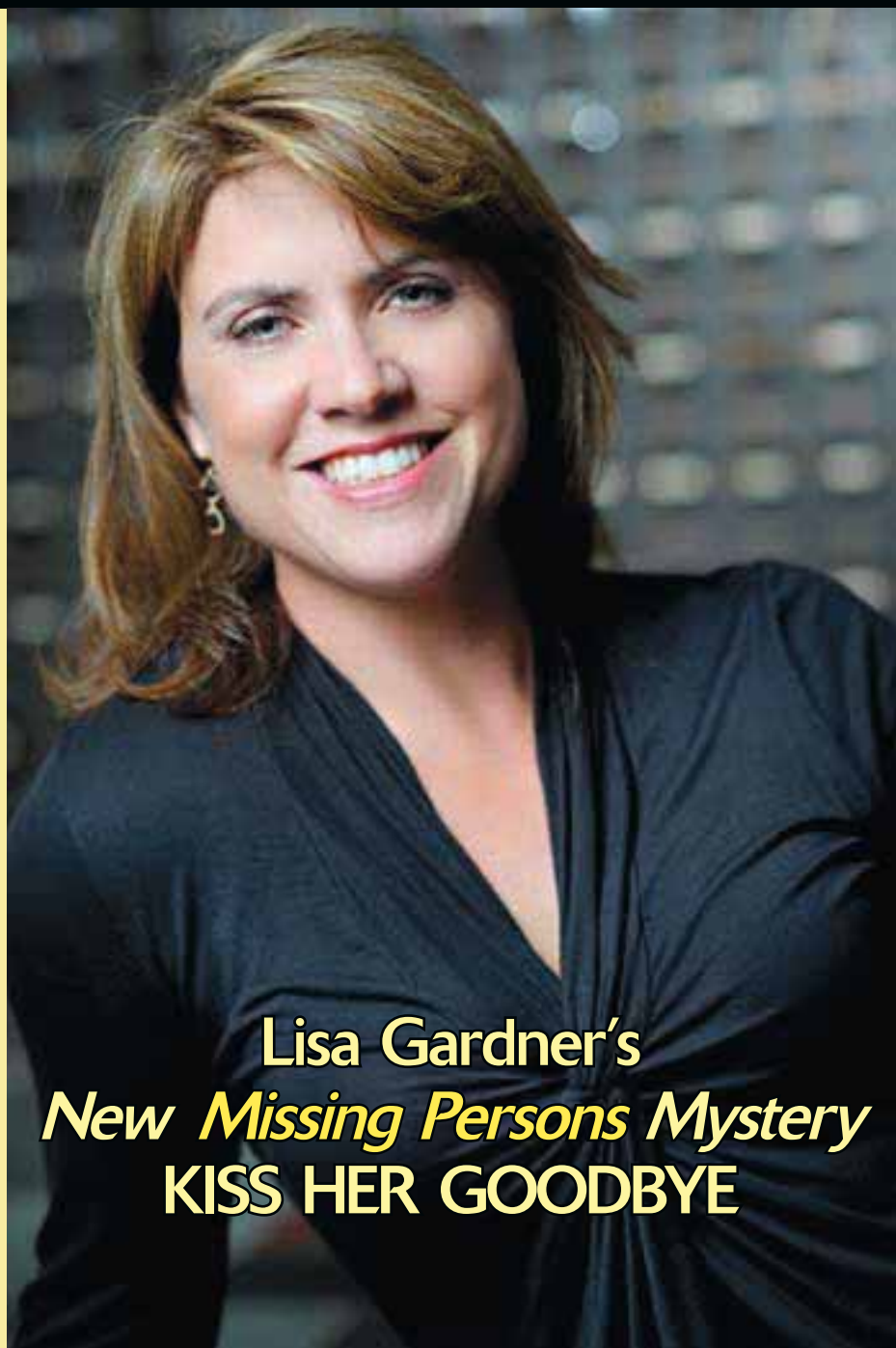


Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



Lisa Gardner's
New Missing Persons Mystery
KISS HER GOODBYE

Lisa Gardner's

Frankie Elkin Series

Lisa Gardner The Author



Lisa Gardner, a #1 New York Times bestselling thriller novelist, began her career in food service, but after catching her hair on fire numerous times, she took the hint and focused on writing instead. A self-described research junkie, she has transformed her interest in police procedure and criminal minds into a streak of internationally acclaimed novels, published across 30 countries. She's also had four books become TV movies (**AT THE MIDNIGHT HOUR**, **THE PERFECT HUSBAND**, **THE SURVIVORS CLUB** and **HIDE**) and has made personal appearances on TruTV and CNN.

Lisa's books have received awards from across the globe. Her novel, **THE NEIGHBOR**, won Best Hardcover Novel from the International Thriller Writers, while also receiving the Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle in France. She was also recognized with the Daphne du Maurier Award in 2000 for **THE OTHER DAUGHTER**. Finally, Lisa received the Silver Bullet Award from the International Thriller Writers in 2017

for her work on behalf of at-risk children and the Humane Society. Lisa has penned four different series: FBI Profiler (7 books), Detective D. D. Warren (11 books), Tessa Leoni (3 books) and most recently the Frankie Elkin series (4 books). In addition, she has also penned three standalone novels.

For a bit of fun, Lisa invites her readers to enter the annual "Kill a Friend, Maim a Buddy" Sweepstakes at LisaGardner.com. Every year, one Lucky Stiff is selected to meet a grand end in Lisa's latest novel. Past winners have nominated spouses, best friends and even themselves.

Lisa lives in New Hampshire where she spends her time with an assortment of canine companions. When not writing, she loves to hike, garden, snowshoe and play cribbage.

The Frankie Elkin Series

Lisa Gardner's latest books have all dealt with the adventures of a seeker of lost people – Frankie Elkin.

Here is how Frankie Elkin describes herself in the first book in the series **BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED**:

I'm not a police officer.

I'm not a private investigator.

I have no special skills or training.

I'm only me. An average, middle-aged white woman with more regrets than belongings, more sad stories than happy ones.

My name is Frankie Elkin and finding missing people – particularly minorities – is what I do. When people have given up, when the public no longer remembers, when the media has never bothered to care, I start looking. For no money,

no recognition, and most of the time, no help. Why do I do what I do?

So many of our children have vanished. Too many will never be found, often based solely on the color of their skin. Maybe the question shouldn't be why I am doing this, but why isn't everyone looking?

Frankie Elkin looks for the missing the world has forgotten, starting with a Haitian teen who mysteriously vanishes in broad daylight in Boston in **BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED** (2021), then heading to the wilds of Wyoming in a desperate search for a lost hiker in **ONE STEP TOO FAR** (2022), before her toughest challenge yet on a remote island in the Pacific in **STILL SEE YOU EVERYWHERE** (2024).

Here is a review of her latest Frankie Elkin investigation.

KISS HER GOODBYE

by Lisa Gardner

Grand Central, \$28.00, August
Frankie Elkin #4

Rating: A-

Missing Person: Afghan Refugee

The novel follows missing persons expert Frankie Elkin as she travels to Tucson, Arizona, to investigate the disappearance of Sabera Ahmadi, a recent Afghan refugee and young mother who vanished three weeks prior. Despite the lack of urgency from local authorities and Sabera's indifferent husband, her close friend insists that Sabera would never willingly abandon her four-year-old daughter, Zahra.

As Frankie delves into the case, a video surfaces showing Sabera walking



away from the scene of a brutal double murder, casting suspicion on her motive for disappearing. The investigation reveals that the Ahmadi family harbors complex secrets: Isaad, the father, is a brilliant mathematician; Sabera is a gifted linguist; and young Zahra possesses an extraordinary photographic memory—a trait that could be both a blessing and a curse given their traumatic past.

When Isaad also disappears under mysterious circumstances and an attempt is made on Zahra's life, Frankie realizes that the family is entangled in something quite dangerous. She must unravel the truth behind their past to protect Zahra and uncover the forces threatening them if she has any hope in finding Sabera.

I found the character of Frankie Elkin to be tenacious and laser-focused on her self-imposed mission – and quite likeable because of those traits. Lisa Gardner's writing is smooth and her plotting complex and full of left turns. This is a worthy series to follow. I certainly will.

Other Experts at Finding Missing Persons

There are a few other series that feature investigators whose primary talent/mis-sion is finding missing people. These are:

The Raker Series by Tim Weaver

THE MISSING FAMILY

by Tim Weaver

Michael Joseph, £18.99, July, 2024

David Raker #13

Rating: A

Missing Persons: Family members and a suspected killer

It's a lovely September day at a secluded lake in Dartmoor, Devon, and the Fowler family are making the most of it. Husband Marc, stepson Kyle and Kyle's girlfriend Clara decide to take a boat out on the lake, leaving Marc's wife Sarah and toddler Mabel behind on the shore. Sixty seconds later (according to Sarah's watch) the boat is empty -- there's no one on it. Three people can't possibly disappear so quickly without Sarah seeing what happened to them, surely? Months later the police investigation is going nowhere, so distraught Sarah employs missing persons investigator David Raker to discover what really happened on that lovely summer's day.

Coinciding with this case is another one that Raker's long-time ally, ex-detective Colm Healy takes on. It involves the Skyline Casino in London, where the security team have just made a head-

line-grabbing arrest of a man suspected of killing a high-roller. After locking the suspect in one of their holding cells, the team station themselves outside and wait for the police. But when the cops arrive, they find something impossible. The suspected killer is no longer inside the cell.

I always look forward to a new Tim Weaver novel because he inevitably presents such intriguing and often "impossible" puzzles to solve – all involved with missing persons. His first five novels in the Raker series were published in the U.S., but since then his American fans have had to buy the rest from the U.K. Intelligent writing and plotting are enhanced by the highly sympathetic character of David Raker, who often has to skirt the line between legal and illegal to reach a good result.

The Finder Series by Simon Mason

The Finder is a man of Middle-Eastern origins who is called in by police departments when they have a particularly difficult or sensitive missing persons case. His investigative approach is that of Inspector Maigret – a deep dive into the background and mind of the missing. The books are short in length and are uniformly praised by critics.

MISSING PERSON: ALICE

by Simon Mason

riverrun, \$17.99, February

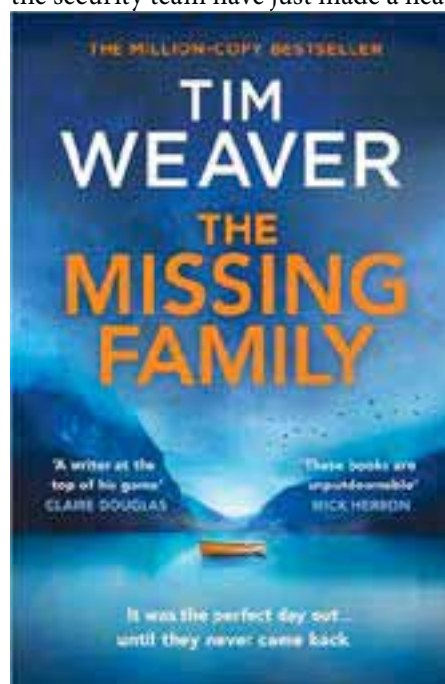
Finder Mysteries #1

Rating: A

Missing Person: Young girl

July 2015, Sevenoaks. 12-year-old schoolgirl Alice Johnson went missing while doing her paper round, her bag found discarded on the pavement. At 08.00, she was spotted standing in heavy rain at the side of the busy by-pass. At 11.00, she was seen talking to the driver of a black car in Tonbridge. After that, nothing. Alice was never found.

Nine years later the body of another schoolgirl, Joleen Price, is pulled from a nearby lake and a local man named Vince Burns detained. Convinced that

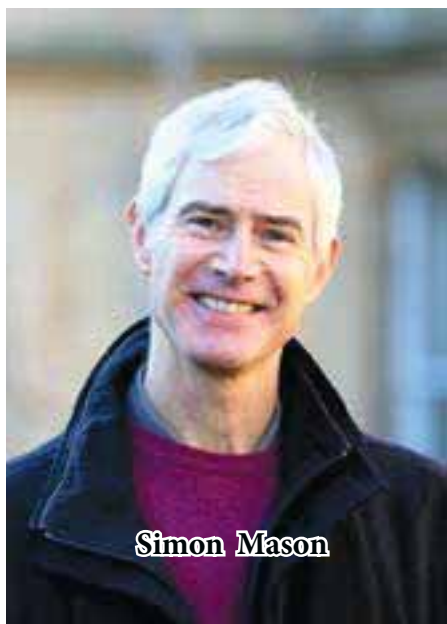


Burns is guilty in both cases, SIO Dave Armstrong calls in the Finder to investigate the earlier disappearance.

Interviewing those who thought they knew her, the Finder gradually reveals a hidden Alice, a girl of surprising contradictions. Seeking answers from her divorced parents - an over-protective mother, a negligent father - the Finder is forced to consider violently opposing narratives. Was the timid 12-year-old a victim of the predator Burns, as he himself hints? Or was she carrying out a plan of her own?

THE CASE OF THE LONELY ACCOUNTANT

by Simon Mason
riverrun, \$17.99, March
Finder Mysteries #2
Rating: A



Simon Mason

Bournemouth 2008, the height of the financial crash. Don Bayliss, a timid and well-mannered accountant, vanishes after leaving his office before a scheduled meeting. His wife is both perplexed and distraught. His clothes are found discarded at the mouth of Poole Harbour.

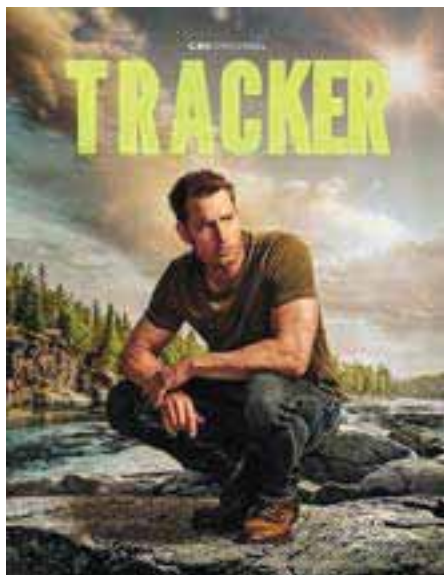
After seven years of searching with no firm leads, the investigation is closed, and Don is presumed dead.

Until, sorting through his possessions, his wife finds a garish business card of one Dwight Fricker and decides it must be of some importance. Now

more than eight years after his disappearance Dorset Police call in the Finder and the cold case is reopened.

The Finder begins with the last sightings of Don on the day he went missing, hearing how he seemed in a hurry, somewhat distracted? He unearths a string of overlooked clues that lead him to face the unlikely friendships that Don had made, the somewhat overbearing nature of Mrs Bayliss, the secrets that haunted him in his home life and the mistakes that led to him being investigated at work.

The Colter Shaw series by Jeffery Deaver



Colter Shaw is a "reward seeker," tracking down missing items and missing people. Not all of the books in his 5-book series involve missing people, but some do. This series is the basis for the successful TV show "Tracker."

The Subject of Missing Persons

People who go missing is a more common occurrence than one might think. About 600,000 people a year are reported missing in the U.S. every year. Of those 600,000 missing about 4,400 turn out to be unidentified bodies. In the U.K. the annual number of missing is 170,000. In Canada, it is 65,000 per year and in Australia 38,000 per year. Of those

reported missing, most are found within a short time, but there is always a small percentage that are never found - or only found through investigation. I had an adult male cousin who went missing many years ago and was never found. It would not surprise me to find out that you have a similar experience in your circle of friends and relatives.

Why do people disappear? Some do it voluntarily, such as runaway teens or abused spouses. The government has a program to help endangered people vanish and it is called the Witness Protection Program. Thomas Perry has been writing a very successful series featuring Jane Whitefield, a person who is an expert at creating new identities for people who are in danger from nefarious forces. The tenth in that creative series, **THE TREE OF LIGHT AND FLOWERS** comes out in January of 2026.

Then there are the people who are taken unwillingly. Some survive that experience and some sadly don't. Some missing person cases turn into murder investigations. Targets for kidnapping and sexual abuse are usually those in society least able to protect themselves against brute force -- children and women. You may be aware of recent news stories involving the high percentage (as compared with the general population) of missing Native American women. This alarming situation has been the subject of several mysteries written by Native American writers such as Laurie L. Dove, Marcie Rendon and Vanessa Lillie

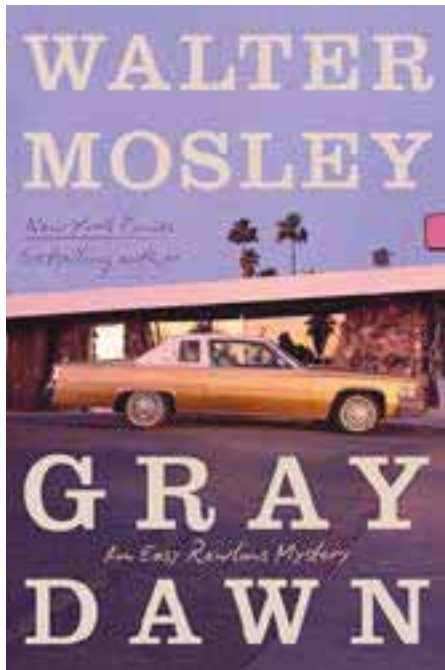
There are all sorts of words and phrases to describe a missing person: "vanished," "gone without a trace," "dropped out of sight or off the grid," "disappeared," "lost," "runaway," "kidnapped," and, of course "missing."



In the last few years, the subject of missing persons in mystery fiction has

become almost as popular as the whodunit. After all, such stories contain mystery, suspense, tension and hope – elements of a good mystery. Besides the series mentioned above, there are numerous stand-alones and series entries with missing people plots. Here are reviews of just a few current titles.

Reviews of Other Missing Persons Mysteries



GRAY DAWN

by Walter Mosley

Mulholland, \$29.00, September

Easy Rawlins #17

Rating: A-

Missing Person: Client's aunt

Easy Rawlins is suffering from ennui and hasn't done much of anything for over a year since his lover Amethystine left him. But behind the scenes, things he'll have to deal with have been coming to a boil and they burst into Easy's life like a flood.

One morning Santangelo Burris, a disheveled man, comes into Easy's detective agency and asks him to find his aunt Lutisha James. It seems that the man's grandmother wants to talk to her daughter (Lutisha) who hasn't been easy to find. For some reason, Easy shakes off the dust (he hasn't taken on a case for

over a year) and goes in search of Lutisha, who, he finds, has quite a reputation for shady activities. Chaos ensues.

Meanwhile, Easy finds out that his son Jesus is being threatened by two bent cops to help them smuggle drugs. Easy must find a way to help his son out of his predicament.

A late encounter with someone Easy knew from his childhood brings a shocking revelation (to Easy and to us).

A whole, large cast of characters from past books in the series, with their colorful names, are brought together in somewhat of a celebration of Easy Rawlins and his life and times.

I thoroughly enjoyed this read, as I have enjoyed many of the books in this series. Is it the last in the series? I've thought that before and been fooled. I'll just have to wait and see.

THE MISSING HALF

by Ashley Flowers

Bantam, \$30.00, May

Rating: A-

Type of Missing Person: Missing Sisters



Nicole "Nic" Monroe is coasting through life, living in a run-down apartment and working at a dead-end job at Funland – and she's only 24 years old. Why isn't her life more promising? Seven years ago her older sister Kasey vanished, leaving no clues as to her fate,

other than her car, which was found a hundred miles from her hometown of Mishawaka, Indiana. Nic's alcoholic mother left the home and her despondent father lives in denial.

Two weeks after Kasey disappeared another young woman, Jules Connor, went missing from the same area. That case was likewise never solved.

Jules Connor's sister Jenna Connor appears on day asking Nic to join her in investigating their sisters' cases – because no one else seems to care. Jenna has uncovered a new line of investigation. So the two grieving sisters form a tenuous bond to find answers.

What follows is the uncovering of long-held secrets and several major surprises. This is a worthy entry in what has become an overflowed market for psychological suspense novels. It's becoming harder to tell the good from the bad, but this is a good one.

GIRL IN CELL A

by Vaseem Khan

Mobius, \$26.99, July

Rating: A-

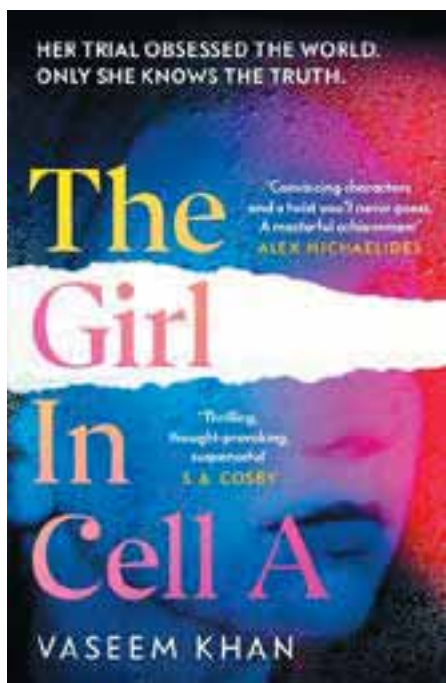
Type of Missing Person: Missing Girl

Vaseem Khan is a talented writer from the U.K. who has brought us the delightful Inspector Chopra mysteries and the illuminating Malabar House history mystery series, both set in India. Now he's stretching his wings by writing an ambitious present-day domestic suspense novel set in the U.S.

Orianna Negi, at the age of 17, was convicted of killing Gideon Wyclerc. On the same day of Gideon Wyclerc's death, Gideon's daughter Grace disappeared. Ori claimed (and continues to claim) that she doesn't remember anything about Gideon's death and Grace's disappearance. At one point that day, Orianna blacked out.

The case against Orianna had gaps wide enough for a good defense attorney to drive a truck through – and certainly enough to raise "reasonable doubt." But Orianna didn't have a top-tier attorney and she was up against the wealth and influence of the Wyclerc family. So she had no chance.

The case became national news and



Orianna became a true crime celebrity known as the "Girl in Cell A."

Eighteen ears have passed and Ori has been released from prison. So where does she go? To Eden Falls, the only place she's ever known -- still ruled by the Wyclerc family. She is determined to find out what really happened to Gideon and Grace, and finds an unlikely ally in the Wyclerc patriarch, who suspects that he and the whole town may have gotten it all wrong. A prickly relationship is soon established.

The story flow is interspersed with frequent flashbacks to Ori's in-prison visits with Annie, a forensic psychologist, which add light to the background of the narrative.

Some may think this psychological suspense novel (with a lot of detection) too long at 592 pages, but it read very quickly and I couldn't figure out what could be cut out without damaging the plot. I've read much shorter books that took quite a bit longer to read. All depends on the author's style.

I think that **GIRL IN CELL A** is the author's attempt to enter the U.S. market. This suspenseful novel should do quite well if quality is any indication.

SHAW CONNELLY LIVES TO TELL

by Gillian French
Minotaur, \$28.00, June

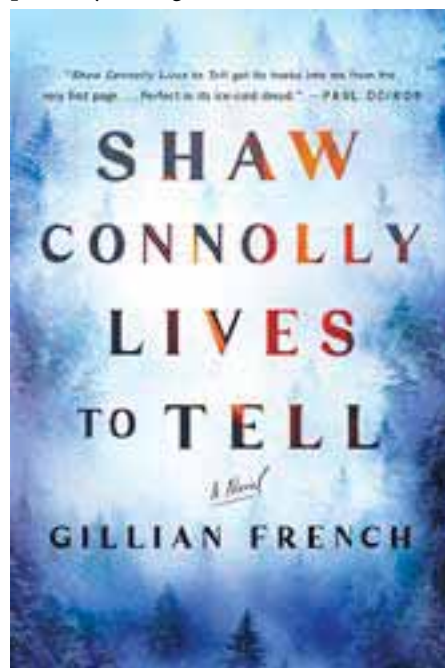
Rating: A-

Type of Missing Person: Missing Sister

Shaw Connolly was irrevocably changed when her younger sister Thea disappeared sixteen years ago. But despite that, Shaw has managed to marry (rocky at present), have a family (two boys) and maintain a career as a fingerprint analyst.

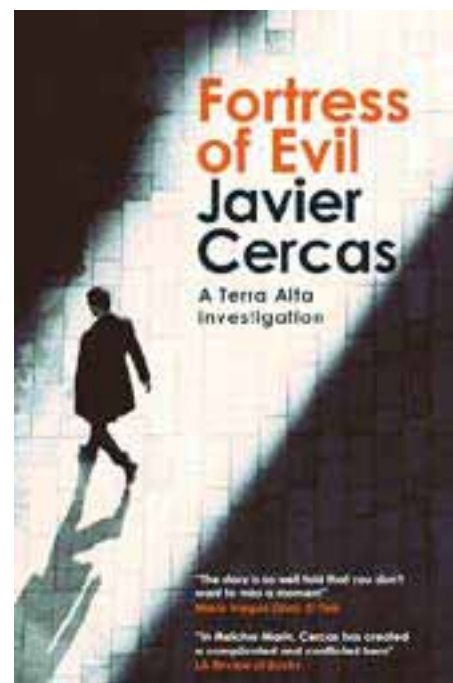
From time to time she receives cryptic phone calls (untraceable) from someone calling himself Anders, who claims to know and possibly be responsible for Thea's disappearance. Shaw tries to ignore the calls (she's changed her phone number -- to no avail), but they do feed her obsession to find out what happened to Thea. Is Anders telling the truth or is he a manipulative sadist?

It was very easy for this reader to put himself in the place of the very sympathetic Shaw. What would I do and how would I feel if a beloved sibling disappeared years ago?



The author slowly increases the tension through her storytelling. **SHAW CONNELLY LIVES TO TELL** is well plotted and well told, but it is the character of Shaw Connolly that carries the day. If you like and sympathize with her, you'll like this book. If not, you won't.

FORTRESS OF EVIL
by Javier Cercas



MacLehose Press, £22.00, April in U.K.
Melchor #3

Rating: A-

Type of Missing Person:
Missing Daughter

Years have passed since Melchor took revenge for his mother's murder and at last found peace with his daughter Cosette, working as a librarian in the sleepy backwater of Terra Alta.

But their peaceful life is shattered when one day Cosette, now seventeen, discovers that her father has been concealing the truth of her mother's death -- that she was killed in a hit-and-run "accident" intended to scare the then-police detective Melchor off a case. He, of course, was just trying to protect her (as a young child) from the harsh realities of adult life.

Angry and betrayed, Cosette takes a break from her dad and goes to Mallorca with her friend Elisa. But only Elisa returns, telling Melchor that Cosette needed "space to think."

That is totally unacceptable, so the former policeman has no choice but to travel to Port de Pollença, where his daughter was last seen alive, and enter the dark, looking-glass world of Swedish-American billionaire Rafael Mattson -- a Jeffery Epstein look-alike.

FORTRESS OF EVIL is an exciting conclusion to the trilogy that started with **EVEN THE DARKEST NIGHT**, a personal favorite of mine. With Cosette's life

on the line, the author really ratchets up the tension and gets us to care about the outcome of the story – a lot!



THE DAUGHTER

by T. M. Logan

Zaffre, £16.99, February in U.K.

Standalone

Rating: A

Type of missing person:
Missing daughter

The plot of **THE DAUGHTER** sounds quite simple, but it turns out to be anything but simple.

THE DAUGHTER opens as Lauren arrives to pick up Evie, her daughter, from university at the end of her first term – only to find a stranger answering the door. Evie's not there and hasn't been there for weeks. In fact, Evie has vanished without trace. With her young son in tow, Lauren sets off on a desperate search into the dark heart of London to find Evie before she's lost forever.

This is the second book I've read by T. M. Logan (the other being **THE MOTHER**) and I've been quite impressed with his ability to get us to care deeply about his characters and to consistently surprise us with unexpected twists to the storyline. He's an expert at keeping the tension at a high pitch.

T. M. Logan is someone that we should

be paying more attention to in the U.S. He hasn't sold over 2 million copies of his books in the U.K. because he's an average writer.

KEEP THIS FOR ME

by Jennifer Fawcett

Atria, \$29.00, October, 2025

Standalone

Rating: A-

Type of Missing Person: Missing Mother

One hot August night in 1993, a young couple go to a party. On their way home their car breaks down, and they are picked up by a truck driver who attacks the man and abducts the woman. She is never seen again.

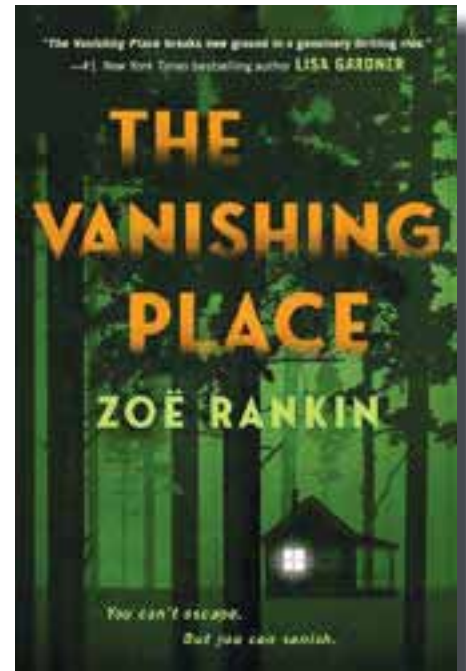
That woman was Fiona Green's mother.

When the trucker, Eddie Ward, is caught, a mass grave of bodies is discovered in his backyard but Fiona's mother isn't there. Thirty years later, on his prison deathbed, Ward insists that he didn't kill her, so Fiona finds herself back in the small town where her mother disappeared. Fighting demons of her own, she's shocked when history repeats itself: another woman, another roadside breakdown, and another disappearance. Only this time the primary suspect is Jason Ward, Eddie's son.



The plot drew me in and kept me focused throughout. Even though this

could be described as an amateur investigation of a cold case, it has the feel of a psychological suspense novel – as do many novels about missing persons.



THE VANISHING PLACE

by Zoe Rankin

Berkley, \$30.00, September

Debut Novel

Rating: A-

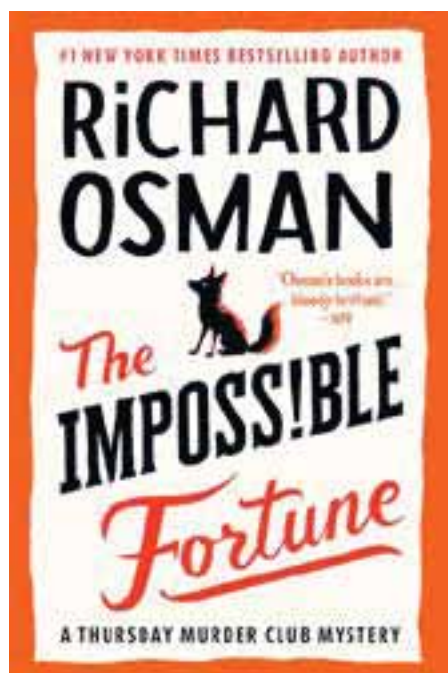
Type of Missing Persons:
Read to find out

Growing up with her younger siblings in the unforgiving New Zealand bush, Effie believed their parents had cut them off from civilization because they loved Nature. She never suspected that their reasons might be more menacing. After witnessing a terrifying episode of violence, she escaped the wilderness to forge a life for herself halfway across the globe in Scotland, where she became a police-woman.

Now, when she learns the only witness to a murder back home is a little girl who looks just like her, Effie is compelled to return to the scene of her troubled childhood, where the secrets of her upbringing and the terrors of her past come rushing back to the surface. In order to find out once and for all what became of her family—and possibly help this mysterious girl who could be her younger self—Effie must face her greatest fears once more.

THE VANISHING PLACE has

definite echoes of **THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER** by Karen Dionne (Barry Award Winner), with Effie's isolated upbringing and her enigmatic and sometimes scary father. A masterful debut novel certain to attract award attention.



THE IMPOSSIBLE FORTUNE

by Richard Osman

Viking/Pamela Dorman Books, \$30.00, September

Thursday Murder Club #5

Rating: A-

Type of missing person: Missing groom

Stay tuned for the movie adaptation of **THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB** which will appear on Netflix August 28th. It has a star-studded cast of Helen Mirren (Elizabeth), Piers Brosnan (Ron), Celia Imrie (Joyce) and Ben Kingsley (Ibrahim). And a month after that you can enjoy the 5th entry in the hugely successful Thursday Murder Club book series, **THE IMPOSSIBLE FORTUNE**.

As this latest book opens, the group of four find themselves more focused on their private lives than any particular murder:

Joyce is engaged in wedding preparations for her only daughter Joanna.

Elizabeth is just coming out of the shell she's been in since the death of her beloved husband.

Ron finds himself focused on the

lives of his son Jason, his daughter Suzi who has just left her husband, and his delightful grandson Kendrik.

Ibrahim is concentrating on helping his client, the imprisoned crime boss Connie.

But everything changes at the wedding. The groom's best man, Nick, seeks out Elizabeth and asks for her help. Then he disappears.

Apparently there is an unbreakable code, a bomb, and bitcoin involved, not to mention a groom who has gone missing. And just like that, the gang has its next clever case.

This series, and this book in particular, are delightful reads. It's a credit to the author that he has been able to live up to such a high standard in each book. These are among my very favorite traditional mysteries to read.

THIS HOUSE OF BURNING BONES

by Stuart MacBride

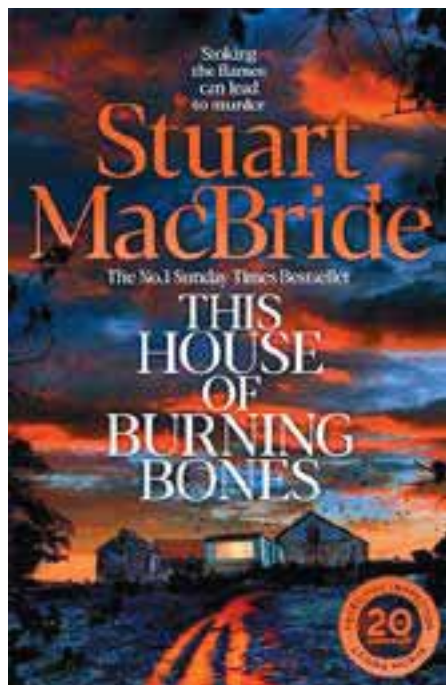
Macmillan, £22.00, May; in U.S. \$27.99

July (from amazon)

Logan McRae #13

Rating: A-

Missing Person: A Tabloid Media Tycoon



I've long considered the Scottish writer Stuart MacBride as one of the best practitioners of the art of the police procedural novel. His main character, the

overworked Logan McRae, is both a good policeman (he cares about people) and an excellent detective with a quick, street-smart mind. MacBride's plot of chock full of interesting crimes to solve.

In his latest narrative, half of Aberdeen's police force is off sick, all leave has been cancelled, someone's firebombed a hotel full of migrants, and there's a massive protest march happening this Saturday.

With officers dropping like flies, Acting Detective Inspector Logan McRae is forced to juggle a number of cases and run a major murder investigation with a skeleton staff of misfits, idiots and malingerers until the top brass can arrange back-up from other divisions.

It doesn't help that the *Aberdeen Examiner* has just been bought by Natasha Agapova, a tabloid media tycoon, hell-bent on blaming local police for everything. And she's more than happy to fan the flames.

But then late one night Natasha is kidnapped, but no one knows it for awhile. Admittedly the missing person element of this novel is not its primary focus.

This is another long book (640 pages) that I read in a blur. There is a fair amount of Scottish slang, but it wasn't disruptive because it wasn't hard to figure out what was being said.

I especially enjoyed Logan's witty sarcasm and dark humor.

THE WITCH'S ORCHARD

by Archer Sullivan

Minotaur, \$28.00, August

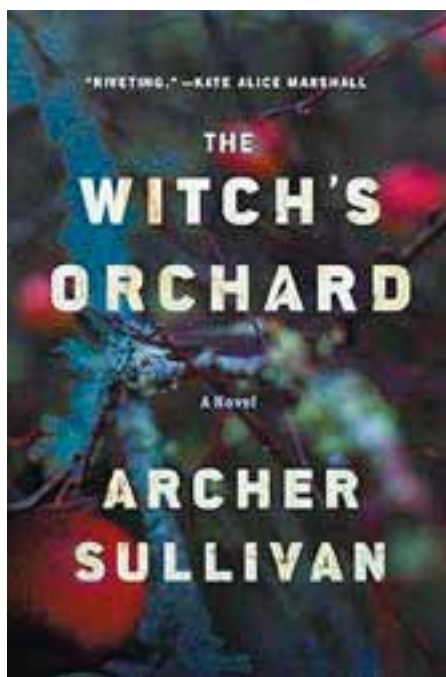
Debut Novel

Rating: A-

Missing Person: Client's Missing Sister

Annie Gore, a former Air Force Special Investigator, now a private detective, is struggling to make ends meet when a young man named Max asks her to find out what happened to his sister Molly who disappeared ten years ago from a small Appalachian mountain town. She is reluctant to accept the case but relents when he offers a healthy fee for her time.

Molly wasn't the only young girl to be kidnapped. Two others were abducted a couple of weeks before Molly. One was even returned, but because of her mental incapacity wasn't able to tell



about her experience.

While Annie may not be from Molly's town, she was raised in a similar mountain town and she gets mountain people, even though many are reticent to talk to her.

It soon becomes apparent that someone doesn't want Annie snooping around. And then another little girl goes missing.

Archer Sullivan is clearly a new talent to pay attention to. To say she is a good writer may not do her justice. I expect to see **THE WITCH'S ORCHARD** to appear on list of best mysteries of 2025 and best first mysteries of 2025 at the end of the year.

WE ARE ALL GUILTY HERE

by Karin Slaughter
Morrow, \$32.00, August
North Falls #1

Rating: A-

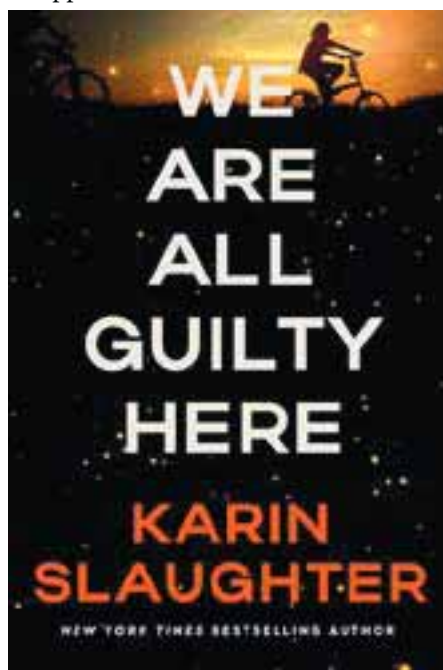
Type of Missing Person:
Two Teenage Girls

This is a Karin Slaughter thriller so prepare to be uncomfortable. In reading one of her novels, I invariably start to squirm at some point in the narrative. There are few uncomfortable subjects that Karin is unwilling to treat.

Two teenage girls disappear during a July 4th celebration in their small town of North Falls.

The investigation is led by Officer Emmy Clifton, who is personally connected to the case—one of the missing girls is the daughter of her best friend. As Emmy delves deeper, she uncovers a web of secrets and lies that suggest the town's idyllic facade conceals a much darker reality. The narrative employs a dual-timeline structure, revealing how a crime from over a decade ago continues to cast a long shadow over the present. As the investigation unfolds, Emmy realizes that every teenage girl has secrets, but some are deadly, and the town of North Falls may be hiding more than anyone could have imagined.

Karin Slaughter's fans will not be disappointed.



This is just a small sampling of missing persons mysteries that are available. They have become almost as popular as whodunits.

My Favorite Missing Persons Novels

I would highly recommend the following novels to anyone interested in the theme of missing persons or just reading great mysteries. You'll see that some of the titles have won Barry Awards which should be an additional sign of their

worthiness. In thinking about the plots of these excellent books, I'm impressed at how varied is the treatment of the subject of missing persons by each author. It is a mystery theme that invites great creativity.

THE KEEPER OF LOST CAUSES,
Jussi Adler-Olsen – Barry Award

A PLACE OF EXECUTION,
Val McDermid – Barry Award

DARKNESS FALLS, Margaret Murphy

SHACKLES, Bill Pronzini

TELL NO ONE, Harlan Coben

NO TIME FOR GOODBYE,
Linwood Barclay – Barry Award

LAST SEEN WEARING, Colin Dexter

ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK,
Chris Whitaker

GONE, BABY GONE, Dennis Lehane

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO, Stieg Larsson – Barry Award
for Best Mystery of the Decade

THE LAST CHILD,
John Hart – Barry Award

THIRTEEN HOURS,
Deon Meyer – Barry Award

OUT OF THE BLACKOUT,
Robert Barnard

THE VANISHING ACT, Thomas Perry

THE BLACKBIRD, Tim Weaver



Reviewed to Death

THE WHITE CROW

by Michael Robotham
Scribner, \$28.99, July
Philomena McCarthy #2

Plot Summary

We first met Philomena McCarthy ("Phil") in **WHEN YOU ARE MINE** (2022) as a fledgling copper who is trying to keep her bosses from finding out that her father is the infamous London gangster *** McCarthy. She has no intention of helping her father as an insider, but it would be better if the higher-ups don't know of the relation.

Now, in **THE WHITE CROW**, Phil is still a constable and enjoying being a policewoman, but she has a secret yearning to be a detective.

One night as she and her partner are driving in an upscale neighborhood, Phil sees the fleeting figure of a child as it disappears into the darkness. At that moment there is a callout to an incident a few miles away. She tells her partner to respond to the callout while she gets out of the car to find the child – who turns out to be a little girl who says that she couldn't wake her mother.

The call-out incident involves a London jeweler who has a bomb strapped to his chest in his ransacked store. Apparently he and his wife and young daughter were at home when a gang of thieves invaded the home, tied up the wife ("She'll be o.k. if you do what we say."), and took the husband to his jewelry shop to rob it.

On another front, Phil's dad is experiencing a lot of difficulties with his development of a large complex (he's trying to go at least semi-straight with his financial activities). The economic climate along with a series of work-in-

terrupting vandalism is threatening to bankrupt the project. It turns out that someone is trying to strong-arm him into giving up a significant percentage of the development.

These two story lines eventually merge in shocking ways.

George Easter

Michael Robotham is one of our age's greatest natural storytellers and his talents are on full display in **THE WHITE CROW**. He's particularly good when it comes to creating strong characters. Phil is just such a character, but there are a few others in this story that fit that bill as well, especially Phil's dad, who is quite complex.

This novel will certainly be considered come award time. **Rating: A**

Meredith Anthony

Michael Robotham's **THE WHITE CROW** is among the very best procedurals ever written. It is a straight up police procedural. No gimmicks or tricks. No fancy writing, no verbal gymnastics, no flashbacks that reveal a crucial piece of information, no sly twists. The prose is clear and direct and features a limited (and very charming) use of a cockney accent. Based in and around London, it has a relatively low-stakes crime at its center – a jewelry store robbery and a related murder – and a cast of characters that includes criminals, police officers and very little else. But from these time-honored ingredients, Rowbotham has produced a pitch-perfect novel that recalls the masters of the genre: Michael Connolly, Tana French, Jeffery Deaver, Louise Penny. Robotham joins the other great new procedural prodigy, Simon Mason, as



proof that there's still life in this revered subgenre.

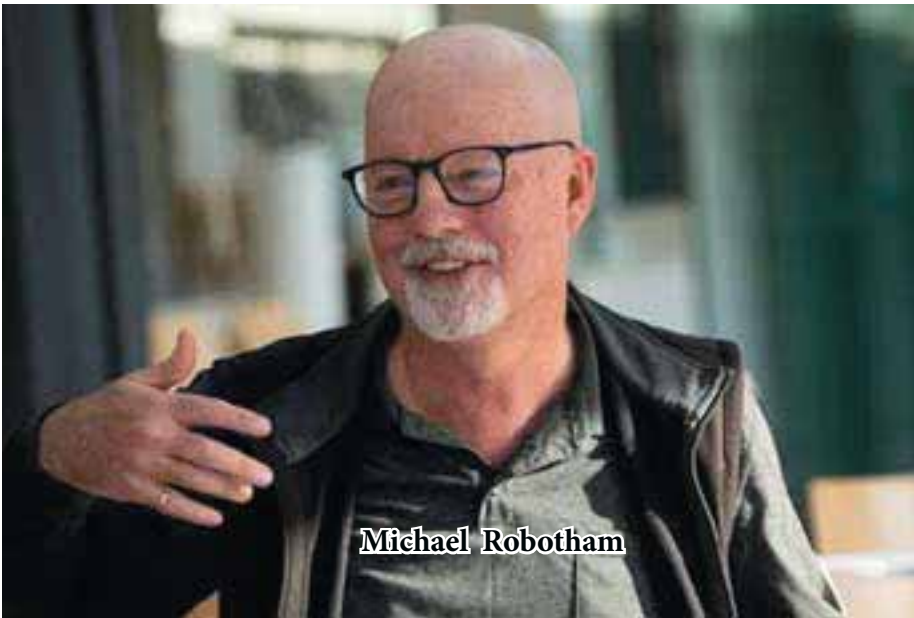
THE WHITE CROW is also a significant improvement over **WHEN YOU ARE MINE**, the first in the Philomena McCarthy series, where the characters were undercooked, the psychological underpinnings murky, and the result unsatisfying. It's still a good read, but not a great one. Start with it if you're a completist. Otherwise, **THE WHITE CROW** works fine as a stand-alone.

Rating: A

Larry Gandle

In judging **THE WHITE CROW** purely as entertainment, I would rate it an A-. It is a perfect summer read for the beach, plane, pool or hammock. It will keep the reader's attention for hours.

