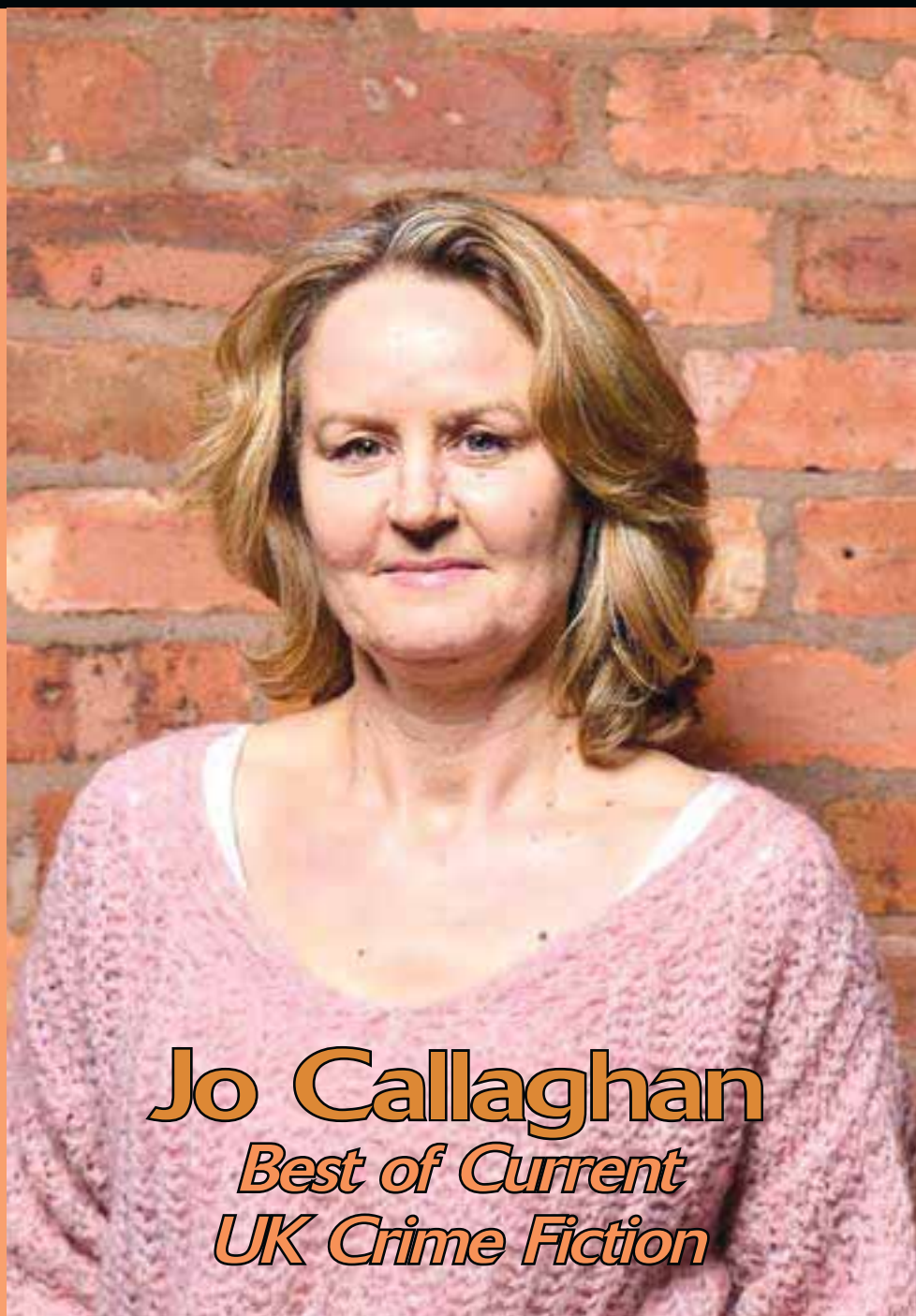


Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



Jo Callaghan
*Best of Current
UK Crime Fiction*

Jo Callaghan

DCS Kat Frank – AIDE Lock Series

In 2023 Jo Callaghan seemed to come out of nowhere and captured the imagination of U.K. readers in a big way. Her introduction of an AI character paired with a veteran detective proved to be a winning combination. And speaking of “winning,” the first novel in the series won two prestigious awards in the U.K.: The Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year and the John Creasey(New Blood) Dagger. It was also nominated for the Crimefest:Specsavers Debut Crime Novel Award.



Jo with Theakston Award

Now its America’s turn to get excited about this groundbreaking new series. First up are reviews of the two series

crime novels and then a telling interview with Jo Callaghan. Needless to say, I highly recommend that you read these books. My tough critic of a wife is thanking me as I write this. – George Easter

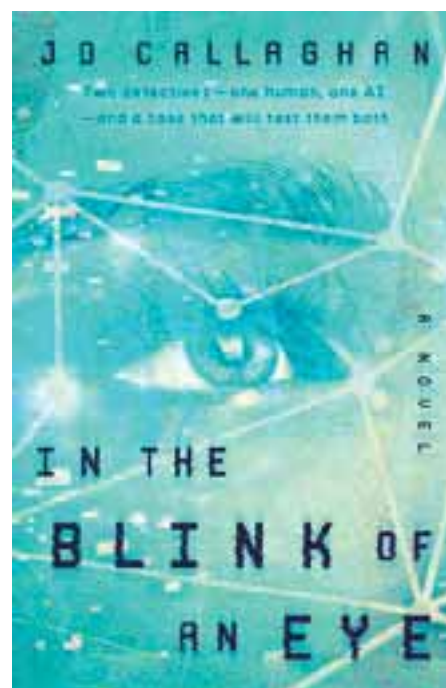
The Series Novels

IN THE BLINK OF ANY EYE
by Jo Callaghan
Random House, \$18.00, August
Kat and Lock #1
Rating: A-

Kat Frank is a veteran policewoman in Warwickshire, England, who has recently returned to work after the death of her husband. Her boss asks her to head up a pilot program to work with an artificial intelligence entity (called Lock) to see what it can do to help speed up criminal investigations. Lock can take the human form as a hologram, carry on a normal conversation, and is controlled by a bracelet that Kat wears. He is a cross between Spok and Tim Sullivan’s detective DS Cross (on the spectrum). Lock is learning how to interact with humans and is often too blunt and insensitive to others’ feelings. Kat like to go with her “gut feelings,” and often has to justify them to Lock.

As their first cold cases, they choose those of two missing persons -- young men who have disappeared for several months and have left no traces of their whereabouts.

Eventually it a combination of



strengths that Kat and Lock bring to the table that solves the case and wins the day.

I found this eminently readable detective novel fascinating and engaging. There is a sequel, **LEAVE NO TRACE**, already out in England in hardcover. The U.S. edition (trade paperback) of **LEAVE NO TRACE** will be out in January, 2025.

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE won two prestigious awards in the U.K.: The Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year and the John Creasey(New Blood) Dagger.

LEAVE NO TRACE
by Jo Callaghan

Simon & Schuster UK, March, 2024 in
the U.K. in hardcover
Random House, \$18.00, January, 2025 in
the U.S. in trade paperback
Kat Frank & AIDE Lock #2

Rating: A

As the second book in this series opens, the two detectives, one human and one an AI learning computer program, have come to a working understanding and harmony. And they are being trusted with their first live case. If they are successful with this, no more cold cases. But there is the added pressure to find a killer before he possibly kills again.

The case is that of a dead man found crucified at the top of Mt. Judd. How did someone get the timbers for the cross and the body up a mountain (sounds like a steep hill to a Utahn like me who lives 1000 feet of elevation above my town) without being seen?

Once the body is identified a small group of suspects become apparent – including the man's fiancée, who has a weak alibi.

When a second male body is found the police issue an extraordinary warning to local males aged between 30 and 40 years old:

- Avoid drinking in pubs
- If you must go to a pub, do not leave alone
- And definitely do not leave a pub with a stranger

With the national media and local men in an uproar, Kat and Lock have to combine their instincts and algorithms to solve this case.

Remember that AI has the ability to learn and Lock is constantly learning, especially about how to relate to humans. So we see his progress in this regard in **LEAVE NO TRACE**. I just wish I had the his ability to read a book at blazing speed. Perhaps in the future there will be AI brain implant that will give us that ability. Let's hope

I continue to be intrigued by the detective duo. AIDE Lock is surprisingly unpredictable for an entity that is supposed to be ruled by data and logic. I liked this second in the series even more than the first as I warm up more



and more to its characters.

Jo Callaghan Interview by George Easter

How did you come up with the idea for your fascinating series?

After spending over a decade trying (and failing) to get my middle grade and YA books published in the UK, I decided to try writing the genre I most loved to read: crime. I had a few vague ideas about writing a novel with a middle-aged female detective as the protagonist, but I couldn't find a unique or fresh way in that excited me enough. Then as part of my day job, I was developing a long term workforce plan for cancer, which involved a lot of research into the future impact of genomics and AI, and the extent to which AI would substitute for and replace key professions, and/or augment their roles. I found this completely fascinating, and I remember sitting on my bed one night and wondering what impact AI would have on other professions, such as policing. Could you have an AI detective? I did some research and discovered that many police forces had been piloting the use of AI in the form of algorithms, and these studies highlighted many risks

as well as opportunities, and offered the opportunity to explore the different ways we all make decisions, and to what extent 'gut instinct' is prejudice, and whether algorithms can entrench or challenge that.

But just as I had the idea, my husband of 28 years was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer, so for a long time, I couldn't write, as I had to care for him and my two children, as well as hold down a full time job. He died in January 2019, and as I returned to work, I knew I had to write to keep myself sane and strong for my family.

So I took my idea about an AI detective driven by algorithms (AIDE Lock) and paired him with DCS Kat Frank, a middle-aged detective returning to work after the death of her husband, who makes decisions according to her gut instinct. I was essentially processing a lot of emotions that I was going through at the time, and I suspect the reason why it has been so successful is because despite being a bit futuristic, it is very personal and authentic.

Please tell our readers a little bit about your two main series characters DCS Kat Frank and AIDE Lock.

Although I am not a detective, DCS Kat Frank is pretty much based on me, as she is a 49 year-old woman returning to work after the death of her husband from cancer. She is quite senior and successful, and makes decisions according to her gut.

As her husband was misdiagnosed by AI, she is hugely sceptical about AIDE Lock, who is driven by logic, and algorithms. I spent a lot of time developing Lock, drawing not just on technological advances that are currently available or just on the horizon (the book is set a few years in the future), but also well known tropes of the 'other' such as Spock, the Terminator and Sherlock.

I was keen to use humour to show the absurdity of some human beings, but also highlight the areas where both AI and humans can add value.

I try to stay quite neutral, and I hope that my books are an entertaining way into the debate about what AI will mean

for us all in the workplace, so that we can have greater agency and intent in how it develops, rather than just being passive recipients of whatever is technologically possible and profitable.

I didn't expect to warm up to AIDE Lock because he is so "socially unaware" and can be quite rude and frank in his speech. And yet, you have managed to create a character in him that I have definitely bonded with. How did you do that?

Thank you! I spent a lot of time -- probably the most time -- on developing Lock. As well as drawing on characters like Spock, the Terminator and Sherlock, I drew on my own experience of raising children and also of neurodiversity, where the most powerful question is often 'why'? Lock takes things literally, and does not understand humour or sarcasm, but he also challenges assumptions and prejudices. However, whilst trying to make it quite light and humorous, I worked hard to avoid making him *too* sympathetic or 'human'. The reader can infer certain things from what Lock does or says, but they never really know what -- if anything -- he is thinking. As the epigraph at the start of *IN THE BLINK OF ANY EYE* says, 'The mystery which surrounds a thinking machine already surrounds a thinking man'. (B.F. Skinner). The question at the heart of this series is how much can a machine that is capable of Deep Learning actually learn, and what happens when they do?

Your books point out the fact that humans have abilities that artificial intelligence cannot replicate and visa versa. What are two things that humans do better than AI and two things that AI does better than humans?

Goodness what a great question! I am trying to show that both AI and humans have strengths and weaknesses. Lock is super quick -- he can analyse vast amounts of social media or other data inputs in seconds, but although he can map the dots, he doesn't necessarily know which ones to connect. Lock is



driven by evidence and statistics, which means he might be 'fairer' in his approach, but it also means he risks missing the bigger picture. As Kat points out in book 2, a statistical analysis drives you to the average, the centre of the bell curve, but sometimes the criminal lives on the edges or in the anomalies. Crime is essentially a human act, driven by powerful human emotions -- there is nothing rational about it. But then as Lock argues in book 1, human decision making processes are impaired by intellectual, social and emotional factors, and we see evidence of this as Kat lets her sympathy dominate and distract her, which leads to some fundamental mistakes. But then when she does use her 'gut instinct' it is probably as Malcolm Gladwell argues in *BLINK*, the result of years of experience and thought processes too fast for her to comprehend. So there is no right or wrong approach. Everyone -- whether human or not -- makes decisions differently. I am just trying to expose that, so we can all discuss this fascinating question!

AIDE Lock has some advanced capabilities that haven't been developed yet -- hence your setting of the

series in the near future. What are some of the Lock's abilities that aren't yet developed in the today's world?

I have deliberately set the novel a few but unspecified years in the future, so that I can stretch what Lock is capable of for the purposes of fiction. I have collapsed together in one unit the different capabilities of automation, algorithms and deep learning, but the two biggest stretches I have made have been to give Lock the ability to participate in real time conversation, and also to project themselves as a 3D hologram without a screen or other platform.

In the first draft Lock was simply an audio device, as I was constrained by current technology, but several early readers said I needed to give him a physical presence so that they could connect with him. I was reluctant to make Lock a robot, as personally I find it difficult to see robots as anything other than stilted and non-human, and I feared it would pull readers out of the narrative. So I decided to make Lock a hologram, which means in some conditions or out of the corner of your eye, he can look very real, but when the light shifts, you can see he casts no shadow, and there is a shimmer around his edges. I kind of like the way that messes with Kat's (and the reader's) mind, as he is almost real, but also, as Kat says in book 2, Lock is less than a ghost.

I have several technical advisors, but at the end of the day I am clear this is a fictional book, and my approach is to write something that is possible, if not plausible.

Some people are fearful that the development of AI is putting their jobs in jeopardy. As a long-time book reviewer, should I be worried? As an acclaimed author, should you be worried?

Potentially, yes, because at the moment, developments appear to be driven by what is technologically possible and what is most profitable.

I am a strategic workforce planner, so I know that for most industries, the workforce is their biggest cost, and

everyone is looking for the magic bullet that reduces that cost, whether it be productivity, IT or AI. However, my personal belief is that if we as citizens and consumers take more agency in these debates, then the future is more hopeful. Instead of asking what jobs can AI technically do, we should be asking ourselves what jobs/tasks do we want it to do?

As human beings, we derive great pleasure and joy from creating, and most of us hate doing life admin and the bins. So why would we give AI the jobs that give us meaning and purpose, rather than direct it to the jobs that get in the way of that?

And in terms of authors, well since being published, I have had the honour of attending many book festivals, and met many wonderful readers. Lock would say it is a completely irrational process -- it would be far easier for people to buy my books online. But readers don't just want to buy books, they want to know the story behind the story: the hardships I have overcome, the grief that informed my development of Kat, the research that informed my understanding of Lock. People write and read stories to know that they are not alone; to know that someone else has felt what they have felt.

Some books will inevitably be written by AI and some people will buy them. But I trust that most people will continue to seek the unique connection that comes from reading somebody else's story. [*Geo's comment: I hope the same can be said for book reviews.*]

You've published two books in the series so far. What's next?

Book 3! In the UK, **HUMAN REMAINS** will be published in April, 2025 and I have just started book 4...

Are you a fan of crime fiction? If so, who are some of your favorite authors?

I am a huge fan of crime fiction, but I hate to single out favourites as it is a bit like asking me what is my favourite food: it depends upon the season/time

of day/mood. But I am a huge fan of the late Susie Steiner, and it is such a honour to be published by her editor, Andrea Walker at Penguin Random House. I adore Chris Whittaker, Kate Atkinson, Patrica Cornwell, Lisa Jewell, Liz Nugent, Fiona Cummins and Jack Jordan. I could go on forever as there are so many brilliant crime writers out there today, I honestly think this is where the best and most innovative writing is at the moment. As well as being lovely, most crime writers are incredibly intelligent and curious, and we are all on a quest to try and understand what it means to be human. I am so proud to be part of this community.

Thank you Jo for this interview and especially for writing such entertaining crime novels. I hope we meet in person some time in the future.

Recommended Recent U.K. Crime Fiction and Thrillers

The year 2024 has been a banner one for U.K. crime fiction (including Irish crime fiction) and thrillers. Of the 22 novels on my Best of the Year so far list, 14 are U.K. novels. So you may conclude that I'm clearly biased or that U.K. crime writers produced some exceptional work in 2024. I choose to believe both are true.

In this article I've included novels published in the U.K. in 2023 and earlier which only reached the U.S. in 2024. You will also find titles published in the U.K. in 2024, but which won't reach our shores until 2025. This time lag between when a novel is published in the U.K. and subsequently published in the U.S. has always bothered me. But in the few years leading up to the pandemic, it seemed like the gap had shortened and more British books were being timely published in the U.S. than previously was the case. But the pandemic appears to have caused publishers to revert to the old norm. Of course there have always been exceptions to this rule in the case of some big name authors, whose

books are published simultaneously in both areas.

If you are like me and find it difficult to wait for a highly-anticipated U.K. book, then an excellent source to buy them from is Blackwell's (www.blackwells.co.uk) which offers new books at reasonable prices with free shipping. I've been very pleased with its service and the fine condition in which the books arrive.

When it comes to Barry Award nominations, we like to nominate U.K. books in the year of the American publication because that is when they are most accessible to **DP** readers (predominantly American), whose votes determine the Barry winners. The exception to that rule is when there is no U.S. publication of an excellent British novel.

A recent trend is that many excellent U.K. crime fiction novels are being published here in the U.S. as trade paperback originals. So some of these will inevitably find their way onto lists of Barry Award nominations for Best Paperback Originals.

You will note that all books found in this article will indicate the U.K. publication information (including date of publication) as well as the U.S. publication information for comparison. Pricing is from amazon sites and don't reflect discounts.

It was surprising to me to see how many of the novels involved ex-police-men (fired, quit or retired).

Ex-Police Detective Novels

MIDNIGHT AND BLUE

by Ian Rankin

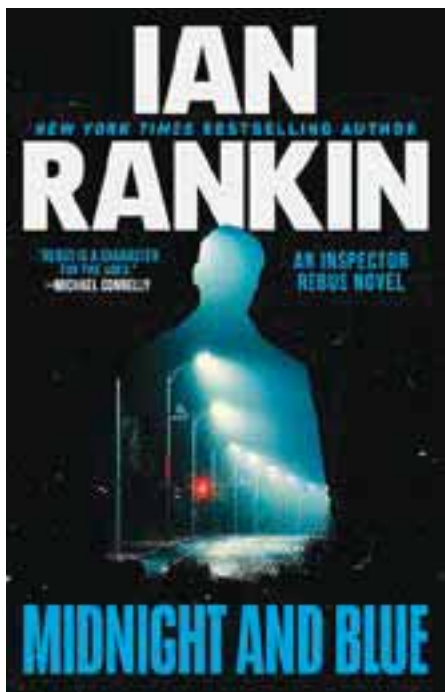
Mulholland, \$29.00, October, 2024 in U.S.

Orion, £25.00, October, 2024 in U.K.
Rebus # 25

Rating: A+

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Ian Rankin's series about Edinburgh detective John Rebus series ranks alongside Michael Connelly's Bosch books, as the most significant crime series of the past thirty years or more. Each of the books are masterpieces of crime writing



that not only showcase the requisite tricks of the trade, but also offer an impressive depth of characterisation, and astute reflections on modern life

MIDNIGHT AND BLUE opens with Rankin's troubled detective in jail alongside many of the crooks he helped to put there. Rebus' life has become a drudge, only enlivened by the constant threats to his wellbeing. For the moment his safety is partially ensured by prison heavyweight Darryl Christie, who is still controlling his criminal empire from inside. Things change, however, when a murder occurs at midnight in a locked cell just down from Rebus. Suddenly he has a purpose, but it is hard to find a killer in a place that is full of them.

While Rebus makes a nuisance of himself asking questions, his former colleagues, Siobhan Clarke Christine Esson, are busy looking into the murder of the prisoner and the disappearance of a young teenage girl. Both cases lead to more mayhem and mystery, while in the background Malcolm Fox, now working in Organised Crime, is trying to further his career by plotting to undermine Christie's criminal power.

As usual, this is a well-crafted and always interesting novel by Rankin, which seizes attention from the opening pages and holds it until the unexpected conclusions. The multi-strand plot is

expertly handled, and enables Rankin to keep the interest at a high level as he moves back and forth between the storylines. It also stops the story from becoming bogged down and limited, by just focusing on Rebus' jail investigation. The book moves along at a good pace with plenty of dips and turns and couple of decent surprises. One of the twists becomes easy to pick, but another two are well hidden and quite surprising.

There are also all the usual, high quality, Rankin hallmarks here: clever plotting, sharp social commentary, vivid pictures of Edinburgh, gritty characters, a wry sense of humour, and the occasional musical reference. Underlying the wit, however, is a strong sense of melancholy that permeates the whole novel. In part, this is due to the corruption and endless cycle of family crime and imprisonment which features so heavily in the book, but it is also heightened by Rebus' age (he is nearly seventy in the book) and his declining capability. Rebus is getting old, and he feels his age knowing that he can no longer physically cope with the threats against him. There is also a sense of lost opportunities and declining relevance.

Rebus features heavily in the book, but Rankin also continues to nicely develop the supporting cast of Siobhan Clarke and Christine Esson in an engaging manner. Both are interesting characters, not perfect by any means, and Siobhan is really growing into a character of real substance, who seems more than capable of carrying a book on her own.

At the core of **MIDNIGHT AND BLUE** is a clever plot that engages and holds our attention. The various strands come together in an interesting way that does not strain credibility, and Rankin delivers some good surprises. Not all of the loose ends are tied up neatly, but we can always look forward to a new novel by Rankin to wrap them up. One of the year's best books!

THE BLACK LOCH

by Peter May

riverrun, £22.00, September, 2024
in U.K.

Mobius, \$28.00, September, 2024 in U.S.

Fin Macleod #4

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

When the third volume of the Lewis Trilogy (**THE CHESSMEN**) was published in 2012 I thought we had seen the last of its detective Fin Macleod. But now, twelve years later Fin makes another appearance when his son Fionnlagh is accused of murdering Caitlin, his mistress, on the Isle of Lewis.

Fin and his wife Marsalili travel to the Isle of Lewis to lend support to their son and his family during this difficult time.

No longer a policeman, Fin has no standing to do any investigation but he can't help but snoop around a bit while he is catching up with the old friends he grew up with. The local policeman George Gunn is one such old friend and he keeps Fin informed about the investigation. All the evidence points to Fionnlagh as the murderer.

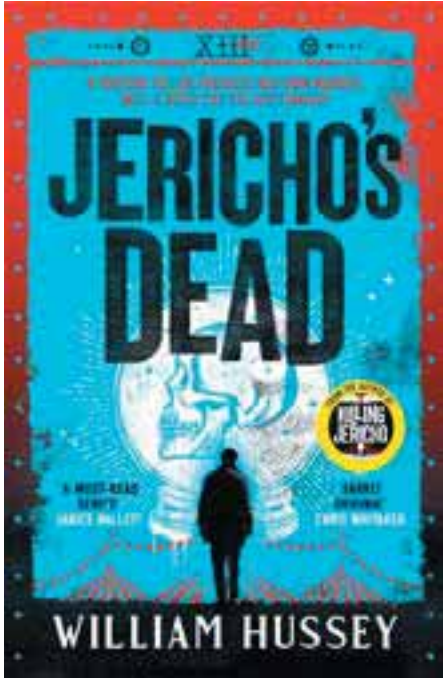


As it turns out there is something rotten and unethical occurring with one of the island's main industries – salmon farming and Fin looks into that to see if it had anything to do with Caitlin's murder.

Peter May does a fantastic job of describing the setting of this remote Scot-

tish island and its tough and imperfect inhabitants. And the mystery is pretty darn good as well.

We now have a Lewis Tetralogy or Quartet. Will we see a Pantalogy of Lewis novels? I hope so.



JERICHO'S DEAD

by William Hussey

Bonnier, £16.99, February 2024 in U.K.

Zaffre, \$20.46, February 2024 in U.S.

Rating: A

Reviewed by Craig Sisterson

Last year, British author William Hussey, whose award-winning kids and YA oeuvre ranged from horror to rom-coms, turned his storytelling talents to adult crime fiction with one of the year's very best books, and one of the freshest leads we've seen in ages. Don't just listen to me on that front; **KILLING JERICHO** was recently shortlisted for the Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year.

Now Scott Jericho is back.

Like Hussey himself, Jericho is a gay man who grew up among Britain's travelling fairground community. Unlike Hussey, Jericho is a former cop who's not that long out of prison, having lost his job and freedom for beating a murderous arsonist during an interrogation. He's also balanced earlier stints of being a 'heavy' for bad men with uni-

versity studies among dreaming spires. A haunted man who tried to escape his ghosts among a haze of drugs, casual sex, and his keen observation skills

In **JERICHO'S DEAD**, after the superb climax to his first outing, Jericho is trying to be done with puzzles, murder, and the darkness that rages within. But he can't stand by when a killer targets someone close to him, fortune tellers and psychics are being murdered, and things seem to be building to a live TV event on Halloween hosted from 'one of the most haunted' buildings in Britain.

Put simply, William Hussey can flat-out write. He's one of the freshest and most interesting voices to emerge in crime fiction in recent years. He just has 'it', a masterful balance of skilful plotting, fascinating storylines and characters that are fresh without feeling 'try-hard' or tick-box, and a vivid evocation of people and place. He showcases all the beauty and ugliness of the traveller lifestyle, the supportiveness and prejudice among the community, in among a page-whirring tale that leaves you hoping for many more books to come starring Scott Jericho. If he can survive.

THE HUNTER

by Tana French

Viking, £18.99, March, 2024 in U.K.

Viking, \$32.00, March, 2024 in U.S.

Cal Hooper #2

Rating: A

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

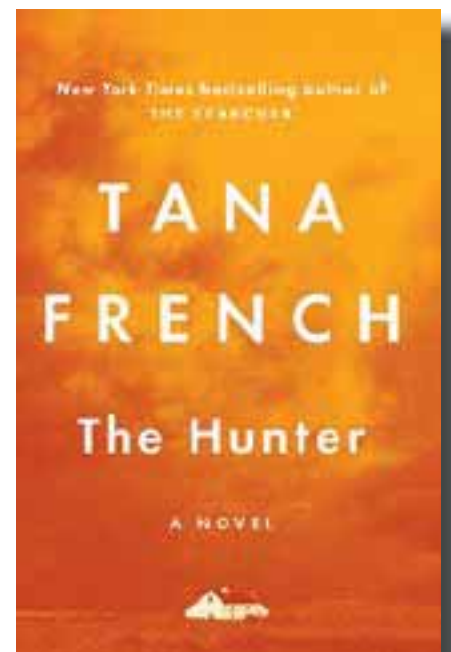
The terrific Tana French has written a terrific new novel, **THE HUNTER**, which focuses again on Cal Hooper, Trey Reddy, and Ardnakelty, the small town in Western Ireland where Cal has come after he left Chicago and his job as a police detective behind. **THE HUNTER** shares characters and setting with her fine novel, **THE SEARCHER**, but I hesitate to call it a sequel. It exists on its own as very much a fully realized novel in its own right.

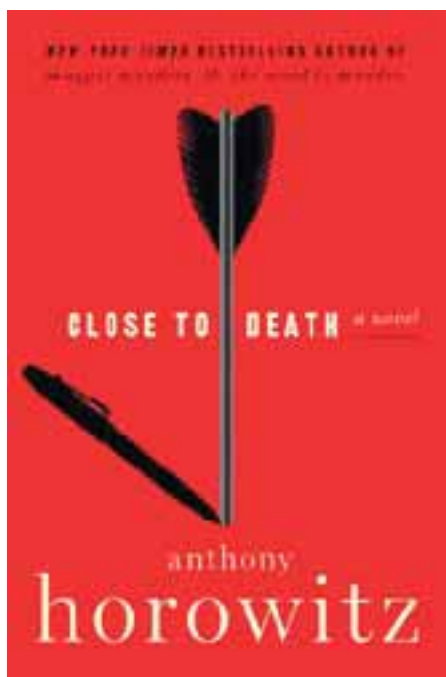
Cal, the American ex-cop, has settled into village life in remote Ardnakelty where he repairs furniture along with Trey Reddy, a troubled teenager he has taken under his wing. He has also start-

ed a relationship with a self-possessed local woman, Lena, and has come to terms with most of his wary neighbors. His tranquility, and that of the entire village, is disrupted when Johnny Reddy, Trey's errant father, suddenly comes home. He brings with him a sketchy Brit and a wild, get-rich-quick scheme that soon unsettles the entire local population.

The local responses to Johnny Reddy range from wildly comic to complicated to lethally dangerous. The locals all play a part in the ultimate fate of the scheme.

One of the finest literary mystery writers, Tana French, has an easy, evocative style and her sense of character and place are unmatched. She also has a sly, oblique way with plot. For instance, in both **THE SEARCHER** and now **THE HUNTER**, the central character seems to be Cal Hooper, the outsider who stands in for the reader in trying to understand the strange dynamics of rural Ireland. My experience was that when I was nearly through **THE HUNTER**, I realized, quite abruptly, that the protagonist is actually Trey Reddy, the lonely and quietly rebellious teenage girl whose search for her brother and his fate actually propel the action in both. Trey IS the searcher. She IS the hunter. And her dedication, her fierce intelligence, and her relentless quest for answers give the books their special impact.





CLOSE TO DEATH

by Anthony Horowitz

Century, £22.00, April, 2024 in U.K.

Harper, \$30.00, April 2024 in U.S.

Hawthorne & Horowitz #5

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

This is the fifth entry in the series that features the author as one of the main characters. I know that sounds gimmicky but it turns out to be quite clever. Anthony Horowitz teams up with the former policeman Hawthorne in solving crimes and writing bestselling crime novels.

Horowitz's publisher is clamoring for another book, but Hawthorne has no current case that he is investigating. So it's decided that he will go back several years to one he worked on as a police consultant with his sidekick John Dudley. He provides Horowitz with his case notes and recordings on a piecemeal basis. These Horowitz writes up as chapters as he goes along and we readers are privy to these chapters and to the arc of the investigation as it unfolds.

The case involved a murder in a small gated community – Riverside Close – in Richmond (Greater London). It is comprised of six homes which feature lawns, flowers and quiet privacy. Everything is peaceful until the Kent-

worthy family arrives. Within a short period of time, the husband manages to aggravate everyone in the Close with his selfish and entitled behavior.

It comes as no surprise to the reader that Mr. Kentworthy winds up dead with a crossbow bolt in his throat.

What does come as a surprise is who did it and how justice is eventually meted out.

The Golden Age puzzle mystery is alive and well in the confident hands of Anthony Horowitz. This was a delight to read.

WE SOLVE MURDERS

by Richard Osman

Viking, £22.00, September, 2024 in U.K.

Pamela Dorman/Viking, \$30.00, September, 2024 in U.S.

We Solve Murders #1

Rating: A-

Reviewed by George Easter

As if the success of the authors Thursday Murder Club series wasn't enough, Richard Osman now gives us another humorous and entertaining series to look forward to each year as new entries are published.

This time he brings us a father-in-law/ daughter-in-law team of sleuths. Steve Wheeler is a retired policeman who has recently lost his wife and has

decided that he's done with being a cop and only wants a quiet life and familiar routines: the pub quiz, his favorite bench, his cat waiting for him at home. Despite his major focus on the simple life, he does accept very small and easily solved cases as an unlicensed private investigator.

On the other hand, his daughter-in-law Amy Wheeler is an adrenaline junkie who works for a private security firm as a body guard. As the story opens, Amy is on a remote island protecting mega-bestselling author Rosie D'Antonio from received threats.

Enter the a hard-to-find villain, François Loubet, who has hatched a diabolical money laundering scheme. He lures micro-influencers to unwittingly carry suitcases full of cash to foreign locales and then kills them before they figure out what is going on. He especially targets influencers who are protected by Maximum Impact Solutions, where Amy works.

As Amy becomes involved in trying to figure out what is going on with an usually large number of dead clients, she enlists her father-in-law Steve's unwilling help.

By the end of the story, Amy and the retired police detective Steve decide to go into business together. The name that they have chosen to work under is "We Solve Murders."

Just like his Thursday Club Murder series, this new series is full of quirky but eminently likeable characters. The tone of the story is light even though people are getting murdered and Osman's sense of humor shines throughout the narrative. I look forward to future episodes of We Solve Murders.

Police Detective Novels

LEO

by Deon Meyer

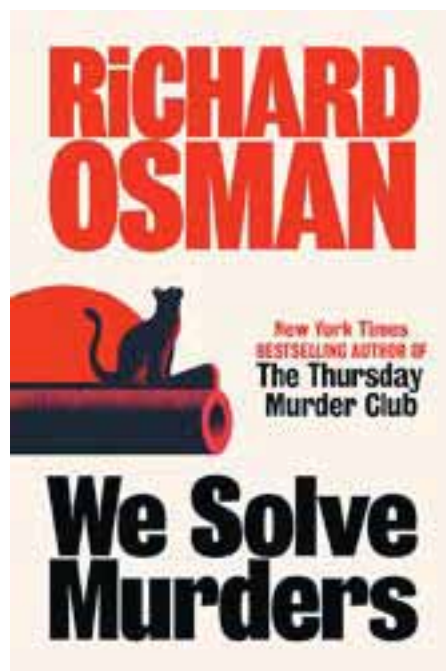
Hodder & Stoughton, £22.00, October, 2024 in U.K.

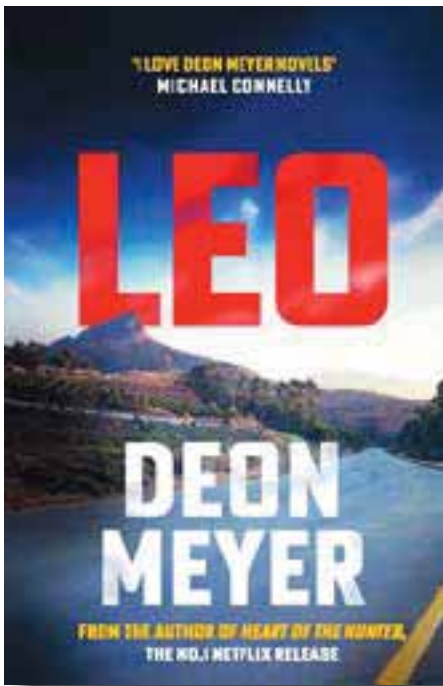
Atlantic Monthly, \$28.00, February, 2025 in U. S.

Benny Griessel/Vaughn Cupido #8

Rating: A

Review by Ali Karim





It has been a little while since we've been riding shotgun with Detective Benny Griessel in South Africa but the wait is finally over with the release of this explosive and violent thriller.

While preparing for his upcoming wedding, Griessel with partner Vince Cupido get involved investigating the death of a female student cyclist on a desolate mountain pass, as well as the principal suspect Basie Small found dead with all the trappings of a professional assassination. Their superiors seem keen to dismiss Basie Small's murder as a robbery gone tragically wrong. What Basie Small was 'doing' may lead Benny and Vince into dangerous intrigue and a conspiracy of sorts that lies at the heart of the country – or does it?

Deon Meyer, an expert in narrative gear shifts, turns the investigation into a caper / heist thriller with a deadly political dimension in the new South Africa.

Written in a terse journalistic style, Meyer's novel delves into the corruption inherent in political governance linking ex-military operators to a series of heists that may [or may not] be linked to Basie Small's mysterious sister Emelia – and his past life in the State Security Apparatus, with the equally enigmatic Tau Berger.

Christina Jaeger and her team of professional criminals who appeared

in **TRACKERS** has returned from Italy and is planning a sequence of multimillion dollar heists – the problem is that they are not the only group eyeing the prize -- or are they?

With blistering set pieces, a keen eye for dialogue – Meyer weaves a dramatic and powerful narrative with a vivid [and colourfully 'alien'] backdrop that is literary escapism at its absolute zenith.

To miss the return of our South African detectives would be a crime. Highly recommended.

THE WRONG HANDS

by Mark Billingham

Sphere, £22.00, June, 2024 in U.K.
Atlantic Monthly Press, \$27.00, July
in U.S.

Detective Miller #2

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

The second in Mark Billingham's new series is even better than the first (**THE LAST DANCE**) and I liked the first quite a bit.

Let's face it – Detective Declan Miller is somewhat of a pain in the butt. He does not suffer fools lightly and doesn't much care what people think of his sardonic wit and sometimes outlandish statements. Bottom line: he's a good, honest and dedicated detective whose track record keeps him from getting



fired.

Miller is still mourning the loss of his murdered wife (herself a police detective) and is frustrated by the lack of progress in the investigation into her murder. He is threatened with dire consequences if he interferes with the case, but as you would expect, Miller works sub rosa to find justice for his wife.

Into Miller's life comes a young man with a suitcase, which he stole at a crowded railway station. Upon opening it and discovering two severed hands, he wants nothing more to do with it so he gives it to Miller.

Suspecting one of the local crime bosses as the party most responsible for his wife's death, he uses the severed hands' case to catch an elusive hit man and bring the crime boss to justice.

Mark Billingham, a former stand-up comic, is known for his caustic wit and wry observations on the inconsistencies of life. I imagine he had a lot of fun writing Miller's dialogue (must as I suppose Reginald Hill felt about writing Dalziel's socially and politically incorrect quips).

The author says that he will continue to write the more orthodox Thorne series, but I, for one, will more eagerly await his next Detective Miller.

THE MERCY CHAIR

by M. W. Craven

Constable, £20.00, June, 2024 in U.K.
Constable, \$27.99, December, 2024
in U.S.

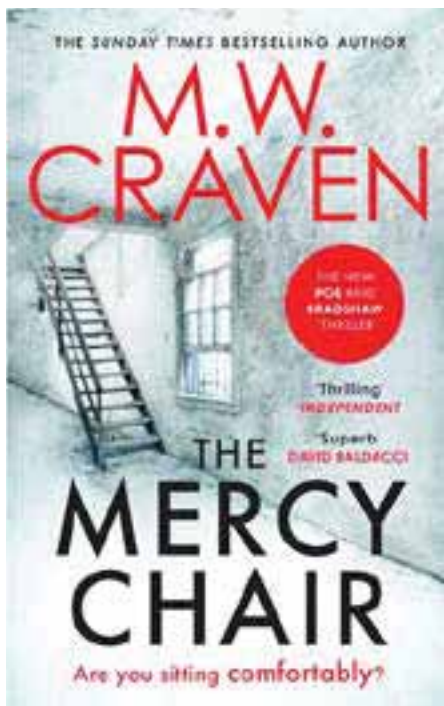
Kindle (June, 2024): \$11.99 in U.S.
Washington Poe and Tilly Bradshaw #6

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

THE MERCY CHAIR begins with Washington Poe attending a mandated therapy session with Dr. Lucy. Poe hasn't been sleeping well and often wakes from nightmares that always involve crows. Poe attempts to explain this obsession his subconscious has with crows by relating the dark details of his most recent murder case. This method of storytelling proves to be quite effective as we, the reader, listen along to what is being told to the psychiatrist.

The case all started when the body



of a fanatical religious leader of a small sect is found tied to a tree, apparently stoned to death. His body is covered in tattoos and some are clues as to why he is now dead. But even Poe's brilliant sidekick Tilly is stumped – for awhile.

Poe and Tilly take a deep dive into the history of the cult, its leaders and members to resolve the case.

I can't applaud the author's skills of plotting and characterization too much. Poe and Tilly are among my all-time favorite characters. Surprises await the reader at regular intervals. Humorous and witty dialogue offset the otherwise dark tone of the novel. But this book, in particular, is not for everyone. There are references to child abuse, homophobia, extremism and violence that some might find quite disturbing. I found them disturbing, but I read on because of the overall quality of the book.

The books in the series should be read in order to follow the strong underlying story, but **THE MERCY CHAIR** could be read as a standalone without much of the back story being revealed.

HOPE TO DIE

by Cara Hunter

Penguin, £9.99 (trade paperback), August, 2022 in U.K.

Morrow, \$18.99 (trade paperback), June,

2024 in U.S.

DI Adam Fawley #6

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

A call out to an isolated farm on the outskirts of Oxford, and a dead man shot at point-blank range. It looks like a burglary gone wrong, but DI Adam Fawley suspects there's a lot more to it than that. When the police discover a connection to a high-profile child murder and an alleged miscarriage of justice, the press go wild. Fawley and his team are suddenly under more scrutiny than ever before. And when you dig up the past, you're sure to find a few skeletons.

This is a continuation of the excellent DI Adam Fawley series, which are all available now in the U.S. in trade paperback. I sense that this series is underrated by its American audience. I find them to be intelligently plotted and populated by intriguing continuing characters.



Cara Hunter

BLACK RIVER

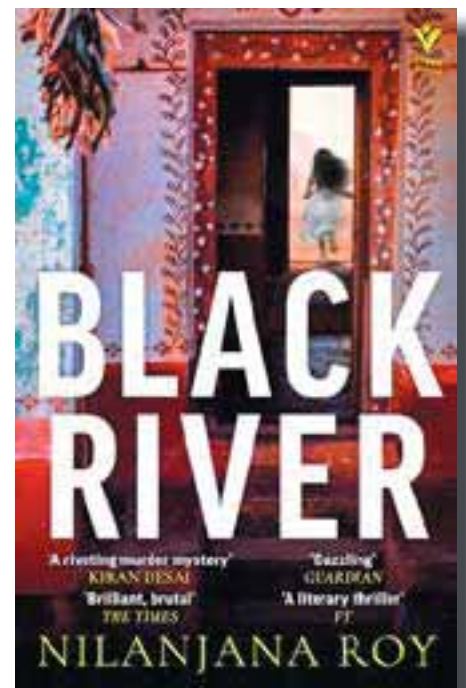
by Nilanjana Roy

Pushkin Press, £16.99 June, 2023 in U.K. (hardcover)

Pushkin Press, \$17.95 September, 2024 in U.S. (trade paperback)

Rating: A

Reviewed by Larry Gandle



In Teetapur, a village a few hours from Delhi, Munia, an eight-year-old girl, is found hanging from a tree. Chand, her father, tries to make sense out of this tragedy. He feels as if he has lost everything in his grief. The village is mostly Hindu so no one seems to have a problem when a Muslim man, Mansoor, is arrested as the main suspect. He was found near the body while proclaiming his innocence. The villagers are convinced Mansoor is guilty while ignoring the fact that Mansoor is unable to raise his arms above his head. Ombir Singh, the police inspector, tries to solve the crime while the department is understaffed.

BLACK RIVER is not simply a police procedural. It is obviously true that a horrible murder has been committed and someone needs to be brought to justice. Yet, the crime falls into the background as the plot revolves around the character of Chand and his life before Munia is born. Chand leaves his family to live in Delhi gaining a trade and developing relationships with other young people. The story tells of poverty and riches, love and loss, and the searing divide of Hindus and Muslims. The book very much reads like a literary work more than crime fiction. It is beautifully written and totally compelling. Characters are rich creations that the

reader will get to know. As the reader approaches the end of the book, there is a satisfactory resolution in spite of the stereotypic scene of the villain divulging all. This is a superb work and a worthy addition to the Gold Dagger shortlist.

LOST AND NEVER FOUND

by Simon Mason

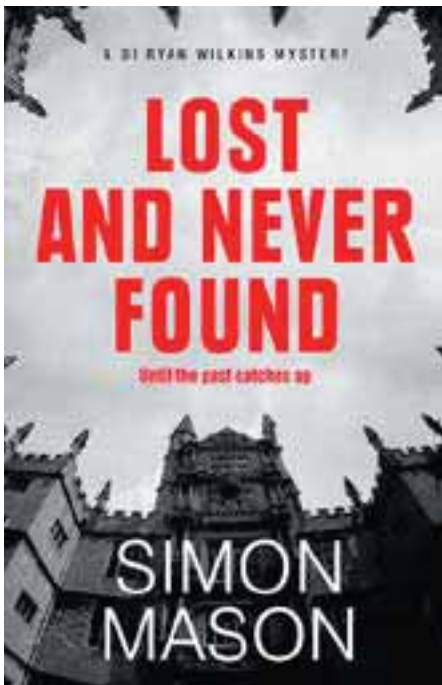
Riverrun, £16.99, January, 2024 in U.K.

Quercus, \$28.99, July, 2024 in U.S.

D.I. Ryan Wilkins #3

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter



DI Ray Wilkins' nose is bent out of shape when his boss Superintendent 'Barko' Wallace appoints DI Ryan Wilkins (no relation) to lead the investigation into the disappearance of socialite Zara Fanshawe. Ryan can't help himself when he requires Ray to perform seemingly menial tasks. I think in England this is referred to as "taking the piss."

As the two detectives dig deeper into Zara's life, they find that for the last few months she has been acting quite erratically, abandoning her life of leisure for that of poverty and penance.

She returned to Oxford, where she had been a student years before, and appeared to have been in search of a homeless man who goes by the name of Waitrose.

There are a couple of side stories. One involves Ray being invited to join a national team in what would be PR work for the police force. Another is Ryan's new romantic relationship with Carol, who may not be all she appears to be.

When Zara's body is found in an empty house belonging to her ex-husband, the investigation enters a new phase. Answers come only when Ryan and Ray take a deep dive into Zara's college life.

Ryan supplies much-needed comic relief with his antics to what would otherwise be a dark and dreary story.

Once again, Simon Mason has come up with a cracker of a story and manages to entertain us on every page. Can't wait to read the next one when it comes out in early 2025.

THE WILD SWIMMERS

by William Shaw

riverrun, £20.00, May, 2024 in U.K.

riverrun, \$20.95, May, 2024 in U.S.

DS Alexandra Cupidi #5

Rating: A

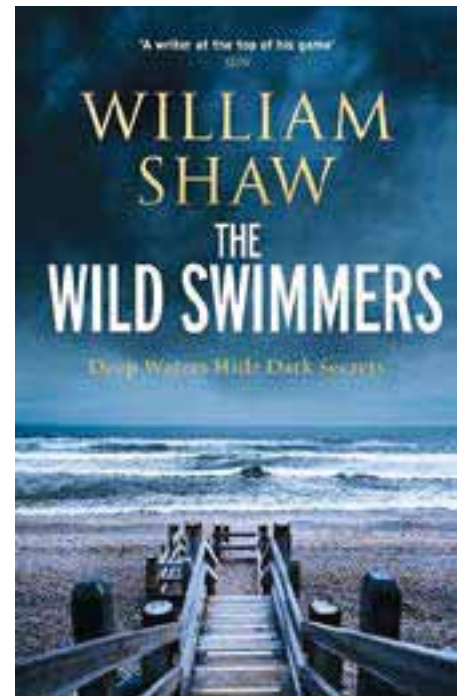
Reviewed by George Easter

Who are wild swimmers you might ask? In this case it's a group of women who brave the cold waters off of the Dungeness coast (Kent) to exercise and commune with nature and each other.

The body of Mimi, one of these wild swimmers, is discovered by DS Alex Cupidi's daughter Zoë, and both become involved in finding answers about this puzzling case. Alex has just returned to full duty after being on light duties for 12 months and begins this investigation getting to know the other wild swimmers in the diverse group. What raises Alex's suspicions is that Mimi was not known to go swimming alone.

A simultaneous plot line involves Cupidi's friend and colleague in the police Jill Ferriter, who goes to Alex's neighbor Bill for help with a private and personal investigation she is conducting. Jill has received a letter from a man in prison who claims to be her father. This side investigations leads to all sorts of unintended consequences.

