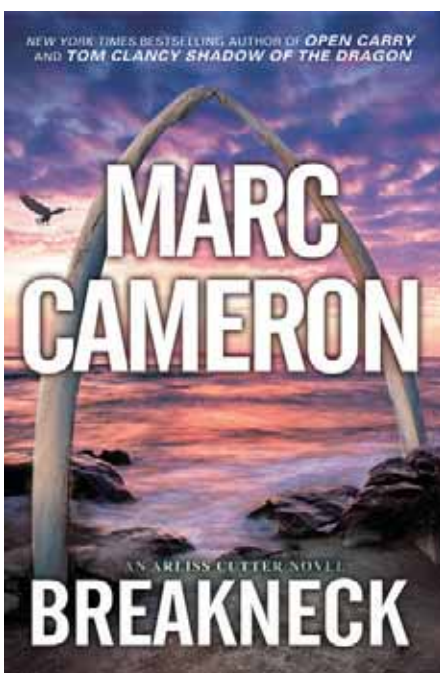
by Nick Medina

Berkley, \$27.00, April

Rating: A



Medina's stunning debut comes with a Content Warning: "SISTERS OF A LOST NATION includes content that addresses issues of addiction, drug abuse, murder, and death (off-page), physical assault and battery, sex trafficking (off-page), sexual abuse of a minor (off-page), self-harm, and racism. Please read with your well-being and best interest in mind." The book does indeed include this content, but it should not deter anyone from reading this haunting exploration of identity, both personal and cultural. It features one



Anna Horn, a member of the fictional Takoda tribe, always out of sync, out of place, searching for meaning in her life through her personal relationships, and via the stories of her tribe. She begins to question her very existence even more deeply when her sister Grace abruptly vanishes, seemingly a victim of human trafficking. Her tireless search for Grace leads to several shocking revelations, both about herself, and about the corruption and injustice plaguing her community. Exceedingly dark and suspenseful, but also uplifting and rewarding, **SISTERS** explores the power of stories (in this case, Native American mythology), simultaneously delivering an effective combination of Bildungsroman, Thriller, and Mystery.

THE BITTER PAST

by Bruce Borgos

Minotaur, \$28.00, July 2023

Rating: B+

Another tale that spans several decades is Bruce Borgos' **THE BITTER PAST** where the murder of a retired FBI Agent triggers a desperate search for a Russian mole who infiltrated American nuclear testing facilities in the late 1950s, who subsequently went to ground in the early sixties. Borgos also uses a two-track approach to storytelling, detailing the Mole's activities in the fifties, slowly shedding light on the misdeeds occurring in the present. It is an effective choice, as each track builds towards its exciting climax. You might spot the mole early on (I did, but Borgos had me doubting my conclusions at times), but that will not diminish your enjoyment of this author's decidedly assured debut.

CHAMELEON

by Remi Adeleke

Morrow, \$30.00, July

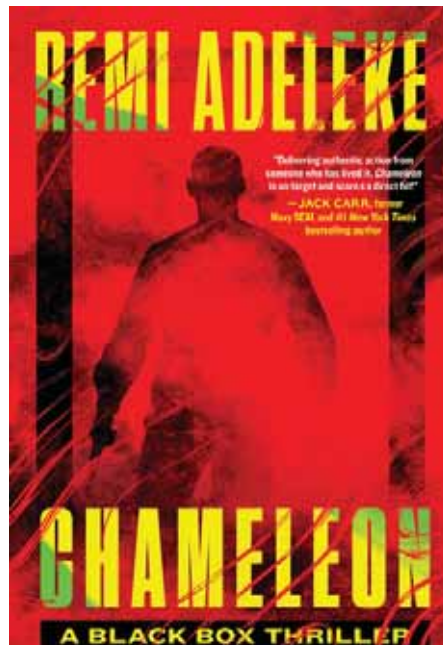
Rating: B

Terrorists who kidnap the progeny of wealthy corporate executives are the antagonists in Remi Adeleke's debut novel. The kidnappings are cover for a longer game, however, as the bad guys make stock plays based on their illegal activities, reaping small fortunes on the

side every time they make a snatch.

The antagonists of Adeleke's book are part of the Black Box program, the CIA's "most elite and specialized operative unit," human chameleons who can assume any number of identities or covers to achieve their goals. One of their number takes notice of this stock market manipulation, thus launching an investigation into what they offhandedly refer to as "Hostage, Inc." That investigation reveals that the kidnappings are only the tip of a more insidious iceberg, a plan which could change the global balance of power forever.

CHAMELEON is surprisingly well written for a first novel, delivering a plethora of high-octane action sequences, a high-speed thriller that touches most of the bases, in terms of plot and action. It shoots high, meeting but never exceeding expectations. It is still a decent read, if you have the right mindset. Don't go in expecting Mission Impossible pyrotechnics and wizardry; **CHAMELEON**'s charms are more on the level of G. I. Joe.



SLEEPLESS CITY

by Reed Farrel Coleman

Blackstone, \$26.99, July

Rating: B

New York City Police Detective Nick Ryan believes in Justice, with a capital



J. It's a belief system that allows him to stand up for the little guy, like when he saves an innocent protestor from a beatdown from three of his fellow officers. But, in his estimation, it also gives him permission to act as judge, jury, and executioner in cases where Justice is not properly served. He's comfortable with this extreme, concluding that he's only doing what needs to be done.

One evening, as he's about to mete out some lethal justice against a particularly heinous individual, he's spared the task when a stranger intervenes and takes care of business for him. The intervention leads to an abduction, then to an invitation for Nick to work for an extra-legal organization that will provide him the means to combat crime and injustice in any way he sees fit. Although initially suspicious, Nick eventually sees value in such an alliance, and begins to accept those assignments which suit him. He now seems to have everything he ever wanted, but is bothered by the absolute power he has been offered. He labors on, content to know that his personal ends justify the unusual means, in the meantime saving his city from total meltdown.

Although competently written, this one felt just a little bit over the top for me, rising to the level of an above average Destroyer novel, but lacking any of the sense of humor that made those books so compulsively readable. Farrel goes out of his way to depict Ryan as extraordinary, but only ends up making him unbelievable. As an antagonist, he is simply too good to be true, too competent to feel real, too confident in his judgment to be appealing. Coleman appears to have lofty aspirations for this character (a series seems inevitable), but, ultimately, fails to make him sympathetic.

L J Roberts

It is purely my opinion



WINTER SWALLOWS

by Maurizio de Giovanni
Europa Editions, 2023, 384 pp.
Commissario Ricciardi #10
Rating: B+

First Sentence: 'I'm sorry, Brigadie.'

About the book: History/myst; Naples, Italy; 1940s

Dr. Bruno Modo finds a severely beaten woman in the lobby of the hospital and is shocked to find it is Lina, a prostitute he had occasionally visited and about whom he'd come to care. Commissario Ricciardi and Brigadier Maione are sent to the Teatro Splendor where a popular actress has been murdered on stage. The husband, playing opposite her, denies inserting a live round into the gun which had been used without an issue in the previous performance. A Nazi officer is pushing for Ricciardi's love, Enrica, to become engaged to a young Nazi officer in order to keep him Italy.

There's nothing more intriguing than a book whose first chapter heading is "the end." De Giovanni writes more about people, their emotions and their relationships with the actual crime almost being secondary to the story. His books are beautiful and tragic, filled with vulnerable people.

The writing is often lyrical and thought-provoking..." And of all the times of year, this is the worst. Because Christmas, with its sweetness and joy, with its candles and bagpipers and season's greetings, is over now, and it won't be coming back, and you look around and suddenly see the smoking ruins of everything you'd hoped for and the fog envelops and conceals what truly awaits

us. These are the days of shattered dreams." And can't many of us identify with... "My state of health is a long and boring topic. A sad novel, published in installments, and without a happy ending, I'm afraid."

The story is not without an element of levity. "Brigadier Raffaele Maione, a man abounding in fine human qualities, was nevertheless the worst driver you could possibly imagine." Even as readers, we tend to hold our breath when he is behind the wheel.

The one weakness of this book are the two characters of an old violinist and his young student. One may find oneself skimming some of their long passages. Even so, they are important to the story and cause one to appreciate the beauty of de Giovanni's words as he describes the difference between one who makes music and one who is a musician.



WINTER SWALLOWS is the final book in a wonderful series one hates to see end. While not the strongest book of the series, it is still a wonderful, emotional story.

MISSING IN THE SNOW

by Ann Cleeves
Self-published Online – July 2023
Tosh/Jimmy Perez Short Story, ePrint
Rating: B

About the story: PromoSS; Shetland, UK; Contemporary

Local Shetland policewoman has asked for the help of her former boss, Jimmy Perez. Thriller writer, Nicholas Manners, has disappeared. One minute he was in the local library, the next he was gone. His phone was left behind, but his laptop is missing.

This is a short story Ann Cleeves offered to those who signed up for her newsletter. From the very beginning, one is drawn in. Narrated by "Tosh," the head of police in Shetland, Cleeves' descriptions are wonderful as she not only talks about the falling snow, but the emotions it engenders from the narrator. Her use of local vernacular causes one to stop, consider, and occasionally smile. "There's a writer, a soothmother,..."; i.e., a newcomer, and outsider especially someone from the south. It's delightful that it takes a bit to realize the narrator, is female.

MISSING IN THE SNOW isn't Ms. Cleeves' best work, but it is delightful. It truly is a tease which is clever, making a nod toward Agatha Christie. No matter which, it is a fun read. As it was a free offer to those who signed up for Ms. Cleeves' newsletter, it is no longer avail-

able. Hopefully, it will be included in a short-story collection in the future.

THESE SILENT WOODS

by Kimi Cunningham Grant
Minotaur Books - Nov 2021 - 288 pgs
Standalone
Rating: B

First Sentence: *Something wrong; I can feel it: a sting pricking the skin and stitching inward.*

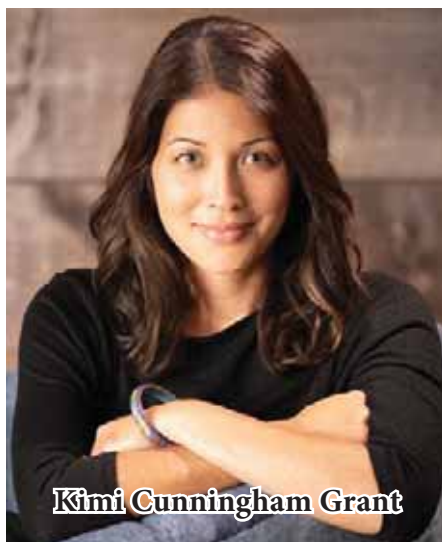
About the book: Novel/Mystery; Cooper/Finch; Appalachian Mountains; Contemp.

A man named Cooper and his daughter called Finch have been living for eight years in an isolated cabin owned by Cooper's friend Jake, with an equally mysterious neighbor named Scotland. Normally, Jake delivers an annual supply of food and goods. This year, he doesn't show up forcing Cooper, with Finch in tow, out into the world. Finch is also getting more curious about the world outside their woods and wandering further away from the cabin, seeing things that put them at risk. Cooper is faced with wondering protect Finch and their home, especially after Finch witnesses the murder of a young woman.

This is a very interesting novel; one of those about which one may not be certain at the start but it keeps one reading. Time-switching can be very annoying, but it worked here. Finch (aka Grace Elizabeth) may seem too old for eight, but considering she has been isolated with Cooper her whole life, it's not surprising. It's clear the author knows children well.

This is truly a book filled with life lessons. One appreciates Cooper's reflections on serving in a war, "It is no respecter of persons, war. Even if it doesn't damage your body, it damages your soul." Scotland, their neighbor, is an intriguing character with a lot of life wisdom.

The author very effectively introduces Marnie and delivers the information about her brother, Jake, the owner of the cabin, being dead. Even though we, the



readers, never met him, we feel his loss and that's the sign of an effective writer. There are some wonderful profound thoughts here, "I can't help but think: Consider how much has happened. How a life can veer and stretch and re-track and shatter." There is a well-done building of suspense with the appearance of the Sheriff.

The book does have its weaknesses. The romance felt to be something akin to the author thinking "I should throw in a love interest." rather than substantially adding to the plot. The ending felt rushed and too easy. The mystery of a murder is almost a side story, albeit important to the plot.

THESE SILENT WOODS main attraction comes from providing a lesson in grace. It's not a perfect book, but one that pulls you in and entices you to read it straight through.

SHUTTER

by Ramona Emerson
Soho Crime, Aug 2, 2022, 313pp
1st in series
Rating: C+

First Sentence: *Souls don't scatter like the rest of the body.*

About the book: PolProc; New Mexico; Contemporary

Rita Todachene is a forensic photographer whose precise crime scene photographs have helped solve cases. She

also sees and hears the ghosts of those who have died. While photographing a supposed suicide, the ghost of the victim latches on to Rita and won't let go. Insisting she was murdered, the ghost demands Rita expose the killer who are members of a dangerous cartel.

The opening chapter is certainly not easy to read as the description of an accident scene are detailed and graphic. However, it is an extremely effective opening and introduction to a protagonist who is unusual and intriguing. Rita can see, and hear, the dead.

It is a very nice change from many police procedurals to have Rita's superior be highly competent and supportive. There is also a wonderful description of Albuquerque in winter.

The book seemed a mash-up of Maurizio de Giovanni, whose books I love, and "The Saints of the Lost and Found" by T.M. (Toni McGee) Causey, particularly the scene in the hospital. The greatest irritant was the constant alternating of time, and that Rita and her grandmother were constantly breaking into tears. Although grim, by far the best part of the book for me was the description of Rita taking the forensic photographs. The details of that science is something we've not previously seen, to my knowledge.

SHUTTER is a decent-enough book. Emerson's characters are interesting, but I've rarely found two characters, Rita and her grandmother, who cry more often. The jumping back and forth of time periods became distracting making the plot hard to follow. Unfortunately, the ending came way too quickly and was predictable.

BEFORE I SLEEP

by Cynthia Harrod-Eagles
Severn House, Feb 7, 2023, 256 pp.
Bill Slider #24
Rating: B+

First Sentence: *Jenrich stuck her head - all cheekbones and burning blue eyes - round the door.*

About the book: Police Procedural; London, England; Contemporary

Felicity Holland left her home to attend a pottery class and never returned. With a lovely home, and Henry Holland, a successful author, for a husband, there didn't seem to be any reason for her to leave, nor has there been any ransom demand. Still her husband is certain she has been kidnapped. In spite of no evidence, Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) Bill Slider and his team are assigned to find out what has happened.

Cynthia Harrod-Eagles is sadly underread, although she is a clever, and noteworthy author. By that I mean, in addition to her plots, one wants to note down so much of what she has written just from the sheer cleverness of her use of language. From the very beginning, one is both captured, and amused, by the chapter headings. They prepare one both for CHE's humor and literary acumen. But don't be fooled, these are serious police procedurals. Even so, her metaphors are masterful... "Borough Commander 'Call Me Mike' Carpenter, Slider's boss, Porson's boss, everybody's boss, who had all the warmth, charm, and empathy of Vladimir Putin with a toothache."