However, there are many problems with the book. First of all, the length is too long -- probably by one hundred pages. I was definitely feeling like the book would never end. I was getting increasingly impatient. Second, the plot is preposterous. There are several episodes of the cliché scene where the villain tells all to the incapacitated hero or, in this case, heroine. Characters are stock figures with unrealistic dialogue. Philomena has to be a blackbelt in karate making her a stereotypic thriller



Michael Robotham

heroine. There are so many pointless episodes which, I feel, did nothing to progress the plot but just served the purpose of adding bulk to the book. Lastly, the twist at the end came as no surprise. I guess the purpose of crime fiction is to entertain. For solely that purpose, I would recommend the book with the caveat that there are definite problems with it. **Rating: B-**

Robin Agnew

I'm a fan of police procedurals and mysteries featuring strong women – score! The main character, Constable Philomena “Phil” McCarthy, has a strange kind of double life. She wants to make it as a police officer, but she's also the daughter of one of the most notorious gangsters in London. While this is a contemporary read, Philomena's family has the feel of a classic old school gangster family. Despite their behavior, they are kind of charming.

When Phil discovers a barefoot child on the street who says she can't wake up her mother, she's drawn into an appalling crime with many threads. Robotham controls and reveals the different plot lines like a master. There are so many twists and reveals, beautifully backed up by truly solid characters from the good (Phil) to the sort of OK (the McCarthys) to some truly bad actors.

This was impossible to put down. I

would meet up with Phil again anytime.

Rating: A

Ted Hertel

Michael Robotham's **THE WHITE CROW** is absolutely terrific. The author's second novel in this series continues the story of police officer Philomena McCarthy who is doing her damndest to distance herself from her notorious criminal relatives. Yet time and time again she is driven back to them, unable to break free. This stunningly suspenseful procedural/crime novel perfectly mixes the good guys with the bad until the reader can barely tell which is which. Besides, the cops operate on a presumption of guilt, not innocence.

Above all, this is a story of family, of the ties that bind them together and their tearing asunder, especially when your family is a bunch of old-school East End gangsters. Mix a well-constructed plot with deeply defined characters and you have a fascinating story that is honestly hard to put down before you finish reading it. This is one of the best novels of 2025. **Rating: A**

Hank Wagner

The last Michael Robotham novel I read was 2017's **THE SECRETS SHE KEEPS**.

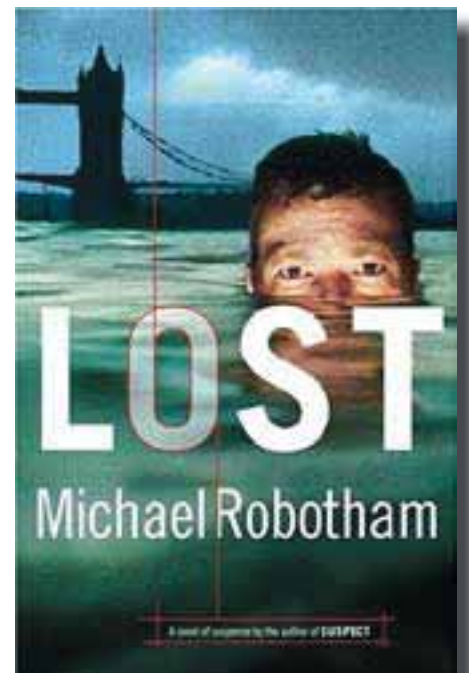
Reading **THE WHITE CROW** made

me feel as if I had missed out on A LOT of good reading over the past eight years, a situation I plan to remedy soon. I was mesmerized by the novel, which grabbed my attention on the first page and never relinquished its grip. I fell for Metropolitan Police Officer Philomena McCarthy instantly, and thrilled as I watched her tread ever so carefully through a figurative minefield created by the head on collision of her professional and personal life.

Robotham writes with great authority and gusto, providing generous dollops of suspense, angst, action, family drama and humor. There's no fat or excess here, just great storytelling; literally every character seems to stand out, no matter how brief their time on stage. It's no mystery to me why Robotham seems to be a special favorite of Mr. Stephen King, who has praised him as “an absolute master,” further stating that “No one does suspense better.”

Rating: A-

Editor's Note: If you haven't read my two favorite Michael Robotham crime novels, you should go out and buy them now. They are **LOST (2006)** and **LIFE OR DEATH (2014)**, which won the CWA Gold Dagger Award. **GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL** (Edgar Nominee) isn't too shabby either.

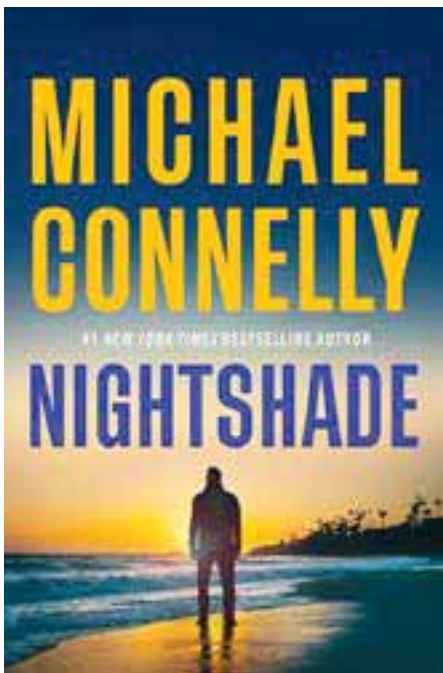


Letters



Richard Goutal

Just finished **NIGHTSHADE** by Michael Connelly and I am writing up some notes for the new leader of our mystery book club about adding this to my nine other recommendations for next year's list (starts in Sept).



Obviously too soon to see where it falls in the "the best of the best" lists. But I decided to check your spring issue to see what you had to say. Glad to see we totally agree. "A-" Def not up to some of the really great ones (for me that includes the first 5 Harry Bosch books -- among others).

I so love this line you wrote: "So I'll say something that can easily be interpreted as damning with faint praise – a so-so Michael Connelly novel is still better than most other novels I'll read this year."

Some of my book club pals and I have said this over and over. After reading Michael Connelly, it can be hard-going with many other books, many with

some positive aspects, but they just cannot tell the story so engagingly, so smoothly, and with no muddling of explanations.

It is incredible how "easy" he makes it seem.

I am trying to help the librarian who has taken over my role as the new leader of our mystery book club to be aware of and utilize your resources.

Jeff Meyerson

I've become a fan of Cara Hunter's since reading about her in the last issue of *DP*. I'm on the second book and will be going through the rest of them in short order, I'm sure.

Jeff Popple

By the way, if you haven't seen, Garry Disher and Jane Harper both have new crime novels coming out in October and Chris Hammer has one in September. [The Jane Harper comes out in April, 2026 in the U.S.] Also Michael Robotham announced that his next novel will be set in Australia! [Editor's Note: *Michael Robotham is an Australian crime writer who has set most of his novels in the U.K. and one in the U.S.*]



Shamus Award Nominations 2025

The Private Eye Writers of America have announced their Shamus Award Nominees.

Best P.I. Hardcover

KINGPIN, Mike Lawson
THE HOLLOW TREE, Phillip Miller
FAREWELL, AMETHYSTINE, Walter Mosley
TROUBLE IN QUEENSTOWN, Delia Pitts
DEATH AND GLORY, Will Thomas

Best Original P.I. Paperback

GEISHA CONFIDENTIAL, Mark Coggins
QUARRY'S RETURN, Max Allan Collins
NOT BORN OF WOMAN, Teel James Glenn
BLESS OUR SLEEP, Neil S. Plakcy
CALL OF THE VOID, J.T. Siemens
THE BIG LIE, Gabriel Valjan

Best First P.I. Novel

TWICE THE TROUBLE, Ash Clifton
THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER, Gordon Greisman
FOG CITY, Claire M. Johnson
THE ROAD TO HEAVEN, Alexis Stefanovich-Thomson
HOLY CITY, Henry Wise



Deadly Pleasures Best of 2025



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 2025 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 to the list for this issue.

Best Mystery/ Crime Novels

****THE IMPOSSIBLE THING**, Belinda Bauer (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, April). 1926. On the cliffs of Yorkshire, men are lowered on ropes to steal the eggs of the sea birds who nest there. The most beautiful are sold for large sums. A small girl—penniless and neglected by her family—retrieves one such treasure. Its discovery will forever alter the course of her life.

A century later. In a remote cottage in Wales, Patrick Fort finds his friend, Nick, and his mother tied up and robbed. The only thing missing: a carved case containing an incredible scarlet egg. Doggedly attempting to retrieve it, Patrick and Nick discover the cruel world of egg trafficking, and soon find themselves on the trail of a priceless collection of eggs lost to history. Until now. **PW, DP & AZ**

****SAINT OF THE NARROWS STREET**, William Boyle (Soho Crime, \$28.95, February). Gravesend, Brooklyn, 1986: Risa Franzone lives in a ground-

floor apartment on Saint of the Narrows Street with her bad-seed husband, Saverio, and their eight-month-old baby, Fabrizio. On the night Risa's younger sister, Giulia, moves in to recover from a bad breakup, a fateful accident occurs: Risa, boiled over with anger and fear, strikes a drunk, erratic Sav with a cast-iron pan, killing him on the spot. The sisters are left with a choice: notify the authorities and make a case for self-defense, or bury the man's body and go on with their lives as best they can. In a moment of panic, in the late hours of the night, they call upon Sav's childhood friend—the sweet, loyal Christopher "Chooch" Gardini—to help them, hoping they can trust him to carry a secret like this. **PW & Kirkus**

****MARGUERITE BY THE LAKE**, Mary Dixie Carter (Minotaur, \$28.00, May). Marguerite Gray is a lifestyle icon known for her garden parties, high-end business ventures, and being the muse behind the famous Serge Kuhnert painting, *Marguerite by the Lake*. Her presence is overpowering, her taste, legendary. For the last few years, Phoenix has been the gardener on the famed Rosecliff grounds, home of the Gray family: Marguerite and her husband Geoffrey. Phoenix came from humble beginnings, and now she works hard to craft the landscape that underpins Marguerite's brand.

When a storm threatens the launch party for Marguerite's latest book, it's the Phoenix who spots the danger to the guests and rushes to Geoffrey's side to save him from a falling tree. Geoffrey is grateful—perhaps too grateful. Marguerite is . . . jealous. Phoenix senses the danger of being drawn deeper into their lives but can't resist the attention,

becoming embroiled in an affair that could destroy her career.

But soon after the affair begins Marguerite falls to her death, from the same high point at Rosecliff where she posed for Marguerite by the Lake. Now Phoenix has another secret, one that haunts her even as Geoffrey invites her to move into the manor with him. A secret that Detective Hanna and Marguerite's daughter—her spitting image—are circling closer and closer to. Phoenix tries to put it all behind her and find her rightful place at Rosecliff. But as every gardener knows, nothing stays buried forever. **BL, AZ & Kirkus**

****WITNESS 8**, Steve Cavanagh (Atria, \$29.99, March). Something is wrong with Ruby Johnson. A former resident of the ultra-elite Manhattan upper class, Ruby now works as a maid in the type of houses she used to live in. Unassuming, she sees everyone's dirty secrets from the inside of their beautiful, renovated brownstones. But when Ruby witnesses a murder, she has wicked plans in mind that don't involve telling the authorities the truth.

Eddie Flynn, streetwise ex con-artist-turned-defense attorney, is the only lawyer in New York City willing to take on hopeless cases. And none is more hopeless than John Jackson's—the gun that killed his neighbor found, with Jackson's DNA, in his own home. Flynn and his unconventional team will need to use every trick they know to keep an innocent man from being locked up. But to save his client's life, Eddie must first protect his own, as the scariest organized criminals in the city are out for his head. **PW, AZ & DP**

****THE GHOSTWRITER**, Julie

Clark (Sourcebooks, \$27.99, June). June, 1975. The Taylor family shatters in a single night when two teenage siblings are found dead in their own home. The only surviving sibling, Vincent, never shakes the whispers and accusations that he was the one who killed them. Decades later, the legend only grows as his career as a horror writer skyrockets. Ghostwriter Olivia Dumont has spent her entire professional life hiding the fact that she is the only child of Vincent Taylor. Now on the brink of financial ruin, she's offered a job to ghostwrite her father's last book. What she doesn't know, though, is that this project is another one of his lies. Because it's not another horror novel he wants her to write.

After fifty years of silence, Vincent Taylor is finally ready to talk about what really happened that night in 1975. **BL, PW & AZ**

****KING OF ASHES**, S. A. Cosby (Flatiron Books, \$28.99, June). When eldest son Roman Carruthers is summoned home after his father's car accident, he finds his younger brother, Dante, in debt to dangerous criminals and his sister, Neveah, exhausted from holding the family together. Neveah and their father, who run the Carruthers Crematorium in the run-down central Virginia town

of Jefferson Run, see death up close every day. But mortality draws even closer when it becomes clear that the crash that landed their father in a coma was no accident and Dante's recklessness has placed them all in real danger.

Roman, a financial whiz with a head for numbers and a talent for making his clients rich, has some money to help buy his brother out of trouble. But in his work with wannabe tough guys, he's forgotten that there are real gangsters out there. As his bargaining chips go up in smoke, Roman realizes that he has only one thing left to offer to save his brother: himself, and his own particular set of skills.

Roman begins his work for the criminals while Neveah tries to uncover the long-ago mystery of what happened to their mother, who disappeared when they were teenagers. **LJ, AZ & DP**

****THE BIG EMPTY**, Robert Crais (Putnam, \$30.00, January). Traci Beller was thirteen when her father disappeared in the sleepy town of Rancha, not far from Los Angeles. The evidence says Tommy Beller abandoned his family, but Traci never believed it. Now, ten years later, Traci is a high-profile influencer with millions of followers and the money to hire the best detective she can find: Elvis Cole. Elvis heads to Rancha where an ex-con named Sadie Givens and her daughter, Anya, might have a line on the missing man. **Kirkus, BL & DP**

****THE SAVAGE, NOBLE DEATH OF BABS DIONNE**, Ron Currie (Putnam, \$29.00, March). Babs Dionne, proud Franco-American, doting grandmother, and vicious crime matriarch, rules her small town of Waterville, Maine, with an iron fist. She controls the flow of drugs into Little Canada with the help of her loyal lieutenants, girlfriends since they were teenagers, and her eldest daughter, Lori, a Marine vet struggling with addiction. When a drug kingpin discovers that his numbers are down in the upper northeast, he sends a malevolent force, known only as The Man, to investigate. At the same time, Babs's youngest daughter, Sis, has gone missing, which doesn't seem at

all like a coincidence. In twenty-four hours, Sis will be found dead, and the whole town will seek shelter from Babs's wrath. **Kirkus, PW, AZ, DP & LJ**

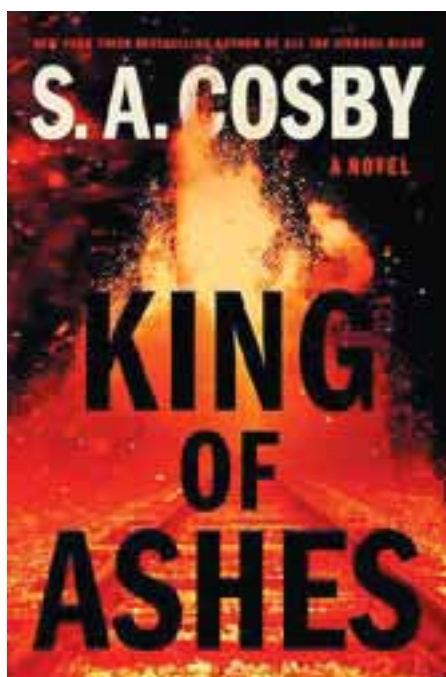
****THE DEATH OF US**, Abigail Dean (Viking, \$27.00, April). Together, Edward and Isabel move to London. They are young and in love, occupied by friends, work and fun. But late on a spring evening when they are thirty years old, their home is invaded by a serial killer. In the wake of this violation, each tries to come to terms with a night that changed everything -- and their marriage begins to crumble.

Twenty-five years later, their tormentor is caught, and Edward and Isabel reunite for his sentencing. Isabel has waited years for the man who nearly ended her life to be brought to justice. Edward has tried to think about anything else. As they prepare to deliver impact statements in the public eye, it is time to revisit their love story. Will they finally be able to confront the secrets, longings and lies that tore them apart? **Kirkus, AZ & PW**

****THE QUIET LIBRARIAN**, Allen Eskens (Mulholland, \$29.00, February). Hana Babic is a quiet, middle-aged librarian in Minnesota who wants nothing more than to be left alone. But when a detective arrives with the news that her best friend has been murdered, Hana knows that something evil has come for her, a dark remnant of the past she and her friend had shared.

Thirty years before, Hana was someone else: Nura Divjak, a teenager growing up in the mountains of war-torn Bosnia—until Serbian soldiers arrived to slaughter her entire family before her eyes. The events of that day thrust Nura into the war, leading her to join a band of militia fighters, where she became not only a fierce warrior but a legend—the deadly Night Mora. But a shattering final act forced Nura to flee to the United States with a bounty on her head. **BL, AZ & DP**

****THE BREAK-IN**, Katherine Faulkner (Scout Press, \$28.99, August). Alice, a professional mother of one, is



hosting a playdate with friends at her upscale London home when a disturbed man breaks in. With her child in the next room, Alice panics and kills him—an act later ruled to have been in self-defense.

Everyone tries to encourage Alice to move on with her life—but with strange comments appearing online, a mysterious phone call telling her all is not as it seems, and her husband, nanny, and friends behaving strangely, Alice finds herself drawn to the mystery of who her intruder really was. As she digs deeper, she discovers a trail of dark secrets that spiral closer to home than she ever could have imagined. **AZ, Kirkus, LJ**

****HEARTWOOD**, Amity Gaige (Simon & Schuster, \$28.99, April) In the heart of the Maine woods, an experienced Appalachian Trail hiker goes missing. She is forty-two-year-old Valerie Gillis, who has vanished 200 miles from her final destination. Alone in the wilderness, Valerie pours her thoughts into fractured, poetic letters to her mother as she battles the elements and struggles to keep hoping.

At the heart of the investigation is Beverly, the determined Maine State Game Warden tasked with finding Valerie, who leads the search on the ground. Meanwhile, Lena, a seventy-six-year-old birdwatcher in a Connecticut retirement community, becomes an unexpected armchair detective. Roving between these compelling narratives, a puzzle emerges, intensifying the frantic search, as Valerie's disappearance may not be accidental. **BL, AZ & DP**

****SALT WATER**, Katy Hays (Ballantine, \$30.00, March). In 1992, Sarah Lingate is found dead below the cliffs of Capri, leaving behind her three-year-old daughter, Helen. Despite suspicions that the old-money Lingates are involved, Sarah's death is ruled an accident. And every year, the family returns to prove it's true. But on the thirtieth anniversary of Sarah's death, the Lingates arrive at the villa to find a surprise waiting for them—the necklace Sarah was wearing the night she died.

Haunted by the specter of that night,

the legendary Lingate family unity is pushed to a breaking point, and Helen seizes the opportunity. Enlisting the help of Lorna Moreno, a family assistant, the two plot their escape from Helen's paranoid, insular family. But when Lorna disappears and the investigation into Sarah's death is reopened, Helen has to confront the fact that everyone who was on Capri thirty years ago remains a suspect—her controlling father, Richard; her rarely lucid aunt, Naomi; her distant uncle, Marcus; and their circle of friends, visitors, and staff. Even Lorna, her closest ally, may not be who she seems. **BL, PW & AZ**

****MARBLE HALL MURDERS**, Anthony Horowitz (Harper, \$31.00, May). Editor Susan Ryeland has left her Greek island, her hotel and her Greek boyfriend, Andreas, in search of a new life back in England.

Freelancing for a London publisher, she's given the last job she wants: working on an Atticus Pünd continuation novel called Pünd's Last Case. Worse still, she knows the new writer. Eliot Crace is the troubled grandson of legendary children's author Miriam Crace who died twenty years ago. Eliot is convinced she was murdered—by poison.

To her surprise, Susan enjoys reading the manuscript which is set in the South of France and revolves around

the mysterious death of Lady Margaret Chalfont, days before she was about to change her will. But when it is revealed that Lady Margaret was also poisoned, alarm bells begin to ring.

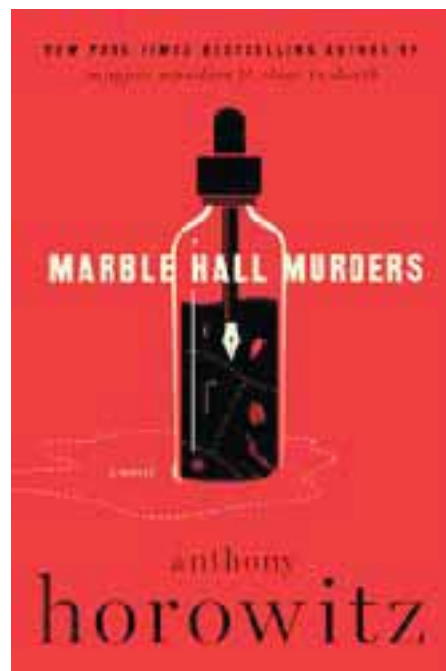
The more Susan reads, the clearer it becomes that Eliot has deliberately concealed clues about his grandmother's death inside the book.

Desperately, Susan tries to prevent Eliot from putting himself in harm's way—but his behaviour is becoming increasingly erratic. Another murder follows . . . and suddenly Susan finds herself to be the number one suspect. **PW, AZ & DP**

****DON'T LET HIM IN**, Lisa Jewell (Atria, \$29.99, June). Nina Swann is intrigued when she received a condolence card from Nick Radcliffe, an old friend of her late husband, who is looking to connect after her husband's unexpected death. Nick is a man of substance and good taste. He has a smile that could melt the coldest heart and a knack for putting others at ease. But to Nina's adult daughter, Ash, Nick seems too slick, too polished, too good to be true. Without telling her mother, Ash begins digging into Nick's past. What she finds is more than unsettling. . .

Martha is a florist living in a neighboring town with her infant daughter and her devoted husband Alistair. But lately, Alistair has been traveling more and more frequently for work, disappearing for days at a time. When Martha questions him about his frequent absences, he always has a legitimate explanation, but Martha can't share the feeling that something isn't right. **BL & AZ**

****NEVER FLINCH**, Stephen King (Scribner, \$32.00, May). When the Buckeye City Police Department receives a disturbing letter from a person threatening to “kill thirteen innocents and one guilty” in “an act of atonement for the needless death of an innocent man,” Detective Izzy Jaynes has no idea what to think. Are fourteen citizens about to be slaughtered in an unhinged act of retribution? As the investigation unfolds, Izzy realizes that the letter



writer is deadly serious, and she turns to her friend Holly Gibney for help.

Meanwhile, controversial and outspoken women's rights activist Kate McKay is embarking on a multi-state lecture tour, drawing packed venues of both fans and detractors. Someone who vehemently opposes Kate's message of female empowerment is targeting her and disrupting her events. At first, no one is hurt, but the stalker is growing bolder, and Holly is hired to be Kate's bodyguard—a challenging task with a headstrong employer and a determined adversary driven by wrath and his belief in his own righteousness. **PW, AZ & DP**

****MURDER TAKES A VACATION,** Laura Lippman (Morrow, \$30.00, June). Mrs. Blossom has a knack for blending into the background, which was an asset during her days assisting private investigator Tess Monaghan. But when she finds a winning lottery ticket in a parking lot, everything changes. She is determined to see the world that she sometimes feels is passing her by.

When Mrs. Blossom booked her cruise through France on the MS Solitaire, she did not expect to meet Allan on her transatlantic flight. He is the first man who's sparked something inside her since her beloved husband passed. She also didn't expect Allan to be found, dead, twenty-four hours later in Paris, a city he wasn't supposed to be in.

Now Mrs. Blossom doesn't know who to trust on board the ship, especially when a mystifying man, Danny, keeps popping up around every corner, always present when things go awry. He is convinced that Allan was transporting a stolen piece of art, and Mrs. Blossom knows more than she lets on, regarding both the artifact and Allan's death.

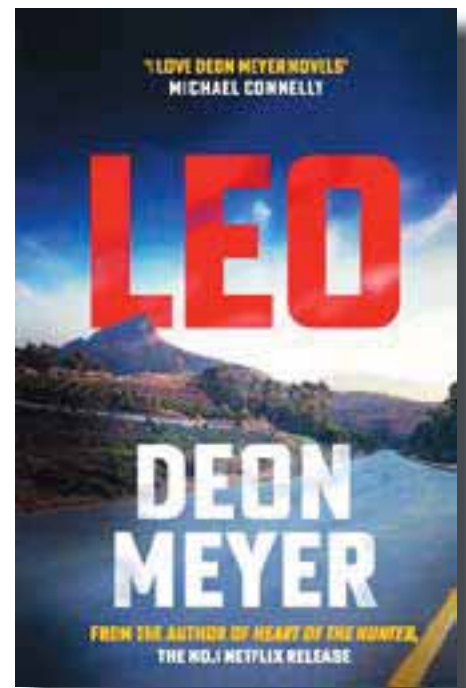
Mrs. Blossom's questions only increase as the cruise sails down the Seine. Why does it feel like she is being followed? Who was Allan, and why was he killed? Most alarmingly, why do these mysterious men keep flirting with her? **PW, LJ & AZ**

****A KILLING COLD,** Kate Alice Marshall (Flatiron, \$28.99, February).

When Theodora Scott met Connor – wealthy, charming, and a member of the powerful Dalton family – she fell in love in an instant. Six months later, he's brought her to Idlewood, his family's isolated winter retreat, to win over his skeptical relatives. Theo has tried to ignore the threatening messages on her phone, but she can't ignore the footprints in the snow outside the cabin window or the strange sense of familiarity she has about this place. Then, in a disused cabin, Theo finds something impossible: a photo of herself as a child. A photo taken at Idlewood. **Kirkus, BL & AZ**

****HANG ON ST. CHRISTOPHER,** Adrian McKinty (Blackstone, \$28.99, March). Rain slicked streets, riots, murder, chaos. It's July 1992 and the Troubles in Northern Ireland are still grinding on after twenty-five apocalyptic years. Detective Inspector Sean Duffy got his family safely over the water to Scotland. Duffy's a part-timer now, only returning to Belfast six days a month to get his pension. But then a murder case falls into his lap while his protege is on holiday in Spain. A carjacking gone wrong and the death of a solitary, middle-aged painter. But something's not right, and as Duffy probes he discovers the painter was an IRA assassin. So, the question becomes: Who hit the hitman and why? **LJ & DP**

****HEAD CASES,** John McMahon (Minotaur, \$28.00, January). FBI Agent Gardner Camden is an analytical genius with an affinity for puzzles. He also has a blind spot on the human side of investigations, a blindness that sometimes even includes people in his own life, like his beloved seven-year-old daughter Camila. Gardner and his squad of brilliant yet quirky agents make up the Patterns and Recognition (PAR) unit, the FBI's hidden edge, brought in for cases that no one else can solve. When DNA links a murder victim to a serial killer long presumed dead, the team springs into action. A second victim establishes a pattern, and the murderer begins leaving a trail of clues and riddles especially for Gardner. **PW, AZ & DP**



****LEO,** Deon Meyer (Atlantic Monthly, \$28.00, February). Detectives Benny Griessel and Vaughn Cupido are languishing in Stellenbosch. Run-of-the-mill police work in the leafy university town is a far cry from their previous life in Cape Town fighting crime and government corruption at the highest level. Then a student is found dead on a mountain trail, and the key suspect, a local businessman, is found murdered in what looks like a professional hit delivering a message—suffocated by fast-action filler foam sprayed down his throat.

On the other side of the country, a beautiful wildlife guide is recruited by a group of special forces soldiers to act as a honeytrap, part of a dangerous multi-million-dollar heist that goes tragically wrong. A single link connects the murdered businessman to the special forces, making Benny and Vaughn's case all the more mysterious. Another former soldier is soon killed, as is an agent of the country's disgraced former president; and then the heist crew reorganizes with an even more audacious theft in mind. **PW & DP**

****BEEN WRONG SO LONG IT FEELS LIKE RIGHT,** Walter Mosley (Mulholland Books, \$29.00, January). Joe King Oliver's beloved Grandma B

has found a tumor, and at her age, treatment is high-risk. She's lived life fully and without regrets, and now has only a single, dying wish: to see her long-lost son. King has been estranged from his father, Chief Odin Oliver, since he was a young boy. He swore to never speak to the man again when he was taken away in handcuffs. But now, Grandma B's pure ask has opened King's heart, and through his hunt, he gains a deeper understanding of his father as a complicated, righteous man—a man defined by women, a man protected by women, a man he wants to know. Although Chief was released from prison years ago, he's been living underground ever since. **LJ & AZ**

****THE RAILWAY CONSPIRACY**, John Shen Yen Nee & S. J. Rozan (Soho Crime, \$29.95, April). London, 1924. Following several months abroad, Judge Dee Ren Jie has returned to the city to foil a transaction between a Russian diplomat and a Japanese mercenary. Aided by Lao She—the Watson to his Holmes—along with several other colorful characters, Dee stops the illicit sale of an extremely valuable “dragon-taming” mace.

The mace's owner is a Chinese businesswoman who thanks Dee for its retrieval by throwing a lavish dinner party. In attendance is British banking official A. G. Stephen, who argues with the group about the tenuous state of Chinese nationalism—and is poisoned two days later. Dee knows this cannot be a coincidence, and suspects Stephen won't be the only victim. Sure enough, a young Chinese communist of Lao's acquaintance is killed not long after—and a note with a strange symbol is found by his body. **BL, PW & AZ**

****BLOOD TIES**, Jo Nesbo (Knopf, \$30.00, February). Nesbo's sequel to *THE KINGDOM* follows murderous Norwegian brothers Carl and Roy Opgard as they interfere with plans for a new highway while dodging a suspicious sheriff. **PW & BL**

****FOX**, Joyce Carol Oates (Hogarth, \$29.00, June). Who is Francis Fox?

A charming English teacher new to the idyllic Langhorne Academy, Fox beguiles many of his students, their parents, and his colleagues at the elite boarding school, while leaving others wondering where he came from and why his biography is so enigmatic. When two brothers discover Fox's car half-submerged in a pond in a local nature preserve and parts of an unidentified body strewn about the nearby woods, the entire community, including Detective Horace Zwender and his deputy, begins to ask disturbing questions about Francis Fox and who he might really be. **Kirkus, BL, LJ & AZ**

****THE GHOSTS OF ROME**, Joseph O'Connor (Europa, \$28.00, February). In the final months of World War II, a clandestine group known as The Choir successfully smuggles thousands of escapees out of Nazi-occupied Rome via a secret route known as the Escape Line. When an unidentified airman falls wounded from the sky, The Choir is plunged into danger and the survival of the Escape Line itself is threatened. The Escape Line's collapse would leave thousands stranded. Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, its architect and the acknowledged leader of The Choir, broods inside the Vatican, paralyzed by the perils of keeping his Roman underground railroad functioning. Meanwhile, SS Commander Paul Hauptmann has been tasked with destroying the entire operation, and the price of failure is high—his wife and children are under Gestapo lock-and-key in Berlin. **PW, BL, AZ & Kirkus**

****THE RELUCTANT SHERIFF**, Chris Offutt (Grove Press, \$27.00, March). Mick Hardin never wanted to be sheriff. An ex-Army CID officer, he's supposed to be retired—or he was until his sister, Linda, was shot in the line of duty, requiring him to step in as interim sheriff while she recovered. Now he's stuck in Rocksalt, the place he was most hoping to escape.

Back in uniform, Mick is chafing at the sudden dissolution of his retirement plans, wearied by the petty squabbles of Rocksalt's townsfolk. It's

all business as usual, until the murder of a local bar owner draws an unlikely suspect who threatens to fan the flames of Mick's past. When two more bodies turn up, seemingly unconnected to the first, Mick is forced to reckon with the mysterious circumstances of a case not so open-and-shut as everyone believes. Meanwhile, Linda is slowly healing when a familiar business tycoon with a vested interest in her returning as sheriff makes it difficult for her to remain on the sidelines. **Kirkus, AZ & DP**

****THE WHITE CROW**, Michael Robotham (Scribner, \$28.99, July). Philomena McCarthy has defied the odds to become a young officer with the Metropolitan Police despite her father and her uncles being notorious London gangsters.

On patrol one night, Philomena finds a barefoot child, covered in blood, who says she can't wake her mother. Meanwhile, three miles away, a London jeweler has a bomb strapped to his chest in his ransacked store and millions are missing.

These two events collide and threaten Philomena's career, her new marriage, and her life. In too deep, and falling further, Phil must decide who she can trust—her family or her colleagues—and on what side of the thin blue line she wants to live. **Kirkus, PW, LJ, DP (6**



****DARK MAESTRO**, Brendan Slocomb (Doubleday, \$28.00, May). Curtis Wilson is a cello prodigy, growing up in the Southeast D.C. projects with a drug dealer for a father. But through determination and talent, and the loving support of his father's girlfriend, Larissa, Curtis claws his way out of his challenging circumstances and rises to unimagined heights in the classical music world—even soloing with the New York Philharmonic.

And then, suddenly, his life disintegrates. His father, Zippy, turns state's evidence, implicating his old bosses. Now the family—Curtis included—must enter the witness protection program if they want to survive. This means Curtis must give up the very thing he loves the most: sharing his extraordinary music with the world. When Zippy's bosses prove too elusive for law enforcement, Curtis, Zippy, and Larissa realize that their only chance of survival is to take on the criminals themselves. They must create new identities and draw on their unique talents, including Curtis's musical ability, to go after the people who want them dead. But will it be enough to save Curtis and his family? **Kirkus, LJ & AZ**

****DEAD IN THE FRAME**, Stephen Spotswood (Doubleday, \$28.00, February). NEW YORK CITY, 1947: Wealthy financier and ghoulish connoisseur of crime, Jessup Quincannon, is dead, and famed detective Lillian Pentecost is under arrest for his murder. Means, motive, and a mountain of evidence leave everyone believing she's guilty. Everyone, that is, except Willowjean "Will" Parker, who knows for a fact her boss is innocent. She just doesn't know if she can prove it. **LJ & BL**

****PRESUMED GUILTY**, Scott Turow (Grand Central, \$30.00, January). Rusty is a retired judge attempting a third act in life with a loving soon-to-be wife, Bea, with whom he shares both a restful home and a plaintive hope that this marriage will be his best, and his last. But the peace that's taken Rusty so long to find evaporates when Bea's young adult son, Aaron, living under

their supervision while on probation for drug possession, disappears. If Aaron doesn't return soon, he will be sent back to jail. **BL, PW & AZ**

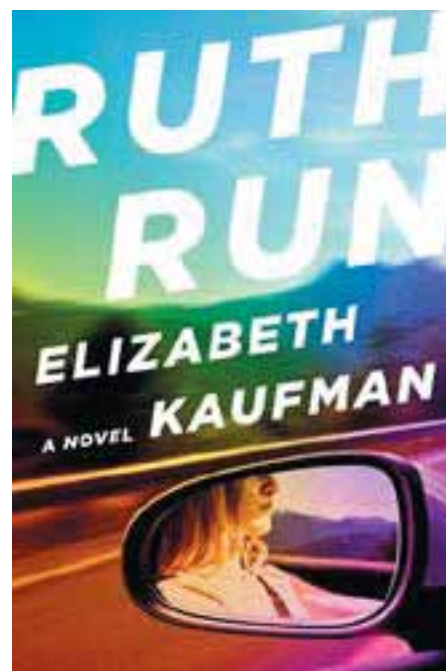
****ONE FINAL TURN**, Ashley Weaver (Minotaur, \$28.00, June). Ellie McDonnell is about to embark on her most perilous mission yet: go to Lisbon, Portugal to save her beloved cousin Toby who has reportedly escaped from a German prisoner of war camp. Toby has been missing since the Battle of Dunkirk and Ellie had all but lost hope in ever seeing him again until Major Ramsey, the British military intelligence officer she had been working closely with over the past few months, shared the news he'd intercepted.

Nothing will stop Ellie from finding her cousin, not even the awkward experience of having to travel to an unknown country with Ramsey after he'd dismissed her for being untrustworthy just as she'd realized she had fallen in love with him. Under the supervision of Captain Archie Blandings, a charming intelligence officer based in Lisbon, Ellie meets with undercover operatives to track down where Toby might be hiding from the Nazis and whether they are too late to safely recover him, all the while fighting her feelings for Ramsey and the incessant burden of war looming around her at every turn. **BL & AZ**

Best First Mystery Novel

****A THOUSAND NATURAL SHOCKS**, Omar Hussain (Blackstone, \$26.99, May). Dash, a reporter in Monterey, California, is desperate to outrun his past. During the day, he investigates the reemergence of a long-dormant serial killer. At night, he has become entangled with a criminal cult that promises a pill to erase his traumatic memory.

But as Dash begins to lose his memories—and his sense of self—he discovers a dark secret about the cult, one that would horrify its members. And soon he finds himself in a race against time to evade the cult, unveil the killer, and reconcile his past before his own memories



fade away. **PW & AZ**

****RUTH RUN**, Elizabeth Kaufman (Penguin Press, \$29.00, April). Twenty-six-year-old Ruth excels at microchip design but decides to get rich the old-fashioned way: robbing banks. She becomes a cybercriminal and devotes five years to siphoning more than \$250 million out of the banking system using a hacked firewall chip that she created and only she knows how to access. Then one night an alarm goes off and she realizes she's been discovered.

Five hours later she's on the run, chased across California and the West by a slew of government agents who see her as both a high-level national security threat and a potential intelligence asset. They'll catch her dead or alive—whatever it takes to make sure no one else discovers what she knows. Each of these men is obsessed with the woman he's hunting, certain he knows what makes her tick. But Ruth, always a step ahead, armed with her ironic wit and a reluctant dog, eludes their understanding; can she elude their capture, too? **BL & AZ**

****DEAD MONEY**, Jakob Kerr (Bantam, \$30.00, January). In her job as unofficial "problem solver" for Silicon Valley's most ruthless venture capital-

ist, Mackenzie Clyde's gotten used to playing for high stakes. Even if none of those tech-bro millions she's so good at wrangling ever make it into her pockets. But this time, she's in way over her head—or so it seems. The lightning-rod CEO of tech's hottest startup has just been murdered, leaving behind billions in “dead money” frozen in his will. As the company's chief investor, Mackenzie's boss has a fortune on the line—and with the police treading water, it's up to Mackenzie to step up and resolve things, fast. Mackenzie's a lawyer, not a detective. Cracking this fiendishly clever killing, with its list of suspects that reads like a who's-who of Valley power players, should be way out of her league. Except that Mackenzie's used to being underestimated. In fact, she's counting on it. **Kirkus, PW & AZ**

****THE MUSEUM DETECTIVE**, Maha Khan Phillips (Soho Crime, \$27.95, April). When Dr. Gul Delani receives a call in the middle of the night from the Sindh police, she thinks they may have finally found her niece, Mahnaz—a precocious, politically conscious teenage girl who went missing three years prior. Gul has been racked with grief since Mahnaz's disappearance and distracts herself through work: a talented curator at the Museum of Heritage and History in Karachi, she is one of the country's leading experts in archaeology and ancient civilizations, a hard-won position for a woman.

But there is no news of Mahnaz. Instead, Gul is summoned to a narcotics investigation in a remote desert region in western Pakistan. In her wildest dreams, Gul couldn't have imagined what she'd find there: amid a drug bust gone wrong, there is a mummy—life-size, seemingly authentic, its sarcophagus decorated with symbols from Persepolis, the capital of the Achaemenid Empire. The discovery confounds everyone. It is both too good to be true, and for Gul, too precious to leave in careless or corrupt hands. **LJ, DP & AZ**

****THE VANISHING PLACE**, Zoë Rankin (Berkley, \$30.00, September). Growing up with her younger siblings

in the unforgiving New Zealand bush, Effie believed their parents had cut them off from civilization because they loved Nature. She never suspected that their reasons might be more menacing. After witnessing a terrifying episode of violence, she escaped the wilderness to forge a life for herself halfway across the globe.

Now, when she learns the only witness to a murder is a little girl who looks just like her, Effie is compelled to return to the scene of her troubled childhood, where the secrets of her upbringing and the terrors of her past come rushing back to the surface. In order to find out once and for all what became of her family—and possibly help this mysterious girl who could be her younger self—Effie must face her greatest fears once more. **PW & DP**

****JOHNNY CARELESS**, Kevin Wade (Celadon, \$27.99, January). Police Chief Jeep Mullane has been bounced back home to Long Island's North Shore by a heartbreaking case that both earned him his NYPD detective's shield and burned him out of the Job. Now heading up a small local police department, he finds himself navigating the same geography he did growing up there as the son of an NYPD cop. Jeep is a “have-not” among the glittering “haves,” a sharp-witted, down-to-earth man in a territory defined and ruled by multigenerational wealth and power and the daunting tribal codes and customs that come with it. When the corpse of Jeep's childhood friend Johnny Chambliss – born into privilege and known as “Johnny Careless” for his reckless, golden-boy antics – surfaces in the Bayville waters, past collides with present, and Jeep is pulled into a treacherous web. **PW, AZ & DP**

Best Paperback Original Mystery

****LEAVE NO TRACE**, Jo Callaghan (Random House, \$18.00, January). When the body of a man is found crucified at the top of a hill in the British Midlands, AIDE Lock—the world's first

AI detective—and Detective Kat Frank are thrust into the spotlight as they are given their first live case. **DP**

****THE UNDOING OF VIOLET CLAYBOURNE**, Emily Critchley (Sourcebooks Landmark, \$17.99, March). 1999: When successful writer Gillian Larking receives a letter from the nephew of an old friend, she knows that her past has finally caught up with her. Violet Claybourne, her old boarding school roommate, was a girl who captivated Gillian with stories of her charming sisters and their picturesque home at Thornleigh Hall. Violet Claybourne pulled Gillian into her life, into her family, and changed Gilly's path forever. Violet Claybourne also spent the past sixty years in a psych hospital, and now she wants Gillian to tell her story. The real story. **LJ & BL**

****MAKING A KILLING**, Cara Hunter (Morrow, \$18.99, May). Forensic evidence found on the body of a young woman discovered in a shallow grave belongs to a girl that police believed was murdered 8 years ago. Now DCI Adam Fawley and his crew must figure out where they went wrong and where the young girl can be found. **DP**

****THE KILLING PLAINS**, Sherry Rankin (Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, February). Crescent Bluff, West Texas. Everybody knows everybody. And everybody has a secret. When a boy is found dead with the skin of a hare's head in his hand, everyone knows who killed him – Willis Newland, just released from prison after serving twenty years for an identical murder. But what if everyone's wrong? Detective Colly Newland reluctantly agrees to investigate a case that seems to involve the whole town, including her dead husband's extended family. But the deeper she digs, the more secrets she unearths. And as threats against her escalate, Colly realizes someone is willing to kill to keep theirs. **AZ & CWA Debut Dagger**

****VERA WONG'S GUIDE TO SNOOPING (ON A DEAD MAN)**, Jesse Q. Sutanto (Berkley, \$19.00, April).

Ever since a man was found dead in Vera's teahouse, life has been good. For Vera that is. She's surrounded by loved ones, her shop is bustling, and best of all, her son, Tilly, has a girlfriend! All thanks to Vera, because Tilly's girlfriend is none other than Officer Selena Gray. The very same Officer Gray that she had harassed while investigating the teahouse murder. Still, Vera wishes more dead bodies would pop up in her shop, but one mustn't be ungrateful, even if one is slightly...bored.

Then Vera comes across a distressed young woman who is obviously in need of her kindly guidance. The young woman is looking for a missing friend. Fortunately, while cat-sitting at Tilly and Selena's, Vera finds a treasure trove: Selena's briefcase. Inside is a file about the death of an enigmatic influencer—who also happens to be the friend that the young woman was looking for.

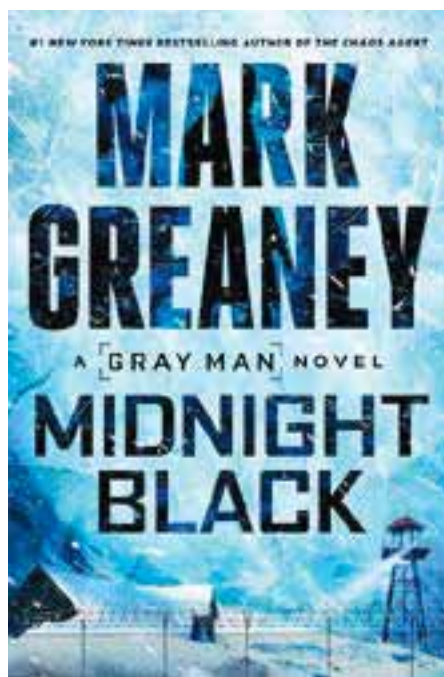
Online, Xander had it all: a parade of private jets, fabulous parties with socialites, and a burgeoning career as a social media influencer. The only problem is, after his body is fished out of Mission Bay, the police can't seem to actually identify him. Who is Xander Lin? Nobody knows. Every contact is a dead end. Everybody claims not to know him, not even his parents. Kirkus, AZ & DP

Best Thrillers

****THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER**, Joseph Finder (Harper, \$30.00, January). Paul Brightman is a man on the run, living under an assumed name in a small New England town with a million-dollar bounty on his head. When his security is breached, Paul is forced to flee into the New Hampshire wilderness to evade Russian operatives who can seemingly predict his every move. Six years ago, Paul was a rising star on Wall Street who fell in love with a beautiful photographer named Tatyana—unaware that her father was a Russian oligarch and the object of considerable interest from several U.S. intelligence agencies. Now, to save his own life, Paul must unravel a decades-old conspiracy that extends to the highest reaches of the

government. **BL, AZ & LJ**

****MIDNIGHT BLACK**, Mark Greaney (Berkley, \$30.00, February). The Gray Man is determined to rescue his partner and lover Zoya Zakharova from a Russian prison camp. The task proves to be even more difficult than imagined. My early pick for best thriller of 2025. **DP (3)**



****UNTOUCHABLE**, Mike Lawson (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, February). Brandon Cartwright was a rich guy worth a couple billion bucks—inherited, of course—meaning he hadn't worked a day in his life. But he sure knew how to party, and the people he rubbed shoulders with were all sorts of rich and famous: politicians and movie stars and British royalty and Russian oligarchs. So when Brendan Cartwright is executed in his own home, the cops quickly conclude that he was most likely killed by one or more of the rich, powerful people he partied with. But when John Mahoney, the former Speaker of the House, emerges from a clandestine meeting with the head of the National Archives, he learns there's evidence suggesting that the President of the United States was somehow involved with Cartwright's death. Mahoney needs someone who can investigate from the shadows—enter Joe DeMarco, Mahoney's fixer.

