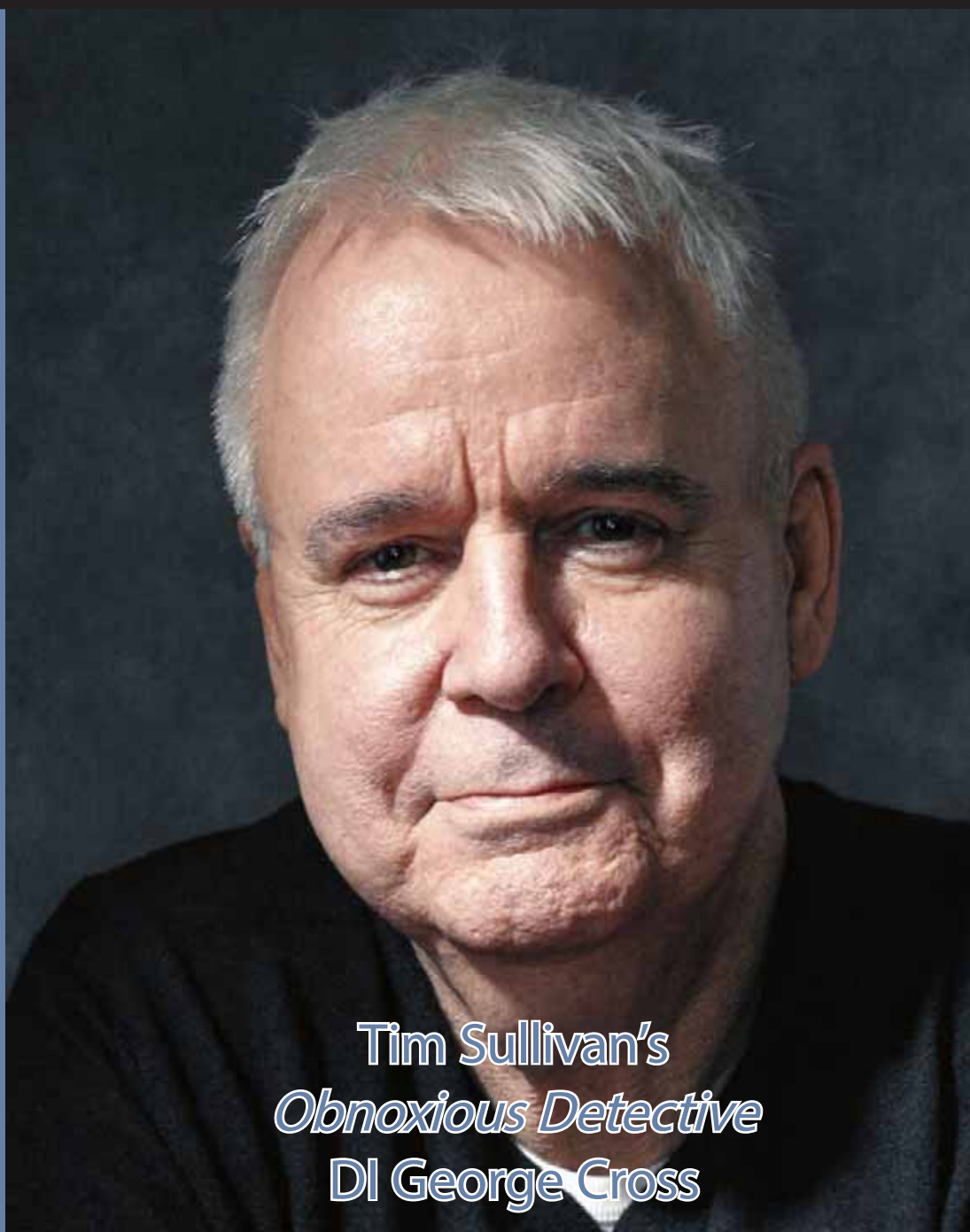


Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



Tim Sullivan's
Obnoxious Detective
DI George Cross

Tim Sullivan's DI George Cross Series

The Author In His Own Words (In 2022)

"My background is in television and film. I started out as a screenwriter and director and was fortunate enough to direct Jeremy Brett in the Granada TV Sherlock Holmes series. He remains for me the greatest Sherlock of them all surpassing, even Basil Rathbone by a thread of Harris tweed. I also developed a series of Maigret for Granada which evolved into the one starring Michael Gambon. Maigret is one of my favourite fictional detectives and my character DS George Cross owes a little something to him.

I began to write crime novels only a couple of years ago, just to see if I could really. I think all the really successful fiction crime writers have one thing in common. They have created a great character at the centre of their stories. Not everyone may agree but I think the character of the detective in crime fiction is the most important thing of all. It's more important than the crime itself to my mind, because what we're intrigued in is how the detective approaches it.

It seems to me that many of the great detectives we all love, from Dupin to Sherlock and Poirot have something in common, other than just their deductive powers. They are all, to an extent, on the autistic spectrum. I decided my character would also be on the spectrum but unlike the detectives above it would not only be acknowledged but also central to the way he worked. Autism, but particularly Asperger's syndrome, now referred to as Autistic spectrum condition, has always interested me. I

set about researching it in depth over a period of a couple of years and met world-leading experts in the field. I wanted this to be an accurate portrayal both socially and at work. Also of a detective for whom his condition is his gift. He views things in a different way to his colleagues around him. He won't deal in hypotheses or theories just the evidence in front of him, however inconvenient it might be at times.

One of the problems about being a screenwriter, even one as moderately successful as myself, is that a script commission is no guarantee that a project will be made. Script development is one of the cheapest things in the film industry, so thousands of scripts are commissioned that never see the light of day. 80% of your work can be paid for and end up on an increasingly dusty shelf. It'll be read by your agent, producer and a handful of studio executives, but that's it. It can be incredibly frustrating.

I realised maybe I wouldn't have these problems if I wrote a book. What

was more if I self-published I could get it out to, and hopefully have people read it, on my own timescale – sooner rather than later. The self-publishing landscape has changed hugely. It's no longer a case of it being for vanity projects that no-one else will touch. There are enormously successful self-published authors out there like Adam Croft and Mark Dawson.

So I did an online course in self-publishing. Hired a leading book cover designer, an editor, learned about advertising on Facebook and Amazon and sent my book out into the world.

In just under five months I had over 200,000 downloads of the first two books across all platforms. So, I think I must've done something right somewhere." – Crime Times

Well, Tim Sullivan's first two books went on to be published by an U.K. mainstream publisher, as did the five DI Cross novels that followed. But it took some time before American mystery publishing caught on that there was this best-selling series in the U.K. that the American reading public would undoubtedly enjoy. Enter, Atlantic Crime (GroveAtlantic), who snatched up rights to the whole series and has been publishing them here in attractive trade paperback editions – all within a one-year span of time – an unusual circumstance in today's publishing world.

The new DI Cross novel **THE TAILOR** will be published in hardcover in the U.S. on August 11, 2026.

The Characters

George Cross is a brilliant Bristol-based detective sergeant on the autism spectrum (Aspergers), known for his high conviction rate, meticulous attention to detail and a dogged, evidence-driven approach to solving crimes. No hunches for him. On the negative side, he has few social skills and is often deemed rude and unfeeling by those he comes in contact with, even though that is not his intention. Cross often does the unexpected, surprising his colleagues and us, the readers. Routine is very important to him. If his



routine is altered, he get unreasonably upset. As an aside, he is an accomplished organist and is quite uncomfortable with any compliments that come his way.

Raymond Cross is George's father. He is in his late seventies and is a retired aerospace engineer. He has brought his son up single-handedly since his mother left when Cross was five. He has a unique understanding of his son and their relationship is both touching and funny.

DS Josie Ottey is Cross's work partner – a reluctant partner at the outset of their partnership, she now understands the way the man works. She has become both his defender and mediator with others in the department. A mixed-race single mother of two daughters, she works hard to maintain a life/work balance and succeeds on the whole.

Alice Mackenzie is a young police staffer, through whose eyes we initially see how Cross's behavior sometimes comes over to others.

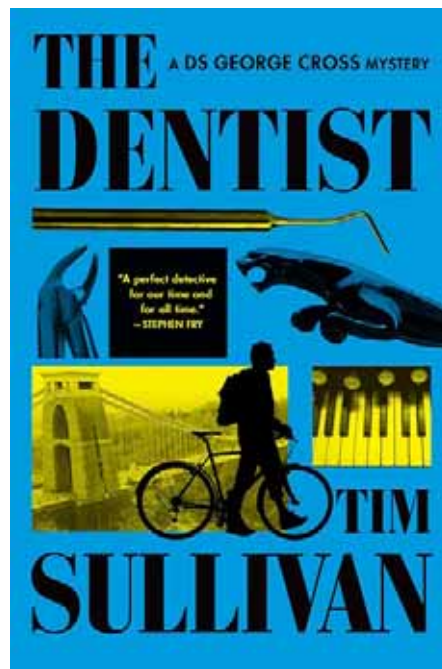
The Books

THE DENTIST

by Tim Sullivan
Atlantic Crime, \$27.00,
\$17.00, October
DS George Cross #1
Rating: A-

DS George Cross of the Somerset and Avon Police is an excellent detective with a reputation for successfully closing cases. He is also someone who suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, which limits his social skills. Cross is missing the empathy gene and his manner often seems abrupt to those unfamiliar with his ways. There are a lot of examples of Cross' unusual behavior in **THE DENTIST**, so that by the end of it the reader has a pretty good idea as to why he acts like he does. The contemporary reader of crime fiction seems to be attracted to unusual characters and in the case of DS Cross, they will get "unusual" in spades. But anyone who underestimates him, does so at their own peril.