There is much to admire in the writings of William Shaw (I've read all of his



books). His detailed descriptions of the setting for this series paints lasting mental pictures of the flat salt marshes with its diverse wildlife. It is a perfect place to place his well-defined characters who all exhibit admirable traits despite all having flaws that we readers of the series are more than willing to overlook.

THE DISSECTION MURDERS

by Steve Packwood

Level Best Books, \$16.95, trade pb in U.S.

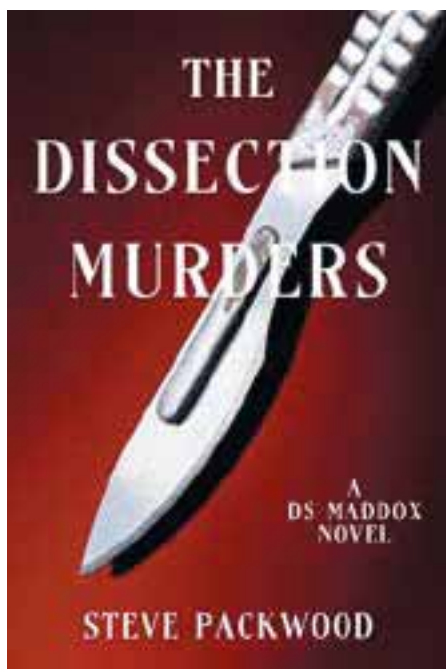
Debut novel

Rating: A

Reviewed by Mary Mason

In the U.K., the police departments are somewhat different than in the U.S. This first novel is a good introduction or example of the differences and similarities. DS Grant Maddox is an old pro, and one of the best. He's assigned to a case that is pretty horrendous. Middle-aged women are being murdered in a gruesome way, hence the book title.

Assigned to help Maddox is DC Amber Bennett, who is new to the CID. They make quite the duo. There are also other members of the force in the office and many of them are interesting to read about. Maddox is well respected and Bennett is lucky to have him as her mentor.



The investigation is complex. Aided and/or hindered by a TV journalist, Isla Baxter and her camera man, who have been given full access to the investigation for a documentary.

Eventually, the common thread is found for the grizzly murders, but it leads to even more puzzles. The victims are of a similar age, but otherwise don't have anything in common. This is where the investigative skills of a veteran cop come into play. The case is solved, but only after a lot of effort by the police, and DS Maddox in particular. I thought I saw the solving of the crime coming, but I was surprised.

I really enjoyed this book. One thing I liked was the look into the mind of an experienced detective, to see the thought process in action. I also enjoyed the various interactions of the officers. Given the author's experience, it's a rare look at the inner workings of police. I understand this is to be a series and I look forward to future installments.

Espionage Novels

THE ENIGMA GIRL

by Henry Porter

Quercus, November, £22.00, November, 2024 in U.K.

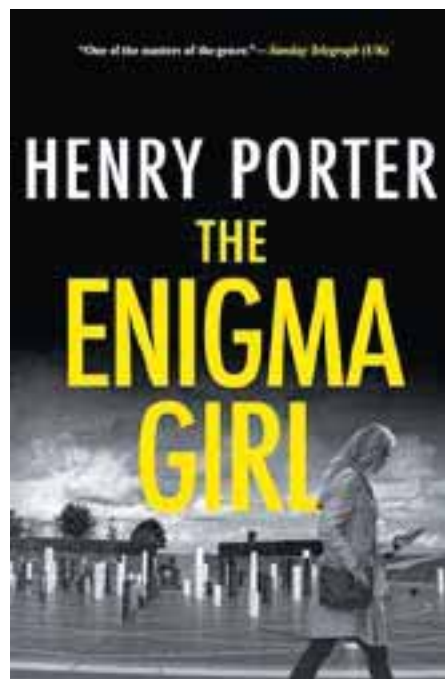
Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, January, 2025 in U.S.

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Poppo

For **THE ENIGMA GIRL**, Henry Porter has deserted his regular central character of recent novels, Paul Samson, for a new protagonist in the form of MI5 operative Slim Parsons. The book opens with Slim recovering from burnout and dealing with a raft of personal issues. Her last deep cover job for MI5 ended with a life-and-death struggle on a private jet that caused her to go on the run from both the deadly target and her angry bosses in the Security Service. They say that violence comes too easily to her and that she is potentially too unstable for the role of an MI5 operative. Despite this, Slim is recalled and asked to infiltrate a news website that is causing alarm in the highest circles. It is staffed by a group descended from wartime codebreakers at Bletchley Park and they seem to have dangerous access to present day government secrets.

The operation looks like a demotion, but Slim accepts it on the condition that the Security Service searches for her missing brother. The mission, however, turns out to be more complex than she expected. Soon Slim is having to deal with threats from her last mission, human traffickers, bosses who seem to be playing their own nefarious game and the pending death of her mother.



This is a first class spy thriller. Porter adroitly mixes the personal and the professional, and develops Slim into a character of real substance, who changes over the course of the book. The pacing is a little slow at times, but is helped along by several flashes of exciting violence and a deep sense of menace that permeates the book from the opening pages. Porter also ably conveys the bureaucratic wheeling and dealing that drives the book, and the dodgy nexus between the intelligence services, politics and the intrusion of corrupt business interests. There is also plenty of interesting information about Bletchley Park and intelligence operations during World War II and after.

On the negative side, the book is probably a bit too long and lacks the driving focal point that made Porter's best novels, **FIREFLY** and **WHITE HOT SILENCE**, so good. Instead of a single overarching mission around which other things develop, there is a mix of different subplots and dangers this time around, which take some time to come together. The ending, though, is very tense and delivers some good thrills. These concerns, however, are only minor and do not stop **THE ENIGMA GIRL** from being one of the best spy novels that I have read this year.

George's Take: Henry Porter's creation and depiction of the fascinating character of Slim Parsons was the highlight of this exciting spy thriller for me. It is not an easy read and one could say that it was too long. For instance, all the archaeological side story could be eliminated and the story would not have suffered in the least. There were more than enough engaging plot lines without it. That said, Henry Porter is one of the best writers of spy/action thrillers writing today and I will always look forward to reading his future works.

Rating: A-

THE SCARLET PAPERS

by Matthew Richardson

Michael Joseph, £14.99 in U.K.

Penguin, \$16.99 in U.S.

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Poppo



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!

Historical Mystery

THE MAIDEN

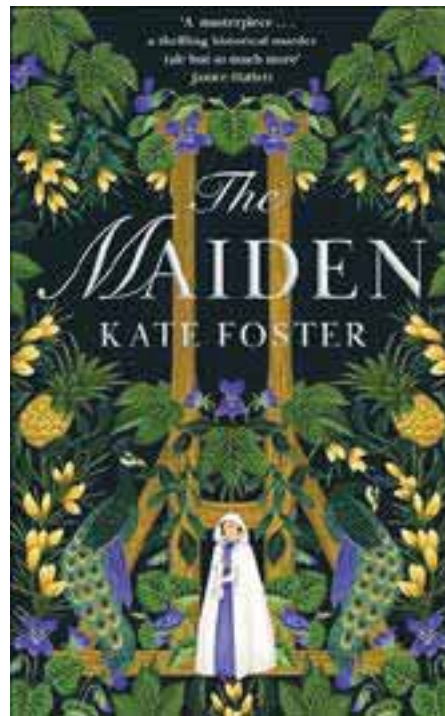
by Kate Foster

Mantle, £14.99, April, 2023 in U.K.

Pan, \$10.78, January, 2024 in U.S.

Rating: A

Reviewed by Larry Gandle



In Edinburgh, October 1679, Christian Nimmo is convicted of murder and she is to be executed by The Maiden- a smaller version of the guillotine. Lady Christian is a member of the aristocracy and therefore the murder of her lover, James Forrester, is the talk of the town. How did this woman of the upper class fall to the position she is? A year ago she was living the life of an upper class woman hoping to be married and now ready to be executed. Why? The answer lies in the text of this superb novel.

The author is extremely talented. Her first novel is skillfully written and is totally compelling. The book follows an alternate point of view plan in which Lady Christian chapters alternates with Violet who is a prostitute living in Edinburgh. They each have a very different relationship to James Forrester. Yet, in the end, their paths cross in a critical way. The book is impossible to put down. Characters are well rounded and realistic. The book was longlisted for the Woman's Prize in Great Britain and I could easily see why. Unfortunately, it is not available in the USA but can be ordered from Blackwells in Great Britain. I loved this book and consider it one of the best of the CWA Dagger shortlists. Highly recommended.

Psychological Suspense

A TALENT FOR MURDER

by Peter Swanson

Faber & Faber, £18.99, July, 2024 in U.K.

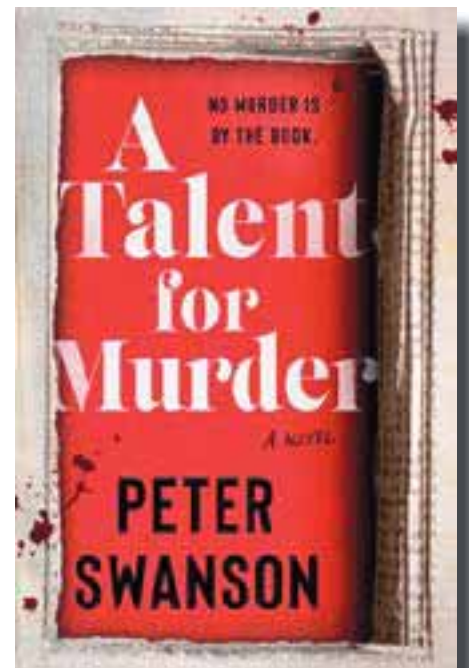
Morrow, \$30.00, June, 2024 in U.S.

Henry Kimball #3

Rating: A

Reviewed by Ali Karim

In a word, Swanson's latest novel can be summarised as 'extraordinary'. And akin to his previous works, A TALENT FOR MURDER is a love letter



to readers of literary crime fiction, for there are affectionate nods and winks toward the conventions of the genre.

Swanson's talent of weaving such engaging tales lies at his ability of taking a crime fiction cliché or a convention and turning it on its head; making you question the darkness [or horror] of human nature as well as its entwined beauty.

Martha Ratcliff is a middle-aged mild mannered librarian; a wall-flower married to an equally unimpressive salesman - Alan Peralta. After viewing him [covertly] from her bedroom window on his return from one of his road-trips, she begins to suspect that maybe her husband is serial killer.

This suspicion becomes an existential crisis for the librarian as a spider-web of thoughts spin in her mind. Swanson forces the reader to contemplate if we ever can truly know [or understand] someone?

Martha contacts her college friend the irascible Lily Kitner to help uncover the truth about her husband. Lily had aided her during her schooling when she previously had 'issues.' Kitner, bored and living at home with her elderly parents decides to help her old friend. She brings Private Investigator Henry Kimball to assist and so this dark adventure starts to unravel as Kitner and Kimball uncover what lies beneath the veneer of normal lives and a trail of dead bodies.

Told in a beguiling style, alternating between third person as well as first person point of views, we get a literary thriller that will make you shiver next time you think about reading a collection of short stories of John Cheever.

Though a warning – this novel is beguiling because under the cheerfully evocative and engaging narrative, lurks a much darker truth about concealed psychopaths and how banal evil can be.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

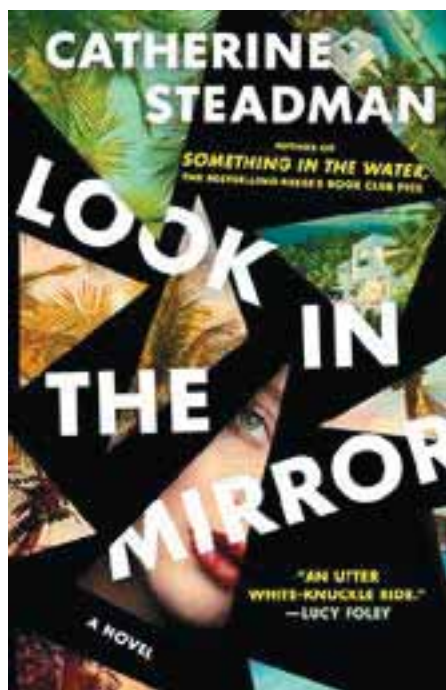
by Catherine Steadman

Quercus, £16.99. July, 2024 in U.K.
Ballantine, \$30.00, July, 2024 in U.S.

Rating: A

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Catherine Steadman's **LOOK IN THE MIRROR** ranks alongside M. W.



Craven's **THE MERCY CHAIR**, as one of the most addictively readable books I have encountered so far this year.

The story opens with a dual storyline. When Nina's father dies, she inherits a gleaming dream vacation home in a balmy tropical paradise, one she had no idea existed. The house is extraordinary: state-of-the-art, all glass and marble. She is confused as to how her sensible father could ever have had enough money for this and why he never told her. Desperate for some answers, she agrees to visit the house.

Meanwhile Maria, once an ambitious medical student, is now a nanny for the super-rich. The money's better, and so are the destinations, like her new assignment in the British Virgin Islands. When her wards fail to turn up at the luxury house, Maria begins to make herself at home, spending her days luxuriating by the pool. There's just one rule: 'Don't go in the basement'. As both women's timelines intertwine, dark secrets start to unravel, and one thing quickly becomes clear: nothing could have prepared them for what they are about to encounter.

Catherine's intriguing plot quickly draws you in and after a couple of chapters you are keenly turning the pages to find out what is going on and what will happen next. The book is quite clever-

ly structured, and Catherine skilfully unfolds her story in a way that keeps the tension at a high level. There are plenty of twists, and a good amount of excitement, as both Maria and Nina find themselves battling for their lives.

Both Maria and Nina are well fleshed out and interesting, and their actions are credible. Their characters grow with the story, without ever slowing the pace, and their reflections add some good depth. The other members of Catherine's cast are also well done and fit nicely into the story.

Towards the end the book's central premise possibly requires some suspension of disbelief, but not enough to stop **LOOK IN THE MIRROR** from being a compelling read.

KILL FOR ME, KILL FOR YOU

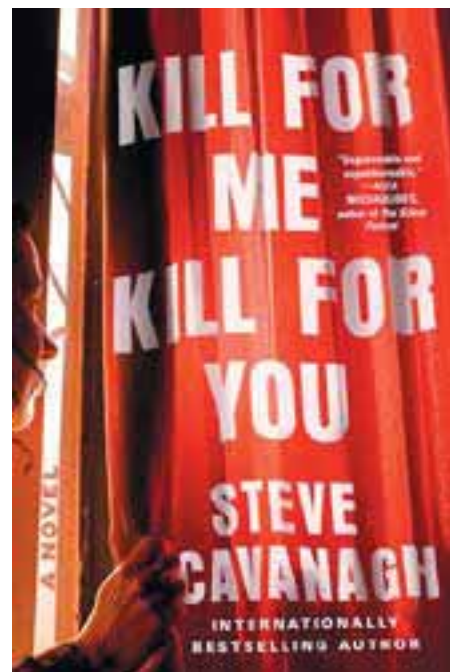
by Steve Cavanaugh

Headline, £14.99, August, 2023 in U.K.
Atria, \$27.99, March, 2024 in U.S.

Rating: A

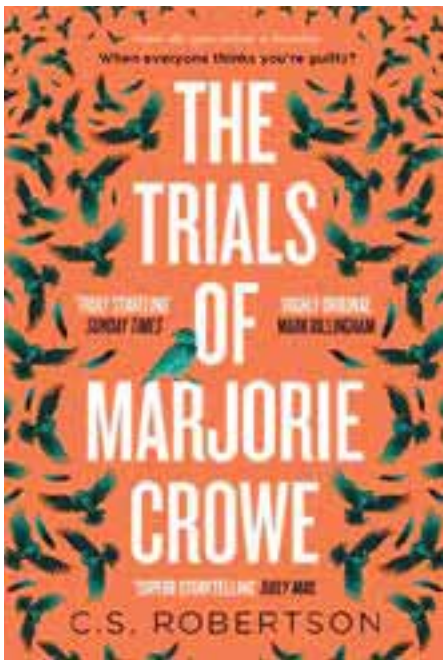
Reviewed by Larry Gandle

Amanda and Wendy meet at a support group in New York City. Both of them have suffered a traumatic incident due to men that they have identified as the individuals responsible for their individual tragedies. They begin to spend time together and then, after one night



of heavy drinking, they make a pact that they will kill for each other -- similar to Patricia Highsmith's **STRANGERS ON A TRAIN**, which Wendy recently read. The result is totally unexpected as nobody appears to be who they seem to be. The suspense continues to ratchet itself up.

This is a standalone thriller by Steve Cavanaugh. His Eddie Flynn legal thrillers are nonstop thrillers and this one follows a similar path. There are multiple twists and turns which most readers will never see coming. It is totally entertaining. At the end, the suspense was so ratcheted up that I could not read it sitting down. I really don't want to say anything else for fear of giving away too much of the plot. All I will say is that it is one of the best thrillers I have read in years.



THE TRIALS OF MARJORIE CROWE

by C. S. Robertson

Hodder & Stoughton, \$26.99,

September

Rating: A

Reviewed by Craig Sisterson

Burn the witch. History doesn't repeat but it often rhymes, as they say, and in Scottish author CS Robertson's terrific standalone thriller the rhyming

echoes from the past involve witchcraft, and how women who stand apart from 'normal society' have been persecuted throughout the centuries; sometimes fatally, often by their closest neighbours. Think the Salem Witch Trials, where 200 people were accused of witchcraft on the flimsiest of evidence, and two dozen executed or died in custody.

In **THE TRIALS OF MARJORIE CROWE**, twice a day the titular character walks the same route through and around the village of Kilgoyne, determinedly keeping on track even when that means walking right through a pub where she can face stares and jeers. She's the village metronome, the 'weird old lady' living on the outskirts that some kids taunt, and others are fascinated by. How old is Marjorie, and is she a retired librarian, a former pharmacist, or a witch? When local teen Charlie McKee is found hanging in the woods, the village begins to turn on Marjorie. Then social media. *Burn the witch.*

Then another youngster goes missing...

Marjorie can't explain her actions or trust her own recollections. Is she a victim, or a monster?

Robertson deftly draws readers into an unsettling, character-centric crime story that dips into the occult while being horrifyingly plausible. Internet pile-ons akin to historic lynch-mobs. Fears of anyone different, or anything that's not easily explained. Interspersed vignettes about real-life Scottish women accused of witchcraft in centuries past, and executed, are a poignant reminder of how easily distrust is stoked into persecution, how those in power may abuse it, and the ubiquitous-ness of misogyny. History doesn't repeat, but rhymes. *Burn the witch.*

An unusual, terrific crime thriller

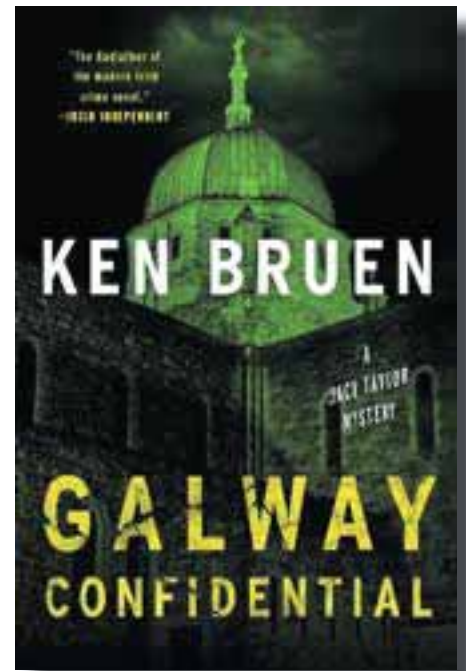
Private Eye Novel

GALWAY CONFIDENTIAL

by Ken Bruen

Head of Zeus, £20.00, March, 2024 in U.K.

Mysterious Press, \$26.95, March, 2024 in U.S.



Jack Taylor #17

Rating: A

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: The man looked down at the woman.

The latest book by the great Ken Bruen, **GALWAY CONFIDENTIAL**, is a brilliant addition to the long-running Jack Taylor series, arguably the best of Irish noir and, for me, one of the best mystery series ever.

Jack Taylor, ex-Garda, ex-drunk, ex-Catholic, has been in a coma. For a year and a half. When he wakes in a hospital, the man visiting him, named Raferty, gives him a drink of whiskey. Jack doesn't remember him. But he has been Jack's most frequent visitor and helps him through his recovery. In fact, it was Raferty who saved his life when he was attacked.

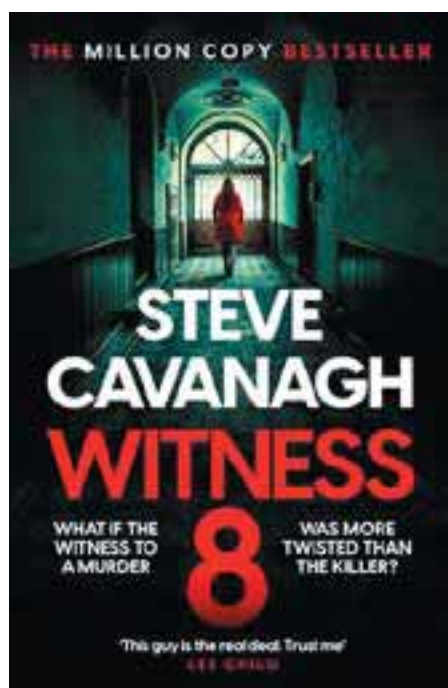
On his first visit to a pub, newly opened after the COVID lockdown, a woman named Sheila Winston, a former nun, approaches Jack and asks for his help. It seems that nuns are being attacked. The Guards are baffled. Reluctantly, with Raferty's help, Jack agrees to investigate. He gets nowhere. More nuns are attacked. Some of them die. Jack gets nowhere. The plot unravels slowly and the twists are heartbreaking. Murders are committed. Jameson is drunk. A

conclusion is reached.

Bruen has always been a great stylist. The Irish lilt, the sly humor, the compact action are all hallmarks. But in his latest few novels, the Galway books, he has further refined his approach. He has pared away all non-essentials, leaving behind a kind of poetry. The characters are still well-drawn, the plot expertly delineated, the action vivid, the humor intact, but the prose itself is sparse and mannered and so beautiful it hurts your eyes to read it.

Bruen is absolutely essential reading. Highly recommended.

Legal Thriller



WITNESS 8

by Steve Cavanagh

Headline, £16.99, August, 2024 in U.K.

Atria, \$29.99, March, 2025 in U.S.

Eddie Flynn #8

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Jeff Popple

Steve Cavanagh's books about New York lawyer Eddie Flynn are always a twisty, fun read and his latest adventure is no exception.

Ruby Johnson is a nanny and maid to wealthy families in Manhattan's West 74th Street. She knows their routines and their secrets. One night, on her way

home, Ruby witnesses a neighbour's murder. She knows the victim. She knows the killer. She makes an anonymous call to the police and names the murderer. But she didn't tell the truth.

Eddie agrees to take on the case for the accused murderer, a high flying New York surgeon, convinced that he is defending an innocent man accused of a terrible crime. Little does he realise that his defence of the man is being constantly undermined by Ruby and her actions. Meanwhile, Eddie also finds himself on the wrong side of a New York criminal enterprise involving cops and former cops, and has to fend off several threats on his life while defending his client.

This is a typical Eddie Flynn novel. The multi-layered plot rushes along at a hectic rate and there are plenty of twists and turns, and unexpected developments. The courtroom scenes are engrossing and clever, and the addition of hired killers hunting Eddie add a good dose of excitement. The telling is short and sharp, without a lot of introspection or description, and the book powers to a very good climax.

You could quibble over the credibility of aspects of the story, but it is very easy to just settle back and let Mr Cavanagh entertain you.

Fans of the earlier novels will love this one.

Action Thrillers

FIRST STRIKE

by Stephen Leather

Independently Published, £16.99, July, 2024 in U.K.

Independently Published, \$22.20, July, 2024 in U.S.

Spider Shepherd #21

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

MI5 analyst David White is on vacation in Israel with his wife and two teenaged daughters when said daughters beg to attend the Nova music festival close to the Gaza border. Then the Hamas attacks of October 7th occur



and David and one of his daughters are captured and taken back to the Gaza tunnels as hostages. The other daughter is killed.

Because of David's knowledge and experience as an employee of MI5, the British government deems it imperative to mount a rescue operation before the Hamas terrorists find out who David is. And who better than MI5 operative and former special forces soldier Spider Shepherd to head up such an operation.? With the invaluable help of Israeli forces and intelligence, the rescue is carried out, but, of his family, only David makes it out alive.

The loss of their two daughters destroys the parents in more ways than one. The normally placid and peaceful David becomes enraged and begins plotting the murders of those Hamas leaders ultimately responsible for October 7th. He uses all of the trade craft learned from his years of experience to disappear in order to carry out his plans. Spider Shepherd is tasked with finding David and putting an end to his plans.

Stephen Leather brings recent headlines news events to life in vivid detail. He writes so smoothly that one almost fails to see the complexity of this story and its multi-layers filled with surprise. I've enjoyed every one of the 21 Spider

Shepherd thrillers that I've read, but **FIRST STRIKE** stands out as one of the best, if not the best, of the series.

Apparently because of the controversial aspects of the novels (the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in Gaza), Leather's decades-long publisher wouldn't publish this novel and Stephen had to self-publish it. I have not been able to confirm that with another source, so this is still hearsay. But it wouldn't surprise me if it was true, considering the current political climate.



ASSASSIN EIGHTEEN

by John Brownlow

Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00, August
Assassin #2

Rating: A

Reviewed by George Easter

Who knew there was a pecking order among world-class assassins? It seems that to be considered the best in the world by your peers, one must successfully eliminate the current holder of the title "Best Assassin in the World." There have been seventeen professional killers who have reached this pinnacle of professional success. The current holder, known as Seventeen, has decided to retire in the fortress-like home of his predecessor Sixteen. But he knows it will be just a matter of time before

someone comes along to try and take his place.

So Seventeen isn't too surprised when a sniper's bullet hits the bullet-proof glass window just inches from his face. He quickly finds the person who attempted to kill him and is shocked to find that it's a 9-year-old girl named Mireille. He's not a child killer so he decides to find out who Mireille is and why she was instructed to fire the bullet. In the meantime, he knows his safe haven is no longer safe and goes on the run. Along the way he picks up his former lover the multi-talented Kat (daughter of Sixteen).

Not everyone will like all aspects of the denouement but all should agree that the ending was inevitable.

Brownlow has mastered the art of short chapters, many of which end with cliff-hangers. The action-packed novel is 467 pages with 190 chapters. That's roughly 2-1/2 pages per chapter.

The author won the CWA Steel Dagger for Best Thriller in the U.K. last year for **SEVENTEEN** (quickly renamed **AGENT SEVENTEEN**) and deservedly so. **SEVENTEEN** is a dynamite thriller and **ASSASSIN EIGHTEEN** is its match. Action thriller fans should flock to this series.



Well, there you have it -- as good a list of great U.K. reads as I have ever provided you. I hope you read some or all of them. Let me know if you agree or disagree with the reviews.

There are a couple of titles that I could have included in this article, but didn't. My favorite book of the year is **ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK** by the British writer Chris Whitaker. The book is set in the U.S. and just doesn't have the feel of a British book so that is the reason you won't find it here. The other exception is **AGAINST THE GRAIN** by Peter Lovesey. I review it in my column because I wanted to make some personal comments about Peter's last book and his stellar career.

**Macavity Award
Winners 2024**

Best Mystery

ALL THE SINNERS BLEED, S. A. Cosby – Winner

- DARK RIDE, Lou Berney
- HIDE, Tracy Clark
- HAPPINESS FALLS, Angie Kim
- MURDER BOOK, Thomas Perry
- CROOK MANIFESTO, Colson Whitehead

Best First Mystery

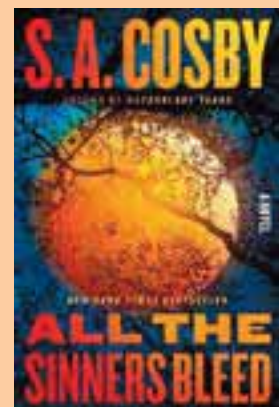
THE PEACOCK AND THE SPARROW, I.S. Berry – Winner

- THE GOLDEN GATE, Amy Chua
- SCORCHED GRACE, Margot Douaihy
- MURDER BY DEGREES, Ritu Mukerji
- DUTCH THREAT, Josh Pachter
- MOTHER-DAUGHTER MURDER NIGHT, Nina Simon

**Sue Feder Memorial
Award for Best
Historical Mystery**

THE MISTRESS OF BHATIA HOUSE, Sujata Massey – Winner

- TIME'S UNDOING, Cheryl Head
- EVERGREEN, Naomi Hirahara
- THE RIVER WE REMEMBER, William Kent Krueger
- OUR LYING KIN, Claudia Hagadus Long
- THE HEAVEN AND EARTH GROCERY STORE, James McBride



Deadly Pleasures Best of 2024



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 2024 lists and some will be nominated for our Barry Awards. All sub-genre's of the mystery/crime fiction and thriller world are represented. Book titles in green are new.

Best Mystery/Crime Novel

****THE HEART IN WINTER**, Kevin Barry (Doubleday, \$28.00, July). October 1891. A hard winter approaches across the Rocky Mountains. The city of Butte, Montana is rich on copper mines and rampant with vice and debauchery among a hard-living crowd of immigrant Irish workers. Here we find Tom Rourke, a young poet and ballad-maker of the town, but also a doper, a drinker, and a fearsome degenerate. Just as he feels his life is heading nowhere fast, Polly Gillespie arrives in town as the new bride of the extremely devout mine captain Long Anthony Harrington. A thunderbolt love affair takes spark between Tom and Polly and they strike out west on a stolen horse, moving through the badlands of Montana and Idaho, and briefly an idyll of wild romance perfects itself. But a posse of deranged Cornish gunmen are soon in hot pursuit and closing in fast. With everything to lose and the safety and anonymity of San Francisco still a distant speck on their horizon, the choices they make will haunt them for the rest of their lives. **PW, Kirkus and BL**

****RETURN TO BLOOD**, Michael Bennett (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, May). After the perils of a case that landed much too close to home, Hana Westerman turned in her badge and abandoned her career as a detective in the Auckland CIB. Hoping that civilian life will offer her the opportunity to rest and recalibrate, she returns to her hometown of Tata Bay, where she moves back in with her beloved father, Eru. Yet the memories of the past are everywhere, and as she goes for her daily run on the beach, Hana passes a local monument to Grace, a high school



classmate who was murdered more than twenty years ago and hidden in the dunes overlooking the sea. A Maori man with a previous record was convicted of the crime, although Eru never believed he was guilty. When her daughter finds another young woman's skeleton in the sands, Hana soon finds herself awk-

wardly involved. **AZ & DP**

****THE WRONG HANDS**, Mark Billingham (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, July). Unconventional Detective Declan Miller has a problem. Well, two problems. First, there's his dead wife and her yet-to-be-solved murder. He really should stop talking to her ghosts... Second, and most pressing, a young man has just appeared on his doorstep with a briefcase . . . containing a pair of severed hands. Miller knows this case is proof of a contract killing commissioned by local ne'er do well Wayne Cutler—a man he suspects might also be responsible for his wife's death. Now Miller has leverage, but unfortunately, he also has something that both Cutler and a villainous fast-food kingpin are desperate to get hold of. **PW & DP**

****ANNA O**, Matthew Blake (Harper, \$30.00, January). Anna Ogilvy was a budding twenty-five-year-old writer with a bright future. Then, one night, she stabbed two people to death with no apparent motive—and hasn't woken up since. Dubbed "Sleeping Beauty" by the tabloids, Anna's condition is a rare psychosomatic disorder known to neurologists as "resignation syndrome." Dr. Benedict Prince is a forensic psychologist and an expert in the field of sleep-related homicides. His methods are the last hope of solving the infamous "Anna O" case and waking Anna up so she can stand trial. But he must be careful treating such a high-profile suspect—he's got career secrets and a complicated personal life of his own. As Anna shows the first signs of stirring, Benedict must determine what really happened and whether Anna should be held responsible for her crimes. Only

Anna knows the truth about that night, but only Benedict knows how to discover it. And they're both in danger from what they find out. **Kirkus, PW & AZ**

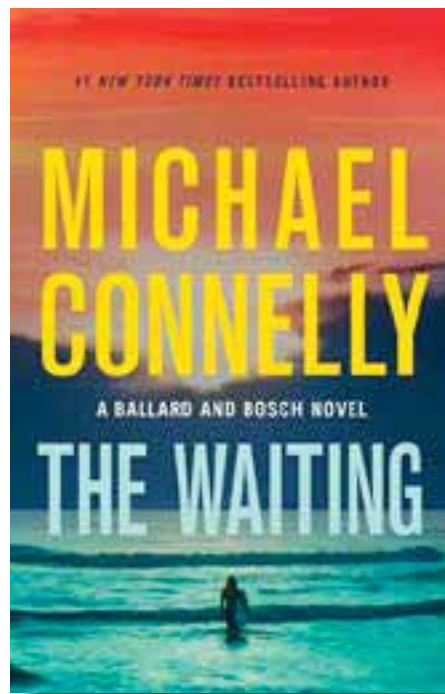
****KILL FOR ME KILL FOR YOU**, Steve Cavanagh (Atria, \$27.99, March). One dark evening in New York City, two strangers meet by chance. Over drinks, Amanda and Wendy realise they have so much in common. They both feel alone. They both drink alone.

And they both desperately want revenge against the two men who destroyed their families.

Together, they have the perfect plan. If you kill for me, I'll kill for you. **PW, AZ & DP**

****ONE OF US KNOWS**, Alyssa Cole (Morrow, \$28.99). Years after a breakdown and a diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder derailed her historical preservationist career, Kenetria Nash and her alters have been given a second chance they can't refuse: a position as resident caretaker of a historic home. Having been dormant for years, Ken has no idea what led them to this isolated Hudson River island, but she's determined not to ruin their opportunity. Then a surprise visit from the home's conservation trust just as a Nor'easter bears down on the island disrupts her newfound life, leaving Ken trapped with a group of possibly dangerous strangers—including the man who brought her life tumbling down years earlier. When he turns up dead, Ken is the prime suspect. **BL, LJ & AZ**

****THE WAITING**, Michael Connelly (Little, Brown, \$30.00). Renée Ballard and the LAPD's Open-Unsolved Unit get a hot shot DNA connection between a recently arrested man and a serial rapist and murderer who went quiet twenty years ago. The arrested man is only twenty-four, so the genetic link must be familial: His father was the Pillowcase Rapist, responsible for a five-year reign of terror in the city of angels. But when Ballard and her team move in on their suspect, they encounter a baffling web of secrets and legal hurdles. Meanwhile, Ballard's badge, gun, and ID are



stolen—a theft she can't report without giving her enemies in the department ammunition to end her career as a detective. She works the burglary alone, but her mission draws her into unexpected danger. With no choice but to go outside the department for help, she knocks on the door of Harry Bosch. At the same time, Ballard takes on a new volunteer to the cold case unit: Bosch's daughter Maddie, now a patrol officer. But Maddie has an ulterior motive for getting access to the city's library of lost souls—a case that may be the most iconic in the city's history. **PW, AZ & DP**

****THE INSTRUMENTS OF DARKNESS**, John Connolly (Atria, \$29.99, May). In Maine, Colleen Clark stands accused of the worst crime a mother can commit: the abduction and possible murder of her child. Everyone—ambitious politicians in an election season, hardened police, ordinary folk—has an opinion on the case, and most believe she is guilty. But most is not all. Defending Colleen is the lawyer Moxie Castin, and working alongside him is the private investigator Charlie Parker, who senses the tale has another twist, one involving a husband too eager to accept his wife's guilt, a group of fascists arming for war, a disgraced psychic seeking redemption, and an old twisted

house deep in the Maine woods, a house that should never have been built. **AZ & DP(2)**

****I DREAMED OF FALLING**, Julia Dahl (Minotaur, \$29.00, September). Roman Grady is the sole reporter for the local newspaper in a tiny Hudson Valley town - a town so small that every store opening and DUI is considered newsworthy. But when Roman's long-time girlfriend, Ashley, the mother of his four-year-old son, is found dead, he realizes he had no idea what was really going on in her life. And when he starts asking questions, he's not prepared for the answers. **PW & LJ**

****THE NIGHT IN QUESTION**, Susan Fletcher (Union Square, \$28.99, April). Florrie Butterfield—eighty-seven, one-legged, and of cheerful disposition—believes there can't be any more adventures or surprises in life to experience. Yet one midsummer's evening, there's an accident at Babbington Hall—the adult residence where she lives—so shocking and strange that Florrie is suspicious; is this really an accident? Or is she being lied to? Is she, in fact, living alongside a potential murderer? In her efforts to learn the truth, Florrie is forced to look back on her own life, with all its passions and regrets; she must confront her own bloody secret—and, at last, forgive herself. Above all, Florrie learns, through the help of her new friend, Stanhope, that you're never too old to have the life you've always dreamed of. When it comes to love, it's never too late. **BL, PW & AZ**

****THE HUNTER**, Tana French (Viking, \$32.00, March). Cal Hooper took early retirement from Chicago PD and moved to rural Ireland looking for peace. He's found it, more or less: he's built a relationship with a local woman, Lena, and he's gradually turning Trey Reddy from a half-feral teenager into a good kid going good places. But then Trey's long-absent father reappears, bringing along an English millionaire and a scheme to find gold in the townland, and suddenly everything the three of them have been building is under

threat. Cal and Lena are both ready to do whatever it takes to protect Trey, but Trey doesn't want protecting. What she wants is revenge. **AZ & DP**

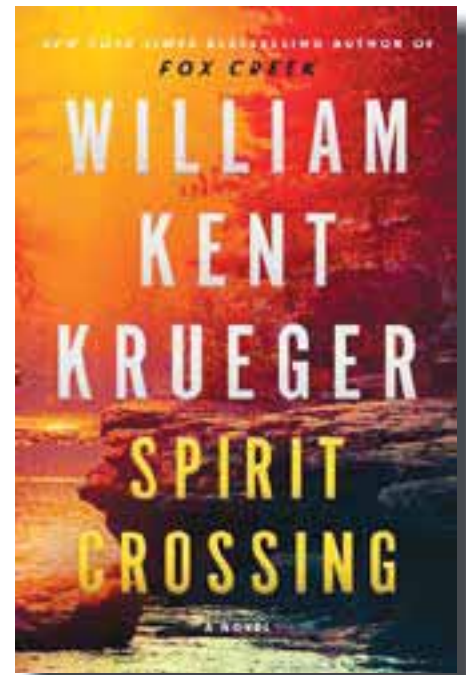
****BLACK WOLF**, Juan Gomez-Jurado (Minotaur, \$28.00, March). Antonia Scott is the lynchpin of the Red Queen project, created to work behind the scenes to solve the most dark, devious and dangerous crimes. In southern Spain, in the Costa del Sol, a key mafia figure is found brutally murdered in his villa, his pregnant wife, Lola Moreno, barely escapes an attempt to kill her and is on the run. An unusual shipping container arrives from St Petersburg in Spain with the corpses of nine women. Now Antonia, with the help of her protector, Jon Gutierrez, must track down the missing Lola. But they aren't the only ones – a dangerous hitman, known as the Black Wolf, is also on her trail. And Antonia Scott, still plagued by her personal demons, must outwit, out-manuever, and, ultimately, face this terrible, mysterious killer. **AZ & DP**

****CLOSE TO DEATH**, Anthony Horowitz (Harper, \$30.00, April). Riverside Close is a picture-perfect community. The six exclusive and attractive houses are tucked far away from the noise and grime of city life, allowing the residents to enjoy beautiful gardens, pleasant birdsong, and tranquility from behind the security of a locked gate. It is the perfect idyll, until the Kentworthy family arrives, with their four giant, gas-guzzling cars, gaggle of shrieking children, and plans for a garish swimming pool in the backyard. Obvious outsiders, the Kentworthys do not belong in Riverside Close, and quickly offend every last one of the neighbors. When Charles Kentworthy is found dead on his own doorstep, a crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest, Detective Hawthorne is the only investigator they can call to solve the case. **Kirkus, AZ, BL & DP**

****SOUTHERN MAN**, Greg Iles (Morrow, \$36.00, May). Fifteen years after the events of the Natchez Burning trilogy, Penn Cage is alone. Nearly all

his loved ones are dead, his old allies gone, and he carries a mortal secret that separates him from the world. But Penn's exile comes to an end when a brawl at a Mississippi rap festival triggers a bloody mass shooting—one that nearly takes the life of his daughter Annie. As the stunned cities of Natchez and Bienville reel, antebellum plantation homes continue to burn and the deadly attacks are claimed by a Black radical group as historic acts of justice. Panic sweeps through the tourist communities, driving them inexorably toward a race war. But what might have been only a regional sideshow of the 2024 Presidential election explodes into national prominence, thanks to the stunning ascent of Robert E. Lee White, a Southern war hero who seizes the public imagination as a third-party candidate. Dubbed “the Tik-Tok Man,” and funded by an eccentric Mississippi billionaire, Bobby White rides the glory of his Special Forces record to an unprecedented run at the White House—one unseen since the campaign of H. Ross Perot. **Kirkus & BL**

****SHANGHAI**, Joseph Kanon (Scribner, \$28.99, June). After the violence of *Kristallnacht* (1938), European Jews, now desperate to emigrate, found the consular doors of the world closed to them. Only one port required no entry visa: Shanghai, a self-governing Western trading enclave in what was technically Chinese territory, a political anomaly that became an escape hatch—if you were lucky enough to afford a ticket on one of the great Lloyd liners sailing to the East and safety. Daniel Lohr was one of the lucky ones—lucky enough to have escaped the Gestapo when his colleagues in the resistance were caught, lucky to have an uncle waiting in Shanghai, lucky to find a casual shipboard flirtation turn unexpectedly passionate. But even lucky refugees have to confront the reality of Shanghai. With all their assets, and passports confiscated by the Nazis, they arrive penniless and stateless in a tumultuous, nearly lawless city notorious for vice. When you can sink fast, how far are you willing to go to survive? **Kirkus, PW, AZ & BL**



****SPIRIT CROSSING**, William Kent Krueger (Atria, \$27.99, August). The disappearance of a local politician's teenaged daughter is major news in Minnesota. As a huge manhunt is launched to find her, Cork O'Connor's grandson stumbles across the shallow grave of a young Ojibwe woman—but nobody seems that interested. Nobody, that is, except Cork and the newly formed Iron Lake Ojibwe Tribal Police. As Cork and the tribal officers dig into the circumstances of this mysterious and grim discovery, they uncover a connection to the missing teenager. And soon, it's clear that Cork's grandson is in danger of being the killer's next victim. **DP & AZ**

****CREATION LAKE**, Rachel Kushner (Scribner, \$29.00, September). A woman infiltrates a cabal of French radicals. Will she go native? The narrator of Kushner's fourth novel goes by Sadie, though her real name—like much of her identity—is clouded in mystery. She works undercover to undermine environmental activists, formerly for the U.S. government, but since a case went sideways, she's gone freelance. Now, she's been commissioned by unnamed “contacts” to disrupt the Moulinards, a small farming cooperative in southwestern France protesting a government

effort to construct a “megabasin” to support large-scale corporate farming. **Kirkus, BL, PW & AZ**

****GUIDE ME HOME**, Attica Locke (Mulholland, \$29.00, September). Texas Ranger Darren Mathews isn't sure he's been a good cop, but believes he's got a shot at being a good man—if he manages to dodge the potential indictment hanging over his head and if he, from here on out, pledges allegiance to the truth. It's a virtue the country appears to have wholly lost its grip on, but one Darren sees as his salvation. He is in the midst of remaking his life with the woman he loves, hoping for the peace of country living at his beloved farmhouse, when he is visited by someone who couldn't hold the truth on her tongue if it was dipped in sugar, a woman who's always been bent of tearing his life apart. His mother. Armed with a tall tale about a missing Black college student, Sera (whose white sorority sisters insist she isn't missing at all). Darren must decide if his can trust his mother is telling the truth—and what her ulterior motive may be, and what if that motive has to do with a grand jury deciding his fate. **Kirkus, AZ & BL**

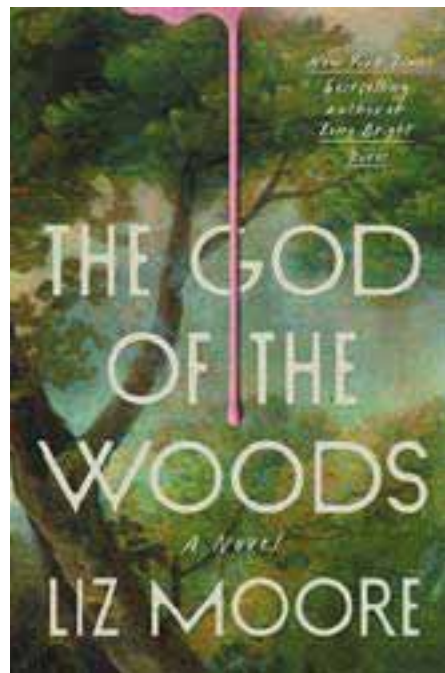
****AGAINST THE GRAIN**, Peter Lovesey (Soho Crime, \$29.95, December). Detective Peter Diamond, chief of the Avon and Somerset Murder Squad, is taking a short holiday in the country. His former colleague Julie Hargreaves has invited Diamond and his partner, Paloma, to visit the idyllic village of Baskerville (no relation to the Sherlock Holmes story, so he's told). It turns out Julie's invitation was not without ulterior motives. The woman who owns the village's largest dairy farm has been convicted of manslaughter following a terrible accident in her grain silo. Julie's ex-investigator instinct tells her there has been a miscarriage of justice and a murderer is on the loose—but Julie's been keeping secrets of her own, and can't take her inquiry any further.

Diamond takes the bait; the case is a fascinating one, and he's quite enjoying his incognito information-gathering, getting to know the villagers as

they prepare for their annual Harvest Festival. The deeper into the cow dung Diamond mucks, the more convinced he becomes there was foul play. But maintaining his innocent tourist facade becomes harder as he closes in on his suspects. **PW & DP**

****PONY CONFIDENTIAL**, Christina Lynch (Berkley, \$28.00, November). Pony has been passed from owner to owner for longer than he can remember. Fed up, he busts out and goes on a cross-country mission to reunite with Penny, the little girl who he was separated from and hasn't seen in years. Penny, now an adult, is living an ordinary life when she gets a knock on her door and finds herself in handcuffs, accused of murder and whisked back to the place she grew up. Her only comfort when the past comes back to haunt her is the memory of her precious, rebellious pony. Hearing of Penny's fate, Pony knows that Penny is no murderer. So, as smart and devious as he is cute, the pony must use his hard-won knowledge of human weakness and cruelty to try to clear Penny's name and find the real killer. **LJ, AZ & DP**

****THE GOD OF THE WOODS**, Liz Moore (Riverhead, \$30.00, July). Early morning, August 1975: a camp

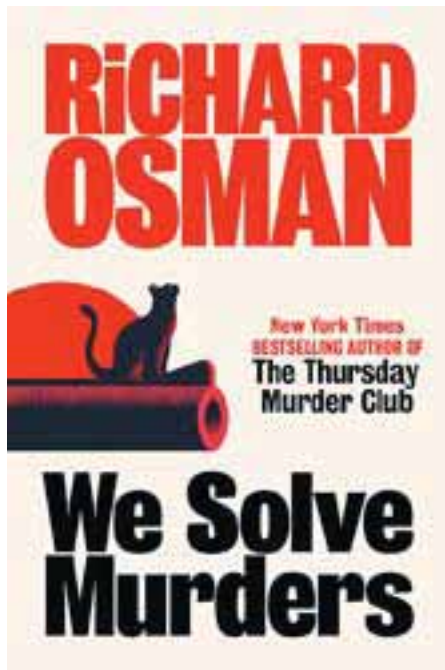


counselor discovers an empty bunk. Its occupant, Barbara Van Laar, has gone missing. Barbara isn't just any thirteen-year-old: she's the daughter of the family that owns the summer camp and employs most of the region's residents. And this isn't the first time a Van Laar child has disappeared. Barbara's older brother similarly vanished fourteen years ago, never to be found. As a panicked search begins, a thrilling drama unfolds. Chasing down the layered secrets of the Van Laar family and the blue-collar community working in its shadow, Moore's multi-threaded story invites readers into a rich and gripping dynasty of secrets and second chances. **PW, BL, Kirkus, AZ, DP & LJ**

****THE MOUNTAIN KING**, Anders de la Motte (Atria, \$29.99, January). Detective Leonore Asker seems to have the leading position at Malmö's Major Crime Division within reach. But things go awry when, in the middle of a high profile kidnapping case, management relegates her to the so-called Department of Lost Souls—the unit for odd, cold cases banished to the basement of the police station. Despite the humiliation, Asker is drawn into one of the more peculiar cases. Someone is secretly placing small ominous figures in a huge model train displays and one of the figures seems to represent the missing woman from the kidnapping case. As Asker's investigation leads her into the world of the abandoned and forgotten, she reaches out to her old friend and urban explorer Martin Hill. Together they discover that an unusual kind of evil lurks—at the heart of a mountain, deep down in the darkness. **PW, AZ & DP**

****THE RUMOR GAME**, Thomas Mullen (Minotaur, \$29.00, February 29). Reporter Anne Lemire writes the Rumor Clinic, a newspaper column that disproves the many harmful rumors floating around town, some of them spread by Axis spies and others just gossip mixed with fear and ignorance. Tired of chasing silly rumors about Rosie Riveters' safety on the job, she wants to write about something bigger. Special Agent Devon Mulvey, one of

the few Catholics at the FBI, spends his weekdays preventing industrial sabotage and his Sundays spying on clerics with suspect loyalties – and he spends his evenings wooing the many lonely women whose husbands are off at war. When Anne's story about Nazi propaganda intersects with Devon's investigation into the death of a factory worker, the two are led down a dangerous trail of espionage, organized crime, and domestic fascism – one that implicates their own tangled pasts and threatens to engulf the city in violence. **BL & AZ**



****WE SOLVE MURDERS**, Richard Osman (Viking, Pam Dorman, \$30.00, September). First in a new series. Steve Wheeler is enjoying retired life. He still does the odd bit of investigation work, but he prefers his familiar routines: the pub quiz, his favorite bench, his cat waiting for him at home. His days of adventure are over. Adrenaline is daughter-in-law Amy's job now.