PW & DP

****HARD TOWN**, Adam Plantinga (Grand Central, \$30.00, April). After surviving a deadly prison break, ex-Detroit cop Kurt Argento is ready for some quiet. Still working through his grief over the passing of his wife, Argento finds himself house-sitting for a friend with his loyal companion, Hudson, a Chow Chow-Shepard mix. It's a simple life, but it's one that Argento is content to live. Then Kristin Reed shows up, begging Argento to find her missing husband and son.

Argento starts to notice that Fenton, Arizona is more than meets the eye. First there's the large, overly equipped public safety team. Then there's the unusual financial boosting of failing small businesses by the U.S. government. Finally, there's a man with no name with unprecedented control over the town. Argento finds himself unraveling not just the truth behind the disappearance of a family, but a conspiracy that's taken a whole town to cover up.

Fenton, Arizona is going to push him further than he's ever had to go. And along the way, he may just lose a part of himself. Because justice isn't as black and white as Argento would like to believe. **PW, AZ & DP**

****THE MAILMAN**, Andrew Welsh-Huggins (Mysterious Press, \$26.95, January). Mercury Carter is a deliveryman and he takes his job very seriously. When a parcel is under his care, he will stop at nothing to deliver it directly to its intended recipient. Not even, as in the current case, when he finds a crew of violent men at the indicated address that threaten his life and take the woman who lives there hostage. A problem for most delivery men but not Carter -- because Carter has special skills from his former life as a federal agent with the postal inspection service. After Carter dispatches the goons sent to kill him, he enters a home besieged by criminals -- but the leader of the gang escapes with attorney Rachel Stanfield before the mailman can complete his assignment. A chase ensues. **AZ, LJ & DP**



It can certainly be said that 2025 is not turning out to be a good year on the obituary front. We have already lost Peter Lovesey, Ken Bruen, Kerry Greenwood and Andrew Gross. Now two more major stars of crime and thriller fiction.

Frederick Forsyth



I remember reading **THE DAY OF THE JACKAL** in the early 1970s and being blown away by it. Over the years I read many other Frederick Forsyth novels and found them almost as well written. His most recent ones were quite good (**THE KILL LIST** and **THE FOX**), so I was pleased to note that he hadn't missed a step. It is with some sadness that I report on his recent passing at age 86.

Here is what Mike Ripley (DP contributor) wrote about him in an obituary for **The Guardian**:

Frederick Forsyth always claimed that when, in early 1970, as an unemployed foreign correspondent, he sat down at a portable typewriter and "bashed out"

***THE DAY OF THE JACKAL**, he "never had the slightest intention of becoming a novelist". ...*

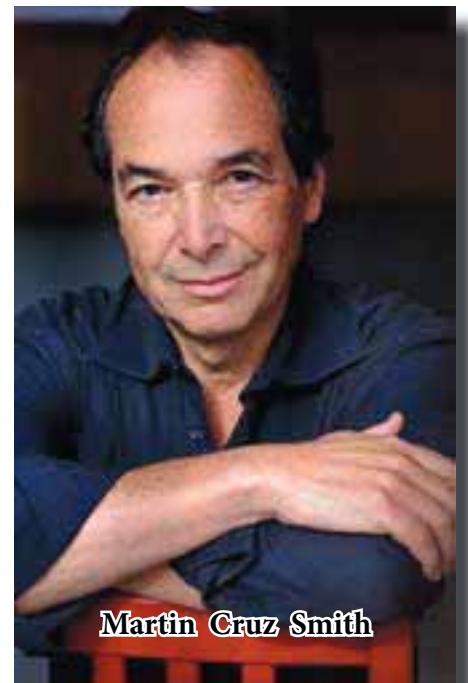
*Forsyth's manuscript for **THE DAY OF THE JACKAL** was rejected by three publishers and withdrawn from a fourth before being taken up by Hutchinson in a three-book deal in 1971. Even then there were doubts, as half the publisher's sales force were said to have expressed no confidence in a book that plotted the assassination of the French president General Charles de Gaulle—an event that everyone knew did not happen. The skill of the book was that its pace and seemingly forensic detail encouraged readers to suspend disbelief and accept that not only was the plot real, but that the Jackal—an anonymous English assassin—almost pulled it off. In fact, at certain points, the reader's sympathy lies with the Jackal rather than with his victim.*

It was a publishing tour de force, winning the Mystery Writers of America[s] Edgar award for best first novel [1972], attracting a record paperback deal at the Frankfurt book fair and being quickly filmed by the US director Fred Zinnemann, with Edward Fox as the ruthless Jackal. Forsyth was offered a flat fee for the film rights (£20,000) or a fee plus a percentage of the profits—he took the flat fee, later admitting that he was "pathetic at money".

Martin Cruz Smith

J. Kingston Pierce writes this on his Rap Sheet Website:

"American author, Martin Cruz Smith most widely recognized for his novels about Russian police investigator Arkady Renko, died July 11th at 82 years of age. His 11th Renko yarn, **Hotel Ukraine**—about the slaying of a deputy defense minister at the outset of Russia's 2022 Ukraine invasion—was published only just last week. The son of a jazz musician, Smith was a journalist before he began composing fiction in the 1970s, often under pseudonyms, many of his early paperbacks now forgotten. Several of Smith's works issued under



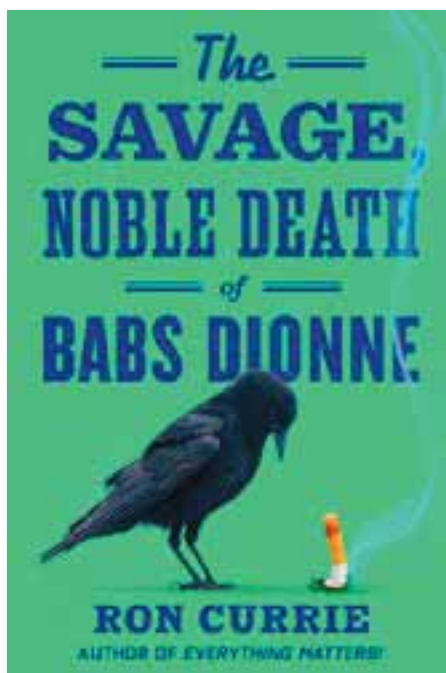
his own moniker, though, were nominated for Edgar Awards, and he twice picked up the Dashiell Hammett Award from the North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers—first for the standalone historical mystery **Rose** (1996), and then for his fourth Renko thriller, **Havana Bay**, in 1999. The author was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in his mid-50s, but only in 2013 did he begin speaking publicly about it. I've read every one of Smith's Renko tales, my favorites being the first, **Gorky Park** (1981), along with the aforementioned **Havana Bay**, **Wolves Eat Dogs** (2004), **Tatiana** (2013), and **Hotel Ukraine**, which takes its title from a Moscow luxury property but also sends the sleuth to the embattled nation of Ukraine, which previously featured in his 2023 novel, **Independence Square** (the same story in which Renko was told that he, too, has Parkinson's). Smith announced in the latest novel's Acknowledgements that it would be his final Renko thriller, but until today's notice that he died, there still seemed hope he might relent and produce another. Sadly, that is now not to be. "

It's sad that there will be no Arkady Renko stories, but Martin did manage to get one more published before his passing. See my review on page 50.

Editor's Message



Use of Names in Titles – New Trend. Over the last couple of years I've noticed the use of protagonists' names in the titles of some mysteries and the trend seems to be growing. You've probably heard of the critically acclaimed **VERA WONG'S UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR MURDERERS** by Jesse Q. Sutanto, **THE RETURN OF ELLIE BLACK** by Emiko Jean and **FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT** by Elle Cosimano. This year we have **THE SAVAGE, NOBLE DEATH OF BABS DIONNE** by Ron Currie, **SHAW CONNOLLY LIVES TO TELL** by Gillian French and **JULIE CHAN IS DEAD** by Liann Zhang, among others. Don't be surprised to see this trend continue and expand.



It got me thinking about rebranding old series titles such as the alphabet ones by Sue Grafton. How do **KINSEY MILLHONE BREAKS AN ALIBI**, or **KINSEY MILLHONE SNAGS A BURGLAR**, or **KINSEY MILLHONE TRIPS OVER A CORPSE** sound? What about **HARRY BOSCH SLIPS**

ON SOME BLACK ICE? Am I onto something here? I hope not.

Use of Real Names in Mysteries.

For myself, I've never been one to try to get an author to use my name as a character in a mystery novel (the practice is called tuckerization). But a few of the members of the **DP** staff have done so over the years. Mary (Maggie) Mason is a character in about 25 various titles. My favorite of those is when Robert Crais created twins named Mary and Maggie, one of them being a dominatrix and Harlan Coben made her a sports groupie named Thumper (you'll have to read the book (possibly **DEAL BREAKER**) to see how the name came about. Of course, Larry Gandle is well known for his name being used in many Michael Connelly novels as Harry Bosch's boss, Captain Larry Gandle. Larry asserts this was done without his requesting it be done, but he's o.k. with it.

At a long-ago Bouchercon, C. J. Box told me that he had used my name for a character in his most recent book and he hoped that I didn't mind. I was embarrassed that I hadn't read it yet and asked who I was in the book. He said that I was one of two black men in a small Wyoming town. I got a real chuckle over that but I never went back and read the book, so I don't even know which one of his books it was. If anyone out there does, shoot me an email.

That introduction brings me to the reason I've brought up this subject. On a recent night, I was propped up in bed, reading a new police series by Bruce Robert Coffin and in the first few pages of the second in the series, **BITTER FALL** (January, 2026), I encountered a policeman named George Easter, who, thankfully, didn't seem like a jerk. I turned to my wife and read her the passage. She then said, "You're famous!" I'm still not feeling it, but thanks, Bruce, for thinking of me.

Best of the Year So Far Lists. I've posted "best of 2025 so far" lists for almost all of our **DP** staff members on www.deadlypleasures.com. Just click on the link for Best of Year near top of the home page and scroll down a bit.

I noticed some anomalies with my own list. Almost all of my favorites for 2025 so far are written by men and almost all of them are U.K writers (one female author, one South African, two Australian and two American). In my opinion, this speaks to the high quality of the British books I've read this year, rather than any prejudices I may have other than my love of British crime fiction. I have more favorite male writers than female because I generally don't read much psychological suspense and don't read any cozy mysteries, both predominantly written by women and two of the largest sub-genre's of mystery fiction. That automatically crosses off a large chunk of female mystery writers from my potential reading lists.

But even I admit this year's list is a little out of the norm for me. I have high hopes that one current title and two upcoming 2025 titles by favorite female authors will make my "best" list for 2025: **THE GOOD LIAR** by Denise Mina, **THE HALLMARKED MAN** by Robert Galbraith (J.K. Rowling) and Val McDermid's **SILENT BONES**. That may increase the number of female writers on my list but it doesn't solve my British writer predominance as two of these writers are Scottish and one English.

As I self-reflect, I really don't think of the sex or the country of origin of a writer when I'm choosing a book to read. I'm thinking, "Is this going to be a good read for me?" or "Is this my kind of book?" If a book is of high quality and/or an entertaining read, I don't care at all about the writer's sex or where they came from. Really.

Mystery Mike -- The Times They Are a Changin'. Many of you know "Mystery" Mike Bursaw, who has been a welcome fixture in the Book Rooms of many Bouchercons. He's reached the age that he is going to retire from bookselling at Bouchercon and through



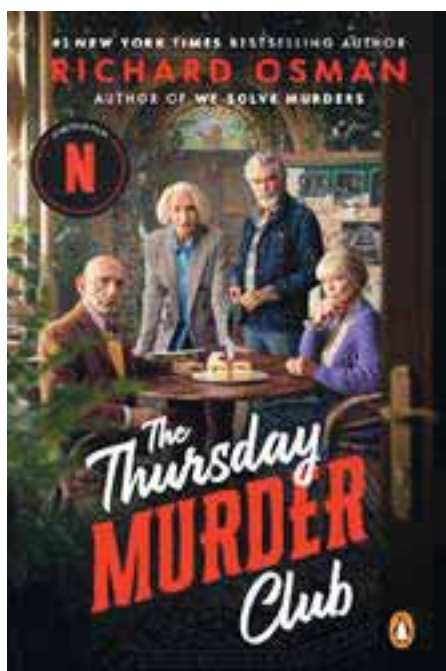
Mystery Mike

his website. But after almost 60 years in the business, it is hard for Mike to completely give it up, so he has decided to become a book scout/buyer. Here is what he told me about this move, "After entering the book business in 1966, I have done a little of everything. I have been blessed with wonderful mentors who taught me so much. One really important lesson was everything changes. Mystery Mike's will be a different type of business going forward.

I will be purchasing books from collectors to sell with another dealer who still has brick and mortar store.

Call me if you have hardcover mysteries and thrillers you would like to sell. My new phone is my cell phone and that number is 317-402-6091. Effective: September 1st."

Look on Netflix August 28th for:



Associate Editor's Message



At this year's Bouchercon in New Orleans, I was asked to be on the review panel by George, who is moderating it. This panel is always well attended as Bouchercon is primarily a crime fiction fan/reader's conference as opposed to a writer's conference. A panel in which reviewers discuss their favorite reads of the year is certain to draw a nice crowd. The topic appeals to all. When George asked me to be on the panel, I was initially reluctant. For over thirty years I read almost exclusively crime fiction. Therefore, my annual reading lists were often 130-140 books a year. My top ten list actually meant something as there were so many books judged. Today, fifty percent of my reading is literary fiction. It just appeals to me more than much of crime fiction. My ideal read is a literary crime fiction novel in which the author puts more emphasis on the quality of the writing in addition to providing a compelling plot.

Recently, I read several excellent literary novels, then picked up the new novel of a favorite author. What was immediately apparent is that the writing was awful. But I couldn't put it down! Therefore, I have to consider it a successful book. I have said many times before that literary novels can wear me down and then picking up a crime fiction novel is like a breath of fresh air. Graham Greene referred to spy novels as 'entertainments.' It gave me the impression that a description such as that implied the books were flimsy and superficial. We have to admit that many books in the genre, as a whole, meet this description but they do so intentionally. Cat novels, knitting club books and other cozies are not meant for deep reading. They are specifically to be read for relaxation. There is, of course nothing wrong with that. These readers do not want to read long complex and often dull literary novels. I, often, do not either.

As I mentioned in a previous column, I am in an online bookclub and this does expose me to books I would not normally pick up. I even took on the challenge of reading *ULYSSES* by James Joyce with a group in 80 days, which began June 1st. I will say *ULYSSES* is interesting though I am not completely sure what is going on.

So, my point is that I simply do not read as much crime fiction as before. When I do select a crime fiction book to read, I have to be careful about it. I want it to have been favorably reviewed and perhaps mentioned as one of the best of the year. I also want it to be well written and considered 'literary' in some way. I simply do not pick up a book on a whim like I have so often done in the past. I will admit that I have selected some really good books and my ratings are, overall, higher than usual for me because I'm being more selective.

George will ask us for our top five books of the last two years for the panel. I now feel highly confident with my selections because I am being so careful. Hope to see you in New Orleans.



*For your Barry
Award Votes!*

A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



WHEN YOU ARE MINE

By Michael Robotham
Scribner, 2023, \$17.99
Philomena McCarthy #1

Rating: A-

First line: I was eleven years old when I saw my future.

Michael Robotham's **WHEN YOU ARE MINE** is the first in a London-based police procedural series that features Philomena McCarthy, an excellent police officer whose father just happens to be a gangster.

Perhaps not quite as good as its sequel, **THE WHITE CROW, WHEN YOU ARE MINE** is a good beginning to a series that promises to build over time.

Philomena and her partner, Nish, respond to a call about a domestic disturbance. A neighbor called it in. She heard screaming. The woman who answers the door has been badly beaten but refuses to make a complaint. The man in the apartment says she had an accident. He also says he is himself a police officer. Darren Goodall is a high-ranking, decorated cop, a hero. But he is also a married man who abuses women. The police higher-ups close ranks to protect him and Philomena is suspended for ten days. When Phil befriends the victim, Goodall swears vengeance.

Meanwhile, Phil's father, noted gangster Edward McCarthy has a birthday party and wants to reconnect with his estranged daughter. Phil brings her handsome firefighter fiancée to the soiree.

With amazing finesse the plot juggles the vengeful cop, the abuse victim with her own agenda, Phil's career, her gangster father, his murderous brothers, and

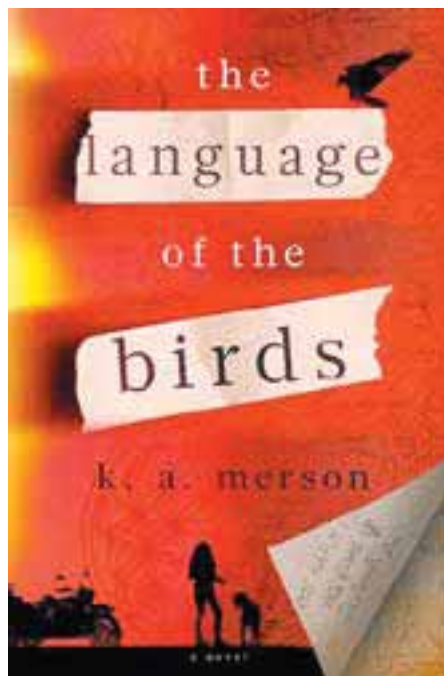
Phil's upcoming wedding with finesse. Pretty soon Phil is arrested and accused of murder.

Robotham's characters are finely drawn. His plot is complex. The violence is stark, and the humor is welcome. He stumbles a bit at the end. There's an unsavory plot twist that doesn't quite ring true. But, all said, it's a good read.

This is the beginning of a series you'll want to follow.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS

By K.A. MERSON
Ballantine, May 2025, \$30.00
Rating: B+



First line: Arizona cradles the figure-eight pendant between her thumb and finger and counts the days since her dad died—seventeen, the same as her age, and a prime number.

K.A. Merson's **THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS** is a lovely, complicated puzzle mystery. Think Dan Brown rewrites **ALICE IN WONDERLAND** after watching the *National Treasure* movies. Or Jack Kerouac meets *Dora the Explorer*.

I always like puzzle mysteries and this one throws pretty much every possible permutation at you: cyphers, cryptograms, logic, math, spatial, the works. It's a bit much. But it works. Kind of.

Arizona and her mother and their dog, Mojo, are on a road trip in the American southwest to scatter Arizona's dad's ashes. Arizona, 17 (a prime number), is somewhere on the autism spectrum, and she is a savant. She's the kind of kid who calls 3:14, "pi time."

Before they can complete their mission, Arizona's mother is kidnapped.

The kidnappers think that Arizona's father, a brilliant scientist, left some important information behind. Information that can be used to change the world. Or rule the world. Or, whatever. They task Arizona with finding the information to save her mother.

But the instructions come in a series of tests. Puzzles. Arizona and her friend Lily, another restless soul, must decipher the codes and follow the clues and hope for the best.

The shadowy archvillain, as smart and cunning as Arizona herself, but, you know, crazy, is a menacing figure sketched in a few chapters.

The convoluted plot references Lewis Carroll, President Herbert Hoover, his wife, Lou Henry Hoover, Scooby Doo, W.B. Yeats, Leonardo DaVinci, alchemy, poems, maps, star charts, songs, numeric codes, hiking, spelunking, scuba diving, the four classical elements,

the U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey, the classic movie *Gunga Din*, and her father's tattoo, to name a few of the many allusions.

Let's put it this way: if you are thrilled and intrigued by a book that puts the term "prime number" in the first line, this is for you.

FLASHOUT

By Alexis Soloski

Flatiron, August 2025, \$27.99

Rating: C-

First line: The subway car ate up the track, lurching, shrieking.

Alex Soloski's **FLASHOUT** is an interesting novel that didn't quite work for me.

Set in gritty, downtown New York in 1972, it tries to capture the marginal counterculture theater scene, with its dirty lofts, psychedelic and other drugs, alcohol, copious sex, charismatic predators, underpaid wannabe actors, and dreams of art that simultaneously shocks and uplifts. The result here is just glum.

The awful characters, almost without exception terrible, untalented, smarmy people, stage experimental work that has little to recommend it. Only a starry-eyed, middle-class girl from the suburbs could mistake it for art. She moves in with them. Bad things happen.

Flash forward to California in 1997, where a theater teacher hopes no one looks into her past too closely.

To be fair, Soloski set herself an impossible task. The artistic excitement of the era is almost impossible to capture. And the dark and dangerous despair is almost too easy to depict.

Alexis Soloski's first novel, **HERE IN THE DARK**, about a cynical theater critic with a crazed fan, was published two years ago and was one of my favorite novels of the year.

I hope her next effort is a return to the present-day urban psychological suspense she does so well.

THE LAST EQUATION OF ISAAC SEVERNY

By Nova Jacobs

Touchstone, 2018, \$25.00

Rating: B+

First line: On the morning that he was to die, the old man woke early and set about making breakfast.

An intriguing puzzle mystery from Nova Jacobs, **THE LAST EQUATION OF ISAAC SEVERNY** is a complicated novel about a complicated family of geniuses, scientists, physicists and mathematicians. When Hazel's grandfather and the patriarch of the clan is found dead in an apparent suicide, Hazel can't believe it. She also receives a letter from the dead man who seemed to know about his coming demise, which he calls an assassination, and asks her to do him a favor. And then a guy stands up at the funeral and begins to read a long, long mathematical equation.

A prolonged saga begins as Hazel sifts through clues and follows obscure leads in an effort to fulfill her promise to her dead grandfather. The family are all eccentric. They are also all suspicious and full of secrets and surprises. Hazel perseveres.

An excellent novel for puzzle mystery fans. And a great debut novel, if not quite as wonderful as Nova Jacobs second book, **THE STARS TURNED INSIDE OUT**, published in 2024 and one of my favorites of the year.

BLOOD LIKE MINE

By Stuart Neville

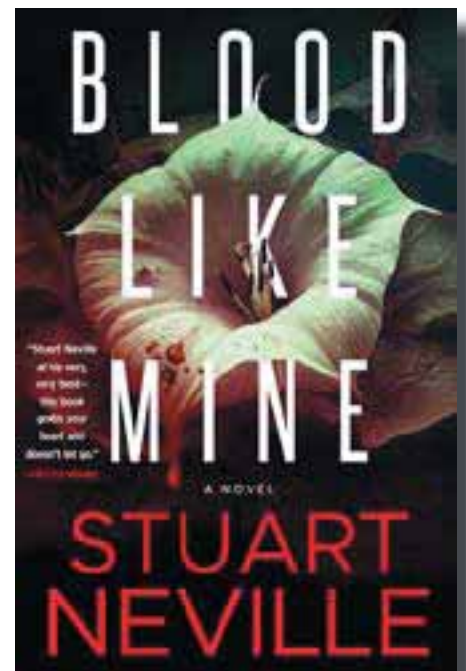
Soho Crime/Hell's Hundred, 2024,

\$27.95

Rating: A

First line: Rebecca Carter saw the first flakes of new snow fall from the night sky and settle on the windshield.

The great Stuart Neville delivers a brilliant and unforgettable new novel that falls somewhere on the thriller/horror spectrum. Blook-soaked and searing, Neville's latest book manages an almost impossible feat: an emotional domestic novel that segues smoothly into supernatural territory. He takes the reader into a classic horror trope only



after he has enlisted them in an entirely different and more personal story.

A mother and daughter are on the run. They stay off the grid as much as possible, trying to remain anonymous, unremarkable, unmemorable. It's difficult. Money is scarce. The weather is terrible. Bad people are looking for them. A federal agent is hot on their trail. Then, in a snowstorm, their van swerves to avoid hitting an elk.

Rebecca and her daughter, Monica, nicknamed Moonflower, try to outrun their pursuers. Rebecca and Moonflower have a warm and loving relationship, made even more poignant by the circumstances, not spelled out, that have led to their flight. The things they do to survive are both troubling and completely justified.

Special Agent Marc Donner is an earnest, high-level cop, determined to find them. His dogged pursuit goes beyond the requirements of his job, and he persists, even though he is risking his own relationships and his career to do so.

BLOOD LIKE MINE is one of the most affecting novels in recent memory. The emotional investment in the fate of Rebecca and her daughter will stay with you.

Although Neville has used elements of magic realism in his previous work,

like the absolutely unforgettable **THE GHOSTS OF BELFAST**, he goes further here and with amazing results. A must read.

DETECTIVE AUNTY

By Uzma Jalaluddin

Harper Perennial, 2025, \$17.99

Rating: B-

First line: Every soul shall taste death.

DETECTIVE AUNTY by Uzma Jalaluddin is the latest in the recent spate of elderly sleuth cozies. Of course, the gold standard is Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club series. Amazing! Closely followed by Tess Gerritsen's Martini Club books. Excellent! Then there's Deanna Raybourn's **KILLERS OF A CERTAIN AGE**. Fun! And there are a few very good outliers like **VERA WONG'S UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR MURDERERS** by Jesse Q. Sutanto and C.J. Wray's **THE EXCITEMENTS**.

Miss Marple, Mrs. Pollifax, and Jessica Fletcher would be pleased by Jalaluddin's novel. In fact, Agatha Christie is name-checked in the first pages of **DETECTIVE AUNTY**.

Recently widowed, Kausar Khan, has been living in North Bay, Canada since her husband's death. She has vowed never to return to Toronto where her teenage son had been killed years before. When her daughter Sana calls from Toronto to tell her that the police think she's a murder suspect, Kausar reluctantly gets on a plane.

She returns to The Golden Crescent, a Toronto suburb with a strong South Asian population. Sana had opened a boutique selling Desi fashions in a small shopping strip. One morning she opens her shop early and finds her disagreeable landlord dead, stabbed with an ornamental dagger from her own window display. Sana's husband is frequently absent on work trips and she has two children. She needs Kausar to help.

Kausar had an arranged marriage but a good, happy one. She had been content to be a wife and mother. And she is happy to help Sana now that she needs her. But Kausar also has a keen intelligence and that ability to observe and

extrapolate and figure things out. She tries not to, but she starts to investigate.

So, an Indian take on the elderly amateur sleuth. Like the Chinese busy-body in the Vera Wong series, Kausar takes a vivid interest in everyone and everything. She is soon on her way to unraveling the mystery of the landlord's murder.

DETECTIVE AUNTY hits all the obligatory notes. Underestimated by the authorities, she interviews suspects, collects information and, eventually, solves the crime. This outing, however, lacks the necessary dollop of charm and wit that elevates the best elderly sleuth series.

HAPPY WIFE

By Meredith Lavender and Kendall Shores

Bantam, June 2025, \$30.00

Rating: B+

First line: I watch through the window as a police car turns up my driveway.

Contemporary domestic suspense is hard to get just right. **HAPPY WIFE** nails it. Written by Meredith Lavender, a Hollywood showrunner, and Kendall Shores, **HAPPY WIFE** features a 28-year-old waitress, Nora Davies, who has married a successful lawyer, Will Somerset, nearly 20 years her senior. They live in the trendy, upscale enclave of Winter Park, Florida.

The truth is that Nora and Will are very much in love. But Will's ex-wife, Constance, and teenage daughter live nearby. And Constance has made sure that Nora is kept at arm's length by the local smart set. Nora has one friend, her next-door neighbor, Este, a lone iconoclast among the wealthy trad wives.

When Nora nervously gives Will a lavish 46th birthday party for all of Winter Park society, it is a major risk. She will either crash and burn or break through the social barriers and prove herself worthy of belonging to the snobbish social set. The party is a smashing success and promises to sweep Nora into the upper echelons of the wealthy enclave, despite Constance's best efforts

to paint her as a gold-digging interloper.

But before the evening is over, Will has disappeared and Nora is a person of interest, then actually a suspect. The ensuing search for Will begins to unravel the ragged edges beneath the town's perfection. Everyone has secrets. Everyone lies.

Nora is a welcome update to the plucky heroine trope. Alternately scared and brash, her acerbic wit and her rebellious friend Este's support see her through.

A very good read.

THE GRAVE ARTIST

By Jeffery Deaver and

Isabella Maldonado

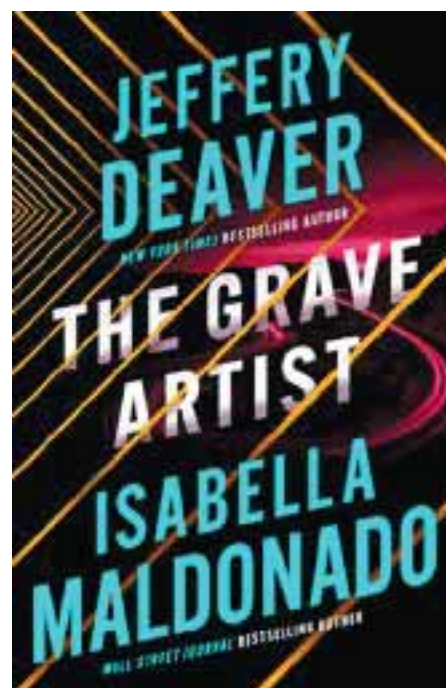
Thomas & Mercer, September 2025,

\$28.99

Rating: A

First line: The man cast his dark eyes approvingly over the bride's white satin dress.

A splendid second outing for Jeffery Deaver and Isabella Maldonado's new series about Carmen Sanchez, a Homeland Security anti-terrorism agent, and her partner, Jake Heron, an academic consultant who specializes in crime. **THE GRAVE ARTIST** is an excellent addition to the serial killer genre.



Part of the procedure involved in tracking down a serial killer is identifying the series in the first place. If the killings are disguised subtly enough, they may pass as accidents or unrelated incidents. Part of Carmen and Jake's gift is their laser sharp intelligence, and they bring that to bear on a series of cleverly camouflaged killings of newlyweds. Once they have found the hallmarks of the series, they go after the Honeymoon Killer with all the resources of the FBI behind them.

We get in the head of the killer, as well, and come to understand the twist-logic that drives him.

The cat and mouse pursuit is at the heart of Jeffrey Deaver's brand. No one does it better. I imagine Deaver has met his match in Maldonado and like to think of the two of them cooking up the craziness with gusto and glee.

Excellent.

THE RED QUEEN

By Martha Grimes

Grove Atlantic, July 2025, \$28.00

Rating: C

First line: It was all in the vermouth.

Martha Grimes is not for everyone. And her latest, **THE RED QUEEN**, is not for me.

Named after a pub, as her books often are, **THE RED QUEEN** is a whimsical British murder mystery, a police procedural featuring Richard Jury, a superintendent with New Scotland Yard. When a wealthy businessman is shot in a pub in the village of Twickenham, Jury is called in to investigate.

The case involves marriage, money, whiskey, soufflés and a look-alike.

If you like mildly humorous British procedurals that are like cozies with teeth, you might give this a try. If your favorite kind of humor is characterized as droll or twee, this is for you. If you like movies like *Clue* and *Knives Out*, you'll love it. If the name Wes Anderson in a movie's credits doesn't send you running, give it a try.

A BEACON IN THE NIGHT

By David Lewis

Kensington, June 2025, \$27.00

Rating: B+

First line: Caitrin Colline stepped out of her taxi into a ruined city.

Set in World War II England, David Lewis' **A BEACON IN THE NIGHT** focuses on a secret unit of trained spies seeking out dangerous saboteurs. The all-female cadre has been assigned to find out why so many churches and hospitals and stately homes have been destroyed by lone bombers, despite the blackout. Someone has been planting radio beacons to help target British historic sites for German planes.

Churchill himself supports the team of unlikely spies who use their invisibility (as women so often are in wartime London) to their advantage. Pretty, red-headed Welsh girl Caitrin Colline uses everything in her arsenal—from her looks to her skills with weapons—to claw her way to the truth. Her contact with a charming secretive mobster, "Teddy" Baer, leads her to the truth behind the beacons. It also leads her into danger.

The second in a series by David Lewis, **A BEACON IN THE NIGHT** skillfully mixes charm and menace, emotion and action into a compelling read. A very nice addition to the historical thrillers set in World War II. Bonus points for being woman centered. Not many historicals in that period are.

TWICE THE TROUBLE

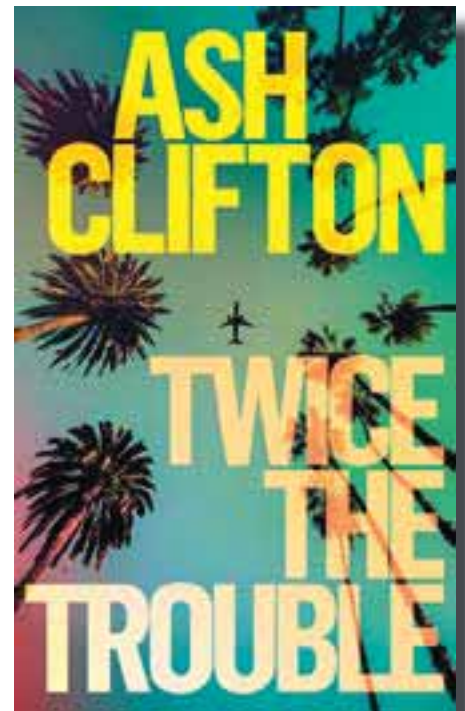
By Ash Clifton

Crooked Lane, 2024, \$29.99

Rating: A

First line: Noland didn't know the cop working the entrance to the courthouse that day, but the cop knew him.

Ash Clifton's **TWICE THE TROUBLE** is a terrific PI thriller in the tough and funny tradition of Robert B. Parker or John D. MacDonald. Like Spenser and Travis McGee, Noland Twice was a star athlete, his promising career sidelined by an injury. Now working as a private investigator in the Central Florida area where he grew up, Twice is hired



by an attorney to find her client, Valkenberg, a wealthy local businessman who embezzled millions from his partners. And to find the money, too.

When he goes looking for the embezzler, Twice finds one of the other partners, dead. He can't call the police. The attorney who hired him needs Valkenberg and the money or neither of them get paid. So Twice takes measures to delay the finding of the body to buy them more time. Now the clock is ticking.

He investigates the remaining partners, one by one. Secrets are revealed. A tangled plot unravels. Consequences are faced. Clearly, the problem of the business and the missing money is more complicated than any of them realized.

Noland Twice is a great update on the classic PI. **TWICE THE TROUBLE** was nominated for a Best First Novel Edgar Award. I loved it. I look forward to reading more about Noland Twice. Recommended.

A SONG FOR KATY SHAYNE

By Jim Fusilli

Level Best Books, 2025, \$16.95

Rating: A

First line: He woke slowly.

Jim Fusilli's **A SONG FOR KATY SHAYNE** is an excellent mystery! Poignant and full of heart, intriguing, and deeply satisfying.

One of the things I love in a mystery is being introduced to a world that I know little or nothing about. The details, the lore, the ambience pull me into a slice of life that feels real and engaging and exciting. For a few hours I live in this world and, after I've finished the book, I feel informed and enriched.

A SONG FOR KATY SHAYNE is one of those books. Fusilli, long-time rock and pop music critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, is eminently qualified to deliver this deep dive into the music scene as it was in the early '70s when folk was nearly over, having been all but supplanted by rock. A&R men, legitimate or not, lurked on the edges of the clubs in Greenwich Village, looking for talent. Sometimes, they discovered and nurtured new stars. Sometimes, they stole songs with promise, sold them, and pocketed the proceeds, leaving the unfortunate victims with little or no recourse.

Jack Fiorello is the rock and pop critic for a fictitious New York newspaper, *The New National Observer*. He lives downtown with his wife, Molly, who runs an Africa-centered humanitarian program. Jack writes a weekly column about new work by existing artists and, more importantly, emerging artists. On his sixty-fifth birthday, his boss takes him to lunch and fires him. Actually, he is told he can stay on for what he calls the Dead Rock Star beat and write "In Memoriam" articles about rock stars as they die. Jack is devastated. He goes into a funk.

He responds to a random email from a man in Princeton, asking him to look into the man's sister's death, decades ago. Katy Shayne had been an aspiring folk singer/songwriter and had evidently killed herself when her career failed to take off. She jumped off the roof of a building in the Village.

On a whim, Jack agrees to talk to the man and review the evidence – letters, newspaper articles, and tapes and videos of Katy performing. Soon he is hooked. Katy Shayne had been very good

and showed promise of becoming an important artist. Her suicide made no sense. Jack follows the trail through the New York music world to Nashville and back. He becomes convinced that Katy was murdered.

With the help of Molly's best friend, Suzi, a fierce attorney, and her husband, Henry, Jack persists despite efforts to dissuade him from investigating.

The middle-aged journalist is an unlikely hero. The violence, when it inevitably comes, is notable for its ugly realism. It's a refreshing change from the cartoonish violence between evenly matched adversaries in so much crime fiction. Eventually, of course, Jack solves the mystery of exactly what happened to Katy Shayne.

But the real draw is the lore. Fusilli's knowledge of the music scene is amazing and rings true. Early in the book, there is an engaging scene that completely captivated me. The hapless Henry encounters Jack at a party and mentions that he had grown up listening to Steely Dan. Jack goes off in a rant that everyone will recognize as the response a professional has to a clueless amateur who has wandered unprepared into their wheelhouse. It's mean, it's informative, and it's delightful.

Highly recommended!

EDGE OF HONOR

By Brad Thor
Atria, July 2025, \$29.99

Rating: B

First line: Scot Harvath's six-month honeymoon had been fantastic.

Thriller lovers! A new Brad Thor! Yay! And **EDGE OF HONOR** ticks all the boxes: Handsome Hero with principles and mad skills? Check? Beautiful Wife with mad skills? (Please note that this one has changed over time from Amusing Sidekick with mad skills to Beautiful Wife with mad skills. That's progress!) Check. High stakes on a global level? Check!

The complicated plot is satisfying and refreshingly atypical. Norway? Canada? Not the usual starting point for a classic thriller, but it's creative. The bad

guys are similarly off-kilter. Our own statesmen? Members of the one percent? Not the usual crew of ruffians, but it's different. Destabilization instead of Global Domination? It's fair game. Lots of action and explosions and chases? Yeah, that hasn't changed.

Brad Thor's work always feels a little like a masterpiece in a paint-by-numbers kit to me, but this one has some chops. More Bob Ross than Francis Bacon, maybe, but still...

Die-hard (pardon the pun) thriller lovers, this one's for you.

THE GREAT HIPPOPOTAMUS HOTEL

By Alexander McCall Smith
Pantheon, 2024, \$28.00

Rating: A

First line: Mma Ramotswe had always understood that people who are one thing may at the same time be another.

A shout-out to one of my all-time favorite authors, Alexander McCall Smith whose **THE GREAT HIPPOPOTAMUS HOTEL** is the latest in the long-running The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series set in peaceful and prosperous Botswana.

Listen, I like thrillers a lot. Fights,



car chases, explosions? I'm there. The fate of nations teetering on the brink of destruction? Yep. Near misses and dirty tricks? Sure. But sometimes, you just need a break. In times of trouble, I turn to the amazing Alexander McCall Smith.

The prolific Alexander McCall Smith has written at least 25 books in The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series. And he has written at least six other series, as well as a bunch of stand-alones and collections of short stories. No one can accurately put a number to his work since by the time I finish writing this and you finish reading it, he has probably published at least two more books.

In this one, a hotel manager enlists the help of Mma Ramotswe and her partner, Mma Makutsi, to investigate a series of troublesome incidents. Food poisoning and scorpions are tarnishing the reputation of the Great Hippopotamus Hotel and the family that owns the hotel are apparently baffled. The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency takes the case. There are interviews and observations but no other obvious detective work. There are no car chases; Mma Ramotswe drives a very old tiny white van and chases are out of the question. There are no fights or explosions. But justice is served.

Read these books. Any of them. All of them. And please do not shrug them off as cozies. They are not cozies. They are moral philosophy in fiction form.

And guess what? They are amazing books. They might not tell you how to check for potential kidnappers or the correct method for getting out of a choke hold, but they do provide something lasting. These amazing books tell you how to live.

Highly, highly recommended.

THE CARPOOL DETECTIVES

By Chuck Hogan

Random House, July 2025, \$32.00

Rating: B

First line: Angela felt like a ghost walking through her own home.

Chuck Hogan's **THE CARPOOL DETECTIVES** is billed as True Crime.

It reads like a novel.

Admittedly, I don't usually review True Crime. I don't usually read it. I prefer my crime nicely nestled into fiction. No matter how dark, how bloody, how savage, how horrific, I am snug in my fiction-loving cocoon. However, I have to admit that the subtitle: A True Story of Four Moms, Two Bodies and One Mysterious Cold Case, lured me in. I think it was the word "Moms."

THE CARPOOL DETECTIVES

is the story of the deaths of an older married couple that had occurred in Los Angeles in 2005. Angela Watkins and her husband Joel, both in their sixties, had been found dead in a ravine near their wrecked SUV six weeks after they disappeared from their home. But detectives had called the deaths a homicide, rather than an accident or a murder/suicide.

The book flashes forward to 2020, when Marissa, the first of the carpool moms, sees the footage of the wrecked car's retrieval from the canyon, she is in an adult learning journalism class, trying to escape the boredom of her life as a wife and mother of two young girls. She decides to investigate, thinking it might be a good story for her budding career as a journalist.

Eventually, Marissa enlists the help of three other carpool moms: Samira, Nicole, and Jeannie. Each brings certain skills to the case. One has a head for finance. Another is good at internet research. One is good at interviews. They are all bored and restless and too smart for their soccer-mom lives. Just as COVID sidelines their lives and brings social distancing, home-schooling, and working from home into play, they all embrace the distraction the project brings with it. The case provides a welcome distraction, and they throw themselves into it.

Stonewalled by the police who cannot release case files, they have to research the family and reconstruct as much as possible about the crime. It takes a long time, but the four women are persistent. The reader, too, will need persistence. The investigation is long and slow. The circumstances that led to the couple's deaths are complex and

reveal themselves slowly. The meticulous records the women keep and the timeline and contact list grow and grow. I found the research absorbing, but the details about each woman's private lives, with their homes and partners and children, less interesting.

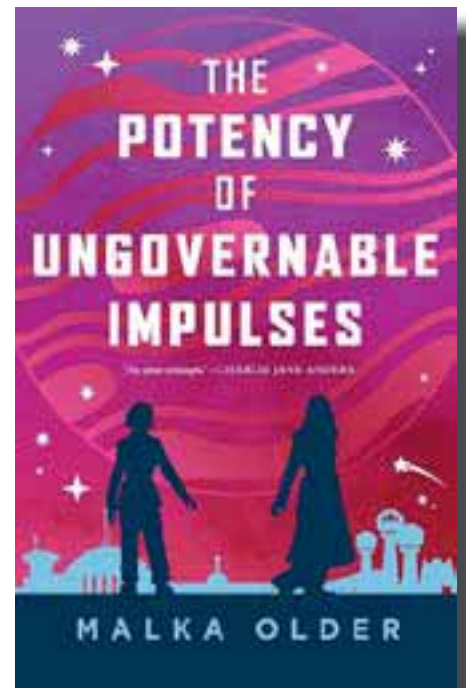
The payoff is worth the journey. A satisfying resolution makes it all worthwhile. The prose is plain and clear, if sprinkled a little too often with phrases like "little did they know that this would change their lives."

Recommended for true crime buffs.

THE POTENCY OF UNGOVERNABLE IMPULSES

By Malka Older
Tor, 2025, \$28.99

Rating: A



First line: There were not so many places to lurk in the scholars' residence on Thanma Street.

The brilliant sci-fi/mystery crossover series, The Investigations of Mossa and Pleiti, has a wonderful new entry: **THE POTENCY OF UNGOVERNABLE IMPULSES**. Set on one of the moons of Jupiter, the series pairs Mossa, a government agent, and her girlfriend, Pleiti, a university scholar, as they investigate strange occurrences and crimes in the platform colony on Giant that has

become humanity's refuge after Earth was poisoned and contaminated beyond recovery.

This time, Pleiti, is, for much of the book, on her own. Mossa is strangely preoccupied, and when a college friend, Petanj, asks for her help, Pleiti cannot turn her down. Petanj is a modernist scholar, working to better life on Giant, while Pleiti is a classicist at the venerable university, Valdegeld, studying Earth to better understand its legacy and prepare for a possible, eventual, return. When Petanj explains that her cousin Villette, a modernist at the other university on the platform, Stortellen, is being victimized by anonymous accusation of plagiarism and other academic misdeeds. Villette is being considered for a donship, a great honor for such a young scholar, and someone evidently doesn't want her to get it. She asks Pleiti to investigate. With some misgivings at undertaking such a task without Mossa's professional expertise, Pleiti agrees.