Cross and his long-suffering partner



DS Josie Ottey are given the case of a homeless man strangled on the Clifton Downs. The higher-ups assume the perpetrator is a fellow homeless person, but Cross isn't so sure – especially when he finds that the victim used to be a respected dentist whose wife was strangled many year before.

I was quite impressed with the author's attention to detail, both regarding the investigation and Cross' personal life. Sullivan's prose is easy on the eyes and flows smoothly.

THE CYCLIST

by Tim Sullivan
Atlantic Crime, \$27.00,
\$17.00, January
DS George Cross #2
Rating: B+

DS George Cross is considered socially awkward and often rude and unfeeling due to the Asperger's Syndrome he suffers from. But on the plus side he is a dedicated and exceptional detective, with the highest case closed rate of anyone on the force. So his bosses and colleagues have learned over time to cut him some slack.

In his latest case Cross and his partner DS Ottey (black, single mother of two) are investigating the murder of a young man whose body was found in

a deserted garage. The body turns out to be that of Alex Paphides, a restaurant part owner and an amateur cyclist.

A number of possible lines of enquiry open up including his use of performance enhancing drugs, his relationship with a 16-year-old girl and his desire to expand his restaurant business.

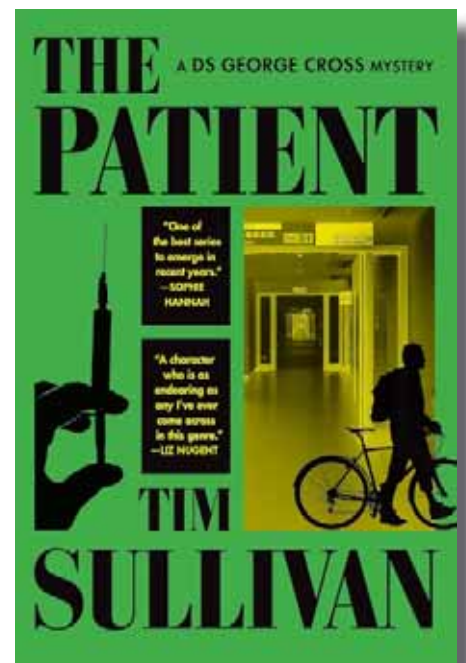
The mystery elements kept my interest, but it is the quirky and unpredictable actions of George Cross that really entertained and will keep me coming back for more.

THE PATIENT

by Tim Sullivan
Atlantic Crime, \$27.00,
\$17.00, February
George Cross #3
Rating: A-

When a young woman is found dead – with no fingerprints, no weapon, and no witnesses – the Bristol Crime Unit is ready to close the case as suicide, especially after the coroner cites the victim's long history of drug abuse. But her mother is convinced it was murder, saying that her daughter had been clean and sober for over two years. And the mother convinces DS Cross that there is a case to be investigated

DS Cross is determined to defy his bosses and re-open the case, even if it



costs him his career. Soon he is mired in a labyrinth of potential suspects – but can he solve the case before his superiors shut it down for good?

Once again, DI George Cross and his cohorts present us with an intriguing case and an enjoyable ride along with an entertaining and quirky detective.

I can see this finely conceived crime fiction series quickly becoming a fan favorite here in the States -- as it already is in the U.K.

THE POLITICIAN

by Tim Sullivan

Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, \$17.00, March

DS George Cross loves puzzles – he's good at them – and he immediately spots one when he begins investigating the death of former mayor Peggy Frampton. To most, the crime scene looks like a burglary that went horribly wrong. But George can see what others can't: This was murder.

After her political career ended, Peggy became a controversial blogger whose forthright opinions attracted a battalion of online trolls. And then there's her family: an unfaithful husband and a gambling-addicted son. With yet more enemies in her past, the potential suspects are unending.

Cross must unpick the never-ending list of seedy connections to find her killer – but the sheer number of suspects is clouding his usually impeccable logic. He's a relentlessly methodical detective, but no case can last forever. And politics can be a dangerous game – especially for people who don't know the rules.

THE MONK (Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, \$17.00, April)

DS George Cross has always wondered why his mother left him when he was a child. Now that she is back in his life, he suddenly has answers—but this unexpected reunion is not anything he's used to dealing with. So when the body of a monk is found savagely beaten to death in a woodland near Bristol, Cross is eager to throw himself into the case.

The problem is, no one in the Bristol station has any leads. Nothing is known about Brother Dominic's past. How can

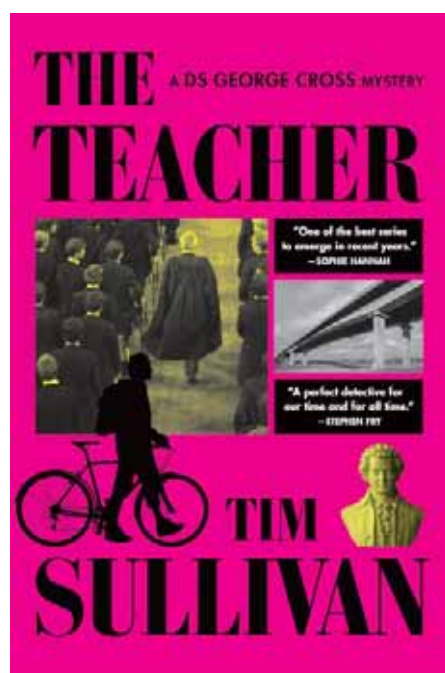
Cross unpick a crime when they don't know anything about the victim? And why would someone want to harm a monk?

Cross's dogged investigation reveals that while the monk was a much-loved and respected friend, brother, he was also a very wealthy man—and he sacrificed it all for his faith. For a man who has nothing, it seems strange that greed could be the motive for his murder. But greed is a sin, after all.

THE TEACHER

by Tim Sullivan

Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, \$17.00, May



Detective Sergeant George Cross has always been a good student—attentive, methodical, and careful to double-check his work. So when an elderly school-teacher is found dead at home in south-west England, Cross knows the math isn't adding up. The angle of the man's neck suggests he fell down the stairs. But the stab wound on his body changes the equation.

In the weeks before his murder, the reclusive Alistair Moreton seemed different. He had always kept to himself, but people swear someone else was in the house when they checked on him. There was a reason he wouldn't let them inside.

DS George Cross has a long list of suspects. Prickly and miserable, More-

ton made life hell for his neighbors and former pupils. But every victim deserves justice—even one who never learned an important truth: If you go through life making enemies, you shouldn't be surprised when someone decides to teach you a lesson.

THE BOOKSELLER

by Tim Sullivan

Atlantic Crime \$27.00, \$17.00, June

DS Cross #7

Rating: A-

DS George Cross is on the autism spectrum which makes it difficult for him to relate to people, with a few exceptions. One exception is his beloved father Raymond who is in the hospital being treated for cancer. This disrupts Cross' life to the extent that he is considering retiring from the police to care for his father. Another person he has allowed inside his shell is his partner DS Josie Ottey, who has just been promoted, which Cross finds disturbing because it involves change – something he is adverse to.

Squire's Rare Books in Bristol is owned by 90-year-old Torquil Squire, but run by his son Ed, with assistants Sam and Persephone (Percy). One night Torquil returns to the bookshop from a trip to London to find his son dead on the floor.

Cross and Josie are called to investigate. What follows is a deep dive into the world of rare book selling (not as peaceful as it may seem) and the personal lives of all possible suspects.

The plotting is very good, but it is the cast of continuing characters, especially Cross, that elevates this series. I think that fans of The Thursday Murder Club books would also like this series, even though there are obvious differences.

THE TAILOR

by Tim Sullivan

Atlantic Crime \$27.00, August

A bespoke tailor boards the 9:26 train from Bristol to London. Before it even reaches Bath, his body is found slumped lifeless in the toilet. The police initially assume it's a robbery.

But the truth is more complicated than that. Why was the man found with a plastic bag over his head? Why was his throat cut in such a savage way? DS George Cross realizes that this was no mugging—it was an organized hit. This realization forces George into a merciless, unfamiliar world—and is it his imagination, or is he being followed?

Everyone knows that DS George Cross is tenacious, that he always gets to the truth. It seems, this time, someone will do anything to stop that from happening.

Well, there you have it -- another new series to read and follow. Thanks to Atlantic Crime for making these entertaining books available to us in the U.S.

Other Irreverent/ Obnoxious/Anti-Social Protagonists

Irreverent protagonists in crime fiction, including antiheroes and antiheroines, challenge conventional norms through witty, cynical, or chaotic behavior, often bypassing legal systems to achieve their own brand of justice. The challenge for writers who create such characters is to make such protagonists relatable at the very least or likeable at best.

Some Recent Examples

Ryan Wilkins (Simon Mason), Coming from a hugely deprived and abusive background, and brought up on a notorious Oxford caravan park, DI Ryan Wilkins is accepted into the police via a diversity program and immediately puts everyone's backs up – from his superiors, to those he's investigating, and fellow DI Ray Wilkins. Always on the edge of being fired (he is once during the course of the series), Ray proves his worth as an exceptional detective, but you wouldn't no it to look at him – he doesn't dress for success. Ray is a widower who is raising his delightfully precocious son (scene stealer) and doing a darn good job of it.