Amy Wheeler thinks adrenaline is good for the soul. Working in private security, every day is dangerous. She's currently on a remote island protecting mega-bestselling author Rosie D'Antonio, until a dead body and a bag of money mean trouble in paradise. So she sends an SOS to the only person she trusts. **DP, PW, BL, AZ & Kirkus**

****THE GREY WOLF**, Louise Penny (Minotaur, \$30.00, November). Relentless phone calls interrupt the peace of a warm August morning in Three Pines. Though the tiny Québec village is impossible to find on any map, someone has managed to track down Armand Gamache, head of homicide at the Sûreté, as he sits with his wife in their back garden. Reine-Marie watches with increasing unease as her husband refuses to pick up, though he clearly knows who is on the other end. When he finally answers, his rage shatters the calm of their quiet Sunday morning.

That's only the first in a sequence of strange events that begin **THE GREY WOLF**, the nineteenth novel in Louise Penny's #1 New York Times-bestselling series. A missing coat, an intruder alarm, a note for Gamache reading "this might interest you", a puzzling scrap of paper with a mysterious list?and then a murder. All propel Chief Inspector Gamache and his team toward a terrible realization. **PW, BL, AZ & LJ**

****ASH DARK AS NIGHT**, Gary Phillips (Soho Crime, \$27.95, April). Los Angeles, August 1965. Anger and pent-up frustrations boil over in the Watts neighborhood after a traffic stop of two Black motorists. As the Watts riots explode, crime photographer Harry Ingram snaps photos at the scene, including images of the police as they unleash batons, dogs, and water hoses on civilians. When he captures the image of an unarmed activist being shot down by the cops, he winds up in the hospital, beaten, his camera missing. Proof of the unjust killing seems lost—until Ingram's girlfriend, Anita Claire, retrieves the hidden film in a daring rescue. The photo makes front-page news. A recuperating Ingram is approached by Betty Payton, a comrade of Anita's mother, who wants Ingram's help tracking down her business associate Moses "Mose" Tolbert, last seen during the riots. Ingram follows the investigation down a rabbit hole of burglary rings, bank robberies, looted cash, and clandestine agendas—all the while grappling with his newfound fame, which puts him in the sightlines of LAPD's secretive intelli-

gence division. **PW & DP**

****THE SICILIAN INHERITANCE**, Jo Piazza (Dutton, \$28.00, April). Sara Marsala barely knows who she is anymore after the failure of her business and marriage. On top of that, her beloved great-aunt Rosie passes away, leaving Sara bereft with grief. But Aunt Rosie's death also opens an escape from her life and a window into the past by way of a plane ticket to Sicily, a deed to a possibly valuable plot of land, and a bombshell family secret. Rosie believes Sara's great-grandmother Serafina, the family matriarch who was left behind while her husband worked in America, didn't die of illness as family lore has it . . . she was murdered. Thus begins a twist-filled adventure that takes Sara all over the picturesque Italian countryside as she races to solve a mystery and learn the story of Serafina—a feisty and headstrong young woman in the early 1900s thrust into motherhood in her teens, who fought for a better life not just for herself but for all the women of her small village. Unsurprisingly the more she challenges the status quo, the more she finds herself in danger. **Kirkus, BL & AZ**

****MIDNIGHT AND BLUE**, Ian Rankin (Mulholland Books, \$29.00). A convict is brutally murdered in his locked cell deep in the heart of Scotland's most infamous prison. Sleeping in a cell across the floor lies John Rebus, the equally notorious detective. Stripped of his badge and estranged from his police family, he is now fighting for his own life - protected by an old nemesis but always one wrong move away from the shank. As new allies and old enemies circle, and the days and nights bleed into each other, even this legendary figure struggles to keep his head.

They say old habits die hard, though. The death stirs Rebus's deductive - and manipulative - impulses, setting off a domino-chain of scheming criminals, corrupt prison guards and perhaps only one or two good souls who may see it all through. But how do you find a killer in a place full of them? **BL, AZ & DP**

****WHERE THEY LAST SAW HER,**

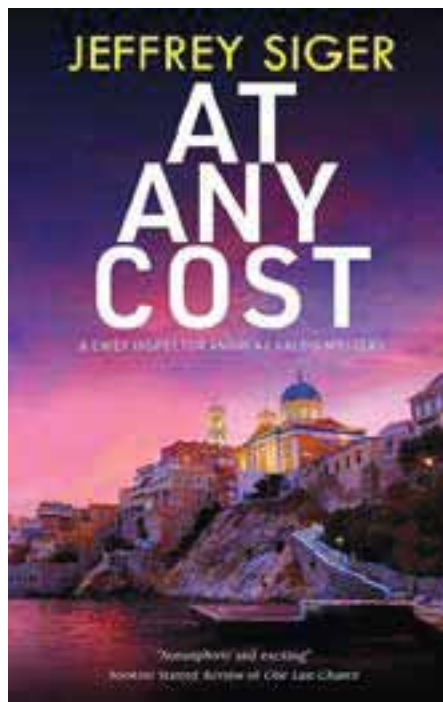
Marcie R. Rendon (Bantam, \$28.00, September). Quill has lived on the Red Pine reservation in Minnesota her whole life. She knows what happens to women who look like her. Just a girl when Jimmy Sky jumped off the railway bridge and she ran for help, Quill realizes now that she's never stopped running. As she trains for the Boston Marathon early one morning in the woods, she hears a scream. When she returns to search the area, all she finds are tire tracks and a single beaded earring.

Things are different now for Quill than when she was a lonely girl. Her friends Punk and Gaylyn are two women who don't know what it means to quit; her loving husband, Crow, and their two beautiful children challenge her to be better every day. So when she hears a second woman has been stolen, she is determined to do something about it—starting with investigating the group of men working the pipeline construction just north of their homes. **AZ, PW, BL & Kirkus**

****THE MURDER OF MR. MA, S.**

J. Rozan & John Shen Yen Nee (Soho Crime, \$25.95, April). London, 1924. When shy academic Lao She meets larger-than-life Judge Dee Ren Jie, his quiet life abruptly turns from books and lectures to daring chases and narrow escapes. Dee has come to London to investigate the murder of a man he'd known during World War I when serving with the Chinese Labour Corps. No sooner has Dee interviewed the grieving widow than another dead body turns up. Then another. All stabbed to death with a butterfly sword. Will Dee and Lao be able to connect the threads of the murders—or are they next in line as victims? **PW, LJ, AZ & DP**

****AT ANY COST,** Jeffrey Siger (Severn House, February 6). Kaldis is initially dismayed to be asked to investigate a series of suspicious forest fires that took place last summer. In Greece, forest fires are an inevitability, and he fears he and his team are being set up to take the political blame for this year's blazes. He quickly becomes suspicious,



though, that the forests were torched for profit - and for a project on a far grander scale than the usual low-level business corruption. There are whispers on the wind that shadowy foreign powers intend to establish a surreptitious mega-internet presence on the island of Syros, with the intent to weaponize the digital world to their own dark ends. **BL & DP**

****EVERYONE ON THIS TRAIN IS SUSPECT,** Benjamin Stevenson (Mariner Books, \$30.00, January) "When the Australian Mystery Writers' Society invited me to their crime-writing festival aboard the Ghan, the famous train between Darwin and Adelaide, I was hoping for some inspiration for my second book. Fiction, this time: I needed a break from real people killing each other. Obviously, that didn't pan out." **AZ, Kirkus & DP**

****A TALENT FOR MURDER,** Peter Swanson (Morrow, \$30.00, June). Martha Ratliff conceded long ago that she'd likely spend her life alone. She was fine with it, happy with her solo existence, stimulated by her work as a librarian in Maine. But then she met Alan, a charming and sweet-natured salesman whose job took him on the road for half the

year. When he asked her to marry him, she said yes, even though he still felt a little bit like a stranger. A year in and the marriage was good, except for that strange blood streak on the back of one of his shirts he'd worn to a conference in Denver. Her curiosity turning to suspicion, Martha investigates the cities Alan visited over the past year and uncovers a disturbing pattern—five unsolved cases of murdered women. Is she married to a serial killer? **PW & DP**

****CALIFORNIA BEAR,** Duane Swierczynski (Mullholland Books, \$29.00, January). Four unlikely vigilantes pit themselves against the villain behind California's coldest case when they decide to take justice into their own hands. **LJ, BL, PW & DP(2)**

****AGONY HILL,** Sarah Stewart Taylor (Minotaur, \$28.00, August). In the hot summer of 1965, Bostonian Franklin Warren arrives in Bethany, Vermont, to take a position as a detective with the state police. Warren's new home is on the verge of monumental change; the interstates under construction will bring new people, new opportunities, and new problems to Vermont, and the Cold War and protests against the war in Vietnam have finally reached the dirt roads and rolling pastures of Bethany. Warren has barely unpacked when he's called up to a remote farm on Agony Hill. Former New Yorker and Back-to-the-Lander Hugh Weber seems to have set fire to his barn and himself, with the door barred from the inside, but things aren't adding up for Warren. The people of Bethany - from Weber's enigmatic wife to Warren's neighbor, widow and amateur detective Alice Bellows -- clearly have secrets they'd like to keep, but Warren can't tell if the truth about Weber's death is one of them. **LJ, AZ & DP**

****THE LAST MURDER AT THE END OF THE WORLD,** Stuart Turton (Sourcebooks Landmark, \$27.99, May). Solve the murder to save what's left of the world. Outside the island there is nothing: the world was destroyed by a fog that swept the planet, killing anyone it touched. On the island: it is idyllic.

One hundred and twenty-two villagers and three scientists, living in peaceful harmony. The villagers are content to fish, farm and feast, to obey their nightly curfew, to do what they're told by the scientists. Until, to the horror of the islanders, one of their beloved scientists is found brutally stabbed to death. And then they learn that the murder has triggered a lowering of the security system around the island, the only thing that was keeping the fog at bay. If the murder isn't solved within 107 hours, the fog will smother the island—and everyone on it. **PW, BL, AZ and LJ**

****ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK**, Chris Whitaker (Crown, \$30.00, June). Late one summer, the town of Monta Clare is shattered by the abduction of local teenager Joseph 'Patch' Macauley. Nobody more so than Saint Brown, who is broken by her best friend's disappearance. Soon, she will eat, sleep, breathe, only to find him. But when she does: it will break her heart. Patch lies in a pitch-black room - all alone - for days or maybe weeks. Until he feels a hand in his. Her name is Grace and, though they cannot see each other, she takes him from the darkness and paints their world with her words. In this hopeless place, they fall in love. But when he escapes: there is no sign she ever even existed. To find her again, Patch charts an epic search across the country. And, to set him free, Saint will shadow his journey: on a darker path to hunt down the man who took them. **DP(2), PW, Kirkus & AZ**

****CITY IN RUINS**, Don Winslow (Morrow, \$32.00, April). Danny Ryan is rich. Beyond his wildest dreams rich. The former dock worker, Irish mob soldier and fugitive from the law is now a respected businessman - a Las Vegas casino mogul and billionaire silent partner in a group that owns two lavish hotels. Finally, Danny has it all: a beautiful house, a child he adores, a woman he might even fall in love with. Life is good. But then Danny reaches too far. **PW, AZ & DP(2)**

****VILLAGE IN THE DARK**, Iris Ya-

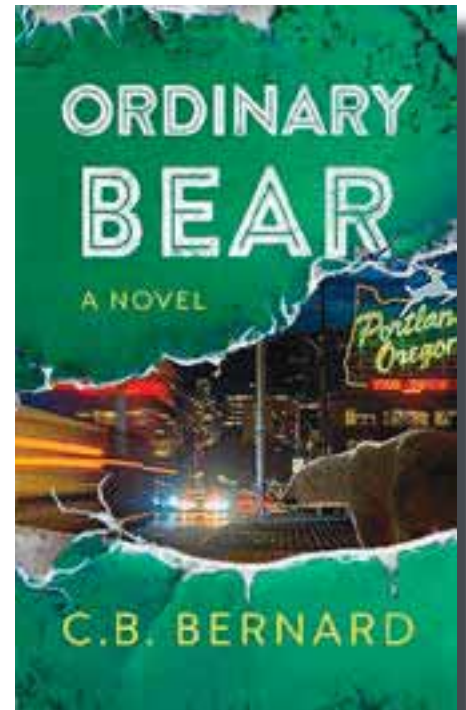
mashita (Berkley, \$28.00, February). On a frigid February day, Anchorage Detective Cara Kennedy stands by the graves of her husband and son, watching as their caskets are raised from the earth. It feels sacrilegious, but she has no choice. Aaron and Dylan disappeared on a hike a year ago, their bones eventually found and buried. But shocking clues have emerged that foul play was involved, potentially connecting them to a string of other deaths and disappearances. Somehow tied to the mystery is Mia Upash, who grew up in an isolated village called Unity, a community of women and children in hiding from abusive men. Mia never imagined the trouble she would find herself in when she left home to live in Man's World. Although she remains haunted by the tragedy of what happened to the man and the boy in the woods, she has her own reasons for keeping quiet. **LJ, AZ & DP**

Best Debut Mystery/ Crime Novel

****PAPER CAGE**, Tom Baragwanath (Knopf, \$28.00, February). Lorraine Henry is generally content to keep her head down and get on with her work as a records clerk at the Masterton police station. But when children start going missing in her small town, Lo can't help but pay attention. After all, she has Bradley, her young nephew, to worry about, and the cops don't seem to be putting much effort into finding the kids. And then the unthinkable happens: Bradley disappears. Distraught but determined, Lorraine vows to bring him home no matter what. And, together with a detective from Wellington, she embarks on a dangerous mission, one that will illuminate all the good and all the bad in Masterton. **Kirkus & DP (4)**

****WILD HOUSES**, Colin Barrett (Grove Press, \$27.00, March). As the town of Ballina prepares for its biggest weekend of the year, introspective loner Dev answers his door on Friday night to find Doll English— younger brother of small-time local dealer Cillian

English—bruised and in the clutches of Gabe and Sketch Ferdia, County Mayo's fraternal enforcers and Dev's cousins. Dev's quiet homelife is upturned as he is quickly and unwillingly drawn headlong into the Ferdias' frenetic revenge plot against Cillian. Meanwhile, Doll's girlfriend, seventeen-year-old Nicky, reeling from a fractious Friday and plagued by ghosts and tragedy of her own, sets out on a feverish mission to



save Doll, even as she questions her future in Ballina. **Kirkus, BL & DP**

****ORDINARY BEAR**, C. B. Bernard (Blackstone Publishing, \$25.99, April). Farley stands out among his Iñupiat neighbors in the Alaska village he calls home, both white and enormous, like the hungry polar bears that wander its streets. Jovial and a little hapless, he works as an investigator for a North Slope oil company. When his young daughter visits from thousands of miles away in Portland—where she lives with her mother, who despises him—a shocking moment of violence leaves her dead and Farley injured. Crippled by his wounds and hamstrung with guilt over his inability to save her, he goes home to Oregon to try to make amends. There he strikes up an unlikely friendship with a single mother and her daughter. With

their help, he begins the slow process of healing—until the girl goes missing. Faced with the opportunity to do what he couldn't do for his own daughter, Farley sets out on a brutal odyssey through Portland's quirky and dangerous underworld, using his wits and his fists to try to save her life along with the shattered remains of his own. **DP(6)**

****THINGS DON'T BREAK ON THEIR OWN**, Sarah Easter Collins (Crown, \$28.00, July). Twenty-five years ago, a young girl left home to walk to school. Her younger sister soon followed. But one of them arrived, and one of them didn't. Her sister's disappearance has defined Willa's life. Everyone thinks her sister is dead, but Willa knows she isn't. Because there are some things that only sisters know about each other—and some bonds only sisters can break.

Willa sees fragments of her sister everywhere — the way that woman on the train turns her head, the gait of that woman in Paris. If there's the slightest resemblance, Willa drops everything, and everyone, and tries to see if it is her. When Willa is invited to a dinner party thrown by her first love, she has no reason to expect it will be anything other than an ordinary evening. Both of them have moved on, ancient history. But nothing about Willa's life has been ordinary since the day her sister disappeared, and that's not about to change tonight. **AZ, BL & DP**

****RADIANT HEAT**, Sarah-Jane Collins (Berkley, \$27.00, January). The blaze came out of nowhere one summer afternoon, a wall of fire fed by blustering wind. Yet, somehow, Alison is alive. She rode out the fire on the damp tiles of her bathroom, her entire body swaddled in a wet woolen blanket. As flames crackled around her, the bitter char of eucalyptus settled in the back of her throat, each breath more desperate than the last. The wildfire that devastated the Victoria countryside Alison calls home sets in motion a chain of events that threatens to obliterate the carefully constructed life she is living. When Alison emerges

from her sheltering place, she spots a soot-covered cherry red car in her driveway, and in it, a dead woman. Alison has never met Simone Arnold in her life . . . or so she thinks. So what is she doing here? **AZ & LJ**

****BLOOD RUBIES**, Mailan Do-quang (Mysterious Press, \$26.95, July). Seven days are all it takes for Rune Sarasin's life to completely derail. It starts with a routine heist: lifting a pouch of rubies from the Bangkok hotel room of wealthy smuggler Charles Lemaire. Rune nearly gets caught when Lemaire's goons give chase, but she manages to escape with her boyfriend Kit. Then Kit delivers some terrifying news: his teenage sister Madee has gone missing. They track her cell phone to the dangerous Khlong Toei slum, but the trail ends there. The night gets even worse when Rune realizes she lost the pouch of gems somewhere in the slum while searching for Madee. Charles Lemaire is the wrong man to mess with. He is a perfectionist when it comes to both his attire and his crimes, and he isn't afraid to kill to get what he wants. When he catches up to Rune and Kit, he gives Rune an ultimatum: return his rubies or she will never see her boyfriend again. Now Rune must race against time to either recover the lost gems or find something even more



valuable with which to ransom Kit back from Lemaire. But she also still needs to find out what happened to Madee. As Rune investigates deeper into the shadows of the Khlong Toei slum, she uncovers a web of crime with consequences far more insidious than just one missing girl and a handful of stolen rubies. **AZ & DP**

****WHEN WE WERE SILENT**, Fiona McPhillips (Flatiron, \$28.99, May). Louise Manson is the newest student at Highfield Manor, Dublin's most exclusive private school. At first, Lou's working-class status makes her the consummate outsider, though all that changes when she is befriended by the beautiful and wealthy Shauna Power. But Lou finds out that even Shauna is caught up in Highfield's web, and her time there ends with a lifeless body sprawled at her feet.

Thirty years later, Lou has rebuilt her life after the harrowing events of the so-called "Highfield Affair," when she gets a shocking phone call. Ronan Power, Shauna's brother, is a high-profile lawyer bringing a lawsuit against the school. And he needs Lou to testify. Now with a daughter and career to protect, the last thing Lou wants is for Highfield Manor to be back in her life. But to finally free herself and others, she has to confront her past, go to battle once more, and discover, for once and for all, what really happened at Highfield. **PW & DP**

****THE NIGHT OF BABA YAGA**, Akira Otani (Soho Crime, \$27.95, July). Tokyo, 1979. Yoriko Shindo, a workhorse of a woman who has been an outcast her whole life, is kidnapped and dragged to the lair of the Naiki-kai, a branch of the yakuza. After she savagely fends off a throng of henchmen in an attempt to escape, Shindo is only permitted to live under one condition: that she will become the bodyguard and driver for Shoko Naiki, the obsessively sheltered daughter of the gang's boss. Eighteen-year-old Shoko, pretty and silent as a doll, has no friends, wears strangely old-fashioned clothes, and is naive in all matters of life. Originally disdaining her ward, Shindo soon finds

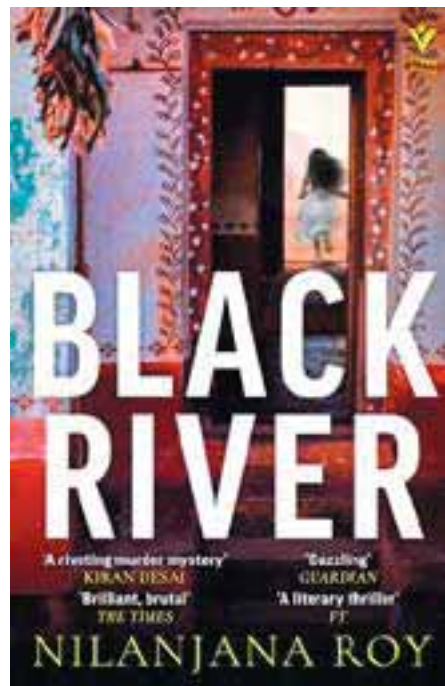
herself far more invested in Shoko's wellbeing than she ever expected. But every man around them is bloodthirsty and trigger-happy. Shindo doubts she and Shoko will survive much longer if nothing changes. Could there ever be a different life for two women like them? **PW, LJ & BL**

****NORTHWOODS**, Amy Pease (Atria/Emily Bestler Books, \$27.00, January). Eli North is not okay. His drinking is getting worse by the day, his emotional wounds after a deployment to Afghanistan are as raw as ever, his marriage and career are over, and the only job he can hold down is with the local sheriff's department. And that's only because the sheriff is his mother—and she's overwhelmed with small town Shaky Lake's dwindling budget and the fallout from the opioid epidemic. The Northwoods of Wisconsin may be a vacationer's paradise, but amidst the fishing trips and campfires and Paul Bunyan festivals, something sinister is taking shape. When the body of a teenage boy is found in the lake, it sets in motion an investigation that leads Eli to a wealthy enclave with a violent past, a pharmaceutical salesman, and a missing teenage girl. Soon, Eli and his mother, along with a young FBI agent, are on the hunt for more than just a killer. **PW, DP & AZ**

****THE MANY LIES OF VERONICA HAWKINS**, Kristina Pérez (Pegasus Crime, \$27.95, September). When Martina Torres arrives in the glamorous and vibrant metropolis of Hong Kong, newly married to her high school sweetheart, the world seems to be her oyster. Adrift in a foreign city, with no job and no friends, Martina chafes in her new role as Expat Wife. But her luck changes when she meets Veronica Hawkins. Beautiful, sophisticated, and very, very rich, Veronica is the epitome of Old Hong Kong—the last surviving member of a British mercantile dynasty that built the city during its colonial heyday. Martina can hardly believe her fortune when she's taken under Veronica's wing and into her confidence, with Veronica helping her to find a new apartment, a

new career, and most importantly, a new self. Veronica transforms Martina's life and then, shockingly, she dies. She disappears over the side of a yacht during a party attended by Hong Kong's most influential people—yet somehow there are no witnesses. Was it murder? Suicide? A terrible accident? **LJ & BL**

****THE ASCENT**, Adam Plantinga (Grand Central, \$30.00, January). When a high security prison fails, a down-on-his luck ex-cop and the governor's daughter are going to have to team up if they're going to escape. **Kirkus, PW & AZ**



****BLACK RIVER**, Nilanjana Roy (Pushkin Vertigo, \$17.95, September) See listing under Best Paperback Originals

****NIGHTWATCHING**, Tracy Sierra (Viking: Pamela Dorman Books, \$29.00, February). Home alone with her young children during a blizzard, a mother tucks her son back into bed in the middle of the night. She hears a noise—old houses are always making some kind of noise. But this sound is disturbingly familiar: it's the tread of footsteps, unusually heavy and slow, coming up the stairs. She sees the figure of a man appear down the hallway, shrouded

in the shadows. Terrified, she quietly wakes her children and hustles them into the oldest part of the house, a tiny, secret room concealed behind a wall. There they hide as the man searches for them, trying to tempt the children out with promises and scare the mother into surrender. **PW, AZ & Kirkus**

****DEATH IN THE DETAILS**, Katie Tietjen (Crooked Lane, \$29.99, April). Maple Bishop is ready to put WWII and the grief of losing her husband, Bill, behind her. But when she discovers that Bill left her penniless, Maple realizes she could lose her Vermont home next and sets out to make money the only way she knows how: by selling her intricately crafted dollhouses. Business is off to a good start—until Maple discovers her first customer dead, his body hanging precariously in his own barn. Something about the supposed suicide rubs Maple the wrong way, but local authorities brush off her concerns. Determined to help them see “what's big in what's small,” Maple turns to what she knows best, painstakingly recreating the gruesome scene in miniature: death in a nutshell. With the help of a rookie officer named Kenny, Maple uses her macabre miniature to dig into the dark undercurrents of her sleepy town, where everyone seems to have a secret—and a grudge. But when her nosy neighbor goes missing and she herself becomes a suspect, it'll be up to Maple to find the devil in the details—and put him behind bars. **Kirkus, LJ & DP**

****THE QUEEN CITY DETECTIVE AGENCY**, Snowden Wright (Morrow, \$30.00, August). Meridian, Mississippi—once known as the Queen City for its status in the state—has lost much of its royal bearing by 1985. Overshadowed by more prosperous cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta, Meridian attracts less-than-legitimate businesses, including those enforced by the near-mythical Dixie Mafia. The city's powerbrokers, wealthy white Southerners clinging to their privilege, resent any attempt at change to the old order. Real-estate developer Randall Hubbard

took advantage of Meridian's economic decline by opening strip malls that catered to low-income families in Black neighborhoods—until he wound up at the business end of a .38 Special. Then a Dixie Mafia affiliate named Lewis “Turnip” Coogan, who claims Hubbard's wife hired him for the hit, dies under suspicious circumstances while in custody for the murder. Ex-cop turned private investigator Clementine Baldwin is hired by Coogan's bereaved mother to find her son's killer. **BL & AZ**

Best Paperback Original Mystery/Crime Novel

****NO ONE DIES YET**, Kobby Ben Ben (Europa, \$18.00, February). It is 2019, The Year of Return. Ghana is inviting Black diasporans to return and get to know the land of their enslaved ancestors. Elton, Vincent, and Scott arrive from America to explore Ghana's colonial past, and to experience the country's underground queer scene. Their visit and activities are narrated by two very different Ghanians: the exuberant and rebellious Kobby, who is their guide to Accra's privileged and queer circles; and Nana, the voice of tradition and religious principle. Neither is very trustworthy and the tense relationship between them sets the tone for what turns into a gripping, energetically told, and often funny tale of murder reminiscent of the novels of Patricia Highsmith, Graham Greene, Chinua Achebe, and Alain Mabanckou. **PW & BL**

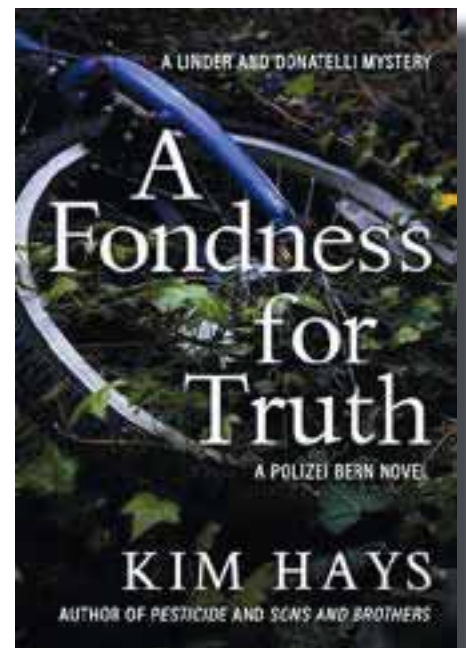
****IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE**, Jo Callaghan (Random House, \$18.00, August). Kat Frank knows all about loss. A widowed single mother, Kat is a cop who trusts her intuition, honed through years of on-the-beat police work. Picked to lead a pilot program that has her paired with Lock, an AIDE (Artificially Intelligent Detective Entity)—a hologram that is activated by a device on Kat's wrist—Kat's gut reactions about people and motives come up against Lock's statistical calculations and data analysis that can be devised in seconds. But as the two missing person's cold cas-

es they are reviewing suddenly become active, Lock is the only one who can help when the case begins to target Kat personally. AI versus human experience. Logic versus instinct. With lives on the line, can the pair work together to solve the mystery in time? **DP, CWA New Blood Dagger Award, Capital Crime's Overall Crime Book of the Year, Crimefest's Specsavers Debut Crime Novel Award.**

****THE TRANSLATOR**, Harriet Crawley (Bitter Lemon Press, \$17.95, April). Clive Franklin, a Russian language expert in the Foreign Office, is summoned unexpectedly to Moscow to act as translator for the British Prime Minister. His life is turned on its head when, after more than a decade, he discovers that his former lover, Marina Volina, is now the interpreter to the Russian President. At the embassy, Clive learns of a Russian plot to cut the undersea cables linking the US to the UK which would paralyse communications and collapse the Western economy. Marina stuns Clive with the news that she's ready to help stop the attack, betraying her country for a new identity and a new life. **DP**

****A FONDNESS FOR TRUTH**, Kim Hays (Seventh Street, \$19.95, April). Andi Eberhart is riding her bicycle home on an icy winter night when she is killed in a hit-and-run. Her devastated partner, Nisha, is convinced the death was no accident. Andi had been receiving homophobic hate mail for several years, and the letters grew uglier after the couple's baby was born. Bern homicide Detective Giuliana Linder is assigned to investigate what happened to Andi. As she pieces together the details of Andi and Nisha's lives, her assistant Renzo Donatelli looks into Andi's job advising young men drafted into Switzerland's civilian service. Working closely together, Giuliana and Renzo are again tempted to become more than just friendly colleagues. **DP**

****THE MAIDEN**, Kate Foster (Pan, \$10.78, January). Edinburgh, October 1679. Lady Christian Nimmo is arrested



and charged with the murder of her lover, James Forrester. News of her imprisonment and subsequent trial is splashed across the broadsides, with headlines that leave little room for doubt: Adulteress. Whore. Murderess. Only a year before, Christian was leading a life of privilege and respectability. So, what led her to risk everything for an affair? And does that make her guilty of murder? She wasn't the only woman in Forrester's life, and certainly not the only one who might have had cause to wish him dead. **DP, Winner of Bloody Scotland Pitch Perfect Award, Shortlisted for CWA Creasey Award and the Women's Prize for Fiction.**

****ALL THE RAGE**, Cara Hunter (Morrow, \$18.99, February). After being abducted and assaulted, a teenage girl somehow managed to escape from her captor. She is traumatized and needs to heal, but the police need her help to catch her assailant—information she clearly knows, but is unwilling to give. Without the girl's assistance, DI Adam Fawley's investigation is at a dead end. When another girl vanishes under the same circumstances, he recognizes a disturbing pattern—and a link to something long buried in his past. **DP & AZ**

****SMOKE KINGS**, Jahmal Mayfield (Melville House, \$18.99, February). Nate

Evers, a young black political activist, struggles with rage as his people are still being killed in the streets 62 years after Emmett Till. When his little cousin is murdered, Nate shuns the graffiti murals, candlelight vigils, and Twitter hashtags that are commonplace after these senseless deaths. Instead, he leads 3 grief-stricken friends on a mission of retribution, kidnapping the descendants of long-ago perpetrators of hate crimes, confronting the targets with their racist lineages, and forcing them to pay reparations to a community fund. For 3 of the group members, the results mean justice; for Nate – pure revenge. Not all targets go quietly into the night, though, and Nate and his friends' world spirals out of control when they confront the wrong man. Now the leader of a white supremacist group is hot on their tail as is a jaded lawman with some disturbingly racist views of his own. As the 4 vigilantes fight to thwart their ruthless pursuers, they're forced to accept an age-old truth: "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." **Kirkus, AZ & PW**

****SOMEONE SAW SOMETHING**, Rick Mofina (MIRA, \$18.99, April). When six-year-old Gabriel vanishes from Central Park, his mother, news anchor Corina Corado, is desperate for answers. Who would take her son—and why? Detectives suspect there's a connection to the barrage of hate mail Corina's received over the years. In her line of work, it's not unusual for agitated conspiracy theorists to send messages that threaten violence...or worse. But as the investigation deepens, the secrets that Corina, her husband, Robert, and her stepdaughter, Charlotte, have kept start to unravel. As the truth behind Gabriel's disappearance emerges, Corina must race the clock to track down her missing child...before paying the ultimate price. **DP (2)**

****CAST A COLD EYE**, Robbie Morrison (Bantam, \$18.00, April). Glasgow, 1933. Murder is nothing new in the Depression-era city, especially to war veterans Inspector Jimmy Dreghorn and his partner, "Bonnie" Archie McDaid.



But the dead man found in a narrow-boat on the Forth and Clyde Canal, executed with a single shot to the back of the head, is no ordinary killing. **AZ**

****TO DIE IN JUNE**, Alan Parks (Canongate, \$18.00, May). A woman enters a Glasgow police station to report her son missing, but no record can be found of the boy. When Detective Harry McCoy, seconded from the cop shop across town, discovers the family is part of the cultish Church of Christ's Suffering, he suspects there is more to Michael's disappearance than meets the eye. Meanwhile reports arrive of a string of poisonings of down-and-outs across the city. The dead are men who few barely notice, let alone care about - but, as McCoy is painfully aware, among this desperate community is his own father. Even as McCoy searches for the missing boy, he must conceal from his colleagues the real reason for his presence - to investigate corruption in the station. **DP**

****THE SCARLET PAPERS**, Matthew Richardson (Penguin, \$16.99, May). Historian Max Archer is invited to a clandestine meeting with legendary Cold War spymaster, Scarlet King. Her offer to share the explosive secrets born of over half a century at the heart of global espionage would be life-changing. Soon he is on the wrong side of the law

and on the run. As the net closes tighter around him he must somehow discover the truth. **DP(3)**

****BLACK RIVER**, Nilanjana Roy (Pushkin Vertigo, \$17.95, September). Teetapur, an unassuming village just a few hours outside of bustling Delhi, is famous for nothing—until one of its children, 8-year-old Munia, is found dead, hanging from the branch of a Jamun tree.

In the largely Hindu village, suspicion quickly falls on an itinerant Muslim man, Mansoor Suspicion ignites like wildfire, fueled by religious tensions that simmer beneath the surface.

The responsibility of uncovering the elusive truth – and prevent the lynching of the prime suspect – now rests on the weary shoulders of Sub-Inspector Ombir Singh. With only one other officer beneath him, and just a single working revolver between them, can he bring justice to a grieving father and an angry village – or will Teetapur demand vengeance instead? **CWA Dagger Nominee, AZ & DP**

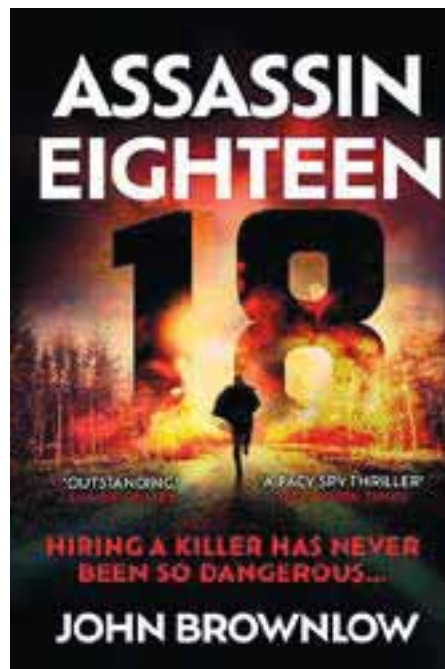
Best Thrillers

****DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE**, Ace Atkins (Morrow, \$30.00, June). Addison McKellar isn't clueless—she knows she and her husband Dean don't have the perfect marriage—but she's still shocked when he completely vanishes from her life. At first Addison is annoyed, but as days stretch into a week and she's repeatedly stonewalled by Dean's friends and associates, her frustration turns into genuine alarm. When even the police seem dismissive of her concerns, Addison turns to her father's old friend, legendary Memphis PI Porter Hayes. Porter and Addison begin to dig deeper into Dean's affairs and quickly discover that he was never the hardworking business owner and family man he pretended to be. As they piece together the connections between a hook-handed mercenary, one of Elvis's former leading ladies, and a man posing as an FBI agent, it becomes clear that Dean was deeply enmeshed in a high-

stakes web of international intrigue, and Porter and Addison aren't the only ones looking for him. **PW, DP & AZ**

****DOUBLE BARREL BLUFF**, Lou Berney (Morrow, \$18.99, November). During his years as a wheelman for the Armenian mob in Los Angeles, Shake Bouchon didn't think of himself as the settling-down type. But now he's happily married to Gina, the love of his life—and former adversary—in Indiana, of all places. The great thing about Bloomington, for two people with checkered pasts, is that everyone is nice and no one knows them. Until the day a brutal Armenian thug who has always hated Shake shows up in his backyard. He demands that Shake help him find his missing mob boss, the pakhan—the dangerous and beautiful Alexandra “Lexy” Ilandryan, who also happens to be Shake's ex-girlfriend. Shake's got a lot of history with Lexy, so he reluctantly agrees to travel to Siem Reap, Cambodia, where she was last seen. Once there, he finds himself tangled in an underworld of Cambodian gangsters, mob politics, and opportunistic expats, where the stakes aren't clear and everyone is looking to score. With only the help of a clairvoyant hippie and the Armenian thug, Shake becomes involved in a high-stakes negotiation for Lexy that might cost him his own life. But perhaps most threatening of all is Gina's wrath when she arrives in Cambodia intent on saving Shake from himself—and from all the people trying to kill him. **BL, PW, AZ & DP**

****TRUST HER**, Flynn Berry (Viking, \$30.00, June). Three years after they narrowly escaped the IRA's worst punishment for informing, Tessa and Marian have built a new life in Dublin with their young children. Though Tessa is haunted by the abrupt and violent end to her old life, she does her best to immerse herself in the joys of Finn's childhood and the rhythms of her new job at the Irish Observer. It's a small island, though, and just as quickly as they disappeared, figures from the sisters' past surface to drag them back into the conflict. Tessa is told she must



track down her old handler from MI5, Eamonn, and attempt to turn him into an IRA informant, or lose everything. **Kirkus & BL**

****ASSASSIN EIGHTEEN**, John Brownlow (Hanover Square, \$30.00, April). 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. **DP(3)**

****ILIUM**, Lea Carpenter (Knopf, \$27.00, January). The young English narrator of Lea Carpenter's dazzling new novel has grown up unhappily in London, dreaming of escape, pretending to be someone else and obsessed with a locked private garden. On the eve of her twenty-first birthday, at a party near that garden, she meets its charismatic and mysterious new owner, Marcus, thirty-three years older, who sweeps her off her feet. Before long they are married at his finca in Mallorca, and at last she has escaped into a new role - but at what

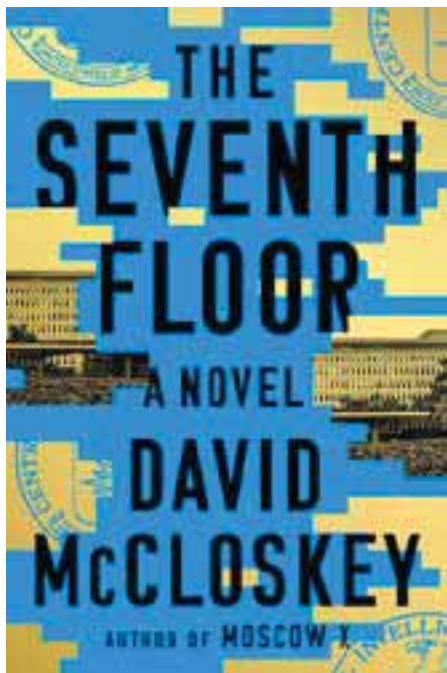
price? On their honeymoon in Croatia, Marcus reveals there is something she can do for him—a plan is in place and she can help with “a favor.” This turns out to be posing as an art advisor to a family on Cap Ferret, where Marcus asks her to simply “listen.” A helicopter deposits her at a remote, highly guarded and lavishly appointed compound on a spit of land in the Atlantic. It's presided over by an enigmatic, charming patriarch Edouard, along with his wife Dasha, children Nikki and Felix, and populated by a revolving cast of other guests—some suspicious, some intriguing, perhaps none, like her, what they seem. **BL & Kirkus**

****PITCH DARK**, Paul Doiron (Minotaur, \$29.00, June). Legendary bush pilot Josie Jonson can't believe her luck when a skilled builder just happens to show up after she purchases land near Prentiss Pond. All Mark Redmond asks in return for building Josie's dream cabin is that he be left alone to homeschool his 12-year-old daughter, Cady. For Maine game warden investigator Mike Bowditch, the intensity of Redmond's secretiveness is troubling, especially in light of suspicious criminal activity being reported around the area—including rumors of an armed man offering large sums of money in exchange for the location of Redmond and Cady. Josie, though hesitant to violate the trust of her prized builder, eventually agrees to fly Mike and his father-in-law Charley Stevens to the secluded pond in an attempt to protect Redmond and Cady. But hours after landing, the trip takes a dark turn when they witness a horrific murder and are taken captive themselves. Freeing himself, Mike is forced to set off through the impenetrable Maine forest towards Canada, alone and unarmed in pursuit of a mysterious fugitive. **Kirkus, BL & DP**

****KINGPIN**, Mike Lawson (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, February). Carson Newman doesn't think of himself as a gangster. He doesn't have a consigliere or operate out of the back room of a bar. No, Carson's a different sort of gangster,

a billionaire Boston real estate developer, who only breaks the law when necessary—and he doesn't usually get his hands dirty. Joe DeMarco, on the other hand, is paid to get his hands dirty. So, when John Mahoney, the former Speaker of the House, calls, DeMarco knows it's time to get to work. Brian Lewis, an intern who worked for Mahoney, has been found dead, seemingly from a drug overdose. But Brian didn't seem like a drug user, and even more concerning, he seemed to be on the cusp of releasing a report that identified a group of politicians who had taken bribes. **DP** (2)

****THE SEVENTH FLOOR**, David McCloskey (Norton, \$29.99). A Russian arrives in Singapore with a secret to sell. When the Russian is killed and Sam Joseph, the CIA officer dispatched for the meet, goes missing, operational chief Artemis Procter is made a scapegoat for the disaster and run out of the service. Months later, Sam appears at Procter's doorstep with an explosive secret: there is a Russian mole burrowed deep within the highest ranks of the CIA. As Procter and Sam investigate, they arrive at a shortlist of suspects made up of both Procter's closest friends and fiercest enemies. The hunt requires Procter to dredge



up her checkered past in the service of the CIA, placing the pair in the sights of a savvy Russian spymaster who will protect Moscow's mole in Langley at all costs. What happens when friendships forged by sweat and blood – from the Farm to Afghanistan and the executive "Seventh Floor" of CIA's Langley headquarters – are put to the ultimate test? What can we truly know about the people we love the most? **AZ & DP**

****WORST CASE SCENARIO**, T. J. Newman (Little, Brown, \$30.00, August). When a pilot suffers a heart attack at 35,000 feet, a commercial airliner filled with passengers crashes into a nuclear power plant in the small town of Waketa, Minnesota, which becomes ground zero for a catastrophic national crisis with global implications. **AZ & DP**

****HERO**, Thomas Perry (Mysterious Press, \$27.95, January). Justine Poole takes her job seriously providing security for wealthy and high-profile Hollywood stars. When she prevents a brazen robbery at the Beverly Hills home of two of her clients – killing two of the five armed robbers in the process – she is initially lauded in the media as a local hero. But the spotlight soon puts her in the crosshairs of the crime kingpin behind the burglaries. **Kirkus, BL & DP**

****THE PRICE YOU PAY**, Nick Petrie (Putnam, \$29.00, February). Lewis has helped Peter Ash out of more trouble than Peter cares to remember. So he doesn't hesitate when Lewis asks a favor in return. Lewis has left his criminal past behind, but a former associate may be in trouble, and he and Peter must drive into the teeth of a blizzard to find him. When they discover blood in the snow and a smoldering cabin, both men know things are bad. Then they learn that someone has stolen notebooks full of incriminating secrets about Lewis's long-ago crimes, and realize the situation is much worse than they'd thought. **DP**

Photos From Barry Award Ceremony



S.A. Cosby presenting Barry Award to Dennis Lehane
(In 2022 Dennis Lehane presented the Barry Award to S.A. Cosby)



George showing audience the Barry Award won by I. S. Berry
Congratulations to Ilana Berry for winning not only the Barry Award for **THE PEACOCK AND THE SPARROW**, but for also winning the Edgar Award, the Thriller Award and the Macavity Award for that debut novel.



Mick Herron accepting the Barry Award for Best Thriller
Photo Credit: John Bychowski

The 2024 Barry Award Winners

Best Mystery or Crime Novel

Dennis Lehane, SMALL MERCIES – Winner

- Lou Berney, DARK RIDE
- S. A. Cosby, ALL THE SINNERS BLEED
- Eli Cranor, OZARK DOGS
- Jordan Harper, EVERYBODY KNOWS
- Adrian McKinty, THE DETECTIVE UP LATE



Best First Mystery or Crime Novel

I.S. Berry, THE PEACOCK AND THE SPARROW – Winner

- Michael Bennett, BETTER THE BLOOD
- Bruce Borgos, THE BITTER PAST
- Amy Chua, THE GOLDEN GATE
- Deepti Kapoor, AGE OF VICE
- Nina Simon, MOTHER-DAUGHTER MURDER NIGHT
- Iris Yamashita, CITY UNDER ONE ROOF



Best Paperback Original Mystery or Crime Novel

Jake Needham, WHO THE HELL IS HARRY BLACK? – Winner

- Mia P. Manansala, MURDER AND MAMON
- Rick Mofina, EVERY THING SHE FEARED
- Jesse Sutanto, VERA WONG'S UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR MURDERERS
- Vanda Symon, EXPECTANT
- Scott Von Doviak, LOWDOWN ROAD



Best Thriller

Mick Herron, THE SECRET HOURS – Winner

- Mark Greaney, BURNER
- John Lawton, MOSCOW EXILE
- Anthony McCarten, GOING ZERO
- T. J. Newman, DROWNING
- Ruth Ware, ZERO DAYS



Thanks to Members of the Barry Award Nominating Committee

Editor's Message



Bouchercon. I hadn't seen Jeff Popple and Larry Gandle in person since 2019 in Dallas so it was a highlight of the convention to spend time with them. Also great to see Maggie Mason, Ted Hertel and Meredith Anthony as well. We have a great staff!