Pleiti and Petanj travel two days to get to Stortellen and Pleiti is introduced to the academics that Villette works and socializes with. Academic rivalries and jealousies abound. The anonymous attacks get more serious and Villette's lab is sabotaged. Her life and Pleiti's, too, may be in danger. Pleiti does what she does best: she treats the problem as if it were a research study. She digs in. When Mossa does appear, she gives Pleiti room to accomplish what she's started.

I think a couple things set this series apart from other Watson and Holmes type partnerships. One is obviously the setting. The references to the climate change and the poisonous ravaging of the planet Earth is always the subtext for a people determined not to make the same mistakes. The differences of life in the colony are easily understood, as the structure of platforms and rail travel are described in context, and the technology for processing the atmosphere for human life is touched on. Some things, however, evidently never change: bickering academics, thwarted romance, the bonds of family, friendship, and love.

Another key feature, interestingly, are the titles of the books in the series. The first, **THE MIMICKING OF**

KNOWN SUCCESSES, had a title that intrigued but baffled me. I found it nearly impossible to remember, so arcane was the five word locution. I kept trying to parse it's meaning. But I loved the book. The second, **THE IMPOSITION OF UNNECESSARY OBSTACLES**, made me smile and love these books even more. Strange, but I got it. Now we have **THE POTENCY OF UNGOVERNABLE IMPULSES**, which, I'm happy to report, I found quite understandable. But if you are new to this series, consider the titles a test, a key, a right of passage. If the titles leave you cold, you will probably not love the novels.

One other detail that stands out is the language. On Giant, the remnants of humanity have been culled from various locations on their home planet. The language is basically English with a smattering of terms from other languages mixed in. From the hilarious Spanish *comemierda* (shit-eater), to the evocative *frunce*, a gather or fold in material, which comes to mean a frown, to the Portuguese *tertulia*, a literary gathering or salon, most of the terms are understandable in context. But the slight difference in language helps keep the reader aware that the setting is very different from our norm.

Another feature that sets this series apart, is the emotional component. Very rarely has a love affair been so warmly and lightly delineated as that of Mossa and Pleiti. This level of human connection is rare in the mystery world, and, I suspect, in the sci-fi realm, as well. The yearning, aching, tenderness of their relationship, and the care with which it is depicted, is what sets this series apart and makes it great. This series is amazing. It's (pardon the phrase) out of this world.

Highly recommended.

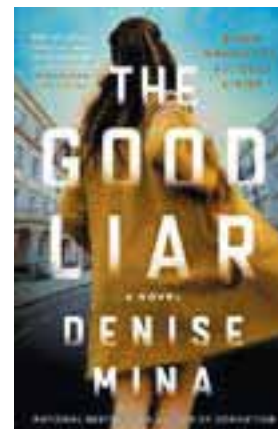
THE GOOD LIAR

by Denise Mina
Mulholland, July , \$29.00

Rating: A

First line: Professor Claudia Atkins O'Sheil, MBE, and Lord Philip Ardmore were taking the back stairs at the Royal College of Forensic Scientists in Regent's

Park, heading down to the distant rumble of a party in the open courtyard.



Denise Mina is one of our greatest writers. Her range, from the charming Paddy Meehan series to the tough GARNETHILL novels is amazing. Her prose is both erudite and timely. Her language lyrical and gasp-inducing. Her grasp of thorny psychological and social issues is strong. Her insight razor sharp. She has written stand-alones, several series, plays and TV, and even graphic novels.

Her latest is a straight-up thriller. **THE GOOD LIAR**, is set in London where a forensic scientist, Claudia Atkins O'Sheil, has developed an algorithm for reconstructing crimes from blood spatter evidence. Her analytical tool has been used to convict a killer in a brutal crime. A man's angry son has been accused of murdering his estranged father, his stepmother, and the family dog. As a result, her mentor, Lord Philip Ardmore, helps her get a better job, a huge salary increase, and an MBE. Her future, and that of her two sons, seems assured.

But when Claudia begins to have doubts about the case and reinvestigates it, her life changes in strange and unpredictable ways. Will she pursue justice or just move on? Will she endanger her own family to correct the wrong? And will she solve the mystery of her own husband's death which had been ruled an accident or suicide?

Complex and exciting, dark and puzzling, **THE GOOD LIAR** is a sensational psychological thriller. She holds us in suspense while she almost casually investigates issues of class, gender, responsibility and morality.

From The Lakefront

Ted Hertel



APOSTLE'S COVE

by William Kent Krueger
Atria Books, \$29.00, September
Cork O'Connor #21

Rating: A

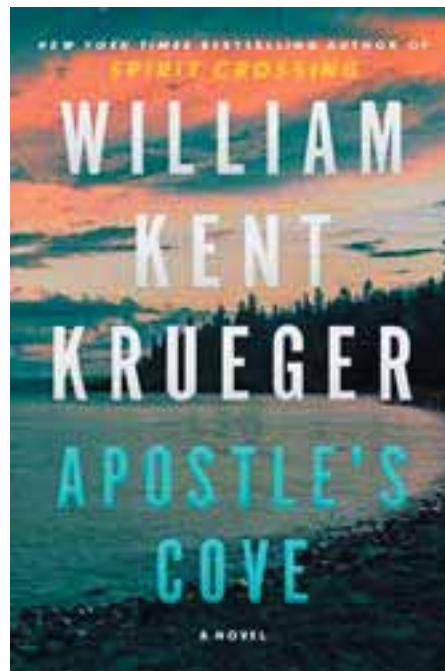
Cork O'Connor, proprietor of a local burger joint and occasional private investigator, is thinking about his upcoming birthday "and the inevitable decline of everything," when his son calls. Stephen is in his second year of law school, interning for the Great North Innocence Project. He reminds his father about the first murder case Cork had handled years earlier when he was the Tamarack County, Minnesota, Sheriff. "Dad, I'm pretty sure you sent an innocent man to prison." Cork thinks back to that time, recalling how Chastity Boshey had been brutally murdered, her grief-stricken mother, Aphrodite, found sitting next to her in a pool of blood. Chastity's husband, a young Ojibwe man named Axel, eventually confessed to the killing. But now Cork has to wonder whether he failed to sufficiently investigate the long ago case, because if the husband didn't kill her, who did? And how can Cork do it when the still-imprisoned Axel himself refuses to help?

The story is told in two parts. The first turns the clock of Cork O'Connor's life back twenty-five years. It reintroduces the reader to earlier versions of the characters we are now familiar with. It's particularly touching to remember Jo, Cork's first wife, and to recall his two daughters Annie and Jenny, all of whom play important roles in Cork's professional and personal lives. This also makes the book a good jumping on point for those who are unfamiliar with William Kent Krueger's excellent series.

That new reader will get all the necessary background to understand what is happening.

In the second, present day, section of the novel, Cork undertakes to reopen the case, questioning the remaining living witnesses, some of whom are very uncooperative. Cork was always uncertain about Axel's guilt, in spite of his confession, which makes his search for the truth all the more intense. He learns early on, due to a brutal beating he suffers, that someone out there does not want the matter investigated further. So after twenty-five years, how does one find the truth?

As always with Krueger, family and love are themes that run through his stories. Love of man and woman, parent and child, brother and sister, and friends, play integral parts in O'Connor's investigation. Aphrodite's "free love" is at the center of so many of the



puzzle pieces. Is it true, as one of the characters suggests, that family is a guarantee of nothing and certainly not love?

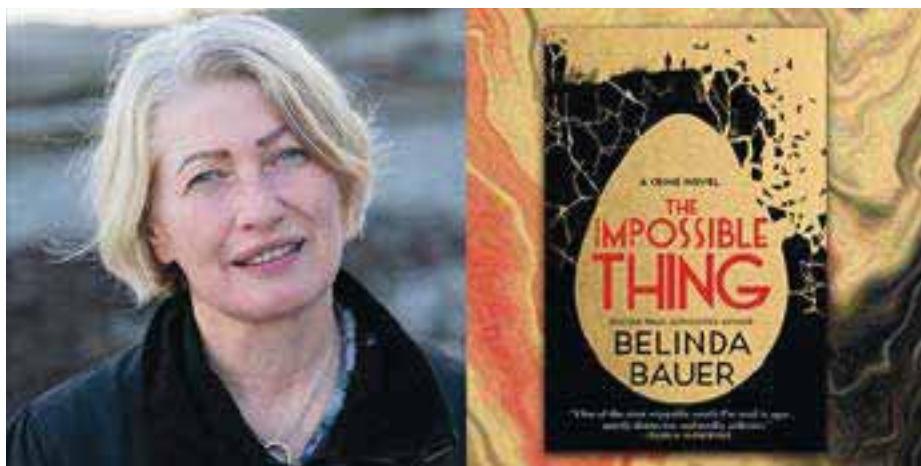
Axel wants no part of the effort to exonerate him, since he is quite content with his prison life helping others find a path for their own lives. As the Ojibwe man tells Cork, he believes that the beauty of the Creator's spirit runs through everything, healing him. In this he finds a purpose to heal others. The truth is finally revealed on a violent Halloween evening, as the dark winds of guilt and anger make their appearance in this outstanding novel, one of the best I've read this year.

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING

by Belinda Bauer
Atlantic Monthly Press, \$27.00, April
Rating: A

1926. The village of Yorkshire, England, with its seaside cliffs. Here lies the roosting place of numerous birds, the most interesting of which (at least for purposes of this story) are the guillemots. One of these birds in particular has laid a beautiful red egg which six-year-old Celie, lowered down the cliff on a rope, has managed to steal from its nest. An eager egg broker buys it from her for an exorbitant price, which in the very long run will change her life forever. A century later, thieves break into a home in Wales, attack the inhabitants, and steal a carved wooden case holding a gorgeous scarlet egg. The owner, "Weird" Nick, and his autistic friend Patrick set out to get the egg back from the thief and in the process discover the nasty world of ... *egg trafficking*. Who knew?

From sports cards to coins and stamps to comic books to automobiles, just about everyone collects something. But eggs? That's what this engagingly fascinating novel involves. It seems that for over one-hundred years, some people had been fanatics when it came to possessing these brilliantly hued eggs. I'm not talking about *Fabergé* eggs, but rather special varieties of eggs bristling with beautiful colors. Unfortunately, these eggs have to be stolen right out



from under birds in their nests. Then small holes are poked into the eggs and acid poured in to kill the embryo inside. No wonder this practice (and the ownership of these eggshells) was eventually outlawed.

Not so in 1926, but certainly illegal in the present day. So when one of the bright red eggs is stolen, reporting the theft is tantamount to admitting to the crime of ownership. So Nick and Patrick (not the brightest eggs in the basket) set out on their own to recover the egg in a series of amusing adventures, staying one step ahead of the law and one step behind the obsessive criminal “mastermind” whom they believe has the egg. Cleverly plotted, with characters you will love – and several villains across the century you might just hate – the story moves along swiftly. The author even makes the poor birds that have lost their one egg for the year sympathetic. The settings are believable, with period details woven into the descriptions. The plot is unlike any I’ve read before and it will keep you entertained from the century-old thefts of the birds’ eggs right up to the final suspenseful pages.

In **THE IMPOSSIBLE THING**, based on a real-life incident, Belinda Bauer does the *near* impossible thing, creating a fascinating, original, and charming story about egg trafficking. This too is one of the best novels I’ve read this year.

George’s Take: **THE IMPOSSIBLE THING** is a tour-de-force of creative

plotting. Who would ever think that a mystery about an egg would be so clever and captivating? I can only imagine the blank stares that Belinda Bauer received when this story was pitched to her publisher. Thank heavens they have faith in her talent or we would never have had the wonderful experience of reading this exceptional mystery. **Rating: A**

HISTORY LESSONS

by Zoe B. Wallbrook

Soho Crime, \$25.95, July 2025

Rating: C

Daphne Overture, junior professor at Harrison University, receives a mysterious text message from Sam Taylor on the night he is murdered. Taylor was on the front lines of a war against injustice, working on an exposé of a penitentiary. Daphne becomes a target of Sam’s killer, who believes she has something that Sam gave to her before he died. But she has no idea either what it was or where it might be. Initially she doesn’t mention the text to the cops but eventually comes around. She sets out to discover her alleged connection to the murdered man with the help of one of the detectives (who has turned from solving crimes to selling books), along the way stumbling on a campus cover-up that could turn deadly once again.

This debut novel was a runner-up for the Eleanor Taylor Bland Award. As a recently tenured professor herself, Zoe B. Wallbrook understands university politics and the traps into which the unwary can fall. Take, for example,

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. One of the high-ranking professors Daphne must contend with believes Harrison U. has “hired too many faculty who work on race and gender.” This lends a very up-to-date take on an issue affecting not only colleges and universities, but also many other businesses. The focus on power and its abuse was for me the highlight of the novel.

But the book, at 375 pages, was much too long to carry the plot. A hundred pages could have easily been cut, tightening up the story to a much more manageable (and interesting) length. The writing style needed more polishing, even considering that this is a first novel. There was a totally unnecessary romantic subplot between Daphne and the cop/bookstore owner that was handled more like the fantasy of a teenage girl and boy rather than adults. I was also puzzled by the cop leaving the force to run the inherited bookstore, yet his former police detective partner kept bringing him along into the investigation. Why make that change? Why not just have him remain a detective if he’s still going to do detecting?

This is the start of a series and I hope that with some more seasoning, Wallbrook will be able to correct some of these flaws to make future entries flow more smoothly.

LAST DANCE BEFORE DAWN

by Katharine Schellman

Minotaur Books, \$28.00, June 2025

Rating: B+

Vivian Kelly, speakeasy employee and dancer at the Nightingale in 1925 Manhattan, finds herself and her friends the target of a stranger from Chicago seeking to settle old scores. He believes they know where he can find the long-vanished Hugh Brown, who is tangled up in a years-old disappearance of a young girl and a truck full of cash. Vivian doesn’t know, but she finds herself tangled up in the stranger’s quest in order to protect those she loves. Some secrets may be better left buried but if they don’t come to light, Vivian could love everything she holds dear.

This is the fourth and final novel in Katharine Schellman's thoroughly entertaining queer novel series. The reader has seen Vivian Kelly grow more confident and capable over that time. It is a story of strong women meeting challenges in life, business, and love, all set against a background of jazz, illegal liquor, often crooked cops, prejudice, and violent gangsters. The straightforward plot moves smoothly and quickly to its tragic but satisfying conclusion in blood and death in Riverside Park, late at night.

The author's strength lies in her compelling characters. Vivian is resourceful but realistic about her abilities. She is not afraid to lean on others for help when needed but she'll go it herself if necessary. Both she and her sister Florence want to create better lives for themselves. They must rely on each other for protection as a man from their distant past who may just have ulterior motives returns. The author manages to bring all of these elements together in a way that should please readers of this series.

So, come on down to the Nightingale "where the gin is cold and the piano's hot . . . and all that jazz!"

THE LENGTH OF DAYS

by Lynn Kostoff

Stark House, \$15.95, July 2025

Rating: B+

Samuel Fulton is minding his own business on a rainy day when the car's service engine light flickers on. He pulls over in front of a house, from which suddenly a nearly naked young woman runs out, followed by a man closing in on her quickly. Two more women come running out of the house, heading away from Fulton's car. The man catches the first woman and, right in front of Fulton, breaks her neck, killing her instantly. The man clearly sees Fulton before he can pull away. Soon, that house is in flames and twelve more women, locked up in one of the rooms, are also dead.

This very fast-moving and entertaining (in the way that only a novel with this high of a body count can be considered "entertaining") book digs

deeply into the stories of people whose lives were affected by these deaths. The reader sees the viewpoints of the driver Fulton, who is being pursued by the killer; a "filler-and-fluff" reporter thrust into the biggest story of her career; the criminal who was "holding" the women until they could be trafficked; a slightly bent cop who is driven to a horrible act; and a man looking for one of the female runners.

Each player has something to lose, be it money, their lives, or their humanity in this dark look at sex-trafficking and its insidious effects on those it touches, no matter how innocent like Samuel Fulton they might be. This short novel, coming in at 200 pages, crackles with energy, tying the stories of each person and their fates together, making for compelling reading.

KING OF ASHES

by S. A. Cosby

Pine & Cedar/Flatiron Books, \$28.99/

ebook \$14.99, June 2025

Standalone Novel

Rating: A

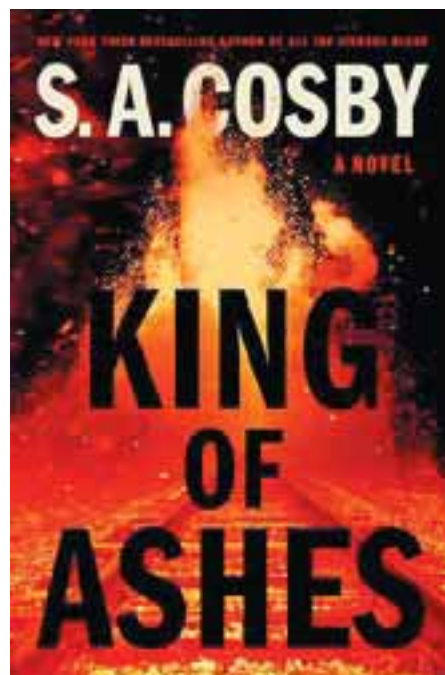
Financial adviser Roman Carruthers is called back home to Virginia after his father is in a terrible automobile accident. But the accident, which has left Roman's father in a coma, may not be an accident after all. Roman's brother,

Dante, is deeply in debt to vicious criminals who are out to recover three hundred grand owing them for drugs sold to him. Dante thought he could make a quick profit but the drugs were stolen by his partners and he is on the hook for the full amount. Ramon thinks he can reason with the gangsters but soon finds out, at the cost of one of his brother's fingers, that he cannot. So he makes a deal the only way he can, by promising to greatly increase their profits through his financial expertise and, not incidentally, disposing of bodies for the gang at the family crematorium. It's a dangerous game he's playing. Meanwhile, his sister is still seeking answers to the disappearance of their mother twenty years earlier.

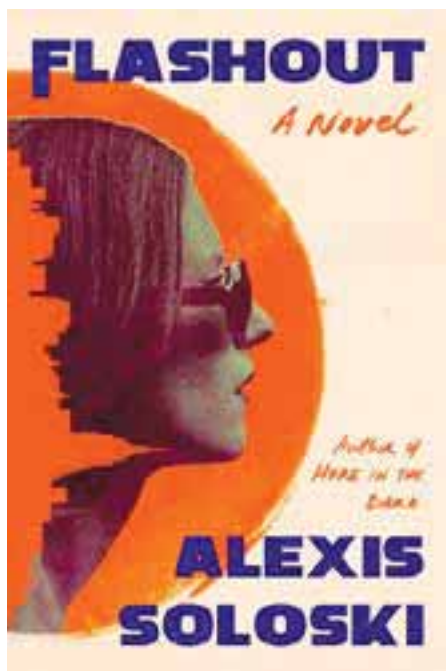
As are all of S. A. Cosby's brilliant novels, this one is dark and violently descriptive. It will not be for everyone. But for those who journey into it, they will find it to be compulsive reading. Cosby knows the brutal underbelly of life and expresses it with his elegant prose. This is Southern Noir at its finest and most intense. The richly drawn and complex characters will remain with the reader for a long time. We see them at their best – and frequently also at their worst, good and bad within each of them. Over all of them hangs a cloud of doom, one that will suck them into it, one at a time, until lives and souls are destroyed.

This novel is action-packed, filled with sudden and awful violence. It comes to us from an author who is getting better with each of his novels, slices of life of the Black experience in America. It is not a pretty picture by any means. Yet what Cosby does here in chilling detail is shine a light on the evil side of the human condition. Shocking buried secrets are exposed one by one, yet the author still can make the reader sympathize with his protagonists even when they are at their worst. It is a remarkable feat, handled smoothly, as he weaves his many plotlines together.

For Roman, saving his family was everything. It was his goal and he sets out to do it in a most imaginative way. The means to that end were justified in his mind. But could it really end in



anything other than ashes? Make no mistake: this is actually a love story – love of family, love of man and woman – wrapped in a blood-soaked shattering tragedy, proving once and for all that everything burns. This is getting to be a familiar refrain, but it is also one of the best novels I've read this year.



FLASHOUT

by Alexis Soloski

Flatiron Books, \$27.99, August 2025

Rating: B

1972. New York City. Allison/Alice Haze and her friend Rachel head for the lights of Times Square to see what has been described to her as a life-changing show put on by an experimental performance troupe—and in fact it does just that. It isn't long before she leaves college behind (not her choice) and joins the group for what will turn out to be its final performances. Jump ahead to Los Angeles in 1997 where Ali is now a teacher at a private school. She begins receiving disturbing notes from some unknown person in her past, telling things that could destroy her present. What can she do to protect her carefully constructed new life and who will she have to do it to?

This second novel by the author of the well-received **HERE IN THE DARK** is a dark, sexual, and disturbing

novel filled with characters that are not particularly likeable. Alice's search for meaning, for freedom from her past, in her quest to change the world (like so many 18-year-olds who want Paradise here and now) teaches her that Paradise is just one more story, that she can't go home again.

Alexis Soloski is a solid writer, with the ability to slowly draw the reader into Alice's world and into her mind. The reader sees how her life has changed drastically in the twenty-five year span of the story, told in chapters alternating smoothly between the two time periods. The atmospheric style creates part of the suspense, as Soloski slowly dribbles clues throughout the story pointing to awful events of the past which shape the life Alice leads in 1997. Is the freedom she sought back then merely another prison for her in the present?

This novel will hold the reader to the final reveals, the suspense layered in just the right amounts until the consequences of her past actions burst through to the light of day.

THE INNS (AND OUTS) OF COURT

PARK AVENUE

by Renée Ahdieh

Flatiron Books, \$28.99/eBook \$14.99,

June 2025

Rating: B

One night young Jia Song, daughter of Korean bodega owners, has a vision of her late grandfather. He tells her that she is the one who will take care of her family, that she is destined for true greatness. Taking this as a sign, she becomes an attorney in a very high-powered Manhattan law firm. Mere days after becoming a junior partner, she is assigned to assist a senior partner with a wealthy new client embroiled in a serious family argument. She is asked mainly because she can speak Korean. The argument is over the division of the family assets in a divorce where the mother is dying, the husband is living with his pregnant lover, the adult children barely tolerate each other, and

hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake. And, of course, everyone is lying, including Jia, it turns out. Naturally murder and blackmail follow.

Renée Ahdieh's adult debut novel is much more than a glimpse into the lives of Korean-American families. It becomes clearer with each interaction that the families have dark secrets, even among themselves. Family members conspire with each other against other family members, perhaps even trying to undermine Jai Song's investigation. Violations of legal ethics (yes, there is such a thing!) abound. Questions of "what is right" versus "what is justice" proliferate.

However, there are some problems with the book. First, there is simply too much emphasis on product placement, cuisine, and fashion. Yes, those added some details of Korean lifestyle but the excessive amounts just got in the way of the story. Full paragraphs (or more) on watches, \$25,000 Japanese whiskey, name-brand clothing, and the like were unnecessary. Further, every few chapters the story was interrupted by an anonymous writer's interlude. It was designed to intrigue the reader and provide a major surprise near the end, but it was intrusive. It stopped the action with its frequency.

Still, it's an interesting rags-to-riches



tale of a young woman who makes good use of her upbringing when she is representing a wealthy-beyond-belief family being torn apart by money and hatred. Can she find a way to bring peace out of dreams, justice out of moral ambiguity, and miracles out of regrets?

HEY GROWNUPS! COMICS!!

THE COLLECTED WILL EISNER'S JOHN LAW

by Will Eisner and Gary Chaloner
Hard Case Crime/Titan Comics
\$24.99, March
Rating: B+

In the world of the graphic novel, no creator stands out more than Will Eisner. In fact the top honor in the “all in color for a dime” world is the Eisner Award, the comics equivalent of the Edgar Award in the mystery field. So it was a pleasure to see this hardcover collection of Eisner’s short-lived 1948 “John Law Detective” stories. In addition to those four tales, the book also has an informative introduction by Denis Kitchen, founder of Kitchen Sink Press

and publisher of many prominent and innovative creators in the comics field, and a complete collection John Law stories by Gary Chaloner, who – with Eisner’s approval – continued the series beginning in 2001.

Eisner, who died in 2005, created the long-running and wildly experimental Spirit comic (1940-1952), printed in Sunday newspapers as a separate comicbook-sized supplement. He popularized the term “graphic novel” with the publication of his classic novel **A CONTRACT WITH GOD**. At one point, when Eisner was running short on time in producing the Spirit section, he cannibalized the unused John Law material, retouched the artwork, and used it for four Spirit stories. One of the most well-known Spirit adventures involved a femme fatale named Sand Serif, who originally was in two of the John Law stories and was redone for the Spirit Sunday comic!

This new edition is in four parts: the original John Law tales written and drawn by Eisner; the John Law/Spirit connection; character profiles and rare art; and Chaloner’s stories. The stories are a mix of crime, supernatural, and noir. They are tales about an honest cop



in a dishonest town, a version of L.A. and Hollywood. John Law is surrounded by an ensemble of strange and interesting characters, including his own femme fatale, all of whom help bring these stories to life.

The stories are reproduced in stunning black-and-white art, collected in the order they were meant to be in. Additionally, Chaloner has added a never-before published story showing the direction that the series might have taken, had it continued. This is a collection worth having on your graphic novel shelf.



Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith



A few books and comics that got to me this time, for various reasons. It's been a weird summer, so far.

HATCHET GIRLS

by Joe R. Lansdale
Mulholland, \$30.00, August
Hap & Leonard #14

What is it about Texas and pigs?

Lansdale's latest has the best porker-related pull quote from a book opening since Larry McMurty had Augustus McCrae bitching that "Pigs on the porch just made things hotter" in the Pulitzer-winning **LONESOME DOVE**.

Now, in Joe R. Lansdale's latest, exasperated sometime-private eye and lapsed hippie Hap Collins is speaking to a woman who wants to hire the firm (owned by Hap's always pragmatic wife, Brett) to deal with her next-door neighbor's unusually aggressive four-hundred pound hog. "Lady, we're a private detective agency, not swine management," he tries to explain.

Sure, things have been kinda slow at the agency lately, but due to a "number of fortunate financial breaks over the past few years," Hap could easily afford to blow her off.

The catch is that Hap is bored to death. And sorta lonely. His wife Brett is off somewhere, and his best friend and longtime partner in badassery, Leonard Pine (Black, gay, violent, if you're new to this acclaimed series), hasn't been around much lately. He's off spending time with his fiancé and local cop Poochie, and contemplating buying into a downtown martial arts studio. But Hap is by nature a good-hearted kinda guy, still clinging to his battered ideals, and when he hears the giant hog is a threat to not just the woman but her kids, he reluctantly agrees, and ropes in

Leonard to help out. After all, it's just an unruly hog. Right?

Turns out this little piggy isn't actually demonic — it's just whacked out on meth, freely sampled from the neighbor's drug lab.

One thing leads to another, though, and Hap and Leonard have no idea of "how ugly things were going to get." And boy, do they get really ugly. Soon enough, a simple case of porcine trespassing leads to a bloody East Texas smorgasbord of corruption, drug-dealing and a murderous cult of women, led by a charismatic but off-the-rails leader, who are possessed of an unsettling fondness for knives, dangers and, yes, hatchets.

Torture, mutilation, meth and murder abound, and the whole thing is awash in severed limbs, brain and gore. Possibly the most disturbing and unsettling stuff I've come across since I read that car crash scene in Henry Gregor Felsen's **HOT ROD** when I was twelve

years old.

It's a white-knuckle read, and while it may not win a Pulitzer, it's laced with bitter black humor and the plotting's relentless; a read that grabs you and shakes you by the throat. It's also.. ahem... very, very much of its time.

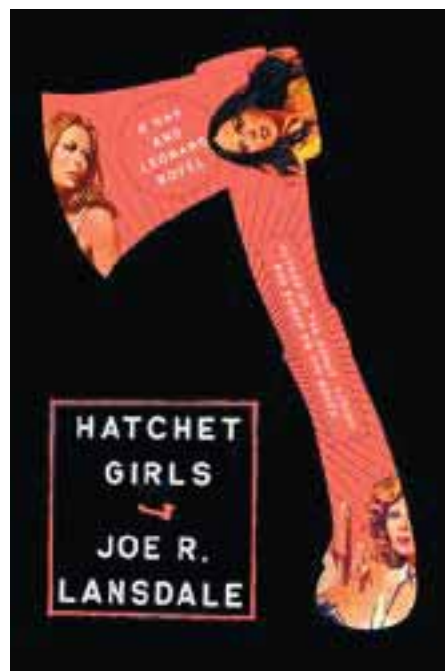
Lansdale is unapologetic; tearing deep into the guts of unchecked greed, corruption, racism, misogyny, homophobia and ideals gone horribly, horrifically awry. The lines are drawn.

As Brett, the perennial adult in the room, puts it, "Assholes come in all sexes, shapes and colors," which about sums it up. Any parallels between fiction and the reality of 2025 are purely coincidental, right?

NIGHTSHADE

by Michael Connelly
Little Brown, \$30.00, May
Detective Stillwell #1

Connelly momentarily cuts Bosch and Ballard loose, swapping all that big city grit and LAPD *sturm und drang* for a few hundred pages of sunshine, cold drinks and relaxation on Santa Catalina, twenty-odd miles off the coast. The island's a long-time playground for LA's wealthy and the Hollywood elite who have frolicked there since the 1920s (*Chaplin! Gable! Monroe!*), and a modern-day escape for those who can afford it, connected by the *Catalina Express* that regularly ferries its passengers from Long Beach on the mainland to Avalon, the island's tiny city whose tiny downtown is crammed with resorts, hotels, restaurants, touristy shops and boutiques. Cruise ships dock there. No cars downtown, though; just golf carts. And as newly appointed Sergeant Stillwell of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department soon discovers: absolutely



no crime.

Just kidding.

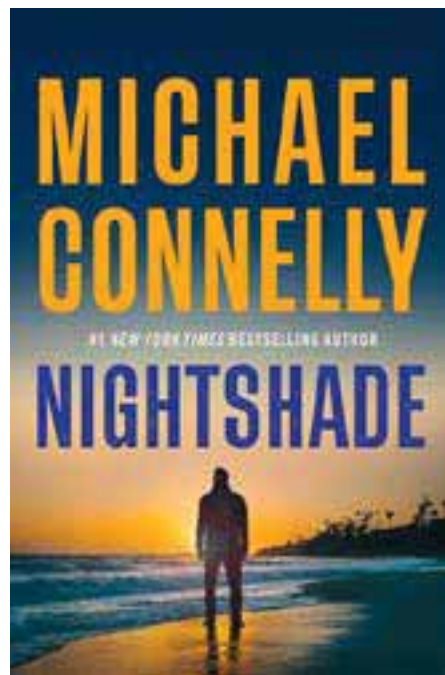
The book opens with Stillwell, in charge of the island's entire small police force and its chief cook and bottle washer, picking up a judge from the mainland, in town to preside over the weekly court. Then he's off to serve a search warrant at the local Island Mystery Tours garage and to question the mechanic, Henry Gaston, a possible suspect in the mutilation of one of the island's beloved bison who roam the hills outside of town (initially imported in the twenties, and left behind). It doesn't go well — especially when shady local business man Oscar "Baby Head" Terranova, who owns the garage, shows up. Words are exchanged.

But Stillwell's barely back to the sub-station when he gets a call from Tash Dano, local gal, assistant harbor-master and girlfriend. A worker (a barnacle scraper) has discovered a woman's body, stuck under a yacht in the harbor, and Stillwell's presence, as the island's only detective, is requested. Soon enough he's in his wetsuit, investigating the crime scene.

It's the start of a great, (mostly) fat-free thriller that introduces a promising new character, not tied down by excess baggage. Not that he's luggage-free, of course — this is Connelly, after all. Stillwell's been assigned to Catalina, a way station for the sheriff's department's "freaks and fuckups," because had a little trouble back on the mainland, where he has more than a few enemies in blue, mostly due to his often defiant stubbornness and penchant for occasionally coloring outside the lines. And naturally, in the best Boschian fashion, he's a loner at heart. Something Tash, his small staff, and he will all have to work on.

The body in the brink turns out to be that of a server at the exclusive and snooty Black Marlin yacht club, recently canned for being a little too friendly with the swells, and as Stillwell starts to look into her death, it's clear there's more than a dead buffalo at stake — and that murder and corruption aren't reserved for the mainland.

And so Stillwell's back and forth



on the *Express* constantly, racking up frequent traveler points, questioning witnesses, suspects and other members of law enforcement, in a manner reminiscent of Giles Blunt's John Cardinal or Robert B. Parker's Jesse Stone, which also feature isolated cops.

But all trails lead back eventually to the island paradise, and to his credit, Connelly's handles the setting with wit, nuance and a veteran journalist's muscle. If the relationship between Tash and Stillwell drags at times, there's also blessed relief when Connelly, not particularly known for his humour, delivers a scene worthy of a Mack Sennett one-reeler, with Stillwell's pompous mainland rival taking the equivalent of a long walk off a short pier.

Yes, there's murder and violence, but there's also a welcome breeziness to the proceedings, a unique and well-rendered setting, and a mystery that's both satisfying and engrossing enough that I'd love to see where Stillwell goes next.

More, please.

MAN WITH A THOUSAND ENEMIES

by W.R. Burnett

Stark House Crime, \$19.95, July

Published by retro press Stark House forty-five years after his death, this feisty

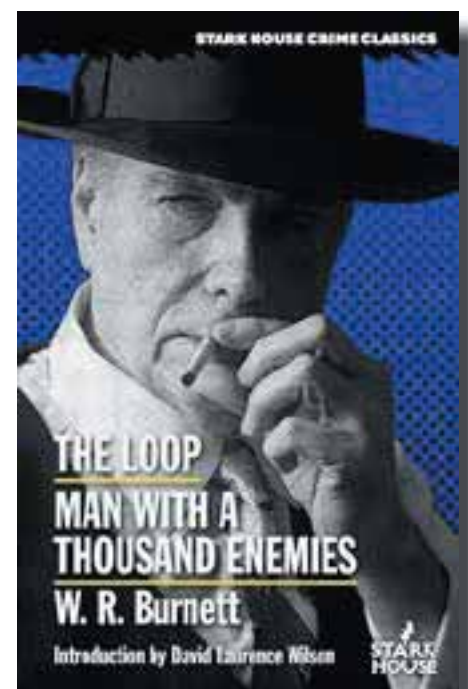
little recently discovered read may not stand with the author's classics (*THE ASPHALT JUNGLE*, *LITTLE CAESAR*), but it is a quick, satisfying blast of hard-boiled pulp: terse, taut and generally fast-paced, full of quick action and snappy patter. Sure, it's also occasionally sloppy, mawkish and confusing, but given that it was written possibly eighty or so years ago, that adds to its charm.

Thirty-year old ex-cop and ex-con Jimmy Devore is the bodyguard for Gordon Minot, the occasionally ill-tempered and impulsive middle-aged millionaire widower of the title. Minot is a piece of work; the big wheel in Steel City, owner of more than a few local businesses, including the plant that's the town's biggest employer, and the possessor of more political clout than he probably needs, or knows what to do with.

Brusque, opinionated and not always able to read the room, Minot is always quick to put Jimmy — or anyone else — in their place, and he's a difficult, if generally well-meaning, boss.

Still, Minot leaves Jimmy with little time to tend to his on/off relationship with his demanding girlfriend Eve, or the growing attraction he's feeling for Minot's daughter Jean, who also lives — as does Jimmy — on the Minot estate.

I know people are getting killed, and



there's a surprising amount of violence going on in the "good" part of town, but the whole working class Eve/rich girl Jean rivalry is a clunker of a side plot; more Betty and Veronica than expected, more wheel-spinning than plot-driving.

Especially when attempts are made on Minot's life, and various notorious criminals are spotted around town. Is it coincidence, or is there something happening?

In his savvy introduction to the collection (the publisher paired the book with *The Loop*, another unpublished novel), David Laurence Wilson speculates that *Man of a Thousand Enemies* may have been intended as a screen treatment, due to its being "episodic and character-based."

I think Wilson may have been on to something. Because the story doesn't so much flow as jump from scene to scene. And the snappy patter snaps merrily along, sorta like the machines that chatter and the roscoes that spit throughout the story.

I mean, really? Pass the popcorn.

And Stark House? Please go through those archives again. Because maybe Jimmy's got another adventure tucked away somewhere. I can't guarantee I'll love it, but I'm pretty sure I'd like it.

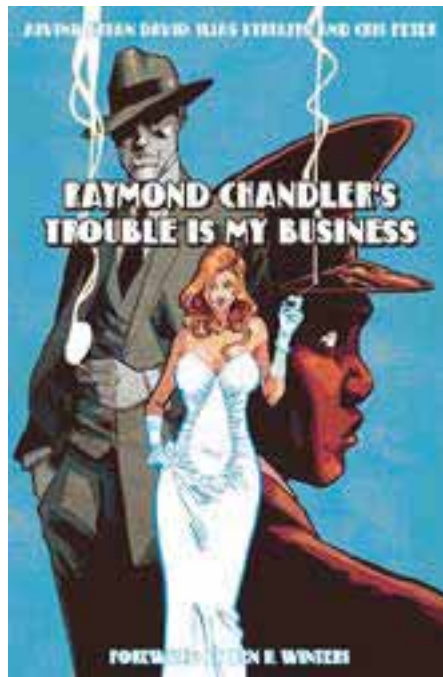
TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS

by Arvind Ethan David and
Ilias Kyriazis
Pantheon, \$29.00, May

Based on the short story by Raymond Chandler

Okay... I like comics. And this graphic novel adaptation by Arvind Ethan David of a Chandler short story deserves a mention.

An unnecessary (and unnecessarily woke one, at that) digression slows the tempo, and I'm not sure that Philip Marlowe's razor-sharp cheekbones (as drawn by illustrator Ilias Kyriazis) quite work. Honestly, while Marlowe may have been handsome, judging by the number of women who succumb to his charms in the canon, I don't picture him with the male model looks depicted here — I picture him as more Robert



Mitchum or Dick Powell. A guy tough enough to hit. Or be hit.

But so much of this is so good, particularly the often imaginative but compelling layout, the way the talk balloons cascade down some of the pages here, or the always intriguing angles of sight, so reminiscent of film noir.

And of course, this being Chandler, the plot doesn't quite make sense. I still don't get it. The oft-told tale of "Who killed the chauffeur?" becomes "Who killed the fat hand-writing expert?" I thought re-reading the original short story might help. It didn't.

But anyone reading Chandler for tightly constructed plots isn't just in the wrong pew — they're in the wrong church.

And so, Chandler is still Chandler, and thank God for that. The worldview, the bruised romanticism, the salty wise-cracks, the gimlet-eyed descriptions, the characters — it's all here.

There have been far worse adaptations (the television version of this story, starring Powers Boothe, is particularly horrid), and this is, for the most part, a respectful if unnecessary re-imagining. The introduction of a new relationship to the plot may appeal to some readers (and anger some knuckle draggers), and the fast forwarding of the story to post-WWII allows a few war-time flashbacks,

although they add relatively little.

But given that Chandler is unlikely to grace us with any new Marlowe stories anytime soon, and that the occasional cinematic adaptations have been disappointing and the recent literary adventures by the Chandler estate's various hired guns are hit-and-miss, so this is a pleasant re-visit.

CALAVERA, P.I.

by Marco Finnegan

Oh, wait. More comics!

At one point in writer/artist Marco Finnegan's recently released graphic novel (which rounds up all four issues of the mini-series of the same name), Los Angeles private eye Juan Calavera admits "I don't know what I am.

Honestly? Neither do we.

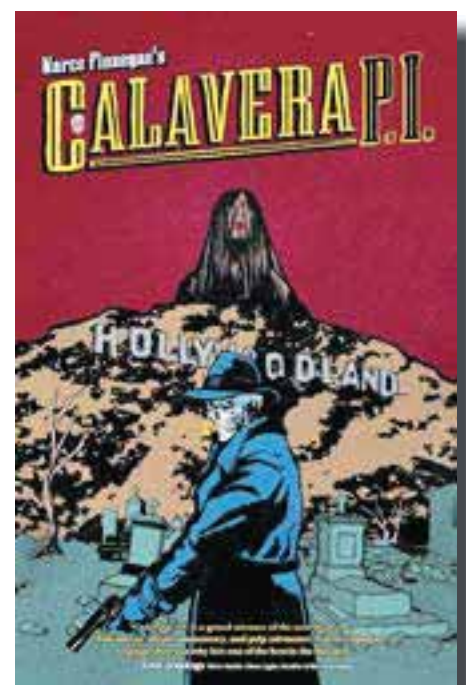
It's Dia de los Muertos in 1930, and Calavera is summoned (or is it conjured?) to help his old pal, feisty lady reporter Maria Valdez, rescue her kidnapped son; a case that may (or may not) involve human trafficking.

The only catch?

Juan's dead.

And has been for five years. Since 1925.

That's the basic premise of this trippy yarn. Finnegan, inspired by his love of film noir, detective stories, Mexican



folklore and the drawings of legendary and iconic Mexican illustrator and cartoonist Posada, has done his influences proud.

Calavera was a rough-and-tumble, hard-drinking shamus with a growing rep and an ego to match — particularly in the Hispanic neighborhoods of LA where he grew up and the cops seldom ventured — as a man you could trust.

Until he tangled with a mysterious cloaked and masked femme fatale known only as La Fantasma, and ended up shot to death when he tried to intervene in an attempted suicide.

But that was back in 1925. Five years ago. Now, on the Day of the Dead, Calavera finds himself resurrected (at least temporarily) in a Los Angeles he barely recognizes. And the city returns the favor. The Depression has not been kind to the City of Angels, and particularly to its Hispanic citizens, many of whom have been rounded up and deported.

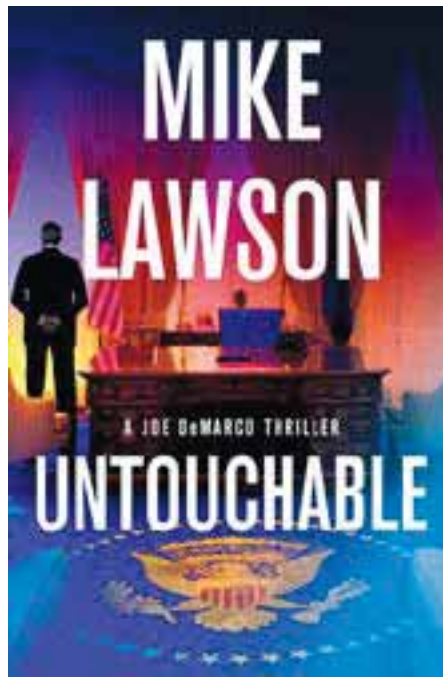
Not that anybody's going to mistake Calavera for any kind of angel — he's been reduced to a flesh-free version of his former self, his skeletal remains clad in the standard-issue fedora and trenchcoat, like one of Posada's beloved skeletons, and tasked with helping Maria find her missing son, and ensuring that justice — or what passes for it — is done.

In fact, it's largely through Maria's efforts that Calaveras has become something of a local hero in the five years since he died, promoting his legend through comic books, pulps and even films, which gives the whole affair a vaguely modern (or should I say, post-modern?) touch. But not too modern, either.

It's a deliberate throwback to an earlier, simpler time, with few subplots and all the supernatural elements presented bluntly, without much explanation. And fancy, attention-grabbing artwork? Nah. Like the story itself, it gets the job done. No apologies.

For those of you craving some pure, unadulterated pulp and don't mind walking the slippery, supernatural side of the mean streets, this is a treat.

UNTOUCHABLE



by Mike Lawson
Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, February
Joe DeMarco #18

In the latest pulse-pounding thriller from Edgar and Barry Award finalist Mike Lawson, beloved Washington DC “troubleshooter” Joe DeMarco finds himself assigned an impossible case: help take down the President of the United States.

Brandon Cartwright was a rich guy worth a couple billion bucks—inherited, of course—meaning he hadn't worked a day in his life. But he sure knew how to party, and the people he rubbed shoulders with were all sorts of rich and famous: politicians and movie stars and British royalty and Russian oligarchs. So when Brendan Cartwright is executed in his own home, the cops quickly conclude that he was most likely killed by one or more of the rich, powerful people he partied with.

But when John Mahoney, the former Speaker of the House, emerges from a clandestine meeting with the head of the National Archives, he learns there's evidence suggesting that the President of the United States was somehow involved with Cartwright's death. Mahoney needs someone who can investigate from the shadows—enter Joe DeMarco, Mahoney's fixer.

DeMarco is no stranger to hunting

down some of the very worst people Washington D.C. has to offer. In fact, he's made a career of it. But as evidence continues to point towards the President, DeMarco is faced with an impossible situation: investigating a man who is quite literally untouchable.

And if that's not enough, check out “Ella,” a new novella featuring DeMarco, now available digitally and in audio.

On George's Nightstand

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

THE GHOSTWRITER,

Julie Clark

THE GOOD LIAR, Denise Mina

FROZEN PEOPLE, Elly Griffiths

RUTH RAN, Elizabeth Kaufman

CLOSING TIME,

Michael Ludwidge

THE CHEMIST, A. A. Dhand

THE PROVING GROUND,

Michael Connolly

TWO KINDS OF STRANGER,

Steve Cavanagh

THE FINAL VOW,

M. W. Craven

Already read for the next issue -

THE HAWK IS DEAD,

Peter James

DYING CRY,

Margaret Mizushima

WILD INSTINCT,

T. Jefferson Parker

THE BURNING STONES

Antti Tuomainen

DEAD RINGER,

Chris Hauty

INSIDE MAN,

John McMahon

BLOOD OATH,

Steve Urszenyi

AT MIDNIGHT COMES THE CRY,

Julia Spencer-Fleming'

Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

By Arthur Conan Doyle

Rating: A

THE WILD ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Volumes Two, Three, Four and Five

By Will Murray

Odyssey Publications, \$24.95, June 2020,

Sept. 2023, April 2024, May 2025

General Rating: B+

A long road trip to the mid-west at the beginning of July prompted me to give my Audio/Kindle/Hard Copy treatment (wherein I hop from medium to medium, depending on where I find myself) to Arthur Conan Doyle's **THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES**, originally published in 1905. I had a great time with it, especially revisiting "The Case of the Empty House," Doyle's first Holmes story after "The Final Problem," which infamously (seemingly) chronicled the Consulting Detective's tragic demise at the Reichenbach Falls. The baker's dozen of tales featured in **RETURN** made the 1600-mile round trip far more enjoyable than it might have been otherwise.