Ryan & Ray Wilkins Series

A KILLING IN NOVEMBER (2022)
THE BROKEN AFTERNOON (2023)
LOST AND NEVER FOUND (2024)
A VOICE IN THE NIGHT (2025)
THE DANGEROUS STRANGER (2026)

Washington Poe (M. W. Craven). Detective Sergeant Washington Poe, the protagonist of M.W. Craven's thriller series, is a dark, cynical, and ruthless investigator living in isolated rural Cumbria. A disgraced, misanthropic former detective, Poe is brought back from suspension to lead a National Crime Age. He is teamed up with civilian analyst Tilly Bradshaw. She is brilliant, adorably awkward, a social hand grenade; she lives at home with her parents and isn't allowed out on her own. She has three PhDs but doesn't know how to boil an egg.

Poe & Tilly Series

THE PUPPET SHOW (2018)
BLACK SUMMER (2019)
THE CURATOR (2020)
DEAD GROUND (2021)
THE BOTANIST (2022)
THE MERCY CHAIR (2024)
THE FINAL VOW (2025)
THE KILLER'S MARK (2026)

Edison Bixby (Lee Goldberg)

MURDER BY DESIGN

by Lee Goldberg

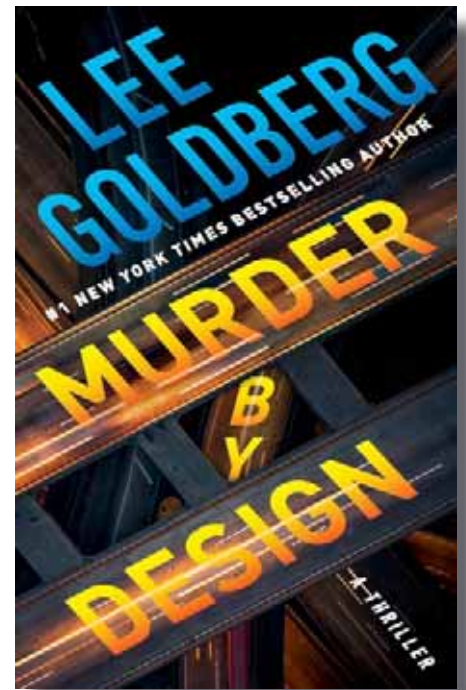
Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99/\$16.99, June

Edison Bixby #1

Rating: B

In the opening pages of **MURDER BY DESIGN** Edison Bixby is described as a “sickeningly wealthy, painfully handsome, irritatingly brilliant, outrageously self-absorbed, and infuriatingly manipulative detective.” But early on he suffers a serious injury and thereafter suffers from “traumatic coprolalia,” a rare disability due to injury to the prefrontal cortex of the brain. Result: Bixby can't always stop himself from saying whatever crosses his mind.

No longer deemed fit for police work, he has taken a job as an insurance investigator. His deductive skills are still on the order of a Sherlock Holmes, but he needs a constant companion to clean



up his verbal messes. Enter failed actor Wally Nash, in his new role as a poor man's Dr. Watson.

Their first case together looks like a simple accident. Caroline Crowley took a nasty fall down a staircase at a shopping mall in front of dozens of witnesses. Video clearly shows the deadly misstep. But Bixby is certain she was murdered “by design,” subtly manipulated into causing her own demise. The mall itself made the crime intentional, if not inevitable.

Now Bixby must prove his outrageous theory before a very cunning killer gets others on his hit list to murder themselves, too.

Bixby was pretty obnoxious before his injury, so it was hard for me to generate much sympathy for the character. The mystery element is just o.k. – it seemed overly complicated to me. I wish the author would stick to Eve Ronin books, which I thoroughly enjoy.

Lock (Jo Callaghan). Lock is an artificially intelligent detective entity who works with human detective Kat Frank. Lock is capable of learning and does so as the series progresses, but his makeup doesn't include emotion and has problems figuring out that human component. He also has no social filters so his remarks are often interpreted as

rude.

Kat & Lock Series

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE (2023)
LEAVE NO TRACE (2024)
HUMAN REMAINS (2025)
BODY OF LIES (2026)



Jackson Lamb

Jackson Lamb (Mick Herron). Lamb is the "slovenly, crude, and aging" head of Slough House, an MI5 administrative purgatory for agents who have made career-ending mistakes. Despite his flatulent and abrasive demeanor, he is a brilliant Cold War-era operative who consistently outmaneuvers his colleagues at "the Park" (MI5 headquarters). The passages that contain his dialogue with cohorts and others are some of the most clever (and profane) repartee you'll find anywhere in crime fiction.

Slow Horses Series

SLOW HORSES (2010)
DEAD LIONS (2013)
REAL TIGERS (2016)
SPOOK STREET (2017)
LONDON RULES (2018)
JOE COUNTRY (2019)
THE CATCH (2020)
SLOUGH HOUSE (2021)
BAD ACTORS (2022)
CLOWN TOWN (2025)

Lisbeth Salander (Stieg Larsson). A brilliant but antisocial punk hacker who uses unconventional and often illegal methods to punish men who abuse women.

Lisbeth Salander Series

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON
TATTOO (2008)

THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH
FIRE (2009)

THE GIRL WHO KICKED THE HOR-
NETS' NEST (2009)

Series continued by other authors

Harry Hole (Jo Nesbo). He is an elite but deeply flawed Oslo detective—an alcoholic anti-hero known for his brilliant deductive skills and frequent clashes with authority.

Harry Hole Series

THE BAT (1997)
COCKROACHES (1998)
THE REDBREAST (2000)
NEMESIS (2002)
THE DEVIL'S STAR (2005)
THE REDEEMER (2005)
THE SNOWMAN (2007)
THE LEOPARD (2011)
PHANTOM (2012)
POLICE (2013)
THE THIRST (2017)
KNIFE (2019)
KILLING MOON (2023)
KILL SHOT (2026)



Vera Stanhope (Ann Cleeves), A police detective who is older, frumpy, socially abrasive, and unconcerned with polite social norms.

Vera Stanhope Series

THE CROW TRAP (1999)
TELLING TALES (2005)
HIDDEN DEPTHS (2007)
SILENT VOICES (2011)
THE GLASS ROOM (2012)
HARBOUR STREET (2014)
THE MOTH CATCHER (2015)

THE SEAGULL (2017)
THE DARKEST EVENING (2020)
THE RISING TIDE (2022)
THE DARK WIVES (2024)

Older Ones

Maureen O'Donnell (Denise Mina – Garnethill Trilogy). Maureen is a resilient yet vulnerable former psychiatric patient in Glasgow who investigates brutal crimes. Facing dysfunction and violence, she navigates gritty, suspenseful mysteries, dealing with personal trauma, family dysfunction, and alcoholism.

Garnethill Series

GARNETHILL (1998)
EXILE (2000)
RESOLUTION (2001)

Charlie M (Brian Freemantle). Charlie Muffin is an anti-hero British intelligence agent who clashes with his aristocratic superiors during the Cold War. The series follows the cunning and unorthodox Muffin as he navigates double-crosses and conspiracies, often outsmarting both his enemies and his own organization through his resourcefulness and survival skills..

Charlie M Series

CHARLIE M (1977)
HERE COMES CHARLIE M (1978)
THE INSCRUTABLE CHARLIE
MUFFIN (1979)
CHARLIE MUFFIN U.S.A. (1980)
MADRIGAL FOR CHARLIE MUFFIN
(1981)
THE BLIND RUN (1985)
SEE CHARLIE RUN (1987)
THE RUN AROUND (1988)
COMRADE CHARLIE (1989)
CHARLIE'S APPRENTICE (1993)
BOMB GRADE (1996)
DEAD MEN LIVING (2000)
KINGS OF MANY CASTLES (2001)
RED STAR RISING (2010)
RED STAR BURNING (2012)
RED STAR FALLING (2013)

Fletcher (Gregory McDonald). A reporter known for using humor, aliases, and irreverent charm to investigate cases.



Fletch Series

FLETCH (1974)
 CONFESS, FLETCH (1976)
 FLETCH'S FORTUNE (1979)
 FLETCH AND THE WIDOW
 BRADLEY (1981)
 FLETCH'S MOXIE (1982)
 FLETCH AND THE MAN WHO
 (1983)
 CARIOCA FLETCH (1984)
 FLETCH WON (1985)
 FLETCH TOO (1986)



SON OF FLETCH (1993)
 FLETCH REFLECTED (1994)

Andy Dalziel (Reginald Hill). Andy Dalziel is often referred to as "Fat Andy." He is a blunt, vulgar, and politically incorrect Yorkshire policeman known for his uncanny intuition and formidable presence. He is famously paired with Peter Pascoe, a younger, university-educated, and more sensitive detective. Their "odd couple" dynamic—contrasting Dalziel's gut-driven style with Pascoe's by-the-book approach—is the cornerstone of the series.