It is refreshing that Slider's boss, Porson, supports his team and that they work well together. At the same time, Porson is known for his malaprops and mangling of language. This adds a

touch of lightness to the story. There is also wonderful repartee between Slider and his Atherton, his second, and it's refreshing that the whole team works well together. One also appreciates that Slider has a stable home life, and that CHE has created very realistic characters.

BEFORE I SLEEP is a very enjoyable read mainly because of CHE's talent with language and how cleverly she plots her stories. Even if one does start to suspect the killer part of the way through, she carries it off beautifully and you want to know how she gets to the end... "There's no end to this, is there? *There never is. Evil casts a long shadow.*" Slider thought." Her principal characters are a pleasure to read. It's nice that she develops them throughout the series and we see them grow and change. This was a delightful read.

CODE OF THE HILLS

by Chris Offutt

Grove Press; June 2023, 288 pp.

Mick Harden #3

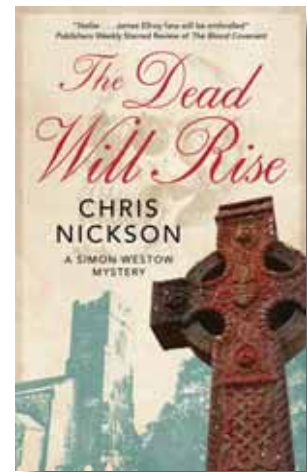
Rating: C+

First Sentence: *Janice drove slowly to avoid jostling the plastic container of food on the floor behind her seat.*

About the book: Police Procedural; Harden, Kentucky; Contemporary

Mick Harden, newly retired from the military, is back in Rocksalt, Kentucky. While his sister, the town's sheriff, is recovering from a gunshot wound, Mick, a former CID investigator, is deputized in order to solve the case on which she was working, and to find out who shot his sister.

CODE OF THE HILLS is the third in the series. While the first book was wonderful and unique, and the second book was very good, sadly, this book falls off. The plot meanders and just doesn't have the same capacity to make one want to read it straight through. One may find themselves somewhat ambiguous about the final resolution. The book was good but may not make one anxious to run out and buy the next book.



THE DEAD WILL RISE

by Chris Nickson

Poisoned Pen Press, Mar 2022, 240 pgs.

Simon Westow #5

Rating: A

First Sentence: *It was a balmy evening for early spring; after ten and still a faint, lingering hint of warmth in the air.*

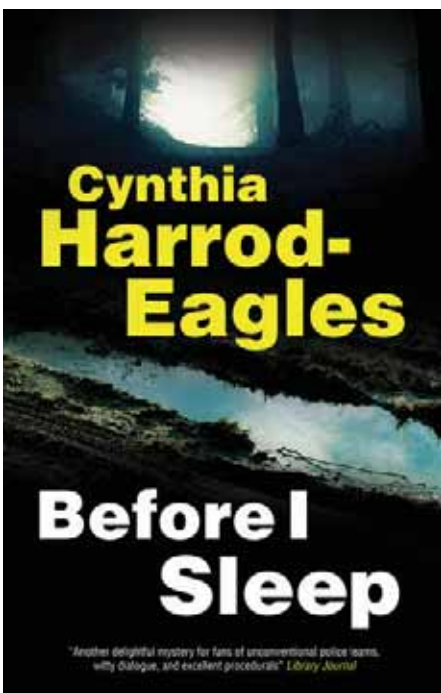
About the book: History Mystery/Private Enquiry; Leeds, England; 1824

Joseph Clark is a wealthy engineer. After discovering the buried body of his employer's beloved daughter, Catherine Jordan, has been stolen, he hires thief-taker Simon Westow and his team to find the men responsible. Simon discovers there is a gang of body snatchers who have stolen several corpses. It is up to him and his assistant Jane to find the Resurrection men who are stealing the bodies.

Set in 1824, Nickson brings his characters to life, making you know and care about them, particularly Jane whose character is developed more with each book. Her landlady, Mrs. Shields, may not help solve crimes, but she adds so much to the story.

For those of us who love historical mysteries, one can't go wrong with Nickson. His research and detail are first-rate. One should also read the book's Afterward.

THE DEAD WILL RISE is such a well-done book in an excellent series. Nickson truly takes one to industrial Leeds, not 'prettifying up' the period or the city.



Down Under Crime



Due to the recent popularity of Australian/New Zealand crime fiction, *DP* is expanding the irregular column reporting on same and adding another expert, Craig Sisterson, to what Jeff Pople has been doing for the last several years. Many of these titles are available in the U.S. as American publishers are picking up Australian/New Zealand writers right and left.

Jeff Pople Reviews



LOWBRIDGE
by Lucy Campbell
Ultimo, \$A34.99
Rating: B

Lucy Campbell's **LOWBRIDGE** continues the recent trend of Australian crime fiction set in semi-rural areas along the eastern seaboard.

The fictional, small country town of Lowbridge is located around halfway between Sydney and Canberra, and serves as the focus of Lucy Campbell's eponymous, debut novel. The story revolves around the disappearance in 1987 of a seventeen-year-old girl from the local shopping centre. The girl is never found, and her disappearance becomes the subject of local speculation and rumour. Thirty years later a newcomer

to Lowbridge, Katherine Ashworth, is trying to recover from her own personal drama and becomes obsessed with the events surrounding the disappearance. Helped by the local historical society she digs into disappearance and that of another girl who vanished at the same time, but was never missed because of her status in the community.

Shifting smoothly between 1987 and 2018, **LOWBRIDGE** is an engaging, slow-burn crime novel, that does a good job of recreating the divisions and tensions in semi-rural Australia in the 1980s and now. The sections set in 1987 are the highlight of the book, and Lucy is very good at recreating the time period and the attitudes and behaviours of the teenagers caught up in the events leading up to the disappearance. The mystery is slow to develop, but once underway it is cleverly played out and the ending is unexpected.

Katherine is not an immediately likable character, and some patience is required with her self-absorption in the opening sections, but she develops nicely as the book progresses. The resolution of the mystery and the attribution of guilt is a bit too easy, but there is some credibility around why it happened. In all, a well written and engaging debut.

EXPECTANT
by Vanda Symon
Orenda, £9.99
Rating: A

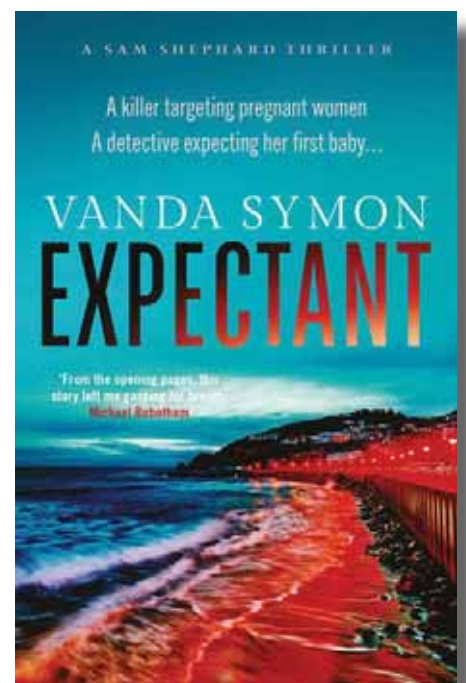
It has been a long wait for the latest Sam Shepard book. We last saw the New Zealand detective back in 2011, but now the very pregnant Sam is back and in very good form.

The murder of a heavily pregnant woman shocks the normally quiet town of Dunedin, especially as the gruesome

details are released. For Sam the crime feels uncomfortably close to home, but because of her condition she is bitterly confined to a desk job. Desperately Sam hunts past records trying to find the missing link between this brutal crime and a string of cases involving mothers and children in the past. As the pieces start to come together, and the realisation dawns that the killer's actions are escalating, Sam finds herself at the centre of the investigation and in trouble.

From the strong, emotional opening section through to the tense and relatively surprising conclusion, **EXPECTANT** is a powerful and gripping crime story. The characterisations are first rate and Sam is a very good lead character, with a good mix of flaws and steely determination. The other characters are also well developed and the interactions between the police officers drip with credibility.

As usual, there is a vivid sense of place to the story and Vanda also nicely



captures the tempo and feel of the city and the New Zealand sense of humour.

A very enjoyable novel that deserves wide readership.

ORPHAN ROAD

by Andrew Nette

Down & Out Books, \$A29.15

Rating: A

I have a real soft spot for gritty heist novels and **ORPHAN ROAD** by Australian pulp expert Andrew Nette is a terrific read that will appeal to fans of Garry Disher's Wyatt series.

ORPHAN ROAD is a follow-up to Nette's **GUNSHINE STATE** from a few years back, and once more features professional thief Gary Chance. It opens with Chance's attempted takedown of a crooked cult, which is scamming money off its gullible members, going astray and forcing him to go on the run. Desperately short of money, Chance heads to Melbourne and a job offer from a former employer, the notorious Vera Leigh. Once the associate of crooks, Vera now runs a declining S&M club in a suddenly trendy area of Melbourne. A shadowy real estate developer is trying to squeeze her out, but Vera has a rescue plan involving a stash of uncut South African diamonds that went missing during Melbourne's Great Bookie Robbery in 1976. Everyone associated with the robbery is now dead, but Vera thinks she has a lead on where the diamonds might have ended up, and she wants Chance's help to retrieve them. Problem is, they are not the only ones looking.

This is a tough, taut crime novel with plenty of moral ambiguity and an enjoyable cast of crooks and lowlifes. The pacing is brisk, and the action moves smoothly from the outskirts of Byron Bay to Melbourne to America and back to Melbourne for a bloody showdown. Nette maintains high interest throughout, and the conclusion is gripping and poignant.

Nette tells his unsentimental story in an appealing stripped down style, which suits the unadorned plot and helps to keep it all moving along nicely. Mixed into the plot are some sharp eyed descriptions of the fringes of society and

a memorable cast of characters, including an ageing Mafia type and a pair of unpleasant local Nazis. There is also plenty of interesting detail around the Great Bookie Robbery.

The end result is a good piece of Aussie noir that is enjoyably different from most other crime fiction being written in Australia at the moment.

THE CARETAKER

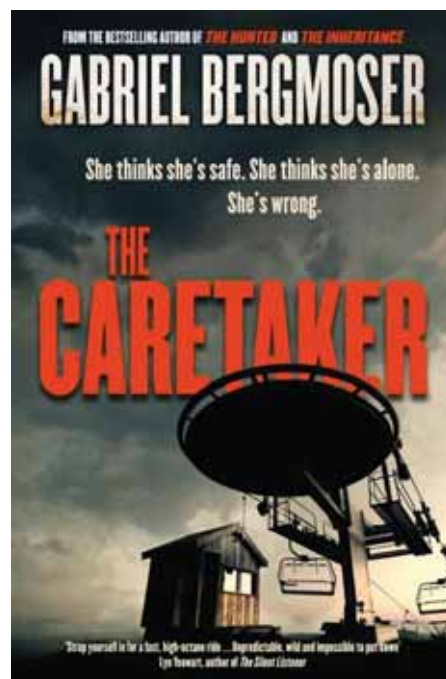
by Gabriel Bergmoser

Harper Collins, \$A32.99 – August 2023

Rating: A

Gabriel Bergmoser's first novel, **THE HUNTED** was a wild ride of a read that kept you keenly turning the pages all the way to the end. He followed it up with the even better **THE INHERITANCE**, and now with **THE CARETAKER** we have another totally gripping thriller.

Charlotte is hiding out with a new identity in a small ski resort in the Australian alpine region. On the run from the police, and some very dangerous criminal associates of her former husband, Charlotte has taken a job as an off-season caretaker for a small clutch of deserted lodges. The lodges are pleasingly empty, but Charlotte still jumps every time the floor creaks or the wind blows through the buildings. Charlotte thinks that she is safe and alone, but suddenly she is not.



THE CARETAKER is a more measured thriller than Bergmoser's earlier novels, but it is still a very exciting read. The opening scenes nicely set the sense of mystery and uneasiness, and just when you are beginning to wonder when the action is going to start, the first twist sets the adrenaline pumping. The pace is quick throughout and Bergmoser skilfully shifts the action between the present and the events in the past that have led to Charlotte's current situation. The suspense really lifts over the final quarter, and there is the usual visceral action that we expect from a Bergmoser book, as well as a neat ending.

The writing is probably more polished this time, and mixed in with the action there are some spot-on reflections on life and a convincing portrayal of how easy it is to become caught up in a life of crime. There are also enjoyable flashes of dark humour, especially around writing and literary pretensions.

THE CARETAKER is a top notch thriller and one of my favourite crime novels of 2023.

Craig Sinsterson Reviews



DOUBLE JEOPARDY

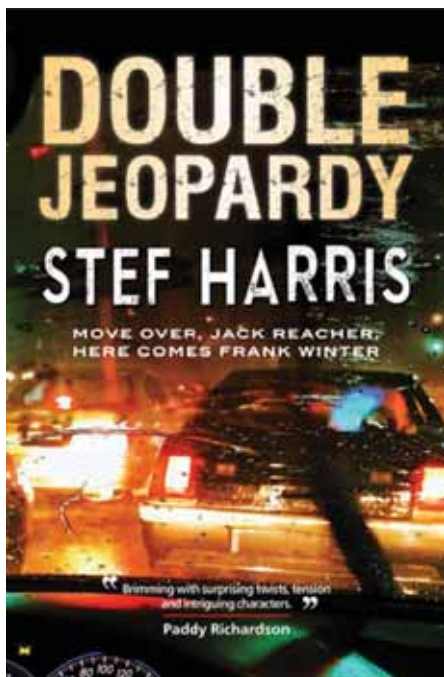
by Stef Harris

Quentin Wilson Publishing,

\$37.00 NZD, May

Rating: B

It had been a long time between drinks, crime novel wise, for New Zealand policeman and award-winning indie filmmaker Stef Harris. Twenty



years after he published his second novel, Harris returns to the page for a third outing with **DOUBLE JEOPARDY**, a muscular, 'old school' crime thriller inspired by his time on set in Boston many years ago with Mel Gibson and Kiwi director Martin Campbell, during the shooting of the film *Edge of Darkness*. While Harris has spent thirty years policing the streets of New Zealand cities and small towns, in **DOUBLE JEOPARDY** he soaks into the gun-heavier culture of American law enforcement. Frank Winter is a retired county sheriff and former Boston detective whose family was shattered many years ago. Now he's working as a late-night janitor while regularly visiting his ex-wife Mary as she slips deeper and deeper into dementia in her care home.