Arriving home, I felt compelled to dip into several volumes of Holmes tales penned by one of my "old" reliables, Mr. Will Murray. Thus, I revisited **THE WILD ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES** Volume Two, and subsequently cracked the spines (figuratively, you KNOW I'm absurdly careful in how I handle my trade paperbacks) of Volumes 3, 4 and 5.

If you're a fan of the bloody pulps, and/or action/adventure, you might already be familiar with Mr. Murray's admirable work, as he has romped in

numerous several fictional sandboxes over the course of his illustrious career, having penned novels featuring Tarzan, John Carter of Mars, The Destroyer, Doc Savage, The Spider, and The Shadow. He continued in this vein with his first collection of Sherlock Holmes short stories, **THE WILD ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES**, published back in June of 2020. As noted above, he has often returned to that milieu, with welcome success.

Each Volume contains ten tales, which consistently hit all the expected grace notes; Murray's admiration of and affection for Doyle's Dynamic Duo fuel every story. Although Murray's respect for Holmes's creator is palpable, he's not reluctant to expand the boundaries of Doyle's fictional territory a bit. There are three stories in Volume 2 which find the Consulting Detective and the stalwart Dr. Watson crossing paths with Algeron Blackwood's "Physician Extraor-

dinary," Dr. John Silence. Volume 3 features stories which will resonate with fans of H. G. Wells and H. P. Lovecraft. John Silence makes another appearance in Volume 4, which otherwise features more traditional Holmes stories. Volume 5 contains a pair of stories featuring Murray's own brainchild, the criminalist Reynard Renbourne, advisor to the Underworld. He joins another Murray creation, Giles Greengold, who made his initial bow in Volume 4, but whose "malign presence" is also felt in the final (so far) volume.

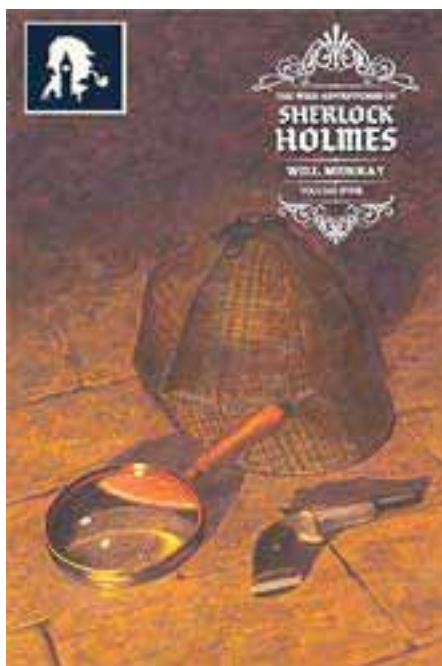
KNIGHT OF DARKNESS: THE LEGEND OF THE SHADOW

By Will Murray

Odyssey Publications, \$29.95, July

Rating: B+

Mr. Murray's journalistic skills are on prominent display in **KNIGHT OF DARKNESS: THE LEGEND OF THE SHADOW** (a companion volume of sorts to two previous non-fiction tomes, **MASTER OF MYSTERY: THE RISE OF THE SHADOW** and **DARK AVENGER: THE STRANGE SAGA OF THE SHADOW**) which compiles a number of informative and entertaining articles and interviews about the origins of the legendary pulp character. I found it fascinating for the information I gleaned from it regarding The Shadow in comic books, and on Street & Smith editor John R. Nanovic, who graduated from the University of Notre Dame some five decades before I did. I didn't know it at the time, but I roomed with his great nephew James while I was there. I only discovered the connection while reading another of Murray's books, **THE DUENDE HISTORY OF THE SHADOW MAGAZINE** (1980),



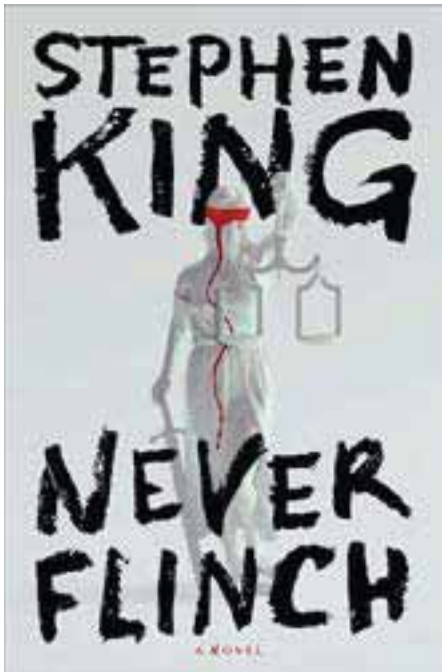
shortly after I graduated.

OUR SECRETS WERE SAFE

By Victoria French
Crown, \$28.00, July

Rating: B

There's a definite "I Know What You Did Last Summer" vibe to Victoria Trench's first novel, **OUR SECRETS WERE SAFE** as an unknown antagonist threatens to expose past misdeeds of the book's lead characters a decade after they occurred. Trench handles the tropes extremely well, giving new meaning to the term "frenemies," as the book's protagonists (you can't call the heroes, oh no...) learn some extremely painful lessons about who they can trust.



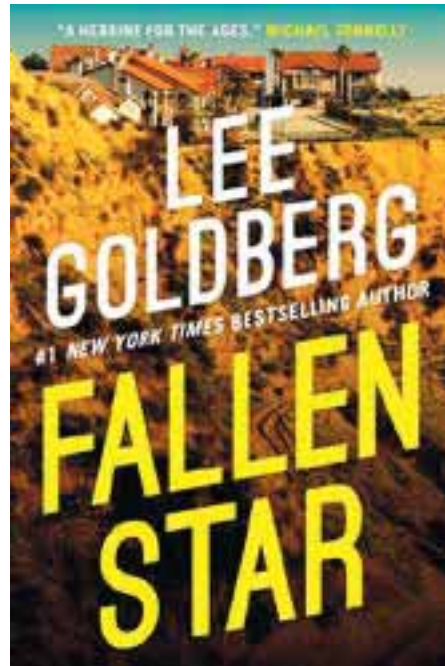
NEVER FLINCH

By Stephen King
Scribner, \$32.00, May

Rating: B

Stephen King's latest is **NEVER FLINCH**, featuring the intrepid Holly Gibney, previously featured in his Bill Hodges Trilogy, **THE OUTSIDER**, **HOLLY** and the novella, "If It Bleeds." I usually revel in all things King (going on fifty years now), but I think I might have reached saturation re: Holly at this point. The book definitely has its

moments, but Holly's intuition seems almost too spot on at times, and the killer's motive didn't really resonate with this most constant of readers. The book is ostensibly "about" a serial killer, but it's mostly about the nature of addiction and obsession, and the way folks try to deal with those maladies.



FALLEN STAR

By Lee Goldberg
Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99, October
Eve Ronin #6

Rating: A

The sixth Eve Ronan procedural finds the LASD Detective in what seems to be an untenable situation when developments in a new case raise questions about the resolution of an older case, one in which Eve and her partner Duncan Pavone were unavoidably complicit in tidying/covering up. I enjoyed this latest visit to Goldberg's "Ronin-verse," treasuring the appearances of familiar faces and references to prior novels and series. I understand that this series, which has always been pretty "Meta," (Eve is somewhat of a media darling, in that she's prematurely promoted due to a viral video, and subsequently gets caught up in a television show about her exploits) will probably become even more so, as a new streaming tv series, featuring Madison Lintz as Eve Ronan,

has been announced in the so-called real world.

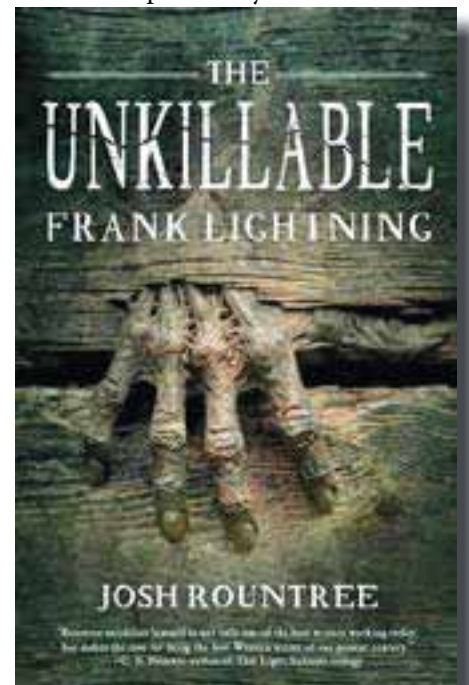
George's Take: If you are looking for a new series to latch onto, I would recommend this one. All six of the books in the series are easy, quick reads. But don't take that to mean that they are superficial in nature. The continuing characters are quite three-dimensional and still growing. The settings are wonderfully described and the plots are quite Michael Connelly-esque. My recommendation would for you to read them in order, **Rating: A-**

THE UNKILLABLE FRANK LIGHTNING

By Josh Rountree
Tachyon, \$17.95, July

Rating: A

Set in turn of the twentieth century Texas, **THE UNKILLABLE FRANK LIGHTNING** is a retelling of Mary Shelley's debut novel set in turn of the century Texas, spanning a twenty-six-year period from 1879 to 1905. Rountree's elevator pitch for the book was "Frankenstein in a Wild West show," but it far more than that; it's a story of love, devotion, compassion, loyalty and duty, peppered with killing and almost unbelievable mayhem, a Gothic Western sure to please any horror aficionado.



do. Fans of Joe R. Lansdale will have a grand old time with this one.

THE LEGEND OF CHARLIE FISH

By Josh Rountree

Tachyon, 2023

Rating: A

After finishing **FRANK LIGHTNING**, I quickly ordered the book's predecessor, **THE LEGEND OF CHARLIE FISH**, with the goal of finding more out about the backstory of one of **LIGHTNING**'s more memorable characters, the young gunslinger Hank Abernathy. The book, set against the backdrop of the Great Storm of Galveston, Texas, features a chain-smoking, blue blooded gill man (ala *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*). Once again, I was inordinately impressed by Rountree's prose and storytelling, and his exploration of just who the real monsters might be. He drops many hints about other strange creatures roaming the wilds of Texas in both books; here's hoping he gets to explore all the myths he feels inclined to.

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS: MASTER OF ADVENTURE

By Richard Lupoff

(Ace, 1968)

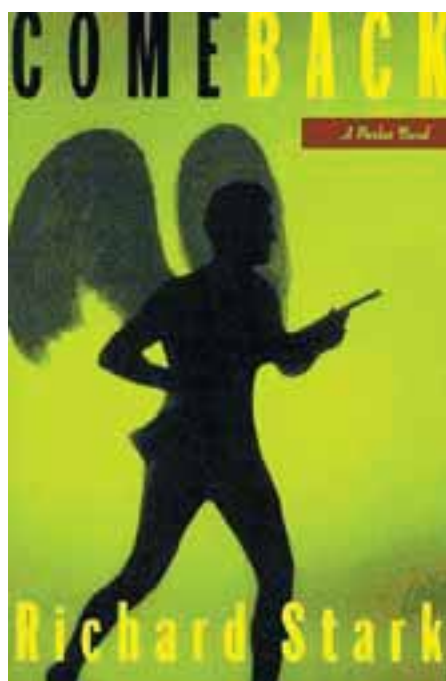
Rating: B+

Published way back 1965, with an "revised and enlarged" Ace paperback edition published in 1968, **EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS: MASTER OF ADVENTURE** is one of the first, if not THE first, works of scholarship about Mr. Burroughs, creator of Tarzan of the Apes and John Carter of Mars, among others. More a review/overview of all his works, it makes for great reading, especially in its Ace paperback edition (old book smell, oh my). The book also benefits from a plethora of illustrations from the likes of Al Williamson, Reed Crandell, and Frank Frazetta.

COMEBACK

By Richard Stark

Mysterious Press, 1997



Rating: B+

1997's **COMEBACK**, by Donald E. Westlake writing as Richard Stark, is exactly that, a welcome return by the esteemed author to the world of professional thief and all-around tough guy Parker. Westlake had been away from that world for nearly a quarter of a century at that point, but it didn't show at all, as Parker and associates extract nearly half a million dollars in "love offerings" from a shady religious outfit hosting a revival at a stadium (a heist similar in a lot of ways to the one depicted in **THE SEVENTH**, reviewed last issue). Following his successful formula (developed and perfected over the course of twenty previous adventures), Westlake has things slide sideways, as Parker is forced to contend with disloyal colleagues, his victim's security outfit, and, of course, the cops. I believe there were seven follow-ups to this great read, all well worth your time.

DR. WERTHLESS

By Harold Schechter and Eric Powell

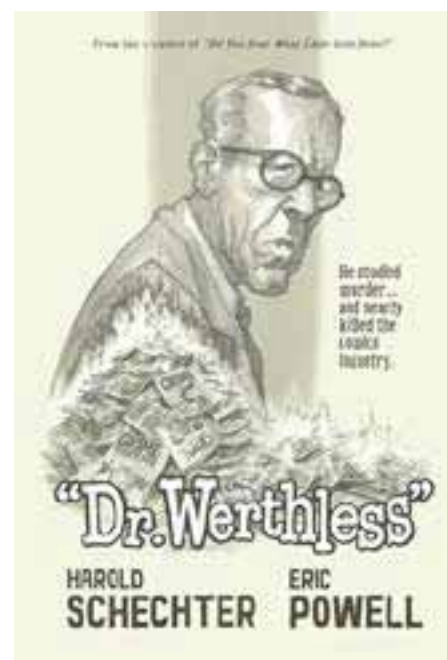
Dark Horse, \$29.99, July

Rating: A

DR. WERTHLESS is an interesting

and informative graphic novel about Dr. Fredric Wertham, the man who almost single-handedly caused the mass extinction of comic books in the nineteen fifties, via his crusade to point out the inherent dangers and evils of the medium. It's a fascinating, straightforward, and unbiased look at a complex individual, detailing numerous facets of the life and history of the man who "studied murder...and nearly killed the comics industry." It was written by true crime scribe (and serial killer expert) Harold Schechter, and Eric Powell (probably most famous for his creation of the comic book anti-hero known as "The Goon"); Powell also illustrates in his unique style, which manages to evoke Will Eisner, Mike Ploog, Jack Davis, and Jack Kirby.

I would be remiss if I didn't also recommend Schechter and Powell's stellar first effort, 2021's **DID YOU HEAR WHAT EDDIE GEIN DONE?** Yes, it's about THAT Eddie Gein, the man whose bizarre behavior provided inspiration for books like Robert Bloch's **PSYCHO** and Thomas Harris' **SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**, and movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. You'll read it with a mixture of dread and fascination: it's truly a *Deadly Pleasure*.



The Cozy - Traditional Mystery Cafe'

Robin Agnew Reviews



A LESSON IN DYING

By Ann Cleeves
Minotaur, \$18. Re-release. March.
Inspector Ramsay #1
Rating: A

This welcome re-release of the first book in Ann Cleeves' Inspector Ramsay series, originally published in 1990, is a pure delight. Our bookstore (open 1992-2018) was lucky enough to have many of these now collectible volumes on our shelves. Before breaking out with her Vera books in 1999 the hardworking writer produced two now completed series, one centering on bird-watching, and this debut in the Ramsay series, a real, golden age gem.

Of course, the golden age of mystery ended many decades before this series began, but Cleeves follows many of the plotting and set up tropes familiar to any fan of the classics. Set in a small village, the book begins when the much hated school headmaster of the insular community is done away with at a combination Halloween/Guy Fawkes party for the school kids. To the natives, all of whom are more than familiar with each other, Inspector Ramsey seems like an

exotic creature who appears from above to swoop in to solve the crime.

There are children underfoot, of course, but they don't really figure into the story, which takes a deep dive into the inner lives of the school's teachers and parents. The dead man's wife is speedily arrested, but Jack Robson, the school custodian and local councilor who has carried a torch for the accused woman since high school, is convinced she's not guilty. He teams up with his friendly and somewhat directionless daughter Patty, to investigate, finding much needed purpose and closeness along the way.

Inspector Ramsay lurks at the edges of the story, as they keep him updated on their discoveries. Patty lurches like a friendly puppy from one home to another, offering comfort where she can, while her father's wheels turn a bit more efficiently, allowing him to be the one who actually cracks the case.

Cleeves' genius is already apparent here. If it's slightly more traditional and less amped up than some of her later works, her characteristic evocative setting and presentation of the characters as complex human beings with flaws and saving graces are all present, as is a plot both obvious and unexpected. And Cleeves, like her golden age forerunners, lays a fair groundwork for her complex solution.

Unlike those golden agers, however, there's quite a bit more fleshing out of her characters and an emphasis on their psychological underpinnings. The tone is darker than an Agatha Christie book, but not that much darker, really, as Christie was no stranger to the horror show life can become, but Cleeves, as a modern writer, is able to be more frank in her depictions of those horrors.

This is also a propulsively plotted book which, like its classic predecessors, is hard to put down, quite liable to be picked up one evening at sunset and finished....well, perhaps at sunrise next morning. Ann Cleeves is a modern treasure. as rich as any from mystery's golden past.

GLORY DAZE

By Danielle Arceneaux
Pegasus, March, \$27.95
Glory Broussard #2
Rating: A

This series, featuring an absolute genius creation of a main character is a delightful breath of fresh air. Glory Broussard, of LaFayette, Louisiana, is a divorcee of a certain age who suffers from arthritis, loves the Commodores (and really, who doesn't?), and works part time as a bookie in her favorite coffee shop on Sunday afternoons.

She's shocked when her ex's new wife, Valerie, shows up at her "place of business" on a Sunday and asks her to track down Sterling, her former husband. Even though she's had as little to do with her successor as possible, she finds herself agreeing.

Unfortunately, when she finds him, he's in the kitchen of a rented duplex with a knife through his heart. Naturally, there's lots of fallout. Glory and Ster-



ling's heartbroken daughter, Delphine, rushes home for the funeral, and Valerie insists that since Glory's had such sleuthing success finding their missing man, she should discover who killed him as well. A reluctant heroine, part of Glory's charm is her terrible attitude – she's pretty rude to Valerie who seems to be a decent person, and she finds the fact that Valerie and Delphine get along well to be a major irritant.. However, despite her qualms, she, Delphine and Valerie manage to form a team to uncover what happened.

Their sleuthing eventually takes them to the stable and a casino where Sterling was working when he died. Lots of things seem off there and there's a fantastic moment where Glory dresses up to go "undercover" at the Casino (she's very good at Blackjack) to see what she can winkle out. Unfortunately, she gets drunk and makes a spectacle of herself at a Commodores concert. The whole scene is expertly written, funny, and sad at the same time.

These books are essentially private eye novels, and despite the fact that Glory is an extremely unlikely one, she still gets results. Though unpaid, she does what every private eye in history has ever done: drive around and ask questions. Her car may be a Honda CRV and she may be a member of the Red Hat society, but she's still a private eye.

Glory is also dealing with the fact that she's taken on the Red Hat Mardi Gras celebration and is woefully behind in the prep, to the point where she's missed ordering the crucial king cake. Luckily, another nemesis, Constance, steps in to help and between the two of them manage to make it work.

Adding some extra oomph to the plot is Delphine's chef girlfriend, Justice, who arrives from New York to offer condolences and steps in when a king cake is needed. Glory, along with solving the crime, mends some bridges along the way and maybe even learns not to hold on to some resentments so tightly. However, you have to hope she doesn't completely mellow out, because it's those thorny warring instincts that make her character absolute reading gold.

The author does not condescend to this character, and obviously loves her, her faults and foibles making her a compelling, if not always completely loveable human. An utterly classic character, Glory feels so real that if she were to walk into your coffee shop or church you'd recognize her immediately. Arceneaux is also a great storyteller, so these books are a win in every way for the lucky reader.

THE CASE OF THE ELUSIVE BOMBAY DUCK

By Tarquin Hall
Severn House, \$29.99, March
Vish Puri #6
Rating: B+

You may not know that the world's greatest detective is Delhi based Vish Puri, but if you read this sweetly sunny book you will immediately find yourself fascinated by his family and work life. As the story opens, Vish has just been named "International Detective of the Year," but, unfortunately, the "confidential" news has leaked prematurely, and his office is quickly deluged with congratulatory phone calls and sweets. Even worse, his mother phones to inform him that she plans to accompany him and his wife to London for the award ceremony, which an unwelcome associate has also pledged to attend.

Then Puri is summoned by a high up bureaucrat and instructed to find a notorious disgraced businessman who has fled to London with his ill-gotten millions, leaving in his wake victims of a medication that caused deaths rather than a cure. It seems rather a full plate, and even more, his investigation must take place without the knowledge of the diplomats in London.

He has so much on his mind when he boards the plane for London that his wife has to secretly drug him to overcome his fear of flying. When they land, he's irritated by the long line at customs and by the fact that he'll apparently have to shlep his own luggage (a friend had warned him that the West is "DIY"). It doesn't help that when they arrive at the cousin's where they are to stay and he discovers to his dismay that not only is

she vegan, she's also a terrible cook.

Puri, however, soldiers on and reaches out to an old friend at Scotland Yard to find information on the whereabouts of the missing millionaire, dubbed by his friend the "Bombay Duck." Puri also has operatives back in Delhi watching the man's wife, and they are sure she's planning to make a run for it. Meanwhile, his own wife is delighted to be in London and wants to see all the sights there are to see. My favorite scene may have been high tea at the Savoy that Puri somehow ends up paying for in the hopes of spotting his quarry.

While still trying to accompany his wife when possible, he's assisted in his investigation by his young cousin, who speaks and behaves like a Londoner with the addition of some impressive tech skills and street smarts. Hall obviously loves these characters and every one of them is beautifully delineated. They would have appeared wooden on the page if there had been any kind of condescension on his part, but instead, they are fully alive, and while Puri can indeed be a bit ridiculous, he gets his man via some very sharp investigation.

He's also ably assisted by his incredibly observant mother who sees through him at every turn. Even his young cousin tells Puri to give her a break – she may irritate him (she's his mother, after all) but she knows what she's talking about. This concisely told tale is stuffed full of plot and wonderful characters. I had no problem starting with book six, but also now feel somewhat compelled to seek out the earlier books, with the worry that the delicious food described so vividly by Hall will make me want to order up too much Butter Chicken myself!

KILLS WELL WITH OTHERS

By Deanna Raybourn
Berkley, \$29, March
Killers of a Certain Age #2
Rating: A

This is the second in Raybourn's delicious, breakout series, which follows a group of sixty something lady assassins. These silver killers work for an organization called "The Museum," with

a mission of eliminating those who are doing serious wrong (originally Nazis) in a way that the deaths can't be traced and don't appear to be murder. The first book was a smorgasbord of beautifully executed death vignettes, each one a sharp and precise how-dunnit. It also introduced the main characters, Billie, Natalie, Helen and Mary Alice, who were on an enforced "retirement cruise" when it became clear they themselves were the targets, and were forced to take matters into their own hands.

The women, now technically retired, are called back to work by an old colleague who believes that the child of one of their past targets is bent on revenge. So, again the hunted, they get back to work, this time on board the Queen Mary II, their target occupying the swankiest possible suite. The assassination that follows is as clever and entertaining as anything in the first book, which is high praise.

Like the first one, this novel has a few different timelines, but, now that the origin story of the women is out of the way, this instalment is able to maintain more focus. There are some trips back in time, with subplots that eventually tie into the main story, and though this can be a tedious story telling method, in Raybourn's expert hands it's absolutely delightful and serves to illuminate rather than slow the action.

After their kill, they return to Helen's home in the UK only to find it in the process of burning to the ground. It becomes clear that their victim had deadly baggage, and the resulting going to ground and figuring out exactly who is after them becomes a memorable chase sequence. As the women undergo extreme travel and a series of attempts on their lives, I was reminded of the immortal Mrs. Pollifax, a hardy late in life adventurer and unlikely CIA agent who undergoes trauma, extreme travel and many adventures because of her profession.

While this book centers on four women, rather than just one, there's a similar feel and spirit to the Mrs. Pollifax series, though Raybourn's take is updated and a lot more lethal. The slow fleshing out of their various personal

lives is also well done, as we learn their backstories and take a closer look at the organization they have worked for, with a focus on Billie.

Pro reader tip: I would not miss one scene where the women don their disguises – often travel pants from Chico's. Raybourn has a funny and affectionate pen, and this book is as relentlessly entertaining, appealing and well told as the first one. I already miss these well-meaning assassins and hope to see more of them.

VERA WONG'S GUIDE TO SNOOPING ON A DEAD MAN

By Jesse Q. Sutanto

Berkley, \$30.00; Paperback, \$19; April

Vera Wong #2

Rating: A



These books are like comfy, beautiful pillows for your brain, and, let me tell you, these days that's not a bad thing. Vera, the heroine of the series, is the 60 something widow who, in the first book, finds a dead body in the middle of her formerly obscure tea shop, ultimately finding friends and a purpose in the act of solving a murder. Vera is opinionated, bossy, maternal, and an excellent cook, who, as the book opens, gets a scam phone call which cons her into sharing her social security number and

even a photo of her driver's licence.

Realizing she's been had, she loads up some food and heads to the police station to look up her son's cop girlfriend Selena (whom she refers to already as her daughter in law) and ask for help. As the putative future daughter in law helps her out, the food she's brought vanishes while the cops clean up what could have ended up as a very nasty situation.

As Vera leaves the police station, she encounters a lost looking young girl, Millie, who she takes back to the tea shop, making her some tea and trying to find out what's bothering her. Millie tells her that her friend Thomas has vanished and she's worried about him, but she flees before Vera can find out more. When the young man is found dead, allegedly a suicide, Vera pursues the case instantly, despite Selena's repeated insistence that she stay out of it.

Ignoring Selena, Vera not only befriends Millie, but also an influencer named Aimes who knew Thomas as Xander, as well as Thomas/Xander's talent manager, TJ. She also discovers that the departed's "grandfather" is a neighboring store owner who met him in his restaurant. As in the first book, Vera draws a disparate, reluctant group of people around her as she snoops, all of them eventually completely won over by her cooking and the power of her (admittedly judgy) form of fierce love. One of the best scenes in the book involves TJ's teenage daughter, Robin, which I won't spoil for you but, believe me, it's an instant classic.

An accidental influencer, Vera shoots cooking and tea making videos, in which she also talks about Xander's death and asks for help, which she gets, along with a side order of trouble. Her friends, of course, rally around her and they all help provide the ingredients that crack the mystery of Thomas/Xander's death.

I love a book that makes you laugh aloud as you read it, and the passionate and observant Vera is flat out, obliviously funny, probably even more so because she's far from perfect. While this book didn't have the special thrill of discovery that comes with a fantastic first novel

and the birth of a great character, it remains a really fun and engaging read. I love Vera and it would be great if she served me a cup of her soothing tea, but I found reading this book every bit as warm and comforting.

MARBLE HALL MURDERS

By Anthony Horowitz

Harper, \$31, May

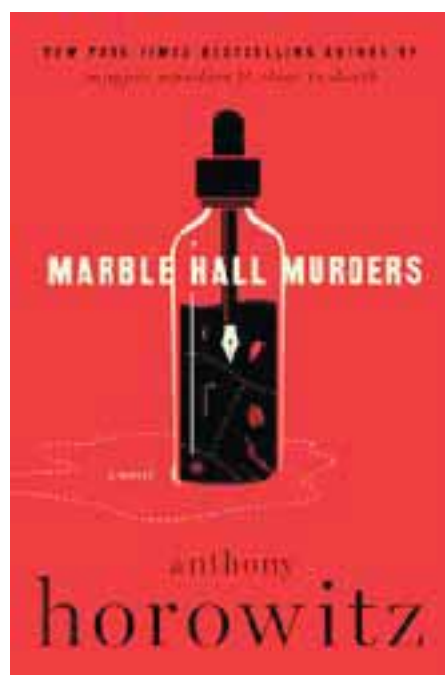
Susan Ryeland #3

Rating: A

If traditional, golden age style mystery is your jam, these books are absolute perfection. Though it's a series, and the main character, Susan Ryland, has her life change drastically between the volumes, you could definitely read each one as a standalone and not be lost. Of course, if you like golden age style traditional mysteries, you're going to read them in the order the author intended regardless, right?

As Anthony Horowitz has proven himself to me to be some kind of genius, I always find that it's a good idea when opening one of his books to just relax and trust that he will reliably serve up a great story. In this instalment former editor Ryeland has returned from her idyll in Crete after abandoning both the hotel business and her boyfriend. She decides to take on freelance editing work (the reason why it's freelance is explained in the earlier books), and the first assignment that comes her way is the continuation of the Atticus Pund series. Pund, a detective working in the 1950s, was the creation of her former client, the late Alan Conway, who grew to hate his detective and decided to give him a fatal illness. The title of the new book, then, is *Pund's Last Case*.

The author in charge of the re-boot is the spoiled, troubled heir to the fortune of a wildly successful (now dead) children's author. Susan expects him to be trouble, and he certainly is, but despite herself and her reservations about the entire project, she finds herself intrigued by the book itself. As in Horowitz's other works, there's a book within the book. In the first instalment



(*Magpie Murders*) the ending was missing as the author died before he could finish, and in this one, Elliot, the new writer, has given her only about a third of the book, but the portion she gets is certainly captivating.

Set in France in 1955, it follows the family of a wealthy woman who dies suddenly, though not completely unexpectedly. She'd reached out to Atticus before she'd left for the South of France, and although he hurries over, he arrives too late. He now feels obligated to investigate, much to the annoyance of the French policeman in charge who views him as an intrusion. Much like his avatar Hercule Poirot, however, Pund is so brilliant that his insights are eventually not only tolerated but eagerly sought after.

Meanwhile Susan is waiting for the next bit of the novel only to discover that her client is ignoring her advice, drinking, and mistreating his girlfriend. He fires her shortly after a disastrous radio interview she'd advised against, but she still attends the family party she'd previously been invited to. There she discovers that the family in the book and Elliott's actual family are obviously not only connected but nearly mirror images. Susan had spent the time before her dismissal looking into Elliott's past, visiting his family home

(now open to the public), and talking to the folks from his past that she is able to track down. When a death occurs and Susan becomes the prime suspect, she must continue to investigate in order to prove her innocence, and she forms a fragile alliance with the detective in charge of the case.

As with every Horowitz novel, the reader is treated to a lovely dance, with plots and characters intertwining, and you can reach the halfway or three quarter point still not feeling completely sure of what may or may not happen next. While the ending was not as tricky as some of his other books, it's still an adroit sleight of hand that is beautifully set up and knocked down. With this strong instalment, Horowitz proves once again that these smart, gorgeously written and compelling books remain some of the very best crime novels being written.

THE MUSEUM DETECTIVE

By Maha Khan Phillips

Soho Crime, \$27.95, April

Rating: B+

Dr. Gul Delani is an art historian working at the Museum of History and Heritage in Karachi, Pakistan. She has basically forced her way into the museum by more or less creating her own department and curating her own staff of eager grad students. When she gets a middle of the night phone call, she thinks it's information about her long missing niece, Mahnaz, who had vanished at 15, but instead, it's an order to get dressed and get in a car for a long ride. When she arrives, she's asked to take a look at what could possibly be the mummy of a legendary princess of Persepolis.

Since Mummification was not a known method of corpse disposal in ancient Iran, this discovery could be paradigm changing, and Gul is beside herself with excitement when the police agree to deliver the mummy to her museum for further investigation. Her grad students share her excitement and do their best to create a secure environment for remains that could be

thousands of years old. For assistance, Gul calls on an old Cambridge friend, Harry, who facilitates the translation of the cuneiform on the mummy's tomb.

To me the actual main character of this novel is Karachi itself, and the author, who was born there, paints a vivid picture of daily life in the capital, as well as Gul's specific routine, which includes volunteering at a shelter where she teaches classes. Coming from a wealthy family she has an array of connections, both high and low, and it's the street connections who help her when the mummy disappears.

Meanwhile a miasma of grief surrounds Gul. Her niece has been missing for three years, but the powerful sense of loss remains, with the continuing uncertainty making things even worse. Mahnaz is always in the back of Gul's mind, but to her immense frustration her parents and upwardly mobile brother and straight-laced sister-in-law really don't want to talk about the situation anymore. Gul pushes forward to discover what has happened to the mummy, with several attempts made on her life as she begins to unravel the crime and the true origins of the mysterious artifact. Since this is a mystery, astute readers know the stories of the missing mummy and the missing niece must inevitably intersect.

I loved Gul the character, and was gripped by the story of her close relationship with her niece, who seems to share more traits with her aunt than with her uptight parents. As Gul reads through Mahnaz's diaries, the girl comes alive to the reader, making her loss all the more poignant. I won't give away the resolutions that Phillips provides, so you may have the pleasure of reading the book for yourself to discover them. When I closed the covers I felt I had been on both an armchair and emotional journey to the city of Karachi.

TRICKS OF FORTUNE

By Lina Chern, Bantam, \$18, July
Play the Fool #2

Rating: B+



This second installment follows up Chern's Edgar winner, *Play the Fool*, which introduced Tarot card reader Katie True. Even though I hadn't read the first book, this one still did an excellent job of effortlessly weaving Katie's origin story into the plot. As the story opens, Katie, who runs a tarot reading business out of her sister's real estate office, is stunned when her friend Gina is arrested for the murder of local hero cop, Matthew Peterson, better known in town as "Officer Pete." Not only is Katie rocked by Gina's arrest, but also by the death of Officer Pete, who years ago famously rescued baby Katie True from a car wreck, saving her life.

As she grew up, Officer Pete periodically checked in with her, claiming she had been saved for something extraordinary. While Pete may have meant well, Katie thinks his prediction has hardly come true, as she's pretty much failed at everything she's tried, including college, jobs and relationships. Her little tarot reading place in her sister's office is the one thing that feels right to her, but otherwise she lives in a crappy, noisy apartment and drives a junker car.

What she also has going for her are friends, Gina, for one, but also Jamie, a cop, and Matt, Officer Pete's son who

has reappeared after this tragedy and reconnected with Katie. Not to mention her odd, genius brother Owen, a professor who sometimes crashes at her apartment to get some work done. This oddly assembled group (except perhaps Owen) are all trying to discover who killed Officer Pete, with Katie certain of only one thing – the guilty party wasn't Gina.

Weaved through the story are vignettes of Katie and her slightly disreputable aunt Rosie, who taught her the tarot when she was eight. Each card Rosie turns over for the young Katie then ties to the chapter in the present, which is a neat structural trick, as well as giving the reader an insight into why Katie finds tarot such a welcome refuge in a busy and chaotic world. The way the cards are explained in this book and the way Katie reads them was so persuasive that I wanted to pick up a deck myself.

I also became a convert to Chern's prose and nuttily resonant turns of phrase. She expertly captures the chaos of being a young woman in the world trying to figure out where she fits in, not just in her professional life, but her even more confusing romantic one as well.

This book is also an excellent portrayal of the public persona of someone – in this case, Officer Pete – who visited schools, sponsored a children's group, and was a great dad whose son, Matt, has grown up in his image and become a cop. And then there's the underside of Officer Pete, which of course is a major part of the book, with his public profile being so accepted and so publicized that the underside becomes hard or even impossible for many people to accept.

Katie, through sheer determination and a belief in her deck (she carries it with her everywhere) eventually manages to get to the bottom of Pete's murder. I wouldn't call this book a cozy or a noir, but simply a thoughtful and original read. I enjoyed Katie True and foresee many more satisfying adventures for her in the cards.

Maggie Mason Reviews

TWO TRUTHS AND A MURDER

by Colleen Cambridge

Kensington Books, \$27.00, October

Phyllida Bright #5

Rating: A

Phyllida Bright has a dream job as housekeeper for Agatha Christie and her husband. Phyllida has also had some success as a mystery writer who has solved some local crimes.

A local woman suspects her husband is unfaithful and asks for help finding the truth. She invites Phyllida to a dinner party where the woman she suspects he's involved with will attend. Genevra Blastwick attends with her sister Ethel who is very unlike Genevra.

That Genevra craves attention is clear. She suggests playing an after dinner game, two truths and a lie. Was her claim to have seen a murder the truth or a way to be the center of attention?

The next morning Ethel is found dead, run down by a car in her way home. Was she mistaken for her sister?

Was the crime done to prevent the murderer being named? Phyllida is called on to find the truth.

A village in England is a perfect setting for a crime as many fictional mysteries prove. Luckily, Phyllida is up to the challenge and solves the mystery. I was stunned by learning who the murderer was, I was totally wrong in my guess.

I enjoyed this book and learned a bit about Agatha Christie's home life. I had a bit of trouble keeping track of the characters, but that's because I hadn't read any previous books in the series. I'm hoping to keep up with future books because I enjoyed this one very much.

THE IN DEATH COOKBOOK

by Theresa Carle-Sanders

St. Martin's Griffin, \$32.00, October

Rating: B+

The most interesting part of this book for me was the introduction. I'm not a cook so a recipe needs to be simple

for me. The author has done similar cookbooks using the works of Stephen King and Diana Gabaldon as inspiration. This book has an introduction by J.D. Robb and features Eve Dallas's culinary delights.

I picked my favorites from categories I felt my skills could handle, it the book has recipes for many levels of cooking skill. I'm not sure if I will be able to actually make these recipes, but I can dream.

Breakfast was "Smart Girls' Savory French Toast Sandwiches, Lunch was Cauliflower and Smoked Cheddar Soup, Dinner was Hungarian Goulash, and Sweets was Flourless Fudge Brownies for Morris. Sadly, Divine's Nondairy Chocolate Sin Gelato is way beyond my skill set.

The book is filled with yummy recipes with links to Eve Dallas. Enjoy

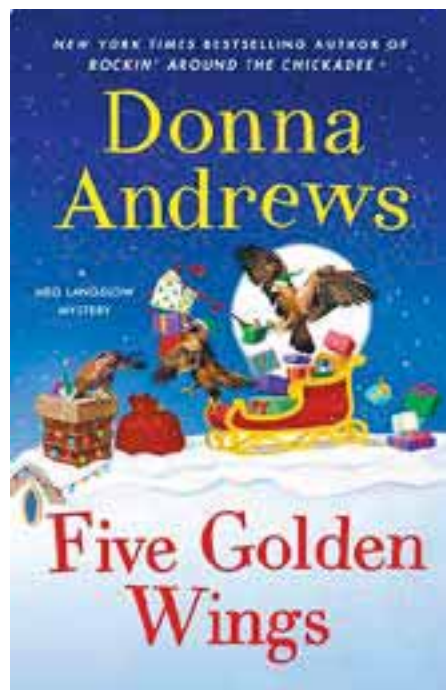
FIVE GOLDEN WINGS

by Donna Andrews

Minotaur, \$28.00, October

Meg Langslow #38

Rating: A



It's Christmas in Caerphilly VA. Meg Langslow and her large extended family are always busy at this time of the year. This time, it's even busier due to two cousins on her mother's side of

the family getting married. Both weddings will take place on the same days, at the same venue.

This normally would be something to celebrate together, but the brides can best be described as long time enemies. The conflict is getting to everyone, even Meg's mother who I don't recall ever being rattled in prior adventures.

The weddings seem doomed, especially when Meg stumbled over the body of the photographer. He's been a nuisance by hitting on many of the guests so the suspect list is pretty long.

Luckily, Meg is, as usual, up to the task of calming down the family and solving the mystery.

Every time I read about Caerphilly, I wish it really existed. Even though I'm not familiar with how to live with snowy weather, I would give it a try.

This is one of my favorite series and, as usual, I highly recommend it.

TWIST

by Steven Packwood

A short story collection

Rating: A

I enjoyed all fourteen of the stories in this collection. The themes were varied and interesting. My two favorite stories were totally different.

"The Bricklayer" took place in ancient Babylon and seemed to me an accurate depiction of life of a workman during that time. The twists were very subtle.

The last story in the collection was a look at modern policing with a bit of local history and a look at WWII. It was one of the best short stories I've read in years.

I enjoyed all of the stories, but these two were my favorites. There was one twist I thought I caught, but was a smidge off base.

I will inform you of the publication information as I get it. The author's publisher is experiencing some turmoil at present.

The author is coming from England to attend Bouchercon and I'm excited to meet him. We've had quite an engaging and delightful e-mail correspondence.

Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



THE PALACE OF SINNERS AND SAINTS

by Ammar Merchant
Simon & Schuster, \$28.99, May
Standalone Thriller
Rating: B

The central character of this thriller is a “mountain of a man” named Irfan Marza. His was a difficult childhood, having been kidnapped by a man called the General, who trained his captive children to become warriors. Two of his closest friends from that period of time are Fin and Renata, who are highly skilled in a number of ways.

Irfan learns that Renata and her fiancé Prince Mahmud are targets of the oppressive regime of the Prince’s native country Aldany. Irfan joins them in Thailand but is unable to prevent their kidnapping.

So Irfan and Fin join forces to rescue Renata and Mahmud. Just one problem. They are being held in a well-guarded medieval fortress in the desert with only empty space surrounding it.

Well, when there is a will, there is a way. Many fight scenes ensue (not all of them believable). When guns start ablazin’, how can the bad men miss a “mountain of a man?”

Good fun, but not on my list of best thrillers of the year. If you’re looking for that, read Mark Greaney’s **MIDNIGHT BLACK**.

WHAT THE NIGHT BRINGS

by Mark Billingham
Atlantic Monthly Press, \$27.00, July
DI Tom Thorne #19
Rating: B+

DI Tom Thorne attends a raid and gets chatting to four uniformed officers

who can’t believe their luck -- a member of the public has left them a box of doughnuts, with a note that reads, “Thank you for your Service.” A few hours later three of them are dead and the fourth is in a coma.

The targeted murder of four officers is only the first in a series of attacks that leaves police scared, angry and, most disturbingly of all, vengeful.

As Thorne and his colleague DI Nicola Tanner delve into the investigation, they uncover a disturbing pattern: the victims are linked to past misconduct, suggesting the murders may be acts of retribution for previous abuses of power.

Good police procedure and detection, but I find the character of Thorne to be wooden and somewhat unlikeable. I much prefer Billingham’s new character Detective Miller (**THE WRONG HANDS**).

CARVED IN BLOOD

by Michael Bennett
Atlantic Monthly Press, \$27.00, July
Hana Westerman #3
Rating: A-

Hana and Jaye’s daughter Addison has just announced her engagement and it is a time to celebrate. So the DI Jaye Hamilton stops at a local Auckland liquor store for some expensive champagne. From the rear of the store, Jaye observes the clerk being assaulted by a balaclava-clad man. When Jaye tries to intervene he is shot twice and left for dead.

As Jaye clings to life in the hospital, his ex-wife Hana (a former detective) asks to be reinstated in the police on a temporary basis and the detective in charge welcomes her expertise.

The police quickly hone in on a young Maori man, Toa Davis, as the prime suspect. Toa’s fingerprints and phone are found in the escape vehicle and he fits the description of the assailant seen on security footage.

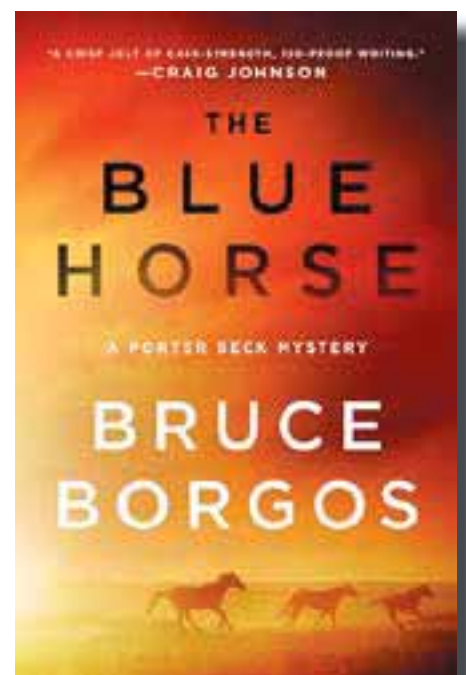
As Hana digs deeper, she suspects that Jaye wasn’t just a random victim of violence, but was targeted by his assailant. The gun used in the assault is distinctive, and she learns that a local gang leader, Erwin Rendall—who had threatened Hana in the past—owns such a weapon.

Though set in a locale half a world away, Michael Bennett imbues his characters with such humanity, that it doesn’t matter where the reader lives. His stories are universal and one can enjoy a good crime story while learning a bit about Maori culture and folklore. Good stuff.

THE BLUE HORSE

by Bruce Borgos
Minotaur Books, \$29.00, July
Porter Beck #3
Rating: A-

A helicopter used to round up wild horses suddenly crashes into a bluff. Initially thought to be an accident due to pilot error turns out to be murder – the pilot was shot through the head by



a rifle bullet. An animal-rights group is protesting the round up and its principals immediately come under suspicion. Not long after, the BLM coordinator of the wild horse round up is found murdered – in a particularly gruesome manner. It’s just Sheriff Porter Beck’s bad luck that these murders occurred in his sparsely populated Nevada county.

To help Porter solve these cases enter Porter’s new girlfriend Detective Charlie Blue Horse. Their investigation leads them to also suspect a Canadian lithium mining company who has recently started operations in the county.