Dalziel & Pascoe Series

A CLUBBABLE WOMAN (1970)
 AN ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING
 (1971)
 RULING PASSION (1973)
 AN APRIL SHROUD (1975)
 A PINCH OF SNUFF (1978)
 A KILLING KINDNESS (1980)
 DEADHEADS (1983)
 EXIT LINES (1984)
 CHILD'S PLAY (1987)
 UNDER WORLD (1988)
 BONES AND SILENCE (1990)
 ONE SMALL STEP (1990)
 RECALLED TO LIFE (1992)
 PICTURES OF PERFECTION (1994)
 THE WOOD BEYOND (1996)
 ASKING FOR THE MOON (1996)
 ON BEULAH HEIGHT (1998)
 ARMS AND THE WOMEN (1999)
 DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD (2001)
 DEATH'S JEST BOOK (2002)
 GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT
 (2004)
 THE DEATH OF DALZIEL (2007)
 A CURE FOR ALL DISEASES (2008)
 MIDNIGHT FUGUE (2009)

Common Traits For Some But Not All

Flawed Nature: Often struggle with personal vices, messy lives, or unconventional backgrounds. Prime Example: Maureen O'Donnell (Denise Mina)

Charm & Wit: They use humor to disarm suspects and infuriate authorities and subordinates.

Prime Example: Fletch (Gregory McDonald)

Unconventional Methods: They often ignore traditional evidence collection in favor of insight, observation, or sheer luck. Prime Example: Roy Wilkins (Simon Mason)

Authority Issues: They often have strained relationships with traditional law enforcement or authority figures. Prime Example: Charlie Muffin (Brian Freemantle)

Underdog Status: Typically fighting against both the criminal and a bureaucratic or corrupt system. Prime example: Harry Hole (Jo Nesbo)

Conclusions

As I look at the foregoing lists of books I've come to the conclusion that this is one of the best reading lists that we've ever come up with. These intriguing characters really hit my reading sweet spot. If there are some authors on the lists provided that you haven't experimented with, please give them a try.

The other thing that I observed is that many of these series have been made into successful movies and tv series, so if you want to get a preview of the books, you can stream their movies or tv series first.



For instance, the Harry Hole streaming series was recently made available on Netflix here in the U.S. and is one of its most-viewed shows.

The Barry Award Nominations

The Barry Awards will be presented at this year's Bouchercon in Calgary, Canada during its Opening Ceremonies on Thursday, October 22, 2026. Congratulations to all those nominated. And thanks to the nominating committee for their expertise.

Voting is now open to subscribers and readers of *Deadly Pleasures Mystery Magazine*. Please vote for one title per each category and return your votes to george@deadlypleasures.com.

Deadline for voting is September 15, 2026.

Best Mystery Novel

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING, Belinda Bauer (Atlantic Monthly)
CROOKS, Lou Berney (William Morrow)
KING OF ASHES, S. A. Cosby (Flatiron Books)
THE BLACK WOLF, Louise Penny (Minotaur Books)
THE WHITE CROW, Michael Robotham (Scribner)
PRESUMED GUILTY, Scott Turow (Grand Central)



Best First Mystery Novel

LEVERAGE, Amran Gowani (Atria Books)
ALL THE OTHER MOTHERS HATE ME, Sarah Harman (Putnam)
DEAD MONEY, Jakob Kerr (Bantam)
THE VANISHING PLACE, Zoe Rankin (Berkley)
STILLWATER, Tanya Scott (Atlantic Monthly)
JULIE CHAN IS DEAD, Liann Zhang (Atria Books)



Best Paperback Original Mystery Novel

CRIMSON THAW, Bruce Robert Coffin (Severn River)
SPLINTERED JUSTICE, Kim Hays (Seventh Street Books)
MAKING A KILLING, Cara Hunter (William Morrow)
IF TWO ARE DEAD, Rick Mofina (MIRA)
WOLF SIX, Alex Shaw (Boldwood Books)
THE DENTIST, Tim Sullivan (Atlantic Crime)

Best Action Thriller

WITNESS 8, Steve Cavanagh (Atria Books)
THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER, Joseph Finder (Harper)
MIDNIGHT BLACK, Mark Greaney (Berkley)
CLOWN TOWN, Mick Herron (Soho Crime)
HEAD CASES, John McMahon (Minotaur Books)
THE MAILMAN, Andrew Welsh-Huggins (Mysterious Press)

Reviewed to Death

MISSING

by E.A. Jackson
Atria/ Emily Bestier Books,
\$28.00, March



Plot Summary by Meredith Anthony

MISSING tells the story of a female police officer in London who heads up the search for a missing child, a baby who disappeared from a hotel room while the parents slept. Detective Inspector Martha Allen, who is suffering from the usual mistrust and disdain of her male colleagues, is assigned to the case by her superiors who think it is a good job for a female cop. Allen interviews everyone diligently and conducts the appropriate investigation but can't quite suppress the nagging suspicion that something is wrong about the case.

Before she can do anything about it, the child is found and returned to the distraught parents. Great. But

Allen alone is not quite satisfied. Her superiors have to warn her to leave well enough alone. In the meantime, her own relationship founders on the child question. Do they want a child? Should they have a child? Can they have a child?

Decades later, something happens, and Allen takes up the case again. And this time, she finds her suspicions were well-founded.

George Easter

Admittedly **MISSING** by E. A. Jackson is my kind of book, it being a British police procedural. Larry Gandle frequently kids me for liking such "dull, dreary and boring" crime fiction. For me the British police procedural is just the opposite – exciting, stimulating and rewarding. You'll notice that several examples of this subgenre appear regularly on my year-end best of the year lists.

I'm not sure calling this a "police procedural" is entirely accurate. I think it more of a novel of detection. There is some procedure at the beginning, but most of the narrative is carried by what's in Detective Allen's mind.

Usually I read about 5-6 books at a time, skipping between them depending on what my mood is. But once I opened the pages of **MISSING**, I read straight through, which is always an indication to me that I'm onto something good and perhaps even special.

I initially thought that this was the author's first novel, but she has written three historical mysteries previously under the name of the name of Emilia Bernhard. E.A. Jackson is a professor at Exeter University in the U.K., but is American by birth. **Rating: A**

Meredith Anthony

The UK seems to produce an endless supply of excellent police procedurals.

E.A. Jackson's debut mystery, **MISSING**, is one of them.

My only caveat is that the novel, while well-constructed, is actually a fugue on a single theme, and the theme is about women and childbearing. Whether to have a child, when to have a child, who to have a child with, what if you can't have a child... On and on. The story of the crime—the missing child—and the story of the policewoman who solves it, are deep meditations on the child-bearing dilemma. To have or not to have. That is the question.

I fear that **MISSING** falls victim to the very issue it seeks to explore: the assumption that childbearing is the central concern in a woman's life. I, for one, am tired of the trope that insists that this topic is the central, and, perhaps, only one in a woman's life. It seems very last century to me, or at least pre-1960's when cheap, reliable birth control became readily available. Many women today make the choice not to have children when they are in their late teens or twenties and stick to that decision. They go on with their lives and never give it another thought (except at Thanksgiving when they feel superior to their harried peers and have another celebratory martini). **Rating: B+**

Lou Jacobs

A highly entertaining novel by E.A. Jackson. This marvelous British police procedural spans decades and juxtaposes the original investigation of the baby kidnapping in the sweltering heat of August 1990 with that of the re-investigation thirty years later due to the death of Nell Beatty. Even though the morally conflicted Detective Martha Allen's career has slowly progressed to one of leadership in the police force, she remains haunted by the uneasy feeling that the original resolution of the case with the return of the baby was suspicious, and was told to refrain from further investigation. This character driven novel excelled in its extensive development of Allen's psyche and psychological motivations. At points the narrative became bogged down in the realistic

portrayal of the tedious nature of police investigation. However, it more than redeemed itself with plot twists and unexpected explorations of hidden motivations of the primary characters. This is a morally layered mystery which prioritizes realism and psychological depth over action. The author thoughtfully explores the realities of poverty, social marginalization, and criticism of the police investigative system, along with the nature of guilt and innocence. I certainly look forward to E.A. Jackson's next immersive offering. **Rating: B+**

Robin Agnew

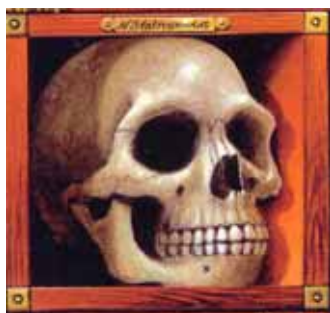
This was a wonderful and unexpected read. It begins as a more or less standard police procedural, but by the middle of the book, I had no idea where it would end up. The main character is a female police officer who works her way through the ranks, encountering sexism at every turn. The case that obsesses her – and that she follows to a conclusion 30 years later – is the case of a missing, and returned, baby. In the years following the return she's felt something was off and can't shake the feeling. Her other obsession – having her own child – colors her reaction to the events in the story. The fact that the main character is as well thought out as the plot makes it an all around stronger read. I could not stop reading. **Rating: A**

Michael Dillman

Great police detective novel. The author writes the story as if there were two separate books dealing with events many years apart. The first part is the original story about what happened in a missing baby case, and the second part could be viewed as the sequel and resolution.

The ending was satisfying, surprising and plausible. Both parts are excellent novels of detection, especially from an author who does not appear to have any police experience. **Rating: A**

Deadly Pleasures Best of 2026



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 2026 lists and some will be nominated for our Barry Awards. All sub-genre's of the mystery/crime fiction and thriller world are represented.