I moderated a panel in which we talked about our favorite mysteries. There was a packed house for our panelists: Larry Gandle, Meredith Anthony, Jeff Popple and Oline Cogdill. It was a lot of fun even though we ran out of time and didn't get through all of our choices. But the audience was provided a handout with that information so we got the word out. It was on this panel that Oline Cogdill alerted me to the book **THE GOD OF THE WOODS** by Liz Moore, which is getting a lot of attention as one of the best mysteries of the year. It got starred reviews in all four library journals, which is quite a feat. (See Larry Gandle's review herein).

Otto Penzler moderated a panel on collecting that Larry and I participated on. I told about selling off a portion of my collection recently (1700 of my best and most valuable books) and commented that I was surprised that I didn't miss the books at all. Otto recently sold all or almost all of his far larger and more valuable collection recently and he responded to my comment by saying that he misses the books every day. I guess one of the differences is that I kept one bookcase of my most cherished books and along with others that I still haven't gotten around to reading. I also have my 2,300 vintage paperback collection.

The Barry Award presentation went well (despite the absence of a podium). Dennis Lehane, I. S. Berry and Mick Herron were there to receive their awards in person. Dennis Lehane came to Bouchercon specifically to receive the award and that was very pleasing to me. Jake Needham lives in Bangkok,

Thailand so he sent a video of his heartfelt acceptance "speech" that was played on the big screen in the venue. And speaking of Jake, he has a new, excellent book **THE DETECTIVE GONE GRAY**, which has just been published. See my review of same herein.

Brad Thor was a guest of honor at the convention and I had a chance to have a brief conversation with him at an author/fan dinner that Mystery Mike and I sponsored on Friday night (around 75 attended). On Sunday morning as I was getting ready to leave for the airport I ran into Brad in passing and he asked if he could take a picture with me. It kind of took me aback a little. I don't get requests like that from authors. But I enjoyed the moment. Thanks Brad for boosting my humble ego.



George with Brad Thor

It's "Best of the Year" Time! The lists of 2024's best mystery, crime and thriller fiction start coming out at this time of year and I have started posting them on the website as I find them on the internet. So check in every few days to see what I have found. I'll collate the lists and distill the books down to a Best of the Best list which will appear in the cover article coming out in early Febru-

ary, 2025. I really enjoy this experience and I hope you gain some good reading recommendations from it.

Many of the **DP** contributors have been keeping a running list of their choices for Best of 2024 on our website. Go to www.deadlypleasures and click on the "Year's Best" tab under my photo on the front page of the site and scroll down.

Larry Gandle, DP Contrarian. Larry takes a lot of pride in voicing strong opinions that sometimes buck the **DP** consensus of opinion. For instance, several of the **DP** staff (including myself) have given recent glowing reviews to **ORDINARY BEAR** by C. B. Bernard and **CALIFORNIA BEAR** by Duane Swierczynski. But in his review column in this issue, you will notice Larry gives these two excellent novels lower marks. I like it that we don't all agree on everything. Larry and I get a good laugh from time to time over books that we disagree on. It's all in good fun and never devolves to the level of Dan Ackroyd's famous line on Saturday Night Live, "Jane, you ignorant slut!"

On the plus side, Larry and I do agree on four of the best books of the year: **ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK** by Chris Whitaker, **KILL FOR ME KILL FOR YOU** by Steve Cavanagh, **WITNESS 8** by Steve Cavanagh (2025 in the U.S.) and **THE GOD OF THE WOODS** by Liz Moore. So you see that he is not entirely devoid of good critical sense. (My tongue is in my cheek.)

Two Recent Deaths. Two well-known writers passed away this last quarter. One was **Robert J. Randisi**. Bob may not have ever achieved best-sellerdom but he may have been the most prolific writer of his generation. He is credited with over 650 books published, most of them Westerns. His series of Gunsmith books (1 book per month), written under the pen name J. R. Roberts, numbered in total 468 books. I remember him saying that he had written 8 sex scenes for this series and he would repeat each scene after every 8th book -- and no one noticed

or complained. One had to cut writing corners if one had to turn out a new book every month.

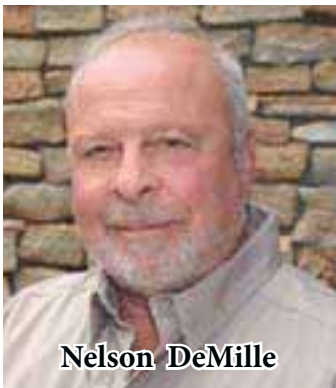
He also wrote a number of crime fiction novels, most of them in the private eye subgenre.

But what he is probably most known for in the mystery fiction world are two things: 1. The creation (with Ed Gorman) of *Mystery Scene Magazine*, which for a couple of decades was the preeminent mystery fan magazine of the genre, and 2. The creation of the Private Eye Writers Association (PWA) with its annual Shamus Awards.

The second writer to leave us is the best-selling thriller writer **Nelson DeMille**. I only met Nelson once at a long-ago ThrillerFest (2017) in New York City.

While introducing myself to Nelson (whom I knew was a life-long Long Islander), I said, "I've lived in Utah for fifty years but I grew up on Long Island – Hempstead High, Class of '63." Nelson replied, "Elmont High, Class of '62." He went on to say that Elmont and Hempstead competed in sports and that he was on the track team that competed against Hempstead High runners. I asked him what races he ran and he replied, "the 100 and 220." I told him that I also ran track (for Hempstead High) and that those were the races that I ran. We figured it out that we ran against each other in 1962. How bizarre! He said that he set records at his high school. I didn't even come close to that. I just really enjoyed the feeling of running at top speed.

It was a pleasure to meet him and find out that we shared a long-past moment in time.



Nelson DeMille

Associate Editor's Message



When Covid began, my life changed. Nothing serious or tragic, like for so many who have suffered in myriad ways. No, my complaints are quite trivial – much more mundane. It has only recently started to come back to what it was pre-Covid. Health wise, I put on twenty-five pounds because of being unable to go out and because I discovered this service called Uber Eats! In less than the time it would take to cook a meal at home, it was possible to have food delivered to my front door from just about any restaurant I desired. If I had a yearning for ice cream after eating, less than thirty minutes later all I had to do was open my door and it was waiting for me! I am in the process of losing the weight, so Uber Eats will now be a rare treat. I **will** physically get back to normal!

Pre-Covid, my annual schedule, as it related to the mystery world, included the Edgar Awards Banquet at the end of April, the International Thriller Writers Conference in July -- both at the Grand Hyatt in Manhattan next to Grand Central Station in New York City. Then there was Bouchercon in the fall. Both the Edgars and Thriller Writers have now moved to different locations as the Grand Hyatt closed temporarily. The organizations have not gone back, as of yet.

I did go to the Edgar Awards this past year and was a bit underwhelmed by the location. It was great to see so many writers I haven't seen in many years. To me, the Edgar Awards do not have the same importance to me as they used to – as I strongly feel the award nominating committees are not in touch with the same books that so many of us are raving about. It has, in a sense, lost its significance in my mind.

The Thriller conference moved from July to Memorial Day which overlapped with my birthday. I have not attended that conference since pre-Covid. I am

not leaving my family on my birthday as they insist on celebrating it with me. In 2025, the conference is moving several weeks later so I hope to be there again.

I attended Bouchercon for the first time in five years! The Gaylord Opryland in Nashville is an incredible hotel and in spite of excessive heat and rainstorms, we never had to go outside if we stayed there. There were huge glass ceilings above the common area and we could see the rainfall while being perfectly dry.



It was great seeing friends but it was bittersweet in that we did lose some amazing people during Covid who were certainly missed. George and I were on a couple of panels together. The room in which the review panel that George moderated was held, reached capacity and the audience seemed to enjoy hearing about our book recommendations. It was a well-run conference and it was great to be back. Next year, Bouchercon will be in my second home, New Orleans. That is, by far, the best location Bouchercon has ever had. It is in a great central location in the city right in the French Quarter. I am very much looking forward to it and seeing two of my best friends – Michael Connelly and Ali Karim – who are Guests of Honor at the convention. However, the conference is now moved to early September and it will be extremely hot and humid, so be forewarned. Dress appropriately.

It is great that life has returned to normal! I hope the same is true for you.

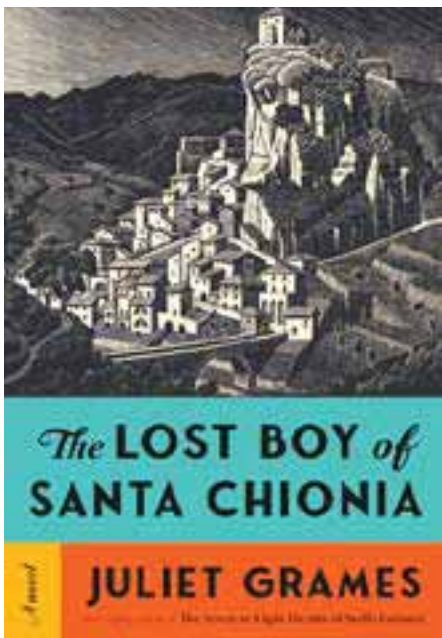
A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



First a note: The Book Gods have smiled on The Book Broad. Every book I read for this column earned an A. Widely different in sub-genres and subject matter, these books are all excellent.

THE LOST BOY OF SANTA CHIONIA
by Juliet Grames
Knopf, \$29.00, July
Rating: A



First line: My father used to tell me that growing up meant understanding who was at fault wasn't what mattered: what mattered was who had to pay the consequences.

Historical suspense: Juliet Grames' **THE LOST BOY OF SANTA CHIONIA** is a captivating read--historical, complicated, and compelling. It's set in 1960 in a fictional town in Calabria, the

mountainous region in the tip of Italy's boot (where, as of this writing, wildfires are raging). A young American woman, Francesca Lofffield, has been sent by a charitable organization to open a nursery school in the remote village. Simple enough, right? Wrong.

In the book, instead of wildfires, there is a flood soon after Franca arrives, and it reveals a skeleton that had been buried under the ruins of the old Post Office. The remote village is even more isolated by the aftermath of the flood and getting the remains to a forensic lab is impossible. The only thing that can be determined is the sex of the remains. It was a man. One by one, local women approach Francesca and ask for her help. They want her to investigate missing husbands and sons, each of them sure that the remains are their missing loved ones.

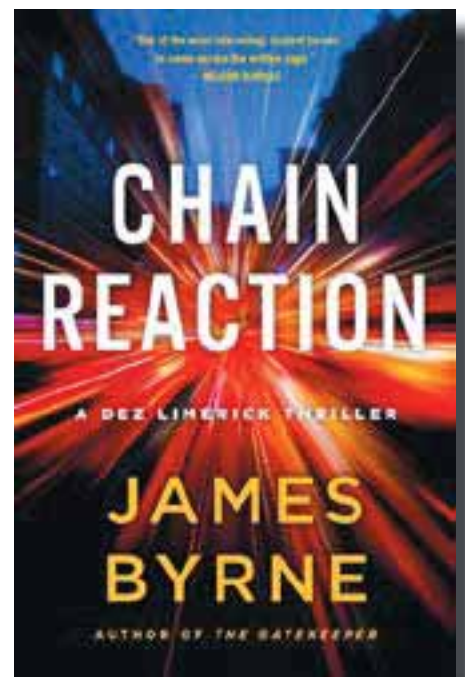
Francesca protests that she is not trained in law enforcement, but she had already announced her mission as helping the residents of the village and this is the help they say they need. She pores over old records, some of them in English, but cannot identify the dead man.

This mystery, along with the reasons her nursery school plan is continually thwarted, make up the deceptively simple plot, but the complexities of this brilliantly constructed novel grow slowly. In the end, it is Francesca's good-hearted naivete that is the real culprit. The conclusion is stunning and completely satisfying. And the richness of the characters and the gorgeous descriptions of the village and its environs are completely captivating, as well.

This book is phenomenal. Highly recommended.

CHAIN REACTION

By James Byrne
Minotaur, January 2025, \$29.00
Rating: A



First line: The innocuous-looking car approaches the research campus at five minutes before eleven at night.

Humorous Thriller: James Byrne's third book in his Dez Limerick series is every bit as wonderful as the first two. Byrne accomplishes a nearly impossible feat: he writes compelling, complex, high-stakes thrillers that are also funny.

Think about it. Humorous mysteries abound, amusing cozies are a mainstay, but witty thrillers? Not really. Recent attempts like **ARGYLLE** fell flat. Probably the closest are the excellent Mick Herron Slow Horses series, spy novels with a good bit of droll wit. But Byrne's protagonist is wonderfully funny and

his sense of humor is as charming as his skills are lethal.

CHAIN REACTION begins with a wonderful action sequence that shows off Dez's many skills, both as a gatekeeper, a master at opening doors and closing them, and as a particularly smart and practiced fighter.

Dez has retired from his mysterious military duties and is on the West Coast playing guitar with various jazz and rock bands. When a group he admires loses their bassist to COVID right before an important gig at the opening of a huge new convention center in Newark. Dez readily agrees to sit in and flies to New Jersey. He has no sooner checked in than he begins to smell trouble. Among the crowds milling around the large, enclosed space are a number of military types. Before long chaos erupts and Dez is in the thick of it. A full-blown terrorist attack leaves dozens dead and thousands held hostage. Somehow, Dez is a special target. The only person Dez can team up with is a thief he caught in a previous incident.

Non-stop action and a complicated plot kept me riveted. And there's no one I would rather be rooting for than Dez.

It works as a stand-alone or you can read the books in order, starting with the fabulous thriller, **THE GATEKEEPER**. Absolutely wonderful!

A VERY BAD THING

By J.T. Ellison

Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99, September

Rating: A

First line: My darling daughter, I'm not going to hide this from you anymore.

Domestic Thriller: J.T. Ellison is an excellent writer. She has written two series and collaborated with Catherine Coulter on a third. But her stand-alones are absolutely exceptional.

A VERY BAD THING is a brilliant take on a familiar trope. A fan finds herself in the orbit of a celebrity she worships. When the celebrity suddenly and mysteriously dies, the fan becomes a suspect and must unravel the puzzle of who killed her idol. In **A VERY BAD THING**, bestselling novelist Columbia Jones has hired Riley Carrington, a young reporter, to join her on a huge publicity tour for her latest book, which is already becoming a hotly anticipated movie. Riley is hired to chronicle the book tour. She is the only journalist Columbia will talk to and the assignment is her dream job. When she finds Columbia dead one morning, Riley is still reeling with shock when Columbia's daughter and publicist, Darian, accuses her of murdering the famous author.

With compelling characters, abundant plot twists, and a dizzying array of family secrets, **A VERY BAD THING** is a must-read!

THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER

By Joseph Finder

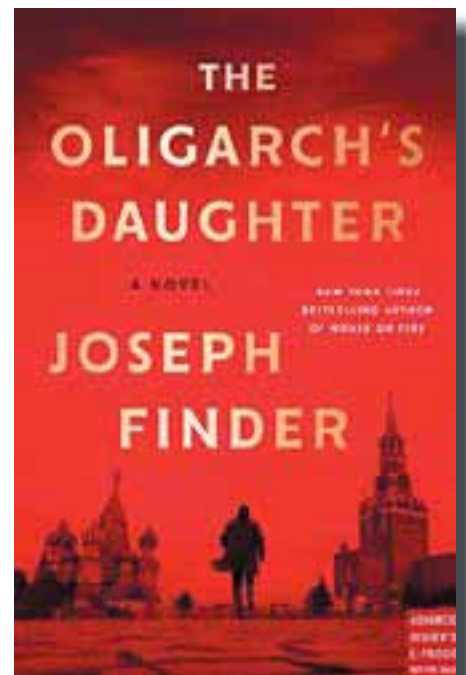
Harper, January 2025, \$30.00

Rating: A

First line: Until that day, Grant had never killed anyone.

Spy Thriller: Joseph Finder is one of our finest authors and he has a wide range of sub-genres. From business and financial thrillers, to legal mysteries, to psychological suspense, he is superb at them all.

His background, including an interest in Russian affairs, comes into full play in **THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGH-**



TER, which features a man named Grant Anderson who had worked in finance and had run into trouble with a powerful oligarch. He had managed to get away and changed his identity and lived quietly, working as a boat builder in a coastal New Hampshire town. When the Russians catch up with him again, he once more goes on the run. The oligarch hates him. After all, he had married the man's daughter.

The story of how he ended up in this predicament is told in flashbacks to six years ago, when he was Paul Brightman, an up-and-coming young investment banker. He met a woman at a charity gala, mistaking her for a cater waiter. She was an artist, a photographer. They struck up a friendship which turned into a romance. He was in love before he found out that she was an oligarch's daughter.

When Paul's firm ran into trouble, the oligarch, Arkady Galkin, offered Paul a job in his own investment firm. Paul's diligence and nose for the telling detail led him to make a lot of money for Galkin right away. But Paul still had to go a long way to gain his trust as his daughter's suitor. And along the way, Paul also began to glimpse the depth of the Russian's corruption and the lengths he would go to avoid consequences.

By the time Paul and Tatyana get



married, Paul has begun to figure out the full extent of the criminal empire. The CIA tries to recruit him, and he can't see a way out. He's pretty sure that although Tatyana loves him, she would never abandon her family. Paul's own mother is dead, and his father is a deranged survivalist. Using skills he learned from his dad, Paul goes on the run.

The plot moves from the wealthy precincts of Manhattan, to Moscow, to the American wilderness and the depiction of each setting is spot on. The action sequences are gripping. The details used to describe the world of international finance have the ring of verisimilitude. The emotional arc of the characters is poignant. **THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER** is an exceptional thriller. A must-read for spy buffs and fans of financial thrillers, as well.

George's Take: I was anxious to read Joe's upcoming thriller because it had been quite a while since his last book was published. The premise was intriguing, but, alas, the execution was lacking. It was just too long (448 pages) and I found the main character a tad wishy-washy. **Rating: B+**

IN TOO DEEP

By Lee Child and Andrew Child
Delacorte Press, October 2024, \$30.00

Rating: A

First line: The pain hit first, then the sound followed, the way lightning beats thunder in a storm.

Action Thriller: **IN TOO DEEP** is the latest in Lee Child and Andrew Child's epic Jack Reacher series. It seems there is no end of complex situations a wandering ex-military man can find himself involved in. Strap in for another wild ride!

Reacher wakes up shackled to a table with no idea how he got there. Amnesia is one of the oldest of plot hooks. Rarely used any more, it serves its purpose here. Reacher was in an accident and has a broken wrist and a concussion. When his captor checks on him, Reacher manages to escape. Of course. It's a classic Reacher scene. Deeply satisfying.

Reacher, still with no idea where he is. He doesn't know the people who seem to know him. He's pretty sure they are a gang planning a crime. A big crime. Someone is dead. And the police are looking for Reacher.

Reacher has fallen in with a gang planning a high stakes heist. They know they are under investigation and must complete their mission before they're caught. They are sure that one of them is helping the FBI track them down.

There are major plot twists complicated by Reacher's memory, which is slow to come back. There is plenty of action complicated by Reacher's broken wrist. There is a policeman on the trail complicated by her personal agenda with one member of the gang.

Classic Reacher. A must read.

THE KILLING FLOOR

by Lee Child

GP Putnam & Sons, 1997, \$30.99

Rating: A

First line: I was arrested in Eno's Diner.

Classic Thriller: **THE KILLING FLOOR**, published in 1997, was Lee Child's first book. It introduced Jack Reacher. It rejuvenated the wandering maverick or samurai, who roamed around righting wrongs when he noticed them—which was often.

For the 2024 Bouchercon Best of the Best panel, I was asked to choose a classic to recommend. I tried to think about Agatha Christie and Poe but Lee Child's **THE KILLING FLOOR** immediately came to mind. It remains one of my all-time favorites. I didn't read it the year it came out, 1997. But soon after, when the author's name crossed my radar, I decided to start with the first book and read the series in order. Not necessary, by the way, with the Jack Reacher series. They aren't even written in chronological order.

It still amazes me that this is an author's first novel. It establishes the series' main character, Jack Reacher (no middle name), and succinctly and instantly places him in the pantheon of unforgettable protagonists. It sets up

the plot, a complex puzzle, with a sure and practiced hand. It wows us with its violence, neatly deconstructed but still delivering a seismic jolt. It gives us a set of memorable characters and a terrific setting. The plot is smart and gives us an insiders' look at counterfeiting, a criminal enterprise seldom explored in depth.

But when we're nicely settled in, about a fourth of the way through, ready to enjoy the unraveling of the puzzle, it delivers a truly amazing knock-out punch. It clobbers us with a this-time-it's-personal whack to the head that elevates this thriller to the highest plane. It's just amazing. Definitely worth a re-read.

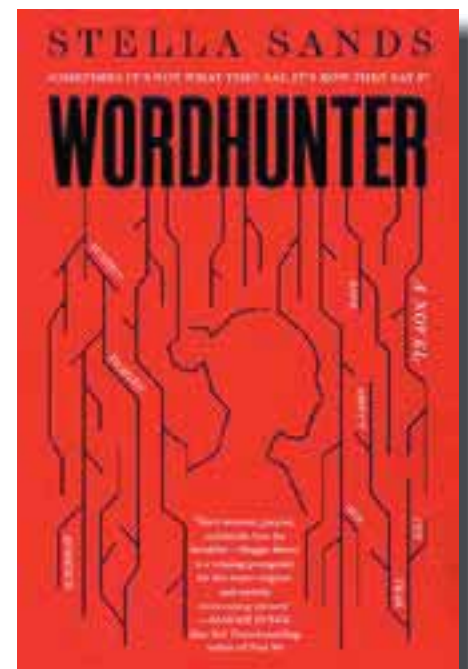
And let me add that it was delightful to read, back-to-back, the first and the latest entries in this extraordinary series. The entire Lee Child canon is brilliant. The hand-off to co-writer Andrew Child is great and the books just keep getting better. Keep reading. I know I will.

WORDHUNTER

By Stella Sands
Harper, \$18.99, August

Rating: A+

First line: "Encrypted," Maggie sang syllable by syllable as she skipped past the bald tires strewn across the Tidwell's yard.



So, imagine you've just read a half dozen excellent novels, first rate mysteries and perfect thrillers. You pick up a book by an author you've never heard of. You start to read, and right away you get this strange feeling. This isn't a good book. It isn't an excellent book. It's a GREAT book!

WORDHUNTER by Stella Sands wowed me from the start. Like many mystery readers, I love words, word games, and word puzzles. And I loved **WORDHUNTER**.

Protagonist Maggie Moore is a brilliant and original creation, a genius who plays with words and sentences from a young age. The novel's first line refers to a challenge she has set herself, to think of three none-letter words where the second letter is an "n." She diagrams sentences in her head. Sometimes sentences from Proust.

It begins with a prologue (I usually hate prologues, but I'll forgive it here since it's used correctly), where Maggie's childhood best friend disappears from her Florida home. Later, when Maggie is in graduate school studying linguistics, she is asked to help the local police chief with a case of cyberstalking. Teamed with Detective Silas Jackson, she is asked to study the texts sent to a terrified woman and help determine who wrote them. That same day, her handsome linguistics professor also asks her to be his research assistant. Maggie is thrilled.

Maggie is tattooed and pierced, she is a smoker, a drinker, sometimes a drug user, and frequently a bit of a slut. She is one of the most interesting women in literature since Lisbeth Salander or Diana Taverner or Miss Marple.

Several mysteries weave together: who is the cyberstalker? What happened to Maggie's childhood friend? And what's the deal with the linguistics professor? Maggie uses her special skill with words to investigate them all.

This book wowed me!

Highly, highly recommended.

THE LAST TIME SHE SAW HIM

By Kate White

Harper, May 2024, \$30.00



Rating: A

First line: "You're really pretty," he told her.

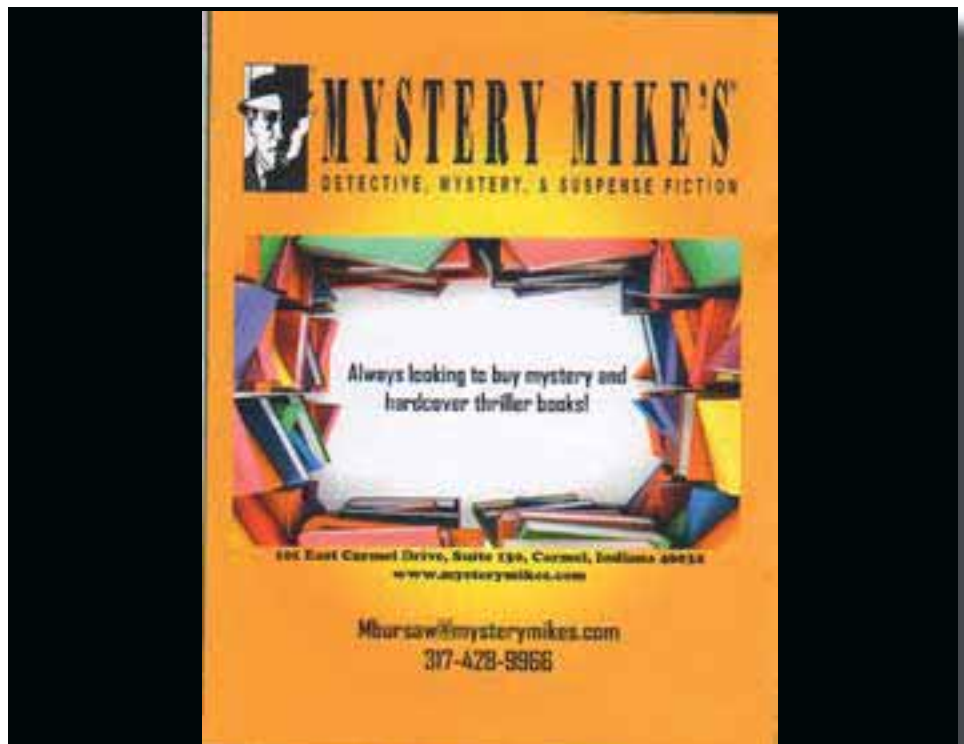
Psychological Suspense: The great Kate White takes the chick lit mystery and dresses it up with the accessories that usually belong to conventional thrillers. Great action, nail-biting suspense, plot twists, and complicated characters.

THE LAST TIME SHE SAW HIM starts when New Yorker Kiki Reed decides to attend a party in Connecticut, even though her ex-fiancé, Jamie, will be there. She feels that enough time has elapsed since she abandoned him and she can socialize with mutual friends without awkwardness. Most of the guests seem happy to see her although Jamie's best friend, Sam, seems cool. Kiki even talks to Jamie, who has brought a date to the party. But when the party is winding down, a gunshot brings guests to the parking lot. Jamie is in his car. Dead.

After a perfunctory investigation, the police write off his death as a suicide. His date had stormed out early. His ex-fiancé was no longer in love with him. He had impulsively shot himself.

Kiki doesn't buy it. She knew Jamie better than anyone else and knew he would not be capable of self-destruction. Many of their mutual friends blame her for his death. But Kiki is determined to find out the truth. She enlists the reluctant Sam to help her, despite the fact that her attraction to Sam had made marriage to Jamie impossible.

Secrets are uncovered, motives are unraveled, dangerous possibilities are explored. The plot twists and winds. Surprises abound. An excellent read.



Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith

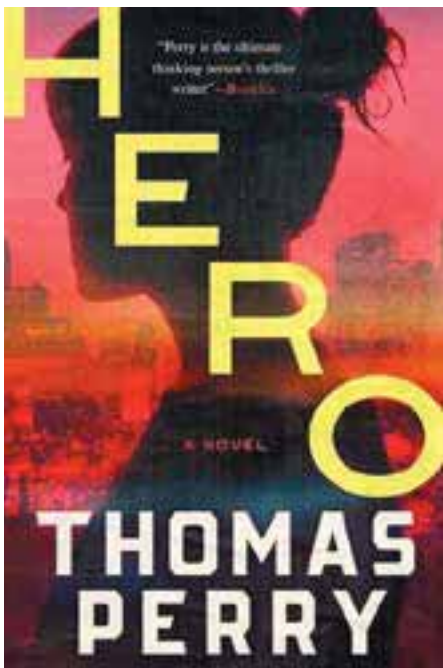


Okay, don't pay the ransom—I've escaped.

HERO

by Thomas Perry

Mysterious Press, \$27.95, January 2024



In this 2024 standalone Thomas Perry, the man behind the critically acclaimed Jane Whitfield series, gives us another strong, resourceful female. But Justine Poole isn't a "guide," shepherding people into a new life under new identities.

Nope, Justine—we eventually find out—has already done that. Not that it matters—it's her present life, as a personal security agent for a high-priced and well-regarded Los Angeles firm that lands her in trouble.

She's young, ambitious, attractive, quick on her feet, and very good at her job, protecting wealthy, high-profile Hollywood celebrities, attending lavish

galas and hobnobbing with Hollywood's rich and famous. So when she gets a call from her hands-on boss, who suspects a couple he's been guarding—an elderly television producer and his wife—are possible targets, she doesn't hesitate. She rushes to the couple's swanky Beverly Hills home, and confronts five armed robbers lying in wait, who open fire. Her training kicks in, and she kills two of them, reluctantly becoming the "hero" of the title.

But it doesn't last. Her brief moment of local fame doesn't go well with the fragile ego of Mr. Conger, the man behind the robbery; a self-styled criminal mastermind who takes umbrage at a lone young "girl" who not only took out two of his lackeys, but more importantly blew his scheme to smithereens. Gee, what will all the other criminal masterminds think?

So he dispatches Leo Sealy, a coldly efficient assassin, to take out Justine and hopefully restore the chronically insecure Conger's reputation. Should be a snap, Leo figures, especially with the local, easily manipulated media more than eager to broadcast info on the new "hero" and her current whereabouts. And so begins a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse, as the young bodyguard finds herself trying to stay out of the sights (literally) of a much more experienced and deadly foe.

I said cat-and-mouse, but maybe I should have said roadrunner-and-coyote. It turns out the Justine is unexpectedly resourceful, clever and... lucky. A few coincidences click into place, a few missteps occur and the increasingly frustrated Leo, it turns out, is rattled, making him even more dangerous.

It's a fine romp, a blood-flecked cartoon of deadly intentions and random chaos.

Meep-meep.

CLETE

by James Lee Burke

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.00, June

New Orleans private detective Clete Purcell has long been one of the most fascinating sidekicks in detective fiction, seen through the eyes of eternally troubled New Iberia police detective Dave Robicheaux. Clete has always played the black sheep to Dave's white knight; the one willing to get his hands dirty (and occasionally bloody); acting without question or pause—he's a 300-pound Hawk in a pork pie hat. A solo outing for Clete—after twenty or so books by Edgar-winner James Lee Burke—seemed long overdue.

Dave, of course, is a recovering alcoholic and fellow Vietnam vet who's had more than his fair share of tragedy, occasionally haunted by the ghosts of the confederate dead, but the "Big Mon" is something else.

William Faulkner famously opined that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." He was talking about his fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, but across the border in Burke's Louisiana, the past isn't just not past.

It won't shut up.

As Clete confesses at one point, "I couldn't keep history separate from the present."

Sure, Dave may have an occasional chat with some Civil War spectres, but Clete is truly haunted in this one, tormented by visions of a Jewish mother and child being lead to the Auschwitz gas chambers, and regularly receiving nocturnal visits from Joan of Arc (I'm not making this up). Yep, Clete—reckless and impulsive, violence-prone and

substance-abusing, and missing more than a few filters—may be even more unstable than Dave.

Reeling from the recent death of his grandniece from a fentanyl OD, dismayed by the trashing of his beloved Cadillac, and surprised to discover he may be falling in love with a hot-tempered stripper, Clete gets dragged into one of Dave's cases.

Or is it the other way around? The plot itself bounces all over the place. Something about a deadly new drug, a major Hollywood film about the Civil War being shot locally, sex workers, and an assortment of violent, racist psychos and degenerate—all typical Burke fare.

None of this fever dream makes much sense, punctuated by spectral visitations, an escapade involving a cement mixer, jarring coincidences, even more jarring acts of violence and hatred, and a surprising amount of Dave, often leaving Clete oddly adrift to play a supporting role in his own tale.

Oh, to be sure, it's a fun read, with Burke's piercing, poetic prose and muscular storytelling a candle to light the way through a complex tale of greed, corruptible seed and vile hatred, and we do get a little more insight into Clete. Ultimately, however, it's not the Confederate dead, Joan of Arc or even a yellow Cadillac the lingers in my mind, but the enduring friendship between Clete and Dave.

And that abides.

JOEY PISS POT

by Charlie Stella

Stark House, \$15.95, June 2024

Friendship also serves as the foundation for Charlie Stella's latest mobster-iffic outing. In the punchy, character-driven *Joey Piss Pot*, it all begins with two old guys in the kitchen, bickering and busting each other's, uh, shoes. Artie Alder is retired NYPD who's dropped by with a bag of deli and a six-pack of Diet Coke. His host, 300-pound Joseph "Joey" Gallo, is a former Brooklyn bar owner, who interrupts their midday feast to urinate in a small sauce pan, which he proceeds to empty down the kitchen sink, as is his wont.

Hence the nick-name.

Life-long friends, they've got each other's backs.

But it all goes sideways when Joey asks Artie to look into what his beloved grandson Chris is up to. Joey's worried that Chris, whose father—Joey's son—was killed in a mob-related incident, is getting involved somehow with organized crime. It doesn't help that his vindictive daughter-in-law (Chris' mother) still blames Joey for her husband's death.

And so Artie agrees to poke around a bit, inadvertently setting off a series of events that could mean curtains for everyone, and in particular Chris, seemingly adrift after a tour in Afghanistan, who is indeed getting involved with the mob—as an undercover agent. Unfortunately, Artie's poking around threatens to blow Chris' cover, and soon enough the lies and betrayals are coming down hard and fast, as the various players scamper and scheme, twisting knives in each others' backs, and the dialogue dances while the bodies fall.

Honor among thieves?

Omertà?

The Mafia's much ballyhooed and lauded code of honor?

You're kidding, right?

And it's not just the mobsters.

Lawyers, cops, federal agents, district attorneys, lawyers, wives, husbands, politicians? Few of them give a damn about anything like rules or laws, let alone honour. They're all out for themselves, driven only by self-interest, greed, revenge or ego, like some unholy (and often incompetent) combination platter.

With a side of lust.

Yeah, some of these people just can't keep it zipped. Which makes it even more fun.

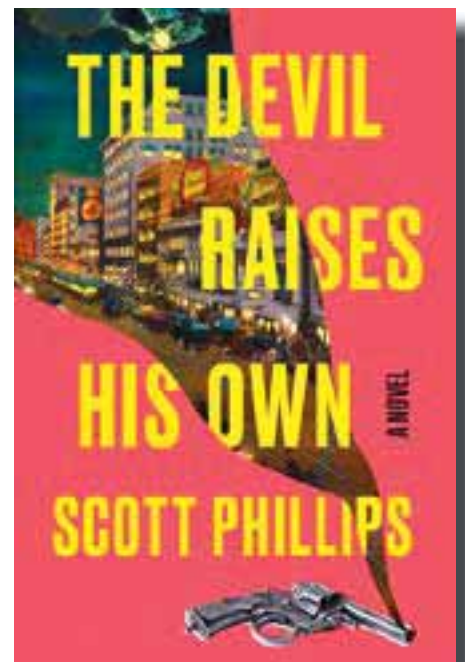
But eventually everyone gets what's coming to them. Some of them even deserve it. Oh, and for those wondering about that piss pot?

Don't worry. Stella knows his Chekov.

THE DEVIL RAISES HIS OWN

by Scott Phillips

Soho Crime, \$27.95, August 2024



Wanna be in pictures? Here's yet another cautionary tale.

But with a twist. We're so used to tales of modern-day Tinsel Town excess that we tend to forget the place has always been like this.

Like, forever.

Set in 1916, Phillips' latest is a rowdy, picaresque tale (very) loosely anchored by aging Civil War vet, amateur camera bug and ladies man Bill Ogden, who previously appeared in Phillips' western noir *Cottonwood* (2004). More than forty years later, he's still snapping that shutter, but he's settled down—at least for now—in Los Angeles with a small downtown photography studio. He's soon joined by his granddaughter, Flavia, who left a dead husband (Don't ask!) back in Wichita.

It's a wild time. The future of the fledgling movie industry is wide-open and up for grabs. The competition is fierce, with fly-by-night filmmakers shooting everything from one-reel comedies to stag films, "borrowing" sets, costumes and props and anything else not nailed down, while a horde of on-scene wannabes storm the city, chasing stardom. Some are talented. Most aren't. But the back-stabbing, scenery-chewing, corruption and rabid egomania running amuck is instantly familiar, as recognizable as tonight's episode of *Access Hollywood*.

City of Angels? Hah!

Joining Bill and Flavia in the sprawling cast is Clyde, a seasoned producer who's recently partnered with Irene and her "husband" George to make "blue movies" on the side. Their director is Milton, who cut his teeth on one-reel comedies, and their "actors" include prostitutes Trudy (a single mom) and easy-going Victoria who discover, much to their surprise and delight, that they have no problem with lesbian scenes. The films are distributed to men's clubs for smokers and private collectors under the banner of the Magnificat Educational Distribution Company, Incorporated—and they're soon raking it in. At least until Melvin, a sharp-eyed postal inspector, porn addict and would-be blackmailer, catches on to their game. Meanwhile, Ezra, Trudy's violent, long-lost husband, has rolled into town, fresh out of prison, determined to reunite with her and their two young children who, just by coincidence, are on the verge of becoming major child stars, due to a series of lucrative comedies alongside Tommy, an unstable former vaudeville star whose career was, until recently, circling the drain. Meanwhile, Henry, a young drifter who rode the same freight into town as the murderous Ezra, has been hired as Bill's assistant, where he promptly falls in love with Flavia. And that's not mentioning the calvacade of one-scene schemers and dreamers who fill out the cast.

Confused? Me too. I had to make notes, because the plot, like a late night film festival of random but enjoyable one-reelers, jumps from character to character and vignette to vignette, occasionally folding back on itself. Meanwhile, the growing pains of the rapidly expanding city, a string of random murders and the on-going debate about the Great War raging overseas provide ample opportunities for local color.

Sure, there's murder and secrets dying to be exposed, but those expecting a Day of the Locust ending may be disappointed—Phillips is more Mack Sennett than Nathanael West here. Still, the sharply etched characters and cheeky black humour make for an intoxicating and even joyful peek at Tinsel Town's

raucous past.

As Irene proclaims at one point, after urging Clyde to up their game., "Let's make some smut!"

BORDER BRAND

by Raoul Whitfield

Black Mask, \$24.95, August 2024

It was the best of books.

Raoul Whitfield is one of my go-to authors, a Black Mask superstar hovering just below the ranks of his drinking buddy Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and Border Brand is definitely my kinda book, the long-awaited publication in one volume (at last!) of a novel originally serialized in Black Mask, the legendary pulp, almost a hundred years ago.

It's pure, unadulterated and unapologetic pulp—a rough and rude, rock 'em, sock 'em tale that follows tough-as-nails federal agent and high-flying manhunter Ben Breed, as he flies back and forth across the American/Mexican border, intent on bringing down a vicious crime lord known to one and all as "The Wop." Yeah, Whitfield's not going to get any prizes her for being woke, but like I said, it was written almost a hundred years ago. The stories are narrated by MacLeod, a fellow pilot and recently returned WWI vet whom Brand recruits as his assistant, waving promises of a reward in front of him.

It's a rip-roaring yarn, full of close calls and casual violence, shootings and stabbings, fistfights and treachery, ambushes and aerial hijinks, played out against a background of desert scrub, bank jobs and mining towns. The action rarely stops, as the bodies fall and one scene tumbles into another, the intrepid duo claw their way from flea bag hotels to fly-blown cantinas on both sides of the line, and from car chase to dogfight. Machine guns crackle and planes crash, and if it doesn't always make much sense, well, so be it.

It's pulp, baby. Live with it.

It was the worst of books.

Whitfield, as I said, was a star of the pulp era, and he wrote some even better stuff. His numerous short stories in Black Mask and other pulps, written

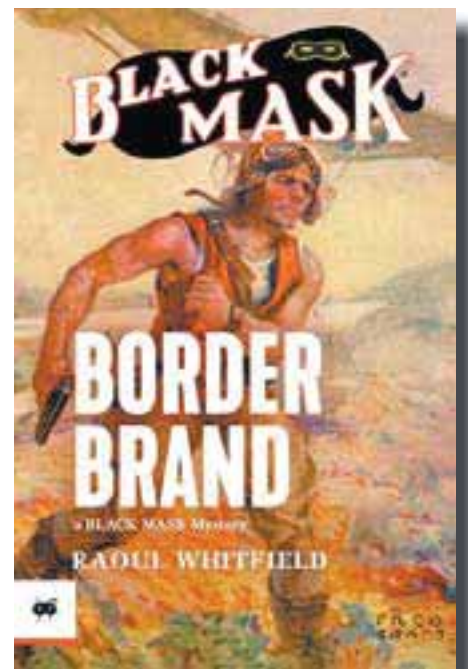
under the Ramon Decolta pen name and featuring diminutive Filipino private detective Jo Gar, were always sure bets, and his novels Green Ice (1930) and Death at the Hollywood Bowl (1931), both originally serialized in the Mask, are stone cold hard-boiled classics.

In fact, the latter is one of my all-time favorite private eye tales; a tough, twisted yarn that follows Ben Jardinn who runs a small detective agency on Hollywood Boulevard, a few blocks from Grauman's Chinese Theatre. He's a hard, cynical son of a bitch, "cold as hell," who gets hired by a Tinsel Town big shot to investigate the murder of his brother, who's shot while conducting a symphony at the Hollywood Bowl—in front of 20,000 witnesses.

Which has absolutely NOTHING to do with Border Brand.

Except... right there on the publisher's web site and all over the internet, and on the actual back cover of the physical book right there on my desk, it's billed as a Ben Jardinn story. Despite the fact that Ben Breed and Ben Jardine are two completely, absolutely different characters. Did anyone actually bother to read this before they published it?

I loved the book, but come on!



HUGE

by Brent Butt

Seal Books, \$10.50, October 2024

So, three stand-up comics walk into a bar...

Wait. Is this some kinda joke?

Nope, it's a scene played out several times in comedian Brett Butt's dead serious thriller *Huge*.

One of the comics is Dale, a cash-strapped but seasoned pro from the States who knows how to work a crowd, and leave them satisfied. Not a superstar, maybe, but he knows how to play the game. He's the combination emcee and headliner on a low-key tour of Canadian prairie towns (Brass Hole! Wire Beach! Horsewater!), slowly working their way to Winnipeg, a prime spot (really!) on the North American comedy circuit.

Joining Dale is Rynn, a feisty, quick-witted young Irish comedienne; a rising star with a possible TV talk show deal in the works who's looking for some much-needed exposure. She's the opener.

The third comic, sitting in the middle slot, is Hobie Huge, a young, impulsive and over-sized Canadian desperate to make it on the stand-up circuit. He's the local, and he's providing the transportation in his customized van, driving them from town to town.

Wait. Did I say impulsive? That's not quite accurate. More like a stone-cold, homicidal psycho, with zero impulse control and a hair trigger.

And so what starts out as a fascinating nightly behind-the-scenes peek at the the stand-up world (the author knows his stuff and some of the tips Dale offers are solid gold, for both comics and even lowly writers), ends up like something imagined by Stephen King (possibly after a bad burrito), as Hobie slowly loses it, and Dale and Rynn realize—too late—just how far out on the crazy train their co-star really is.

Lovably schlubby Canadian actor/comedian Butt (probably best known in this country for *Corner Gas*, a long-running Canadian sitcom centered around a Saskatchewan gas station out in the boondocks), is no stranger to the crime world, having written and starred in the delightful *No Clue*, a 2014 comedy in which a mild-mannered, middle-aged Vancouver novelty salesman poses as a hard-boiled private eye to impress a

“stone cold gorgeous dish of smoking red hot fox meat.” But Huge is something else again—a dark, twitchy, and surprisingly effective nail biter that draws you in, before yanking the rug out from under you.

It's a killer.

NEGATIVE GIRL

by Libby Cudmore

Datura Books, \$18.99, September 2024

All rock stars die in plane crashes of one kind or another. Sex. Drugs. Actual plane crashes. Take your pick. Someone said that once.

Lennon, maybe?

But in former rock musician Martin Wade's case, it was definitely drugs (mostly heroin) that ended his gig as front man for *The French Letters*, a 1990s punk band that had a brief, heady dance with success. The drugs, and the subsequent disappearance of his wife, Cecilia, which the LAPD have long suspected Martin of. As he tells it, “they didn't know if she was dead or alive, but they saw a junkie ex-rock star aching for a fix and a blackout where a woman should be.”

But that was almost twenty years ago, and somehow Martin was eventually cleared. He survived, cleaned himself up, got his P.I. ticket, and moved to *Perine*, a small town in upstate New York, where he “learned how to run searches and what to look for,” coming to the conclusion that “there was no trace of the woman (he) had once planned to spend (his) life with.”

It's that long-ago tragedy, however, that has added a strong touch of compelling melancholy to an award-winning string of short stories, as Martin continued to rebuild his life. He attended meetings, and lived quietly and alone, working simple cases out of his shabby office over a vape shop, playing piano alone in his living room. Not drinking. Not doing drugs. And keeping his head down.

Of course, one of the big hooks for a music geek like me is the never-quite-gone music that is still a huge part of the middle-aged Martin's life, with songs and bands name-dropped like confetti

all over the place. His former bandmates were casually mentioned in the stories, but now, with his long-awaited first novel-length adventure *Negative Girl* (the title nicked from a Steely Dan song), one of them is finally dragged into the spotlight.

Janie, a promising young musician shows up at the office, asking Martin's new assistant, heavily tattooed, thirty-something Valerie, for an appointment. Janie wants Martin to speak to her estranged, drug addict father who is trying to push his way into her life. But it turns out the man is Ron Carlock, Martin's old friend and guitarist from *The French Letters*, who is still struggling with pills and booze. When Martin finally hooks up with him, the reunion isn't a happy one. And it doesn't improve when Janie's corpse is fished out of the river, only days later.

The cops quickly write her drowning off as an accident, but neither Martin, Valerie or her heart-broken father buy it. Martin reluctantly starts to nose around, unaware Valerie, eager to prove her investigative chops and do more than manage the office, is conducting her own parallel investigation. Martin, however, isn't the only detective here with a dark past, and Valerie has more than enough secrets of her own to confront.

As the story unfolds, and the side-by-side investigations criss-cross in an uneasy tango (at one point, she confesses she doesn't mind her boss when he “wasn't being an asshole”), the facades fall and long-hidden secrets and hard, unpleasant emotional truths are dragged into the light. Addiction, family ties, obsession, greed, resentment, mental illness, jealousy and denial swirl around, as Martin and Valerie swap the first-person narrative chores from chapter to chapter. When the solution of this moody, noir-tinged weeper comes, it cuts deep.

But not as deep as the secret histories of our two detectives. Wrenching.

P.S. Damn, Libby. Next time, how about a playlist?