On another narrative track we follow Porter’s sister Brinley who has volunteered to help on a wilderness program for troubled teens. One young man named Rafa is having difficulty following the rules and one night he just takes off. Brinley goes in search

I’ve read and enjoyed all three books in the series and consider **THE BLUE HORSE** the best so far. It proved to be a smooth and exciting read as we follow the lives of Porter and those close to him. Fans of C. J. Box and Craig Johnson will likely enjoy the works of Bruce Borgos. The settings are somewhat similar – all being centered in the West, but the characters and plot situations on the Borgos novels are quite different from those of Box or Johnson. And there’s even a dog for you canine lovers out there!

GOODBYE, MR. BOOGIE

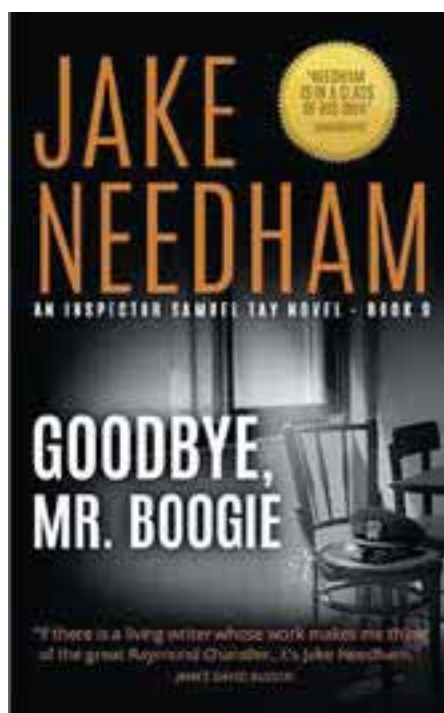
by Jake Needham

HP, \$18.99, July

Inspector Samuel Tay #9

Rating: A-

The phlegmatic Inspector Tay is enjoying his retirement in Singapore – well, not exactly -- he is quite bored and lonely with his uneventful existence. But one morning, while returning from grocery shopping, Tay is surprised to find Captain “Beer” of the Special Branch of the Royal Thai Police waiting for him. She comes at the request of her boss known as “David” because of his long and unpronounceable name. Tay’s services are desperately needed to track down an international assassin (known



as the “Boogieman”) who is reported to be in Bangkok to kill someone at the upcoming conference of foreign ministers (ASEAN). Tay worked with Beer and David on a recent case, appreciates their friendship and feels indebted to them. So off to Bangkok he goes.

Tay is used to investigating once a crime has been committed. He is puzzled as to how to go about looking into something that hasn’t happened yet. There is precious little to investigate. The information regarding the assassin came from Israel’s Mossad and no one involved is even sure if the Boogieman really exists. A tough case but Tay and Beer are up to the job and they make progress little by little.

The author lives in Thailand and describes it well. But it is Jake’s characters, dialogue and page-turning plot lines that have won me over.

HOTEL UKRAINE

by Martin Cruz Smith

Simon & Schuster, \$27.99, July

Arkady Renko #11

Rating: B+

It’s hard to believe it’s been 44 years since the blockbuster **GORKY PARK** burst onto the international scene. And it was sad to hear that the author passed

away at the age of 82 on July 11th of this year from Parkinson’s disease, which Martin had been living with since 1995.

The backdrop of the story told in **HOTEL UKRAINE** is the Ukraine War, or as Russians are advised to call it, a “special military operation.”

Renko is still going to work as a police detective despite the side effects of his Parkinson’s Disease, which he has kept secret from most around him.

When the deputy minister of defense, Alexei Kasasky, is found slain in a particularly violent manner, Renko’s superior, Zurin, puts him and his small team on the case --- but with an extremely short leash.

At home, Renko must deal with his wife Tatiana who works as an investigative reporter doing a piece on the war for *The New York Times*, and with his son Zhenya who is definitely anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian in the conflict.

The case is made more complicated for Renko by the unexpected appearance of his long-time adversary, Marina Makarova, who works with the FSB (state security).

Renko and Tatiana set their sights on a man named Volkov who heads a radical para-military group within Russia and has been rumored as a potential replacement someday for Putin, if and when he is no longer able to continue as leader.

All investigative paths lead to an exciting denouement and a fitting ending to this perceptive series.

THE WORLD’S GREATEST DETECTIVE AND HER JUST OKAY ASSISTANT

by Liza Tully

Berkley, \$30.00, July

Rating: B+

This debut novel sounds like a cozy mystery, but I would classify it as a traditional one. Its structure is akin to an Agatha Christie novel: a puzzle for the detective to unravel and reveal to a room full of suspects as a denouement.

Olivia Blunt’s dream is to become a private detective so she’s thrilled (but also intimidated) when hired as an assistant to the crusty, laconic and

nationally famous private investigator Aubrey Merritt. Initially her work consists of boring computer investigations, but then, suddenly Olivia finds herself on a road trip with her boss, driving her barely serviceable car to Vermont's Lake Champlain district.

Victoria Summersworth fell to her death from her balcony and the police have quickly ruled the death a suicide. But Victoria's daughter Haley thinks otherwise and has hired Aubrey Merritt to look more deeply into the matter.

As the two conduct interviews and other investigations, the secrets of the Summersworth family are slowly revealed. Olivia's enthusiasm often leads to mistakes on her part – one of which proves to be very dangerous. On the other hand, Aubrey turns out to be anything but a caring mentor, unwilling to share her perspectives on the case until the very end.

But this seemingly mismatched pair manage to finally get to the truth of what happened. And along the way, we readers are treated to a fine puzzle mystery.

AN INSIDE JOB

by Daniel Silva
Harper, \$32.00. July
Gabriel Allon #25

Rating: A-

I've appreciated Daniel Silva's pivot in the last few years from spy novels involving Israeli intelligence vs. its enemies to art and international intrigue novels.

Life in Venice is good for Gabriel, his wife and two children. Gabriel is fully engaged in his occupation as a world-renowned art restorer when he finds a body floating in the waters of Venice. By a huge coincidence the body turns out to be that of a fledgling art restorer for the art department of the Vatican. Foul play is suspected and Gabriel can't resist a good mystery to solve. Did her death have something to do with the rumored discovery of a long-lost Leonardo da Vinci painting?

As Gabriel pursues his quest, we are privy to some good art world detecting, a well-planned heist and a behind-the-veil look at the Pope, who just happens to be one of Gabriel's best friends.

The pages flew by without much of a critical look on my part. I just went with the flow and thoroughly enjoyed the ride. Some books are like that. Your mind tells you that you could find things to criticize and nitpick about, but it just doesn't seem worth the effort. **AN INSIDE JOB** did what it was intended to do – it entertained!

EDGE OF HONOR

by Brad Thor
Atria/Emily Bester Books, \$29.99, July
Scot Harvath #24

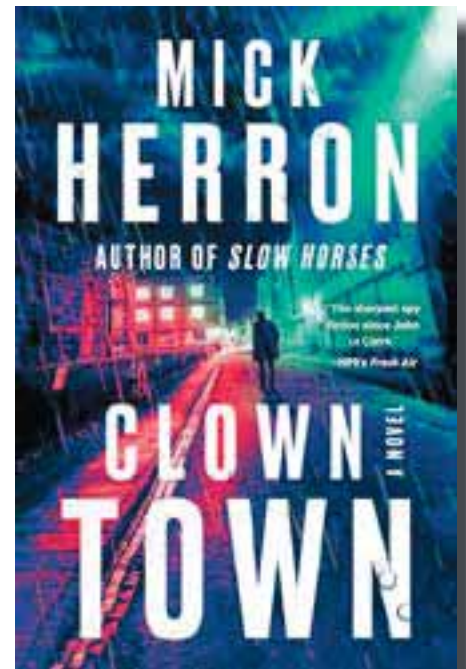
Rating: A-

After jumping from one hot spot to another with little rest in between for the last umpteen years, author Brad Thor has finally given his main character Scot Harvath a 6-month break/honeymoon so that Scot and Solvi (a Norwegian intelligence agent) can adjust to each other and enjoy peace and serenity for awhile.

But just like Jack Reacher, trouble seems to come to Scot even when he's not looking for it. It's the 4th of July and the couple are in Washington, D. C. to celebrate with cold beer, hot dogs and some fireworks watching. What they get instead is a protest outside the Vice President's residence that turns deadly. Both Scot and Solvi jump into action and follow one of the gunmen into the Norwegian embassy, which is situated across the street from the Vice President's home.

Before you know it, Scott is called on to protect someone who had a hand in saving his life, and Solvi is called back into service by the Norwegian Prime Minister, who is visiting for a NATO summit. The shooting, Scott's mission, and Solvi's job are all related to an operation whose tentacles reach deep inside the U.S. government. This leaves Scott not knowing who to trust and the clock ticking on ever-escalating danger.

EDGE OF HONOR is classic Brad Thor. This thriller and all of his books are filled with likeable protagonists, exciting plots and realistic action scenes. In other words, my kind of thrillers.



CLOWN TOWN

by Mick Herron
Soho Crime, \$29.95, September
Slow Horses #9

Rating: A

Those of you who have been following the Slow Horses series will know that River Cartwright fell victim to a Russian nerve agent and that his love interest Sid Baker was shot in the head early on. Both have recovered but still suffer side effects from their injuries.

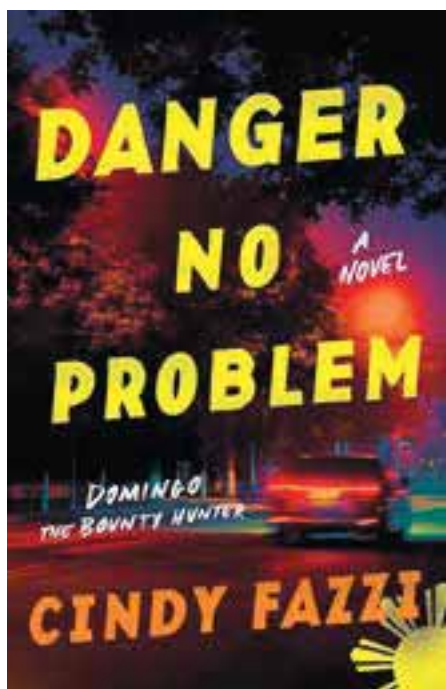
Diana Taverner (sardonically referred to as "Lady Di"), head of MI5, decides to use River and Sid's shaky status with the security services to help her get rid of someone who has become a vexing problem – Peter Judd, an immoral power broker who is privy to startling information that, if made public, would ruin Lady Di's career. That situation is intolerable to Taverner so she plots to have him removed.

In another plot line there is a trio of retired spies whose team leader has come across scandalous material (concerning an operation that went wrong during the Troubles) that could prove very embarrassing to the security services. The three feel that they were ill-treated by their bosses and as a result are living in a retirement of poverty. So they decide to blackmail Lady Di

and their scheme goes totally awry – in most dramatic fashion. “Old spies grow ridiculous, River. Old spies aren’t much better than clowns.” Or so David Cartwright, the late retired head of MI5, used to tell his grandson. And this proves to be true.

Mick Herron, through the voice of the irascible Jackson Lamb, gives us a master class in witty dialogue and humorous put-downs. When I read one of Mick’s books I find myself marveling at every word – sometimes stopping to re-read an especially entertaining passage. In our present day, Mick Herron is the finest wordsmith in all of crime/espionage fiction, a position once held by the inimitable Reginald Hill (1936-2012).

This latest episode of the Slow Horses maintains the high standard set by the previous books in the series.



DANGER NO PROBLEM

by Cindy Fazzi

Thomas & Mercer, \$16.99, September

Domingo the Bounty Hunter #1

Rating: A-

The first time Domingo (who calls himself “Sunday”) caught up with Monica Reed, the Filipino daughter of an American general and a Filipino woman, Domingo let her go.

The second time (years later) Do-

mingo found Monica Reed, it was to persuade her to give her father a kidney in return for his aid in getting her U.S. citizenship. But it turned out to be much more than that, and Domingo helped her escape a life-threatening situation.

The third time (again, years later) Domingo was tasked with finding Monica, it was to tell her that her stepmother was leaving her a vast fortune. But Monica proved quite elusive this time.

Domingo is a Bounty Hunter whose principal job is to find bail jumpers/illegal criminal immigrants. He himself is a naturalized citizen of the United States and is quite sympathetic to undocumented immigrants – just not ones who commit criminal acts. In fact, he is writing a primer for the undocumented and we are treated to short chapters interspersed with the story he is telling. I found them quite informative.

Cindy Fazzi stuffs a lot into her narrative (sometimes a bit too much) and sometimes the pacing lags. But overall I enjoyed it and am reading the second in the series, **SUNDAY OR THE HIGHWAY**, which is also being published this September.

THE DEEPEST CUT

by P. J. Tracy

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, September

Monkeewrench #11

Rating: B+

Minneapolis homicide detectives Leo Magozzi and Gino Rolseth arrest a sadistic pair of killers for the murder of several women with the help of Monkeewrench, their eccentric, cyber-sleuth friends and partners. One of the killers dies in custody and the other, Wolfgang Mauer, is sent to a maximum security mental hospital in a rural corner of Minnesota.

There, Mauer pulls off a successful escape, with the help of his mother, a former militia leader and assassin living an extravagant, reclusive life. Now that he’s out, he plans revenge against the detectives who arrested him and the Monkeewrench crew that got him a life sentence.

An inexperienced county sheriff is

thrown head-first into a massive man-hunt for the murderer. When she finds three bodies and discovers that Mauer has kidnapped a young boy, she realizes that she’s in over her head. With many lives on the line, Magozzi, Gino, and Monkeewrench join in the desperate search effort. The longer he’s at large, the more people will die.

As many of you are aware, the name P.J. Tracy was the pen name for a mother-daughter writing team. The mother (P.J.) passed away in 2016, but her daughter, Traci Lambrecht, continued to write under the pen name P.J. Tracy. Traci wrote three more Monkeewrench mysteries on her own, then tried a four-book series featuring Detective Margaret Nolan, and has now returned to the Monkeewrench series with its eleventh entry.

It was nice to visit old friends – Magozzi, Rolseth and the Monkeewrench gang, to see what they are up to now. The story was o.k., nothing special – just a good solid read.

BURIED ABOVE GROUND

by Mike Ripley

Severn House, \$29.99, September

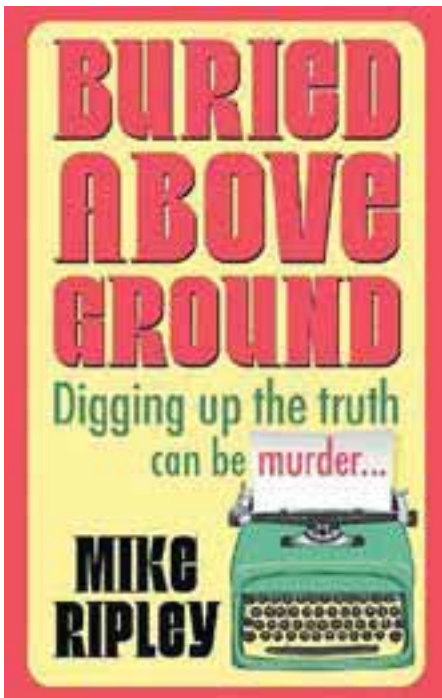
Standalone Novel

Rating: A-

If you are curious as to the inner workings of the British publishing world, **BURIED ABOVE GROUND** is for you. Ripley uses his well-honed sardonic wit to skewer crime fiction publishers as they have transformed from stuffy, old codgers who didn’t care if books sold or not to the modern bean-counters who don’t care if a book is well-written – if it sells and makes a profit.

The story line involves the sudden resurgence of interest in the works of Duncan Torrens, a long-forgotten mystery writer who hasn’t been published in two decades. As various parties scramble to secure the rights to Torrens’ backlist so they can be re-published as e-books, the situation becomes more convoluted—and dangerous—than any plot he ever penned.

The story unfolds through the perspectives of five unreliable narrators:



The Librarian: Once Torrens' editor, now puzzled by a blogger's inquiries into the author's rights.

The Reader: A determined Golden-Age mystery blogger named Jacon, convinced that Torrens' home and mysterious garden shed hold the key to a literary revival.

The Publisher: Eager to capitalize on the renewed interest, needing Jacon to untangle the rights before the original publishing house catches on.

The Editor: Never worked directly with Torrens but suspects financial motives behind the sudden attention and seeks to uncover the truth about the rights.

The Writer: As the intrigue deepens, questions arise about whether the renewed interest in Torrens' mysteries will unveil a dark—and deadly—twist.

BURIED ABOVE GROUND is told from the viewpoints of these five individuals and somehow, miraculously you may say, the truth eventually comes to light, but not before there is a mortal casualty.

The author leans on his vast experience in the world of publishing, gained as a writer and a reviewer for close to forty years.

A thoroughly enjoyable read, from our *DP* Contributor -- The Ripster.

DARK HORSE

by Felix Francis

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, September

Sid Halley #6

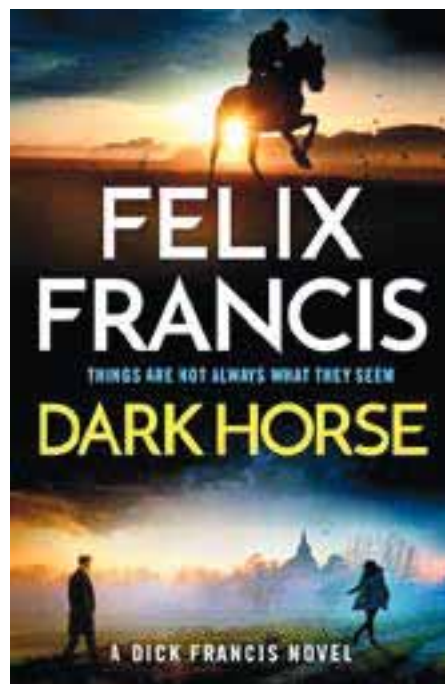
Rating: A-

The young Irish jockey Imogen Duffy is finding some success when she decides to break up with her controlling boyfriend. Liam, who is also a jockey. Liam can't accept the break up and switches back and forth between being nice to woo her back and being mean in seeking revenge. Then Liam starts some false rumors about Imogen that get her fired. But her luck turns when an English trainer of some renown hires her to replace one of his injured jockeys.

So Imogen goes off to England and is quickly engaged in the hard work of being a full-time jockey. But Liam quickly follows her and gets a job at a nearby horse trainer's facility. And Liam's harassment continues.

Eventually there is a resolution to Imogen's problem, but not one you might expect. The investigation by series character Sid Halley doesn't occur until after page 200 so he isn't in the majority of the book's storyline, but it is a pleasure to catch up with him and see his facile mind at work.

For me, a big fan of Dick Francis' work, it was a pleasure to read **DARK**



HORSE, in which the author does a wonderful job of bringing back his father's style of exciting storytelling that highly engages the reader



SILENT HORIZONS

by Chad Robichaux with Jack Stewart

Tyndale, \$32.99, May

Standalone Thriller

Rating: B

Foster Quinn is a Marine to the core and he struggles with his desire to serve his country versus his loyalty to his wife and daughter. His wife is supportive but he still feels guilty about the time spent away from family.

Foster is devastated when his closest friend is killed while performing a clandestine operation. So when the opportunity arises for him to take his friend's place and find out who is responsible for his friend's death, he jumps at it. Only one problem: it involves Foster going undercover into Iran as a hunting guide. He and some former teammates mount a kidnapping operation, but it turns out to be a fizzle as far as capturing the man responsible for his friend's death. So back again to Iran, for another similar operation. But the longer he remains in Iran, the more dangerous his situation becomes.

I would compare this military thriller to the works of Tom Clancy. The narrative contains lots and lots of detail as to military tactics and weaponry. And the detail gets in the way of the pacing of the story. I started doing a bit of skimming just to get through the book. There was some action -- just not enough for me to be satisfied.

HISTORICAL EMPORIUM

Robin Agnew



INTO THE LEOPARD'S DEN

by Harini Negendra

Pegasus Crime, \$27.95, July
Bangalore Detectives Club #4

Rating: A

I love this richly evocative series set in 1920s India. While that country did not achieve independence until 1947, unrest was already bubbling under, with an understandable resentment building toward the British who intruded on their country and culture, trying to remake it in their own image. While Negendra is far from a political writer, she introduces these sentiments into her stories organically, personified in this book by an unpleasant British planter.

As the story opens, our heroine Kaveri is feeling both confined by her pregnancy and her protective mother-in-law, while missing her husband, Ramu, who is in the state of Coorg attempting to help the people there with their medical needs. Coorg was a big coffee growing region, controlled by the British until independence, and Ramu is staying with a friend who owns a plantation there.

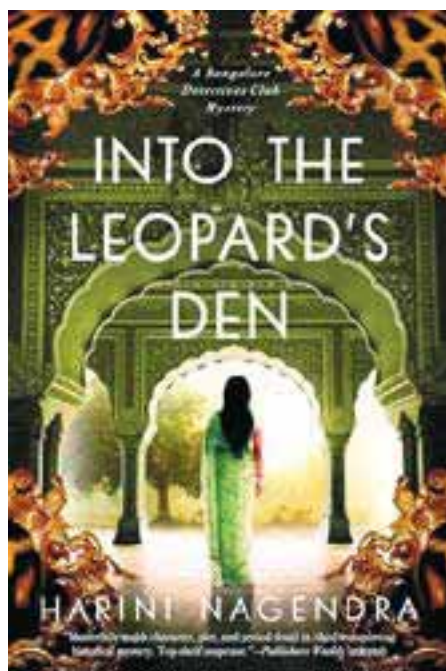
Kaveri is also drawn into the mysterious death of an old woman who was found dead in her hut on the abandoned circus grounds, clutching a piece of a magazine article praising Kaveri's prowess as a detective. When Kaveri learns the old woman had visited Coorg right before her death, she knows she must both travel to Ramu and untangle the mystery.

The clues are sparse, the first one being that someone clearly doesn't want her investigating. Her friend's plantation is being crippled by a so-called ghost leopard, and the workers are so afraid of it that they refuse to come to work, causing the coffee beans to go unharvested.

As Kaveri gets to know her way around the city, she's also made aware of the unpleasant Brit, Colonel Boyd, who has acquired swaths of land and imposed his own "scientific" farming methods on them. He's intensely disliked, to the extent that someone has attempted to kill him, and he asks Kaveri to discover the identity of the culprit.

While Kaveri doesn't care much for the Colonel, she also simply can't resist a mystery. As she delves into the lives of the workers at her friend's plantation, looks for possible missing relatives or family of the dead woman, and tries to figure out if there really is a ghost leopard, she finds she's taken on a complex and baffling case – or maybe several of them.

Negendra is a very skilful traditional storyteller, and these books are intelligent and well plotted classic mysteries, with the added bonus of the wonderful characters of Kaveri and Ramu. Much



like Tana French, she is able to describe a place and a landscape so explicitly it approaches poetry, with the setting becoming an additional rich character. While this book is set in Coorg and not Bangalore, the mountainous terrain and surrounding jungle are so beautifully portrayed that you will feel you have been transported there.

Kaveri has her "ground crew" back in Bangalore looking for clues to the old woman's death, and the communications with Uma Auntie, her next door neighbor and fellow detective, add spice to the story, especially as she is able to help out with a few crucial pieces to the puzzle.

The book ends in the way you think it might, with the crime solved and Kaveri's pregnancy delivered, leaving the reader wondering how efficiently a new mother will be able to investigate crimes in the future. I feel certain she will, and very much look forward to discovering exactly how she'll do it. This is a beautiful series, one I cannot recommend more highly.

THE SILVERSMITH'S PUZZLE

by Nev March

Minotaur, \$27, May

Captain Jim & Lady Diana #4

Rating: A-

I loved, loved, loved the first book in this series, *Murder in Old Bombay*. In that first book, the main characters, Captain Jim Agnihotri and Lady Diana Framji, meet and marry despite some pretty steep obstacles. Jim is half white, half Indian, and he is not a Parsi, as Lady Diana is. The Parsis, the aristocrats of Indian culture in the 1890's, have very strict rules about marrying outside the faith. This creates problems for the couple.

Jim, a dashing and decorated Captain in the British army, has worked as a journalist and a private investigator for the Framji family. He met the Framjis when he searched for the killer of Diana's sister-in-law. In this novel, it's her widower, Diana's brother Adi, who is in trouble. The two novels in between this one and the first found Diana and Jim in Boston and Chicago and on a steam-

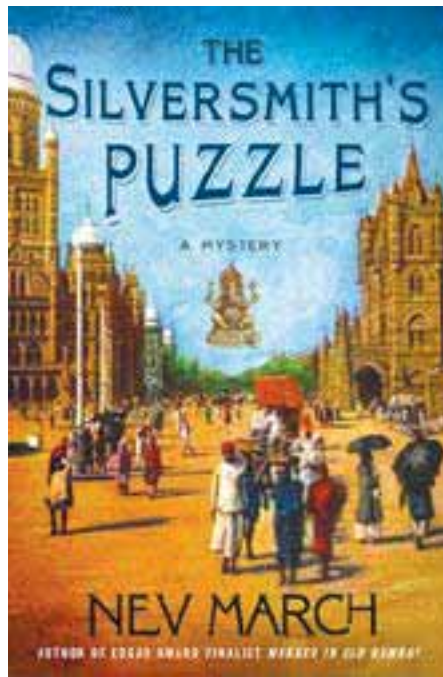
ship crossing the ocean. Those novels, which were fine traditional mysteries, nevertheless lacked the zip and life of the first novel. As the Agnihotris return to India, however, life returns to this wonderful series.

Adi is in serious trouble. His business partner has been murdered and he's the most likely suspect. The two of them had been manufacturing surgical instruments but were having a tough go selling them as they are made in India. Doctors seem to want instruments made in the UK. Not only is the business partner dead but the business is struggling, and it turns out that the man had borrowed all kinds of money as well as cleaning out Adi's bank account before he died.

Additionally, the Framjis, while delighted to have Diana and Jim home again, are finding themselves shunned, both because of Adi's situation and because of Diana and Jim's marriage. Jim, who feels responsible for the family's plight and worries about his wife's pain, wants nothing more than to save Adi and discover the true killer. This is made far more difficult and time imperative when Adi is actually arrested and taken to jail.

Jim operates on his knowledge of Adi's character and calls on the various connections he's made in Bombay – through the army, the police, and from his brief stint as a journalist. March, a devotee of Holmes (as is Jim), has created a series that relies, as Doyle's creation did, on deduction, and also includes Sherlock's love of disguise and adventure. Jim is having little success until he mobilizes the entire Framji family in his endeavour, finding a team works better than he could alone.

The disguises, tricky connections, and well laid out mystery are a delight, but what brings the book to life are not only the personalities of Jim and Diana (and her family) but the city of Bombay, which serves as a character as well. One way of armchair travel is of course geographical, but another way, in the hands of a gifted writer, is virtual time travel. When reading this novel you can feel you are back in old Bombay, a city on the cusp of independence from the



British, a city with arcane connections between classes that make everything function.

The mystery here is excellent and if March takes a minute to unfold her tale, be assured it's well worth it. She's a master storyteller. I am hoping she keeps her couple in Bombay, as they still have a few issues to resolve, issues which add resonance and depth to this wonderful series. If you're up for a bit of time travel coupled with a great story, pick this one up.

ONE FINAL TURN

By Ashley Weaver
Minotaur, \$28, June
Electra McDonnell #5

Rating: B

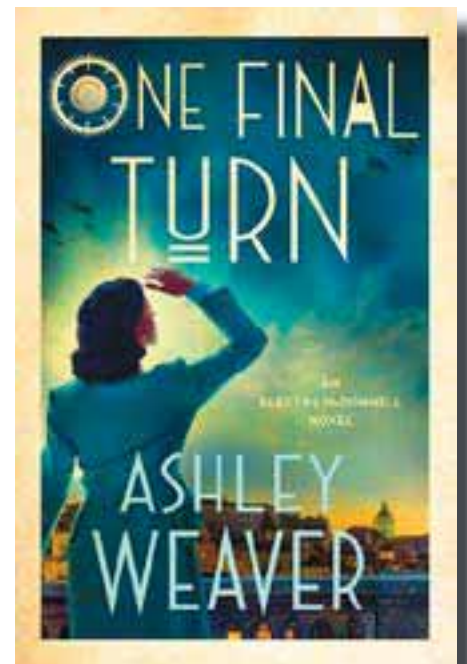
This is the last instalment in Ashley Weaver's series following the exploits of safecracker turned intelligence agent Electra McDonnell in 1940s London. She came to live there with her "locksmith" (and safecracker) uncle after both her parents died. Her cousins Colm and Toby are like brothers to her, but since the start of the war Toby has been missing, feared dead.

Electra has a real pall of gloom hanging over her in general – not only because of the war, but also because her last assignment with one Major Ramsey

ended with him injured and her dismissed. Realizing too late that she was actually in love with him, she's trying mightily to forget the whole fiasco. When an assignment comes through via Archie Blandings, an underling of Ramsey's, she's off to Lisbon, hoping to locate her long lost cousin. Much to Electra's discomfort, it turns out that Ramsey is a part of the operation as well.

Since Portugal was neutral during WWII, cities like Lisbon were full of people from every country in Europe and an enormous amount of espionage operations took place there. Electra and Archie meet up with Ramsey, vigilant for spies surveilling them as well as the contacts they'll need to locate Toby and any other refugees on the run, but a series of deaths and double crosses make things very tricky for them.

As this is the final book in the series, Weaver must wrap up some long running storylines, one being the search for Toby, another the question of the guilt or innocence of Electra's mother, who died in prison, accused of murdering her father, and, most prominent in this book, the romantic destiny of Electra herself. Even though she still carries a torch for him, she's convinced things are finished with Ramsey, and hometown honey Felix (working undercover himself) is again in the romantic mix.



In my opinion this was not the strongest entry in this very enjoyable series, the best of which focuses on Electra's lock picking abilities. She uses those skills some here, and remains brave and intrepid, but this book is in the main a romance, with some tricky espionage elements.

Weaver manages to skilfully tie up all her loose threads, and her wonderful storytelling moves things along briskly. By this point in the series the reader has built up a lot of affection for Electra and hopes the best for her. I enjoyed the read but I will say nothing in it really surprised me. In my opinion it didn't quite match up to Susan Elia MacNeal's masterful wrap up of her Maggie Hope series, *The Last Hope*, which also took place in Lisbon.

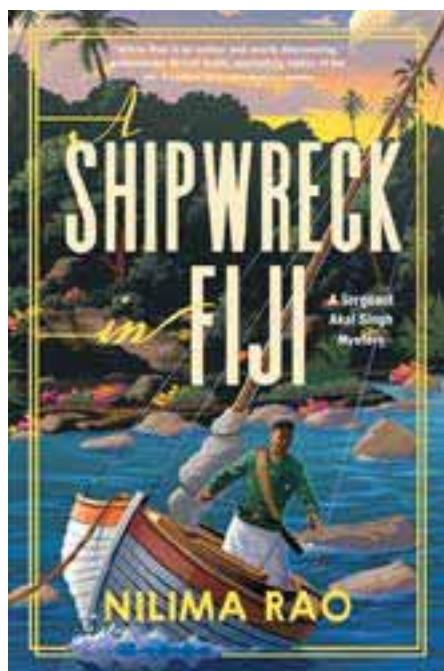
That said, I won't deny shedding a tear or two at the conclusion, and found this *One Final Turn* an enjoyable read, if not my favorite in this generally engaging series.

A SHIPWRECK IN FIJI

By Nilima Rao
Soho Crime, \$27.95, June
Sgt. Akal Singh #2
Rating: B+

This series takes the reader on a journey to the complex society of Fiji in 1915. At that time the island was naturally populated by Fijians, but there also by many Indians who had been imported as indentured labor, some of whom chose to stay on the island after working through their service. Since the islands were a colony at the time, there's the added ingredient of the British overlords, the mixture sometimes finding a hard time cohering.

Main character, Sergeant Akal Singh, is stationed in the capitol, Suva, but he's come to Fiji from Hong Kong (originally from the Punjab) somewhat under a cloud. He's still on a short leash as far as his commanding officer is concerned and given what he views as a simple babysitting job. He's to escort two Australian ladies aiming to clean out the home of their brother and uncle, the newspaper editor in Suva on the island of Ovalau. He's also to check out one



Constable Kumar, an incredibly young, inexperienced, and slightly hysterical young man who claims to have seen Germans on the island, which, as world war was raging at the time, is something to be investigated. Accompanying Akal is his second in command, a native of Ovalau named Taviti.

When they land at the town of Levuka, the two men conduct the ladies to their hotel and head to the police station where they meet young Kumar, who tells them the Germans were seen in one of the local shops. When they arrive at the store to question the owner, they find the store ransacked and the owner dead, fatally flogged with a whip. They find a few clues, including a puzzle box, which Singh takes back to town to the police station.

As far as the plot goes, there are many threads, with the Germans making an appearance, as well as another death, and the revelation that the two Australian women have come to the island for far more than cleaning out a house. Singh must be on his best and most formal behavior around the women, and when he accompanies Taviti to the village where he's grown up, he finds he must be another culture's idea of best behavior as the Fijians welcome him as a guest. It turns out Taviti's uncle has sent him to Suva to learn worldly political

skills, with the expectation that he will ultimately return home and become the chief of the village. Taviti is uncomfortable with this destiny, though he is also delighted to be back home in a familiar environment.

Even though I felt the plot in this installment was a bit all over the place, what charmed me about the first book in the series (*A Disappearance in Fiji*), the strong sense of place, charmed me in this book as well. Fiji in 1915 is an unusual mise en scène, and the descriptions of the village customs, from weaving mats to cooking in an underground pit, are lovingly and vividly described. The tension Kaviti feels about coming home after being away is beautifully portrayed, as is Akal's experience in the village as an outsider.

Reading the book, I wished for a bit more of Akal, who I loved as a character in the first novel, as well as a larger helping of the dashing Dr. Holmes, who does make a late, if brief, appearance in the proceedings. I ultimately enjoyed the read but I yearned for a plot that served up some of the bittersweet aspects of the first novel. This is a more straight up traditionally told story, and while there's not a thing wrong with that, I ultimately just hoped for a touch more sting in the tale.

HUNTER'S HEART RIDGE

By Sarah Stewart Taylor
Minotaur, \$29, August
Franklin Warren and Alice Bellows #2
Rating: A

I admired and enjoyed the first book in this series, *Agony Hill*, but I full on love this one, which is more focused, better paced, and just as beautifully written as its predecessor. It's set in 1960s Vermont as the Vietnam war is raging (an event, I now realize, that's part of history, though I still remember seeing scenes of that war on TV every night). While the conflict grinds on far away from tiny Bethany, Vermont, it's still a part of general consciousness and worry as boyfriends, sons and husbands are drafted.

The main series character is Franklin Warren, a Detective from Boston who is

rebooting his life in rural Vermont after a personal tragedy. The other central character, Alice, an avid gardener who was married to an intelligence agent, now does a bit of intelligence work on the side herself, keeping an eye on the Russian in town.

As the book opens, Warren is called to a reported death at a fancy hunting lodge outside of town. The victim, a recently recalled ambassador, who was apparently a hunting novice, was found shot in the woods. Since the body was moved and brought back to the lodge, there's no crime scene to examine, making it even more difficult to determine whether it was an accident or something much more sinister, which an autopsy proves was murder.

The guests at the lodge, many of them high ups in business or government, are close mouthed about the man's death, so Detective Warren is able to make little progress on the case. Stewart Taylor, who has a gift for employing classic tropes which she then reimagines for her own purposes, utilizes here one of my all-time favorites: the isolated house cut off by a massive snowstorm.

Stranded at the lodge thanks to the storm, Warren must stay over even as a second death ramps up the tension. This book is redolent with the

atmosphere of the snow, the cold, and ultimately, when the power goes out, the dark. In another part of town, Alice has her own adventure when she travels to the home of Sylvie, who lost her husband in the last book, to take her to a poetry reading. When the two women return, the heavily pregnant Sylvie is obviously suffering from labor pains and with the snow descending and the phone lines out, Alice is pressed into service.

There's flashbacks from the past at play for both Warren and Alice, relating to different traumas from their own lives that connect to the situations they are dealing with now. This book, for me, was incredibly moving, especially the plotline concerning Alice and Sylvie. Warren's plotline is more straight up suspenseful detective work, and despite a small suspect pool, Stewart Taylor manages to create both tension and a heartbreaking turn at the resolution of her novel.

I love the way she writes, her characters and the way she clearly loves her setting, and in this series (her third), I especially enjoyed the unexpected context of the Vietnam war and all that went with it in the turbulent 1960s of my early childhood. Like all the best mysteries, this one was deeply felt, well set up and packed a surprise at the conclusion.

A SILENCE IN BELGRAVE SQUARE

by Jennifer Ashley
Berkley, \$18.99, August
Below Stairs #8
Rating: B+

I was entranced by book 7 in this series, *SPECULATIONS IN SIN*, and am now a hard core fan. If you are a fan of the late, great Victoria Thompson, this might also be the series for you. Set in Victorian London, the main character, Kat Holloway, is a cook for a wealthy family. While I have read many Victorian mysteries, this is the rare series that focuses on the servants rather than the aristocrats upstairs. They are the minor characters, while the downstairs characters – cooks, maids, delivery men, urchin boys – are the main feature.

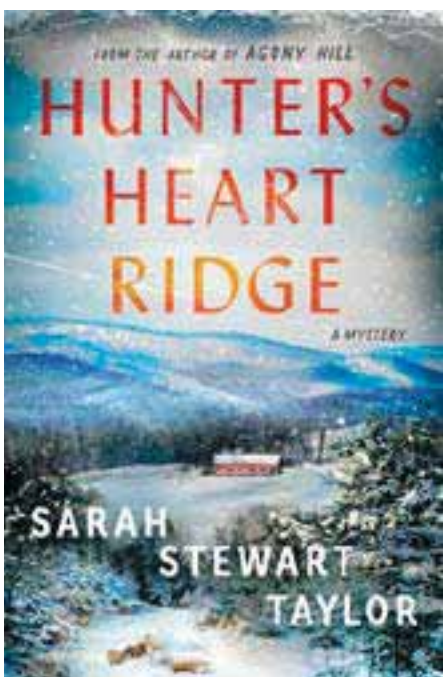
Kat is the single mother of a daughter, Grace, who lives with a good friend of hers while she works. She's only able to see Grace once a week on her day out. As a reader, you feel the hard pull every time she leaves her daughter to go back to work. The rest of her heart is occupied by one Daniel McAdam, an undercover policeman who is paying off a dangerous debt. As the book opens, Daniel tells her he'll be on an assignment for an unspecified period, and they can have absolutely no contact while it's going on.

Kat is not putting up with this situation, however, and leverages her network of street urchins, Daniel's son, and other friends to keep a light watch on the house in Belgrave Square where he's to be working. The wheels are frequently greased by the pastries she prepares and shares out judiciously. She also recruits an old friend, Hannah, to get a job in the household as a maid and keep an eye on things. The two women are able to meet up fairly often, so Kat is able to get a proof of life report, at least.

The case Daniel is working on seems to be following up on the activities of the Fenians, who were using a dynamite bombing campaign to try and secure Home Rule for Ireland. The house where Daniel is working is apparently a nexus of the organization.

To me the strength of this book was the renewed friendship between Hannah and Kat – Hannah is a con artist, basically, but she's worked as a maid in fancy houses. When she and Kat meet, she's in deep disguise, sometimes so deep Kat doesn't recognize her at first. The way the two women illustrate the way society operated in 1880s London from the point of view of the "regular" person is very well done.

There's also a subplot involving some poison pen letters, giving Kat a legitimate excuse to snoop around, especially as the letters seem to have originated in the very block where Daniel is undercover. To me, the mystery part of the story, which was fine, was the least of it. What is so great about these books are the characters, all of them fully and memorably delineated, the time period, and the snappy pace. These are brisk, fun, satisfying reads.

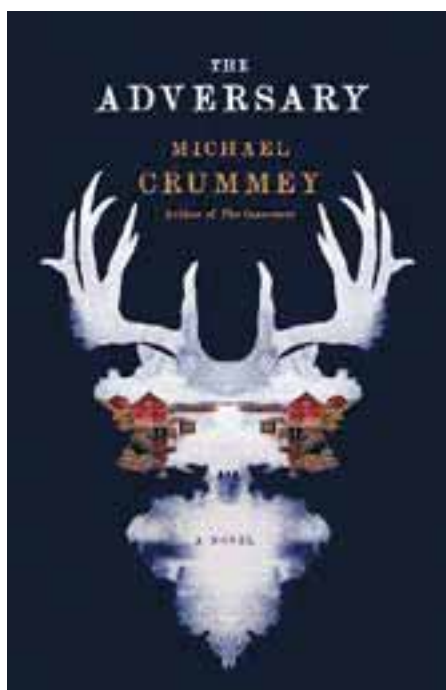


Lookin' For A Few Good Books

Larry Gandle



THE ADVERSARY
by Michael Crummey
Doubleday, \$29.00, 2024
Rating: A



In Mockbeggar, a small town on the Newfoundland northern coast, Abe Strapp is about to marry a young girl whose father owns a competing business on the shoreline. This marriage will consolidate Abe's hold on the region. As the wedding is about to commence, Abe's sister, the Widow Caines, halts the wedding when she shows up with a pregnant young girl who accuses Abe of being the father of the child. The father of the bride calls the wedding off and Abe is obligated to marry the pregnant child. This sets off a series of events in which the siblings vie with each other to control the business interests of the region. Both are inherently evil and through their disagreements, they man-

age to disrupt the entire region, eventually, with deadly results.

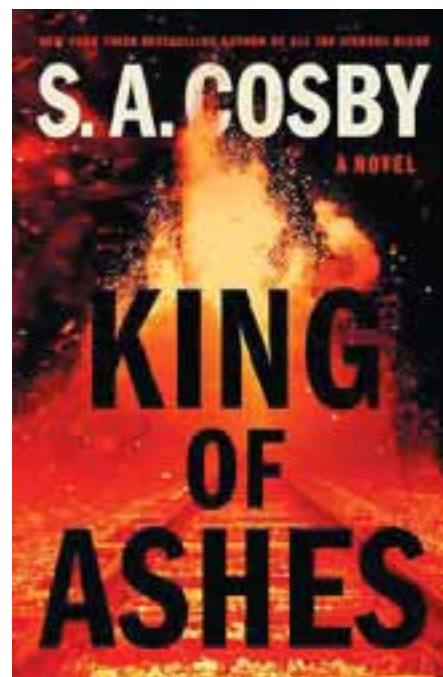
THE ADVERSARY is a brilliantly executed novel which perfectly created the time and the setting. Characters are full of depth and their dialogue is so realistic. The writer cares about each word he places on paper with the result being rich in detail. As the characters become more familiar, the story becomes more compelling. This is a tough book to read in that there is so much evil within it. Yet, it is difficult to put down. It is a superb read and highly recommended.

KING OF ASHES
by S.A. Cosby
Flatiron Books, \$28.99, June
Rating: B+

In a rural Virginia town called Jefferson Run, which has seen better days, Roman Carruthers has finally returned to his family. His father has had a car accident and lies in a comatose state. He discovers his family has fallen apart since he left. His younger brother, Dante, is in debt to some local criminals who prove to be vicious killers. He is addicted to drugs and has no sense of responsibility though he is 30 years old. His sister, Neveah, has taken on the huge responsibility of running Carruthers Crematorium, the family business. Roman soon discovers, his father's car crash was no accident. He also discovers that the criminals Dante is in debt to will just as soon kill them all than be paid back. Yet, Roman is a master at financial investments even if he has to skirt the law. He will use his talents to get his family out of debt but will that prove to be enough for the criminals?

This is another fine crime fiction

novel by one of the stars of the genre. The plot is totally compelling and the book is hard to put down as a result of that. Characters range from well-developed to stock figures. There is a lot of dialogue while the hero is held hostage. It goes on for pages. There is also a character, ex-military, that Dante could call upon to silently and deftly wreak havoc and destruction at Dante's will. It is a sidekick reminiscent of Robert Crais's Elvis Cole and Joe Pike or Harlan Coben's Myron Bolitar and Win. It is an old device and comes off as a bit contrived. Overall, an entertaining book and certainly one of the year's best. Even if I do not consider it the author's best work, it is still better than almost all the other books written so far this year.



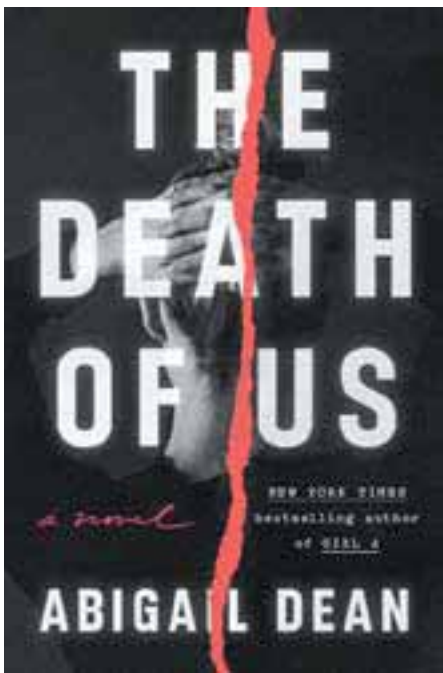
EXILES
by Mason Coile
Putnam, \$28.00, September
Rating: B

A human crew of three is sent to Mars to live in a base permanently. The base is to be set up by three robots whose mission it is to serve the humans. When the crew finally arrives, the base is half destroyed and they are told one of the robots went rogue and is missing. The crew must sift through the stories of the robots to get at the truth. Things get increasingly complex in that there appears to be an alien outside the building eager to get in and finish the destruction it apparently has started.