Best Mystery/Crime Novels

*****THE FINE ART OF LYING**, Alexandra Andrews (Harper, \$30.00, May). It was Clare Bast's love of art that saved her from a bleak, predictable life in upstate New York, and drew her to the cultured world of Manhattan's Upper East Side where she met Jed, her doting, affluent husband. When the well-connected wife of Jed's new boss introduces her to influential friends—a curator here, a gallerist there, an aficionado abroad—Clare feels an essential part of herself coming alive again. And when she discovers that an important work painted by the subject of her unfinished dissertation is hanging in the brownstone of a seductively attractive

dealer, she believes fate is leading her where she belongs . . . until she finds herself at the scene of a gruesome murder and a stolen masterpiece. **Kirkus & PW**

*****THE HADACOL BOOGIE**, James Lee Burke (Atlantic Crime, \$30.00, February).

Robicheaux #25. When a cloaked, disfigured man leaves a dead woman in a garbage bag on Dave Robicheaux's property, he knows his world and family are about to change. With Valerie Benoit, a detective new to the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Department who is grappling with sexist and racist harassment from their colleagues, and the volatile but fiercely loyal Clete Purcel, Dave embarks on an investigation that brings him into the most dangerous moments of his career and threatens the lives of Valerie and his daughter Alafair. **LJ & PW**

*****THE ENDING WRITES IT-SELF**, Evelyn Clarke (Harper, \$30.00, March). Arthur Fletch, one of the world's bestselling novelists, is a reclusive genius known for his iconic protagonists and fiendish twists. When six struggling authors are invited to spend a weekend on his private Scottish island, they arrive to discover a shocking secret: Arthur Fletch is dead . . . and his last book is unfinished. Desperate to publish the novel, Fletch's agent and editor have summoned these writers in the hope that one of them will imagine a worthy ending for this final book. To sweeten the deal, they are offering an irresistible prize: in addition to ghost-writing the last chapter—for a mind-boggling sum—they will also help the lucky writer successfully re-launch their own career, guaranteeing future bestsellers.

The catch: the writers have just seven-ty-two hours to finish Fletch's magnum opus. It's the perfect plot. All it needs is a killer ending. **LJ & AZ**

*****RETURN OF THE MALTESE FALCON**, Max Allan Collins (Hard Case Crime, \$27.99, January). Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Max Allan Collins (author of **ROAD TO PERDITION**) brings closure to this crime classic, reuniting all the surviving members of the original cast alongside femme fatales, crooked collectors, and greedy gangsters for one more thrilling, deadly chase through the streets, wharves, morgues, bars, and back alleys of 1920s San Francisco – and finally answers the question, Whatever became of the Maltese falcon? **PW, DP(3) & BL**

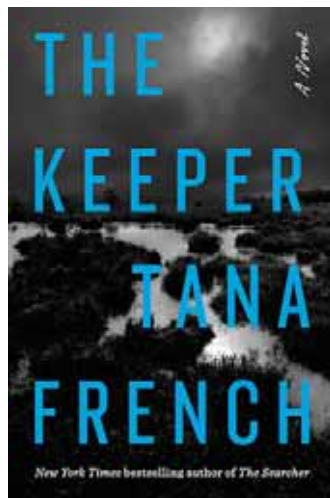
*****IRONWOOD**, Michael Connelly (Little, Brown, \$32.00, May). Stilwell #2. Detective Sergeant Stilwell knows that his posting on Catalina Island is no paradise, but to most residents, it seems blissfully separated—by twenty-two miles of ocean—from the troubles of Los Angeles County. But now a threat is coming to his safe haven. Acting on a tip from a confidential informant, Stilwell and his deputies watch a plane land in the middle of the night at the Airport in the Sky, a remote airstrip in the mountains. A duffel bag of drugs is dropped and the deputies move in, but things quickly go sideways. An internal inquiry follows, putting Stilwell on the bench until he is cleared of responsibility for the disastrous operation. But he is determined to find out who brought deadly violence to his island, and begins his own secret investigation into the drug deal gone wrong. He soon crosses paths with Renee Ballard and they join forces. **BL, LJ & DP**

*****A RIVER RED WITH BLOOD**, John Connolly (Atria, \$30.00, June). Charlie Parker #23.

In a darkly brilliant thriller set in Maine's rural Kennebec River Valley, the body of a young runaway from a "troubled teens" school has been found in the water, seemingly drowned, while a teenage girl has gone missing, believed

dead. Now it is up to one man, private investigator Charlie Parker, to find the connection, and bring two evils—one new and one ancient—to an end.

*****I'M NOT THE ONLY MURDERER IN MY RETIREMENT HOME**, Fergus Craig (Berkley, \$30.00, February). Carol is delighted to be leaving her tiny prison cell behind to take her place in a luxury retirement home. She's hoping her past as a serial killer won't come to light so she can make a few friends and find some murder-free hobbies. But it's not long before a fellow resident—who happens to be a former police commissioner—drops dead, and Carol's true identity is leaked—making catching up over daily activities of bingo and baking rather awkward. Just her luck, Carol soon realizes that the victim wasn't the only former law enforcement officer at Sheldon Oaks—it's filled to the brim with former cops, barristers, and government representatives, her new-found friends included. And everyone thinks Carol's guilt is a no-brainer, but she is ready to prove them dead wrong... without killing anyone, for once. **PW, AZ, DP & Kirkus**



*****THE KEEPER**, Tana French (Viking, \$32.00, March). Cal Cooper #3. Sweet, loving Rachel Holohan was about to be engaged to the son of the local big shot. Instead, she's dead in the river. In a close-knit small Irish town, a death like this isn't simple. It comes wrapped in generations-old grudges and power struggles, and it splits the townland

in two. Retired Chicago detective Cal Hooper has friends here now, and he owes them loyalty, but his fiancée Lena wants nothing to do with Ardnakelty's tangles. As the feud becomes more vicious, their settled peace starts to crack apart. And when they uncover a scheme that casts a new light on Rachel's death and threatens the whole village, they find themselves in the firing line. **AZ**

****STRANGERS IN THE VILLA**, Robyn Harding (Grand Central, \$29.00, March). Sydney Lowe's life in New York is shattered when her husband, Curtis, admits to a meaningless affair with a client. Begging for forgiveness and vowing to prove his devotion, Curtis suggests the couple retreat to a remote hilltop house in Spain to repair their marriage. High above the Mediterranean, Sydney and Curtis are working on the isolated property and their relationship when a pair of Australian travelers turns up at their door in dire need of help. Lonely for companionship and desperate for free labor, Sydney and Curtis invite the attractive young couple to stay. But as the days pass, dark secrets come to light, the Lowes' bond is tested, and not everyone will leave the villa alive. **LJ, AZ & BL**

*****A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE**, Jordan Harper (Mulholland, \$29.00, April). A city ready to explode: A Hollywood pedophile is arrested, and is ready to tear down the city to get his freedom. A young woman goes missing—and men in black rubber gloves who look like cops clean out her apartment in the middle of the night. And the serial killer known as the LA Ripper is on the loose, leaving tragic/graphic/brutal crime scenes in his wake. Three people trying to keep their heads above the dirty water will find themselves coming together to unite these strands into one enormous, unspeakable crime. **PW, LJ & AZ**

*****MAD MABEL**, Sally Hepworth (St. Martin's, \$29.00, April). Meet Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick: eighty-one years old, gloriously grumpy, fiercely independent, and never without a hot cup of tea -- or a cutting remark. She minds her



own business in her quiet Melbourne suburb, until a neighbor turns up dead and the whispers start flying. Because Elsie hasn't always been Elsie. Once upon a headline, she was Mad Mabel Waller -- Australia's youngest convicted murderer. But was she really mad, or just misunderstood? Either way, she's kept her secret buried for decades. **BL, LJ & AZ**

*****A DEADLY EPISODE**, Anthony Horowitz (Harper, \$32.00, April). Hawthorne & Horowitz #6. Ex-Detective Inspector Daniel Hawthorne is dead. Or, rather, the actor playing him in the film adaptation of *The Word is Murder* is. Rising star David Caine has been stabbed, and it seems that everyone on the set had a motive. **PW**

*****MISSING**, E. A. Jackson (Atria, \$28.00, March). In August 1990, baby Bella Carpenter is snatched through the open window of her London hotel room. Detective Inspector Martha Allen is assigned the high-profile case and, knowing that it could make or break her career, is determined to find Bella. When a young woman named Nell Beatty walks into the police station with a baby who appears to be Bella, and whom Nell claims she found on a bench, it seems that the mystery is solved. But

DI Allen isn't convinced -- something about Nell's story doesn't ring true.