When Bruno Krupke is released on parole after twenty years, will Frank deliver on his well-televised drunken promise from the courthouse steps to shoot the man acquitted of killing Frank's daughter Evelyn (while convicted of other killings), if he's ever released? As more and more has been taken from Frank in the years since, he's a shell of his former self, but has little left to lose. Timid detective Nunzio Arabito, teased by his colleagues for his spreadsheet-first and technology-reliant style of investigations, is tasked with ensuring

the dangerous Krupke – who couldn't be retried for Evelyn's murder even if Frank found new evidence – integrates back into society, and that Frank doesn't kill him. Krupke meanwhile swears he's just looking to get on with his life and run his fast-growing business legally selling equipment to far-right militias. All very constitutional, if worrisome.

Overall, Harris delivers an action-packed tale laced with humour, several fascinating characters, and some interesting storyline swerves along the way to an explosive conclusion. It's the kind of novel that's easy to envisage on-screen, the sort of thing Clint Eastwood or Gene Hackman may have starred in fifteen years ago as the cantankerous yet engaging lead, Frank Winter. Well worth a read.

BLOOD MATTERS

by Renée

Joffe Books, \$11.99, June

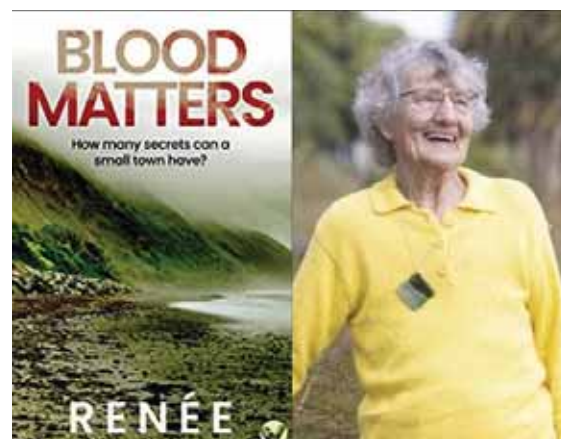
Rating: B

Inheriting a secondhand bookshop may seem like bliss to some, but for Puti Derrell it's a delight beset with many problems in **BLOOD MATTERS**, the latest engaging murder mystery from legendary New Zealand playwright, indigenous author, and activist Renée. A groundbreaking figure who was one of the keynote speakers at the first-ever International Women Playwrights Conference in New York in 1988, the mononymous Renée continues at 94 years of age to create compelling stories.

In **BLOOD MATTERS**, she wonderfully blends 'Golden Age' touches with modern sensibilities.

A classic setup from the days of Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh was the unlikable victim slain in the early pages; a person whose personality and behaviour offered plenty of believable reasons for various people – suspects and red herrings – to want to bump them off. Matthew Derrell certainly qualifies on that front, even before his granddaughter Puti – who also received guardianship of a young girl, Belle Rose, from her sister – finds him dead in his living room, a rope around his neck and a Judas mask covering his face. An awful man whose legacy gets worse as other family secrets and moral failures come to light. But here there's no Poirot, Marple, or Inspector Alleyn-like singular sleuth on the case. Instead, Renée's Porohiwi Mysteries spotlight a wider cast who live, love, and die in the small New Zealand town. In **BLOOD MATTERS**, it's Puti along with Bella Rose, who wants to grow up to be a private eye, and frenemy policewoman 'JoJo' Jones who are searching for answers.

When Puti is followed, threatened, and then another death hits close to home, it's clear the danger didn't end with Matthew Derrell's death. Can Puti and her pals unmask the killers? Renée spins a wonderful yarn that's full of warmth and wit among the dark deeds. She effortlessly soaks readers into Porohiwi, offers a fascinating cast of characters, and showcases her love for the mystery genre. Unsurprisingly given Renée's oeuvre, big issues such as misogyny, child abuse, and racism are canvassed, and overall there's a great balance between dark and light. Very enjoyable, more please.



DP Calendar



August 30 - September 3, 2023

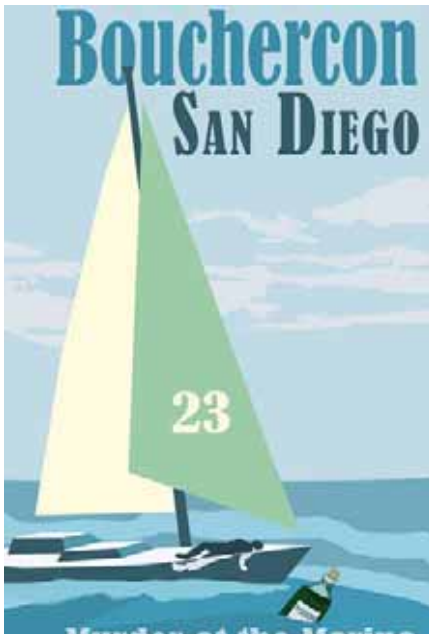
Bouchercon

Murder at the Marina

San Diego, California

Guests of Honor: David Baldacci, Ann Cleeves, Jacqueline Winspear, Naomi Hirahara, C. J. Box, Kate Carlisle, Dru Ann Love

Website: <https://bouchercon2023.com/>



September 15-17, 2023

Bloody Scotland

Stirling, Scotland

Special Guests: TBA

Website: <https://bloodyscotland.com/>



September 28-30, 2023

Capital Crime

London, UK

Special Guests TBA

Website: <https://www.capitalcrime.org/>



April 11-14, 2024

Left Coast Crime 2024

Seattle Shakedown

Seattle, Washington

Guests of Honor: Megan Abbott, Robert Dugoni and Wanda M. Morris

Website: <https://leftcoastcrime.org/2024/>



April 26-28, 2024

Malice Domestic 36

Bethesda, Maryland

Guests of Honor: Sujata Massey, Elaine Viets, Lori Rader-Day, Krisopher Zgorzki and Lucy Worsley

Website: <https://www.malicedomestic.org/>

May 9-12, 2024

Crimefest

Bristol, England

Guests of Honor: Mark Billingham, Elly Griffiths, Peter Guttridge

Website: <https://www.crimefest.com/>



May 28-June 1, 2024

Thrillerfest XIX

New York City

Guests of Honor: TBA

Website: <https://www.crimefest.com/>



August 28 - September 1, 2024

Bouchercon

Murder and Mayhem in Music City

Nashville, Tennessee

Guests of Honor: Harlan Coben, Heather Graham, Anthony Horowitz, Mick Herron, V. M. Burns, Brad Thor, Kelli Stanley, Rachel Howzell Hall, J. T. Ellison

Website: <https://www.bouchercon2024.com/>

What's New In the U.K.



ASSASSIN EIGHTEEN, John Brownlow (Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00, August). Agent Seventeen, the most infamous hitman in the world, has quit. But whoever wants to become Assassin Eighteen must track him down and kill him first. So when a bullet hits the glass inches from his face, he knows who fired it - doesn't he? But the sniper isn't the hardened killer he was expecting. It's Mireille - a mysterious, silent child, abandoned in the woods with instructions to pull the trigger. Reuniting with his spiky lover, Kat, Seventeen must protect Mireille, and discover who sent her to kill him, and why.

PREY FOR THE SHADOW, Javier Cercas (macLehose Press, £22.00, July). The mayor of Barcelona is being blackmailed. A sex tape from her student days - one she never knew existed. The price: 300,000 euros and her immediate resignation. A political chameleon who swept to power on a populist wave, she has her enemies. Nor can she trust those closest to her. Both her ex-husband and her deputy would profit from her fall. Melchor Marín, living a quiet life in Ter-

ra Alta, is tempted back to Barcelona to work the case. But what seemed a simple matter has its roots in far more serious and disturbing crimes. With the mayor on the verge of capitulation, a shock revelation changes everything - not least the course of Melchor's life. At long last, his heart's dark desire is in his grasp.

THE FINE ART OF UNCANNY PREDICTION, Robert Goddard (Bantam Press, £20.00). Umiko Wada never set out to be a private detective, let alone become the one-woman operation behind the Kodaka Detective Agency. But so it has turned out, thanks to the death of her former boss, Kazuto Kodaka, in mysterious circumstances. Keen to avoid a similar fate, Wada chooses the cases she takes very carefully. A businessman who wants her to track down his estranged son offers what appears to be a straightforward assignment. Soon she finds herself pulled into a labyrinthine conspiracy with links to a twenty-seven-year-old investigation by her late employer and to the chaos and trauma of the dying days of the Second World War. As Wada uncovers a dizzying web of connections between then and now, it becomes clear that someone has gone to extraordinary lengths to keep the past buried. Soon those she loves most will be sucked into the orbit of one of the most powerful men in Tokyo. And he will do whatever it takes to hold on to his power...

DEATH OF A LESSER GOD, Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99, August). Bombay, 1950. James Whitby, sentenced to death for the murder of prominent lawyer and former Quit India activist Fareed Mazumdar, is less than two weeks from a date with the

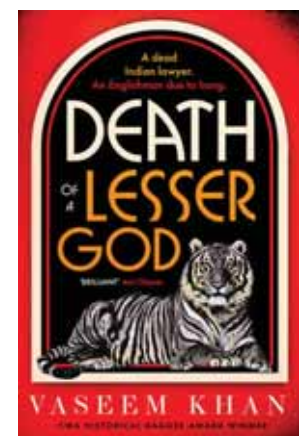
gallows. In a last-ditch attempt to save his son, Whitby's father forces a new investigation into the killing.

The investigation leads Inspector Persis Wadia of the Bombay Police to the old colonial capital of Calcutta, where, with the help of Scotland Yard criminalist Archie Blackfinch, she uncovers a possible link to a second case, the brutal murder of an African-American G.I. during the Calcutta Killings of 1946. PrAre the cases connected? And if Whitby didn't murder Mazumdar, then who did?

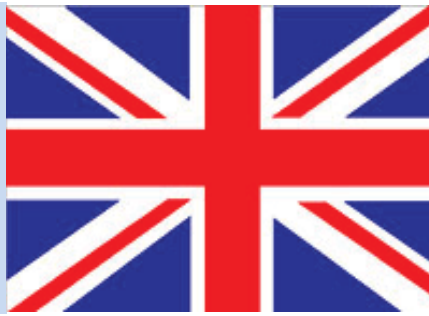
THE CONSPIRATORS, G. W. Shaw. a.k.a. William Shaw (Riverrun, £18.99, July). Jacob Meaney makes so little money as a translator that his girlfriend has given up on him. Then Eloise, an Australian digital marketer, appears out of the blue, offering him unheard of sums for a couple of weeks' work.

A private plane and helicopter take him to a showcase villa in Carinthia and all the luxury he could ever want. Here he meets the owner of the house Bondarenko. Unwillingly Jacob has become part of an organised crime conspiracy, held captive there by armed guards.

His task is to interpret between Hindi, Russian and English during Zoom calls with Nazim, an Indian criminal whose gang have taken over the manufacture and distribution network of the wonder fertility drug that Bondarenko has been selling on the internet. It becomes clear to Jacob that his employer is in far deeper and more dangerously than he realises. The gang's plan is to take over the entire operation by any means.



U.K. Reviews



Jeff Popple Reviews

MR CAMPION'S MEMORY

by Mike Ripley

Severn House, £21.99, September

Rating: A-

Mike Ripley's latest addition, the eleventh, to the continuation of Margery Allingham's Albert Campion novels, **MR CAMPION'S MEMORY**, is probably the strongest entry in the series so far.

Moving back and forth between 1972 and 1932, it is a well crafted mystery that intrigues and keeps the reader guessing until the final exciting chase through the English countryside.

The story opens with Albert Campion's nephew Christopher, an aspiring public relations guru, seeking his help with a client. Construction magnate Sir Lachlan McIntyre enjoyed a meteoric rise after the Second World War and is in line for a life peerage, but his reputation is in jeopardy when he becomes the suspect in a murder inquiry. Journalist David Duffy was found shot dead in his car close to McIntyre's rural retreat shortly after a heated exchange with the magnate. Duffy was more interested in McIntyre's youthful years in the 1930s than his rags-to-riches claim to success, but the businessman saw his interest as being an invasion of privacy.

Campion knows nothing of McIntyre or Duffy, but the police are curious as to why his name appears, along with others, under the heading 1932. Campion is baffled by the notation and the names, but as he digs into his own past a pattern appears, and old, dangerous memoirs resurface.

This is an engaging crime story. There is a good sense of mystery, and the unfolding of past and present crimes is well handled. As usual, the characters sparkle, and Campion is in good form with plenty of wry comments and the occasional laugh out loud observation. There is also an amazing amount of interesting snippets of information woven into the story, from the activities of British fascists in the 1930s to the forgery of silverware to the real reason behind the naming of the British villages of Black Notley and White Notley.

An absolute treat.

JUST BETWEEN US

by Adele Parks

HQ, £14.99

Rating: B

JUST BETWEEN US by Adele Parks is probably one for those who enjoy domestic thrillers with lots of family tension.

As the COVID pandemic sweeps Britain, Kylie Gillingham's disappearance grips the nation. Outed as a bigamist, Kylie is now missing, presumed dead, and both her husbands are suspected of potentially murdering her. DCI Clements is trying to keep an open mind, but as time slips by she begins to suspect the worse. Hampered by the pandemic and the quarantine rules, she is determined to find out what really happened to Kylie, but the trail is quickly going cold. Meanwhile, Stacie Jones lives a quiet life in a small village, shielded by her father from any upsetting news as she recovers from illness during the strictures of the pandemic. Her memory is weakened by her recent brain operation, but gradually she begins to remember things and finds

herself caught up in the search for Kylie.

JUST BETWEEN US is a sequel to Adele's popular bestseller **BOTH OF YOU**, but can be read as a standalone novel. Newcomers to the series will appreciate the book's early twists, while fans of the earlier novel will enjoy being re-united with the various versions of Kylie, her two husbands and the tenacious Clements. There are not a lot of surprises in the book, but it is interesting watching the characters evolve and change. After a slowish start, the book builds to a tense conclusion in the English Channel.

Probably more of a domestic thriller and family drama, than a crime novel, **JUST BETWEEN US** will appeal to fans of Lisa Jewell and B. A. Paris.

THE LAST DANCE

by Mark Billingham

Sphere, £22.00

Rating: A-

After two decades of writing about London detective Tom Thorne, Mark Billingham has decided to temporarily put aside his popular detective and head in a new direction with his latest book, **THE LAST DANCE**.

The book features a quirky new sleuth in the form of Blackpool police detective Declan Miller. A ballroom dancer and owner of two rats, Miller is returning to work after extended personal leave following the death of his wife. On his first day back, Miller finds himself caught up in the investigation of a double murder at the rundown Sands Hotel. At first glance the two murdered men, a local gangland figure and an IT consultant, seem to be completely unconnected, and the police suspect that one of them was a case of mistaken identity. But as Miller and his new partner dig into the killing, they come to realise that things are not that simple.