This is a relatively quick read that truly never lets up. There is a pervasive sense of hopelessness as the home of the astronauts is under attack. Characters certainly have some depth as an explanation is in order to explain why they would each volunteer to leave Earth forever for a very lonely and perilous life on Mars. It is a clever and entertaining book but, obviously reality must be suspended. Recommended for the plane, pool or beach.

THE DEATH OF US

by Abigail Dean
Viking, \$30.00, April
Rating: A



Isabel and Edward, a newly married couple live in London. They are thirty years old. They have friends, a great

marriage and are living a wonderful life. This all changes when a serial killer enters their home late one night and as a result, they are both wounded more psychologically than physically. Their marriage crumbles and, given the fact that the killer still remains at large, they live in fear. Now twenty-five years later, the killer is caught and faces his accusers in a London courtroom. Isabel and Edward, no longer together, both plan on delivering public statements in the courtroom. They must relive that night and come to terms over their crumbled relationship.

This is a powerful novel that explores the nature of love and fear. It is a story rich in characterizations. There is a great deal of care taken by the author in constructing the prose. Dialogue is spot on realistic. The plot is always compelling as the chapters switch between Isabel and Edward and between the past and the present. In the end, this book is a beautifully written work of what a trauma can do to a marriage. Highly recommended.

THE CURSE OF PIETRO HOUDINI

by Derek B. Miller
Simon & Schuster, \$28.99
Rating: C-

In August, 1943, Massimo, a fourteen-year-old, is orphaned after his parents are killed in a bombing raid in Rome. He flees to the base of Montecassino, an ancient monastery, where is assaulted by youths and left for dead at the side of a road. He is found by an elderly man who calls himself Pietro Houdini. Pietro calls himself a master artist and a confidante of the Vatican. He makes Massimo his assistant as they climb up to the monastery at the top of the mountain. With the allies coming quickly, Houdini makes it his mission to protect the artwork within its walls. This begins the tale and journey in an effort to save three masterpieces. Their very dangerous journey will take them into the path of the Nazis, smugglers, thieves and even the allied troops. Many will die as a result.

Initially, I had high hopes for this

story. It was very compelling and appears rich with historical detail. Then the plot became increasingly implausible where they form a merry little band with other refugees with a donkey named Ferrari. The story began to drag and I barely made it to the end which was not worth getting to. I wish I could get back the hours it took me to read this book. Avoid.

THE SAVAGE, NOBLE DEATH OF BABS DIONNE

by Ron Currie,
Putnam, \$29.00)
Rating: A-

Babs Dionne is the matriarch of a crime family in Waterville, Maine, a small, decrepit and rundown town. She is very much in the drug trade. With her are her daughters, relatives and childhood friends they form a vicious gang. A major drug dealer notices his income is down in the region and he sends a robotic hitman to investigate. When a member of the Dionne family goes missing, Babs has no problem starting a war. Of course, this will lead to many fatalities.

Ron Currie has written a very skilled novel depicting a small town and the damaged people who live there. It is filled with drug addicts and criminals. The characters in the novel are carefully crafted and so very realistic, as is their dialogue. The pacing of the plot is a bit uneven. Some of the book moves at lightening speed and, at other times, it meanders. The writing, as a whole, is beautifully descriptive as Waterville comes very much to life. This is a clever work and is quite worthy of a reader's time. It is one of the best books of the year, so far. Highly recommended.



Down Under Crime



Jeff Poppo Reviews

DUST

by Michael Brissenden,
Affirm Press, \$A34.99

Rating: A

Outback Australian crime novels set in blistering heat and drought-like conditions are becoming a bit of a cliché, but Michael Brissenden brings some freshness to genre with his politically astute latest novel, **DUST**.

Lake Herrod, once a thriving outback community in New South Wales is now in great decline as the lake dries up, taking much of the local businesses with it. When barely hanging on local Aaron Love discovers a fresh corpse near the cracked lakebed, he sets in train a violent series of events. The body belongs to a respected journalist who was investigating some dangerous people, including Aaron's missing, presumed dead, father. Aaron pockets the evidence that he finds and sets off to find his father and a young woman who is somehow connected to it all. Meanwhile, haunted Sydney detective Martyn Kravets is sent to Lake Herrod to investigate the murder, and uncovers a web of conspiracy that reaches far beyond the small community.

DUST is fast paced crime novel with a good cast and some sharp political observations. Brissenden's portrayal of the groups caught on the fringes of Australian society, whether by misfortune or deliberate choice, is first rate and he cleverly weaves in how these groups are encouraged by politically motivated media outlets. He also

vividly captures the impact of climate change on the Australian outback and the decay of local communities.

While the social observations are interesting, Brissenden never forgets that he is writing a crime novel and **DUST** moves along at a quick rate with plenty of surprises and some good suspense. The characters are well crafted, especially the hapless Aaron, and Brissenden really captures the feel of the small local towns against which the action plays out. After some good twists, the book builds to a taut climax and there is plenty of excitement in the final chapters, as well as a suitably cynical conclusion.

I really enjoyed **DUST** and think that it is the best of Brissenden's novels to date. There are some coincidences towards the end, but they add to the suspense, and the book certainly keeps you turning the pages until the final revelation. Recommended.

VANISH

by Shelley Burr,
Hachette, \$A34.99, May.

Rating: A-

Shelley Burr really hits the mark with **VANISH**, the third novel in her series about crime solver and soon to be released prisoner, Lane Holland.

Lane's crime-solving career ended the day he went to prison. Yet one unsolved case continues to haunt him: the disappearance of Matilda Carver two decades ago. Matilda is the long lost daughter of the head of the prison where Lane is being held. With Carver's lowkey assistance, and his own secret endeavours, Lane finally finds a lead: a mysterious farm community where

Matilda lived briefly. The farm is led by the enigmatic Samuel Karpathy, and to Lane seems more like a cult than a working farm. It is a place that attracts lost souls. People looking for answers. People hiding from their pasts. People who have nowhere else to go.

On the day that Lane arrives at the farm on a prison education scheme, along with a prison guard, an accident claims the life of a member of the community. It also seems that there has been at least one other recent mysterious disappearance. With his typical singlemindedness, Lane dives in to find out what really happened to those who seemingly vanished from the farm without a trace.

Shelley is a very good writer, and she can really capture scenes and moods. Her characters are just a little different from the usual outback noir casts, and she mainly avoids the stereotypes we so often see. Lane is an interesting, offbeat central character, infuriating at times, but with an admirable inner determination that drives the story along.

The plot flows well and there is a good sense of unease from the first moments that Lane arrives at the commune, and the tension continues to mount as the book progresses. The story builds to a strong climax involving the almost obligatory outback noir bushfire, and there are the usual surprising revelations. My only reservation is that some of the elements seem a little unlikely, but not enough to diminish the pleasure from what is a very good crime novel.

BURNING MOUNTAIN

by Darcy Tindale,
Penguin, \$A34.99, May.

Rating: B+

Eighteen years ago, five teenagers went for a hike up Burning Mountain in the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales, but only four came back. Despite an intensive police search, fifteen-year-old Oliver was never seen again. Now a skull has been unearthed on the mountain and the old mystery is re-ignited. Detective Rebecca Giles' father had been in charge of the original investigation into the disappearance of Oliver, now it is up to her to finally find out what really happened.

BURNING MOUNTAIN makes good use of familiar bush noir tropes to produce an engaging and enjoyable out-back mystery. The small rural town and its inhabitants are nicely evoked and interesting, and Darcy really makes you feel the heat and hear the flies. The story proceeds at a decent pace and a couple of interesting sub-plots add drama and tension. Rebecca is a pretty standard central character, of the female detective in a small country town variety, but she has a couple of quirks and is quite engaging. Some of the other characters are very well done, especially a young boy caught up in a terrible situation.

The main plot is quite good with some unexpected twists and turns. At first it seems quite straight forward, but Darcy skilfully introduces some unexpected developments and pulls out some very good surprises, including one on the last page. Perhaps there are too many coincidences around timing, but overall **BURNING MOUNTAIN** is a very enjoyable example of bush noir.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

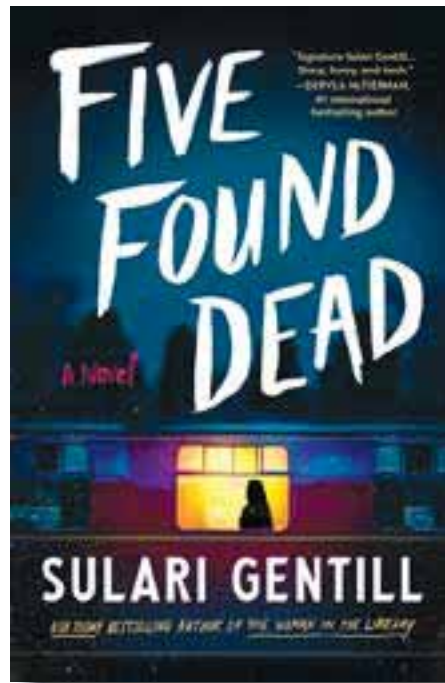
FIVE FOUND DEAD

by Sulari Gentill

Poisoned Pen Press, \$18.99, August

Rating: A-

The Orient Express. An iconic multi-day train journey between Paris and Istanbul that for more than a century has symbolised both luxury travel, and murder, thanks to Agatha Christie's iconic 1934 novel. The mere words can't help but conjure images of a moustachioed Belgian sleuth, in whichever of



his various forms, from Albert Finney to Kenneth Branagh, Alfred Molina to David Suchet.

While there is no Poirot in sight, there are plenty of sleuths on board in **FIVE FOUND DEAD**, Sri Lankan-Australian crime writer Sulari Gentill's modern homage to the Christie Classic. Narrator Meredith is a lawyer accompanying her twin Joe on a once-in-a-lifetime trip, celebrating Joe surviving a life-threatening illness, and to hopefully rekindle his crime writing mojo. Their fellow passengers include former spies, police officers, private eyes, and a pair of sisters on the trail of a swindler. Suspicious? Or merely to be expected given the iconic train's drawcard mix of literary history and luxury?

Joe's muse is stirred by the setting and company; on the first evening he begins to write again. But the next morning the murder mysteries become all-too-real, as the cabin next door is bathed in blood. But where's the body? Cut off from the outside due to various factors, including a COVID strain tearing through parts of the train, Joe and Meredith are requested to join a group looking to find answers. But what if one of them is the killer? Especially as other bodies begin to show up.

Gentill, who earlier this year won the Mary Higgins Clark Award for her novel

THE MYSTERY WRITER at the 2025 Edgar Allan Poe Awards, clearly has lots of love for Golden Age-style mysteries given her own terrific series set in 1930s Australia starring artist-sleuth Rowly Sinclair. She appears to be thoroughly enjoying herself with **FIVE FOUND DEAD**, a clever and engrossing mystery that like her prior novel plays with the mystery genre, and has plenty of winks and nods to Christie, Hitchcock, and others. There's even an appearance by real-life Australian books podcasters Flex & Herds (who host "Death of the Reader", which deep-dives into classic and foreign mystery fiction), who enthusiastically (and dangerously?) insert themselves into the investigation.

It's a fun read, and more, that like Christie herself at times, rides the implausibility curve to its limits. But there's depth here too, Gentill threads in nods to memento mori and meditations on the fragility of life – perhaps inspired by her own cancer scare – as Joe and others confront their mortality.

THE VANISHING PLACE

by Zoë Rankin

Penguin, \$30 USD, September

Rating: A

Scotland-born author Zoë Rankin's passion for the outdoors seeps through the pages of her outstanding debut **THE VANISHING PLACE**, which takes readers deep into the rugged, deadly magnificence of the New Zealand bush. It's a compelling, atmospheric tale set on the 'wild West Coast' of her adopted homeland's South Island, entwined with smalltown secrets, past sins, atypical upbringings, and religious fervour. With an exceptionally strong sense of people and place; you can almost smell the fern-encrusted undergrowth as you read, hear the babbling streams and birdsong, and feel the scratching anxiety of just how easy it would be to vanish in such isolated back country.

As we begin, Effie is a highly capable police officer on the Isle of Skye in Scotland who has a habit of sometimes stubbornly getting in over her head. Putting herself and others in danger, with the best of intentions. She has al-

ways loved remote places, despite mixed memories of growing up in a cabin deep in the bush outside of Koraha, a tiny West Coast settlement, before escaping to the far side of the world as a teenager. But when a girl who looks just like Effie stumbles into a Koraha store, covered in blood, bringing back echoes of a troubling past to the small community, Effie is called back to New Zealand to try to find answers, including what happened to the rest of her own family?

There is a lot to love about **THE VANISHING PLACE**. Rankin, who has won prizes for her short story writing and been knocking on the door of the (novel) publishing world for a while, masterfully immerses readers in Effie's tale, past and present, along with that of Lewis, the boy who saved her many years ago, and is now a sole-charge policeman on the West Coast who is trying to deal with Anya, the bloodied young girl who'd appeared out of the bush. The Vanishing Place is an exceptionally well-crafted thriller, rich in character and place, beautifully written.

WHISKY VALLEY

by Joan Sauers
Allen & Unwin, \$32.99 AUD,
Rating: B+

Without starting a debate on the meaning or parameters of 'cosy crime' - which can seem a little amorphous at times, conflated with 'classic mysteries', or and defined differently on opposite side of the Atlantic - "Outback Noir for cosy fans" could be a pithy and apt distillation for screenwriter Joan Sauers' intriguing series starring historian and amateur sleuth Rose McHugh, set among the scenic Southern Highlands of New South Wales in Australia. A countryside area of small townships, nature, wineries, fascinating history and other delights, about 70 miles outside of the Sydney metropolis.

In this second instalment, Rose is still recovering from events in **ECHO LAKE**; battling anxiety, seeing a therapist, struggling to go on her beloved bush walks. But she's excited for her sister Kim and son Sam visiting from the city, sparked by a performance by

noted violinist Billy Mah at a local music festival. Sam and Billy were great friends growing up, many years before. But when Billy vanishes, along with his priceless violin, and floodwaters begin to rise, Rose must uncover the truth from a web of secrets and lies, before police zero in on her son as a prime suspect.

WHISKY VALLEY is an engaging Aussie crime tale in a richly evoked setting; while it's solid more than spectacular on the mystery front, and doesn't reach the genre-leading heights of some compatriots, there's a lot to enjoy here. And with Rose, an intriguing sleuth with shades of Marple, lovely touches of local history, and a fascinating wider cast, there's plenty to lure readers - particularly those who enjoy their mysteries a little lighter -- to follow what will hopefully be an ongoing series.

A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY

by Jennifer Trevelyan
Knopf Doubleday, \$28 USD, June
Rating: A-

'Wanna help me find the body?'

Tweens Alix and Kahu are sitting in the sand dunes, above a beach 'that stretched uninterrupted for miles, to the north and to the south' when Kahu makes this offer. A question wrapped in curiosity and innocence, rather than any ghoulishness that may have weighted it were it to come from anyone older. Both children are searching for something to occupy themselves over a long, hot summer holiday, away from school, home, and their usual lives. Embarking on the shared quest will stave off any looming boredom, or loneliness and give them the connection they seek

'Her name was Charlotte... She was nine.'

Like Stephen King's novella, **The Body** (adapted into the brilliant 1980s film *Stand By Me*), Jennifer Trevelyan's debut novel **A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY** uses the fate of a missing child as a MacGuffin to kickstart a layered coming-of-age story of adolescent friendships, fears, and dysfunctional families, that shimmers with tension and nostalgia.

Trevelyan turns back the clock to

the 1980s, soaking readers in the times through her narrator's recollections. That summer holiday begins with a surprise. Alix's mother, who always loves remote places with few to no people, this time specifically picked a popular, built-up area of coastal holiday homes. Why? Meanwhile their father oscillates between fun-loving adventurer trying to make the most of their annual family trip, and being consumed by sports watching on TV. The singing of cicadas. Clicking from their neighbour's balcony. Unspoken hurts and simmering tensions.

Trevelyan does a marvellous job with the spaces in between. A Beautiful Family is rich with subtext, and things often aren't spelled out or neatly tied up. Like lazy, hazy memories of our own childhood summers - where things may be amplified or overlooked at the time, or with time - how much can we trust what the narrator recalls? It's a child's-eye view of adult actions, or inactions.

Authors such as John Hart, with his Edgar Award-winning **THE LAST CHILD**, Edgar nominee Paul Cleave's terrific **A KILLER HARVEST**, and Ojibwe storyteller Louise Erdrich, with her National Book Award-winning **THE ROUND HOUSE**, have successfully meshed a child investigator with multi-layered adult tales of crime, literary quality, and genre-blending. It's a rare feat.

Jennifer Trevelyan has joined that club with this novel.

A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY doesn't move at breakneck pace but inexorably pulls you through the pages, like an unseen riptide as opposed to raging whitewater, compelling you to keep reading. I'm looking forward to what Jennifer Trevelyan brings us next.



An Interview Geoff Parkes by Craig Sistorson



Geoff Parkes is a Melbourne-based businessman and writer who for the past 12 years has written a popular weekly opinion column for *The Roar*, Australia's leading online sports website. He was born and raised in the King Country in rural New Zealand, the setting for his acclaimed debut crime novel **WHEN THE DEEP DARK BUSH SWALLOWS YOU WHOLE**. (See DP #107, page 68 for our A-grade take on the book.)

Given your longtime involvement with writing about Australasian sport, including two non-fiction books about rugby, what inspired you to write a novel, and a crime novel in particular?

Geoff Parkes: I always had this idea that I wanted to write fiction, and crime fiction was an obvious place as I've always been interested in crime, watched a lot of TV crime dramas, and like most people I read a fair bit of mystery and thriller books when I was young – all of the Agatha Christies, some Ngaio Marsh, even Dick Francis. I'm a mad keen sportsperson so he was like winning the lottery, combining sports – horse racing, in his case – with crimes. That was a real winner for me. So I always had the interest, but with respect to *When the Deep Dark Bush Swallows You Whole*, what I was most motivated to write about was my home region of the King Country. I blended crime with my experience working sheep shearing gangs in the summer while I was at university, and I built the plot around the

location and the aspects of rural life that go along with that.

Despite Australia and New Zealand being former British colonies, 'Down Under' rural crime fiction seems to have a very different feel to its traditional British equivalent -- where we grew up with village murder mysteries, dark deeds happening in bucolic countryside. For me, there's a wildness, closer connection to nature, a rugged magnificence and hovering sense of the cycle of life and death -- was that something you were aware of while writing your debut crime novel?

Geoff: Definitely. Particularly in Australia, you've got elements like extreme heat, and animals that can kill you, snakes and spiders and stuff. Or people who are a bit deranged wandering around the Outback. In New Zealand, we don't necessarily have the animal threat, but the landscape itself, with weather changes and rivers etc can be very intimidating and dangerous, especially for people not used to it. So it really adds an element. Whereas in the UK -- and perhaps there's exceptions around the Moors -- mostly the rural stuff, perhaps because of TV, we tend to associate more with cozier crime, green fields, and the threat comes more from mad vicars or things like that.

One of the many things I really enjoyed about your terrific crime debut was the way you took us into the perspectives of many different characters, across different time periods, even if Ryan, Emilia, and Sanna were the central figures. What made you take that kaleidoscopic perspective?

Geoff: While it's a crime novel, I was pretty determined not to make **WHEN THE DEEP DARK BUSH SWALLOWS YOU WHOLE** procedural in any way, and that the main character wouldn't be a police officer or professional detective. Once I started, I realised I wanted to tell a story not just from the main character's perspective, and I realised for me it was actually easier to write it like a movie, and it was very visual to me while writing. So at the start of each scene it was like 'whose story is this scene, and

from what perspective do I want to tell it?' I just felt it was more interesting to write it from different characters perspectives as much as I could. I know that's not going to be something everybody will embrace, but I'd like to think it helps maintain interest, and I've done the same thing again for my next book, where I'm not scared to tell a chapter from a more minor character's perspective, because they're all important. They're all in there because they're integral to the story.

I'm very curious about your next novel, given the quality of your first but that it's not really centred on a singular sleuth or naturally set up for a series in a more traditional way. But there are several really interesting characters I think readers may like to see more from, that perhaps you could bring forward into another novel. Is there much of a connection between your debut and the next book you're working on now, even if just sharing a similar 1980s rural New Zealand setting, for instance -- or is the next book a complete standalone?

Geoff: No, you've absolutely nailed it there, Craig, so there is a connection, but not to the extent where it's a series or a traditional sequel. So my second book is set ten years later, and there are three or so characters who carry on through, one of which is Ryan, who was a law student back home for the summer holidays, working on a shearing gang to earn money, in the first book. Ten years later, Ryan is living in the town of Nashville, as a practicing lawyer. So he is I guess the glue of the second book, but there's a different crime, a different setup, there's no shearing gang or anything like that. So people will be able to read the second book entirely as a standalone, and they won't be impacted at all by not having read my first novel, but people who read the first book, who then go on to the second, everything will make a lot of sense to them. So there is a connection and a continuation, but it's not an essential connection, or it's not overly strong, compared to most series.

DP Calendar



Website: 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

February 26- March 1
Left Coast Crime 2026
San Francisco
Guests of Honor: Robin Burcell,
Gary Phillips
Website: leftcoastcrime.org/2026



April 24-26, 2026

Malice Domestic 38

Bethesda, Maryland

Guests of Honor: Jacqueline Win-
spear, Ellen Byron, Annette Dashofy
Website: malicedomestic.net



September 12-14, 2025

Bloody Scotland

Stirling, Scotland

Guests of Honor: TBA

Website: bloodyscotland.com



May 5-9, 2026

ThrillerFestXXI

New York Hilton Midtown
Guests of Honor: Lisa Scottoline,
Harlan Coben, Rachel Howzell Hall,
Barbara Peters
Website: thrillerfest.com

June 18-20, 2026

Capital Crime

London, England
Guests of Honor: TBA



July 23-26, 2026

Theakston Old Peculier
Crime Festival

Harrogate, England

Guests of Honor: TBA

Website: harrogateinternationalfestivals.com



October 21-25, 2026

Cross-Border Crimes

Bouchercon

Calgary, Canada

Guests of Honor: Louise Penny,
Kathy Reichs, Abir Mukherjee,
Mark Greaney, Jennifer Hillier, Vicki
Delaney, P. J. Vernon

Website: bouchercon2026.com



BOUCHERCON NEW ORLEANS 2025

SEPTEMBER 3 - 7, 2025

NEW ORLEANS MARRIOTT

BLOOD ON THE BAYOU

Case Closed

www.bouchercon2025.com

What's New In the U.K.



TWO KINDS OF STRANGER, Steve Cavanagh (Headline, £16.99, July). Ellie Parker had everything. Perfect husband. Perfect apartment. Perfect friends and the perfect job. As an internet celebrity - famed for her random acts of kindness -- everyone knew it. So when a betrayal causes her to lose it all, millions of people are watching.

But even at her lowest, Ellie will always help someone in need. Which makes her the perfect target for a sadistic game. Because as she soon learns, you can never trust a stranger - and a seemingly random encounter plunges her into a nightmare worse than she ever imagined.

The only person she can turn to is conman turned trial lawyer Eddie Flynn, who must take on a case where nothing is what it seems. With the most cruelly ingenious mind manipulating events from the shadows, everyone is in danger - including Eddie and his family.



EVIL IN HIGH PLACES, Rory Clements (Viking, £16.99, August). Munich, 1936. All eyes are on the Bavar-

ian capital for the upcoming Olympic Games. As athletes fight for gold and the Nazis fight for power, Detective Sebastian Wolff faces a battle of his own. A famous actress has disappeared and Wolff has been ordered to find her, fast. But Elena Lang is no ordinary film-star: she is the mistress of Joseph Goebbels - Hitler's right-hand-man in the party that Wolff despises.

But this is a country on the brink of war, and corruption runs deep. In a search that will take him from high society to the city's darkest corners, Wolff will soon learn just how fine the line is between justice and jeopardy.

THE FINAL VOW, M. W. Craven (Constable, £22.50, August). An invisible killer with a 100% success rate. No one is safe. Not even those closest to Washington Poe. A shooting at Gretna Green. A bride is murdered on her wedding day, seconds after she slips on her new ring. It's brutal and bloody but she isn't the first victim and she won't be the last. With the body count now at 17, people are terrified, not knowing where the sniper will strike next. With the nation in a state of panic, the police are at a loss and turn to Washington Poe and Tilly Bradshaw - the only team who just might be able to track down a serial killer following no discernible pattern and with the whole country as his personal hunting ground. Can Poe and Tilly stop an unstoppable assassin, who never misses his mark and never makes a mistake? Or will he find them before they find him...

LEGACY, Chris Hammer (Wildfire, £20.00, September). A bomb at his book launch. Gunfire in his hometown. Someone wants journalist Martin

Scarsden dead. Fleeing for his life into the outback, he learns that nowhere is safe. The killers are closing in, and it's all he can do to survive. But who wants to kill him - and why? With nowhere left to run, Martin finds his fate in the hands of some surprising individuals: a disgraced ex-wife of a footballer, a fugitive wanted for a decades-old murder and two nineteenth century explorers from a legendary expedition, whose fate may hold the key to his own.



THE SCENE OF THE CRIME, Lynda La Plante (Zaffre, £22.00, July). The husband of a prominent and infamously ruthless barrister is found in horrific condition after a robbery and brutal assault. Now in a coma, a major investigation is launched using the newly formed, experimental Metropolitan Police Serious Crime Analysis Unit. Jessica Russell is an experienced CSI with degrees in psychology and criminology with an exceptional Masters in Investigative psychology and behaviour analysis. But Jessica's first job as team leader of MSCAN is entirely new to her: to bring together a team of three trusted officers. Between them, the team has dealt with every kind of murder and major crime scene - their expertise ranges from forensic DNA to blood spatter analysis, digital forensics and beyond. Now they must piece together the complex puzzle at the heart of this brutal crime. If it was a robbery gone horrifically wrong, what was so important to have been stolen?

U.K. *Reviews*



Jeff Popple Reviews



CHASING SHADOWS

by Robert Bryndza
Raven Street, £10.99.

Rating: B+

CHASING SHADOWS is the ninth book in Robert Bryndza's series about London Detective Chief Inspector Erika Foster, and takes the reader back to the early defining events in the detective's career. A routine murder call takes an unexpected twist when Erika arrives on the scene and discovers the body of a woman in an empty flat, with all the DNA evidence scrubbed away. When forensics find cocaine residue coating every surface of the ceiling, Erika calls in the drug dogs, which leads her to a mysterious parcel locker on the outside wall of the property. Chasing down the locker's owner takes Erika back where she never expected to be, staring into the eyes of Jerome Goodman, the drug dealer who murdered her husband and other police officers ten years ago.

Erika arrests Goodman on the spot, but there's just one problem. His passport and his solicitor say his name is Kieron Bagshaw, and his record is squeaky

clean. With top brass demanding she take leave to deal with her PTSD, and even her closest colleagues questioning her sanity, Erika decides to use the time off to do some digging of her own. In the process she uncovers some surprising secrets that make her question what really happened on that day ten years ago.

CHASING SHADOWS is a fast paced, gripping tale that quickly draws the reader in. The early surprising developments keep you interested, and a secondary timeline, and point of view, from ten years ago efficiently recaps what happened and shows it in a different light. The investigation unfolds in a credible manner, although it does rely on a touch of luck. There are certainly some good surprises, and nicely placed red herrings keep everything uncertain until the end.

Erika can be a prickly character, but Bryndza nicely fleshes her out in this book and her emotional reaction to past events really adds to the book's tension. In all, I thought that it was a really strong novel from Bryndza. I had some slight quibbles over the likelihood of processes towards the end of the book, but not enough to stop me from thoroughly enjoying it.

GUNNER

by Alan Parks
Baskerville, £16.99

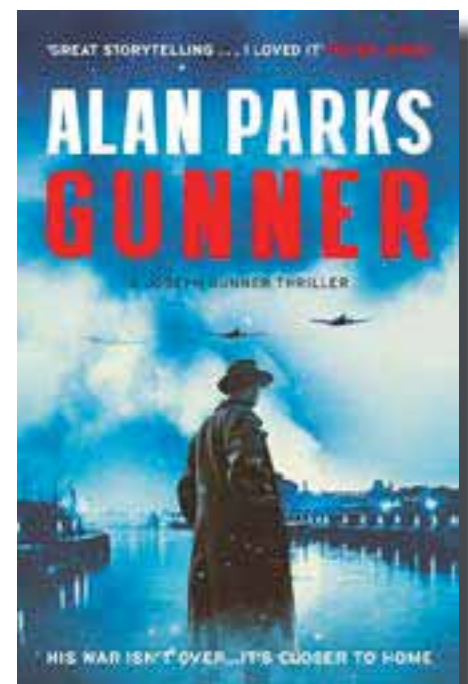
Rating: A

GUNNER is set in 1941 and opens with former police detective Joseph Gunner back on the streets of Glasgow after being wounded on the front line in France. Still suffering from shock, and keeping the pain in his leg at bay with the help of morphine, Gunner is hoping

to lie low as the Luftwaffe begins bombing Glasgow. But when he runs into his old boss, Drummond, he is persuaded to help examine a body found in the wreckage. When it turns out to be that of a German, mutilated to disguise his identity, Gunner reluctantly agrees to investigate. As he begins to hunt for the truth Gunner runs into old flames and bitter enemies, before finding himself embroiled in a high-level conspiracy, that somehow involves his conscientious objector brother Joe, and reaches far beyond his hometown of Glasgow.

This is a gritty slice of meticulously researched noir that vividly captures a clear sense of place and time. Parks does not hold his punches in describing the brutal effects of the German bombing of Glasgow, the horrors of the war in France, and the corruption on the Homefront, and there is a strong sense of authenticity throughout the book. The mix of local crime and broader conspiracy works very well, and allows Parks to introduce a good breadth of interesting characters, including the local gangster head, Matthew Sellars.

Gunner is very much a man of his time, and Parks does not gloss over his faults or try to give him too many modern sensibilities. The plot is a clever mix of murder mystery, gangland violence and political thriller, that gives new



life to the old Rudolph Hess conspiracy theories. The pacing is good throughout and the final chapters bristle with suspense and action. Gunner takes plenty of punishment on his way to finding out the truth, and the ending delivers the requisite twists and surprises. Strong, enjoyable stuff.

George's Take: I liked **GUNNER** but not as much as Jeff did. The historical aspects of the story appealed to me, but some elements of the plot didn't ring true. **Rating: B**

THE HOUSE AT DEVIL'S NECK

by Tom Mead

Head of Zeus, £20. 00

Rating: B+



THE HOUSE AT DEVIL'S NECK is the fourth book by Tom Mead in his series about illusionist-turned-sleuth Joseph Spector.

It opens on the eve of World War II, with a coach slowly making its way through the rainy English countryside to visit an allegedly haunted house on a lonely island called Devil's Neck. The house, first built by a notorious alchemist and occultist, was later used as a field hospital in the First World War before falling into disrepair. The visitors plan to hold a seance to conjure the spirit of a long-dead soldier. But when a

storm floods the narrow causeway connecting Devil's Neck to the mainland, they find themselves stranded in the haunted house. Included in the party is Spector, who is there as a sceptical observer but finds that his sleuthing skills are needed when the stranded guests start to die. Meanwhile back in London, Scotland Yard detective George Flint finds himself investigating an apparent suicide, which uncannily mirrors a similar incident from twenty-five years ago.

THE HOUSE AT DEVIL'S NECK is a very enjoyable, old-styled murder mystery of the 'locked room' variety. The opening sections are very good, and Mead effectively evokes the mood of classic British detective stories as he assembles his cast of pending victims and suspects. The supposedly haunted house at Devil's Neck is a marvellous creation and its unfortunate history as a field hospital at the end of the First World War is given extra poignancy by the pending start of a new World War.

The mystery elements are well handled and despite the cleverly planted clues, few readers will be able to solve 'whodunit' before Spector and Flint. Spector is an engaging character, and I really liked Mead's use of the point view from a young woman on the coach. The revelatory monologue towards the end is perhaps too drawn out, but not enough to detract from the pleasure of the book.

Ali Karim Reviews

NEVER FLINCH

by Stephen King

Hodder and Stoughton, £25.00, May;

in U.S., Scribner, \$32.00, May

Holly Gibney #5

Rating: A+

Though the undisputed master of the horror genre, after this latest release perhaps Stephen King will be anointed the king of crime fiction. **NEVER FLINCH** features the return of private investigator Holly Gibney, tasked to bodyguard the controversial feminist speaker Kate McKay. It seems McKay is being stalked by a deranged brother and sister duo from a radical religious sect intent on

disrupting her promotional book tour.

Add to the mix a serial killer referred to as Bill Wilson [aka 'Trig'] whose intention is to '.....kill thirteen innocents and one guilty...' in retribution for the murder of an innocent man [wrongly incarcerated] in the Ohio state penitentiary.

Detectives Izzy [Isabelle] Jaynes and Tom Atta of the Buckeye City Police Department are tasked with hunting down this serial killer with pressure mounting as the body count of innocents rise. Clues in the form of names written on crumpled pieces of paper found in the clenched fists of the murder victims perplex Izzy Jaynes, as do the messages relayed by self-styled outlaw podcaster Buckeye Brandon – leading our detective to seek unofficial assistance from P. I. Holly Gibney.

Amid these two narrative strands comes a vast array of characters who all appear distinct and deftly painted onto the page by years of experience from this author. Many of these characters have featured in King's previous crime novels in his 'Finders Keepers' [aka Bill Hodges] Trilogy, **HOLLY**, as well as the other-worldly thriller **THE OUTSIDER**. We have Gibney's friends, the brother and sister duo of Jerome and Barbara Robinson; Betty Brady [aka Soul Singer Sister Bessie] and her entourage; Rev. Big John Ackley, as well as small but distinct appearances of minor characters such as Deacon Andy and Pastor Jim of the radical sect [who appear to be funding the attacks on Kate McKay]; Judge Irving Witterson and the politically ambitious Assistant D. A. Douglas Allen and many others who add additional dimensions to this investigative crime thriller.

The climax approaches stealthily, with King taking his time to reach the conclusion, ratcheting the tension up until it becomes unbearable. There is a baseball game featuring the Buckeye Police Department versus the Fire Department – entitled 'Guns and Hoses' held at an arena that becomes the epicentre for when the [a] Serial Killer 'Trig' and [b] Brother and Sister stalker of Kate McKay plot strands collide explosively with blood and fire.

King again delves into the relationships between parents and their offspring with Holly Gibney hearing her late Mother Charlotte's voice in her head; as does serial-killer 'Trig' who hears his abusive Father's voice whisper the words that give this novel its title – and which could also describe an admonition of what the readers' reaction should be regarding the more disturbing elements contained in this dark narrative.

Highly Recommended.

George's Take: This is the fifth novel that Holly Gibney has appeared in and she has become a favorite character for me. I'm not a fan of horror fiction so I have skipped that part of Stephen King's bibliography. But I have enthusiastically read his mystery/crime fiction and am more than willing to sing his praises as an exceptional writer. For those of you who have not yet gotten on the Holly Gibney bandwagon, start with the Edgar-winning **MR. MERCEDES**, in which she is introduced. **NEVER FLINCH** is one of the best crime novels of 2025 and should not be missed. **Rating: A**

THE WASP TRAP

by Mark Edwards

Michael Joseph, July

Rating: B+

Edwards writes claustrophobic thrillers elegantly, but with a pace that commences slowly but soon gathers momentum until the reader has to take care not to get paper cuts as the climax comes into view. His latest is no exception though the narrative follows the 'hidden psychopath' route that has become 'a thing' in contemporary crime fiction.

THE WASP TRAP is a split narrative that alternates from just before the millennium and contemporary times.

Six student friends gather to remember the life of Psychology Professor Sebastian Marlow who they worked with on a new dating app, before such applications on the iPhone became ubiquitous as the nineties morphed into the noughties.

Theo [with his partner Georgina] has organised a dinner party in their

salubrious house in Notting Hill.

Invited are Rohan, Lily, Sophie, Will and the enigmatic Finn (who appears to have been the Professors' last assistant). The gathered are not 'friends' per se -- but old former colleagues who worked together for Professor Marlow. Soon it becomes apparent that none of them really knew Marlow, despite working as a focused team on what could have become a 'killer app'.

The pace is slow, because Edwards' tale is all about character interplay back in 1999 when they worked for Marlow, but tonight their lives today [as well as past secrets] are converging.

The narrative then takes an 'In Cold Blood' styled swerve as there is a 'home invasion', and the narrative becomes literally a locked-room mystery. The clues to solving the mystery lie hidden in that summer of 1999 when these six people were colleagues working for Professor Sebastian Marlow.

There needs to be confessions.

Though it is apparent that the author is an admirer of Dame Agatha Christie due to the style of **THE WASP TRAP** – however, the unravelling is based around character[s] with the late Professor Marlow's Academic expertise - a clue that may separate the protagonist[s] from the antagonist[s] as the novel reaches its tense climax.

BROKEN

by Jon Atli Jónasson

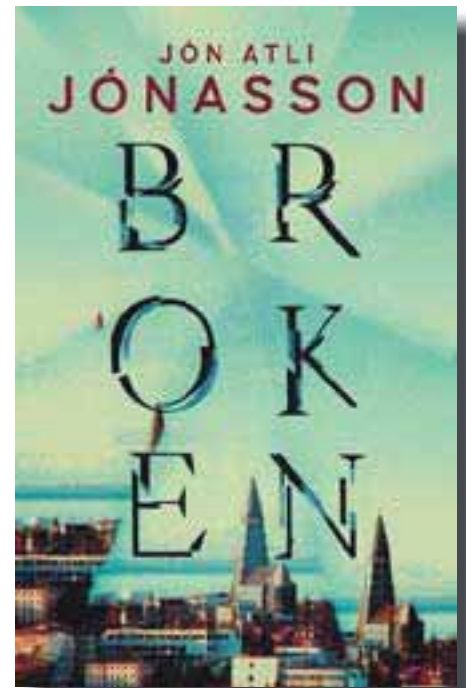
Translated into English

by Quentin Bates

Coylus Books, £19.99, June

Rating: A+

This extraordinary crime novel debuted 2022 in the authors' native Iceland, but is now finally available in an English Language translation. **BROKEN** is a deeply thought-provoking narrative, written in an urgent present-tense style making the reader pause to collate and evaluate the proceedings as well as to take a breath. Written from multiple viewpoints, terse dialogue with deftly placed social commentary - its narrative pace is measured, but zings along with the velocity of the bullet that impacts Dora's head in **BROKEN**'s opening



chapter.

Dora works for the police in Reykjavík, shielded from 'real' police work by her boss Elliói, instead she's left to manage administration / office work, though she longs to return to working on the street. Elliói hides his guilt [from the assignment they shared and which left fragments of a bullet lodged in Dora's skull], by keeping her in the office, deskbound on minor cases -- and away from further danger. The cranial injury still causes Dora physical pain, constant operations, and strict regime of medication -- affecting her cognition and distorting her personality.

When a major drug-raid entails a large deployment of the Reykjavík police man-power, Dora is assigned the case of missing teen girl who vanished from a school trip - to keep her away from danger [and the action].

Elliói explains that the police are under pressure to find the missing teenager Guðbjörg Hákonardóttir as quickly as possible, both from [a] the press as well as [b] Chief Superintendent Bjarki Freyr [nicknamed Gorbi behind his back, due to the prominent birthmark on his balding forehead]. The school-girl Guðbjörg is not only dark-skinned [of mixed-race], but also suffers from gender dysphoria and insists on being called 'Morgan'.

Due to the issues of both race and gender, Dora is assigned a partner to assist track down the missing teenager - enter Rado [short for Radomir] - the child of Serbian refugees who came to Iceland [with his brother Zeijko] following the war in Bosnia. Rado has tried hard to integrate into Icelandic society by training to become a police officer - despite the anti-foreigner epithets from some of his police colleagues. Elliöi is also under pressure to keep Rado away from the planned drug raid, because the target is Rado's father-in-law Jurek, and his wider family of Polish gangsters [also immigrants to Iceland] - including Rado's wife Ewa, and brother-in-law Artur.

So this unlikely pair of misfits [Dora, recovering from a brain injury received in the line of fire and Rado, a Serbian Immigrant who is connected to a Polish Criminal Family] - begin their hunt for a troubled teenager who vanished during a school trip.

The author adds to the mix a biker gang who peddle narcotics and racist ideologies; a skyscraper development 'Elysium' built exclusively for the ultra-wealthy; a petty thief called Hector, the gang-boss Gustav Karl, and lurking in the shadows is a former soldier / mercenary turned underworld hitman named amusingly 'The Groke'.

The characterisation is vivid though subtle as the author applies deft touches to make even the minor figures distinct and painted with pathos, such as Rado's three-year old son Jurek [junior]; Dora's long suffering partner Jafet and their boss Police Captain Elliöi's boy-friend - Indriði.

The chapters are short and the writing style terse, which is of little wonder as Jónasson is a poet, and also a playwright and screenwriter. The narrative is propelled like a slingshot, but there are moments that provoke deep thought in the reader, contemplation on some of the nuances that make up life.

There is a very minor scene toward the climax that made me pause and reflect, where Rado poses as an uneducated immigrant cleaner in order to gain access to a penthouse suite at the Elysium tower. After clearing the secu-

rity gate his partner Dora grins and says "Well played my man."

"It comes easy enough," Rado says. "That's how my dad talked."

He doesn't mention the shame he used to feel every time his father opened his mouth in public. These days he's just ashamed of having been ashamed.

In the opinion of this reviewer, **BROKEN** is a standout as the writing took my breath away.

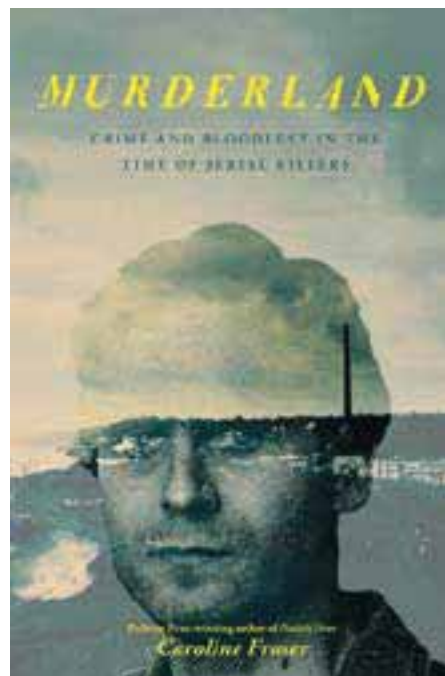
Translated from the Icelandic elegantly into English by Quentin Bates

Published in Hardcover on June 12th 2025 and then in Paperback on August 1st 2025 by Corylus Books.

MURDERLAND: Crime and Bloodlust in the Time of Serial Killers

By Caroline Fraser
Fleet, £25.00, June

Rating: A+



This book is most unusual. Ostensibly a true-crime narrative that investigates the serial killer Ted Bundy and others such as the Green River Killer, the Night Stalker, the Hillside Strangler, Zodiac, Charles Manson [et. al.] - linked in terms of their murderous activity to -

[a] The geography of the Pacific North West of America., both natural as in the Olympic-Wallowa Lineament [OWL] fault line, as well as man-made structures like the regional "floating

bridges" with their problematic 'reversible car lanes'.

[b] The events and socio-political turmoil of America in the 1970s to the 1980s.

[c] Heavy industry and the chemical poisoning that resulted from the smelters [metal extraction and purification from molten ores] before environmental safeguards came into being with the E.P.A. And [d] the authors' own 'coming of age' in that region and age.

The title has inserted "Crime and Bloodlust in the Time of Serial Killers" as a suffix of sorts which acts as a warning - because this is a disturbing [and at times distressing] work, but one that provokes deep-thought amidst the revelations and the revulsion that the author knits from.

The author is an award-winning journalist and writer / biographer / academic -- though the writing style far from academia, instead, it's conversational which corrals the reader into some dark places, dark postulations, with screamingly whispered horrors - all triangulated in terms of time, place and ecology until it reads like a historical thriller.

The origins, influences and wealth of the American dynasties of the Guggenheim and Rockefeller families, of industrial organisations such as the American Smelting and Refining Company [ASARCO], the Ethyl Corporation, Automotive and Petro-Chemical Operations are sprinkled into the narrative together with anecdotal [as well as direct linkages] to the heavy metal pollutants such as Lead, Zinc, Cadmium, Arsenic among many of the transition elements [and toxic gases] that seeped into the air and soil of the American North West.

Fraser provides a lengthy [and interesting] appendix in the form of a series of source notes, detailing her research findings [chapter by chapter]. This forces the reader to flick back and fro, as the narrative progresses in its surreal journey.

The poisoning of minds and bodies continues as the pollution pervades the landscape as well as the culture. The area of Tacoma, Washington with its polluted land and waterways is refer-

enced as an influence on novelists who lived there - Dashiell Hammett, one of the grandfathers of the Noir Thriller [The Maltese Falcon], and also on Frank Herbert, the grandfather of Ecological Science Fiction [Dune].

I found the 'coming of age' anecdotes from the authors own life interesting diversions [or intermissions] from the darkness of capitalistic industrial chemistry that the author tries to align to the phenomenon of serial killing.

Though there may be a causal link [or influence] between large scale industrial pollution with mental impairment - but when you consider the vast majority of the aforementioned serial killers referenced in this book to be white men; when half the affected population from the pollution are women, and that is without referencing the genetic / racial make-up of the serial killers [white], the author's argument of a direct causal correlation comes into question.

MURDERLAND is an obsessive work, which could be considered a labour of love despite its dark subject matter. It is a dense narrative that provokes deep-thought, making interesting commentary - even if the conclusion [the author wants the reader to embrace] is ultimately masked and confused like the clouds of toxic fumes billowing out of the chimney stacks of the industrial smelters.