But she's ordered to close the investigation. Thirty years later, Nell Beatty is found dead. Now a superintendent, Allen has never really gotten over her doubts about the Carpenter case and can't resist doing a little digging on her own time. **PW & DP**

*****THE FINAL PROBLEM**, Arturo Perez-Reverte (Little, Brown, \$29.00, February) June, 1960. Rough weather at sea leaves a group of strangers stranded on the idyllic Greek island of Utakos, all guests of the only local hotel. Nothing could prepare them for what happens next: Edith Mander, a quiet British tourist, is found dead inside a beach cabana. What appears at first glance to be a clear suicide reveals possible signs of foul play to Ormond Basil, an out-of-work but still well-known actor who in his glory days portrayed the most celebrated detective of all time. Accustomed to seeing him display Sherlock Holmes' amazing powers of deduction on the big screen, the other guests believe that the actor is the best equipped to uncover the truth. **Kirkus & PW**

*****RUBY FALLS**, Gin Phillips (Atlantic Crime, \$29.00, March). An historical mystery set almost entirely underground at the onset of the Great Depression, about the discovery of a 150-foot waterfall in the middle of a mountain, the unthinkable crime that happens in the caves, and a woman who's never felt more alive. **Kirkus, BL & PW**

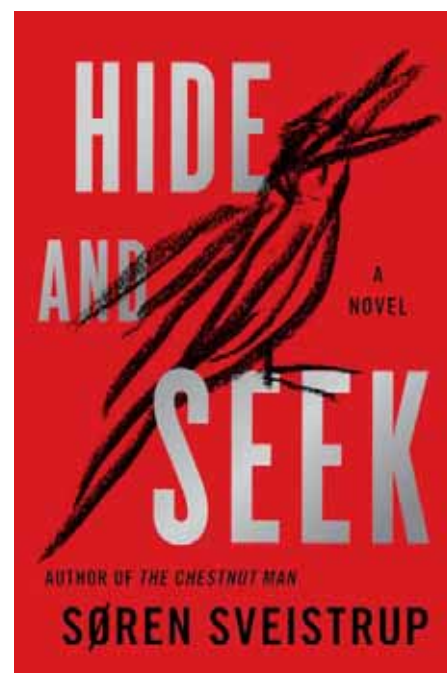
*****WRECK YOUR HEART**, Lori Rader-Day (Minotaur, \$29.00, January). Dahlia "Doll" Devine had the kind of hardscrabble beginning that could launch a thousand broken-hearted country songs, but now she's the star of her own stage at McPhee's Tavern. She's part of Chicago's -- yes, Chicago's -- country music scene, until her boyfriend Joey ups and goes, taking the rent money with him. **PW, LJ & AZ**

*****FIRST DO NO HARM**, S. J. Rozan (Pegasus, \$27.95, January). Lyd-

ia Chin/Bill Smith #16.

With River Valley Hospital in the midst of negotiations to avert a nurses' strike, a wealthy benefactor is set to give a large donation to honor of the Chief of Emergency Medicine: Dr. Elliott Chin, the brother of private investigator Lydia Chin. Before the donation can be finalized, a member of the nurses' negotiating committee is found murdered. **LJ, BL & DP**

*****HIDE AND SEEK**, Soren Sveistrup (Harper, \$32.00, July). On Valentine's Day, detectives Naia Thulin and Mark Hess are searching to find the missing woman. But when they uncover links to a decades-old cold case, their investigation takes a terrifying turn. A violent killer is on the loose. Can Hess and Thulin catch them, before they strike again? Sequel to **THE CHESTNUT MAN**, which won a Barry Award. **DP**



*****FROM THE DUST**, David Swinson (Little, Brown, \$30.00, March). Graham Sanderson thought he'd left it all behind. His years as a Washington, DC, homicide detective, his tragically dead wife, pain, violence. Taking over his father's house in the remote Finger Lakes region of rural New York, and looking after his shut-in brother, Tom-

my, seemed like a respite. That is, until the first body is found. The chief of the town's small police jurisdiction, who is also a family friend, asks for Graham's assistance. Graham's instincts immediately kick in and he soon discovers there's more to the area – the people, its brutally quiet, sophisticated hierarchies – than he or his family ever knew. **PW & DP**

*****FURIOUS VIOLET**, Sara Walker (Harper, \$30.00, July). Violet "West" Shelley has unwillingly spent her life in the spotlight as the only daughter of a legendary poet and feminist icon who died tragically young. Now, as the self-described "lowbrow" crime journalist approaches fifty—burned out, creatively blocked, and far older than her mother ever was—she retreats to her hometown in the Colorado mountains to finish a long-overdue book about the "Crying Killer," a notorious serial killer who sobs for his mother after committing his crimes.

But what begins as a bid for solitude quickly spirals into something far more sinister. A stalker emerges—mysterious, relentless, with accusations disturbingly intimate: this invisible stranger insists that West is their long-lost mother, though West has never had children. As the threats escalate and her carefully defended privacy starts to shatter, West is drawn into a chilling psychological web where the boundaries between fiction and reality begin to collapse. **PW & BL**

Best First Mystery Novels

*****A BAD, BAD PLACE**, Frances Crawford (Soho Crime, \$28.95, March), Glasgow, 1979: If it hadn't been for her wee stupid dog, Sid Vicious, twelve-year-old Janey Devine might never have stumbled upon the corpse of Samantha Watson. And then maybe she'd still be able to sleep at night. And maybe her nana wouldn't be so worried all the time. And maybe Billy "The Ghost" Watson, a notorious gangster, wouldn't be on her tail—for it's Billy's daughter who was left for dead on those train tracks, and now Billy wants answers.

While Janey swears she can't remember the details of that morning, the cops think she's hiding something—and indeed, there's something she knows that she's not quite ready to tell anyone, not even her nana, who won't rest until this whole thing is behind them. **BL & PW**

*****THIS STORY MIGHT SAVE YOUR LIFE**, Tiffany Crum (Flatiron, \$29.99, March). Benny Abbott and Joy Moore host one of the most beloved podcasts in the world. Each week, they delight listeners with a different "against all odds" survival story, gleefully finding the weird, life-affirming humor in near-death experiences. Since their first episode on Joy's experience with severe narcolepsy, they've been the best friends everyone wants to befriend -- and thanks to the meticulous management of Joy's husband, Xander, they've built a lucrative empire. Best friends Benny and Joy like to say they've been saving each other's lives since the moment they met. Until the day Joy disappears and Benny is suspected of murder. **BL, AZ & PW**

*****THE SILENT HOUSE OF SLEEP**, Allan Gaw (Mysterious Press, \$17.95, May). No one who meets Dr. Jack Cuthbert forgets him. Tall, urbane, and brilliant, the Scottish pathologist is the best that Scotland Yard's new detective chief inspector has seen. But Cuthbert is also a damaged man—a man who lives with secrets, and who still battles demons brought back from the trenches even ten years after the end of the Great War. When not one but two corpses are discovered in a London park in the winter of 1929, Cuthbert must use every tool at his disposal, including cutting-edge forensics of the period, to solve the mystery of their deaths. **PW & BL**

*****MY NAME WAS GERRY SASS**, Tiffany Hanssen (Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, May). One morning in 1986, his life of crime catches up to him when two men march him out into the woods and shoot him in the back of the head. Plunged into purgatory, he's doomed to a painful examination of his life. Unbeknownst to the assassins, Gerry's closest

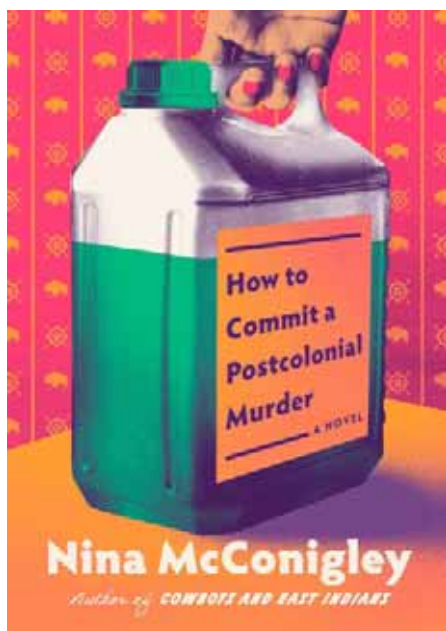
friend, a Catholic priest named Father Dan, witnesses his execution – yet does nothing to stop it. Meanwhile, Gerry's daughter, Early, jumps into his prized Mustang with a thirst for revenge. On her adrenaline-fueled hunt, she comes to realize that she's more like Gerry than she ever wanted to admit. **PW**

*****A GIFT BEFORE DYING**, Malcolm Kempf (Crown, \$28.00, January). After a botched high-profile murder investigation, Corporal Elderick Cole is exiled to the remote, rugged landscape of Nunavut, a vast territory in the Arctic Circle known for its untamed beauty, frigid temperatures, and endless winter nights. With his family having severed all ties, Cole waits out the result of a civil lawsuit alone—the wrong verdict could end what's left of his flailing career. His bleak existence takes a sinister turn when he discovers the hanging body of Pitseolala, a troubled Inuit girl whom he had sworn to protect. Her death dredges up demons he thought he'd buried along with the scars of a fractured marriage and the aching divide between him and his estranged daughter. **BL, PW, DP & AZ**

*****MY GRANDFATHER, THE MASTER DETECTIVE**, Masateru Konishi (Putnam, \$29.00, March). Debut Novel. As a lover of classic crime stories, it's no surprise that school-teacher Kaede encounters everyday mysteries more often than your typical twenty-seven-year-old. Solving them is another matter, though. For that, she turns to her beloved grandfather, who retains a keen sharpness of mind despite his dementia, and who was once a key member of The Waseda Mystery Club. From impossible locked room murders to confounding missing persons cases, the grandfather-granddaughter duo "weave stories" to get to the bottom of every mystery. **BL & AZ**

*****WHIDBEY**, T Kira Madden (Mariner, \$27.00, March). Debut Novel. Birdie Chang didn't know anything about Whidbey Island when she chose it, only that it was about as far away as she could get from her own life. She's a

woman on the run, desperate for an escape from the headlines back home and the look of concern in her girlfriend's eyes—and from Calvin Boyer, the man who abused her as a child and who's now resurfaced. On her way, she has an unnerving encounter with a stranger on the ferry who offers her a proposition, a sinister solution and plan for revenge. **BL, PW, Kirkus & AZ**