As usual with a Billingham novel, there are multiple strands to the plot, including Miller's tragic backstory. The core mystery at the centre of the story unfolds in an interesting way and the resolution is clever and surprising. The other elements are also pleasingly developed, and Billingham leaves some

unresolved mysteries to tease the reader into reading the next book in the series.

Overall, the pacing of the book is good, and the secondary characters are textured and well developed, especially a young homeless girl, Finn, who plays an important part. Miller is a very different character from the world weary Thorne, and his constant joking takes a while to get used to. It is clear, however, that underneath the bad jokes there is a very damaged figure and a good detective.

In all, **THE LAST DANCE** is a good crime story with a pleasing plot and some real substance. Miller is not likely to appeal to all of all Billingham's regular readers, but I think that he is a character that will grow and become more engaging as the series develops. Less jokes will probably help, and the further development of Finn and Miller's new partner, Sara Xiu, will assist in balancing the sometimes forced quirkiness of Miller. A solid start to the series.

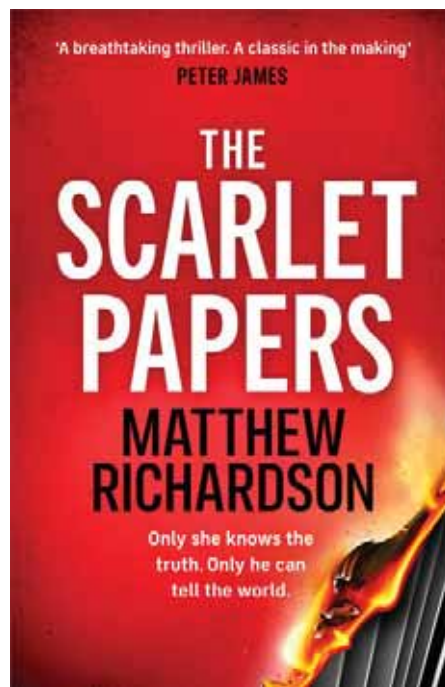
THE SCARLET PAPERS

by Matthew Richardson
Michael Joseph, £14.99
Rating: A

Matthew Richardson's **THE SCARLET PAPERS** ranks alongside John Lawton's **MOSCOW EXILE** as one of the best spy novels I have read so far this year.

Ranging over seventy years, **THE SCARLET PAPERS** is an epic espionage thriller that holds your attention from beginning to end. At the core of the novel are the eponymous Scarlet Papers, the recollections of renown British spymaster, and possible Russian double agent, Scarlet King, who is now in her nineties. The papers touch on key points in her career from her recruitment and capture of a brilliant German scientist at the end of World War II, to an assignment in Moscow in 1964, to her role in the analysis of the Mitrokhin Files, and other moments of deception and betrayal. Meanwhile in the present day, British academic Max Archer finds himself in possession of the inflammatory papers and on the run from British Intelligence.

This is a very clever thriller, that impresses with the breadth of its story



and the intricacy of its plot. Close reading is rewarded, as the story twists and turns its way through a maze of double dealing and shifting alliances that all seem to reach back to Scarlet's initial recruitment for British Intelligence of the German scientist Otto Spengler in 1946. The plot is captivating, and the historical detail is convincing and neatly woven into the story.

At over 570 pages, it is on the long side, possibly too long, but I was never bored by the story or tempted to skip over pages. The writing is smooth, and the frequent twists and surprises continue all the way to the final pages. The modern story provides some good chicanery by British Intelligence, and moments of suspense and action, but it is the historical elements, and references to real life events, that really gripped my attention. An outstanding achievement!

George Easter Reviews

THE MOTHER

by T. M. Logan
Zaffre, £16.99, March
Rating: A

A parent's worst fear is the death of a child. A close second is serious harm or illness that befalls a child. That could include kidnapping. I would say the third

worst fear would be separation from the child. And that is what has happened to Heather. She has been accused and convicted of the murder of her MP husband and sentenced to 18 years in prison. Her two young boys are in the care of their paternal grandparents and have no contact with their mother.

After ten years in prison, Heather is released on parole. She is under strict orders to have no contact with her children. Violation of any of the rules of probation will land her back in prison to serve out the remainder of her sentence.

Her primary mission in life is to find out who her husband's killer is and clear her name so that she can get her children back.

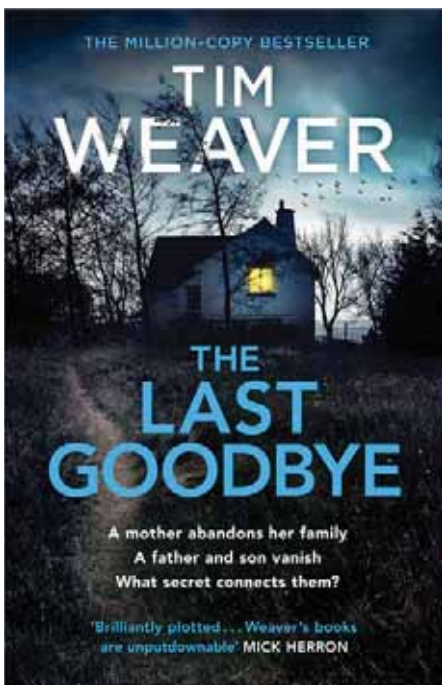
I was not familiar with the author whose books appear to be only published in the U.K. But the plot of this book intrigued me so I got a copy. On the front cover of **THE MOTHER**, the author is billed as "Master of the up-all-night thriller." While the 403-page book did not keep me up all night, it did keep me glued to its pages until I finished it in two days of reading. The author is skilled at getting the reader on board and vicariously experiencing this emotional roller coaster of a story. This is a real doozy of a read and should appeal to all readers of crime fiction.

THE LAST GOODBYE

by Tim Weaver
Michael Joseph, £14.99, June
David Raker Missing Persons #12
Rating: A

The initial plot seems quite straightforward. Rebekah Murphy was a 3-year-old when her mother Fiona walks out of their house and is never seen again. Now nearly forty years on, Rebekah receives letters of condolence on the deaths of her father and two brothers. They say that they are from Fiona. So she hires David Raker, the empathetic investigator who has a reputation from finding lost people when others fail. He is not afraid to break the law to get the results he wants. Raker's subsequent investigation proves to be anything but straightforward.

Then the plot goes off on a lot of



tangents that in the end all prove to be relevant.

A major subplot involves Raker's efforts to help his friend Healy fake his death some years ago and stay off the radar. Unfortunately, as a result of what happens in the previous book in the series, **THE BLACKBIRD**, the police have arrested Healy and he is languishing in prison. He is being pressured by the police to spill the beans on Raker, whom some in the police hate because Raker has made them look bad and uncovered police corruption.

I read some of the early entries in the series and liked them, but not enough to search out subsequent Raker books when they were no longer available in the U.S. But last year I heard a lot of good things about **THE BLACKBIRD** and decided to give Weaver another try. I'm glad I did because I gave **THE BLACKBIRD** an A rating and it made my personal Best of 2022 list. **THE LAST GOODBYE** is equally as good and will appear on my 2023 list. It is worth searching out.

This excellent novel is full of surprises, especially early on in the book where it seems like a lot of the chapters end with a twist of some sort. Weaver is a fine example of an author who has finely honed his craft and made good use of his talents.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

RITUAL OF FIRE

by DV Bishop

Pan Macmillan, \$27.99, August

Rating: A-

After decades of crafting a diverse array of stories from Judge Dredd and 2000 AD comics to BBC radio plays to official Doctor Who and Warhammer novels, Scotland-based New Zealander DV Bishop announced himself on the historical mystery scene in 2021 with a sumptuous first novel, **CITY OF VENGEANCE**, starring Cesare Aldo, a fascinating investigator serving the feared Otto Di Guardia e Balia criminal court in Renaissance Florence. A thrilling page-turner that vividly evoked time and place, Bishop's crime debut soaked readers in the grandeur and grime of the sixteenth century city. A place and time where a modern tourist spot like Ponte Vecchio was then awash with blood and offal every evening, and many rulers terms were cut short thanks to the machinations of those closest to them.

That first novel demanded an ongoing series, and Bishop has delivered, with quality. Last year's sequel, **THE DARKEST SIN**, recently won the CWA Historical Dagger as well as being longlisted for the Ngaio Marsh Award for Best Novel in Bishop's homeland, adding to an array of several awards listings and wins for the Cesare Aldo series already. The latest instalment, **RITUAL OF FIRE**, has already been longlisted for the McIlvanney Prize in Scotland, and offers readers another rip-snorting story.

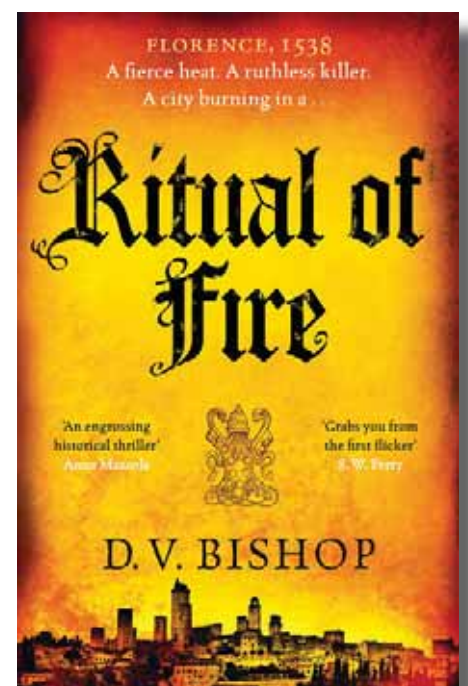
It's summer 1538, and the city of Florence is sweltering. Then a night patrol finds a rich merchant hanged and set ablaze in the city's main piazza, evoking memories of the execution of popular puritanical monk Girolamo Savonarola forty years earlier. Cesare Aldo is now hunting thieves in the Tuscan countryside, far outside the city walls, following a falling out with his former protégé Constable Carlo Strocchi. So it's up to Strocchi to investigate the ritualis-

tic killing. When another rich merchant is burned alive in public, the pressure rises from the city's leaders. Are Savonarola's followers making a new play for power, or long-marinated revenge? Or is something else going on? Aldo and Strocchi must set aside their differences to unmask dangerous killers as religious fervour and a scorching heatwave drives the city-state towards riots and self-destruction.

Bishop delivers another captivating, action-packed mystery that's full of flavour and texture. He finely balances history and mystery, offering readers plenty of insight into the era without ever overwhelming the intrigue and forward momentum. Aldo is a fascinating protagonist; a man of the law who is breaking the law (of the times). A man giving all of himself to a regime and superiors that could see him imprisoned or worse if his secret came to light. His sexuality is a Sword of Damocles.

In a strange way, I think there's a bit of Harry Bosch in Cesare Aldo - in that Aldo is an honourable man that is full of some contradictions, who loves his city and is determined to protect its people, even as he stands apart, a lone sentinel fully aware of all the flaws in the place he loves and protects.

A great read in a great series that will hopefully have many more instalments



to come.

ALL OF US ARE BROKEN

by Fiona Cummins
Macmillan, £16.99 July

Rating: A-

What do you get if you cross an Oscar-winning Meryl Streep movie with famous real-life criminals and rather terrific British crime fiction? In a way, you get showbiz journo turned Essex author Fiona Cummins' latest DC Saul Anguish crime thriller, *ALL OF US ARE BROKEN*. A dark, disturbing, and superb read that keeps the pages whirring while delivering a few emotional body blows along the way.

Ninety years ago Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker transfixed the media and public during the Depression with a cross-country crime spree that left behind a trail of robbed banks and dead policeman, before their lives were ended and their legend secured in hail of bullets from a law enforcement posse on a dusty Louisiana road in 1934. Now callous young British couple Missy and Fox are chasing similar excitement and infamy as they try to escape their mundane lives with little care for those who cross their path. A schoolteacher stands frozen as a child struggles for life in her classroom. An ex-policeman is found shot in his home. A grieving and overwhelmed widow on a restorative vacation to the Scottish Highlands is



Fiona Cummins

given a horrifying 'Sophie's Choice' after fate brings what's left of her family into the path of the killer couple.

Pick one of your children to die, or you all die.

ALL OF US ARE BROKEN is an emotional rollercoaster of a book from a terrific author who was recently short-listed for the prestigious Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year for her previous DC Saul Anguish novel, *Into the Dark*. This follow-up is even better. DC Anguish, who's grown from troubled teen in Cummins' earliest novels to troubled detective in her latest ones, is on the trail of the killer couple, but can he and forensic linguist Dr Clover March, aka 'Blue', save any of the Hardwicke family and other hostages in the lodge by the loch? Meanwhile Saul and Blue both have plenty going on outside of their working lives; dangerous secrets and desires that could upend them.

Fascinating characters, nerve-racking action, and gut-punch twists; Cummins delivers a superb read.

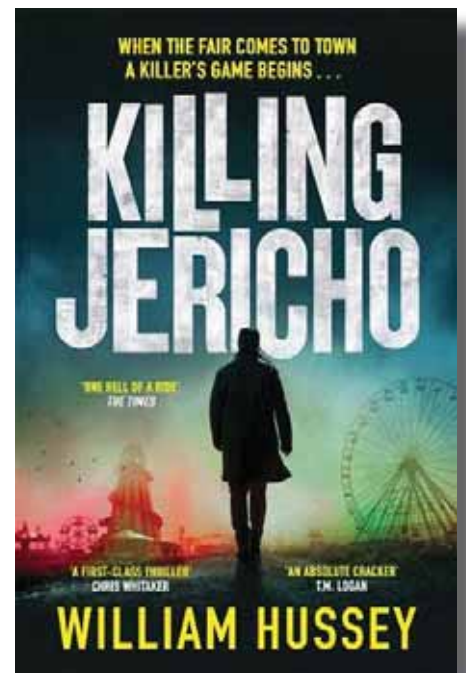
KILLING JERICO

by William Hussey
Zaffre, £14.99, April

Rating: A

Crime fiction is a big tent nowadays, stretching far and wide from early days of puzzling mysteries and intellectual detectives such as Dupin, Holmes, and Poirot, or unusual men - untarnished and unafraid - going down mean streets. Nowadays there's more and more room under the canvas for a diverse array of stories, voices, and perspectives. So it's fabulous to see British kids and YA author William Hussey conjuring a fascinating new sleuth who echoes some genre tropes - troubled ex-cop whose life has gone off the rails and needs a case to bring him back - while feeling undeniably fresh and, importantly, authentic and coming from a real place. Not 'try-hard' as we'd say *Down Under*, where it's clear someone is 'putting something on' that doesn't fit, for tick-box reasons.

In Hussey's first adult thriller, *KILLING JERICO*, like his creator Scott Jericho is a gay man who grew up in a



travelling fairground community. Unlike Hussey, Jericho is an ex-cop recently out of prison, penniless and disgraced after badly beating an arsonist suspected of killing kids. The fairground fun and colour can hide dark secrets, and while Jericho honed his uncanny observational skills and ability to read people through years on the circuit, he's now retreated into a haze of booze and pills to quieten his ghosts. Until a surprising encounter lures him to dig into a series of bizarre deaths linked to fairground folklore. And that hit quite close to home with his own family.