A worthy read that weaves Toxic Masculinity into a Chemically Toxic Environment - well worth your time.

George Easter Reviews

NO MAN'S LAND

by Neil Broadfoot
Constable, £19.99, 2018
Connor Fraser #1

Rating: B+

Connor Fraser is an ex-Belfast police officer, now a close protection officer working in Stirling, Scotland.

In one of Stirling's tourist hot spots at Cowane's Hospital, a decapitated body is found by a dog walker showing all the signs of a medieval sadistic savagery that horrifies all who are unfor-

tunate enough to see it. The murder inquiry is assigned to DCI Malcolm Ford, who becomes obsessed with finding the murderer.

An ambitious freelance journalist Donna Blake is a single mother with a baby son, Andrew, living a financially precarious existence, forced to rely on her parents for childcare. She is currently working at Valley FM radio, but she has big plans to move into TV reporting, she just needs that big story and a series of exclusives. The murders provide her with that opportunity as she mines all her contacts for that cutting edge information, but she is not prepared for the killings to come so close to her personal world.

Then another body is found in Stirling - this time with a message for Connor, a message from his time battling the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

The story lines of these three protagonists eventually merge as each seeks to find who has caused these murders.

The author builds his narrative to heighten suspense that results in a surprising and satisfactory ending. This is the first novel produced by Neil Broadfoot and the first I've read. There are six more in the series and three more in a Doug McGregor series. I will be reading more of them in the future.

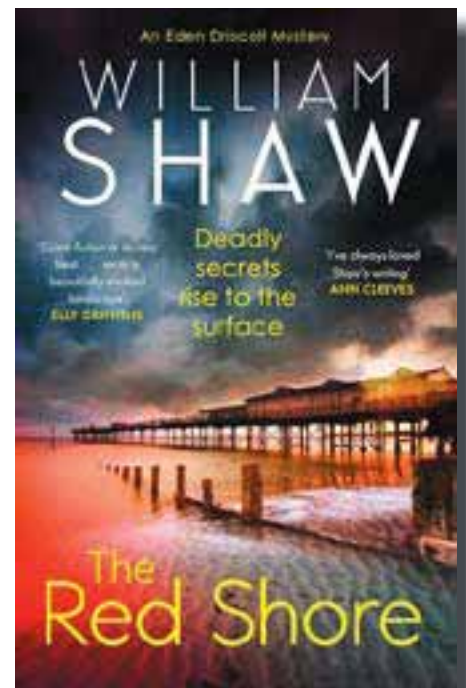
THE RED SHORE

by William Shaw
Hemlock Press, £18.99, July
Eden Driscoll #1

Rating: A

Out at sea, the weather in the Channel is getting worse and locked in the cabin of a yacht is a nine-year-old boy. Alone.

Metropolitan Police DS Eden Driscoll of the Met has just wrapped up a successful operation. Then he gets a phone call that changes everything. His estranged sister Apple is missing and the now rescued boy on the boat is Finn, his nephew, whom he never knew existed. With a heavy heart, Eden makes his way to Teignmouth in Devon and his first meeting with Finn is not exactly auspicious. Under a certain amount of pressure from social worker Bisi, Eden



agrees to stay for a week and look after Finn, a task for which he is ill equipped. It's clear from the start that something has gone dreadfully wrong for Apple and the more Eden digs the muddier the waters become.

William Shaw is one of England's premier storytellers. This book is packed with suspense, pathos, surprise and good detection.

THE PROTEST

by Rob Rinder
Century, £20.00, June
Solicitor Adam Green #3

Rating: A-

The Royal Academy is having a fete to celebrate the works of the world-famous artist Max Bruce. As the artist begins his remarks, a young woman runs up to him, sprays his face with blue paint and yells repeatedly, "Stop the War!" What seems to be a fairly harmless protest against the war in Khanistan turns into something much more serious when Max Bruce keels over dead. A security guard wrestles Lexi Williams, the perpetrator, to the ground and when the police arrive, she is arrested.

Meanwhile, at Stag Court Chambers, the intimidating Morris Brown returns and is handed the Lexi Williams defense with the young barrister Adam Green

to act as his second (doing all the grunt work – and perhaps some investigating).

Lexi claims she did not insert poison into the spray can of blue paint. “I’m a pacific. I don’t kill people!” So Adam sets about to prove her innocence or at best cast doubt on the prosecution case.

Having read and greatly enjoyed all three of this series so far, I have felt quite at home in Adam Green’s law chambers and at the Old Bailey. After all, the Rumpole series penned by John Mortimer are among my all-time favorite mysteries and they are set in the same milieu.

Rob Rinder (U.K. TV personality “Judge Rinder”) does a masterful job of depicting the chambers and courts with all of their quirky characters and ways of doing things.

I could see the plot progressing to a predictable end in *THE PROTEST*. Nope! Didn’t happen.

LAST CHANCE

by Stephen Leather

Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99, July; in U.S. \$28.99 or \$11.99 on Kindle
Spider Shepherd #22

Rating: A-

I’ve read and praised all 22 of the Spider Shepherd thrillers by Stephen Leather and consider him one of the top thriller writers in the market today.

This high-octane thriller follows former SAS operative turned MI5 agent Dan “Spider” Shepherd as he confronts a deadly network of assassins operating across Europe.

A clandestine group of professional killers, known as “The Office,” is executing high-profile targets on behalf of the Iranian government, with victims including some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals. When a series of murders strikes London, MI5 determines that decisive action is necessary. Shepherd is tasked with infiltrating the organization and dismantling it from within. As he delves deeper, he uncovers a complex web of international espionage and political intrigue, raising questions about how far he’s willing to go in the name of justice and still stay true to his values.

Another excellent entry into this high quality series. Lots of essential elements of a good action thriller: danger, suspense, deadline and realistic action scenes.

This series is published in the U.K., but all books are readily available on amazon. And if you read on a Kindle, they are available at very reasonable prices.



HUMAN REMAINS

by Jo Callaghan

Simon & Schuster U.K., £18.99, April
Kat Frank & AIDE Lock #3

Rating: A

The narrative kicks off when a headless, handless body is discovered on a Warwickshire farm. As the Future Policing Unit investigates, the emergence of a second body raises fears that the notorious Aston Strangler may have returned (or at the very least, a copycat killer). Tensions escalate inside and outside the police force, especially when Kat faces accusations of having wrongfully imprisoned someone years earlier (the alleged Aston Strangler).

Kat’s AI partner Lock, driven by unyielding logic, seeks to uncover the truth, even as Kat strives to keep her past concealed. Their partnership is tested as they confront a shadowy figure seeking revenge, forcing Lock to choose

between algorithmic evidence and human intuition.

I don’t know why this isn’t scheduled to be published in the U.S. (at least not yet). This series is one of high quality and deserves a wide audience. For a more in-depth of the first two books of the series, see the cover article of Issue #105.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

THE MIDNIGHT KING

by Tariq Ashkanani

Viper Books, £16.99, April

Rating: A

Edinburgh lawyer Tariq Ashkanani announced himself as a fresh and exciting talent while gathering accolades for his first two crime novels, *WELCOME TO COOPER* and *FOLLOW ME TO THE EDGE*, layered smalltown thrillers set in the United States, but he takes a huge leap with this oh-so-very-dark new tale. Ashkanani has previously spoken about Thomas Harris classic *RED DRAGON*, the first Hannibal Lecter tale, being his gateway drug to his passion for American settings, and in *THE MIDNIGHT KING*, he brilliantly delves into a similar abyss of crime-meets-horror. Without the charming serial killer.

Here, Isaac, a former detective, is limping through life as a private eye doing low-level insurance and cheating spouse cases, while his old school friend Nathan Cole has reluctantly returned to Nashville following the suicide of his father, a renowned pulp fiction author. Isaac is one of very few to know how troubled Nathan’s childhood was - and some of why Nathan eventually fled, leaving his sister behind - but even he doesn’t know just how evil Lucas Cole really was. For Nathan’s father didn’t just write about murders; he committed them. Abducting and killing children; failed attempts to try to grow their family. As Nathan and his sister adjust to a world without Lucas Cole, his presence haunts, including through a manuscript he left behind - a fictionalised account of his crimes, and their family.

Then there's the girl who went missing, just before their father's death. As Isaac and Nathan separately search for the young girl, for different motivations, another man sits on death row, and Nathan begins to read his father's unpublished final manuscript. With *THE MIDNIGHT KING*, Ashkanani crafts a tremendous thriller that will likely be too grim for some (given serial child abductions and very dark twists) but for those who can handle the darkness verging on bleakness, it's a brilliant ride, beautifully crafted and with plenty of emotional heft alongside the twists and turns.

WHAT THE NIGHT BRINGS

by Mark Billingham

Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00, July

Rating: A-

Now celebrating his 25th year of publication, bestselling British crime writer Mark Billingham has returned to his most famous creation, Tom Thorne, after largely side-stepping (or perhaps quick-stepping away from, perhaps) the London-based police detective in recent years.

Three of Billingham's last four novels have been the exquisite standalone *RABBIT HOLE*, set in a psychiatric ward, and two dazzling, more comical crime tales starring unconventional, ballroom dancing loving, grief-stricken Blackpool police detective Declan Miller. All superb books, yet longtime readers have been hanging out for an update on what's going on with Thorne and pals.

In *WHAT THE NIGHT BRINGS*, readers are once again immersed in the troubling world of DI Tom Thorne, and a supporting cast we've come to know and love over 19 novels since 2001's *Sleepyhead* (to my mind, one of the best crime fiction series debuts of the past quarter century). Thorne is initially miffed when four police officers who helped arrest murder suspect Nick Cresswell thanks to his work don't share the box of doughnuts; until three of them die and the other ends up in hospital. Poisoned.

Then another policeman is murdered in a park. Someone is targeting the Met Police, as accusations of rape and official misconduct swirl. Working with DI Nicola Tanner, pathologist and best friend Phil Hendricks, and longtime colleagues DI Dave Holland – recently returned to the Met – and DCI Brigstocke, Thorne must unravel a tricky case entwined with the dark web and awful crimes and betrayals committed by some of the Met's own.

A terrific read. Billingham continues to evolve his bestselling series in an admirable way. No resting on laurels. He's unafraid to address the real-life clamour about Metropolitan Police misconduct, or changing global views on policing. And he's likewise courageous in the closing chapters of *WHAT THE NIGHT BRINGS*, with some jaw-dropping events which may divide long-time readers. Strap in.

THE CHEMIST

by AA Dhand

HarperCollins, £16.99, May

Rating: B+

Fresh off his pioneering series starring Bradford detective Harry Virdee being adapted into an acclaimed BBC drama, AA Dhand has returned to his roots. The longtime pharmacist's page-whirring latest thriller centres on Idris Khan, the mild-mannered co-owner of a Leeds pharmacy that relies on a steady stream of methadone users to keep its doors open.

That, and a deal with a local drug kingpin which allows Idris rare access to the Mews, a poverty-stricken council estate. When one of Idris's patients, his ex Rebecca, doesn't turn up for her daily dose, Idris goes searching. Only to end up elbows deep in covering up a killing, and a brewing gang war. How far will he go to survive, and protect those he cares about?

THE CHEMIST is a gritty crime thriller that takes readers into tough landscapes and torn lives. With a resourceful, caring 'hero' pushed to his limits, amongst the action it's an at-times bleak peek into lives many ignore: addicts, sex workers, and immigrants

searching for a better life - who've ended up with something far worse. Very good, well worth a read.

BURYING JERICHO

by William Hussey

Bonnier, £16.99, April

Rating: A



In 2023, award-winning young adult author William Hussey made his adult crime fiction debut with the excellent *KILLING JERICHO*, introducing one of the freshest and most fascinating crime fiction leads we've seen in recent years. Scott Jericho is a haunted man who grew up gay in the tight-knit travelling fairground community, became a cop then convict after he assaulted an unrepentant child killer, and tried to escape his ghosts among a haze of drugs, casual sex, and keen observations.

This third instalment in an already terrific series sees Jericho facing a baffling case when his former employer Mark Noonan, a local gangster, asks for his help on behalf of a worried mother to find a missing young man. Still recovering from the events of last year's *JERICHO'S DEAD*, Jericho travels to Fenchurch-on-Sea, a rundown seaside town in Norfolk, and uncovers a spider-web of secrets and local folklore, including unexpected ties to his own fairground family. Paper figures hanging in the woods. Eerie waxworks in a defunct

fairground attraction. Meanwhile his partner Harry is conducting investigations of his own, as a twisted killer from the past is zeroing in on them both.

Hussey, who grew up in the travelling fairground community himself and whose YA oeuvre ranges from horror to rom-coms to LGBT+ wartime tales, can flat out write. **BURYING JERICHO** is a compelling, emotionally hard-hitting page-turner that upturns expectations and may leave readers, along with key characters, reeling. Highly recommended.

BELLA DONNA

by Jill Johnson

Bonnier Books, £16.99, May

Rating: B+

With her quirky, unusual sleuth and murderous use of poisonous plants, Brighton-based Māori storyteller Jill Johnson's Professor Eustacia Rose series are the kind of mysteries that Agatha Christie would likely have enjoyed. A double Ngaio Marsh Awards finalist last year for her debut, **DEVIL'S BREATH** (aka **THE WOMAN IN THE GARDEN** in the United States), which was also a BBC2 Between the Covers Book Club pick on British television, Johnson blends fascinating characters, deadly botanicals, and page-turning events into some very good reads.

In **BELLA DONNA**, the third in the series, neurodivergent Professor Rose is trying to juggle some tricky things: a visit from her lover Matilde, who seems to want to change her well-ordered life a little too much; a search for some of her extremely deadly plants that were previously stolen from her private garden; and trying to avoid telling her police contacts just how well she knew a murdered man.

And how well she knew the murder weapon; he was poisoned with hemlock, likely stolen from Eustacia's own garden. What has a dangerous gang got to do with things, and why is Zsa Zsa, a beguiling trader of rare plants, and Professor Hutchings from a rival university, determined to team up with her? Can't everyone just leave her alone for a bit, to do things her way?

Johnson has created an unforgettable main character in Professor Eustacia Rose, a fascinating and frustrating, compelling and contradictory woman. **BELLA DONNA** is a mystery where the many secrets held by various characters, including Eustacia herself, may be even more poisonous than the deadly plants. Johnson does a good job drawing readers into a twisting tale. More please.

THE GIRL IN CELL A

by Vaseem Khan

Hachette, \$26.99, July

Rating: A

Mystery readers may be pretty familiar with Vaseem Khan, the most recent Chair of the famed Crime Writers Association, thanks to his two fabulous series set in India -- the Baby Ganesh mysteries, and the Malabar House historical mysteries set in post-Raj years. But the British-Indian author provides something very different with **THE GIRL IN CELL A**, the first of two curveballs the sports-loving storyteller is throwing in 2025 (keep an eye out for his 'James Bond universe' thriller later this year).

Alternating between doctor and patient perspectives of prison psychologist Annie Ledet and celebrity killer Orianna Negi, **THE GIRL IN CELL A** is a masterful mix of psychological thriller and rural noir. While Orianna has always maintained her innocence, despite being unable to recall events, it was no surprise she was convicted of killing Gideon Wyclerc, scion of the family that founded Eden Falls. She was found lying near the body, her fingerprints were on the shotgun, gunshot residue on her, and plenty of motive given events of that day, and her entire life. A black teen with dissociative amnesia, a controversial diagnosis fuelling Orianna's true crime celebrity, and plenty of online conspiracy theories. Can Annie Ledet uncover the truth; should Orianna ever be released?

Khan soaks readers in a town full of secrets and scandals and a crumbling dynasty with its own mythology. **THE GIRL IN CELL A** is an impressive novel about the stories we believe and

the lies we tell others and ourselves, that lingers long after its final page.

THE GOOD FATHER

by Liam McIlvanney

Bonnier Books, £16.99, July

Rating: A+

It is a seemingly ordinary August day that fractures the lives of Gordon and Sarah Rutherford. Late summer on the west coast of Scotland; their seven-year-old Rory enjoying the beach outside the family home with their dog Bonnie. Then Bonnie comes home alone. Gordon and Sarah wander the beach. No sign of Rory. The police are called. Questions. More extensive searches. More questions. Hours pass. Days. Months. Can any hope remain, or is it the hope that kills?

Award-winning novelist and literary professor Liam McIlvanney may be a self-confessed 'slow motion crime writer' who doesn't produce the book-a-year of many peers, but **THE GOOD FATHER** demonstrates once more why his tales are always well worth the wait. What could be worse than your child disappearing? A seemingly ordinary day, something Rory had often done, playing near the house with their dog. A safe community in their small town, he'd always returned home. Until he didn't. Guilt. Fear. Whispers and gossip. How do your neighbours see you now; how do you see yourselves?

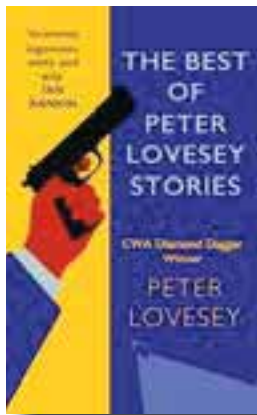
McIlvanney takes parental fears and delivers gut-punch storytelling; he is a great writer alongside being a great storyteller. His sentences sing, as Gordon and Sarah's happy lives are eroded away day by day. What could be worse than your child disappearing? **THE GOOD FATHER** is a quietly terrifying tale that upturns expectations without pyrotechnics, that draws you in and twists the knife, delivering emotional gut-punches without resorting to 'look at me' hash-tagable twists.

From an author who's already collected major writing prizes and plenty of accolades in both hemispheres, **THE GOOD FATHER** may somehow be McIlvanney's best work yet. Unforgettable.

Ripster's Revivals

by Mike Ripley

THE BEST OF PETER LOVESEY STORIES will be published by Alison & Busby in June and I was actually reading the advance publicity material for it when I heard of Peter's death.



Peter Lovesey, along with Reginald Hill and Robert Barnard, all born in 1936, formed what some hack (me) once referred to as the Golden Triumvirate of solid British crime-writing. They are no longer with us but I was proud to have known them all.

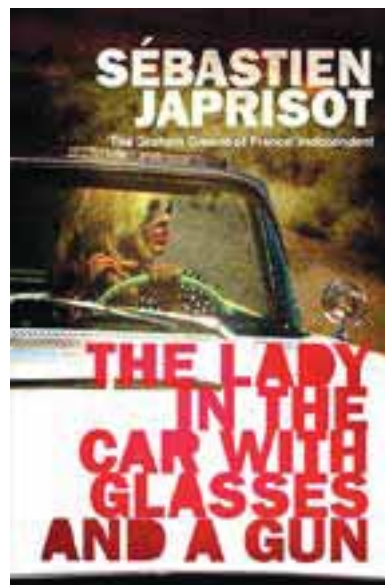
If only the French had a word for noir...

I am grateful to my old chum Rob Mallows, the curator of that indispensable website The Deighton Dossier, for the word Tsundoku which he assures me is the Japanese term for a pile of books waiting to be read.

I continue to make slow but steady progress chipping away at my own towering TBR pile and recently rescued, read and thoroughly enjoyed the wonderfully-titled: **THE LADY IN THE CAR WITH GLASSES AND A GUN** by Sebastien Japrisot [1931-2003],

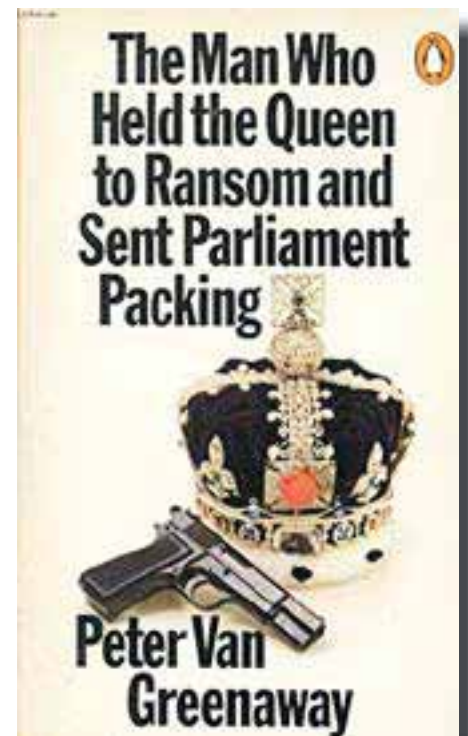
who has been described as the French Graham Greene, though to be honest, **THE LADY...** conjured up, for me, shades of some of the work of Cornell Woolrich (writing as 'William Irish'). There is a female protagonist who seems to be the victim of a bizarre, almost supernatural, series of coincidences as the short-sighted, mild-mannered Dany Longo embarks on a spontaneous road trip across France in a company car – a not inconspicuous Thunderbird convertible with enough room in the boot (or trunk if you're being picky) to conceal a body. And if that was a sort of spoiler alert, well you always knew something nasty was coming, as Dany discovers along her unplanned, spur-of-the-moment trip that she has been there and done that before, and quite recently and in that car. Is she going mad, does she (and the car) have a doppelganger, or is someone setting her up? Given the speeds she drives at and the amount of alcohol she consumes, anything could be possible.

Whilst the plot is slightly ludicrous



if you think about it too much, and none of the characters are particularly empathetic, the hypnotic quality of Japrisot's writing, even when translated, is undeniable. I am assuming the 2019 paperback edition I read was a more recent translation than the original 1967 English version, but couldn't be sure. Either way, this is a great example of a dark, dream-like road trip which, from the off, you know is not going to end well for somebody.

THE LADY... got me thinking about other thrillers in my library which have pub-quiz worthy titles, one of which I have read at least three times and owned for 53 years, although in all that time I have never met anyone else who has read it, or even remembers **THE MAN WHO HELD THE QUEEN TO RANSOM AND SENT PARLIAMENT PACKING**.



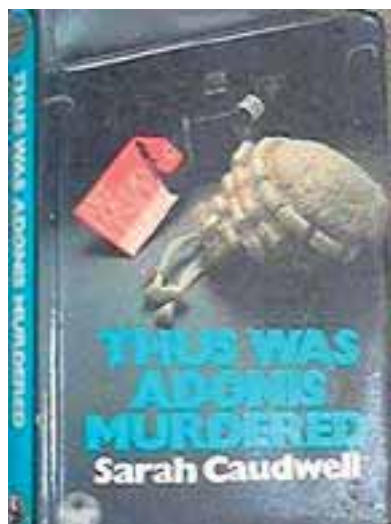
Peter Van Greenaway's hopefully not prophetic thriller was first published in 1968 and came out in paperback four years later. It spookily foretells the political craze for 'Victorian values' in the Thatcher era, and cashes in on public paranoia about crime, immigrants and 'anti-social behaviour' whilst smoothly subverting all the right-wing's answers to their concerns as a small band of

regular army officers decide enough is enough and stage a coup.



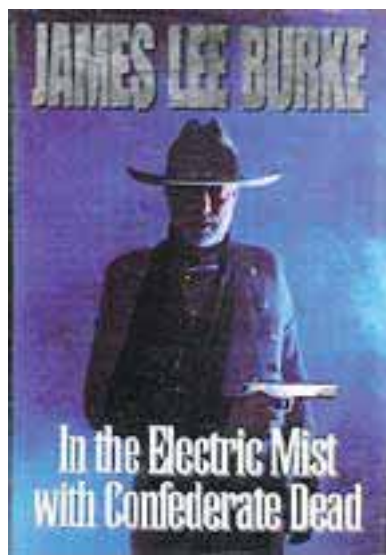
David Brierley

Whilst Greenaway's title sums up exactly what happens in his novel, in David Brierley's 1995 thriller **ON LEAVING A PRAGUE WINDOW**, the title encapsulates a setting: the Prague of post-Cold War, post-Velvet Revolution where many an old score remains unsettled. It is a title which will be subtly familiar to anyone who learned about The Thirty Years War at school (some of us did!) and the famous 'defenestration of Prague' in 1618.



For ten years, until her untimely death in 2000, I was a friend and fellow boulevardier of Sarah Caudwell, regularly touring the wine bars of Holborn and some rather dubious clubs in Soho, and for that reason alone I treasure a much-loved (American) Penguin copy

of her 1981 debut novel **THUS WAS ADONIS MURDERED**. Hysterically funny, the book launched Professor Hilary Tamar on to an unsuspecting legal establishment and a readership which appreciated fine, dry wit. Sarah, who long fought to avoid the epithet 'prolific' (unlike most crime writers), left us far too soon and with only four novels, but all are worth seeking out.

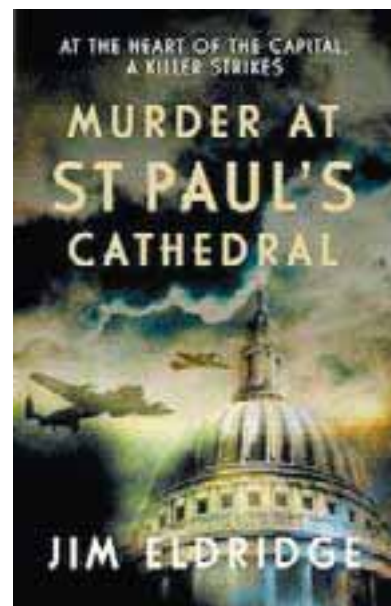


I have no idea how many novels, most featuring Louisiana detective Dave Robicheaux, James Lee Burke has now published, and **IN THE ELECTRIC MIST WITH CONFEDERATE DEAD** (1993) was probably his twelfth when, in my opinion, he was at the height of his descriptive powers, showing that the crime novel could read like poetry. Although I have had my reservations about his more recent output, I cannot understate the importance of Burke's style in American crime-writing – what the Washington Post called 'the luminosity of his writerly voice' – as well as his emotional attachment to the history and environment of the bayous of southern Louisiana. In many ways **IN THE ELECTRIC MIST WITH CONFEDERATE DEAD** (a great title and a great book, by the way) could be almost be a generic descriptor for all his work.

Do Mention the War

In my last missive I noted no less than five upcoming British mysteries set

during WWII. I was, of course wrong, for no sooner had I dismounted from my pulpit I was confronted with two more.



Jim Eldridge, after staging murders in museums, hotels and Underground stations, turns the attention of his police detective hero DCI Edgar (Saxe?) Co-burg to notable cathedrals, starting with **MURDER AT ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL** [Allison & Busby this month]. A follow-up involving, no doubt, more murderous mayhem at Canterbury Cathedral has been announced for 2026.

Mike Hollow's ninth outing for his 'Blitz Detective' Inspector John Jago also begins in an air raid on the area around St Paul's, which devastates the heart of the British publishing industry – begging the question of who tipped off the Luftwaffe – but Jago is drawn to an individual murder in Soho. **THE SOHO MURDER** [also Allison & Busby] is published in May and a tenth in the series, **THE BLOOMSBURY MURDER** is flagged for October.

These days there are so many bodies lying around London (and also Cambridge, Oxford, Leeds and Glasgow – see Revivals #13) anyone would think there was war on.

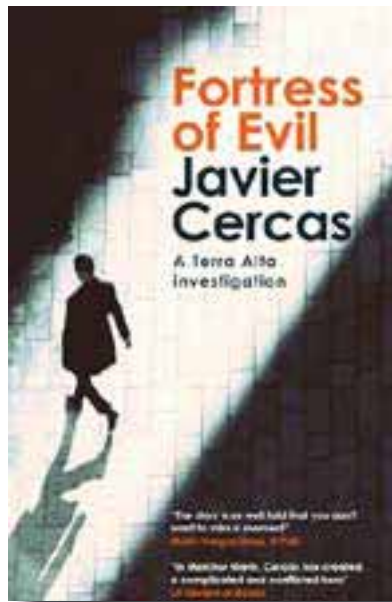
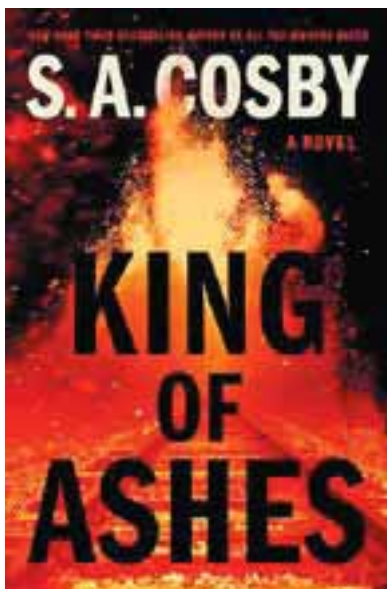
Coming Up (New Stuff)

Contrary to popular belief, I do take

an interest in new crime fiction, though for the sake of my blood pressure I have to ration my intake these days.

I have followed the publishing career of S.A. (Shawn) Cosby since he was first published here in the UK. I can date the start of my interest (and admiration) to a party thrown by publisher Headline in 2020 in the upstairs room of a pub somewhere near St Paul's. It turned out to be the last publishers' party before the first Covid lockdown was imposed, or perhaps just the last one I was invited to.

Among the forthcoming books being promoted that evening was a debut crime novel by an American no-one had ever heard of, entitled **BLACKTOP WASTELAND**. Encouraged by the super-enthusiastic Headline publicity team, I started reading an advance proof on my train home and found myself hooked on this hard-boiled slice of contemporary crime in rural Virginia. And subsequent thrillers proved this was no flash-in-the-pan; all tough, sometimes brutal tales, but always with a big, generous heart when it came to the trials and tribulations of the characters. I was looking forward to his new novel **KING OF ASHES**, which is published in June by Headline, but as they have kindly sent me an advanced proof, I can already say that it is very, very good and involves a family under threat from local crime lords while trying to protect their specialist business of running a local 'crematory' (crematorium).

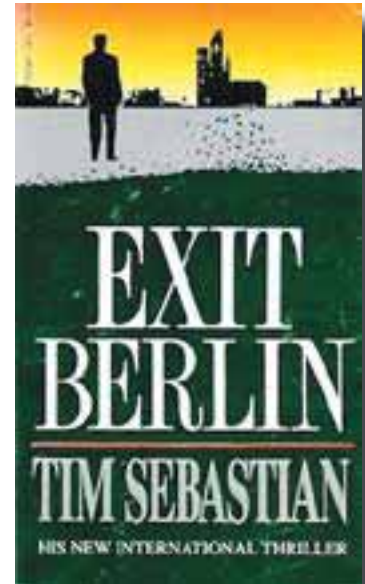


For a change of scenery, though still on the dark side of crime fiction, I can recommend the 'Terra Alta Investigations' of the former Catalan policeman Melchor Marin. In his latest outing, **FORTRESS OF EVIL** by award-winning Spanish author Javier Cercas, which is published this month by Maclehose Press, Marin has more family problems as having at last (he thinks) found peace with his teenage daughter Cosette now he has avenged her mother's murder, the spikey 17-year-old ups and disappears and Marin follows her trail to Mallorca where she was last seen – or at least seen alive.

Goodbye To Berlin

It was a delight to find an unread Tim Sebastian thriller in my TBR pile and it reminded me of me of what an absolutely superb writer of spy-fiction he was when chronicling the last stages of the Cold War. As a former BBC correspondent in Warsaw and then Moscow (from which he was expelled) in the 1980s, one really could not expect anything less. His 1992 novel **EXIT BERLIN** has a particularly tortuous plot involving a British spy who has defected to East Germany with a view to infiltrating the Stasi and uncovering their mole in British intelligence, but then suddenly the Berlin Wall comes down, the Stasi fade away and all bets seem to be off. Does our hero stay put or walk

back into the West, where he is still, as far as he knows, regarded as a traitor in an attempt to complete his mission? With considerable trepidation, our now homeless spy launches his own dangerous quest for revenge which takes him to London, Oxford and Washington (with suspicious ease) and finally back to East Berlin.



For all the espionage skullduggery and betrayal, of which there is plenty, I found Sebastian's descriptions of an exiled spy's life in Berlin, both before and after the Wall came down, to be the most fascinating and gripping parts of the novel. This, I have to admit, is in no small part due to fact that many of those Berlin scenes take place in the Prenzlauer Berg district and, specifically, along Schonhauser Allee, an area which I have got to know well in my trips to a united Berlin. Indeed, on my last visit I was presented with a framed photograph of the Eberswalder Strasse U-bahn station on Schonhauser Allee, which I am told was taken (illegally) by a well-known photo journalist documenting daily life in the East on the day before the Wall came down.

Pip! Pip! The Ripster

Reprinted by permission of the author and Shots Magazine (shotsmag.co.uk)

Sneak Previews

Upcoming Mysteries



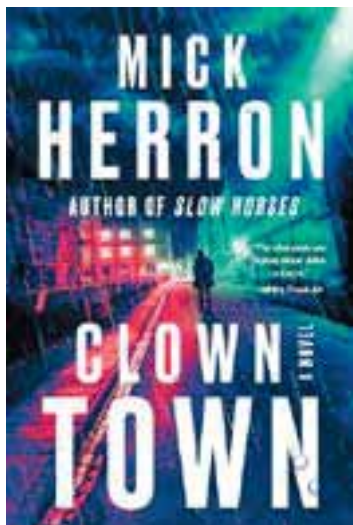
August, 2025

- 5 Eli Cranor, **MISSISSIPPI BLUE** 42 (FBI Special Agent Rae Johnson)
- 5 Claire Douglas, **THE WRONG SISTER**
- 5 Ulf Kvensler, **MY FATHER'S HOUSE**
- 5 Donna Andrews, **FOR DUCK'S SAKE** (Meg Langslow)
- 5 Kathy Reichs, **EVIL BONES** (Temperance Brennan)
- 5 Sarah Stewart Taylor, **HUNTER'S HEART RIDGE** (Bethany, Vermont)
- 5 Laura Shepherd-Robinson, **THE ART OF THE LIE**
- 5 Jessa Maxwell, **DEAD OF SUMMER**
- 5 Steve Cavanagh, **THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE** (Eddie Flynn)
- 5 Scott Carson, **DEPARTURE** 37
- 5 Alexis Soloski, **FLASHOUT**
- 12 Lisa Gardner, **KISS HER GOODBYE** (Frankie Elkin)
- 12 Karin Slaughter, **WE ARE ALL GUILTY HERE**
- 12 Philip Miller, **THE DIARY OF LIES** (Shona Sandison)
- 12 Tanya Scott, **STILLWATER**
- 12 Joanna Schaffhausen, **GONE IN THE NIGHT** (Annalisa Vega)
- 12 Samantha Downing, **TOO OLD FOR THIS**
- 12 Jo Morey, **LIME JUICE MONEY**
- 12 Jennifer Ashley, **A SILENCE IN BELGRAVE SQUARE** (Kat Holloway)
- 14 M. W. Craven, **THE FINAL VOW** (Poe & Tilly) – U.K.
- 19 Joe R. Lansdale, **HATCHET GIRLS** (Hap & Leonard)
- 19 Melissa Pace, **THE ONCE AND FUTURE ME**
- 19 Jo Nichols, **THE MARIGOLD COTTAGES MURDER COLLECTIVE**

- 19 Hannah Richell, **ONE DARK NIGHT**
- 19 Ace Atkins, **EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD**
- 19 Andrew Taylor, **A SCHOOLING IN MURDER**
- 26 Katherine Faulkner, **THE BREAK-IN**
- 26 Christopher Reich, **THE TOURISTS** (Mac Decker)
- 26 D. V. Bishop, **CARNIVAL OF LIES** (Cesare Aldo)
- 26 Stacy Willingham, **FORGET ME NOT**
- 26 Amanda Chapman, **MRS. CHRISTIE AT THE MYSTERY GUILD LIBRARY**
- 26 Randy Wayne White, **TOMLIN -SON'S WAKE** (Doc Ford)

September, 2025

- 1 James Patterson & Duane Swierczynski, **BILLION DOLLAR RANSOM**
- 2 Mick Herron, **CLOWN TOWN** (Slow Horses)



- 2 Graham Hurley, **KANE** (Spoils of

- War) – U.K.
- 2 Frederick Forsyth & Tony Kent, **REVENGE OF ODESSA**
- 2 Ken Jaworowski, **WHAT ABOUT THE BODIES**
- 2 William Kent Krueger, **APOSTLE'S COVE** (Cork O'Connor)
- 2 Karin Smirnoff, **THE GIRL WITH ICE IN HER VEINS** (Lisbeth Salander)
- 9 Lou Berney, **CROOKS**
- 9 Dan Brown, **THE SECRETS OF SECRETS** (Robert Langdon)
- 9 Robert Galbraith, **THE HALL MARKED MAN** (Cormoran Strike)
- 9 Ragnar Jonasson, **THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE MISSING CRIME WRITER**
- 9 P. J. Tracy, **THE DEEPEST CUT** (Monkeewrench)
- 9 Hank Phillippi Ryan, **ALL THIS COULD BE YOURS**
- 9 K. J. White, **SEVEN REASONS TO MURDER YOUR DINNER GUESTS**
- 9 Clive Cussler & Jack du Brul, **THE IRON STORM** (Isaac Bell)
- 9 Jack Anderson, **THE RETURN OF MORIARTY**
- 9 J. Todd Scott, **SCAR THE SKY**
- 9 Jeffrey Deaver & Isabella Maldonado, **THE GRAVE ARTIST** (Sanchez & Heron)
- 16 Robert Thorogood, **MURDER ON THE MARLOW BELLE** (Marlow Murder Club)
- 16 Clare Mackintosh, **OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES**
- 16 Peter James, **ONE OF US IS DEAD** (Roy Grace)
- 16 Walter Mosley, **GRAY DAWN** (Easy Rawlins)
- 16 Mark Edwards, **THE WASP TRAP**
- 16 Mindy Mejia, **THE WHISPER PLACE** (Celina Investigations)
- 16 Zoe Rankin, **THE VANISHING PLACE**
- 23 James R. Benn, **A BITTER WIND** (Billy Boyle)
- 23 Janice Hallett, **THE KILLER QUESTION**
- 23 Cate Holahan, **THE KIDNAPPING OF ALICE INGOLD**
- 23 Elizabeth George, **A SLOWLY DYING CAUSE** (Lynley/Havers)
- 23 Julia Kelly, **A DARK AND DEADLY**

JOURNEY (Evelyn Redfern)

- 23 Blake Crouch, **FAMOUS**
 25 John Banville, **VENETIAN**
VESPER (Standalone)
 30 David McClosky, **THE PERSIAN**
 30 Richard Osman, **THE IMPOSSIBLE**
FORTUNE (Thursday Murder Club)
 30 Robin Burcell, **Clive Cussler's THE**
SERPENT EYE (Fargo)
 30 Ann Cleeves, **THE KILLING**
STONES (Jimmy Perez)
 30 Sherry Thomas, **THE LIBRARIANS**

October, 2025

- 7 Chevy Stevens, **THE HITCHHIK**
-ERS
 7 Patricia Cornwell, **SHARP FORCE**
 (Scarpetta)
 7 Bella Mackie, **WHAT A WAY**
TO GO
 7 Jennifer Fawcett, **KEEP THIS**
FOR ME
 14 Lee Goldberg, **FALLEN STAR** (Eve
 Ronin)
 14 Margaret Mizushima, **DYING CRY**
 (Timber Creek K-9)
 14 Hisashi Kashiwai, **THE KAMOGA**
-WA FOOD DETECTIVES: MENU
OF HAPPINESS
 14 David Rosenfelt, **AND TO ALL A**
GOOD BITE (Andy Carpenter)
 14 Tom Ryan, **WE HAD A HUNCH**
 14 Donna Andrews, **FIVE GOLDEN**
WINGS (Meg Langslow)
 14 Nic Stone, **BOOM TOWN**
 14 Stephen Hunter, **THE GUN MAN**
JACKSON SWAGGER
 21 Michael Connelly, **THE PROVING**
GROUND (Lincoln Lawyer)
 21 Olivia Black, **DEATH AT THE**
DOOR (Ruby & Cordelia)
 21 Charles Todd, **A CHRISTMAS**
WITNESS
 25 Tim Sullivan, **THE DENTIST**
 (George Cross) – 1st in series
 28 Louise Penny, **THE BLACK WOLF**
 (Gamache)
 28 Janet Evanovich, **THE KING'S**
RANSOM (Gabriela Rose)
 28 Nelson DeMille & Alex DeMille,
THE TIN MEN (Scott Brodie &
 Maggie Taylor)

November, 2025

- 4 Charles Finch, **THE HIDDEN CITY**
 (Charles Lenox)
 4 C. M. Ewan, **STRANGERS IN THE**
CAR
 4 Con Lehane, **THE RED SCARE**
MURDERS
 4 Alissa Lee, **WITH FRIENDS LIKE**
THESE
 4 Oyinkan Braithwaite, **CURSED**
DAUGHTERS
 11 T. Jefferson Parker, **WILD**
INSTINCT
 11 S. J. Bennett, **THE QUEEN WHO**
CAME IN FROM THE COLD
 11 Laura Griffin, **INNOCENCE ROAD**
 11 David Baldacci, **NASH FALLS**
 18 Steve Unszenyi, **BLOOD OATH**
 (Alexandra Martel)
 18 Jennifer Hillier, **CREEP**
 18 Daniel Hurst, **THE DOCTOR'S**
WIFE
 18 Julia Spencer Fleming, **AT MID**
-NIGHT COMES THE CRY (Clare
 Fergusson)
 18 Kathy Reichs, **EVIL BONES**
 (Temperance Brennan)
 25 Connor Sullivan, **RED FALCON**
 (Brian Rhome)
 25 Marisa Kashino, **BEST OFFER**
WINS
 25 Mia P. Manasala, **DEATH AND**
DINUGUAN

December, 2025

- 2 Val McDermid, **SILENT BONES**
 (Karen Pirie)
 2 Robert Gold, **ELEVEN LIARS** (Ben
 Harper)
 2 Christopher Carlsson, **THE LIVING**
AND THE DEAD
 2 Kit Frick, **FRIENDS AND LIARS**
 2 Stuart Woods & Brett Battles,
BLOWN AWAY (Teddy Fay)
 2 Matthew Pearl, **THE AWARD**
 8 S. J. Rozan, **FIRST DO NO HARM**
 (Lydia Chin/Bill Smith)
 9 Arnaldur Indridason, **THE QUIET**
MOTHER (Detective Konrad)
 9 Robin Cook, **SPASM**
 9 L. M. Chilton, **EVERYONE IN THE**
GROUP CHAT DIES
 16 W. E. B. Griffin & Jack Stewart,
DIRECT ACTION (Presidential
 Agent)

January, 2026

- 6 Laura Dave, **THE FIRST TIME I**
SAW HIM (Hannah Hall)
 6 Amy Pease, **WILDWOOD**
 6 Lori Rader-Day, **WRECK YOUR**
HEART
 13 Bruce Robert Coffin, **BITTER FALL**
 (Detective Justice)

February, 2026

- 3 Jo Nesbo, **WOLF HOUR**
 3 Mike Lawson, **THE ASSET** (Joe
 DeMarco)
 10 Gregg Hurwitz, **ANTIHERO**
 (Orphan X)
 17 Mark Greaney, **THE HARD LINE**
 (Gray Man)
 17 Naomi Hirahara, **CROWN CITY**
 (Japantown)
 24 C. J. Box, **THE CROSSROADS** (Joe
 Pickett)
 24 Nicci French, **TYLER GREEN WILL**
NEVER BE FREE (Maud O'Connor)
 26 Tim Weaver, **THE LOST WOMEN**
 (David Raker) – UK

March, 2026

- 10 Nick Petrie, **THE DARK TIME**
 (Peter Ash)
 24 Steve Cavanagh, **TWO KINDS OF**
STRANGER (Eddie Flynn)

April, 2026

- 23 Jo Callaghan, **BODY OF LIES** (Kat
 & Lock)

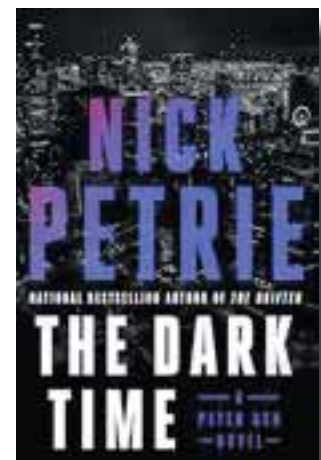


Table of Contents

Lisa Gardner	2
Frankie Elkins Series	2
Missing Persons Experts	3
Other Missing Persons Mysteries	5
Favorite Missing Persons Mysteries	9
Reviewed to Death	10
Letters	12
Shamus Award Nominations	12
Deadly Pleasures Best of 2025	13
R.I.P.	21
Editor's Message	22
Associate Editor's Message	23
Reviews	
Meredith Anthony	24
Ted Hertel	31
Kevin Burton Smith	36
Hank Wagner	40
Cozy/Traditonal Cafe'	43
George Easter	49
Robin Agnew	54
Larry Gandle	58
Down Under Crime	60
Ngaio Marsh Award Longlist	35
On George's Nightstand	39
DP Calendar	64
Bouchercon 2025	65
News and Reviews From the U.K.	
New Books	66
Reviews	67
Mike Ripley Column	75
Sneak Previews	78



Editor/Publisher
George A. Easter
george@deadlypleasures.com

Associate Editor
Larry Gandle
LGandle@aol.com

Contributors
Mary Mason
Jeff Popple
Mike Ripley
Ted Hertel, Jr.
Ali Karim
Kevin Burton Smith
Meredith Anthony
Robin Agnew
Hank Wagner
Craig Sisterson



Subscription Rates

Sample Free (see website)
1 year digital (four issues) \$10.00

Make checks (U.S. funds only)
payable to George Easter or
Deadly Pleasures and send to
George Easter -- DP
1718 Ridge Point Dr.
Bountiful, UT 84010
PayPal payment is also accepted
at george@deadlypleasures.com