*****HOW TO COMMIT A POST-COLONIAL MURDER**, Nina McConigley (Pantheon, \$26.00, January). Summer, 1986. The Creel sisters, Georgie Ayyar and Agatha Krishna, welcome their aunt, uncle and young cousin—newly arrived from India—into their house in rural Wyoming where they'll all live together. Because this is what families do. That is, until the sisters decide that it's time for their uncle to die. According to Georgie, the British are to blame. And to understand why, you need to hear her story. She details the violence hiding in their house and history, her once-unshakeable bond with Agatha Krishna, and her understanding of herself as an Indian-American in the heart of the West. **PW, Kirkus, LJ & AZ**

*****THE MURDER AT WORLD'S END**, Ross Montgomery (Morrow, \$30.00, January). Stockington & Pike #1. Cornwall, 1910. On a remote tidal island, the Viscount of Tithe Hall is

absorbed in feverish preparations for the apocalypse that he believes will accompany the passing of Halley's Comet. The Hall must be sealed from top to bottom—every window, chimney, and keyhole closed off before night falls. But what the pompous, dishonest Viscount has failed to take into account is the danger that lies within... By morning, he will be dead in his sealed study, murdered by his own ancestral crossbow. **PW, DP & Kirkus**

*****A SOCIOPATH'S GUIDE TO A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE**, M. K. Oliver (Atria, \$29.00, February). Being good might be its own reward, but Lalla can't pretend she hasn't missed the adrenaline rush that comes with transgressing. And, as a wife and mother, she's already an expert multitasker. So disposing of a body, framing a friend, and being the world's best homemaker should be easy to achieve. **Kirkus & AZ**

*****MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT**, Alessandra Ranelli (Gallery/Scout Press, \$30.00, May). In modern Vienna, American ex-pat Sterling Lockwood is the loyal concierge at the infamously secretive Hotel Orient, where cameras are banned, aliases are required, and every guest has something to hide. After the double murder of two guests, including a tech mogul building an Austrian surveillance state, Sterling must turn detective. But finding the truth will require breaking the Orient's sacred code of secrecy while keeping a few secrets of her own. **DP**

*****YOU'LL NEVER FORGET ME**, Isha Raya (Bantam, \$30.00, January). Struggling actress Dimple Kapoor wouldn't call herself a murderer, per se—she'd prefer the term "opportunist." Years ago, she did what had to be done to get herself out of a bad situation. And now, after accidentally killing her Hollywood rival, Irene Singh, at a party, she's simply seizing the chance to nab her dream leading role and resuscitate her career in the process. There's only one problem: Someone else at the event witnessed the crime . . . and caught it all on camera. **LJ & AZ**

Best Paperback Original Mysteries

*****CARNEY**, A. F. Carter (Mysterious Press, \$17.95, February). Delia Mariola #5. Baxter's a city on the move. You can't drive along a single street without running into a construction project. Captain Delia Mariola understands all of this, and the Baxter Police Department is prepared to battle against the city's drug dealers, pimps, and stick-up artists. The department began recruiting shortly after the Nissan contract was awarded, which began the city's rapid transformation, but the commission vetting new hires rushed to bring in almost anyone with a law enforcement background. Men and women were added as fast as they applied, creating a vortex that perfectly suited a group of ex-cops from Missouri as corrupt as they are brutal..Delia's not afraid—she's got Tom Carney, an undercover cop who is giving her good intel. **PW & DP**

*****THE MIDNIGHT TAXI**, Yosha Gunasekera (Berkley, \$18.99, February). Siriawathi Perera never expected to be a taxicab driver in New York City, struggling to make ends meet and still living with her parents at twenty-eight. The true-crime podcasts that keep Siri company as she drives don't do much to make up for the legal career she imagined for herself, or the brother she's grieving. When public defender Amaya Fernando gets into her cab, they make a quick connection through their shared Sri Lankan roots. Siri, whose social circle is limited to her grade-school best friend, Alex, thinks things might finally be looking up with this new potential friendship. But she's suddenly dropped into her own true crime when she discovers her next passenger murdered in the backseat, and she has to call Amaya sooner than she'd expected. **PW**

*****CHILDREN OF THE SAVAGE CITY**, Elizabeth Heider (Penguin, \$17.99, February). Nikki Serafino #2. A peaceful evening mass at the historic Chiesa del Gesù Nuovo is shattered

when a young au pair is killed in one of the cathedral's quiet chapels. The daughter of the US Ambassador sees it happen—but she'll speak only to one person: Nikki Serafino. Shaken by betrayal in her last high-profile case, Nikki has retreated from the relentless vigilance that once defined her work as liaison between Italian police and the US military. Withdrawn and mistrustful, she works her shifts, cares for her aging family, teaches self-defense classes, and avoids entanglement. But this case threatens her self-imposed invisibility—drawing her into a web of lies and resurfacing old wounds and buried loyalties. **DP**

*****ONE SECOND AWAY**, Rick Molina (Doubleday Canada, \$17.95, April). One sunny day in California, Jessie is hugging her nine-year-old son, Dylan, goodbye at the airport. He's travelling by himself, all the way across the country, to visit his father, Jessie's soon-to-be ex-husband, and his grandparents. Her heart breaks, but she puts on a brave face and gives her son one last wave as a flight attendant leads him away. Several hours later, Jessie gets a frantic call from Dylan's grandmother in New York. Dylan is missing. **DP**

*****CODEBREAKERS**, Stella Sands (HarperPerennial, \$18.99, August). Wordhunter#2.

Steamy, seedy, swampy south-central Florida once again serves as the backdrop for the unlikely duo of loquacious, tattooed, trash-talking Maggie Moore and laconic Detective Silas Gabriel Jackson—linguistic genius and genius detective, respectively. Now operating their own agency and using their extraordinary skills in forensic semiotics (her), and good old-fashioned observation (him), the pair decode clues embedded in words and symbols to uncover a sadistic criminal who preys upon unsuspecting men. **DP**

*****THE PATIENT**, Tim Sullivan (Atlantic Crime, \$17.00, February). George Cross #3. DS George Cross can be rude, difficult, and awkward with people. But his unfailing logic and

dogged pursuit of the truth means his conviction rate is the best on the force. Now, this unusual detective is met with an even more unusual case. When a young woman is found dead, the Bristol Crime Unit is quick to rule it a suicide: the woman had a long history of drug abuse. But her mother is convinced it was murder: her daughter had been clean for years and making strides in a new therapy program. As an outsider himself, DS Cross is drawn to cases involving the voiceless and the dispossessed. He is determined to defy his bosses and re-open the investigation. **DP**

*****HOW TO KILL A GUY IN TEN DATES**, Shailee Thompson (Gallery, \$18.00, February). When Jamie Prescott and her best friend Laurie attend a speed-dating event, Jamie expects to meet a roster of mediocre men and indulge in some street food afterwards. She doesn't expect one of her dates to have his throat slit at their table during a blackout. After the lights come back on and there are more bodies on the floor, it becomes clear that dating can be a very dangerous pastime. **Kirkus, AZ, PW & LJ**

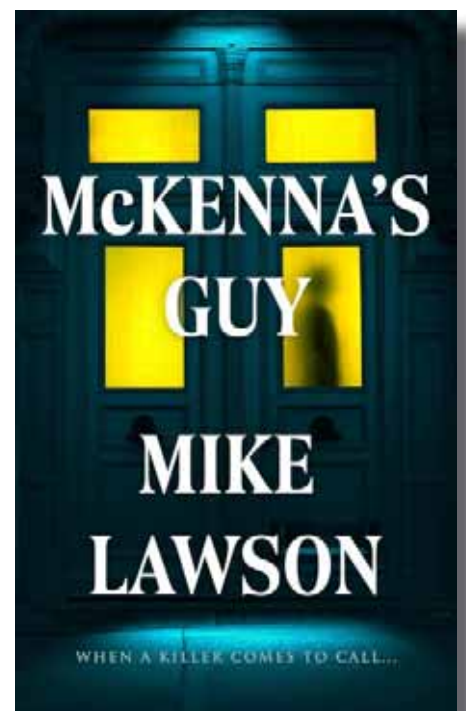
Best Thrillers

*****THE HARD LINE**, Mark Greaney (Berkley, \$31.00, February). Gray Man #15. Somewhere at the top of the US Intelligence apparatus, security experts and intelligence operations worldwide are threatened. It starts with a blown safe house in Tunis. Then Court himself barely escapes from an ambush in the jungles of Nicaragua. Now key members of the U.S. counterintelligence community are being assassinated in their own neighborhoods. With the feds compromised, it's up to Court and his team to stop the hit squads. **DP**

*****THE CORMORANT HUNT**, Michael Idov (Scribner, \$29.00, January). Ari Falk#2. Disheartened CIA officer Ari Falk, now hiding in the Republic of Georgia, is hailed as a hero by some and branded a traitor by others

after blowing the lid off a massive conspiracy. But his quiet exile is shattered when a mission arises—one perfectly suited for someone as jaded and unpredictable as him. **Kirkus & DP**

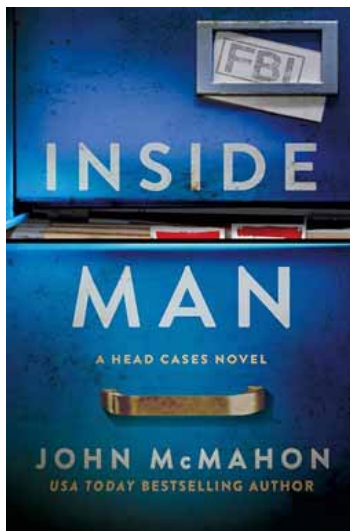
*****THE ASSET**, Mike Lawson (Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, February). Joe DeMarco #19. Former Speaker of the House John Mahoney is approached by Diane Lake, an ex-CIA agent with a gift for Mahoney: she reveals that the wife of one of his biggest rivals in the U.S. Senate has a wife (Lydia Chang) who may be passing top secret information to the Chinese. Mahoney has two choices: 1. forward this information on to the FBI and possibly destroy the Senator's reputation, or 2. put his fixer Joe DeMarco on it to verify if the allegations are true. Mahoney chooses the latter, and DeMarco wonders if his boss has an ulterior motive. It doesn't take DeMarco long to discover that Lydia Chang is being blackmailed with a disturbing video of her daughter, a young Georgetown University student. **DP**



*****McKENNA'S GUY**, Mike Lawson (Blackstone, \$29.99, July). When an intruder with murderous intent breaks into Roger Smith's modest home one night, the big brute gets more than

he bargained for, ending up a bloody corpse staining Roger's carpet.