Hussey crafts a superb tale full of dark and light; a gritty thriller with a vivid and colourful cast, that takes readers behind the frivolity and fun of dodgems, Ferris Wheels, and candy floss into the hardscrabble slog and bigotry faced by Travellers. Scott Jericho is a fascinating protagonist - angry and talented, self-loathing yet likable - who screams out for an ongoing series. If he can survive the events of *KILLING JERICO*. Hussey's first adult thriller delivers strongly on multiple levels - vivid characters and setting alongside an intriguing, twisting storyline that throws up a few surprises.

THE LAST GOODBYE

by Tim Weaver

Michael Joseph, £14.99, June 2023

Rating: B+

While murder mysteries with their dead victim hook and cast of suspects have been a core tenet of detective fiction since its inception in the 19th century, authors such as Harlan Coben and British bestseller Tim Weaver have shown that missing persons cases can create just as much drama. Years ago Coben told me in an interview that he found disappearances more interesting because of the uncertainty and lack of closure; and the hope that lingers can fuel those left behind, or crush them.

Weaver has leaned into that in his popular, long-running series starring missing persons expert David Raker. This intriguing twelfth instalment, **THE LAST GOODBYE**, involves puzzling disappearances separated by nearly forty years. In the present, Tom Preacher and his nine-year-old son Leo enter a ghost house ride at the country's newest theme park, then vanish. Video footage shows them going onto the ride, but never coming out the other end. Meanwhile Raker is hired by Rebekah Murphy, a British woman now living in New York, to dig into the disappearance of Rebekah's mother back in 1985 – an old wound that has been reopened by recent letters. At the same time, the unwanted reappearance and remand of once-dead policeman Colm Healy may upturn Raker's own life.

Already under great risk due to his past actions, Raker's latest investigations prove more dangerous than even he could ever envisage, as his search grid unwittingly begins to entwine with perhaps his most vicious foe ever – relic of a monstrous regime, the poisonous point of a broken spear.

Weaver lives up to his name well in **THE LAST GOODBYE**, masterfully handling then bringing together a variety of fascinating threads that span time and geography. He lures the reader into an intriguing tale then ratchets up the tension as his long-time hero and others are thrust into dire jeopardy. Another very good instalment in a very good series, well worth a look for crime fiction fans.

And now Craig weighs in on the American publications of a Philip Marlowe pastiche by eminent Scottish crime writer Denise Mina.

THE SECOND MURDERER

by Denise Mina

Mulholland Books, \$18.99, August

Rating: A

Reanimating legendary detectives after their creator's death can sometimes seem like a modern trend, given the plethora of fresh mysteries popping up in recent years starring everyone from Golden Age sleuths like Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Inspector Alleyn, and Albert Campion through original Tartan Noir detective Jack Laidlaw, Boston private eye Spenser, Swedish hacker Lisbeth Salander, and Navajo tribal cops Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. But it's something estates, publishers and readers have benefited from for more than half a century. Kingsley Amis, under a pen name, continued the adventures of Ian Fleming's world-famous secret agent James Bond in 1968's **COLONEL SUN**. Others have continued 007's adventures since, including Jeffery Deaver and Anthony Horowitz.

Unsurprisingly, classic hardboiled hero Philip Marlowe has also been resurrected in book form in the years since Raymond Chandler's death in 1959 – even if it took three decades for it to begin. Since Robert B. Parker's authorised completion of **POODLE SPRINGS**, Benjamin Black (John Banville), Lawrence Osborne, and Joe Ide have slipped on Marlowe's coat and hat in new novels and taken readers back into the mean streets of mid-20th century Los Angeles. Another 25 authors wrote Marlowe short stories for a centennial anthology. Now in **THE SECOND MURDERER**, Denise Mina brings a fresh and fantastic perspective to a genre classic. It's 1940s Los Angeles, and Marlowe is pickling his conscience over one case when he's summoned to the Montgomery Estate high in Beverly Hills.

Dying mogul Chadwick Montgom-

ery wants Marlowe to try to find his missing 22-year-old daughter Chrissie, who's set to inherit a vast fortune. To Marlowe it's apparent the 'try' seems more important than 'find'. Something's off with Montgomery and his bottle blonde girlfriend. And while Marlowe's a solo sleuth, he's not alone on this hunt. Anne Riordan (from **FAREWELL, MY LOVELY**) has opened her own detective agency after Marlowe spurned her professional advances, and she's been hired her too. Dual investigations or duelling investigations; an extra complication when searching for someone who may not want to be found. And that's before the dead body at the Brody Hotel.

Mina, the Crown Princess of Scottish Crime, has already shown throughout her outstanding oeuvre that she's a crime writing chameleon. From her Garnethill series starring a psych patient turned sleuth through award-winning police procedurals and novelisations of real-life murders in the 1560s and 1950s, Mina's continually pushed her own boundaries. In **THE SECOND MURDERER**, she conjures a cracking tale for both long-time Chandler fans and those who may consider the originals outdated. Stylishly written, full of quips and keen-eyed description, some excellent plotting, Marlowe being Marlowe, and a more fully realized wider cast, sans some of the casual racism and sexism.

Skid Row, September heatwaves; dive bars, duplicity, and dead bodies. An excellent read.



Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Numbers Game

As my long-awaited retirement approaches, I am increasingly looking forward to spending more time with the leaning tower that is my pile of To-Be-Read books: books I actually want to read – indeed may have actually purchased – rather than the constant stream of crime novels I am expected to read. When Mr Gladstone said he had been ‘borne down by a torrent of gin and beer’ he had been referring to the 1870 Licensing Act, but I think I know how he felt. I am now too old and too cynical to make sensible judgements on the 300+ new crime novels I receive each year, let alone the thousands of eBooks and self-published novels which I never see.

So far this year, and the year is not yet half over, I am aware of 367 new titles being published in 2023 [in the U.K.] and, even more frightening, I have received a bound proof of a crime novel being published on 18th January 2024!

After 34 years as a reviewer of crime fiction, I believe I have covered almost three thousand new titles. From 1989 to 2008, I reviewed 972 new novels in print media including the *Sunday Telegraph*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Publishing News* and the *Birmingham Post*. From then on it becomes more difficult to estimate the number of titles I have covered in *Shots* and other online media, but thanks to an algorithm provided by the Black Ops division of Cambridge Analytica, my best guess is 1,860, which will make a total of 2,832 reviews by the time *Getting Away With Murder #200* is posted.

I hope I have always been fair and I have certainly tried to be kind, much preferring to recommend titles rather than rubbish them, following my mother’s advice that if you can’t say anything

good about one, say nowt. Nothing irritates me more than when once-great newspapers devote half a page to pouring scorn on the latest Dan Brown or Jeffrey Archer when there are so many good books around. I am proud to say that I never received a death threat (unlike one fellow reviewer) and only one letter of complaint, though I was once accosted by an author at a crime writing convention with the words ‘You haven’t reviewed my new book’ to which I replied ‘There’s no need to thank me.’

Along the way, I have met many talented writers through reviewing, and some of them became long-standing friends, among them Janet Neel, Ben Pastor and Minette Walters. I also had the privilege of comparing opinions with noted reviewers of crime fiction, including Julian Symons, Harry Keating, Marcel Berlins, Philip Oakes, Tim Binyon, Matthew Coady, Jessica Mann, Peter Guttridge, Bill Pardoe, Jake Kerridge and Maxim Jakubowski. (And ten of those eleven very kindly reviewed my own crime writing.)

When asked, as I once was by a new publicity officer for a leading publisher ‘what sort of crime novels do you like?’, I replied: ‘Good ones.’ More honestly, I think the answer should be that all reviewers are looking for ‘something new’.

Having said that, I must admit to getting more pleasure these days in recommending old favourites to a new generation of readers before titles and their authors are totally forgotten, and this I will continue to do through my regular ‘Bargain Hunt’ column in the magazine *CADS* and, if allowed, in *Shots*.

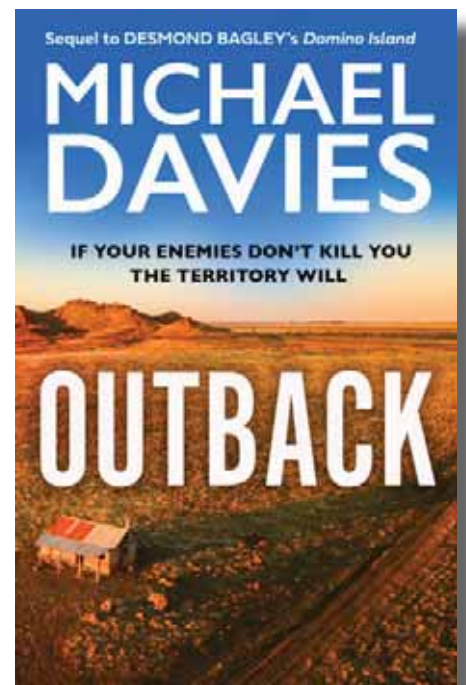
Reviewing almost 3,000 thrillers over years involved at least looking at something like 18,000 titles as there was never enough time or space to do them justice – and by no means did I see

all published crime fiction. To anyone thinking of chancing their arm at reviewing, I would advise they follow the old maxim:

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was to convince the world he did not exist. The greatest trick the reviewer can pull is to convince an author they have read to the end of their book.

Centenary Celebrations

What better way to celebrate the centenary of one of the most popular thriller writers of the 1960s and 70s, Desmond Bagley (1923-1983) than to publish a novel in homage to his style and technique? From Bagley’s dedicated publisher HarperCollins comes **OUTBACK** by long-time Bagley fan Michael Davies, who completed the draft manuscript left after the author’s death which became **DOMINO ISLAND** in 2019.



All the traditional Bagley elements are present and correct in *Outback*. The setting is exotic, wild and, of course, dangerous – the desert hinterland of South Australia; the unassuming Everyman hero – insurance assessor Bill Kemp; a dubious legacy possibly of great value – an abandoned opal mine – and gang of well-armed villains. Oh, and

Land Rovers, naturally.

The (sadly) late Christopher Fowler remembered Bagley as a writer who ‘hit on a winning combination of craftsmanship, authenticity and excitement’ and with **OUTBACK** Michael Davies makes a fair fist of hitting those standards.

The Wisdom of Dorothy

I think it was Dorothy L. Sayers, commenting on an author who had published two novels in the same year, who said that such productivity was likely to be the result of either the demands of the taxman or an over-active thyroid.

I was reminded of that when I came across the name Simon McCleave, described as ‘the million-selling crime-writer’ of whom I had, unforgivably, never heard. Intrigued, I Googled the author and, unless the internet is lying, his first crime novel appeared in 2020 and his *twenty-third* comes out this year.

I find such an achievement positively exhausting and am more than ever feeling my great age.

Rumours of Retirement Not Exaggerated

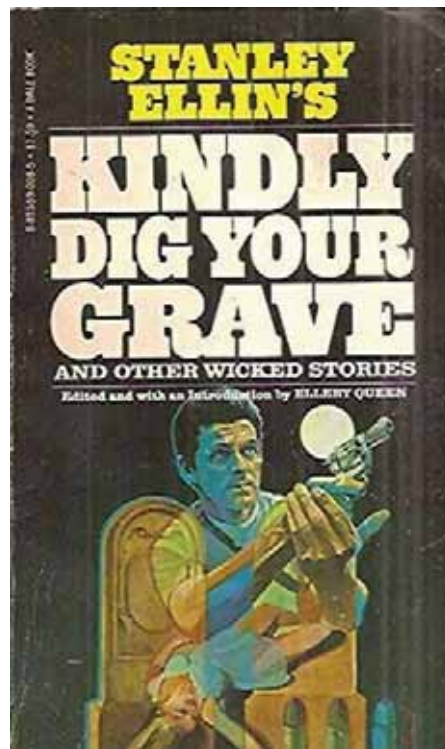
The announcement of my impending retirement in August produced a slew of responses from readers. They ranged from the disbelieving – ‘I don’t have to believe it if I don’t want to’ (Jake Kerridge); ‘You’re having a laugh!’ (Peter Buckman); ‘Tell me it isn’t so!’ (Antoni Deighton) – to the downright threatening: ‘You are absolutely not allowed to retire’ (Vaseem Khan); ‘Retire? You mustn’t and I say it with more force than many. I know where you live. Just saying’ (David Brierley).

Sadly not one single message was accompanied by a cheque, postal order or Bitcoin promissory note and I understand that the ‘Bribe the Ripster’ page has been taken down from the Go Fund Me site for legal reasons.

Lawton’s Law

At the recent CrimeFest on the ‘(Forgotten) Authors Remembered’ panel, John Lawton urged, nay, ordered, his audience to read the work of American short story maestro Stanley Ellin (1916-86).

Although the author of some noted crime novels, Ellin is best remembered for his award-winning short stories (more than thirty of them) and as I always do what John Lawton tells me, I began to seek them out, realising that it must be nearly fifty years since I read his most famous novel **HOUSE OF CARDS**. By pure chance, I lighted upon Ellin’s last published collection, **KINDLY DIG YOUR GRAVE**, of stories first published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* between 1963 and 1977.



I had not been aware of this anthology or had read any of the stories contained in it before now, so I count that as a Win-Win situation and one which should put me in John Lawton’s good books, though not literally.

Pulp Quest

I have a bespoke (book) dealer who supplies my craving for vintage pulp

paperbacks who has come up trumps once again with a brace of American hardboiled classics.



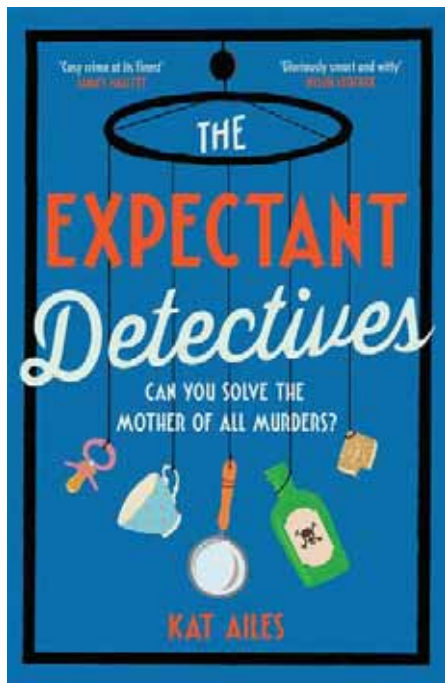
Although I already own the 2001 Robert Hale hardback, I was delighted to receive the 1969 Fawcett Gold Medal edition of Elmore Leonard’s **THE BIG BOUNCE**. What I had not known before this was that the novel was filmed twice. In the 1969 version the action was moved from Michigan to California and the film starred Ryan O’Neal and Van Heflin. It was not well-received, least of all by Elmore Leonard, who called it ‘the second worst movie ever made’ the very worst being the 2004 remake – the setting moved to Hawaii this time – starring Owen Wilson, Morgan Freeman and Vinnie Jones, no less.