* * * * *

Well, that's it for now. You can email me at kvnsmith@thrillingdetective.com,

From The Lakefront

Ted Hertel

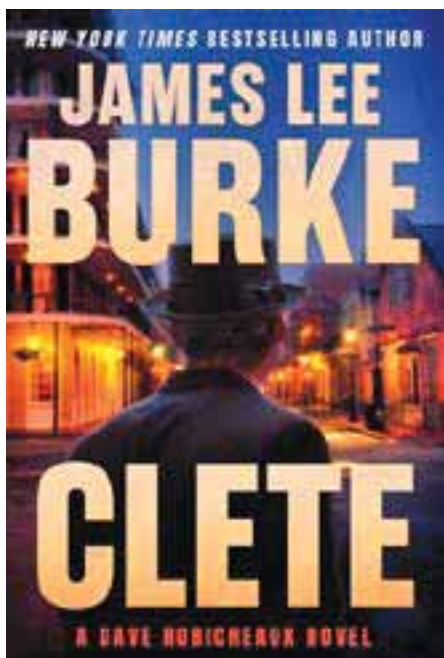


CLETE

by James Lee Burke

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.00, June

Rating: A-



Louisiana, the late 1990s. Clete Purcel calls upon Dave Robicheaux, his longtime partner and friend, when some thugs beat him up and trash his beloved Cadillac. The two suspect that some missing fentanyl might be the motive. But as they dig into the attack, they discover that things go much deeper and darker than they expected. That's not the only trouble that comes their way. Clara Bow (no, *not* that one!) hires Clete to investigate her Ponzi-scheme running, soon-to-be ex-husband, who is surrounded by his own set of vicious less-than-desirables. Much to Dave's disbelief, Clete soon has his own "In the Electric Mist" visions of a beautiful woman who is seen by and only speaks to him.

"The Bobbsey Twins from Homicide" ride again in this novel told in the first person point-of-view of Clete Purcel. Dealing as usual with themes of racism, guilt, and the darkness that pervades the lives of both Robicheaux and Purcel, the two men face danger from all sides as they once again learn that one cannot save others from themselves. Clete sees Dave as a knight-errant while Clete believes he is the grunt who has to do the grunt's work. The two are really alike in that, like Dave, Clete will go out of his way to poke the bear, antagonizing others who will only make his life that much worse.

There is so much beauty in Burke's words that they make one want to continue reading into that darkness. "I wanted to be [under a live oak on the edge of Bayou Teche] at that special moment when the sky lights with a special kind of flame, one that issues from the rim of the Earth and trails curds of purple-and-red smoke to the top of the heavens. It made me think of *Gone with the Wind*, when Tara is set afire and an era is burned to the ground." Sheer poetry throughout the book from an MWA Grand Master.

Burke neatly pulls off an inside joke when Clara Bow begins making a Civil War era film called *Flags on the Bayou*, which of course is the name of Burke's 2024 Edgar Award winning Best Novel. The filming plays an essential part in this novel.

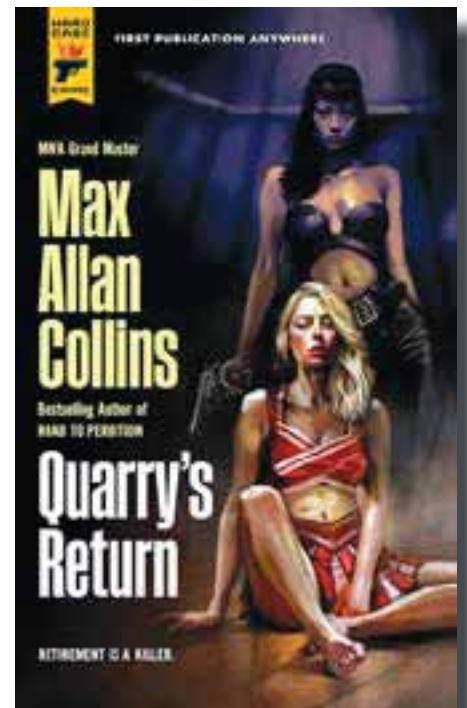
Clete's cause is nothing less than justice, charity, and a voice for those who have none. So, who is the true knight-errant here? Clete or Dave? This is another outstanding novel by one of this country's finest authors.

QUARRY'S RETURN

by Max Allan Collins
Hard Case Crime, \$16.99, November
Rating: B+

Seventy-one years old and retired "professional" (okay, "hitman") Quarry has only recently connected with Susan, the forty-year-old daughter he never knew he had. But shortly after leaving Quarry's home at Christmas, she disappears. She's a best-selling author of true crime books, some of which are based on Quarry's own life. When an attempt is made on Quarry, he is saved only at the very last minute by Lu, a woman from his past. Reluctantly, he agrees to let her join him in his search for Susan. After all, a woman wrapping up a corpse in plastic sheeting and duct tape is not to be argued with!

There's a reason why MWA Grand Master and PWA's Shamus Lifetime Achievement winner Max Allan Collins is the true heir to Mickey Spillane. He writes stories filled with tough men and tough sexy women (most of whom sleep with the protagonist of whatever novel Collins is writing). How does he do manage to do this so successfully? "It was easy," I said, quoting Mike Hammer at his shocking best. Well, that's not really true. Collins only makes it seem easy because he can smoothly and



seamlessly create these hard-boiled tales that move at the speed of light.

Since **THE LAST QUARRY** was published in 2006 there have been eleven more Quarry novels published, including one graphic novel. As one can see, he is a hard man to kill. Thank goodness for that, as the series is consistently dark and tremendously entertaining. Lu, his partner here, is equally adept at carrying out the mission. Along the way there is a brutal cast of villains. Susan had been tracking the facts behind the vicious murders of several young women, The Cheerleader Killer. Could she be the hostage (or worse) of someone she was now planning to expose?

Interestingly, Quarry is using the name Jack Keller in this book. Those who have read Lawrence Sanders' novels will recall that the hitman in books like, well, **HIT MAN**, **HIT PARADE**, and others, is also named Keller. Fun fact to know and tell.

QUARRY'S RETURN is tightly written with not a wasted word in this 200 page novel of a man who just because of he's aging doesn't mean that he's lost his skills. The same can be said of Collins.

ALTER EGO

by Alex Segura

Flatiron Books, \$28.99, December

Rating: B+

At the end of Alex Segura's previous novel, **SECRET IDENTITY**, Carmen Valdez, creator of the comic book "The Lethal Lynx," sits down with a writer who is putting together a nonfiction account about women who had shaped the comic book industry, particularly those who may have been forgotten. So Valdez tells her story to Laura Gustines in 2018. While it would help a bit to have read this earlier book, there is sufficient explanation of those events told in **ALTER EGO**.

In Chapter One of this new novel, Gustines is murdered as she returns from her interview with Valdez. The story then jumps around in time from the 1980s to the present, with numerous stops in between, all told in a non-linear



fashion. The protagonist in this novel is Annie Bustamante, filmmaker, author, and comic book artist. Her current goal is to return The Lynx to comic book life and get her ready for film, as well. The rights to the character have suddenly become available. Or have they, as the son of the man who published the Lynx stories back in the day claims ownership? Suspicious of the entire enterprise, Annie plunges in, her creative spark burning bright. Then things go horribly wrong, more murder follows, and Annie is left to uncover the truth behind the character and the deaths that have followed the Lynx in the real world.

Author of both mystery series (the Pete Fernandez mysteries) and comics/graphic novels, Alex Segura is the perfect choice for writing this novel of the comic book industry. He has incorporated numerous mentions of real creators, from Stan Lee to Jack Kirby to Chris Claremont and Louise Simonson, along with famous teams such as The X-Men, The Justice League, and the Doom Patrol. This all adds to the fun of the book for comics fans who will know these creators' names and their invaluable contributions to the Golden, Silver, and Bronze ages of comics. Those readers not familiar with these names will learn some history of the "four-color world" and will find no impediment to understanding the story Segura tells.

One needs to keep a close eye on the details here, with chapters jumping back and forth in time. For me that was a drawback, as it makes the story somewhat difficult to follow. However, the bit of work required for that was not impossible to overcome. One just has to keep track of who is where in which time doing what. The plot is intriguing and the characters are sufficiently defined for the reader to keep in mind as the years shift around, although the villain shouldn't come as much of a surprise. You don't have to be a graphic novel/comic book fan to enjoy this entertaining look at the comic and movie industry, but it doesn't hurt.

The book contains illustrations from The Legendary Lynx comic book (drawn by Sandy Jarrell), which enhance the atmospheric descriptions of Segura. And yes, there is an actual Legendary Lynx graphic novel being published in November 2024 by Mad Cave Comics, written by Segura and illustrated by Jarrell. \$17.99. Look for it in your neighborhood comics shop!

FATAL INTRUSION

by Jeffery Deaver and
Isabella Maldonado

Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99/TPO \$16.99/

eBook \$4.99, August

Rating: C

When her sister is attacked, Homeland Security agent Carmen Sanchez steps in to help find the assailant. She discovered links to a series of murders across California. Carmen teams up with private security expert Jake Heron, with whom she has a troubled past. Heron looks for risks of intrusion, both digital and physical, safeguarding private companies, governments, and individuals. Initially Sanchez and Heron can find no motive for the attack nor does the perpetrator appear to have a classic criminal profile. But a distinctive tattoo leads them to the man's nickname of Spider, setting the two off on a frantic search as the bodies mount up, leading them into a conspiracy of intrigue and death.

The two best-selling authors met at a writers' conference and decided they

would like to join forces to create a thriller. They worked together extensively, outlining, writing chapters, and editing each other's work, "a true 50/50 collaboration," according to Deaver.

This is a thriller that opens with the usual serial killer troupes (by which I mean "clichés"). We see the inner workings of the killer's mind. He thinks of himself as "Spider" (by the way, much too much information about spiders and webs!) who uses what he calls "the Push" to act out physically to relieve tension. This approach and the alphabet city of acronyms used are shortcuts to tell the reader "hey, look, this is a serial killer thriller!" If that's all it were, it would be pretty standard stuff. But that's just misdirection. There's more to this than initially meets the eye.

However, even with this turn events in the novel, the forward momentum is often hampered by too much exposition. How much information does one really need about a roulette wheel or, for that matter, spiders? At almost 450 pages the book could have used more editing than it got – and yet there is still a thread left open for the follow-up book. I had hoped for better from these two otherwise fine writers. Sometimes the whole really is less than the sum of its parts.

WORST CASE SCENARIO

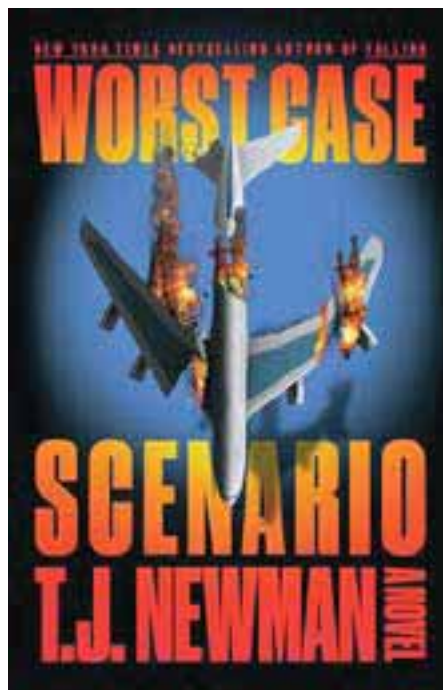
by T. J. Newman

Little Brown, \$30.00, August

Rating: B

Everything is going along perfectly fine aboard Coastal Airways Flight 235 until the pilot has a widow-maker heart attack at 35,000 feet – and that's in just the first terrifying sentence of this novel. From there things only get worse, as the plane crashes into a nuclear power plant in Waketa, Minnesota, now ground zero for a global catastrophe worse than either Fukushima or Chernobyl. It's up to the community of power plant workers, firefighters, teachers and other ordinary people to give everything they have (including their lives) in order to save the world – if they can.

The opening chapters, of the disaster in the cockpit and later of those on the ground as the parts of the plane are



crashing all around them, are harrowing and compose the best part of the novel. The majority of T. J. Newman's first two well-received novels, *FALLING* and *DROWNING*, take place inside the planes. Not so here, which takes away some of the claustrophobic suspense. Yes, okay, what's happening on the ground at the power plant can be nerve-racking, as well, but it doesn't have the same sense of urgency I found in the earlier books. The calls, texts, internet, power outages, etc., did paint a frightening and realistic picture of what could happen, but the ground-only point of view was not as compelling to me.

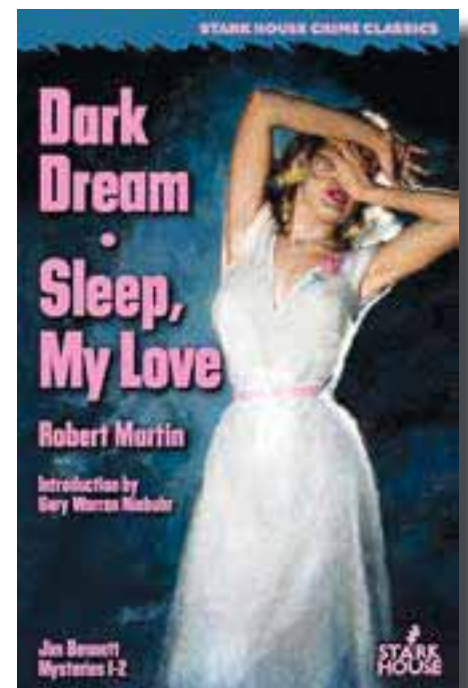
The cast of characters is huge and to a large extent clichéd. The out of business underwater welder, for example, is a drunk. Other characters act in almost identical manner to characters from Newman's earlier novels. Scenes of rescue also struck very familiar chords from those books. Dialogue often left something to be desired, as well. However, there is no getting away from the suspense that the early part of the book creates. That alone will satisfy most readers until the inevitable movie appears.

DARK DREAM/SLEEP, MY LOVE by
Robert Martin

Stark House, \$19.95, October

Rating: B+

In *DARK DREAM* (1951), the first Jim Bennett novel, a National Detective Agency operative, is assigned to two cases in the small town of Wheatville, Ohio. The first involves Sam Allgood who is shot at (and missed) on the sixth hole of his golf club. Bennett needs to find who might want the lawyer dead and why. The other case is one of the more unusual that I have ever read about, namely, someone is sabotaging Pete Donati's beauty salon's hair curling process and, as a result, burning his customer's heads. Neither of these appears to be particularly challenging until, that is, Donati is brutally murdered in his salon's office. Along the way Bennett encounters women who can't resist him, men who can't resist shooting at him, and others who will just settle for beating him up.



SLEEP, MY LOVE (1953) is Bennett's second recorded case. His high school friends Don and Kay Canfield's marriage is over. Don foolishly marries Louette on the rebound. Of course she's a golddigger and it's not long before she is sleeping with someone else and then ends up with a knife in her cheating chest. Don, of course, is the sole

suspect. Meanwhile, back at the office, Don's boss Roger Quinn discovers one of his many extramarital lovers, her throat slashed, in their seedy motel room. But when Roger brings Bennett back to the room, the body has been moved from the floor to the bed and staged, a small bunch of wilted violets in her hands. Roger, of course, is the only suspect. Bennett has his work cut out for him.

Robert Martin held a number of jobs, from bank teller to stock clerk to personnel manager. He began writing stories for the pulp magazines in the late 1930s. He sold steadily into the early fifties to such magazines as *Dime Detective*, *Black Mask*, and many more. As the pulp market dried up, he did what others in the detective writing field did: he cannibalized his own short stories for plots he turned into full-length novels. He also wrote under the name of Lee Roberts.

Renowned expert on private eye novels Gary Warren Niebuhr has contributed an excellent introduction to this collection, detailing both Bennett's fictional life story and a "Case File" examining all thirteen books in the series. As he succinctly puts it, these stories are "[d]efinitely in the Hammett-Chandler school of writing." Needless to say (but obviously I'm saying it anyway!), that's an excellent school to be in.

Tightly written at fewer than 160 pages per novel, this collection is a real bargain at just under \$20.00 for two full-length novels instead of today's often bloated 400+ page \$30 book.

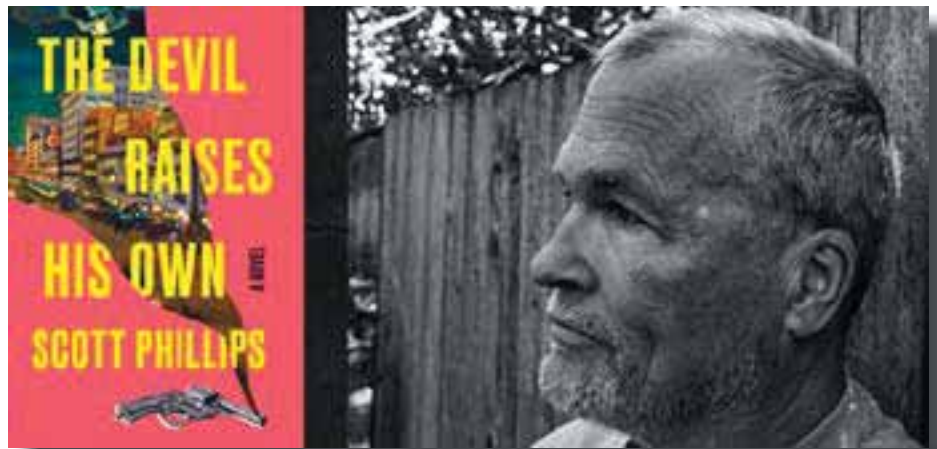
HOW LIKE A GOD

by Rex Stout

Hard Case Crime, \$16.99, June

Rating: B

William Sidney, gun in his pocket, takes this entire novel to walk up two flights of stairs to where he intends to kill the woman at the end of that climb. Along the way the reader learns about Sidney's life and the women who populated it, told in the second person. We hear about the love he had for his sister, seduction by his Sunday School teacher and the results thereof, romance with a



local girl, marriage to a rich but unfaithful woman, and an affair with his mistress (okay, so, he's not Mr. Faithful himself!). One of these women appears to be doomed to die when Sidney reaches the door at the end of the stairway, but which one is it? And will he be able to pull the trigger?

First printed in 1929, this is among the earliest novels that Rex Stout published. It has been out of print for over fifty years, so thanks to Hard Case Crime for bringing it back to life. Better known of course for his highly praised Nero Wolfe stories, which began five years after this one, Stout here has created one of the very earliest psychological suspense novels, one which still holds up well almost one hundred years later.

As Sidney says to one of these women, "I'm tied somehow, I don't know how, to an ugly and ignorant bitch whom I despise. She is dull, unhealthy, perverted, false . . . but the intimate touch of her hands has stayed with me twenty years in my dreams and now I'm a hopeless slave to it. For god's sake tell me what to do. . . ." His conclusion: "What could anybody do except choke her, or smother her, or shoot her?"

None of these characters are particularly pleasant, but Sidney's dilemma and what to do about it form the basis for a strange but gripping early novel by one of our most distinguished mystery writers and an MWA Grand Master. Information about how it was "lost" for some fifty years and how it came to be "rediscovered" after all that time would have been helpful and interesting, perhaps putting the book into more of a

context for its time.

THE DEVIL RAISES HIS OWN

by Scott Phillips

Soho Crime, \$27.95 August

Rating: B

Los Angeles. 1916. Photographer Bill Ogden runs a portrait studio in Hollywood, a seedy noir world. So, in other words, not all that much different from today's slimy underbelly of Tinsel Town! His granddaughter Flavia, seeking a fresh start in life after killing her drunken abuser of a husband in Wichita, has joined him. While Bill's business is basically legitimate, he manages to come into contact with the burgeoning porn industry. Add in a reluctant "blue industry" actress or two, a couple of hitchhiking men on the move, wealthy investors, a claw hammer killer, and there is a nice dark mix of sex (often graphic), violence (likewise), and death. Those easily offended have now been warned.

This is the third in Scott Phillips western noir stories about Ogden. The character has previously appeared in *COTTONWOOD* (2004) and *HOP ALLEY* (2014). Those were set in Kansas and Denver, respectively, in the 1870s. However, it is not necessary to have read either of those novels in order to follow the events portrayed here.

There are a lot of colorful characters to keep track of, but each does serve their own function in moving the story forward once the reader can sort through them and their extremely complex relationships to the others. The

book is a bit too long at almost 400 pages (a common complaint of mine). Still, the reader's attention is held straight through to the violent end. The story is well-plotted (though you may feel the need to diagram the characters' connections!), atmospheric, a solid reflection of that Hollywood era, and told with enough bawdy humor to lighten the darkness occasionally.

THE SHORT CIRCUIT

CREAM OF THE CROP: Best Mystery and Suspense Stories of Bill Pronzini

by Bill Pronzini

Stark House, \$19.95, August

Rating: A

Mystery Writers of America Grand Master and Private Eye Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Bill Pronzini is probably best known for his terrific "Nameless" Detective novels (although by the final stories, Nameless was really no longer nameless), as well as his standalone award winners like *Snowbound* or *A Wasteland of Strangers*. But he has also written over three hundred excellent short stories, twenty-six of which are reprinted here. And who better to choose them than Pronzini himself, who also contributes the preface to the book? One simply cannot go wrong with this fine collection of character driven tales. He is married to another MWA Grand Master, Marcia Muller.

There are standalone stories like *Opportunity*, which comes knocking for two cops in the form of a suitcase containing \$112,000. Or two other cops who try to find *Proof of Guilt* when an attorney is murdered in a locked room and no weapon is found in it. Revenge rides the rails in *Sweet Fever*. There is the Edgar-nominated *Strangers in the Fog*, where three men meet on a foggy beach – is one an escaped killer? In *Liar's Dice* a serial killer tells his next victim about his plans, but is it the truth . . . or a lie? Return to the days of *Black Mask*, Hammett and rum running in *Hooch*.

Pronzini didn't forget his series



characters. Carpenter and Quincannon make one appearance in *Gunpowder Alley*, where a blackmailer meets his fate in a locked room within a locked room. The final section of the book collect ten Nameless cases. For example, while under the watchful eye of Nameless, a man disappears into *Thin Air* from inside of a locked car. In the PWA Shamus Award winning *Cat's Paw*, a thriving black market in exotic animals leads to murder in another locked room tale (where is John Dickson Carr when Nameless really needs him?). Not to be outdone by PWA, MWA nominated *Incident in a Neighborhood Tavern* for an Edgar. There Nameless is investigating a series of burglaries when a holdup man enters the bar. Nameless seeks a bail jumper but instead meets a man who has no son in the shattering *Home Is the Place Where*.

It's not just the puzzles, the crimes, and the characters that make these stories worth reading. It's also Pronzini's descriptive power that comes into play in them. Here is just one of many examples from *Soul Burning*: "Friday night, and Sixth Street was teeming. Sidewalks jammed – old men, young men, bag ladies, painted ladies, blacks, whites, Asians, addicts, pushers, muttering mental cases, drunks leaning against walls in tight little clusters while they

shared paper-bagged bottles of sweet wine and cans of malt liquor, men and women in filthy rags, in smart new outfits topped off with sunglasses, carrying ghetto blasters . . . It was a mean street, Sixth, one of the meanest, and I walked it warily."

If that doesn't make you want to get this book, I have no idea what else I could say about it. Top notch stories of crime and criminals, detection and detectives, cops and robbers, noir and locked rooms galore from an MWA Grand Master at less than a buck a story. A better deal you won't find.

News from the Michael Connelly Universe

When the Amazon Prime series of *Bosch* ended with its 7th season, a smaller, lower -budget spinoff series called *Bosch: Legacy* was produced with some of the same actors who appeared in the original series. It was streamed on Amazon: Freevee, a free streaming service.

Amazon Prime Video says about that spinoff series:

The series follows Harry Bosch (Titus Welliver), a retired homicide detective-turned-private investigator, as he embarks on the next chapter of his career; attorney Honey "Money" Chandler (Mimi Rogers), who struggles to maintain her faith in the justice system after surviving a murder attempt; and Maddie Bosch (Madison Lintz), as she discovers the possibilities and challenges of being a rookie patrol cop on the streets of Los Angeles.

The final, third season will premiere on the streaming service in March 2025, and there will also be a cold case detective Renée Ballard series starring Maggie Q (another Bosch spin-off) in the autumn next year.



Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



I'll begin with two books I listened to on road trips and otherwise read on Kindle. The first was Ed McBain's **HARK!** (Simon & Schuster, 2004), a novel of the 87th Precinct (the 51st!), featuring such classic characters as Detectives Steve Carella and Fat Ollie Weeks, the dark, mean streets of Isola (a stand in for NYC), and one of the best antagonists (in every sense of the word) in all of crime fiction, the Deaf Man. Here, the Deaf Man taunts the members of the 87th with a plethora of Shakespeare quotes, daring them to figure out his future aims even as they investigate a series of incidents which are leading up to that crime. Fast, funny, and well written, the crime story at its center is enhanced by the telling glimpses the author provides into each of the characters' personal lives. **Rating: B+**



The other Audio/Kindle combo was Ira Levin's 1953 debut **A KISS BEFORE DYING**, a classic that took home an Edgar for Best First Novel in 1954. It features the ambitious Burton "Bud" Corliss, who, having experienced the thrill of taking a human life in WWII, is willing to literally kill his way to the top in his journey to achieve success. Although it may seem rather mild mannered by modern standards, I can't imagine how shocking it was to read in 1953, seeing as how Corliss presaged such infamous literary villains/anti heroes such as Norman Bates, Patrick Bateman, and Hannibal Lector. All in all, a memorable first effort from the man who later gave us **ROSEMARY'S BABY**, **THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL**, and **MAGIC**. **Rating: B+**

Might as well move on to my old reliables. This time out, that crowd is represented by the estimable F. Paul Wilson, and the esteemed Will Murray. Wilson delivered two (count them, two!) thrillers set in his universe chronicling the adventures of those on the fringes of the epic, eternal battle between the cosmic entities he calls the Ally and the Otherness. The Otherness is malevolent, seeing humans as playthings to torture; the Ally is basically indifferent, content to frustrate or thwart the evil machinations of the Otherness (a.k.a. the Adversary). The first new novel is **THE UPWELLING: BOOK 1 OF THE HIDDEN** (Crossroads Press, July 2024, 390 pages, \$14.99) which takes place in the aftermath of a tidal wave that literally wipes Atlantic City off the map, and ends with what is later labeled as The Catskill Cataclysm. The second is **LEXIE: BOOK 2 OF THE HIDDEN** (Crossroads Press, Sept. 2024, 360 pages,

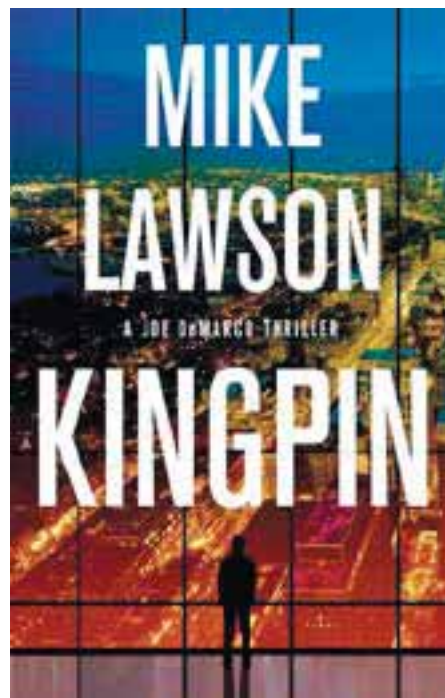
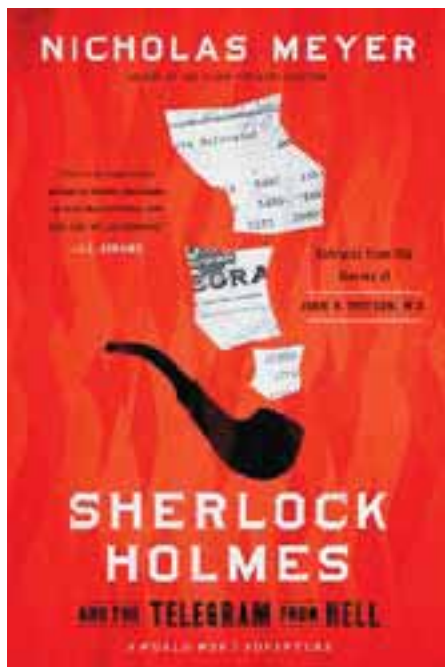
\$14.99), which chronicles the strange adventures of a survivor of said Cataclysm, as she becomes involved in visits to other realities, and in the investigation of a long-lost Nazi U-boat found embedded in an iceberg. They're both a lot of fun, with Wilson proudly showing off his science fiction and horror chops. The second book may also be an example of Wilson's fondness for anagrams, as I suspect Lexie may be an anagram for Exile, certainly relevant to the overall story. **Rating: THE UPWELLING: B+ Rating: LEXIE: B+**

Will Murray's latest addition to Spider lore is **THE SPIDER: THE HANGMAN FROM HELL** (Altus Press, 2024, 300 pages, \$24.95), wherein criminologist/vigilante Richard Wentworth teams with the legendary US Secret Service agent James Christopher (more commonly known as Operator 5) to foil the plans of the killer known as the Hangman, and also those of the European terrorist group known as the Purple Shirts. The Shirts, it seems, plan to invade pre-WWII America, and have dispatched the killer specifically to eliminate Christopher, the man they deem most capable of thwarting their insidious plans. Murray touches all the Pulp bases while playing off the tension between the by the book Operator 5 and the Spider, who is, at best, a wild card. There's action aplenty as the Spider leaves a trail of dead evildoers all across New York City, all bearing the trademark Spider insignia on their foreheads. **Rating: B+**

I also should note a neat little short story of Murray's that appeared exclusively in the hardcover edition of the word-slinger's **TARZAN: BACK TO**

MARS (Altus Press, 2023), titled “The Adventure of the Vengeful Viscount.” Therein, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson is approached by Tarzan, a.k.a. John Clayton, a.k.a. Earl of Greystoke with an entreaty to discover the whereabouts of the man who marooned his parents in the African jungle decades before. Holmes agrees, leading to a memorable confrontation between the Ape Man and Black Michael Doom at the Southern Outfall Works, a conclusion reminiscent of Holmes and Moriarty engaging in battle at the Reichenbach Falls. **Rating: B+**

Holmes and Watson also appear in Nicholas Meyer’s **SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE TELEGRAM FROM HELL** (Mysterious Press, 2024, 280 pages, \$26.95), his sixth novel length addition to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s legendary canon. I’ve enjoyed this series ever since encountering 1974’s **THE SEVEN-PER-CENT SOLUTION** as a lad, and this latest entry, featuring an aging Holmes and Watson in a race against time circa 1916 didn’t disappoint (the telegram in question is the infamous Zimmerman Telegram). Meyer, who also directed some of my favorite Star Trek movies, once again proves that he’s especially adept at playing in other creators’ sandboxes. **Rating: B+**



KINGPIN (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2024, \$27.00, 284 pages), by Barry and Edgar Award nominee Mike Lawson, finds his Washington, D.C. trouble-shooter/fixer Joe DeMarco on the trail of a murderous Boston billionaire real estate developer who bears a striking resemblance to a former New York City billionaire real estate developer, although I’m sure the resemblance must be purely coincidental. The book’s portrayal of dirty politics, inherent world weariness and cynicism, coupled with its exceedingly dark tone, brought to mind Robert Penn Warren’s **ALL THE KING’S MEN** (1946), a personal favorite of mine. His portrayal of the villains of this piece are absolutely chilling, as not a single one of them shows the slightest bit of remorse for any of the evil things they do, or cause to be done. Absolutely riveting and thoroughly engaging. **Rating: A**

The second of three planned Luke Daniels adventures, **RED STAR FALLING** (Grand Central, \$30.00), by Steve Berry with Grant Blackwood, finds the former Army Ranger out to rescue old friend and colleague John Vince; presumed dead, the CIA case officer may actually be alive, ensconced in a Russian prison. Vince embarks on a

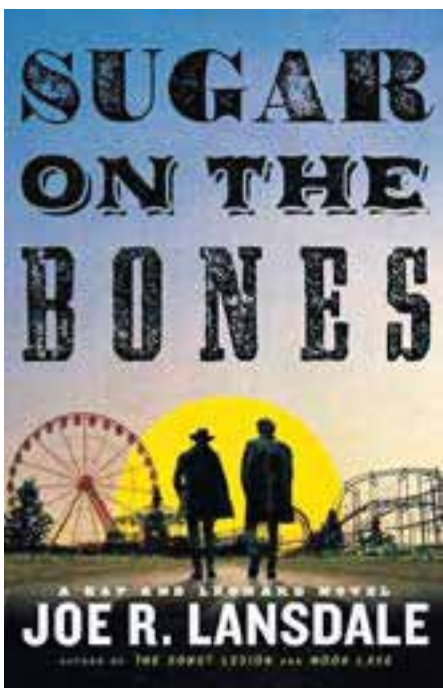
mission to retrieve his old friend, little realizing he is destined to become embroiled in an insidious plot by a former Soviet leader against his successors. Set in Berry’s Cotton Malone universe, **RED STAR FALLING** should prove pleasing to Berry and Blackwood fans alike; both know how to deliver high octane thrillers with action aplenty. This being a Berry collaboration, readers will also be treated to a painless history lesson, as the fabled lost library of the first Tsar of Russia, Ivan the Terrible, plays a key part in the story. **Rating: B+**

WORST CASE SCENARIO (Little, Brown, 2024, \$30.00, 324 pages), reminded me of the disaster films of the seventies and eighties that I grew up on (movies like the *Towering Inferno*, *Earthquake*, and, especially, *The China Syndrome*) as author T. J. Newman addresses a truly horrifying worst case scenario, specifically, “What if a jet liner crashed into a nuclear power plant?” Doing so, she writes about heroism, both large and small, focusing as much on small, individual acts of heroism, as she does on desperate technical efforts to prevent an ecological disaster of biblical proportions. Literally exhausting (in a good way), this book speeds along, defying you to take a break from reading; the pacing is excellent, the characters sympathetic and relatable, and the action set pieces memorable and harrowing. Newman definitely knows her way around an aeronautical disaster novel. **Rating: A**

Set in 1987, **HAMPTON HEIGHTS** (Harper Perennial, 2024, \$16.99, 196 pages), by Dan Kois, is thrilling in the way Ray Bradbury’s **SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES** (1962) is thrilling, in that it’s dark, elegiac, sentimental, atmospheric, and nostalgic, yet quietly terrifying all the same, as six middle school paperboys discover the truth about a nearby Milwaukee neighborhood while trying to enlist new subscribers. The story features creatures who some deem

monsters, immigrants who have settled in Hampton Heights, hanging on to old ways even as they try to blend in to their new environs. Thus, the boys encounter ogres/trolls, witches, and werewolves, while their employer, Kevin, encounters sirens. Scary stuff ensues, with the boys learning invaluable lessons about themselves and their relationships with acquaintances, friends, and family. Beautifully written and executed, it will remind many of the works of the aforementioned Ray Bradbury, and other horror masters such as Charles L. Grant and Dan Simmons. **Rating: A**

SUGAR ON THE BONES (Mulholland Books, 2024, \$27.00, 314 pages), Joe R. Lansdale's thirteenth Hap and Leonard adventure, finds both him and his creations in fine form, as the author delivers another prime example of East Texas Noir (a.k.a. Redneck Noir). Ostensibly crime novels, they're primarily a platform for Hap and Leonard to continue their sarcastic, ongoing discourse about the vagaries of their existence, and the meaning (or lack thereof) of life. They also provide a great excuse for Lansdale to trot out the great supporting characters he's created over the years,



such as the unpredictable private detective Jim Bob Briggs and the lethal assassin Vanilla Ride. This time out, the big bad is SO bad that the boys require assistance from their old ally, Veil, a character created by the late, great Andrew Vachss, the man Lansdale calls his brother in the touching dedication that precedes the first chapter. Veil's appearance is timely, and memorable, and should provide a bit of welcome closure for Vachss's legion of fans. **Rating: A**

The **INVISIBLE WOMAN** (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2024, \$27, 260 pages) of Katia Lief's latest novel is Joni Ackerman, a fifty something empty nester who long ago gave up a budding career in film making to support her husband's endeavors in producing. She has mixed emotions about that decision, as she's always wondered what might have been; she's happy enough, but is only starting to appreciate what she gave up.

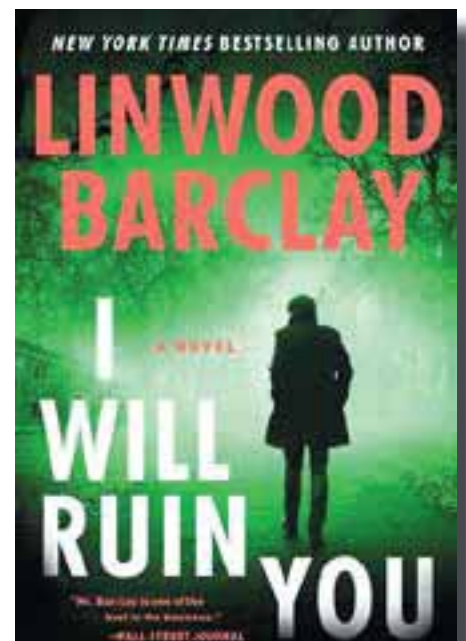
Memories of a purposely ignored past are dredged up when one of her husband's closest friends, Harvey Weinstein stand in Lou Pridgen is accused by multiple women of sexual assault. Joni shares a secret with her friend, Val: Val was roofied, then assaulted by Pridgen and another, unidentified assailant at a party some thirty years before, but has never spoken about it publicly. The revelations trigger a series of events in Joni's life from which there's no coming back.

I enjoyed this novel overall, mostly for its intense look into Joni's and Val's marriages, and the insights it gave into the complex relationship between the two. Also, for Lief's style and bravery in tackling such an explosive subject. I also enjoyed the book's twists and turns, although I think most will see the first one coming a mile away. I was a little turned off, though, by the constant references to Patricia Highsmith, which I thought might have been too big a swing to take. Lief is good, but it would be hard to for *any* writer to match the sheer perversity of hu-

man behavior depicted in so many of Highsmith's novels. **Rating: B**

I WILL RUIN YOU, by Linwood Barclay (William Morrow, 2024, \$30.00, 344 pages), begins as the book's hero, English teacher Richard Boyle, confronts an ex-student who has invaded school property during school hours: the student has apparently crafted an explosive vest which he threatens to use unless his demands are met. Boyle has a brief conversation with the student and eventually dissuades him from using the vest. The device is triggered accidentally; no one is killed, but many are injured. The explosion also triggers a series of events which will affect Boyle in profound, and perhaps, deadly ways, as the ex-student makes several jarring, but cryptic accusations before he dies.

Barclay's latest delivers everything we've come to expect from him over the years; a snazzily titled, well plotted stand-alone thriller that keeps readers in suspense until its very last page. I kept thinking that this was uncannily like a book that the great Dallas Mayr, a.k.a. Jack Ketchum would have written in his prime. Barclay's book isn't as dark as one of those books would be, but his propulsive storytelling is just as compelling. **Rating: B+**



The Cozy - Traditional Mystery Cafe'

Robin Agnew Reviews



DEATH AT THE SANATORIUM

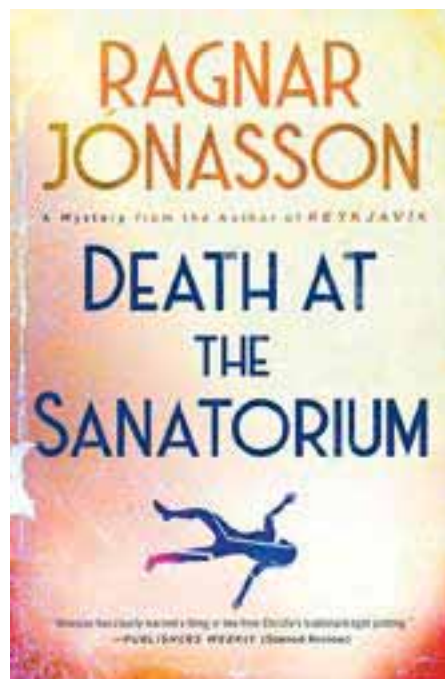
By Ragnar Jonasson
Minotaur, \$29, September
Grade: A

Author Jonasson, an Icelandic fan of Agatha Christie from a child, had read all the available books translated by the time he was 17. At that point, craving more, he simply went to the publisher and asked if he himself could translate more of her previously untranslated titles. They agreed, and Jonasson was treated to a master class in plot, structure, character and setting as he did his work. As evidenced by his own books, the lessons certainly took. Like Christie's, his books are perfectly structured, have memorably distinctive characters and always feature an evocative setting. Oh, and they are also short, another valuable lesson he gleaned from Agatha.

His latest brilliant, intelligent, compelling effort, *Death at The Sanitorium*, is set in the titular building that had previously been used for TB patients. By 1983, when much of the narrative takes place, the site is pretty empty but still kept functional as a research facility with a skeleton staff while the

government decides how to dispose of it. One of the nurses, Tinna, is an early riser who always arrives first (thereby gaining overtime at the beginning of the day rather than the end). One morning when she enters the building something seems off – and indeed, when she goes to check in her supervisor's office, she finds the woman dead, several of her fingers cut off.

The investigation begins, and as readers, we are also sequentially reading a part of the story that takes place in 2012, centered around Helgi, a young man who has decided to investigate the now 30-year-old case for his master's thesis. Helgi also has something troubling going on with his girlfriend, who wants him to remain in Reykjavik instead of returning to the UK as he had planned, a contentious point between them and for much of the book. Other than investigating this old crime, Helgi's



plans remain up in the air, providing another mysterious thread to the story.

He's a good investigator, however, and interviews most of the people involved who are still alive. In true golden age fashion, there's a very tight group of suspects, and questions remain about the initial resolution of the case. It's true the crimes stopped but most concerned aren't completely sure the outcome was the correct one. Jonasson also takes the reader inside the lives of the sanitorium staff – nurses, doctors, the building caretaker – and illuminates their lives, past and present.

Jonasson is such a good storyteller that I was unsure of the culprit until the very end of the novel, though, again in classic fashion, the reader is given enough information to theoretically figure it out. The atmosphere of both Reykjavik and the old sanitorium, with its ghosts of TB patients, are certainly distinctive parts of the story as well. Obviously, this is a book that's been translated, but the crispness and sparseness of the prose as well as the tightness of the plot seem to retain some kind of Icelandic ethos. Like all the best writers, Jonasson has taken the lessons he learned from Christie and made the form his own, making this one of the reads of the year.

A MESSY MURDER

By Simon Brett
Seyn House, \$29.99, September
Decluttering mysteries #4
Grade: A

I'm not sure why I haven't read this series before, but this book is so good it makes me want to go back and check out the first three installments. Main character Ellen Curtis is a "professional declutterer," a job that sounds very silly but really isn't. As the story begins she's working for a husband and wife looking to downsize, with the wife being all for it and the husband, a fading former TV host, not so enthusiastic. Ellen is a widow, having lost her husband to suicide, and when the husband, "Humph" to his friends, dies, apparently a suicide as well, Ellen's skills and familiarity with grief come to the fore.

My sister is always informing me that hoarding is all about grief, and indeed, it seems to be an emotion that Ellen deals with on a daily basis. The hoarders she is helping to declutter have deeper issues that extend well beyond simply saving magazines. In the case of Humph's widow, Theresa, the two bond over their similar traumatic experience, and Ellen agrees not only to continue the decluttering, but to go ahead and investigate Humph's apparent suicide, which Theresa is sure is murder. She may just be right – this is, after all, a murder mystery.

This book is both cozy and traditional – Ellen's job is certainly a typical cozy element, but veteran writer Brett deals with some more serious issues as well. Along with being a widow, Ellen is saddled with a needy mother, the demanding and egotistical Fleur, a semi-retired actress. She also has two children – Jools, who now works with her, and Ben, who is presently in California dating an up-and-coming movie star. (Fleur is delighted by this development.) This is background, but it's not only interesting, but well developed and even deep, giving Ellen's relationships with her children real resonance.

In the foreground, of course, is the investigation into Humph's death, which finds Ellen interviewing members of his not extremely bereaved family. Brett has the golden age skill of sketching a character quickly and indelibly in a very few strokes. Characters then stay with you as you read on, gaining real life as more details are added. He's also funny, adding another underrated golden age ingredient, humor, into his classic mix.

Ellen also deals with a few other clients, along with a mystery about her daughter's former neighbor. Her compassionate skills are such that you may feel like looking up declutterers in your area as the book makes it sound like the perfect thing for loneliness and grief. An added bonus is that the junk is often reused or recycled rather than simply being discarded.

The clever central mystery has a satisfying wrap up which demonstrates another golden age skill – you're left guessing the identity of the killer until

practically the very last moment. I found this to be one of the best written and enjoyable mysteries I've read all year. Simon Brett has produced almost 80 books to this point, and he remains a great gift to all of us who love the genre.

THE NIGHT WOODS

Paula Munier, Minotaur, \$29, October
Mercy Carr #6

Grade: B+
and

GATHERING MIST

Margaret Mizushima, Crooked Lane,
\$29.99. October
Timber Creek K-9 #9

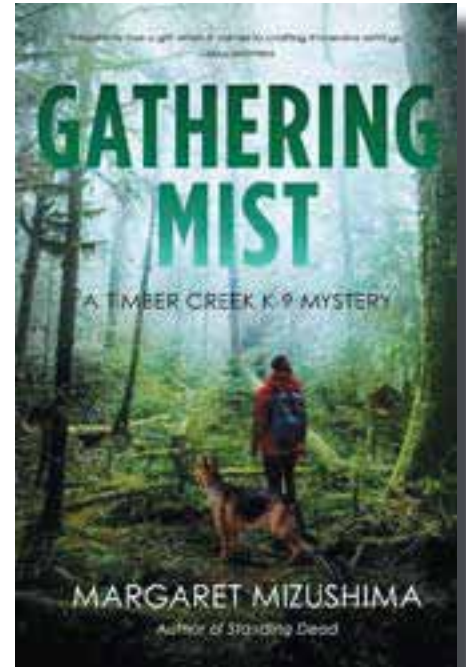
Grade: A

In sports there are often rivals who challenge each other to greater excellence. This happens in writing too, and the head-to-head match up of Paula Munier and Margaret Mizushima, who both write working dog mysteries, is a fantastic example. Both series continue to maintain their excellence, and while I can't say for sure if these two women know each other, are friendly rivals or even read each other's work, I do know the similarity in topic calls for a comparison. Munier's first book, *A Borrowing of the Bones*, was published in 2018, while Mizushima's first novel, *Killing Trail*, came out in 2015. Each writer has worked steadily, producing a book every year.

Munier's series focuses on Mercy Carr, who lost her beloved to war, and came home with PTSD and her late partner's dog, Elvis, who suffers from the same torment. The two form a stronger and stronger bond throughout the series, and Elvis, a wonderful tracker, is often put to use by the police department of the tiny Vermont town where Mercy lives. At this point in the series, Mercy has married Troy, the fish and game warden, first seen in the first book. Things have progressed nicely, and in this instalment Mercy is heavily pregnant, giving the book a ticking clock aspect that adds to the suspense.

Trying to avoid her mother who is intent on planning a baby shower, she goes to visit her buddy Homer, who lives alone in the woods and loves a good

game of Scrabble. Unfortunately, when she arrives, he's gravely injured, and, oh yeah, there's also a corpse in the cabin. This initiates a long series of scary events that eventually conclude with the pregnant Mercy alone in the dark, freezing Vermont woods, facing the imminent birth of her baby.



For her part Mizushima's series focuses on Mattie Cobb, a grown up foster kid and deputy who has been assigned the task of working with K-9 officer Robo. As the series opens, she and Robo are just beginning to learn how to cooperate and trust, and by book 9 they've become a cohesive team. Like Mercy, Mattie has a personal milestone coming up, as she's about to get married. But before that can happen, she and Robo are called away to help find a child who has vanished into some treacherous woods in Washington State. The ground has been awash in rain (and an atmospheric mist) for days, so much of the ground scent has been effaced. As Robo has been trained as an air scent dog, meaning he can track someone using scents in the air, he's indispensable. The search for the child is the whole of this suspenseful, well written book, where frustrations in the field, the various human/dog partnerships, and the complications of grieving, divorced parents present daunting challenges for the search and rescue teams.

Mercy and Mattie aren't the kind of gals who dwell on the domestic, but both share strong love and home lives with the partners who flesh out their respective series. Often helpful in the field, Mattie's significant other is a vet, while Mercy's, as mentioned, is a fish and wildlife agent, so the two often work the same territory. In each series nature plays such a strong role that it practically becomes a character itself. Although Mattie lives in a small Colorado mountain town and Mercy in a tiny town in Vermont, each place seems to be visited (much like Cabot Cove) by a nearly unbelievable amount of crime!

While both authors focus on some of the technical elements that make dogs such good search partners, Mizushima tends to include more details. Munier can almost visit the cozy side of things at times, with her books being a real melange of elements – as in this one where Mercy's baby shower is a strong plot thread. Both celebrated/celebrate the weddings of their main characters, neither of whom were particularly interested in their wedding dress. (Their creators are though, and descriptions of each are included).

Both writers are similarly wonderful at narrative and suspense, causing me to usually have a hard time putting books by either woman aside while I'm reading. As my son discovered to his horror, I like Batman *and* Superman. Almost equally. Malinois (Mercy) or Shepherd (Mattie)? Both! And I adore both Mattie Cobb and Mercy Carr (same initials even. Hmmm). Both series bring a unique edge to their books, so I can also learn a bit while I'm being sucked into their great stories. In this case, rivalries rule, with both series coming out as winners.

THE SERIAL KILLER'S GUIDE TO SAN FRANCISCO

By Michelle Chouinard
Minotaur, \$18/\$28, September
Series debut

Grade: B+

I enjoy picking up a book where I don't know what to expect, and it's even better when the book I've selected

doesn't match my expectations -- but in a good way. From the title, I supposed this book would be all shiny concept, heavy on clever plot, no emotional engagement, but probably funny. It does have a shiny concept, but the concept (as it should be), is just the kick off. Heroine Capri (like the car, the pants or the island) Sanzio, granddaughter of a serial killer, makes her living giving – you guessed it – serial killer tours of San Francisco. She's been quite successful, and the patrons only infrequently ask questions about her grandfather, who was known as "Overkill Bill."

Bill got his moniker because he used three methods to kill each of his victims (as Lenny on *Law & Order* might put it, he used a belt *and* suspenders). Her grandfather is long dead but when a copycat murder occurs, Capri latches on to it for several reasons. One, she thinks she might do a podcast about the new crime (along the way, hopefully exonerating her grandfather), and the reason she needs to do the podcast is that her ex mother in law has cut off grad school funding for her daughter. Then, the grandmother herself is killed in the exact same manner. Now the eyes of the police are on Capri and possibly her daughter, making her investigation even more important.

The family pulls together in the wake of the grandmother's death. She was an unpleasant socialite who had been a difficult mother-in-law but Capri is still of the strong opinion that she didn't deserve to be murdered. The unexpected part of the novel comes in after the set up. Capri's family pulls together after it all goes down. We, as readers, get to know her daughter, her ex-husband, and her former father in law.

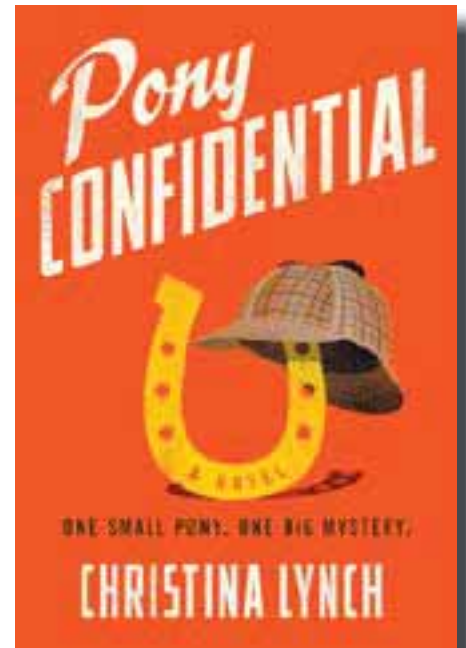
Capri's doggedness also leads her to uncover many unpleasant realities about her ex mother in law's life, things that her family was completely unaware of. The tale of corruption and fraud she winks out is really straight out of an old *Rockford Files* episode. Meanwhile, the cops are on her ass and she's worried for her daughter.

The tours she runs are sprinkled throughout the book, lending the story authentic atmosphere and a flavor of

San Francisco - a city that's been home to killers, sure, but is also beautiful and historic. The little factoids about killers were often familiar to me (I did run a crime bookstore for decades) but they might be new to the reader. This wasn't really a light read but it was a fun one, with a tricky plot at the center. It was far from all high concept but instead returned to straight up mystery trope territory. I very much liked Capri and hope she makes another appearance.

PONY CONFIDENTIAL

by Christina Lynch
Berkley, \$28.00, November
Grade: A+



I loved this book and sobbed my way through it. So much so that I may not even be able to speak rationally to people who don't feel the same way, even though, as you can judge by the title, it may not be everyone's cup of tea. As the book opens, our heroine, Penny, is being arrested for reasons not all that clear until her overworked public defender, who has yet to pass the bar exam, arrives to present her with her options. As is common practice, the lawyer advises Penny to settle, but she refuses as she knows she is innocent of what emerges as a murder charge.

The other narrator is the Pony. He doesn't have a name, though he's given

various names by various owners. He's guided by hatred and revenge toward Penny, who he feels abandoned him long ago. So whenever he can, he bites or steps on feet, consistently resisting the world of men. He's like a grumpy old coot who also seems to think very much as we might imagine a pony would think. He can talk to any animal, whatever species, bat, rat, sparrow, goat, dog (he feels dogs are altogether too fond of humans), and the journey he takes to find Penny is a very, very lengthy one.

We are with the Pony as he is part of a birthday party troop, a pony racing group, and a fancy stable where the owners tart him up and try to sell him for lots of money. He travels via truck, boat and even at one point a car, living through hurricanes and cold and periods where – to his horror – he has no carrots. But like a private eye, he's obsessed with tracking down Penny's whereabouts, with creatures from sparrows to butterflies giving him clues along the way.

As we go back in time, the reader realizes that the partnership between Penny and the Pony was once nearly perfect, a situation that was never to be repeated for either of them.

Although the conclusion of it made Penny sad, in the interim she's also grown up, gotten married, and become a teacher as well as the mother of a difficult daughter. Further into the story, the Pony eventually realizes not only that Penny probably didn't abandon him, but she certainly is not a murderer. So his mission changes: save Penny.

While this may sound a bit ridiculous and cutesy, it's actually a fairly profound and funny look at love, the nature of friendship, and a rather sobering depiction of the way humans treat animals. Each animal from the comfort chicken to Dr. Rat has a distinct personality, and various horses are able to give Pony advice and thoughts on the nature of love, although none of them actually believe in it as a concept.

Meanwhile, Penny's struggles in jail are another sobering portrayal, this time of the justice system. As she doesn't have the money to hire the kind of lawyer who might have been able to get her

out, she is confused by the process and forced to rely on its slowly turning gears.

She only finally meets her actual attorney in the courtroom; the entire time, she still works with her incredibly overworked law student lawyer who does what she can.

I really don't want to give away any of the many surprises in this book. Even three quarters of the way through, I remained unsure of where things would end up. But the voice of the Pony and the agonies he and Penny go through as they try to find one another are not just funny, they are the through line of a universal story of thwarted love and friendship. This is one of my favorite reads of the year.

Maggie Mason Reviews



WE THREE QUEENS

by Rhys Bowen

Berkley, \$28.00, November

Royal Spyness #18

Rating: A

In the latter part of 1936, things are changing in the UK. King Edward is determined to marry Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee. This isn't going over well with the British people or the powers that be in the British government. Lady Georgiana Rannoch (Georgie to her fans) is living happily with her husband Darcy and her infant son James. The family lives in the country estate owned by her godfather.

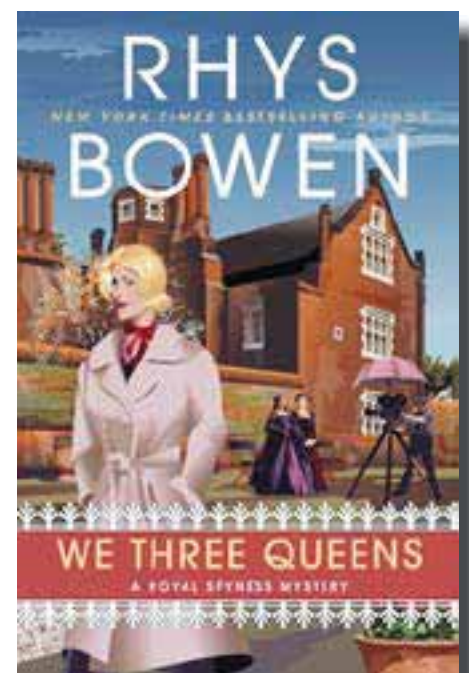
Life gets complicated when the King, Georgie's relative, makes plans to install Wallis with them to avoid the press. He's trying to get approval to marry her despite the bad feeling

about her, a twice divorced American who is just not a nice person. He succeeds, being the king, and Ms. Simpson is just as unpleasant as they imagined. What makes it worse is Sir Hubert has invited an American film crew to film at the estate, which is Tudor era, fitting with the historical film being made.

Georgie has to juggle this with the unexpected visit of her brother, the Duke, and his family (wife Fig, an unpleasant woman, and his two children who are too young to be other than nice. Georgie isn't raising her infant suitably according to Fig, but Georgie is determined to do her best to provide a loving caring home. With the uninvited family, and the irritable Mrs. Simpson already installed, the film crew is just the sour cherry on top of a bitter cake.

The film crew has a young star, Rosie, who is being promoted as the next Shirley Temple with a fierce stage mother. Georgie's sweet niece Addy is recruited to be a stand in for Rosie, something she enjoys and the family appreciates due to the money she's being paid. All royal families aren't flush with cash, with big estates to keep up.

Things get tense when Mrs. Simpson seems to disappear, Rosie appears to be kidnapped, and Georgie's mother appears unexpectedly. Georgie's mother is living in Germany with a wealthy man



who is an avid Nazi, something Georgie tries to make her mother understand isn't the best way to live. Everything comes to a head when one of the American film stars is found dead.

Georgie with husband Darcy are able to solve the mystery of the missing Mrs. Simpson, the kidnapped Rosie and the dead film star. What they couldn't do is convince the King to keep the status quo.

This series is one of my favorites, and I'm looking forward to seeing what's next for the family. I applaud Georgie for giving their son a more 'normal' upbringing, filled with love.

THE BEST AMERICAN MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE 2024

Edited by S.A. Cosby
Mariner, \$18.99, October
Rating: A

This is an annual anthology, with many wonderful and varied short stories. The introduction by S.A. Cosby set the tone for the book.

The stories were varied and all were deserving of being included in this edition. Of course, as any reader will agree, there have to be favorites, and I had two that stood out for me.

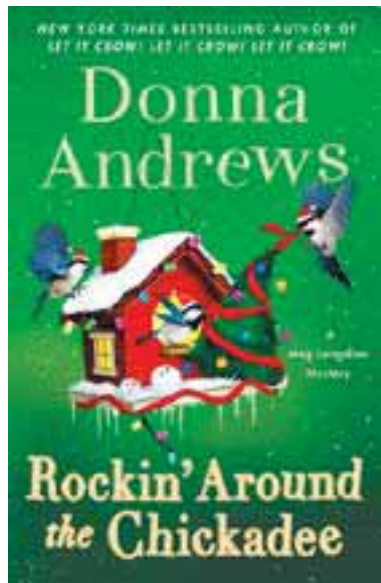
With the right bait by Gar Anthony Haywood was a great example of gamesmanship. Baby Trap by Tony LP Kelner explored a newly widowed new mother's predicament in adjusting to her new way of life when extreme complications are posed.

All of the stories in this edition of the series are deserving of inclusion, but the two I've cited were the ones that stood out for me. I expect other readers will have their own favorites, which makes this series a good choice for all mystery readers.

ROCKIN' ROUND THE CHICKADEE

by Donna Andrews
Minotaur, \$27.00, October
Meg Langslow #36
Rating: A

In this latest trip to Caerphilly VA, it's Christmas time and the weather is



turning colder, but the snow makes the scenery beautiful. Meg and her family are looking forward to many things this season, including the birth of a child. Her sister in law, Delaney is pregnant, due any time. The festivities are low key this year, due to the pregnancy and a conference being held at the Inn. The conference, Presumed Innocent, has been organized by Meg's Grandmother.

The attendees range from people who want to learn how to exonerate someone to true crime fans. Sadly, there's a man who doesn't agree with the idea of an innocent person being falsely convicted and is making a scene every chance he gets. One of the most poignant examples is a man who spent 50 years in prison for a murder, despite having many people testify to his alibi.

The conference has various panels giving suggestions on how to proceed and examples of successful efforts. Sadly, Godfrey Norton, also known to most as the Gadfly, is making a pest of himself, loudly expressing his views on the subject. When he is found murdered near Meg's home, few people are truly sad. But justice must be done, and Meg and company are up to the task.

The murderer is not full of the holiday spirit, and when Meg figures out whodunnit, she's taken by the murderer. She's saved by a heroic act, more I cannot say without revealing a wonderful act of bravery.

I love my visits to Caerphilly, and

though I'd love to move there, I know that I'm not suited for living in very cold and snowy climates. I'm just happy to visit and look forward to many more adventures there.

And now a **non-cozy review**:

THE WAITING

by Michael Connelly
Little Brown, \$30.00, October
Ballard & Bosch
Rating: A

Renee Ballard is head of the LAPD's unsolved unit. The unit is well suited to the task of helping solve crimes from the past. I'm certain they didn't expect to have the opportunity to solve a very famous crime from decades ago, but they are up to the task.

Maddie Bosch, daughter of Harry, is responsible for bringing the case of the Black Dahlia to the forefront of the unit. Maddie uncovers evidence of the serial killer who was and is infamous for the gruesome slaughter of the woman now known as the Black Dahlia. While the case file has lost some of the information, Maddie is able to find enough to bring forward a viable suspect, even after decades past.

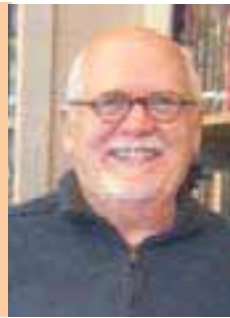
Renee and the unit also get a DNA link to a rapist and murderer from twenty years ago. Sadly, there are complications and legal issues that make the case difficult. Also difficult is the theft of Renee's badge, ID and gun. Maddie could face problems with the department if the theft is discovered, so she takes private action to retrieve her belongings. She gets help from Harry Bosch, and is successful in saving her career and lives of people in the community from terrorism.

I was amazed at the way the Dahlia case was found and brought to light. I know this is fiction, but it was fascinating to me to see how modern techniques are able to help solve decades old cases.

Connelly is one of the most skilled writers around and this book for me shows he's at the top of the class in many ways. I highly recommend this book. I'd love to see this brought to the big screen.

Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



DEATH AT DEAD MAN'S STAKE

by Nick Oldham

Severn House, \$29.99, October

Jessica Raker #1

Rating: A-

British cops are rarely armed and those that are authorized to carry weapons (guns), are held to high accountability if those firearms are ever discharged. Sergeant Jessica Raker is a veteran police firearms officer who encounters a jewelry store robbery in progress. One of the robbers escapes and Jessica gives chase. When cornered, the thief refuses Jessica's demands and tries to draw a gun from his waistband and is mortally wounded. It is a "righteous" shooting in self-defense but Jessica is put through an administrative hell before she is cleared.

And there is another complication. The man Jessica killed was a favorite son of a notorious organized crime boss, who puts out a contract on Jessica's life. It takes awhile for the crime boss to find out her name (never revealed to the media), but he is having trouble finding her whereabouts.

That's because Jessica and her family (husband, daughter and son) have been moved to her home town of Clitheroe in the Ribble Valley to take up a sergeant role in the Lancashire police. There, she immediately encounters allies and enemies within the police force and a number of intriguing incidents to deal with.

As I've already written repeatedly, Nick Oldham writes great, easy-reading and enjoyable British police procedurals and thrillers. He recently concluded the Henry Christie series with the 29th entry DEATH RIDE. Now Oldham has started a new series with a spirited female police detective. I'm already hooked

and look forward to the next Jessica Raker episode.

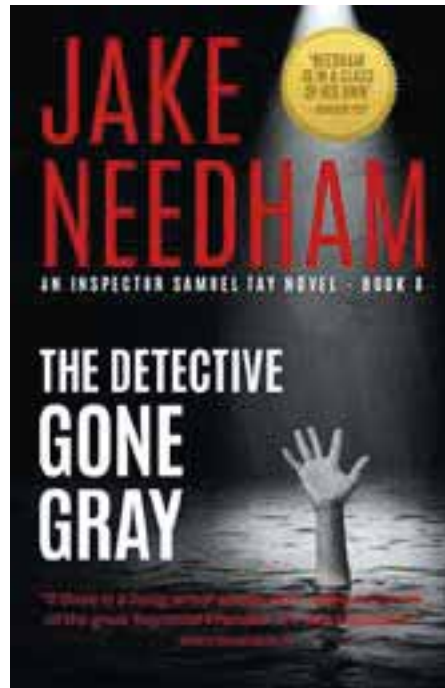
THE DETECTIVE GONE GRAY

by Jake Needham

Half Penny, \$18.99, Kindle Unlimited or \$7.99, October

Inspector Samuel Tay #8

Rating: A



There is a reception being held for the Chinese foreign minister at a Bangkok, Thailand university. Most of the attendees have gathered, but before the reception can begin someone locks the main doors and a gunman enters the room from the back and proceeds to kill thirteen people and wound another seven. Then the gunman (dressed all in black and wearing a baseball hat and a Covid mask) disappears.

Three theories arise:

1. It was a random shooting of a crazed killer.

2. It was a terrorist attack most likely perpetrated by Muslim separatists from the south of Thailand.

3. It was a targeted attack on a certain individual or individuals and the other dead and wounded were mere collateral damage.

The Bangkok police find themselves overwhelmed with the puzzling investigation (little or no clues to pursue) and they request help from outside. And that help arrives in the person of the retired Singapore homicide detective Inspector Samuel Tay, recently seconded to Interpol for the purposes of this investigation.

Tay is teamed up with the charismatic Colonel Khemkhaeng Jaturapattara-pong ("Call me David.") who is heading the investigation.

Together they use their complimentary strengths to get to the bottom of this puzzling mass murder.

Recent Barry-Award winner Jake Needham has a pleasing storytelling style. The narrative flows without a hiccup as we encounter surprise after surprise along the way. In this particular book, it was fascinating to learn more about the Thai culture and how it differs from ours.

The narrative is heavily sprinkled with the idiosyncrasies of Inspector Tay that lend credibility and humor to the story. I highly recommend this series. It should be picked up by a major American publisher.

THE WAITING

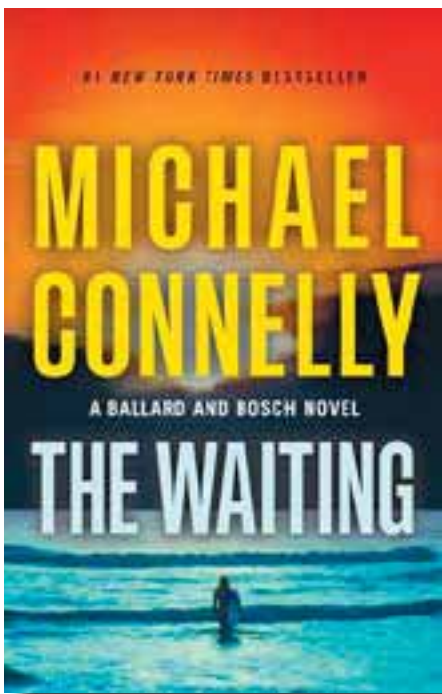
by Michael Connelly

Little, Brown, \$30.00, October

Renee Ballard #6, Harry Bosch #25

Rating: A

Renee Ballard, head of the LAPD Open-Unsolved Unit, likes to clear her mind and energize her body by surfing in the early-morning sun. When returning to her car after one such outing, she discovers that a thief has used her hidden car key to enter her car and steal her wallet, badge and gun. She knows if she reports the theft that it will leave a black mark on her reputation (and possibly get her fired), so Renee decides to find the thief and recoup the items



stolen from her – with help from her old friend Harry Bosch. The trail they follow leads to much more than they expected.

Then there is the matter of Maddie Bosch (Harry's daughter who is a rookie cop) volunteering the give one day a week of her free time to work with Ballard's cold-case group. Ballard is delighted to get another cop with a badge to help out and it's not long before Maddie has come up with a strong lead on a famous unsolved Los Angeles murder.

Michael Connelly is the best crime writer of what I would call "smooth and flowing prose." Combine that with his gift for storytelling and you have a master of his craft. It always surprises me how easy it is to read and enjoy one of his novels. Every page propels you to read on until you finish the book. No lulls and no speedbumps along the way. I usually read one of his books in a day. This one took me a day and a-half because of family commitments. Grrr. Life should not interrupt when one is reading a Michael Connelly.

JOHNNY-BOY

by A. F. Carter

Mysterious Press, \$17.95, October

Delia Mariola #4

Rating: B+

Johnny-Boy is a hired killer, which doesn't require all of his time. So what does he do in his down-time for a hobby? He's a serial killer. Talk about a one-track mind!

His latest assignment takes him to Baxter, a Rust Belt town experiencing a re-birth due to the construction of a Toyota factory complex. There Johnny-Boy kidnaps a teenaged boy and tortures him to death in a deserted farmhouse.

A cat and mouse narrative ensues as Delia Mariola, Chief of Detectives and her best investigator Blanche Weber follow the scant clues left by Johnny-Boy.

The plot of this novel is pretty standard. I read and enjoyed **JOHNNY-BOY** for the setting and the characters. It's a good, solid series.

THE NIGHT OF BABA YAGA

by Akira Otani

Soho Crime, \$27.95, July

Rating: B-

I read this book for two reasons. It was short – 216 pages with relatively few words on a page. And it received three starred reviews in the library journals, which usually is a pretty good indication of a good book.

Tokyo, 1979. Yoriko Shindo is a large, young woman with exceptional fighting skills. When she bests a group of yakuza thugs, she is kidnapped and given an ultimatum by the yakuza boss. Shindo can either become the bodyguard for his sheltered 18-year-old daughter Shoko or be killed. She chooses the former.

What starts out as a cold relationship soon warms up and Shindo finds herself invested in Shoko's wellbeing.

Shoko is being groomed by her father for an arranged marriage with a sadistic business associate. But with Shindo's influence, Shoko finds herself becoming more and more independent. And adding to that are the stories of her grandmother about a Russian witch Baba Yaga, who was able to live her life on her own terms.

The two women in this short tome are portrayed with favorable traits while nearly every man in the book is despicable. **THE NIGHT OF BABA YAGA**

should appeal to ardent feminists but it ultimately didn't work for me. I never connected with any of the characters. Thankfully it was short and didn't take up much of my time.

THE SEVENTH FLOOR

by David McCloskey

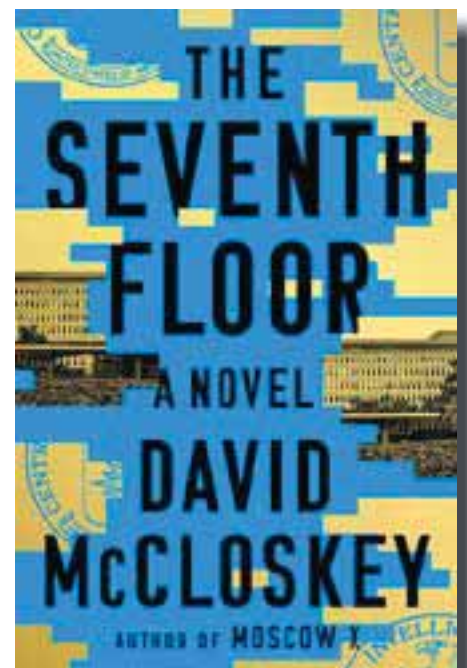
Norton, \$29.99, October

Artemis Proctor #3

Rating: A

There was a time there in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when spy novels forgot about spying on Russia and finding their moles within the U.S. intelligence services. And if it hadn't been for jihadi terrorism, espionage fiction might have laid dormant for a generation. But then along came Putin who wants to reinstate the "glory days" of the Soviet Union and destabilize the West, particularly the good ol' US of A. And now spy fiction involving Russia is again all the rage.

So if you pick up, say for instance, a recent David McCloskey spy novel, you will find great similarities to spy novels of the 1960-1980s. **THE SEVENTH FLOOR** certainly gives off nostalgic vibes to me, with one major difference – today's technology gives spies some superpowers that spies of yesteryear didn't have.



The title refers to CIA's center of power at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

The publisher-provided plot summary is better than anything I could come up with so here it is:

A Russian arrives in Singapore with a secret to sell. When the Russian is killed and Sam Joseph, the CIA officer dispatched for the meet, goes missing, Artemis Procter is made a scapegoat and run out of the service. Traded back in a spy swap, Sam appears at Procter's doorstep months later with an explosive secret: there is a Russian mole within the upper reaches of the CIA. As Procter and Sam investigate, they arrive at a shortlist of suspects made up of both Procter's closest friends and fiercest enemies. The hunt requires Procter to dredge up her checkered past in the service of [the]CIA, placing the pair in the sights of a savvy Russian spymaster who will protect Moscow's mole in Langley at all costs.

What I will add to this review is a short list of characters, which I hope will help with your reading.

Main Characters:

Artemis Aphrodite Procter, CIA maverick Agent

Sam Joseph, CIA agent captured by Russians

Theo Monk, CIA Agent, single, alcoholic

Director Finn Gosford, Director of the CIA

Deborah Sweet, Deputy Director for Operations, CIA. Gosford and Sweet hate Artemis Procter and are trying to get Artemis kicked out of the CIA

Mac Mason, Chief of Russia House, CIA, straight-laced, married

Gus Raptis, recent Chief of Station, Moscow

Petra Devine, Chief of Special Investigations Unit, CIA – a mole hunter

BUCCANEER, code name for spy recently killed by Russians

Bratva, a collective moniker inside CIA for Mac Mason, Theo Monk, Gus Raptis and Artemis Procter. All went through training at the Farm at the same time years ago.

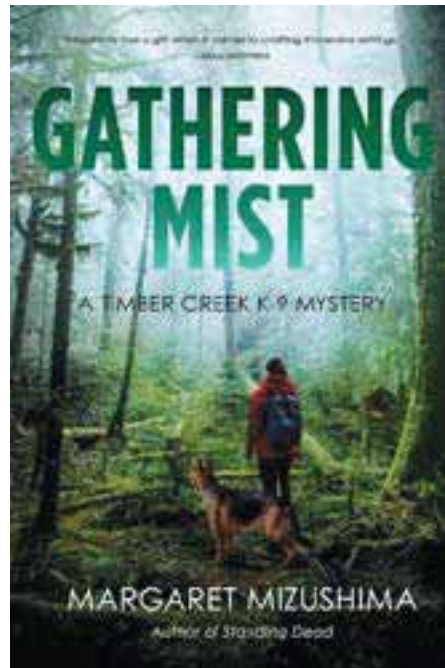
Rem Tarrman, CIA agent in Moscow
If you like spy fiction, then you'll

have to read **THE SEVENTH FLOOR** and David McCloskey's other two novels. The chapters are short and full of suspense. The writing and plotting are of the first order and the pacing is quite good for a spy novel such as this.

GATHERING MIST

by Margaret Mizushima
Crooked Lane, \$29.99, October
Timber Creek #9

Rating: A-



A week before her pending marriage to veterinarian Cole Walker, Deputy Mattie (Cobb) Wray and her K-9 partner Robo are urgently summoned to Washington's Olympic peninsula to rescue the missing 9-year-old son of a famous actress.

What she encounters is rain, dense forests and challenging terrain. Did the boy wander off and get lost or is there something more sinister at play here?

Eminently readable, **GATHERING MIST** kept me up well past my bedtime to finish it. Robo is center stage in this tale and his skill and passion for the people he loves (and who love him) shine through all the rain and mist.

I've been a fan of this series from its beginning. They are well-written mysteries with a strong continuing story that underlies the work. If you love dogs, that's an added bonus.

SYNDICATE

by Felix Francis
Crooked Lane Books, \$29.99, September
Rating: C

Chester Newton has carved out a nice living for himself as a syndicator of quality race horses. He puts together a pool of investors and purchases a race horse with the money they put into a particular syndicate. It is a way for race horse enthusiasts to invest "modest" sums and spread the risk/reward of thoroughbred ownership.

Just as one of his syndicate horses is racing to national prominence, Chester receives threats from an unknown source to throw races – or his daughter will be kidnapped and/or seriously injured.

The story proceeds as one would expect a "Dick Francis" story to proceed – with one big exception, and that is that the protagonist is quite unsympathetic and unlikeable. Chester Newton is indecisive, cowardly and unfaithful. That is certainly not Dick-Francis-like. Dick Francis must be turning over in his grave.

SICK TO DEATH

by Andrew Welsh-Huggins
Swallow Press, \$21.95, September
Andy Hayes #8

Rating: B+

Private eye Andy Hayes has taken a 9-5 job as a guard at the Columbus Museum of Art. He's quite enjoying the regular hours and steady paycheck.

When a group of thieves run off with a priceless painting, Andy gives chase despite a museum rule against doing so. With the help of a young woman named Alex, he is able to thwart the robbery. But his reward is a pink slip.

He meets up with Alex shortly thereafter and she reveals that she is his daughter – one that he never knew he had. She also tells him that her mother (with whom Andy had a drunken one-night stand), was a recent victim of a hit-and-run "accident." Alex wants him to look into the situation and find out if Alex's mom was murdered and if so, by whom.

This is a solid p.i. novel with likeable characters, realistic situations and good detection. **SICK TO DEATH** is the first in this series that I've read, but I'll look out for more of the series in the future.

I greatly enjoyed the author's 2023 novel **THE END OF THE ROAD**.

IN TOO DEEP

by Lee Child & Andrew Child
Delacorte Press, \$30.00, October
Jack Reacher #29

Rating: C+

As this novel opens Reacher wakes up in the dark handcuffed to a bed with no memory of how he got there. He does remember that he hitched a ride, that the vehicle was run off the road and the driver was killed. Apparently the people responsible think Reacher was the driver's associate and want information from him. What that information is Reacher has no idea.

After an exciting beginning, the story went downhill from there for me, culminating in a too rapid finale. Sadly, Andrew is not up to his brother Lee when it comes to writing chops. I won't be reading any more of this series.

LOST MAN'S LANE

by Scott Carson (Michael Koryta)
Atria/Emily Bester, \$28.99, March

Rating: C+

At the halfway point of 2024 amazon.com came out with a list of the best mysteries and thrillers of the year to that point. **LOST MAN'S LANE** was not only on the list, but was the Editor's pick for Best Mystery of the list. I'm always anxious to be well read when it comes to the best books of any given year so I got a hold of a copy and gave it a read..

Publisher's plot summary:

Marshall Miller would've remembered her face even if he hadn't seen it on a MISSING poster. When a young woman disappears in his small town, the investigation hinges on Marshall's haunted sighting of her, crying in the back seat of a police car driven by a cop named Maddox. There's only one problem: no local cop named Maddox exists.

But the speeding ticket he handed to Marshall certainly does.

Dealing with police and media is heady stuff for a teenager, the son of a single mother, but Marshall is sure he can handle it, until the shocking day when his reliability as a witness implodes. Now scorned and shamed, he finds unlikely allies as he confronts the ancient secrets behind his small town's peaceful façade—and learns the truth about his own family.

Calling **LOST MAN'S LANE** a "mystery" is mis-labeling in my opinion. It definitely falls within the horror genre, which I disdain and try to avoid. This is **NOT** my kind of book and then adding insult to injury, it is 516 long pages in length, with frequent lulls in its pacing. A horror fan would likely rate this much higher than I did.

DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE

by Ace Atkins
Morrow, \$30.00,

Rating: A-



Addison McKellar might as well be clueless because she looks the other way as to her husband's secretive ways because he is a good provider for her and their two children. But Dean has been missing for some time now and her allowance money is running out. So she goes snooping. First up is his downtown

office which houses his construction business. When she gets there, the space is occupied by another company and no one has any idea who Dean is. The few friends and associates of Dean's that she is aware of are ghosting her.

The police seem to take Dean's disappearance lightly and don't seem motivated to look into it. So Addison's next avenue is to hire an experienced private detective in the form of legendary Memphis PI Porter Hayes.

Porter is able to discover that Dean was leading quite a secret life and that Addison isn't the only one looking for him. What kind of trouble has Dean gotten himself into?

Other characters are introduced to the plot: a hook-handed, violent mercenary, one of Elvis' for leading ladies still living off that borrowed light and a man posing as an FBI agent. Their connection to the main story is slowly revealed as the novel progresses.

Do we ever find out Dean's whereabouts or whether he is still among the living? You'll have to read **DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE** to see.

This wild ride shows Ace Atkins' prodigious talents as a story teller and a creative mind. I expect this novel to show up on some Best of the Year lists shortly. I know it's already on syndicated reviewer Oline Cogdill's list.

EXPOSURE

by Ramona Emerson
Soho Crime, \$27.95, October
Rita Todacheene #2

Rating: B

This book needed fewer ghosts and more detection to live up to the first in the series, **SHUTTER**, which I greatly admired.

Publisher-provide plot synopsis:

In Gallup, New Mexico, where violent crime is five times the national average, a serial killer is operating unchecked, his targets indigent Native people whose murders are easily disguised as death by exposure on the frigid winter streets. He slips unnoticed through town, hidden in plain sight by his unassuming nature, while the voices in his head guide him toward a terrify-

ing vision of glory. As the Gallup detectives struggle to put the pieces together, they consider calling in a controversial specialist to help.

Rita Todacheene, Albuquerque PD forensic photographer, is at a crisis point in her career. Her colleagues are watching her with suspicion after the recent revelation that she can see the ghosts of murder victims. Her unmanageable caseload is further complicated by the fact that half the department has black-listed her for ratting out a corrupt fellow cop. And back home in Tohatchi on the Navajo reservation, Rita's grandma is getting older. Maybe it's time for her to leave policework behind entirely—if only the ghosts will let her.

Good, but not great.

OUT IN THE COLD

by Steve Urszenyi

Minotaur, \$29.00, November

Alexandra Martel #2

Rating: A-

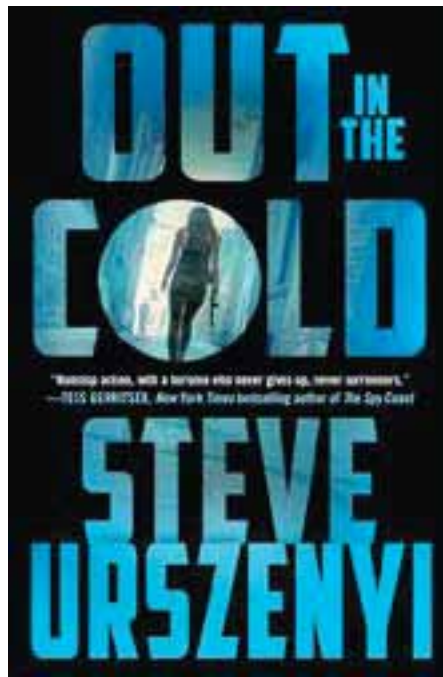
Good thriller writers often take great effort in setting up the opening of their books with exciting, action-packed scenes in which their hero or heroine can show off their abilities and talents.

OUT IN THE COLD is just that kind of thriller.

Alex Martel is no longer an FBI agent on loan to Interpol, but a newly minted CIA agent. But her invite to sail the Mediterranean on the mega-yacht Aurora has nothing to do with her new calling. It's for pleasure. She will get to spend some time with her close friend and mentor, the secretary general of Interpol and rub shoulders with other wealthy and powerful people.

But then suddenly the ship comes under attack from a group of well-trained mercenaries who seem bent on taking over the ship and killing anyone who stands in their way. Others join in the fight but it is Alex's actions that save the day. But what was the end goal of the mercenaries?

The focus of the book soon shifts to what has been going on in Finland, which has been the victim of several man-made disasters. Is Russia bating this new member of NATO, trying to



incite a war? Or is someone trying to frame Russia for their own profit? Alex must get to the bottom of this conundrum before a world war is ignited.

I ordinarily don't care for "save the world" thrillers, but this one is a cut above the rest, with an exceptionally appealing heroine.

NORTHWOODS

by Amy Pease

Atria/Emily Bester, \$27.00, January

Debut Novel

Rating: B+

This is a police procedural which focuses on the opioid crisis. Its central character, Eli North, is a damaged vet (Afghanistan deployment) who is barely hanging on to his job as a sheriff's deputy. The sheriff of Northwoods, Wisconsin is Eli's mother, Marge North – so that helps. Eli is a kind soul but is unable to handle his alcoholism and PTSD and as a result has lost his wife to divorce. And he only sees his beloved daughter occasionally.

Eli is forced to be more alert than normal by the discovery of the body of Ben Sharpe, a young teenaged boy, in the town of Shaky Lake. Ben was reported to be meeting up with a fellow teenager Caitlan Wallace. And now Caitlan is missing. FBI agent Alyssa

Mason joins Eli and Marge in their search for Caitlan.

What follows is a complex web of murder, kidnapping, greed, drug dealing and much more -- revealing a darker side to the lakeside resort town. Eli, Marge, and Alyssa must race to find the killer and locate the missing teenager before it is too late.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

by Peter Lovesey

Soho Crime, \$28.95, December

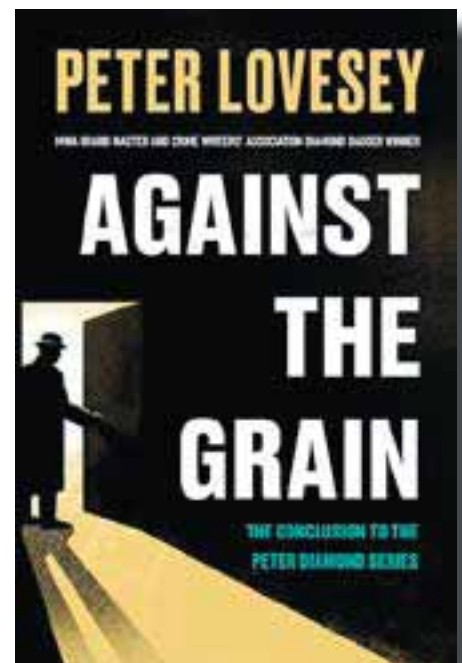
Peter Diamond #22

Rating: A-

Peter Diamond is a policeman to his core, so how will he do when acting as an amateur detective without the resources and staff he is used to commanding?

His former assistant Julie Hargreaves is retired and living the good life in the idyllic village of Baskerville. She has invited Peter and his partner Paloma to stay a week with her. When they arrive, they find that Julie also would like Peter to look into a local mystery – unofficially. Julie can only do so much as she has slowly gone blind.

The village's largest dairy farm has been inherited by the flightily Claudia Priest, who initially held raucous parties with her invited London guests. At one such party, Claudia offered up a game



for some of the male attendees. A pink garter was hidden somewhere on the farm. The one to find the garter was vaguely promised some sexual favor. No one found the garter and all the guests eventually went home. Four months later the body of art dealer Roger Miller was found at the bottom of the farm's silo – with a pink garter around his shrunken arm. Apparently he found it at the top of the grain silo and was sucked into the grain, suffocated and eventually made his way to the bottom.

Claudia Priest was brought up on charges of manslaughter and served two years in prison. But was she really responsible? Julie Hargreaves would like to know and so Peter Diamond goes snooping without revealing his true identity as a top cop. To keep that identity secret he has to step out of his comfort zone to drive a tractor, do a country line dance dressed as a cowboy and help a cow give birth to its calf. All of this to the amusement of the reader.

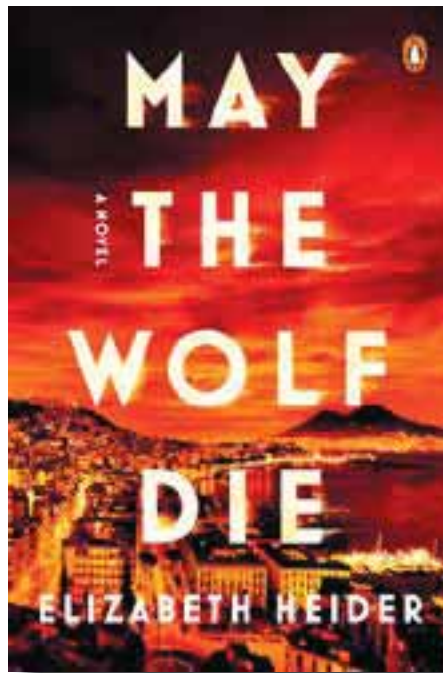
And Peter is there when Claudia is released from prison to return home, only to find out within a matter of hours that another body has shown up on the farm.

The consummate professional Peter Lovesey has served up another tantalizing treat of a mystery.

It has been announced that this will be the last Peter Diamond (the author is, after all, 88-years old). Alas, we must accept that all good things must come to an end – eventually. Peter Lovesey has had a remarkable career spanning over 50 years. Thank you, Peter, for all the top quality reading experiences that you have provided me and the readers of *Deadly Pleasures*. It has been an honor for me to get to know you personally.

FYI. Peter won the very first Barry Award for Best Mystery for his **BLOOD-HOUNDS**, which is a must read for all book clubs as it involves a mystery bookclub. He has also been a long-time subscriber to *Deadly Pleasures* and I thank him for that support.

MAY THE WOLF DIE
by Elizabeth Heider
Penguin, \$20.00



Trade paperback original, July
Debut

Rating: A-

Nikki Serafino is a trained investigator working as a liaison between local Italian police and American armed forces stationed in Italy.

One pleasant evening she is enjoying her boat in the harbor of Naples when Nikki discovers the dead body of a man in the water nearby. It turns out to be that of a U.S Navy captain who had been stationed at a nearby military base. The Italian/American military connection is right up her ally so she gets involved in what becomes a murder investigation.

Soon another body of a American is discovered and the case becomes even more complex

Heider's strengths are character and setting. Nikki is eminently likeable and admirable. And the setting of Naples is lovingly on display.

This is an impressive debut novel and portends the be a well-liked series with more future episodes. It should be considered for Best Paperback Original or Best Debut lists for 2024.

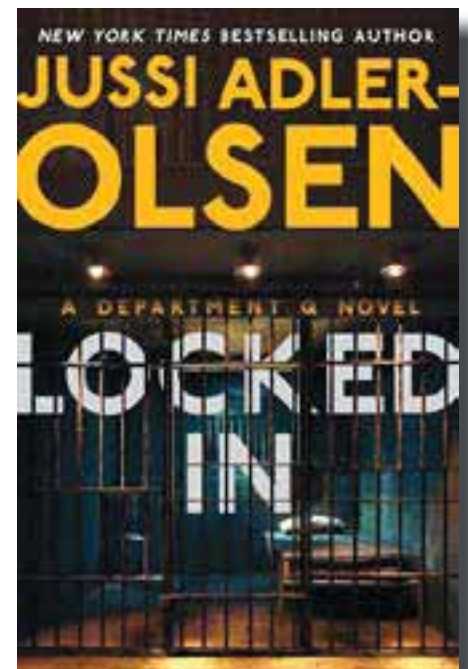
LOCKED IN
by Jussi Adler-Olsen
Dutton, \$30.00, December
Department Q #10

Rating: A-

There is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing in the 512-page **LOCKED IN**, the final novel in the 10-book series. A good editor could have pared this down a bit and it would have been a better read. That said, I have read all of the prior nine books in the series and was anxious to see how the author tied everything up with this last one. Detective Carl Mørck, head of Copenhagen's Department Q, is led off to prison in handcuffs. He is being framed and charged with drug trafficking and murder. His boss believes the evidence, but his colleagues in Department Q – Rose, Assad, and Gordon – don't. They are ordered to refrain from going anywhere near the case, but, of course, they ignore that command and go about proving Carl's innocence.

Also, a few characters from earlier books, make an appearance to help Carl out of the jam he finds himself in. One of them is Merete Lynggaard, the woman he saved from a pressure chamber prison in the Barry-Award-winning **THE KEEPER OF LAST CAUSES**, the first book in the series. Merete has accumulated great wealth and uses it to keep Carl safe from those attempting to kill him while in prison.

His former partner Hardy, who was



injured and paralyzed in an incident fifteen years ago, has benefitted from new, groundbreaking technology enabling him to be able to walk again with the aid of a special body suit. Hardy also provides vital aid to his old friend Carl.

There are several tangential plot lines that add to our understanding of what is really going on. One follows the downfall of a corrupt cop and another the machinations of a well-hidden criminal mastermind who is behind all of the chaos we read about in **LOCKED IN**.

As you might imagine, the series is tied up in a highly satisfactory way by the end of the book. I give it the high mark (despite my reservations already explained) because of the highly sympathetic and intriguing characters you find in this novel and the whole series, as well as the thrilling nature of the denouement.

Protagonists in Prison/Jail

I've been attracted to stories surrounding protagonists being wrongly imprisoned since I first read the Classic Comic books of **THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO** and **LES MISERABLES** as a young boy. Then there were the great movies such as **Stalag 17**, **The Great Escape** and **The Shawshank Redemption**, based on the Stephen King novella **Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption**.

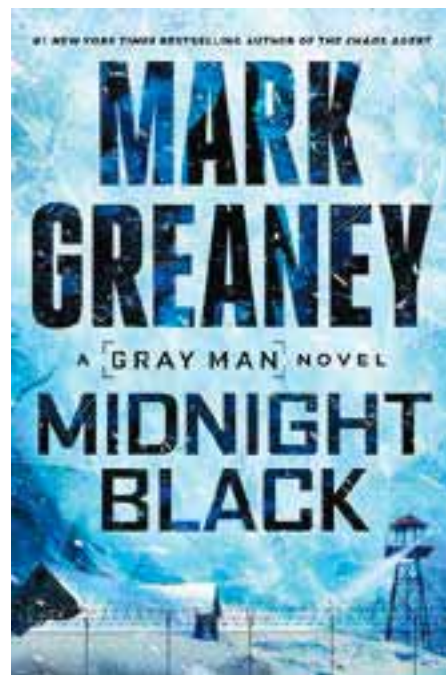


Shawshank Redemption

In recent years there have been several excellent crime fiction novels with this theme. In 2016 M.J. Arlidge imprisons his main character DI Helen Grace in **HIDE AND SEEK**. Michael Connelly's **THE LAW OF INNOCENCE** (2020) finds Mickey Haller (the Lincoln Lawyer) jailed without bail, accused of

a murder when a body is found in the trunk of his car. Washington fixer Joe Demarco is arrested for murder in Mike Lawson's **HOUSE ARREST** (2019). In Cara Hunter's **THE WHOLE TRUTH** (2021), her detective Adam Fawley is framed for a murder and imprisoned awaiting trial.

This year we have two of my favorite books of the year with protagonists in prison: Ian Rankin's **MIDNIGHT AND BLUE** and Jussi Adler-Olsen's **LOCKED IN**. And in 2025 we find the Gray Man's lover Zoya Zakharova in a Russian prison camp in **MIDNIGHT BLACK**.



There are common elements to all of these stories.

1. Some form of injustice results in the protagonists' imprisonment.
2. There is a support group who help the protagonist.
3. There are a number of challenges for the protagonists in prison, not the least of which, is some cases, are fellow inmates who are intent on killing the protagonist. Cops especially experience expected hardships behind bars.
4. A high level of intensity and suspense is omnipresent.

If you are like me and like these types of novels, you can't go wrong reading the books mentioned herein.

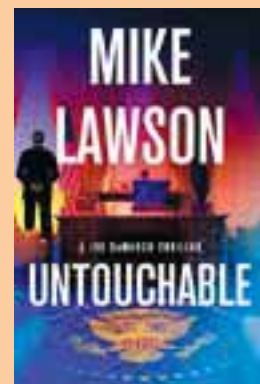
On George's Nightstand

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 a particular book, odds are I will review it in the magazine.