The second half of my pulp double bill was also a Fawcett Gold Medal book, though this time published in the UK (hence the two shillings price mark) by Frederick Muller in 1958. Now recognised as one of the masters of American noir fiction David Goodis (1917-67) **PUBLISHED FIRE IN THE FLESH** towards the end of his writing career and it is, I believe, quite a rare book these days.

Pregnant Pause

Richard Osman has made a killing, literally, with the idea of a group of people sharing the same life environment, if I can call it that, solving murders, in his case, a gang of Over Active Pensioners in a retirement home. It is a concept which has been done with other ‘special interest’ groups before, including professional crime writers, but I have never

come across, until now, a plot where the murder is investigated by a National Childbirth Trust class of expectant mothers.



I believe the original title of **THE EXPECTANT DETECTIVES** [Zaffre], the debut crime novel of Kat Ailes, was in fact **THE NCT MURDERS** which reminded me of my own experience, many years ago, of attending a local NCT class as a not-so-innocent bystander. What I learned there about what those ladies were about to go through left me in no doubt that they would make formidable opponents for any murderer.

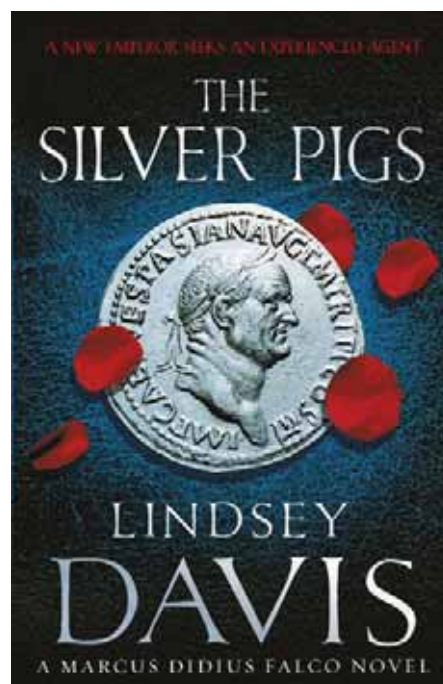
A Well-Deserved Triumph

I am delighted for my old chumette Lindsey Davis as her 1989 novel **THE SILVER PIGS** has been chosen as one of his favourite pieces of fiction about Ancient Rome by historian Tom Holland – my go-to guy when it comes to Roman history.

Writing in *The Times* (American readers please note there is no such thing as *The London Times* despite what Google says) this month, Holland lists his favourite fictional depictions of Roman life both high and low. Lindsey's

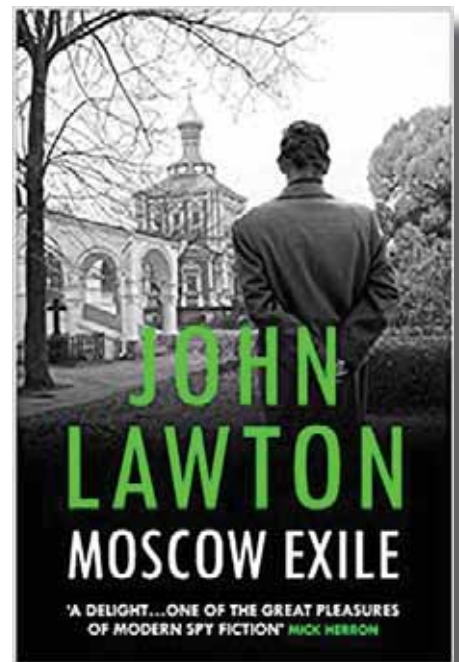
debut take on a private eye operating under the rule of Emperor Vespasian is picked alongside **THE SATYRICON** by Petronius, **I, CLAUDIUS** by Robert Graves and Rosemary Sutcliffe's **THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH**, so she is in very good company.

Holland declares that (her series hero) Falco, is 'a wonderfully drawn character, the plots are invariably thrilling, the humour is gentle and warm, the research is impeccable, and the portrait of the imperial capital in all its splendour and squalor is unforgettable.' The series is well worth a Triumph; the Romans would have given her one.



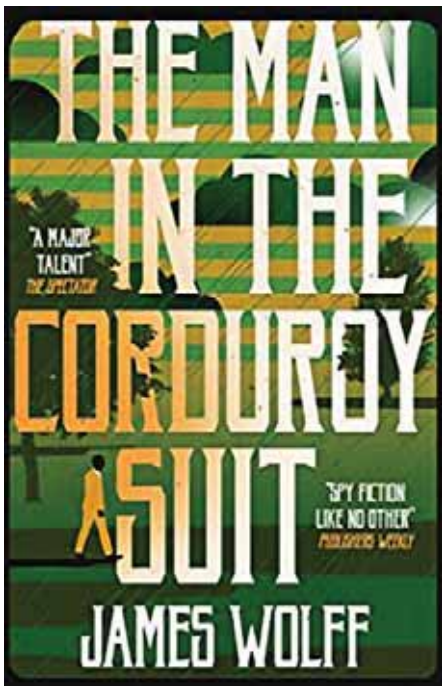
Books of the Quarter

John Lawton's latest is billed as the fourth 'Joe Wilderness' novel, but where is Joe? Lawton keeps us waiting, though the clue has always been in the title. **MOSCOW EXILE** [Grove Press] is a continuation of Lawton's sparkingly perceptive, cynically ruthless history of the Cold War as seen through the eyes of characters either defending or taking a scalpel to the British class system. There are many familiar names herein, real and fictional, from the Troy family in all its glory (and one of them is also exiled to Moscow), to Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Harold Wilson and even



H.G. Wells, and of course, eventually, the resourceful Joe Wilderness, not to mention a starring role for Berlin's 'bridge of spies'. Lawton weaves a magic carpet of a plot to fly the reader through three decades of betrayal and deception and spikes it with wicked barbs of humour, even, in the acknowledgements at the end, giving a nod to Sir Arthur Streeb-Greebling, which must have confused his American editors. Intelligent, fascinating and gripping. Wunnerful stuff, as Arthur Mullard would say.

In **TO DIE IN JUNE** [Canongate] Alan Parks, the brightest dark light on the Scottish crime scene, gives us another hectic few days (in 1975) in the life, and associated nasty deaths, of Glasgow detective Harry McCoy. Apart from his gruesome workload, this time McCoy is semi-under-cover assigned to a police station where corruption and Masonic loyalties are rightly suspected of hindering the fight against crime. This being Glasgow and 1975, there are cameos for Stanley Baxter, Lulu and an up-and-coming folk singer called Billy Connolly, as well due homage to the Tennents Lager Lovelies, which might need explaining to a younger generation. They were different times and Parks captures them, in all their seediness, quite gloriously.



At the recent *CrimeFest*, Simon Brett identified two types of fictional spies: those who drank cocktails and those who (usually British) had a cup of tea. The spies in James Wolff's **THE MAN IN THE CORDUROY SUIT** [Bitter Lemon Press] are definitely in the latter category as this is very much Le Carré territory rather than Ian Fleming's. And very good it is too, centred on the 'Gatekeeping' department of MI5 as it tackles a slew of disciplinary offence and botched operations by its officers. Who on Earth is vetting these people in the recruitment phase? The question of 'who will vet the vetters?' becomes crucial when a low-level MI5 officer collapses, the victim of what looks like a Kremlin-inspired poisoning. The investigation which follows, from London to a Suffolk country hotel, is packed with twists, turns, tradecraft and several surprises, without a car chase, gun fight or a vodka martini in sight. Terrific stuff by a pseudonymous author you feel might have actually been there, done that and got the t-shirt. This is the third novel in a sort of trilogy and though it is not necessary to have read the previous two James Wolff thrillers, you are hereby recommended to do so.

Given that the first James Bond novel **CASINO ROYALE** was published in

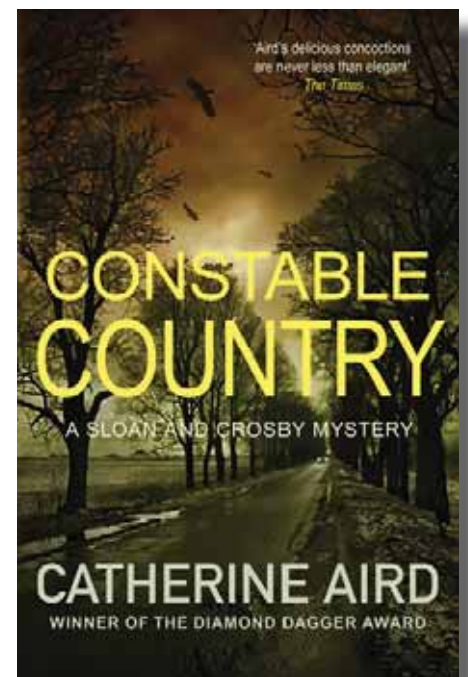
the year of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, it seemed only logical to try and get a new Bond story out for the Coronation of King Charles III. The author chosen, Charlie Higson, was approached in February 2023 and was remarkably cool under fire when told that the finished manuscript had to be at the printers by the end of March. The result was the novella **ON HIS MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE** [Ian Fleming Publications], which has an ageless Bond taking on Æthelstan of Wessex, the self-proclaimed usurper to the throne with a private army training secretly in Hungary. Along the way he locks horns (if that's the right phrase) with a stunning and very fierce Icelandic lady, resulting in all the fire and ice you might expect. Oh, and SPOILER ALERT – the Coronation goes ahead as planned.

No place was more confused by its past or more terrified of the future than 'The South' thinks the main character and that is pretty much the underlying theme of the outstanding **ALL THE SINNERS BLEED** by S.A. Cosby [Headline]. Titus Crown is the first Black sheriff of Charon County, Virginia, a quiet backwater where statues of Confederate 'heroes' are still honoured and the poisonous legacy of slavery is much in evidence. An unusual 'school shooting' (not the sadly familiar massacre of students) reveals something very nasty bubbling under the surface of life in Charon with its snake-handling churches and failing local industries. And then bodies are discovered, a lot of bodies, all cruelly tortured. A former FBI agent, Titus realises there is a serial killer lurking in plain sight in the population of Charon and begins the hunt, although he himself becomes a target. As a serial-killer-thriller, *All The Sinners Bleed* is up there with *Silence of the Lambs*, but as a crime novel which peels back the onion-layers of racism and bigotry in the southern states, it is in a class of its own. Simply superb.

I don't know if anyone has officially called old Hollywood 'the devil's playground' but they certainly should have

if half the diabolic goings-on actually went on as described in Craig Russell's epic thriller **THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND** [Constable]. The multi-award winning Russell spins his blood-splattered story across almost seventy years, though the crux of the matter is 'the greatest horror film ever made' in Hollywood in 1927, at the twilight of the silent era. Needless to say the film is lost to posterity after a series of events so weird – even for Hollywood – that they are surely the result of voodoo. The Hollywood here – its stars, its 'fixers' and its venal studio bosses – revel and prosper in corruption, proving that the devil not only has the best tunes, but the best screenplays.

For a charming and relaxing change of pace, I always look forward to a 'Calleshire Chronicle' which record the investigations of Detective Inspector Sloan and Detective Constable Crosby in the cosy, but criminous county invented by Catherine Aird which contains places with names such as Little Missal, Capstan Purlieu and Kinnisport (very much an in-joke). **CONSTABLE COUNTRY** [Allison & Busby] is the 28th in the series by the Diamond Dagger winning Aird, who celebrates publication this month, a few days before her 93rd birthday. It begins with an investi-

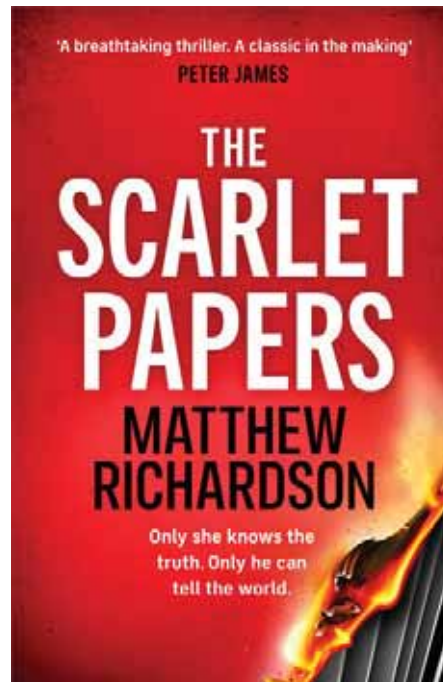


gation of the missing partner in a local specialist printing company – ‘missing’ along with all the firm’s cash – just as a prestigious memoir for a local toff is about to come off the presses; a memoir with the delectably ridiculous title *Muniments and their Hanapers*. Pretty soon, though, there’s a murder and a near-fatal assault to add to Christopher Dennis Sloan’s workload (he’s known as ‘Seedy’ because of his initials) but the cool, calm and collected policeman sieves out the red herrings. Along the way is much fascinating background on vintage printing lore, including (which I did not know) where the term *Foolscap* came from.

For no good reason, when I heard that former FBI Director James Comey was writing a thriller, I assumed it would be about spies, political chicanery and the impeachment of a US President or two. Actually, **CENTRAL PARK WEST** [Head of Zeus] is a conventionally twisty American legal thriller and a very good one at that. The detail of law enforcement agencies and procedures is, as to be expected, immaculately accurate as a murder trial runs concurrent with an investigation into organised crime and the tantalising prospect that the actual murderer may be a Mafia hit woman. The courtroom scenes zing with tension and there are many examples of smart-aleck lawyers having the Persian rug pulled from under them.

Bad things happen in threes and to three specific young females in particular in **THE RULE OF THREE** [Simon & Schuster] by Sam Ripley (no relation). When the bad things include the deaths of parents and siblings at suspicious intervals involving the number three, is something supernatural happening, is it the result of drug-induced paranoia or is there good-old serial killer on the loose? The story unfolds over twenty years and in the voices of multiple, mostly unreliable, narrators and includes many useful tips on taking drugs and one very gruesome bit of psychotic self-analysis. In some ways it is reminiscent of the *Scream* franchise of ‘slasher movies’ (but without the slashing) and

I would not be surprised, if it’s filmed, were it to spawn a slew of sequels: *Rule of Four/Five/Ten* etc. ‘Sam Ripley’ is one of several pen-names used by a successful British thriller writer and you will note the name contains nine (three time three) letters. Coincidence? Probably not.