THE BUTCHER'S GAME,
Alaina Urquart
KILLS WELL WITH OTHERS,
Deanna Raybourn
THE RELUCTANT SPY,
David Goodman
ICE TOWN, Will Dean
GUIDE ME HOME, Attica Locke
SIN CITY, James Swain
DEAD ISLAND, Samuel Bjork
THE LEDGE, Christian White

Already read for the next issue --
THE QUIET LIBRARIAN,

Allen Eskens
HARD TOWN Adam Plantinga
THE BIG EMPTY,
Robert Crais
KARMA DOLL,
Jonathan Ames
PRO BONO, Thomas Perry
MIDNIGHT BLACK, Mark Greaney
JOHNNY CARELESS,
Kevin Wade
UNTOUCHABLE, Mike Lawson
HEAD CASES, John McMahon
WHITE KING, Juan Gomez-Jurado
THE MAILMAN,
Andrew Welsh-Huggins
GALWAY'S EDGE, Ken Bruen





HISTORICAL
EMPORIUM

Robin Agnew



THE PHANTOM PATROL

By James R. Benn
Soho Crime, \$27.95, September
Billy Boyle #19
Grade: B+



War is hell. In his gentle, narrative manner, James R. Benn has demonstrated through 19 and counting Billy Boyle novels this harsh verity. All of them, in their own way, are excellent, some of them more traditionally structured mysteries, like the locked room puzzler **THE RED HOUSE** (2020) or the English village set **PROUD SORROWS** (2023). But they all take place during WWII and feature at least one bravura battle or action scene. Book 19 is set during the Battle of the Bulge, and even though hostilities would end several months later, Billy finds himself still in the thick of things.

Billy, a former cop, works for General Eisenhower (a cousin, though he calls

him “Uncle Ike”) as an investigator. This novel kicks off with the discovery of Klimt drawing which was obviously looted by the Germans. The thread he follows in order to find the original owner illuminates the work of the real life Rose Valland, a woman who kept track of looted art and was able to ultimately return 60,000 works. In the novel, she validates the value and authenticity of the Klimt drawing.

Much of the story then focuses on the group – we might think of them as a sleeper cell – who stole the drawing and seem as though they could be disrupting the allies in other, more dangerous ways, one of them a rumored attack on First Army headquarters. The journey Billy takes (mostly solo) through the French countryside illustrates the confusion of the soldiers on the front as the Battle of the Bulge was going on. In the midst of the chaos nothing seemed to make sense.

In pursuit of his objective he finds himself trudging through snow, surviving a plane crash, hiding in the woods, throwing grenades, setting off bombs, and in more than one encounter, fighting for his life. In constant danger, exhausted and often hungry, he still must use his brain to piece together what’s happening in the topsy-turvy world around him. Benn’s novels *always* give the reader an appreciation for what the soldier on the ground experienced and though Billy is slightly elevated and has more access than a common soldier, his experiences are as challenging and dangerous as theirs.

Benn also presents a magnificent set piece in each novel, and, happily, this one has two. In the first, Billy and a pilot get aboard a tiny plane (which at that time were basically frames covered with canvas) on a low visibility day.

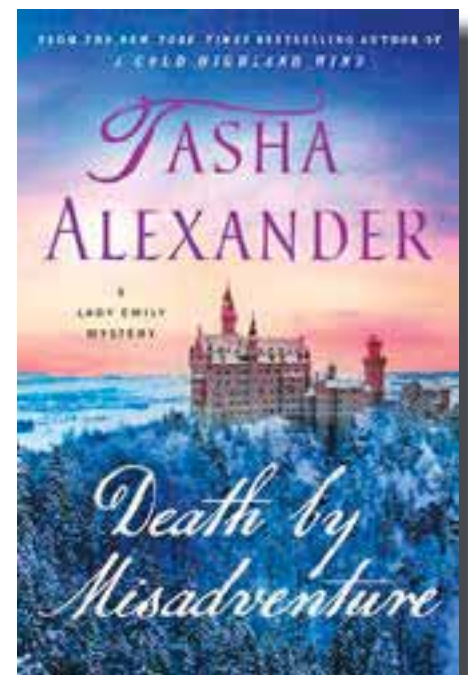
Their terrors are recounted in a way that makes it only too easy for the reader to feel they are along for the white knuckle ride. The other is a sequence toward the end of the novel which I won’t reveal too much of here, but suffice it to say, it’s a wowsler of an ending.

While I enjoyed much of this book I found myself wishing there was a bit more about the work of the Monument Men, who recovered stolen artwork. Much of Billy’s on the ground machinations in and around the front were, to me, slightly confusing. I even re-watched *Patton* to get a feel for the Battle of the Bulge, but of course that story is told from the point of view of a general and not a soldier. However, I always learn something when I read a Benn novel, and am always delighted to reunite with Billy, who is a wonderful, dare I say already classic, character.

DEATH BY MISADVENTURE

By Tasha Alexander
Minotaur, \$29, September
Lady Emily #18
Grade: A

I’ll freely admit that I love this series. Of course some of them are even yummier than others, and this latest one might be one of the most delicious. The books follow Lady Emily and her dishy husband, Colin, as they inves-



tigate crimes all over the globe, and although Colin has a mysterious secret arrangement with her majesty's government, it's often Lady Emily's intuition and intelligence that solves the case. Another standard element in the books is a dual timeline, with events from the past connecting or relating to events in the present in some form or fashion, with part of the mystery consisting of figuring out how.

In this installment, present day (1906) Lady Emily and Colin are in a lovely home in Bavaria, visiting Ursula, a collector of all kinds of art. Lady Emily is fascinated by the way her hostess can put an impressionist painting next to a Greek vase and somehow make it work. Also present is their mutual friend Cecile; Ursula's daughter and boorish son in law; a dashing man about town; a young, vapid beauty and Liesel, an art dealer there to present a few paintings to Ursula for possible purchase.

In the past timeline (1866), a certain young Niels, who loves opera and natural beauty, is wandering the wilds of his family home when he encounters the infamous "mad" King Ludwig. The two become fast friends, with Niels eventually going to live with Ludwig. Ludwig is known for building a number of lavish castles, including Neuschwanstein, thought to be the model for Disney's Cinderella castle (they do look quite similar). He hated official duties and court and spent most of his time worshipping the music of Wagner, who he patronised, and creating his architectural wonders. As presented here, he seems moody and eccentric, certainly, but not actually crazy.

In 1906, Ursula's house party devolves into something of a disaster. The son in law suffers continual potentially fatal or disabling "mishaps," ultimately leading to a tragic death. The house is cut off by snowfall and the guests try skiing as an entertainment with varying degrees of success (Lady Emily is not a fan). Because the police cannot get to the castle when the fatality occurs, it's Emily and Colin who must investigate.

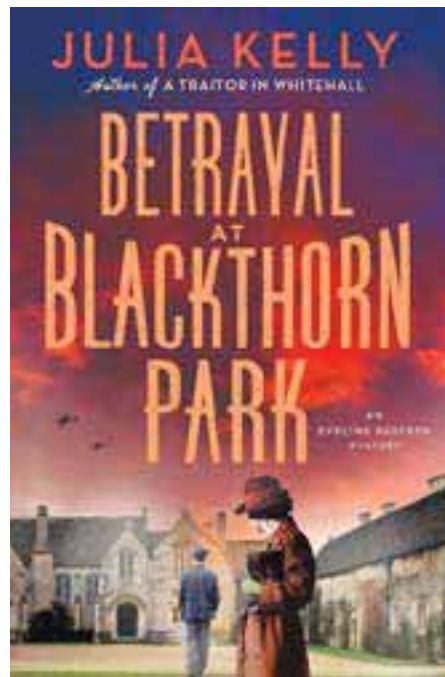
As the book weaves past and present, one of the strengths of this type of narrative becomes apparent. Each storyline

is so compelling that it's a bit wrenching to leave one to return to the other, captivated by each in succession. a skilful narrative feat on the part of Alexander who keeps both strands equally vivid and compelling.

By this time, Emily and Colin may be familiar to readers, but the books remain fresh by varying the settings and the characters who inhabit them. The cast in this one are especially memorable, and I loved the Bavarian setting as well as learning a bit about King Ludwig. I was unfamiliar with him before cracking open the book and I am always a fan of not only armchair travel, but of the kind of armchair history that makes me want to investigate further.. I can only hope this installment is only the midpoint and this series will continue for at least eighteen more!

BETRAYAL AT BLACKTHORN PARK

By Julia Kelly
Minotaur, \$28, October
Evelyne Redfern #2
Grade: B+



In Julia Kelly's first book in this series, heroine Evelyn Redfern got a job as a clerk in Churchill's war rooms only to discover a body on her very first day. As she'd been asked by a high up family friend to "keep her eyes open,"

she ends up investigating. and solves the crime. In book two, she's already been sent north for training as a member of the ultra secret Special Operations Executive, where she'll be working as an investigator. Her maiden outing is to Blackthorn Park, which has been requisitioned by the government as a center for creating bombs for use in the field. The home office suspects some kind of theft is going on and requests that Evelyn travel there and assess how easily the property can be breached.

Her handler will be the man she worked with in book one, David Poole, and despite their slightly prickly relationship they function efficiently and intelligently together. All goes well as Evelyn checks into the cottage she's to stay in and reconnoiters Blackthorn Park, but when she clandestinely returns there at night (easily breaking in) there's a shot and she discovers a dead body, an apparent suicide. Readers, when is a suicide in a mystery novel a suicide? Close to never, and true to form, in this case it is a murder, and not only that, the victim is the man in charge of Blackthorn.

Much to the consternation of the higher-ups there, Evelyn and David quickly assume control of the investigation. They are under a tight deadline though, as Churchill is coming for an inspection in 3 or 4 days, and some of the bombs seem to be inconveniently exploding in the field when they shouldn't, killing agents. This is a fairly standard story of a wartime investigation in some ways, but Kelly makes it sing with her characters and narrative verve, which really commands the reader's attention. I didn't think this installment was quite as good or unusual as the first, but it still has some fascinating threads to it.

The tangle of characters at Blackthorn and the way they relate – or don't relate – to one another is a marvelous depiction of class interaction in a wartime setting, a time when people of different social classes are forced to work closely together. It's also an interesting look at how the war was being waged behind the scenes in parts of rural England. The boys may have been at the front, but back home plenty was happening and the scientists and

engineers at Blackthorn are hoping to be able to shorten the duration of the war through their work.

I very much enjoy Evelyne as a character. She's more or less a poor little rich girl – when she lost her mother at a young age, her dad about father deposited her in the care of her aunt. A background in a British boarding school has stiffened her upper lip and her family history makes her want to simply get on with things. In this, she's an incredibly British character, just carrying on with her war work and dealing with her complex relationship with handler David.

Although her central character is a brash American, these books very much remind me of Susan Elia MacNeal's wonderful Maggie Hope series. Both women began their careers working in one way or another for Churchill, and from there moved to the Special Operations Executive. As MacNeal has recently wrapped the Maggie series, I'm thinking Evelyne may just satisfy my WWII reading cravings. While I didn't love this book as much as the first, I still found it entirely enjoyable and look forward to the resolution of the tantalizing cliffhanger Kelly leaves dangling in front of the reader at the end of this book.

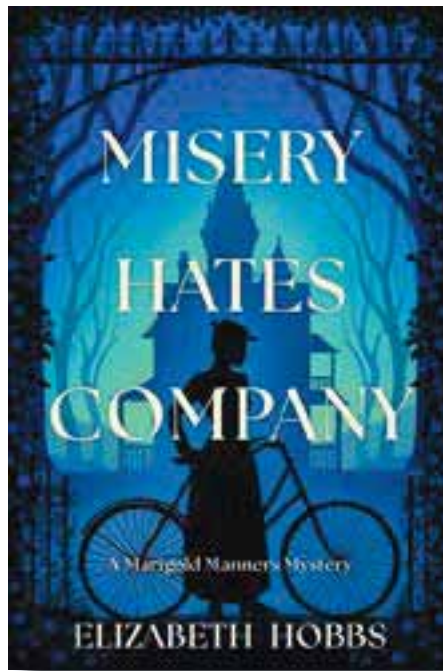
MISERY HATES COMPANY

By Elizabeth Hobbs

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, November
Marigold Manners #1

Grade: A

I really, really appreciate a book that's able to keep me guessing. This novel, while adhering to many of the expectations applying to cozy historicals, also completely upends them in other ways, to the point that even when I was about three quarters of the way through it I was still not quite sure where the story was headed. (I was more than eager to discover where that might be, however.) As the book opens in 1890's Boston, Marigold Manners has just lost both parents to the flu pandemic. And worse, she's discovered that they died broke. While Marigold had formerly been a firm part of upper crust Boston, it appears now as though she will have to leave ritzy Wellesley College, abandon



her dreams of archaeology, and throw herself at the mercy of her relatives. She has a last, final night out with her friend Isabelle and her devoted society hunk, Cab. So far, so standard.

Of all the letters from far flung cousins and aunts the one Marigold chooses to accept is from her cousin Mrs. Sophronia Hatchett, who lives on a place called Misery Island, off the New England shore. Marigold has never heard of Sophronia, but she's intrigued by her letter, which promises to reveal secrets and right family wrongs. And from then on, things take a turn to the weird and uncanny. It reminded me a good bit of one of my favorite girlhood books, Joan Aiken's *Nightbirds on Nantucket*, and heroine Dido Twite's stay with her Aunt Tribulation. Misery Island is all the reader might expect from the name, and the well dressed Marigold arrives at the train station with her trunks to find no one there to meet her. What she does find, after some asking around, is a drunk on the beach with a little boat who rows her over to the island (and she has to assist him).

The island is desolate, her relatives, rather than being welcoming, are scattered around the island and often downright hostile when they do happen to encounter her. Cousin Sophronia is cryptic beyond belief, and the only

food to hand is the goopy stew made by Cleon, the inebriated rower. Marigold, not one to let things lie or to wallow in misfortune, rolls up her sleeves the next morning and gets to work cleaning the kitchen. She also makes her way across the water to town, where she finds the library, retrieves her bicycle (a real novelty in the 1890s) and forms a women's bicycle club. She's truly the model of an independent female, or "new woman," and, as such, finds very little fellow feeling with her new cousins.

She then determines to disarm them with charm – learning that her lovely cousin Daisy has a secret beau, cousin Saviah has a talent for singing, and cousin Wilbert intends to raise sheep on the desolate island. She finds their father, Ellery, intimidating, as every-time he sees her he starts ranting and shouting. Her putative patron Sophronia remains aloof, and, to add to her dread, Marigold is almost certain on her initial voyage across that she'd seen the body of a young woman under the water. This body remains submerged in the plot, never resurfacing again until later on in the novel.

The middle bit has a bit of a Cinderella feel as she helps her cousins begin to realize their goals, meanwhile reuniting with Cab at an actual ball, ballgowns supplied by couturier friend Isabelle. She also befriends Lucy, a young black woman who cooks meals and leaves them on a tray outside the door of matriarch, Alva, who never leaves her room.

That gets us through about three quarters of the book, in turns a story of identity (Marigold's), a dysfunctional family, adventure, and a gothic, haunted house. After that it morphs into a straight up mystery when one of the family is discovered murdered and Marigold and Cab have to be the ones to solve it in the face of a local constable who seems totally unsuited for the job of detection. This was a charming, funny, and at times bleak story which has a surprisingly happy ending and a wonderful central character. Marigold is a blooming heroine I can only hope to encounter again.

Lookin' For A Few Good Books

Larry Gandle



SOUTHERN MAN

by Greg Iles
Morrow, \$36.00
Penn Cage #7
Rating: B-

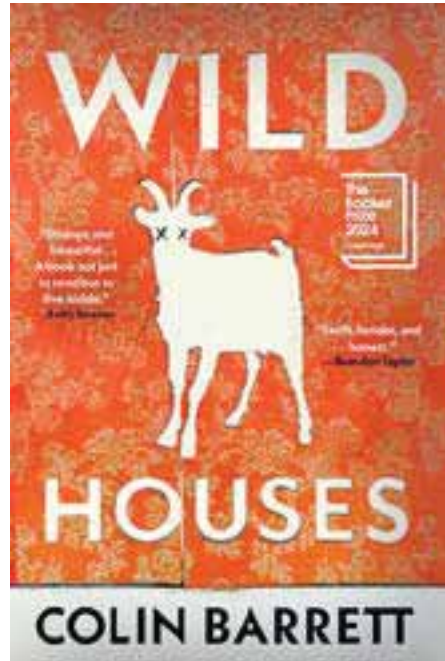
Fifteen years after Natchez Burning trilogy, Penn Cage is a beaten man. Almost all his relatives are gone except his daughter, Annie. He lost a leg in a car accident so has difficulty moving and suffers from a terminal illness called Multiple Myeloma. A fight at a rap festival in Bienville, Mississippi progresses to a mass shooting. It is felt to be racially motivated. After that, a Black radical group claims responsibility for burning antebellum mansions. At the same time, Bobby White, a local war hero, gained national prominence after saving lives at the rally. He is proving to be a force to be reckoned with as a possible third-party candidate for President. The problem is Bobby White is planning a deadly event which will cast him as a hero and possibly into the White House. He is an egomaniac and a dangerous racist. It is up to Penn to ultimately stop him.

SOUTHERN MAN is a doorstop of a novel clocking in at almost one thousand pages with small type. It certainly could have been broken up into another trilogy. The story is initially riveting as we are introduced to the cast of characters. The plot then gets bogged down with repetitious and pointless events. There is much political diatribe as the author is no doubt left wing. In fact the good guys are left wing liberals and the evil villains are far right Republican stereotypic racists and gun nuts. It all becomes a bit too much. The reader must suspend reality for most of this very overlong and overwritten novel.

It is merely okay but due to its length, I wish I read a few other novels instead.

WILD HOUSES

by Colin Barrett
Grove Press, \$27.00, March
Rating: A



In Ballina, Ireland, Dev, a loner living way out of town, answers his door at night and is greeted by two hoodlums, Gabe and Sketch Ferdia, with a teenage boy named Doll English. They have kidnapped Doll in an effort to impel Doll's brother, Cillian, to pay off some gambling debts. Dev has agreed to provide his house but his heart is not in it. In the meantime, Doll's girlfriend, Nicky, will stop at nothing to find him and free him.

This is a brilliant and short novel. Characters are superb rich and realistic creations. The plot is certainly compelling enough to keep the pages turning.

The dialogue and depiction of the locale is appears to be authentic. There are comedic elements to the books, as well as, abject cruelty. After all is said and done, characters reign supreme. This book is longlisted for the Booker Award and deservedly so. Highly recommended.

WORST CASE SCENARIO

by T.J.Newman
Little Brown, \$30.00
Rating: B-

A commercial airliner crashes into a nuclear power plant in a small town of Waketa, Minnesota. The reason is the pilot suffers a fatal heart attack. There is no act of terrorism. The plane severely damages the nuclear power plant and the crises is at a whole new level never seen before. At risk is the whole nation in that the plant is right next to the Mississippi River where the radioactive water can affect the nation's food supply. The residents of the town must band together to prevent the ultimate disaster.

The first chapter is as riveting a read as any I have ever read. Once the story goes onto the ground, the plot falls into the usual cliché storylines where stereotypic characters go into hero mode with some offering the ultimate sacrifice—their own lives. The plot is highly predictable and not really all that interesting. The author has to explain why most of the rescue crew is so busy trying to rescue a five-year-old boy trapped in a car vs preventing a totally catastrophic meltdown at the plant. This is the worst of the author's three books. She is a much better writer when the locale of her story is inside an aircraft.

ORDINARY BEAR

by C.B. Bernard
Blackstone, \$25.99

Rating: B-

Farley is living in a small Alaskan village as an investigator for an oil company. After suffering a horrible loss and multiple injuries, he returns to Portland, Oregon to recover. He develops a friendship with a single mother and her eight-year-old daughter. When trouble arises, Farley is placed into a position where he must investigate the crime. Perhaps it will redeem the loss he suffered in remote Alaska.

The character of Farley -- a big, hulking bear of a man, is quite charming and carries the book. A crime does not occur for almost a third of the way through it. In the meantime, the author establishes the characters and the locale around Farley. Eventually, the plot gets increasingly silly and reality must be suspended for the second half of the book. The locale is overly depicted with such detail that it takes up pages of the volume. Yet, the impression of the Portland left with this reader is that the city is nothing but a series of homeless shelters. This book was heavily hyped to the extent that I was expecting much more from it. Perhaps a more literary work. In the end, I felt like I was reading a comic book with the over-the-top villain strutting around with a gun pointed everywhere. The book is entertaining but just don't expect anything deep and meaningful.

CALIFORNIA BEAR

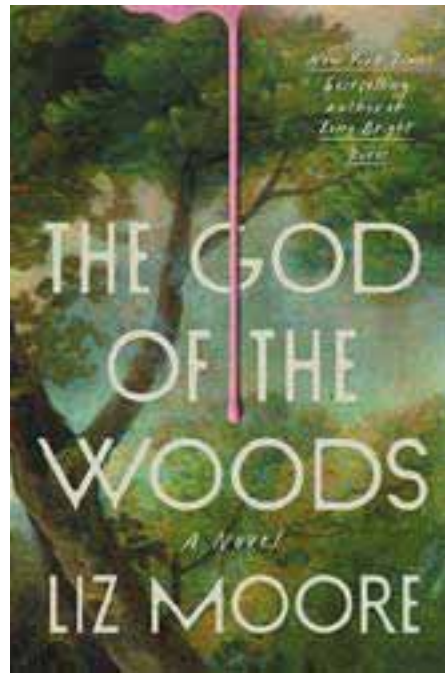
by Duane Swierczynski
Mulholland Books, \$29.00, January

Rating: C+

Jack Queen, in prison for murder, is exonerated due to the efforts of retired LAPD Detective Cato Hightower. He wants some help finding and black-mailing a serial killer named The Bear who raped and murdered women in the 1970s. Cato's wife, Jeanie, examines and investigates family trees for a living. With a DNA sample, she has identified The Bear and now her husband hopes to capitalize on it. Meanwhile, 15-year

old Matilda Finnerty, Jack's daughter, is hospitalized for Leukemia. She is also a brilliant investigator and also knows who The Bear is. It seems The Bear is now coming out of retirement endangering Jack, Cato, Matilda and Jeanie.

I am not sure what to think about this novel. In a sense, it is so ridiculous that I suspect the author was going for humor. But it is not funny. The characters are generally fools. The plot is silly and reality must be suspended. I found Matilda to be more precocious than a 15-year-old would be. I found her more irritating. I never really bought into the whole story. The book is mildly entertaining but find it difficult to recommend.



THE GOD OF THE WOODS

by Liz Moore
Riverhead Books, \$30.00, July

Rating: A

In August, 1975, a thirteen year old camper is found missing from her bunk at a summer camp. Her name is Barbara Van Laar and she is the daughter of the camp's owners who live in a large mansion on the property. Fourteen years before her brother also disappeared there. As the search for Barbara unfolds, the reader is brought into the lives of the various family members, as

well as, the camp staff. Things just do not seem to be right. The Van Laars are dysfunctional and that appears to affect everyone around them. Nonetheless, what happened to Barbara? The truth will prove surprising.

This is one of those all-encompassing novels that the reader can get lost in. The characters are carefully created and have great depth. The plot is compelling throughout as we meet the various characters. There is something seriously wrong with the Van Laars. Secrets eventually come out leading to the very satisfying and clever conclusion. This is one of the best mystery novels of the year.

ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK

by Chris Whitaker
Crown, \$30.00, June

Rating: A

In 1975, in the small town of Monta Clare, Missouri, Misty, a beautiful teen from a wealthy family, is found by Patch a local boy, being attacked by a masked man. Patch distracts the man and Misty flees. Patch is then abducted and it takes his relentless friend, Saint, to find him after the law officers have given up. Patch emerges as a hero but is changed in a way that will last him the rest of his life. During his confinement, he was supposedly with a young woman called Grace that he never saw but has fallen in love with. She disappears and he now makes it his life's mission to find out what happened to her. So begins this epic novel of kids growing into adulthood while confronting the horrors of the past and a serial killer.

This compulsively readable very long narrative is broken up into hundreds of short two to three page chapters. This keeps the plot moving with increasing speed. The years and then the decades fly past as these character's lives become increasingly intertwined. There is much tragedy, but also love and hope. A few plot twists occur near the conclusion which are quite clever but reality must increasingly be suspended. This is an ambitious novel and one well worth your time.

Down Under Crime



Jeff Poppo Reviews

WHEN IT RAINS

by Dave Warner
Fremantle Press, \$A34.99
DI Dan Clement #5
Rating: A

Dave Warner is a veteran of the Australian outback noir scene and his latest book, **WHEN IT RAINS**, is another high quality tale about crime and murder in one of the most isolated places in Australia.

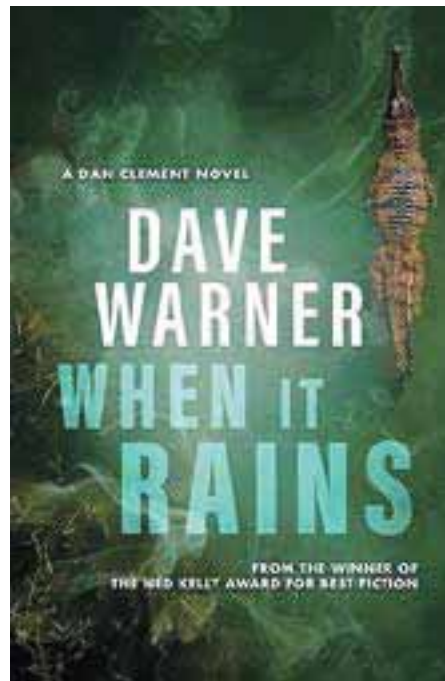
WHEN IT RAINS is the fourth book by Warner to feature Broome detective Dan Clement, and finds the aging detective trying to balance a much younger love interest and a sudden deluge of crime. When his sergeant is beaten up, and a woman is brutally assaulted, it seems like the same two suspects are behind both incidents. Clement quickly mounts a search for the two across a great expanse of the outback, but things take a macabre turn when a woman's hand is discovered tied to a post in crocodile-infested waters. It seems like someone is working their way through a list of victims, but Clement has no idea who is next.

This is a very well-crafted police novel. Warner's depiction of the vastness of the area that Clement is responsible for, "[it was unlikely that any] other law enforcement officer in the world had a jurisdiction as big as his", is richly described and really captures the heat and sparseness of the location. The contrast between the beauty of the countryside with the tackiness of the roadside pubs

and hotels is effectively conveyed, and Warner is very good at peopling his novel with interesting and credible secondary characters.

The details of the police operation are smoothly woven into the story, and the book moves along at a decent pace. There are several good twists, and the tension really mounts in the final stages. The opening chapter involving the fate of the first victim, is probably one of the best I have read, with the horror of the situation nicely interwoven with poignant reflections on the different paths that we take in life.

A really good read, but intending tourists to Australia of a nervous disposition, might want to give it a miss.



THE VALLEY

by Chris Hammer
Allen & Unwin, \$A34.99
In U.S., \$19.99 trade paperback
Rating: B+

Chris Hammer is a leading figure in Australian crime fiction writing, with a growing number of police novels set mainly around rural New South Wales. His latest, **THE VALLEY**, sticks pretty much to the successful pattern of his previous books, but moves the action north from the Murrumbidgee irrigation zone to a small village community between Canberra and the state's south coast.

THE VALLEY brings back Hammer's popular pairing of Detective Sergeant Ivan Lucic and Detective Senior Constable Nell Buchanan, who operate out of the rural homicide team based at Dubbo. This time around they are called in to investigate the death of a controversial entrepreneur in a remote mountain valley. Despite the peaceful surroundings, Ivan and Nell soon find themselves contending with a range of potential suspects, including cowboy lawyers, conmen, bullion thieves from the past, and grave robbers. But when Nell discovers that the victim is a close blood relative, things take a troubling turn.

As with his previous books Hammer tells the story through different timelines and perspectives, which gradually all come together. This approach allows him to build a comprehensive description of the history of The Valley, and the area surrounding it, and the impact of settlement on the environment. There is also a lot of backstory, much of which impacts on Nell. While in the present, the police investigation unfolds in a steady manner with the sort of twists you expect from a crime novel.

As the narrative switches between the various stories, Hammer deliv-

ers some good surprises and creates an interesting historical narrative of the local area. As with his previous books, Hammer creates a strong sense of place, and really builds up a comprehensive history of the area. The various backstories and the heavy dose of information, however, do slow the pace of the present day police investigation, which does not get a lot of space in the book.

Overall, **THE VALLEY** is an enjoyable crime novel, but some paring back would have made it a sharper read.

OPAL

by Patricia Wolf

Echo Publishing, \$A32.99

Rating: B+

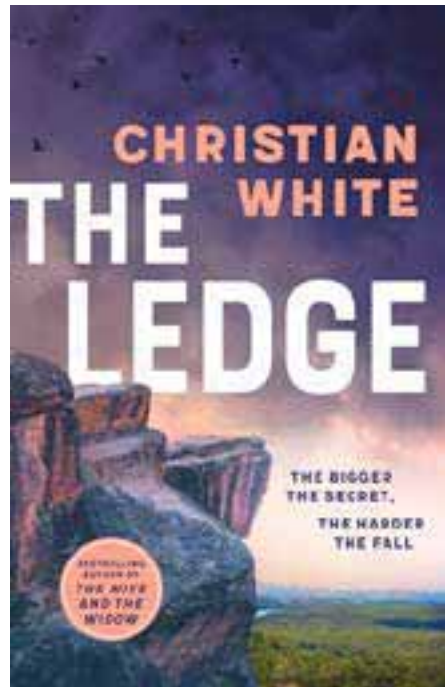
OPAL finds Australian Federal Police officer DS Lucas Walker on leave from his job in the Organised Crime Unit and escorting his young half-sister Grace, who is visiting from Boston, to his outback Queensland hometown of Caloodie. They are supposed to be visiting family, but a phone call sends them 400 kms further west to the tiny mining town of Kanpara to fetch Walker's cousin Blair, who has been digging for boulder opals and is keen to escape the town. On their arrival, they find the atmosphere in the town tense with rumours of a life-changing opal discovery. The following day, they awake to find that Kanpara has been completely cut off by a flood and the roads closed. The discovery of the murdered bodies of a man and woman complicates things further, especially when Blair is taken in for questioning. Walker must now work with the police to uncover the killer in the community's midst before the waters recede and they can escape.

This is an enjoyable read. The story is well crafted, and Patricia has a good journalistic eye for capturing the essence of a scene and conveying it in simple sharp sentences. Whether it is a hot, overcrowded pub or a crowd of people on a riverbank watching the

water rising, she is very good at painting the scene and making you feel as though you are there. The mystery plot is also solid, and the main characters are well done, although some of the minor players are more interesting.

Patricia grew up in Australia, and returned from Berlin to research the book's background, and there is a good authenticity to the story. The inclusion of Walker's American stepsister allows Patricia to smoothly weave in information as part of conversations and there is a good flow to the plot.

OPAL may lack the depth and originality of some of the better Australian crime fiction, but it is an entertaining detective story that will have wide appeal.



THE LEDGE

by Christian White

Affirm Press, \$A34.99

in U.S. \$26.93 trade paperback

Rating: A-

Award-winning Australian author Christian White has been described as Australia's 'Master Of Misdirection' and his latest book, **THE LEDGE**, is another twisty tale of surprises and suspense.

The book opens with the discovery of old human remains in a forest area of regional Victoria. The police are baffled, the locals are shocked, and one group of old friends start to panic, fearing that their long-held secret is about to be uncovered. One of the friends left the small town of West Haven years ago, but the other two stayed and forged their own lives. Now that they are re-united, old secrets and concerns are re-ignited, and the loose bonds that bound them begin to fall apart.

The story operates on two timelines. The first is in the present, the second is in 1999 and is told through the diary entries of one of the boys. These entries tell the story of what happened all those years ago, and why the events have reverberated through the years.

The diary entries are probably the highlight of the book, and White smoothly recreates the 1999 milieu and the coming to age of the four boys involved. The sense of sixteen-year-old camaraderie is well evoked, although a little idealistic, and the four boys and their families are well sketched. The story they tell is a good one, and the various twists and developments keep the reader interested and engaged.

As it is typical of White's books and screenplays, it is the final dramatic twist that dominates the story and makes the reader look back at what came before and re-evaluate it. It is very clever and certainly reinforces his reputation for trickery.

The debt to Stephen King weighs a little heavily at times, but overall **THE LEDGE** is a very good book that readily holds attention from beginning to end.

PRIZE CATCH

by Alan Carter

Fremantle Press, \$A34.99

Rating: B+

Alan Carter has demonstrated in the past a clear ability to mix topical

international themes with a good local thriller plot, and he does so again with **PRIZE CATCH**, which has an interesting storyline about dodgy farming practices, modern war crimes and the routine abuse of power by the wealthy.

When Roz Chen's wife, Niamh, is killed in a hit-and-run on a lonely Tasmanian road, the grieving widow begins to wonder if Niamh's death was an accident after all. Meanwhile, SAS veteran Sam Willard is hoping for a fresh start with a job at a salmon farm. But as allegations of old war crimes surface and Sam is 'promoted' as a special operative against anti-salmon farm activists, he and Roz form an unlikely alliance. A series of events force them into the unforgiving Tasmanian wilderness as they try to escape from the murderous thugs on their trail and achieve some sense of justice for Niamh and the other victims.

This is a serious, well written thriller that also canvasses some important current issues. The characters are richly created and believable, and there is a strong degree of credibility around the plot. The story moves along at a steady pace, and it builds to a very a tense climax on the water. The plot is very much driven by the actions of the central characters, and it is interesting to watch Roz grow and change as the book progresses.

It moves a little slowly at times, but overall **PRIZE CATCH** is an engaging and interesting crime novel with real heart and good political awareness.

George Easter Review

THE CALL

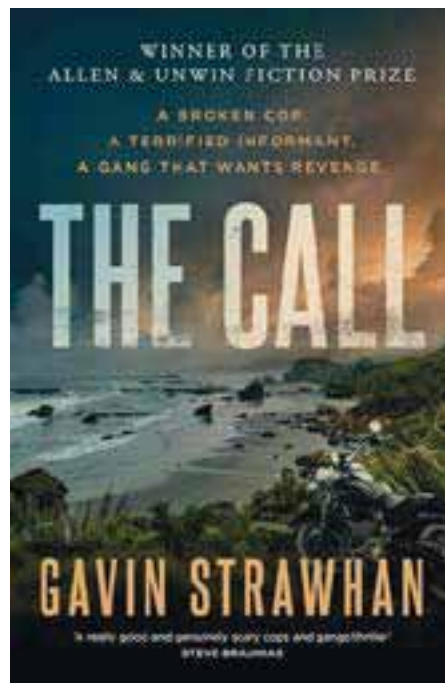
by Gavin Strawhan
Allen & Unwin, \$A32.99

Rating: A-

Jeff Pople was nice enough to bring a copy of **THE CALL** to give me at Bouchercon. Thanks, Jeff!

Jeff's Plot Summary:

"After surviving a brutal attack,



Auckland detective DS Honey Chambers returns to her hometown of Waitutū on a remote part of the New Zealand coastline to care for her mother. Waitutū holds some unpleasant memories for Honey, especially around her sister's suicide, but it does give her the time to recover. Her troubles from Auckland, however, follow her home, and she finds herself in a deadly battle with a dangerous gang and her own past."

Connecting with an early love brings even more complications for Honey.

I think that somewhere not too deep under my skin there lies an Aussie or a Kiwi. I feel such an affinity for their crime fiction that it must be so. I can't ever remember being disappointed with a "down under" recommendation from Jeff Pople or Craig Sistrson. My experience is usually one of awe at the embarrassment of riches represented by the ever expanding cadre of fine Australian and New Zealand crime writers.

Strawhan's plotting, characterizations and settings are those of a veteran writer. Every page kept my interest and highest attention. I'll be keeping my eye out for any follow-ups.

Anthony Award Winners 2024

Best Hardcover Novel

ALL THE SINNERS BLEED,
by S.A. Cosby – Winner

Everybody Knows,
by Jordan Harper
Time's Undoing, by Cheryl A. Head
Face of Greed, by James L'Etoile
The Last Devil to Die,
by Richard Osman

Best First Novel

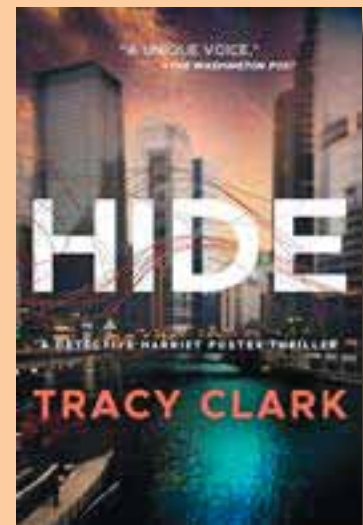
MOTHER-DAUGHTER MURDER NIGHT,
by Nina Simon – Winner

The Peacock and the Sparrow,
by I.S. Berry
Play the Fool, by Lina Chern
Scorched Grace,
by Margot Douaihy
City Under One Roof,
by Iris Yamashita

Best Paperback Novel

HIDE, by Tracy Clark – Winner

No Home for Killers,
by E.A. Aymar
Because the Night,
by James D.F. Hannah
The Taken Ones, by Jess Lourey
Magic City Blues,
by Bobby Matthews
Lowdown Road,
by Scott Von Doviak



DP Calendar



March 13-16, 2025
Left Coast Crime
Denver, Colorado

Guests of Honor: Sara Paretsky, Mauel Ramos, John Copenhaver
Website: <https://leftcoastcrime.org/2025/>



June 13-14, 2025
Capital Crime
London, England
Details to Follow

Website: <https://www.capitalcrime.org/>

September 3-7, 2025
Bouchercon
Blood on the Bayou: Case Closed
New Orleans, Louisiana
Guests of Honor: Michael Connelly, Steph Cha, Craig Johnson, Charles Todd, Jonathan Maberry, Alafair Burke and Ali Karim



June 17-21, 2025
ThrillerFest XX
New York City, NY

Guests of Honor: Janet Evanovich, John Grisham, James Patterson, Oyinkan Braithwaite, Jennifer Hillier
Website: thrillerfest.com



September 12-14, 2025
Bloody Scotland
Stirling, Scotland

Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: bloodyscotland.com

April 25-27, 2025
Malice Domestic 37
Bethesda, Maryland

Guests of Honor: Marcia Talley, Donna Andrews, Gigi Pandian, Lucy Worsley
Website: www.malicedomestic.net/

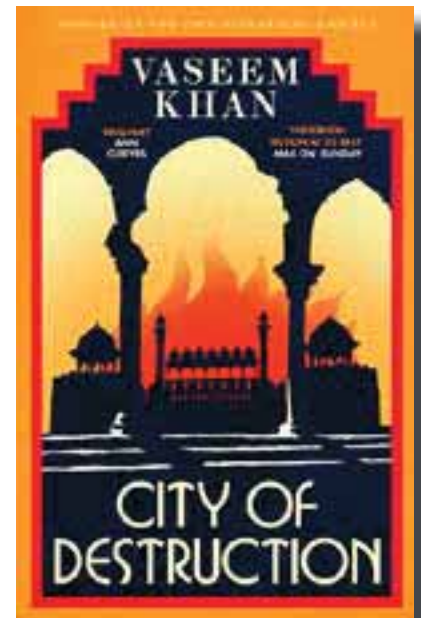
May 15-18, 2025
CrimeFest
Bristol, UK

Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: crimefest.com



October 21-25, 2026
Cross-Border Crimes
Bouchercon
Calgary, Canada

What's New In the U.K.



THE NEIGHBOUR'S SECRET, Sharon Bolton (Orion, Kindle \$9.99, November). Three teenage girls have vanished at the annual Gathering as they reach their sixteenth birthday.

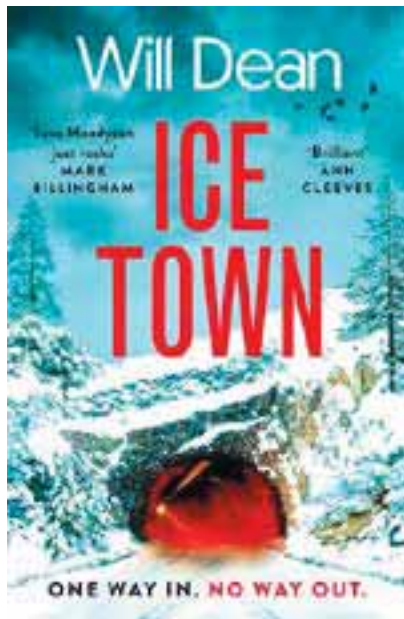
No one seems to be investigating. And a fourth girl begs Anna for help, fearing that she will be next to disappear. Everyone has secrets. Anna is watching everyone. But who is watching Anna?

tunnel closes at night, the residents are left to fend for themselves. And as more people go missing, it becomes clear that there is a killer among them.

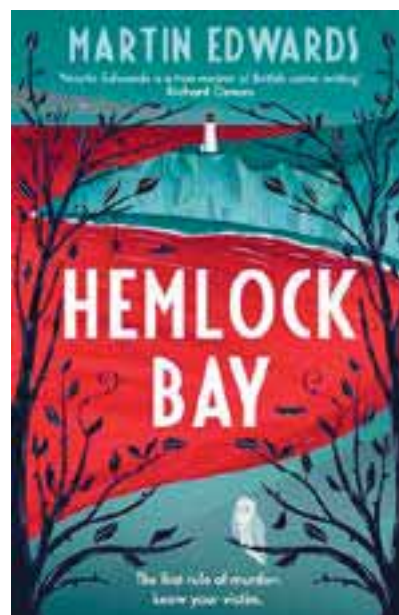
HEMLOCK BAY, Martin Edwards (Head of Zeus, £22.00, September). Basil Palmer plans to murder a man called Louis Carson. The problem is he doesn't know anything about his intended victim, not who he is nor where he lives. After learning that Carson runs a hotel in Hemlock Bay, a playground for the wealthy and privileged, Palmer invents a false identity. Posing as Dr Seamus Doyle, he journeys to the coast plotting murder along the way. Meanwhile, after hearing a fortune teller has predicted a murder in a place called Hemlock Bay, amateur sleuth Rachel Savernake rents a cottage there, determined to discover for herself the serpent that has slithered into this idyllic Eden.

people wake up in a remote mansion. The doors are all locked. They have no idea where they are. Who brought them there. Or how to escape. Each knew the victims of a dreadful crime committed four years earlier but that's all that links them. Then a voice echoes through the house with a terrifying message.

They've been poisoned -- and have less than 12 hours to live. There's an antidote on hand: but only if someone admits to being a killer. And they all claim to be innocent.



ICE TOWN, Will Dean (Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00, November). "Deaf teenager goes missing in Esseberg. Mountain rescue are launching a search party but conditions hinder their efforts. The tunnel is being kept open all night as an exception." When journalist Tuva Moodyson reads this news alert she knows she must join the search. If this teenager is found, she will be able to communicate with him in a way no one else can. Esseberg lies on the other side of a mountain tunnel: there is only one way in and one way out. When the



YOU ALL DIE TONIGHT, Simon Kernick (Headline, November). Seven

CITY OF DESTRUCTION, Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton, £20.00, November). Bombay, 1951. A political rally ends in tragedy when India's first female police detective, Persis Wadia, kills a lone gunman as he attempts to assassinate the divisive new defence minister, a man calling for war with India's new post-Independence neighbours. With the Malabar House team tasked to hunt down the assassin's co-conspirators - aided by agents from Britain's MI6 security service - Persis is quickly relegated to the sidelines. But then she is given a second case, the burned body of an unidentified white man found on a Bombay beach. As she pursues both investigations - with and without official sanction - she soon finds herself headed to the country's capital, New Delhi, a city where ancient and modern India openly clash.

U.K.

Reviews



Jeff Popple Reviews



MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS

by Mike Ripley

Severn House, £21.99, October 2024

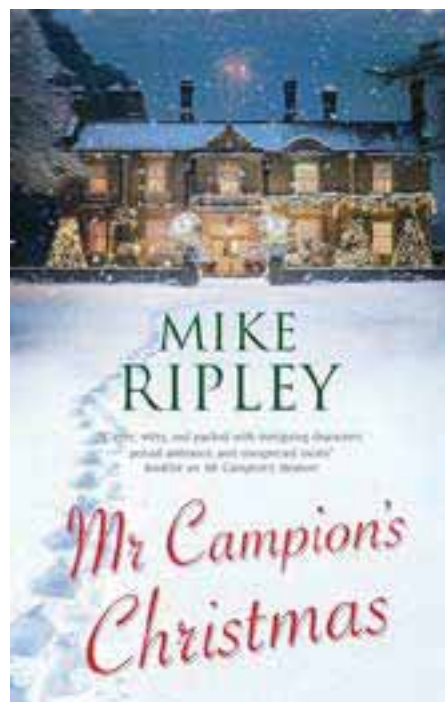
Rating: A-

MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS

sadly ends Mike Ripley's enjoyable continuation of the Albert Campion novels by Margery Allingham. The books have become a regular feature of the British crime scene over the past ten years, and they conclude in good style with this twelfth volume in the series.

Set in in the days following Christmas Day 1962, **MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS** opens with Boxing Day looking like being a quiet affair for the Campions who are snowed in at their remote Norfolk farmhouse, Carterers. That changes when a charabanc full of 'pilgrims' travelling from London to the Shrine of Our Lady in nearby Walsingham crashes into their imposing granite gateposts and the family unexpectedly find themselves playing host to the eccentric passengers. However, any lingering festive cheer is in short supply when a shocking discovery is made the following day, and some of the guests

are revealed as not being who they claim to be. Suddenly the Campions are drawn into a fiendish web of espionage, as the Cold War comes chillingly close to home.



MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS is good fun, with Ripley skilfully concocting an innovative spy plot in the most unlikely location at the most unlikely time. The book unfolds in his typically leisurely style, with an abundance of interesting historical snippets and cultural references, as well as several amusing insider references by Ripley. There are also the twists, surprises, shady characters and red herrings you expect from a crime novel, and a good burst of action towards the end. Campion flits amiably through the story trying to keep one step ahead of the villains, with the concluding heroics coming from an unexpected source.

In all, **MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS** is an enjoyable seasonal feast of a story and a good finale for the series.

PROFILE K

In the U.S. as THE PROFILER

by Helen Fields

Avon, £16.99, 2024;

In U.S., Avon, \$18.99, February, 2025

Rating: B+

Helen Fields is best known for her series about Edinburgh detectives DI Luc Callenach and DCI Ava Turner, but with **PROFILE K** she heads off in a fresh direction, with a new central character.

Midnight Jones is an analyst trained to understand the human mind. She works for a London biotech company creating profiles based on applications received by various companies and educational institutes. One day the application she's reviewing comes up as Profile K, K for Killer, which she's never come across before. To confirm the results, she takes the same test herself and is soon convinced of the applicant's potential threat. She raises her concerns with her employer, but is told to drop it and is reminded of her privacy obligations. Nevertheless she persists with her efforts and finds herself in pursuit of a serial killer.

This is a clever, scary novel that provides an interesting twist on the standard serial killer thriller. The book starts with a shocking killing, and the pace rarely lets up, as Midnight pursues her target. The background information is interesting, and Midnight is an engaging central character who is nicely fleshed out. Her relationship with her disabled sister is touching, and for the most part she goes about her investigations in a credible and logical manner. As with her earlier books, there is plenty of violence and detailed descriptions of death and injury. An entertaining read, but not one for the squeamish.

George's Take: This had a fascinating premise but overall I found the killer's torture and murders hard to stomach. If you like gory murders, then this book is for you. **Rating: B**

ONE OF US IS DEAD

by Peter James

Pan Macmillan, £22.00, in U.S. \$27.99,

November, 2024

Roy Grace #20

Rating: B+

Peter James' series about Brighton police detective Roy Grace has become a mainstay of the British crime scene, both in books and on television, over the past twenty years, or so, and the latest entry, **ONE OF US IS DEAD**, is another smoothly written tale of murder, greed and mayhem.

James Taylor arrives late and has to stand at the back of the church at his friend's funeral. As the service progresses, he recognises the man who is six rows in front of him as being his old friend Rufus Rorke, but he must be mistaken as two years previously he read out the eulogy at Rorke's funeral. Meanwhile Grace and his team are investigating a row of suspicious deaths, including by mushroom poisoning. Grace suspects that the deaths are connected and that they somehow lead back to Rufus Rorke, but he struggles to make the connection.