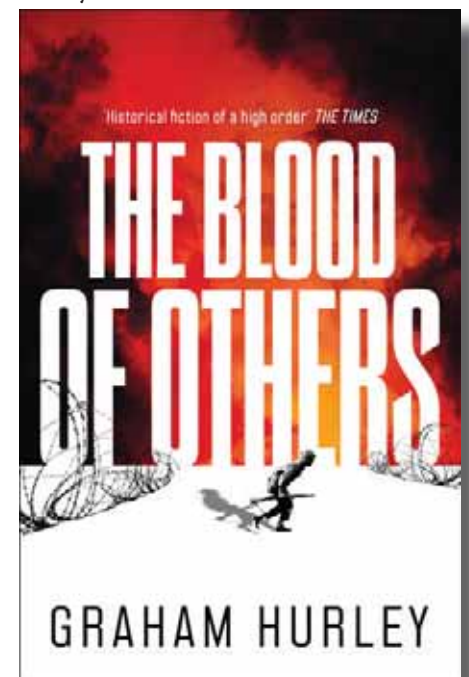


Kim Philby and the infamous ‘Cambridge’ ring of spies once again show that they are the gift to spy fiction which just keeps on giving. The legend of Russian moles at the heart of British (and American) intelligence services at the height of the Cold War is given a new twist in **THE SCARLET PAPERS** [Michael Joseph] by Matthew Richardson, a long (perhaps a tad too long) spy saga in which the ‘papers’ in question, as curated by an innocent academic, seem likely to blow the lid off fifty years of treachery. Impressive, superior spy stuff.

If you want proof that the Swiss certainly did not spend five hundred years of brotherly love inventing the cuckoo clock, try one of the Inspector Hunkeler books by Hansjörg Schneider, the latest to appear in translation, **THE MURDER OF ANTON LIVIUS**, is now published by Bitter Lemon Press. Like Maigret, Hunkeler seems to solve crimes by some form of osmosis from the numerous restaurants and bars he visits

(and there is a lot of snacking in this book) in either the frosty Swiss heartland of Emmental or over the border from his base in Basel into Alsace. An elderly Russian (or German?) immigrant is found shot and hung on a butcher’s hook on his allotment, which just happens to be over the border in France, but Hunkeler cannot resist getting involved and tracing the identity of the victim. (The tattoo under the left arm should have been a give-away.)

The latest novel in Graham Hurley’s magnificent *Spoils of War* series, **THE BLOOD OF OTHERS** [Head of Zeus] concentrates its attention and that of the reader on one incident in WWII, the ill-fated commando raid on the French port of Dieppe in 1942, which took a heavy toll on the mostly Canadian attacking force. As with all Hurley’s war stories, there is far more to this novel than sheer military action, though that is, as usual, superbly done, rather the genesis of the raid is covered from both the Canadian and German sides, with cameo roles for Willi Schultz of the *Abwehr* and Tam Moncrieff of MI5 from earlier novels. Real players in the game include Lord Mountbatten, Lord Beaverbrook and Noel Coward. Historical fiction of the highest order which teaches that however just the cause, war is folly.





A global internet-based fraud selling counterfeit drugs which involves criminal elements from Russia, Ukraine, India and Australia with a base in Austria worthy of a Bond villain, is surely in need of a good linguist as when the guns come out, Google Translate simply isn't adequate. In **THE CONSPIRATORS** by G.W. Shaw [Riverrun] a nerdy (multi) linguist is seduced by the promise of a huge pay-check (he wants to get on the property ladder in Brighton so it has to be huge) and agrees to become a translator, mostly translating threats from Hindi into Russian and vice versa. Pretty quickly our good-hearted hero Jacob finds himself a prisoner and realises that the business his employer is in is not only illegal but highly dangerous and there is absolutely no honour among thieves. Jacob's naivete extends to believing that the CIA want him to communicate by messages written on paper aeroplanes and he is easily cowed by a brutal Russian crime lord, but his aptitude for languages, and one in particular, sees him through all the double-crossing and violence. This is fast-moving, superior thriller-writing at its best.

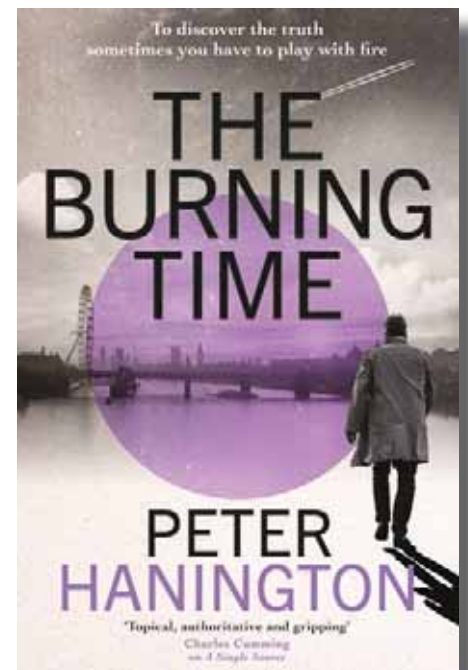
Until this year, I had not read a book set in wartime Singapore for ages. Then I discover the work of Ovidia Yu and,

this month, **TOKYO TIME** [Brash Books] by Australian Dawn Farnham. During the Japanese occupation of what was known as Syonan, the population had to adopt a Japanese calendar and operate on Tokyo Time, and although the British have surrendered and the fighting may be over, detectives still have to detect crimes and murderers still murder. Eurasian homicide detective Martin Bach has to investigate the killing of the trophy wife of a rich, well-connected, businessman with virtually no resources and the need to guide his new boss, an aristocratic Japanese, the former police chief of Nagasaki with penchant for Sherlock Holmes stories, through the local underworld. Both having to keep one eye over their shoulders for the dreaded secret police. Tokyo Time offers a thoroughly satisfying murder mystery and, in addition, a fascinating portrait of a multi-racial, multi-cultural society which finds it has exchanged one set of imperial overlords for another.

Yulia Yakovleva's **DEATH OF THE RED RIDER** [Pushkin Vertigo] is cleverly billed as the second in a 'Leningrad Confidential' series, so presumably there will be a quartet, at least. The Leningrad in question is that of 1931, on the eve of Stalin's great purge and other horrors, and Comrade Inspector Zaitsev is landed with a bizarre murder in the world of trotting (aka harness racing) when a favourite horse collapses and throws its rider/driver. Bizarrely, it seems that the horse was the intended murder victim which leads Zaitsev to a cavalry school in the Ukraine where secrets stay buried and mutiny is fermenting. The setting of 1930's Russia is brilliantly realised and the author comes up with a devilishly cunning method of murdering a thoroughbred racehorse.

PREY FOR THE SHADOW [MacLehose] by Javier Cercas is the second outing for his police detective Melchior Marin, whose beat is the 'perpetual slumber' region of Terra Alta in Catalonia near Barcelona. When I read his first outing, **EVEN THE DARKEST NIGHT** (which has recently won

a CWA Dagger for crime novels in translation), I thought that here was a fictional detective worth keeping tabs on and I am delighted to say that I was, as usual, right. All fictional detectives have troubled backgrounds, but Melchior Marin's would take some beating as the son of a murdered Barcelona prostitute, who then does time in prison, sees the light, becomes a policeman and, almost accidentally, a hero after a shoot-out with terrorists. His second investigation starts with the populist female mayor of Barcelona facing blackmail over a sex-tape from her student days and Melchior's dark heart goes out to her. This is a multi-layered, deeply satisfying crime novel which cheekily breaks the fourth wall when Melchior spots someone reading *Even the Darkest Night*, which he dismisses as 'all lies'.



Peter Hanington has a journalist's nose for stories likely to make tomorrow's Radio 4 news, which is not surprising as he was until recently a BBC Radio reporter. His latest novel, **THE BURNING TIME** [Baskerville], is a headline-grabbing thriller which encompasses Downing Street chicanery, climate change gurus seeding clouds with 'diamond dust', attack drones, assassinations and assorted conspiracies organised by the shady but all-powerful solid-fuel lobby, all on a global scale, the

action moving from Spain to Australia via America and the academic groves of Oxford. Investigating all this is a radio journalist of the old school, William Carver, who whilst officially employed mentoring the next generation of journalists, is not yet prepared to hang up his Uher recorder, or keep his nose out of a good story.

After a wave of excellent American rural noir thrillers, we are back in hard-boiled urban noir territory with **EVERY HIDDEN THING** by Ted Flanagan [No Exit] where a night-shift paramedic trying his best to save lives finds his own at risk. Not only from a ruthless city mayor covering up an unwanted pregnancy, who has brutal ex-cop as an enforcer, but also from a well-armed loony survivalist 'militiaman' on twisted mission of revenge. A gritty, unrelenting tale of despair and violence in a diamond-hard cityscape.

At first glance, I was sure I knew who the 'old rogue' in question was, but then I realised the title read Limehouse and not Whitechapel. **THE OLD ROGUE OF LIMEHOUSE** by Ann Granger [Headline] is set in 1871 – too early for the Ripper's gruesome activities – and it is soon clear that the old rogue in question is reclusive anti-quarian and suspected fence for stolen jewellery Jacob Jacobus, who suffers from agoraphobia – a condition first diagnosed that same year. As Jacobus never left the upper floor of his house, somebody has to get in – be let in – to murder him, which of course happens just as Scotland Yard detective Inspector Ben Ross learns of a jewellery theft from the upper-crust Roxby family in Hampstead. Coincidence? Unlikely. The action moves smoothly across Victorian London and its class barriers, in twin narrative streams by the affable Inspector Ross and his bright wife Elizabeth, all flowing from the stylish pen of Ann Granger, one of our most fluent writers of traditional crime novels.

If you go down to the woods today... well, just don't. Not if, that is, if they

are anything like the spooky Gloucestershire forestry described in **THE CLEARING** by Simon Toyne [HarperCollins], where nasty things happen, particularly to young women. Ancient terrors from local folklore (the 'Cinderman' of Cinderford), indifferent policemen and long-buried family secrets combine to paint an unnerving picture of the Forest of Dean, despite its designation as an area of outstanding natural beauty. There are, perhaps, too many of the expected serial-killer-thriller tropes, such as the night vision goggles, an escaping female who falls and twists an ankle and the constant frantic search for more than one bar of signal reception on a mobile phone, but none the less, a pacy, occasionally jolting, read.

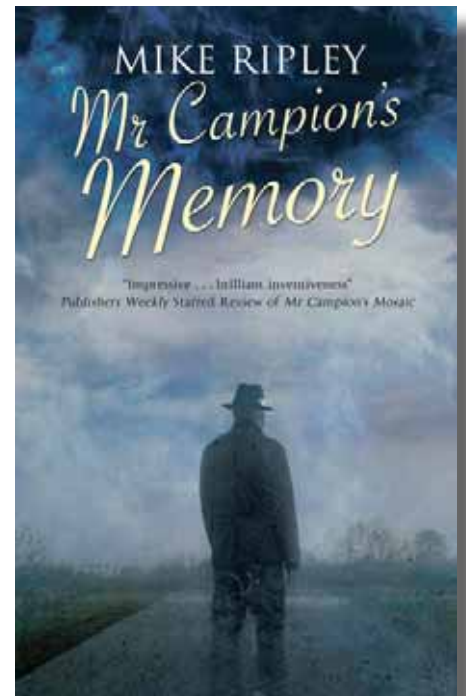
In **ALL OF US ARE BROKEN** by Fiona Cummings [Macmillan], many a character enjoys a somewhat esoteric name: Galen, Melissa, Dashiell (!), Aliyah and police detective Saul Anguish, yet the story starts in the rather boringly-named Essex town of Midtown-on-Sea. But Essex is only the jumping off point for a bloody road trip north for two blithe psychopaths and the family with whom they collide. Reminiscent of Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek on their killing spree in *Badlands*, though the lovebird killers here are nastier, presenting a mother with a real Sophie's Choice about her children, this is not for the faint-hearted.

Rumours of My Demise

Although it is probably my fault, announcement of my retirement has somehow transitioned into rumours of my demise if not total extinction. I would reiterate, for the benefit of the nay-sayers and wishful-thinkers, that I am only retiring from this monthly column, although a Christmas Special for Shots has been green-lit by the editor.

I will still write for the obituaries department of *The Guardian* and for the **OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY** and carry on reminiscing about crime novels and thrillers of days gone by in my Bargain

Hunt column in the magazine *Crime And Detective Stories (CADS)*.



And I will also continue my 'continuation' novels featuring Margery Allingham's Golden Age detective Albert Champion, which reminds me that **MR CAMPION'S MEMORY** will be published by Severn House in September.

I am delighted to report that [one of my] three of my regular readers have already pre-ordered the title, though I have no idea why the other two are dragging their feet.

Bucket List

One reason for my impending retirement is to spend more time with my groaning To-Be-Read pile of books – books I want to read rather than feel I have to. This, however, is not one of them:



Sneak Previews

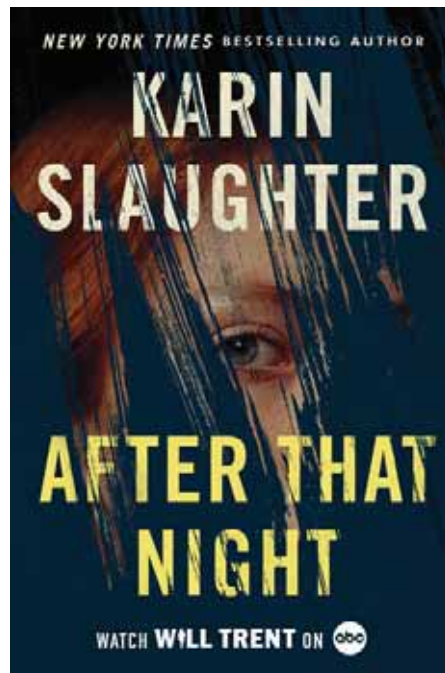
Upcoming Mysteries



August, 2023

- 1 Martin Edwards, **THE PUZZLE OF BLACKSTONE LODGE** (Rachel Savernake)
- 1 Naomi Hirahara, **EVERGREEN** (Aki Ito)
- 1 Mindy Mejia, **TO CATCH A STORM**
- 1 Sarah Pekkanen, **GONE TONIGHT**
- 1 Catherine Ryan Howard, **THE TRAP**
- 1 Gillian McAllister, **JUST ANOTHER MISSING PERSON**
- 1 Denise Mina, **THE SECOND MURDERER** (Philip Marlowe)
- 1 Denise Mina, **THREE FIRES**
- 1 Peter James, **PICTURE YOU DEAD** (Roy Grace)
- 1 Alberto Mansur, **ONLY THE DEAD KNOW PEACE**
- 1 Kathy Reichs, **THE BONE HACKER** (Temperance Brennan)
- 1 David Joy, **THOSE WE THOUGHT WE KNEW**
- 1 Rachel Ryan, **SOMEONE YOU TRUST**
- 1 Georgina Cross, **ONE NIGHT**
- 8 Adrian McKinty, **THE DETECTIVE UP LATE** (Sean Duffy)
- 8 James Byrne, **DEADLOCK** (Dez Limerick)
- 8 Allison Brennan, **NORTH OF NOWHERE**
- 8 Joanna Schaffhausen, **DEAD AND GONE** (Annalisa Vega)
- 8 Lisa Jewell, **NONE OF THIS IS TRUE**
- 8 Lauren Beukes, **BRIDGE**
- 8 Will Dean, **THE LAST ONE**
- 8 Megan Goldin, **DARK CORNERS**
- 8 Clive Cussler & Robin Burcell, **THE SERPENT'S EYE** (Fargo)
- 8 Ryan Steck, **LETHAL RANGE** (Matthew Redd)