This is another professional piece of writing by the always reliable Peter James. He quickly puts the various elements of the story in place, and steadily ratchets up the emotional tension as the plot unfolds. The book progresses nicely through some decent twists, and James keeps the interest at a good level as the plot advances to its tense ending. As usual, the viewpoint is skilfully moved between a variety of characters, and this frequent shifting of perspective heightens the interest and builds the suspense. The pace lags at times, but the characters and the storyline mainly keep you engaged.

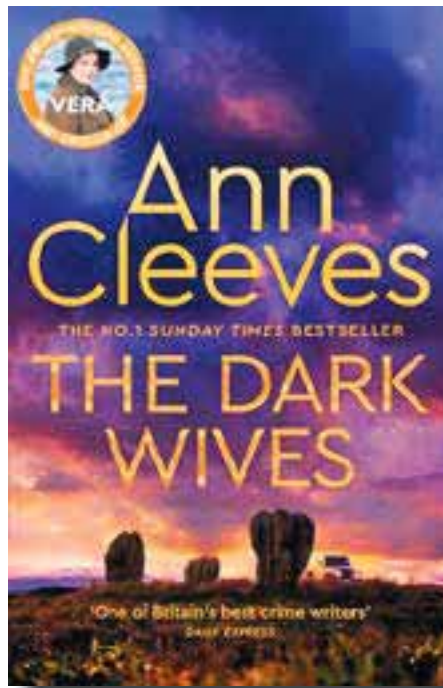
In all, another finely structured tale that will appeal to James' many fans.

THE DARK WIVES

by Ann Cleeves

Pan Macmillan, £22

Vera Stanhope #11

Rating: B+

Ann Cleeves is a well-loved veteran of the British crime scene, both in book and on the television screen. Her iconic series about DI Vera Stanhope has garnered millions of fans around the world, especially as the result of Brenda Blethyn's portrayal of the detective in the TV series *Vera*. Now as the show enters its final series, we have a new Vera novel from Ann.

The book opens with the discovery of a man's body by the almost obligatory local dog walker. The body is found on the common outside Rosebank, a care home for troubled teens. The victim is Josh, a staff member, who was due to work the previous night but never showed up. DI Vera Stanhope is called out to investigate the death. Her only clue is the disappearance of one of the home's residents, fourteen-year-old Chloe Spence. Vera can't bring herself to believe that a teenager is responsible for the murder, but even she can't dismiss the possibility. When a second connected body is found near the *Three Dark Wives* standing stones in the wilds of the Northumbrian countryside, superstition and folklore begin to collide with fact.

THE DARK WIVES has all the trademarks we have come to expect from an Ann Cleeves novel. The story is

well plotted and clever, but never overly complicated. The mystery is cleverly out and logical, and the outcome is a good surprise. The well-established central characters seem like old friends, with their quirks and flaws, and Ann smoothly introduces a new member into the group. The broader characters are also well done, especially the poor inhabitants of the Rosebank care home. Cleeves' reflections on the state of care in England for troubled teens are seamlessly woven into the novel, and give the story some good substance. I also really liked the background information on the standing stones and the local traditions and beliefs. Another steadily paced and enjoyable addition to the Vera series.

THE CHIDHAM CREEK MURDERS

by Pauline Rowson

Joffe, £9.99

Rating: B

Pauline Rowson is a real stalwart of the British crime writing scene. With over thirty books to her credit she has been turning out reliable, enjoyable mysteries, often with a maritime setting, for around twenty years.

Her latest book, **THE CHIDHAM CREEK MURDERS**, is the eighteenth book in her series about policeman Andy Horton and opens with Horton being called to investigate the discovery of a body. Juliette Croft, a professional celebrant, is dead in her living room, sprawled on an orange velvet sofa with empty bottles of champagne and medicine neatly arranged on the coffee table beside her. It looks like suicide, but Horton is suspicious. It is too neat and tidy. The champagne glasses are dry, and there's no smell of alcohol on the body. When Horton tries to notify Juliette's next of kin, he discovers the sole beneficiary of her will is one Rodney Pierce, a multimillionaire businessman. Pierce, however, says he has not heard of Juliette. Horton's perplexed, but when other related deaths occur, he realises that he has a murder on his hands.

THE CHIDHAM CREEK MUR-

DERS is a solidly plotted and engaging mystery. The story unfolds at a leisurely pace, but there are enough interesting developments to keep you reading. The central mystery around the nature of Juliette's demise is well handled and the story gets a good kick along when the other deaths occur. The characters are simply sketched, but adequate, and Horton is an enjoyable central character.

There are no big twists or high concept plot lines, but instead **THE CHIDHAM CREEK MURDERS** is a well written and entertaining crime story that builds to an unexpected conclusion. The final confession is probably a bit too neat, but I do not think that many readers will care. Fans of classic British murder mysteries will enjoy this one.

A RELUCTANT SPY

by David Goodman

Headline, £22.00

Rating: A-

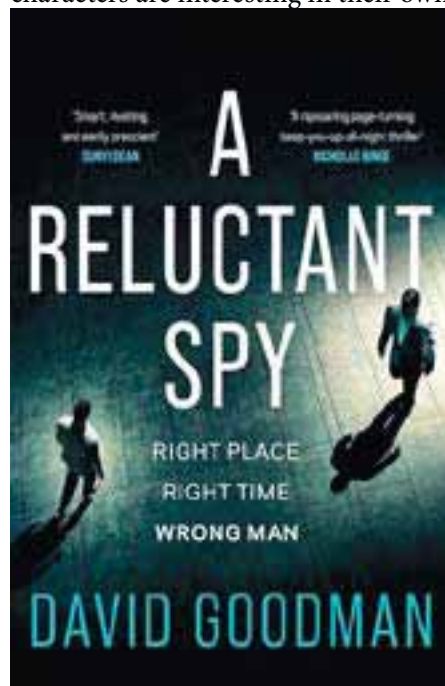
David Goodman's debut espionage novel, **A RELUCTANT SPY**, revolves around the central conceit of the Legends Program, a secret British intelligence effort to prepare impenetrable backstories for undercover agents. It uses real people, living low-key real lives, who are willing to hand over their identities, so that an agent can become them for a few weeks in order to go undercover. In return, the real 'legends' are given a helping hand with plum jobs, influence and access, and a stress free holiday while someone else is using their identity.

Jamie Tulloch is a successful executive at a top tech company, a long way from the tough upbringing that drove him to rise so far and so quickly. He has also been a member of the Legends Program since he was 23, getting a nice kick along in his career in the process. After years of waiting, he is finally activated by British Intelligence. Arriving at a French airport ready to hand over his identity, Jamie finds his primary contact murdered in a toilet, the agent who's supposed to step into

his life missing, and his options for escape non-existent. In desperation, he uses the ticket meant for the fake Jamie Tulloch, and steps onto the plane as himself, and heads to Zanzibar. Once there he becomes caught up in a dangerous operation involving Russian mercenaries, a rogue general, and an infamous arms trader. Meanwhile British Intelligence is playing catch-up, with the controller on the ground in Zanzibar only gradually coming to realise what has happened. While back in London, the bosses of the Legends Program have to deal with a major IT and physical attack on the program.

The twin storylines work really well, with the political and inter-service manoeuvrings of the Intelligence mandarins in London nicely contrasted with the on-the-ground action of the scenes in Zanzibar. The pace is brisk throughout, with just the occasional pause for descriptive passages of the sights and smells of Zanzibar and Tulloch's internal angst over his situation.

Some suspensions of disbelief are required, especially around Tulloch's actions, but this is nicely offset by convincing spycraft detail and believable descriptions of the various intelligence operations. The multiple viewpoints are also well handled, and each of the characters are interesting in their own



rights, particularly Tulloch's controller Nicola Ellis and Adil Komba from the Tanzanian Intelligence and Security Service.

After some good build-up, the ending delivers with a violent maelstrom of action and killing, and the requisite twists and turns. The identity of the 'mole' at the centre of the operation is not overly surprising, but the steps to their unveiling are well worked out.

In all, a very impressive debut.

DEATH IN THE ARCTIC

by Tom Hindle

Century, £16.99 – January 2025

Rating: B+

Tom Hindle has been described as the "new heir to Agatha Christie" and his forthcoming book, **DEATH IN THE ARCTIC**, certainly contains most of the elements of the traditional mystery: a locked room murder, a group of suspects isolated from the rest of the world, a slew of motives and guilty secrets, and an engaging amateur sleuth. All of which has been updated for the 21st century and placed onboard a modern airship flying towards the North Pole.

When aspiring travel writer Chloé Campbell is invited at the last moment to join the select group of passengers on a luxury airship flying on its maiden voyage to the North Pole, she thinks she's bagged the opportunity of a lifetime. The airship is the brainchild of Ezra Day, who has been working towards this trip all of his adult life, and sees it as the perfect homage to his father who died in the Arctic when he was a child. Also onboard the airship are a small group of passengers and crew, all of whom have issues with each other and with Ezra and his business partner, Howard Barnes. For Chloé it is a chance to break into the big time, but when things start to go wrong and the first death occurs, she realises that those dreams are about to be dashed, and that she is trapped at the top of the world with a killer.

This is a stylish and enjoyable 'whodunit'. Hindle wastes little time in

establishing the various backstories of the passengers and the key members of the crew, and setting the groundwork for possible motives when the first murder occurs at the 150 page mark. The tensions between the collection of old school friends, conniving crew members, and opportunistic social media influencers certainly create a good array of suspects.

The carefully concocted plot is nicely supported by a good sense of place, and the central conceit of a luxury airship is vividly described and quite believable. A constantly shifting point of view is well used, and the cast of characters are adequate for the job. Chloé is no Miss Marple, but she is credible, pleasant and a lot more astute than she first appears. It is a little tricky at the beginning to keep all the suspects and their motives in mind, but a Passenger and Crew Manifest at the beginning of the book is certainly a big help.

Most importantly, Hindle is very good at spreading red herrings, unexpected developments and twists throughout, and the identity of the killer came as a surprise to me. There are well planted clues for those cleverer than me, and Hindle's engaging style easily compensates for the slowish start to the book. An enjoyable murder mystery.

Larry Gandle Review

WITNESS 8

by Steve Cavanagh

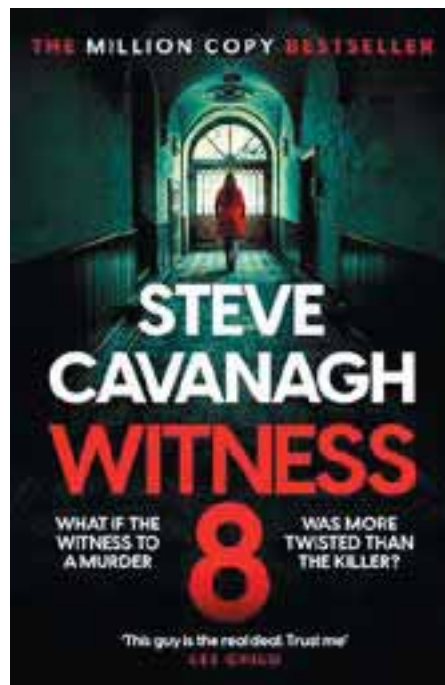
Headline, £22.00, August 2024 in U.K.

Atria, \$29.99, March, 2024 in U.S.

Eddie Flynn #8

Rating: A

Ruby has been a domestic helper for multiple families on a street in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Her family was once among the elite but her father's gambling debts put her and her mother in low cost housing in lower Manhattan. She now works for the Jackson family who live on the street. However, as the first line of the



book states, "Something is wrong with Ruby Johnson" She witnesses a murder and has a plan in mind to better her situation.

In the meantime, Eddie Flynn must defend a physician who has been accused of murder with the murder weapon found in his closet. The case seems to be open and shut. However, to him something doesn't appear right. To add to his woes, a general contract has been put out on Eddie's life. He must try to put an end to it before it is too late.

Steve Cavanaugh brilliantly juggles multiple plot points throughout this book. Again, his books are impossible to put down and this one is no exception. So many plot twists just keep coming. Please don't misunderstand me. This book is not great literature but it is a helluva lot of fun. Steve continues to keep up the high quality he established in his earlier thrillers. In my opinion he is one of the most entertaining authors writing today.

George's Take: A new Eddie Flynn mystery by Steve Cavanagh is always on my "must-read" list. **WITNESS 8** turned out to be just as entertaining as the rest of the series. Full marks for ingenious plotting. **Rating: A**

The 2024 Shamus Award Winners

Best PI Novel

HEART OF THE NILE, Will Thomas – Winner

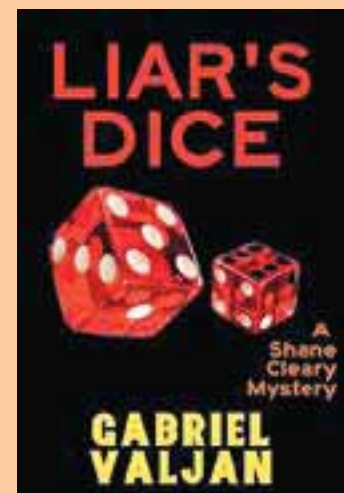
HARD RAIN,
Samantha Jayne Allen
GO FIND DADDY, Steve Goble
THE MISTRESS OF BHATIA
HOUSE, Sujata Massey
THE BELL IN THE FOG,
Lev AC Rosen

Best First PI Novel

Not awarded this year

Best PI Paperback Original

LIAR'S DICE, Gabriel Valjan – Winner



DRUMS GUNS 'N' MONEY,
Jonathan J. Brown
GILLESPIE FIELD GROOVE,
Corey Lynn Fayman
THE TRUTH WE HIDE,
Liz Milliron
BRING THE NIGHT,
J. R. Sanders

Best P.I. Short Story

"Errand for a Neighbor" by Bill Bassman (Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine) – Winner

Ripster's Revivals

by Mike Ripley

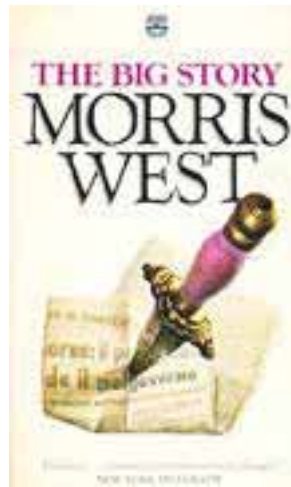
When I announced last year that I was ending my *Getting Away With Murder* column after two hundred editions and retiring from front-line reviewing, the world of crime fiction breathed a sigh of relief. When I said I had plans for a series of features reviving some forgotten favourites, one regular reader commented 'So, just old stuff then?' Well, my young friend, you hit the nail on the head with an anvil there and I make absolutely no apology for that.

In fact, after reviewing nearly 3,000 crime novels over 34 years, I decided it really was time to tackle the To-Be-Read pile, now resembling three Leaning Towers of Pisa, which I have accumulated but never had time to do justice. I was partially inspired by an American chum who, on reaching the age of eighty-six with a massive TBR pile, chose just enough books to keep him going until he reached the age of one hundred, and then sold the rest of his collection. Sadly he never made his goal, but he inspired me to make the demolition of my To-Be-Read pile a lead item on my personal bucket list.

So, in no particular order, I will share some of the joys and disappointments of rediscovering books I should have read many years ago had I not been distracted by those pesky new crime writers. And as that reader who said "Just old stuff, then?" has subsequently contacted me saying how much he missed *Getting Away With Murder*, this 'Revival' will be done in traditional GAWM style; i.e. rambling and occasionally accurate.

From the TBR pile

I have not read much by Australian novelist Morris West [1916 -1999], though my mother was a big fan, especially of his best-known novel **THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN**, one of the books which gained him the epithet 'the Pope of the Vatican thriller'. Certainly he seemed to corner the market in 'religious thrillers' - unsurprising given his early experiences as a Christian Brother, although he left before taking his final vows as a monk in 1939 to serve in the Australian army, being commissioned as a lieutenant in Military Intelligence.

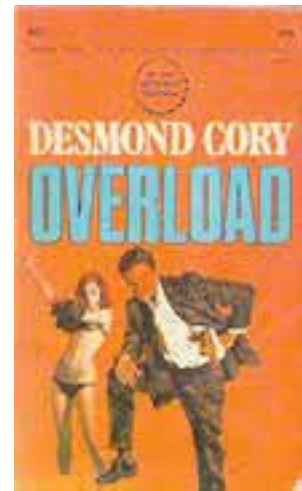


After a post-war career producing radio plays, he moved to Sorrento in Italy with his second wife and began to write novels with increasing success. **THE BIG STORY** is a cracking little thriller about an American journalist who thinks he has proof of the corruption of an aristocratic Italian politician but comes under pressure - from a variety of sources - to bury his big exclusive. Pitted against the rigid Naples class system and macho Italian concepts of 'honour', the journalist would seem to have little option, especially when he is framed for the murder of his informant

and effectively becomes a prisoner in the home of the politician he aims to bring down.

It was filmed as *The Crooked Road* in 1965 starring Robert Ryan, with the action transferred from Naples to the Balkans.

OVERLOAD (1959) by Desmond Cory was originally published as *Johnny Goes South*, as the eighth outing for Irish-Spanish secret agent Johnny Fedora created by Shaun Lloyd McCarthy [1928-2001], who, thanks to his debut pre-dating *Casino Royale* by two years, has a claim to being the first 'licensed to kill' agent to work for the British secret service.



Described by critic Anthony Boucher as 'the thinking man's James Bond', Fedora shared all Bond's toughness and hedonism but also had a cultured side, notably as a more-than proficient pianist, as was his creator. Fedora's early career involved hunting down Nazi war criminals and ended, in the 1960s, with what became known as the 'Feramontov Quintet' and chronicled Fedora's duel with his KGB nemesis. In between Fedora was sent on missions to all four points of the compass, quite literally, and this one finds him in South America where he is caught up in the politics of an insurgent break-away state demanding independence from Argentina. Fedora spends most of the book explaining (and practising) systems of interrogation to the putative regime's dubious leaders and this I found to be the most disap-

pointing of Fedora's adventures.

I'm not quite sure how I missed reading Gavin Lyall's **THE CONDUCT OF MAJOR MAXIM** back when it was published in 1982, but discovering it after all these years was an absolute treat.

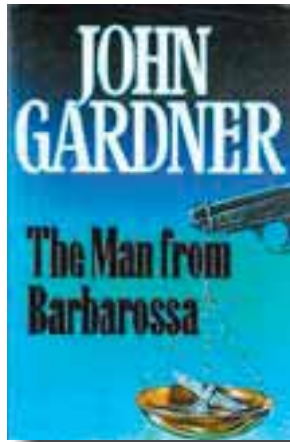


I had always been a fan of Gavin's early thrillers from the 1960s – and told him so in cringeworthy gushing terms when I first met him. The creation of Major Harry Maxim marked Gavin's move from adventure thrillers (usually involving aeroplanes) into spy fiction and although the plot is seeded on the borders of East and West Germany, much of the action, of which there is plenty, takes place in London's docklands and, unusually, in the East Yorkshire port of Goole.

In spy stories, dramatic finales usually take place in exotic locations – on board nuclear submarines at the North Pole, in poisonous Japanese gardens, on ski slopes in Alps, on (or under) the Berlin Wall, etc. etc.– but **THE CONDUCT OF MAJOR MAXIM** shows that a good writer can produce tension and excitement on the unpromising Goole dockside.

I was always a great fan of the books of John Gardner (1926-2007) and the characters he created, from Boysie Oakes to Herbie Kruger to Suzie Mountford, and even had the honour to re-publish his 1964 comic masterpiece **THE LIQUIDATOR** as a Top Notch Thriller. But I was never particularly at-

tracted to his James Bond continuations.



Although Gardner himself said that **THE MAN FROM BARBAROSSA** (1991) was his personal favourite, I have to admit that it did nothing for me, either thirty-odd years ago or attempting to re-read it now. In fact on both occasions I never finished it, which is painful to admit. I certainly read his first Bond book, **LICENCE RENEWED**, when it came out in 1981 and I fondly remember the story H.R.F. (Harry) Keating told me about its genesis.

As crime fiction critic for *The Times*, Harry had been approached by the estate of Ian Fleming to help find a suitable author to re-start the Bond stories in novels. Harry thought of Gardner, then living in Ireland, and wrote him a letter 'in pen, on Basildon Bond paper' (Harry was a letter-writer of legend and had amassed a considerable supply of Basildon Bond notepaper). Gardner, whose first novel was very much a spoof 'anti-Bond' spy story, already a prolific and successful thriller writer, could not resist and I believe he ended up writing more Bond books than Ian Fleming.

I have been devouring the backlist of Joseph Kanon, the American master of historical spy fiction, having read three on the trot, the latest being **LEAVING BERLIN** from 2014.

Set in Berlin (who'd have thought it?) in 1949 at the time of the famous 'air bridge' flying supplies into the isolated West Berlin, this is a convoluted spy story involving the 're-defection' (if that's a word) of a German-Jewish American

writer persecuted by the McCarthy witch-hunts who flees to East Berlin to seek sanctuary. He is, of course, secretly working for the fledgling CIA but is distracted from his mission by old family loyalties.

There are some standard Kanon plot traits, familiar from his other books: the early murder implicating the main characters, someone who has to hide from the secret police and then be helped to escape the city. Much of the story being told in long sections of dialogue, usually conversations at cocktail parties or official receptions where no one says what they mean, except perhaps, in this case, Berthold Brecht!



Kanon's style and pacing may not be to everyone's taste, but he is a fine writer with a terrific sense of historical place. His post-war Berlin is authentically grim and gritty and in *Istanbul Passage* (2012) he nails the old Ottoman city as well as Eric Ambler.

Confession time. I had only read one Tim Sebastian novel before I met the former BBC foreign correspondent – once expelled from the Soviet Union and accused of being a British spy (falsely, he says) – for lunch. He turned out to be such an engaging, erudite and charming guy that I loaded my TBR pile with several of his thrillers.

WAR DANCE (1995) is an exceptional thriller, a fast-moving story of international political chicanery, deception and betrayal, the setting being the highly inflammable Balkans (again!)

and the British army unit sent as UN peacekeepers caught in the middle of an increasingly violent situation. Colonel Tom Blake, a superbly professional soldier who inspires devoted loyalty from his men (if not his wife), finds himself set up, betrayed and finally a target. Fortunately, Tom Blake is not one to take the UN mandate of 'don't shoot unless shot at' too literally.



I am continuing to work my way through Tim Sebastian's back list with great pleasure and cannot really understand why he is not far better known in the pantheon of spy-writers.

I have not read much science fiction, having been too often drawn in by fantastic set-ups and scenarios (planets run by apes, time-travel, the ingredients of soylent green and so on) and then disappointed as a plot thins or disappears entirely.



Several friends aware of my condi-

tion have, over the years, recommended **THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE** where the set-up could not be more intriguing. Having lost WWII, the United States is occupied in the east by the Nazis and the west coast becomes a vassal state of Japan with, by 1960, a neutral zone between them. With power struggles in Berlin likely to lead to a war between the former Axis partners, various characters, American and Japanese, try to make sense of this crazy world using I Ching hexagrams and a dangerously subversive novel **The Grasshopper Lies Heavy** written by the man in the high castle himself (though the high castle itself is a fiction).

On second reading (after four failed attempts), I can't say I am any clearer about where **TMITHC** was trying to take me and, frankly, found some of the dialogue in 'Japanese English' to be rather off-putting. Still, it had its moments, particularly the enjoyment by several characters of marijuana cigarettes manufactured under the brand name Land O' Smiles.

An Official Apology

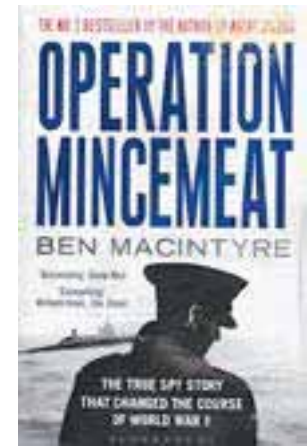
I have long had an unhappy relationship with the detective stories of Nicholas Blake (Cecil Day-Lewis, 1904-1972) and particularly with his **MINUTE FOR MURDER** from 1947.



Set at the end of WWII, this murder mystery features a leading British spy,

one of the heroes of the Special Operations Executive, a much decorated officer whose success at infiltrating the highest levels of the Nazi elite seems to have due mostly to his skill as a female impersonator. So pleased with his track record of fooling men, the officer thinks nothing of dressing as a woman in order to visit his girlfriend on his return to London 'as a lark'. She, of course, is shocked (perhaps the hat was a mistake...or the moustache...) though no one else in the book seems at all troubled.

I have to admit I was slightly scathing when I wrote about **MINUTE FOR MURDER** for a distinguished crime fiction quarterly, but I discover, on reading Ben MacIntyre's superb history of **OPERATION MINCEMEAT**, that I might have to eat humble pie.



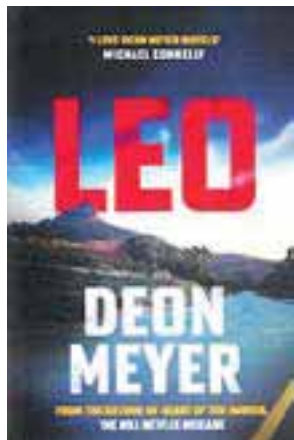
It seems that British Intelligence's head of deception operations in the Mediterranean (to fool the Germans into thinking the Allies would invade Greece rather than Sicily) was a certain Lt-Colonel Dudley Wrangel Clarke, who took his talents to deceive to extraordinary lengths by dressing as a woman. While thus 'under cover' in Madrid during the war, he was arrested by Spanish police (quite why is not clear) and photographed. Enough diplomatic and intelligence network strings were pulled in order to get his release. Much lauded for his military service and intelligence work (he was instrumental in the formation of the Commandos and the SAS), Dudley Clarke (1899-1974) wrote numerous military histories after

the war and one thriller, **GOLDEN ARROW**, in 1955, which is said to be pretty good on female fashion.



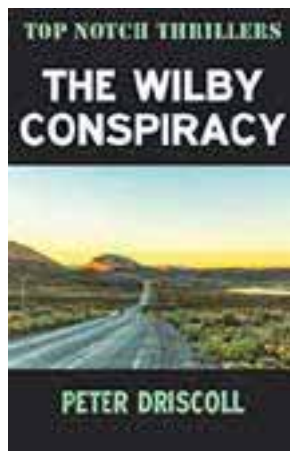
In Other News

Now freed from the tyranny of having to review a regular tsunami of new crime fiction I have the luxury of picking and choosing titles I genuinely like. Most publishers have already totally forgotten me, but I am delighted that I am still remembered by someone at Hodder & Stoughton and thank them for advance copy of **LEO**, the new novel to be published in October by Deon Meyer which features my favourite pair of South African detectives: Benny Griessel and Vaughn Cupido.



Not only is Deon Meyer one of the best crime writers in the world (let alone South Africa), he is also an absolute diamond geezer.

Back in 2018 I edited a Top Notch Thriller edition of Peter Driscoll's spy thriller **THE WILBY CONSPIRACY**



which, when first published in 1973, was lavishly praised by both Eric Ambler and Len Deighton. As much of the action in the book, set in South Africa, involves a long chase across country and a region called the High Karoo, I wondered where I could get a suitable photograph for the cover. If only I knew someone who knew the country and had a motor-bike and was an accomplished photographer...

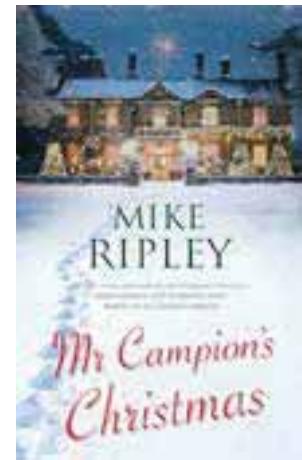
Fortunately I did and Deon generously did the honours and received (as far as I know) his first credit for cover design.

Bodies in the Bookshop



Despite several false starts, I eventually made it over to Richard Reynolds' new emporium, Bodies in the Bookshop (new and second-hand crime fiction: the clue is in the title) in Cambridge where I was able to take part in the age-old tradition (well, it's been going a couple of months) of visiting authors sitting in "Bunty's chair" to sign copies of their books.

Nothing has been negotiated and no money has changed hands (yet) but I do hope that Richard's new venture will stock or even take advance orders (and yes, this is a hint) for my new novel **MR CAMPION'S CHRISTMAS** which is published on 5th November and which has already received a starred review from *Publisher's Weekly* in America.



It will be my twelfth Campion 'continuation' and my last.

All Is Revealed

For years I have been under the impression that the initials CWA had something to do with crime writing. However, the scales have fallen from my eyes because I now know it stands for the Cat Writers Association based, I believe, in Texas.



As this club is quite likely to have me as a member, I have taken steps to join by submitting a testimonial from one of the many feral cats which stalk the grounds of Ripster Hall.

And now back in to retirement.
(For now)
The Ripster

Sneak Previews

Upcoming Mysteries



January, 2025

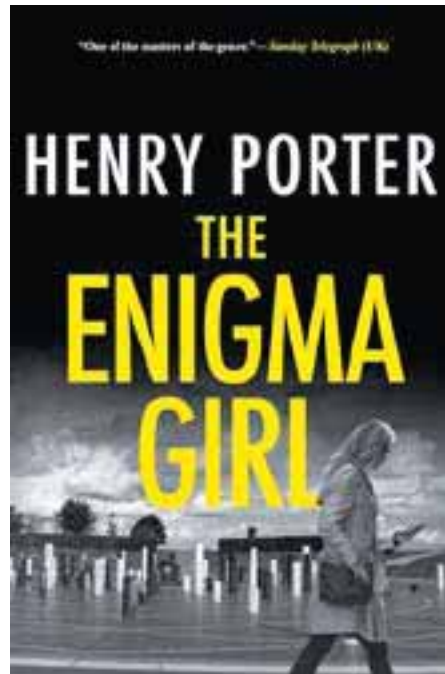
November, 2024

- 5 Michael Connelly, **THE WAITING** (Renee Ballard/Maddie Bosch/Harry Bosch)
- 5 Philip Margolin, **AN INSIGNIFICANT CASE**
- 5 Brad Parks, **THE BOUNDARIES WE CROSS**
- 5 Beatriz Williams, Lauren Willig, Karen White, **THE AUTHOR'S GUIDE TO MURDER**
- 5 Shelley Burr, **MURDER TOWN**
- 5 Marshall Karp, **DON'T TELL ME HOW TO DIE**
- 12 Rita Mae Brown, **TIME WILL TELL**
- 12 Mia Manansala, **GUILT AND GINATAAN** (Lila Macapagal)
- 12 Steve Urszenyi, **OUT IN THE COLD** (Alex Martel)
- 12 Jesse DeRoy, **SAFECRACKER**
- 12 John Straley, **BIG BREATH IN**
- 12 Robert Harris, **PRECIPICE**
- 14 Douglas Skelton, **A THIEF'S BLOOD** (Jonathan Wild)
- 14 Douglas Jackson, **BLOOD SACRIFICE** (WWII Warsaw)
- 19 Jordan Harper, **THE LAST KING OF CALIFORNIA**
- 19 Kotaro Isaka, **HOTEL LUCKY SEVEN**

December, 2024

- 3 Peter Lovesey, **AGAINST THE GRAIN** (Peter Diamond)
- 3 Jussi Adler-Olsen, **LOCKED IN** (Department Q)
- 3 Jess Armstrong, **THE SECRET OF THREE FATES** (Ruby Vaughn)
- 3 M. W. Craven, **NOBODY'S HERO** (Ben Koenig)
- 3 Paige Shelton, **PERFECT STORM** (Alaska Wild)
- 3 Tracy Clark, **ECHO** (Harriet Foster)

- 3 Alex Segura, **ALTER EGO**
- 3 Jane Pek, **THE RIVALS**
- 3 Pip Drysdale, **THE CLOSE-UP**
- 3 Michael Sears, **LOVE THE STRANGER** (Queens)
- 3 William Boyd, **GABRIEL'S MOON**
- 3 David Mark, **PAST REDEMPTION** (DS McAvoy)
- 3 Paul Doherty, **MURDER'S SNARE** (Brother Athelstan)
- 3 E. J. Copperman, **GOOD LIEUTENANT** (Jersey Girl Legal)
- 3 Alys Clare, **THE CHRYSANTHEMUM TIGER** (Gabriel Taverner)
- 10 Joseph Knox, **IMPOSTER SYNDROME**



- 10 Henry Porter, **ENIGMA GIRL**
- 17 Keigo Higashino, **INVISIBLE HELIX** (Galileo)
- 25 Clea Koff, **SILENT EVIDENCE** (Jayne & Steele)

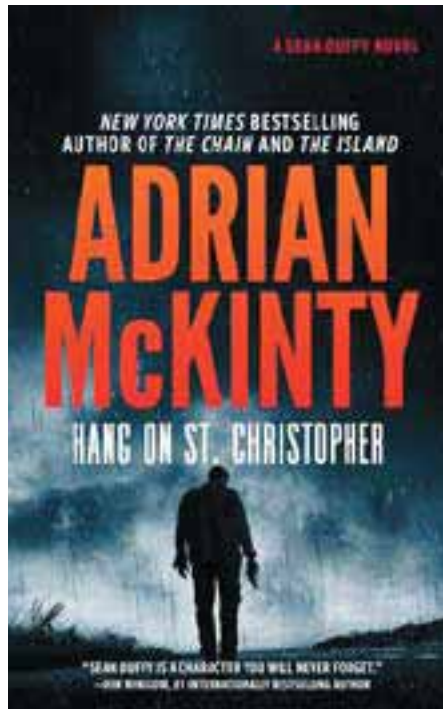
- 1 Rick Mofina, **IF TWO ARE DEAD**
- 6 James Patterson & Brian Sitts, **HOLMES IS MISSING** (Holmes, Marple & Poe)
- 7 Allison Brennan, **SEE HOW THEY HIDE** (Quinn & Costa)
- 7 Jo Callaghan, **LEAVE NO TRACE** (AIDE Lock/Kat Frank)
- 7 Alafair Burke, **THE NOTE**
- 7 Amy Jordan, **THE DARK HOURS**
- 14 Robert Crais, **THE BIG EMPTY** (Elvis Cole)
- 14 Thomas Perry, **PRO BONO**
- 14 Asia Mackay, **A SERIAL KILLER'S GUIDE TO MARRIAGE**
- 14 Brian Freeman, **Robert Ludlum's THE BOURNE VENDETTA**
- 14 James Grippando, **GRAVE DANGER** (Jack Swyteck)
- 14 Scott Turow, **PRESUMED GUILTY** (Rusty Sabich)
- 14 Alice Feeney, **BEAUTIFUL UGLY**
- 14 Leah Konen, **THE LAST ROOM ON THE LEFT**
- 14 James Patterson & Andrew Bourelle, **THE TEXAS MURDERS**
- 14 Bradford Morrow, **THE FORGER'S REQUIEM** (Henry Slader)
- 14 Astrid Dahl, **THE REALLY DEAD WIVES OF NEW JERSEY**
- 14 Jonathan Ames, **KARMA DOLL** (Happy Doll)
- 21 Isabella Maldonado, **A KILLER'S CODE** (Dani Vega)
- 21 Simon Mason, **A VOICE IN THE NIGHT** (DI Wilkins)
- 21 David Bruns & J. R. Olson, **PROXY WAR** (Command & Control)
- 28 Henry Porter, **THE ENIGMA GIRL**
- 28 Andrew Welsh-Huggins, **THE MAILMAN**
- 28 Joseph Finder, **THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER**
- 28 Alison Gaylin, **WE ARE WATCHING**
- 28 Walter Mosley, **BEEN WRONG SO LONG IT FEELS LIKE RIGHT**, (King Oliver)
- 28 Jakob Kerr, **DEAD MONEY**
- 28 Kevin Wade, **JOHNNY CARELESS**

February, 2025

- 4 Stephen Spotswood, **DEAD IN THE FRAME** (Pentecost & Parker)
- 4 Joshua Moehling, **A LONG TIME GONE** (Ben Packard)
- 4 Jonathan Kellerman, **OPEN SEASON** (Alex Delaware)
- 4 Christopher Farnsworth, **Robert B. Parker's BURIED SECRETS** (Jesse Stone)
- 4 Aisha Saeed, **THE MATCHMAKER**
- 4 J. D. Robb, **BONDED IN DEATH** (Eve Dallas)
- 4 Ward Larsen, **DARK VECTOR**
- 4 Joseph O'Connor, **GHOSTS OF ROME** (The Choir)
- 4 William Boyle, **SAINT OF THE NARROWS STREET**
- 10 James Patterson & James O. Born, **PARANOIA** (Michael Bennett)
- 11 Gregg Hurwitz, **NEMESIS** (Orphan X)
- 11 Arne Dahl, **WITHIN THE CIRCLE**
- 11 Jo Nesbo, **BLOOD TIES**
- 11 Loren D. Estleman, **SMOKE ON THE WATER** (Amos Walker)
- 11 Robin Burcell, **Clive Cussler's THE SERPENT EYE** (Fargo)
- 11 Steve Berry, **THE MEDICI RETURN** (Cotton Malone)
- 11 Ande Pliego, **YOU ARE FATALLY INVITED**
- 11 Laura McCluskey, **THE WOLF TREE**
- 18 Deon Meyer, **LEO** (Benny Griessel)
- 18 Mark Greaney, **MIDNIGHT BLACK** (Gray Man)
- 18 Allen Eskens, **THE QUIET LIBRARIAN**
- 18 M. C. Beaton & R. W. Green, **DEATH OF A SMUGGLER** (Hamish Macbeth)
- 18 Callie Kazumi, **CLAIRE, DARLING**
- 18 James Rollins, **A DRAGON OF BLACK GLASS** (Moonfall)
- 18 Lisa Unger, **CLOSE YOUR EYES AND COUNT TO 10**
- 18 C. L. Miller, **THE ANTIQUE HUNTER'S DEATH ON THE RED SEA**
- 25 Mike Lawson, **UNTOUCHABLE** (Joe DeMarco)
- 25 Jean-Luc Bannalec, **AN ISLAND OF SUSPECTS** (Brittany)
- 25 John Shannon, **BOYSTOWN** (Jack Liffey)
- 25 C. J. Box, **BATTLE MOUNTAIN**

- (Joe Pickett)
- 25 Helen Fields, **THE PROFILER** (in **UK PROFILE K**)
- 25 Brett Battles, **Stuart Woods' SMOLDER** (Stone Barrington)
- 25 Karen Thompson Walker, **THE STRANGE CASE OF JANE O**
- 25 Allison Epstein, **FAGIN THE THIEF**
- 25 Alyssa Maxwell, **TWO WEDDINGS AND A MURDER**
- 25 Erica Ruth Neubauer, **HOMICIDE IN THE INDIAN HILLS** (Jane Wunderly)
- 25 Gillian McAllister, **FAMOUS LAST WORDS**

March, 2025



- 4 Adrian McKinty, **HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER** (Sean Duffy)
- 4 Sandra Brown, **BLOOD MOON**
- 4 Karen Rose, **DEAD MAN'S LIST**
- 4 Nicci French, **THE LAST DAYS OF KIRA MULLAN**
- 4 Marcie R. Rendon, **BROKEN FIELDS** (Cash Blackbear)
- 4 Danielle Arceneaux, **GLORY DAZE** (Glory Broussard)
- 11 Steve Cavanagh, **WITNESS 8** (Eddie Flynn)
- 11 Rhys Bowen & Clare Broyles, **SILENT AS THE GRAVE** (Molly Murphy)

- 11 Hayley Scrivenor, **GIRL FALLING**
- 11 Deanna Raybourn, **KILLS WELL WITH OTHERS** (4 Assassins)
- 11 Joel C. Rosenberg, **THE BEIJING BETRAYAL** (Marcus Ryker)
- 11 Sarah Harman, **ALL THE OTHER MOTHERS HATE ME**
- 11 Christina Dodd, **GIRL ANONYMOUS**
- 11 Sara Blaedel, **A MOTHER'S LOVE** (Louise Rick)
- 11 Jasper Fforde, **RED SIDE STORY** (Shades of Grey)
- 17 James Patterson & J. D. Barker, **THE WRITER**
- 18 Matt Plass, **THE TEN WORST PEOPLE IN NEW YORK**
- 18 J. Robert Lennon, **BUZZ KILL** (Pool)
- 18 Tess Gerritsen, **THE SUMMER GUESTS** (Maggie Bird)
- 18 David Handler, **THE MAN WHO SWORE HE'D NEVER GO HOME AGAIN**
- 25 Harlan Coben, **NOBODY'S FOOL**
- 25 Ann Cleeves, **A LESSON IN DYING** (Inspector Ramsay)
- 25 Ryan Steck, **Ted Bell's MONARCH** (Alex Hawke)
- 25 Ron Currie, **THE SAVAGE, NOBLE DEATH OF BABS DIONNE**
- 25 Chris Offutt, **THE RELUCTANT SHERIFF** (Mick Hardin)
- 25 Wendy Corsi Staub, **THE FOURTH GIRL**
- 25 Katy Hays, **SALTWATER**
- 25 Krysten Ritter, **RETREAT**
- 25 C. B. Everett, **THE OTHER PEOPLE**
- 26 Brad Taylor, **INTO THE GRAY ZONE** (Pike Logan)

April, 2025

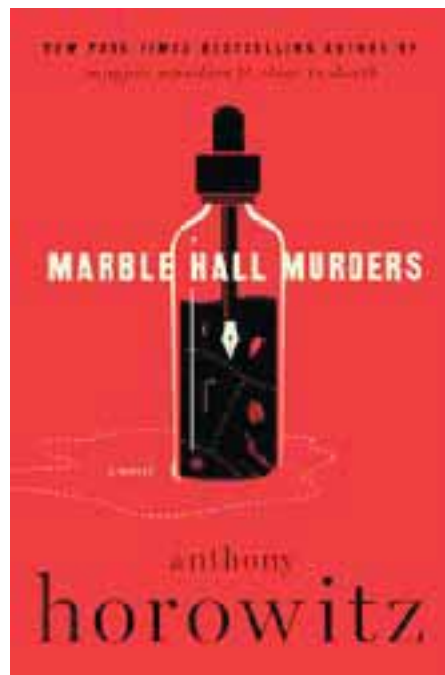
- 1 Jesse Q. Sutanto, **VERA WONG'S GUIDE TO SNOOPING (ON A DEAD MAN)**
- 1 Maha Khan Phillips, **THE MUSEUM DETECTIVE**
- 1 Sara Koffi, **WHILE WE WERE BURNING**
- 1 Rav Grewal-Kök, **THE SNARES**
- 1 Lisa Olsen, **THE SCIENTIST AND THE SERIAL KILLER**
- 1 J. A. Jance, **OVERKILL** (Ali Reynolds)
- 1 S. J. Rozan & John Shen Yen Nee,

THE RAILWAY CONSPIRACY

- 1 Olesya Lyuzna, **GLITTER IN THE DARK**
- 1 Mark Oneill, **TO CATCH A SPY**
- 1 Paige Shelton, **WRITTEN IN STONE** (Scottish Bookshop)
- 8 John Sandford, **LETHAL PREY**
- 8 Adam Plantinga, **HARD TOWN** (Kurt Argentio)
- 8 Nita Prose, **THE MAID'S SECRET** (Molly)
- 8 John Sandford, **LETHAL PREY** (Lucas Davenport & Virgil Flowers)
- 8 Kelly Mullen, **THIS IS NOT A GAME**
- 8 Belinda Bauer, **THE IMPOSSIBLE THING**
- 15 David Baldacci, **STRANGERS IN TIME**
- 15 Abigail Dean, **THE DEATH OF US**
- 15 Anna-Marie McLemore, **THE INFLUENCERS**
- 15 C. S. Harris, **WHO WILL REMEMBER** (Sebastian St. Cyr)
- 22 Connor Sullivan, **RED FALCON** (Brian Rhome)
- 22 Rita Mae Brown, **SEALED WITH A HISS**
- 22 Will Thomas, **SEASON OF DEATH** (Barker & Llewelyn)
- 29 Robert Gold, **TWELVE SECRETS**
- 29 Chuck Wendig, **THE STAIRCASE IN THE WOODS**
- 29 Heather Graham, **THE MURDER MACHINE**
- 29 A. J. Landau, **COLD BURN** (National Parks)
- 30 Colleen Cambridge, **A FASHION-ABLY FRENCH MURDER** (American in Paris)

May, 2025

- 6 Janet Evanovich, **HARDCORE TWENTY-FOUR** (Stephanie Plum)
- 6 Mike Maden, Clive Cussler's **GHOST SOLDIER** (Oregon Files)
- 6 Jeffrey Deaver, **SOUTH OF NOWHERE** (Colter Shaw)
- 6 Ashley Flowers & Alex Kiester, **THE MISSING HALF**
- 6 Leonie Swann, **BIG BAD WOOL** (Sheep Detective)
- 6 Alex Finlay, **PARENTS WEEKEND**
- 6 Sue Hincenbergs, **THE RETIRE-**



MENT PLAN

- 13 Anthony Horowitz, **MARBLE HALL MURDERS** (Susan Ryland – Magpie)
- 13 Michelle Gagnon, **SLAYING YOU** (Amber Jamison)
- 13 Jack Du Brul, Clive Cussler's **UNTITLED** (Isaac Bell)
- 13 Lisa Martin, **THE ONLY ONES WHO KNOW**
- 13 K. A. Merson, **THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS**
- 13 Gary Phillips, **ASH DARK AS NIGHT** (Harry Ingram)
- 13 Paul Doiron, **SKIN AND BONES** (Bowditch short stories)
- 13 Brendan Slocumb, **DARK MAESTRO**
- 13 Alex North, **THE MAN MADE OF SMOKE**
- 20 Jenny Morris, **AN ETHICAL GUIDE TO MURDER**
- 20 Susan Juby, **CONTEMPLATION OF A CRIME**
- 20 Sarah Pinborough, **WE LIVE HERE NOW**
- 20 M. P. Woodward, **Tom Clancy's LINE OF DEMARCATION** (Jack Ryan, Jr.)
- 20 Brian Freeman, **Robert Ludlum's THE BOURNE SHADOW**
- 20 Chris Pavone, **THE DOORMAN**
- 27 Brett Battles, **Stuart Woods' GOLDEN HOUR** (Teddy Fay)
- 27 Nora Roberts, **HIDDEN NATURE**

(Sloan Cooper)

- 27 Steven Konkoly, **A HIRED KILL**
- 27 Craig Johnson, **RETURN TO SENDER** (Longmire)
- 28 Simon Toyne, **THE BLACK HIGH WAY** (Laughton Rees)

June, 2025

- 3 Ashley Weaver, **ONE FINAL TURN** (Electra McDonnell)
- 3 Julie Clark, **THE GHOSTWRITER**
- 10 Camilla Sten, **THE BACHELOR-ETTE PARTY**
- 10 Karen Dukess, **WELCOME TO MURDER WEEK**
- 10 Jack Carr, **CRY HAVOC** (Stand-alone)
- 17 Ryan Steck, **GONE DARK** (Matthew Redd)
- 17 Laura Lippman, **MURDER TAKES A VACATION**
- 17 Gillian French, **SHAW CONNOLLY LIVES TO TELL**
- 24 David Housewright, **THEM BONES** (Mac McKenzie)
- 24 Simon Toyne, **THE BLACK HIGH WAY** (Laughton Rees)

July, 2025

- 22 Alex Pavesi, **INK RIBBON RED**
- 29 Sandra Jackson-Opoku, **SAVVY SUMMERS AND THE SWEET POTATO CRIMES**

August, 2025

- 5 Claire Douglas, **THE WRONG SISTER**
- 19 Melissa Pace, **THE ONCE AND FUTURE ME**
- 19 Jo Nichols, **THE MARIGOLD COTTAGES MURDER COLLECTIVE**

September, 2025

- Mick Herron, **CLOWN TOWN** (Slow Horses)

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