- 9 C. J. Carey, **WIDOWLAND**
- 14 James Patterson & Duane Swierczynski, **LION & LAMB**
- 15 Mark Pryor, **THE DARK EDGE OF NIGHT** (Henri Lefort)
- 15 Ayelet Gundar-Goshen, **WHERE THE WOLF LURKS**
- 15 Sandie Jones, **THE TRADE OFF**
- 15 Taylor Moore, **RICOCHET** (Garrett Kohl)
- 15 James Rollins, **TIDES OF FIRE** (Sigma Force)
- 22 Karin Slaughter, **AFTER THE NIGHT** (Trent & Linton)



- 22 Jesse Q. Sutanto, **I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU**
- 22 Preston & Child, **DEAD MOUNTAIN**
- 22 Robert Swartwood, **THE KILLING ROOM**
- 27 David Baldacci, **THE WHOLE TRUTH** (Shaw)
- 29 Alice Feeney, **GOOD BAD GIRL**
- 29 Lucy Clarke, **THE HIKE**

- 29 Karen Rose, **BENEATH DARK WATERS**
- 29 Landon Beach, **THE BLUE HOUR SANCTION**
- 29 Martin Walker, **A CHATEAU UNDER SIEGE** (Bruno)
- 29 Karin Smirnoff, **THE GIRL IN THE EAGLE'S TALONS** (Lisbeth Salander)
- 29 Louise Hare, **HARLEM AFTER MIDNIGHT** (Lena Aldridge)
- 29 Angie Kim, **HAPPINESS FALLS**

September, 2023

- 1 Lee Goldberg, **MALIBU BURNING** (Sharpe & Walker)
- 5 Craig Johnson, **THE LONGMIRE DEFENSE**
- 5 Mick Herron, **THE SECRET HOURS**
- 5 William Kent Krueger, **THE RIVER WE REMEMBER**
- 5 James R. Benn, **PROUD SORROWS** (Billy Boyle)
- 5 Nina Simon, **MOTHER-DAUGHTER MURDER NIGHT**
- 5 Stephen King, **HOLLY**
- 5 Ann Cleeves, **THE RAGING STORM** (Matthew Venn)
- 5 Laura Shepherd-Robinson, **THE SQUARE OF SEVENS**
- 5 Ragnar Jonasson & Katrin Jakobsdottir, **REYKJAVIK**
- 5 Don Bentley, **Tom Clancy's WEAPONS GRADE** (Jack Ryan, Jr.)
- 5 Mike Ripley, **MR CAMPION'S MEMORY**
- 5 Chris Nickson, **RUSTED SOULS** (Tom Harper)
- 5 Jeanne M. Dams, **MUSIC AND MURDER** (Elizabeth Fairchild)
- 5 Sandra Balzo, **ANY POT IN A STORM** (Maggy Thorsen)
- 5 Yasmin Angoe, **IT ENDS WITH KNIGHT** (Nena Knight)
- 12 A. F. Carter, **BOOMTOWN** (Delia Mariola)
- 12 Kyle Mills, **CODE RED** (Mitch Rapp)
- 12 James Ellroy, **THE ENCHANTERS**
- 12 J.A. Jance, **BLESSING OF THE LOST GIRLS** (Brady)
- 12 Tod Goldberg, **GANGSTERS DON'T DIE** (Sal Cupertine)
- 12 J.A. Jance, **BLESSING OF THE**

- LOST GIRLS** (Joanna Brady)
 14 Boyd & Beth Morrison, **THE LAST TRUE TEMPLAR** (Fox & Willa)
 19 Ava Glass, **THE TRAITOR** (Emma Makepeace)
 19 A. J. Chambers, **THE VICAR**
 19 M. C. Beaton & R. W. Green, **DEAD ON TARGET** (Agatha Raisin)
 19 Allen Eskens, **SAVING EMMA** (Boady Sanden)
 19 Amy Chua, **THE GOLDEN GATE**
 19 Mia P. Manansala, **MURDER AND MAMON** (Tita Rosie's Kitchen)
 19 Brooke Robinson, **THE INTER-PRETER**
 19 Jessica Knoll, **BRIGHT YOUNG WOMEN**
 19 Richard Osman, **THE LAST DEVIL TO DIE** (Thursday Murder Club)
 26 Jeffrey Archer, **TRAITORS GATE**
 26 S. J. Bennett, **MURDER MOST ROYAL** (Her Majesty the Queen)
 26 Robert Galbraith, **RUNNING GRAVE** (Strike/Ellacott)

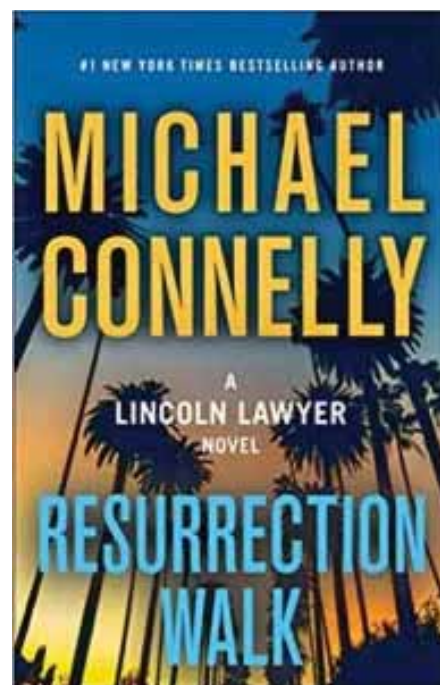
October, 2023

- 3 Tasha Alexander, **A COLD HIGH-LAND WIND** (Lady Emily)
 3 Jessica Knoll, **BRIGHT YOUNG WOMEN**
 3 Meg Gardiner, **SHADOWHEART** (UNSUB)
 3 Jonathan Lethem, **BROOKLYN CRIME NOVEL**
 3 Stephanie Barron, **JANE AND THE FINAL MYSTERY** (Jane Austen)
 3 Lori Rader-Day, **THE DEATH OF US**
 3 Daniel Sweren-Becker, **KILL SHOW**
 3 John Sandford, **JUDGMENT PREY** (Davenport & Flowers)
 3 Eileen Brady, **MURDERS OF A FEATHER** (Dr. Kate)
 3 David McCloskey, **MOSCOW X**
 3 Danielle Arceneaux, **GLORY BE** (Glory Broussard)
 10 Nelson DeMille & Alex DeMille, **BLOOD LINES** (Scott Brodie)
 10 R. G. Belsky, **IT'S NEWS TO ME** (Clare Carlson)
 10 Lev AC Rosen, **THE BELL IN THE FOG**
 10 Chris Hatfield, **THE DEFECTOR**
 10 David Rosenfelt, **'Twas THE BITE**

- BEFORE CHRISTMAS**
 10 Donna Andrew, **LET IT CROW! LET IT CROW! LET IT CROW!** (Meg Langslow)
 10 Simon Gervais, **THE LAST GUARDIAN**
 17 John Grisham, **THE EXCHANGE** (Mitch McDeere)
 17 Jim Shockey, **CALL ME HUNTER**
 17 Ritu Mukerji, **MURDER BY DEGREES**
 17 Spencer Quinn, **UP ON THE WOOF TOP** (Chet & Bernie)
 17 Peter Swanson, **THE CHRISTMAS GUEST**
 17 Paula Munier, **HOME AT NIGHT** (Mercy Carr)
 17 Allison Epstein, **LET THE DEAD BURY THE DEAD**
 24 Lee Child & Andrew Child, **THE SECRET** (Reacher)
 24 Eliot Pattison, **FREEDOM'S GHOST** (Duncan McCallum)
 24 Dann McDorman, **WEST HEART KILL**
 24 Carlene O'Connor, **SOME OF US ARE LOOKING** (County Kerry)
 24 Robbie Morrison, **EDGE OF THE GRAVE** (Jimmy Dreghorn)
 24 Lisa Unger, **CHRISTMAS PRESENTS**
 31 Andrew Klavan, **THE HOUSE OF LOVE AND DEATH** (Cameron Winter)
 31 Kelley Armstrong, **A CASTLE IN THE AIR** (Stitch in Time)

November, 2023

- 7 Michael Connelly, **RESURRECTION WALK** (Haller & Bosch)
 7 Charles Cumming, **KENNEDY 35** (Lachlan Kite)
 7 David Swinson, **SWEET THING**
 7 James L'Etoile, **FACE OF GREED** (Emily Hunter)
 7 Phillip Margolin, **BETRAYAL** (Robin Lockwood)
 7 Janet Evanovich, **DIRTY THIRTY** (Stephanie Plum)
 7 Stephen Mack Jones, **DEUS X** (August Snow)
 7 Ausma Zehanat Khan, **BLOOD BETRAYAL** (Blackwater Falls)
 7 Kerry Greenwood, **MURDER IN**



- WILLIAMSTOWN** (Phryne Fisher)
 7 Gilly Macmillan, **THE MANOR HOUSE**
 7 Rhys Bowen, **THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING** (Royal Spyness)
 7 Dirk Cussler, **Clive Cussler's THE CORSICAN SHADOW** (Dirk Pitt)
 7 Chris Brookmyre, **THE CLIFF HOUSE**
 7 Loren D. Estleman, **VAMP** (Valentino)
 7 Peggy Townsend, **THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE WILD**
 14 Matt Coyle, **ODYSSEY'S END** (Rick Cahill)
 14 Amanda Flower, **I HEARD A FLY BUZZ WHEN I DIED** (Emily Dickinson)
 14 Steve Urszenyi, **THE PERFECT SHOT** (Alexandra Martel)
 14 Anna Pitoniak, **THE HELSINKI AFFAIR**
 14 Lauren Nossett, **THE PROFESSOR**
 14 Cleo Coyle, **BULLETPROOF BARISTA**
 14 Val McDermid, **PAST LYING** (Karen Pirie)
 14 Tim Maleeny, **HANGING THE DEVIL** (Cape Weathers)
 14 David Baldacci, **THE EDGE** (6:20 Man)
 21 Femi Kayode, **GASLIGHT** (Philip Taiwo)
 28 Mike Lupica, **Robert B. Parker's**

- BROKEN TRUST** (Spenser)
 28 Jeffery Deaver, **THE WATCH
 -MAKER'S HAND** (Lincoln Rhyme)
 28 Nita Prose, **THE MYSTERY GUEST**
 (Molly Gray)

December, 2023

- 5 Caz Frear, **FIVE BAD DEEDS**
 5 Ilaria Tuti, **DAUGHTER OF ASHES**
 (Teresa Battaglia)
 5 Chris McKinney, **SUNSET, WATER
 CITY**
 5 Victoria Thompson, **CITY OF
 BETRAYAL**

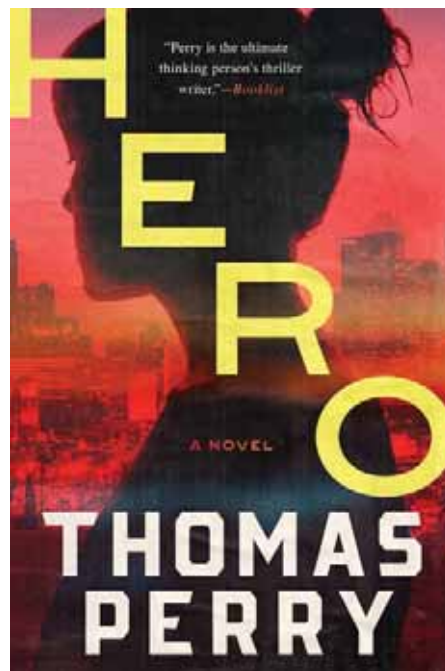
 5 Robin Cook, **MANNER OF DEATH**
 5 Chris McKinney, **SUNSET WATER
 CITY**
 5 Stephen Spotswood, **MURDER
 CROSSED HER MIND** (Pentecost
 & Parker)
 5 Paige Shelton, **LOST HOURS**
 (Alaska Wild)
 5 S. J. Rozan, **THE MAYORS OF NEW
 YORK** (Chin/Smith)
 12 Keigo Higashino, **THE FINAL
 CURTAIN** (Kyoichiro)
 26 Simon Scarrow, **DEAD OF NIGHT**

January, 2024

- 2 Jonathan Santlofer, **THE LOST VAN
 GOGH**
 9 Rachel Hawkins, **THE HEIRESS**
 16 Lee Goldberg, **DREAM TOWN** (Eve
 Ronin)
 16 Otho Eskin, **FIRETRAP** (Marko
 Zorn)
 16 Alex Michaelides, **THE FURY**
 16 Thomas Perry, **HERO**
 23 Nicolas Ferraro, **MY FAVORITE
 SCAR**
 23 Janice Hallett, **THE MYSTERIOUS
 CASE OF THE ALPERTON
 ANGELS**
 23 Kate Alice Marshall, **NO ONE CAN
 KNOW**
 30 Michael Robotham, **BEFORE YOU
 FOUND ME** (Cyrus Haven)

February, 2024

- 6 Jenny Hollander, **EVERYONE WHO
 CAN FORGIVE ME IS DEAD**



- 6 David Downing, **UNION STATION**
 (John Russell)
 6 Teresa Dovalpage, **LAST SEEN IN
 HAVANA**
 13 Erin Young, **ORIGINAL SINS**
 13 Greff Hurwitz, **LONE WOLF**
 (Orphan X)

- 20 Mark Greaney, **THE CHAOS
 AGENT** (Gray Man)
 20 B. A. Paris, **THE GUEST**
 20 Leah Konen, **KEEP YOUR
 FRIENDS CLOSE**
 20 Kelley Armstrong, **THE BOY WHO
 CRIED BEAR** (Haven's Rock)
 20 J. Robert Lennon, **HARD GIRLS**
 27 Thomas Mullen, **THE RUMOR
 GAME**
 27 C. J. Box, **THREE-INCH TEETH**
 (Joe Pickett)
 27 A. J. Tata, **THE PHALANX CODE**
 (Garrett Sinclair)

March, 2024

- 19 Sulari Gentill, **THE MYSTERY
 WRITER**

April, 2024

- 16 Brian Panowich, **NOTHING BUT
 THE BONES** (McFalls County)
 16 Sara Koffi, **WHILE WE WERE
 BURNING**
 23 D.V. Bishop, **RITUAL OF FIRE**
 (Cesare Aldo)

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