Washington DC Detective Grace Lillinthal is summoned to the crime scene and marvels at the outcome. Why would anyone want to kill gray-haired Roger Smith? He's the picture of respectability--a widower devoted to his family, an amateur painter, and a civil servant who works at the Government Printing Office. When asked why he'd be a target, a clearly shaken Roger claims to be baffled. But instinct tells Grace there's more to Roger's story. **DP**



*****INSIDE MAN**, John McMahon (Minotaur, \$29.00, January). Head Cases #2. PAR's latest case involves a militia group stockpiling weapons. When their confidential informant in the case is killed, it quickly becomes clear that the militia did not kill him. As the squad looks into the evidence surrounding his murder, an unidentified man is caught on camera with their informant. This mystery man's picture is connected to another case at the FBI, an unsolved series of murdered women, buried in the ground in north Florida. Could they have uncovered a serial killer? And if so, what is his connection to their C.I.? **DP**

*****GUNNER**, Alan Parks (Pegasus, \$27.95, April). March 1941. Joseph Gunner is back on the streets of Glasgow after being wounded on the front lines in France. Keeping the pain in his leg at bay with the help of morphine, Gunner,

a former detective, 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. **PW, BL & DP**

*****THE TREE OF LIGHT AND FLOWERS**, Thomas Perry (Mysterious Press, \$27.95, March). Jane Whitefield #10. A violent car crash brings on the premature birth of the baby that Jane Whitefield and her husband have hoped for, but it also shatters the period of calm in their lives. Within weeks, Jane's peaceful time as a new mother in a safe, harmonious home starts to revert to her harrowing previous life. She had spent over a decade rescuing and sheltering people from dangerous foes, taking them to new locations, and teaching them to live under new identities. It was something that she'd hoped to never have to do again. But there are still people who are determined to capture the woman who makes people disappear so they can force her to reveal where their potential victims are now. **LJ & DP**

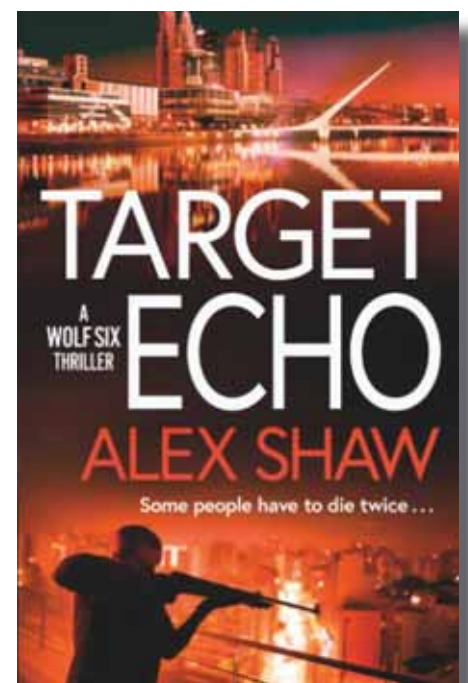
*****THE DARK TIME**, Nick Petrie (Putnam, \$30.00, March). Peter Ash #9. Katelyn Thorsen, known as KT to her friends and enemies, is an independent journalist who receives a very specific death threat. Fortunately, Peter Ash has arrived in town to protect KT at the request of his girlfriend, June Cassidy. From the moment of his arrival, he's thrown into a maelstrom of violence trying to protect KT and her daughter and discover the source of the death threat. **DP**

*****PENDERGAST: The Beginning**, Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child (Grand Central, \$30.00, January). Prequel. It only took six months for the life of Special Agent Dwight Chambers to crumble around him. First, he lost his partner, and then, tragically, his wife. Returning to work at the New Orleans Field Office, Chambers is dismayed to find himself saddled with mentoring

a brand new FBI agent—a certain A. X. L. Pendergast. As Chambers tries to pull himself together, his enigmatic and exasperating junior partner pulls an outrageous stunt that gets both of them suspended. Pendergast welcomes the banishment, because it gives him the opportunity to investigate a peculiar murder in Mississippi that has captured his fancy. Chambers grudgingly goes along. **DP**

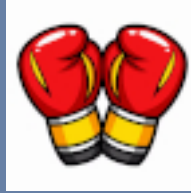
*****TARGET ECHO**, Alex Shaw (Boldwood, \$18.99, Kindle – \$4.99, February). Wolf Six #3.

Elite Ukrainian assassin Ruslan Akulov, aka Wolf Six, is a ghost. A weapon for hire forged in the fires of conflict and tempered by experience. Known by both the underworld and international intelligence agencies, he works alone, guided only by the next mission and his unwavering commitment to his personal kill code. So when a routine contract in Argentina turns from simple to chaotic in the squeeze of a trigger, Akulov is thrown into a complex web of deceit and dangerous tests of loyalty. Akulov had heard of the French intelligence operative Sophie Racine – her reputation and skills are world-class, but when her business becomes his problem, Wolf Six must quickly learn to work with others. **DP**



Edgars vs. Barrys

Larry Gandle



This year, George asked me to compare the Edgars and Barry shortlists for Best Novel given the fact that I decided not to read or review the Edgars Best First Novels which simply did not interest me. Given that I have already read four of the six Barry books, I decided that I would this year. The Barry list is typically the better list of books in that it is culled from the best books of the year list that George creates by tallying up the number of times a book is mentioned using dozens of best of the year lists from publications and reviewers such as those from *Deadly Pleasures*. However, this year is an exception as we shall see.

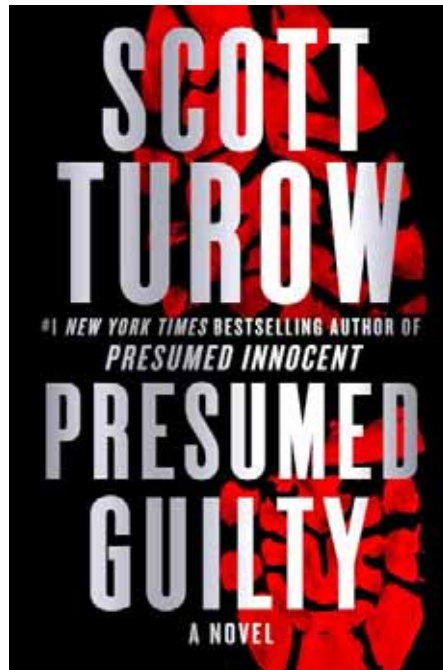
Edgar Awards Shortlist BEST NOVEL 2026

PRESUMED GUILTY by Scott Turow (Grand Central, \$30.00) **Rating: A**

Rusty is a retired judge living on a lake in the Midwest with the new love of his life, Bea. Everything appears to be close to idyllic until Bea's adopted son Aaron, disappears after leaving his girlfriend, Mae, in the woods after they fought on a camping trip they were on. After Mae turns up dead, Aaron is the natural main suspect and the fact that he is black, obviously, doesn't help. Rusty must enter the court one last time to defend Bea's son. The stakes are incredibly high for him.

This is a superb courtroom drama. Once the back story is set up, the courtroom becomes the major focus for the vast majority of this novel. Courtroom dramas are my favorite subgenre in crime fiction and this one is one of the best. As is typical with Scott Turow's writing, characterizations are meticu-

lously done. They are vital to the story. The legal suspense continues to ratchet up. This is easily one of Turow's best books and, as such, easily one of the best books of the year. There are even a few clever twists towards the end. This is my pick for the Edgar Award Best Novel.



THE DREAM HOTEL by Laila Lalami (Pantheon, \$29.00) **Rating: A**

In the near future, Sara, upon returning to LA from London, is arrested and held by the Risk Assessment Administration in the airport because, according to an AI algorithm, she is in danger of committing a crime in the future. That person who might suffer harm is her husband. She is detained and brought to a facility to be observed for, supposedly, twenty-one days. This is a situation where Sara has not done anything wrong but this algorithm has put her at an elevated risk to do harm. Sara must try to get out by keeping her

head down because every little infraction can increase her imprisonment. She desperately wants to get home to her young twins and her husband. However, as time goes by, it looks increasingly unlikely she will get home anytime soon.

This novel is a surreal look at the potential pitfalls of AI. The author conveys a setting for the prison that captures the helplessness of the women incarcerated for doing nothing wrong. The story moves swiftly and is never dull. There is an underlying suspense as whether Sara ever gets out of this incredibly unjust prison. It is a book that is difficult to put down.

WILD DARK SHORE by Charlotte McConaghy (Flatiron Books, \$28.99) **Rating: A-**

Dominic Salt and his three children live on a remote island of Shearwater, close to Antarctica. Their job is to protect the world's largest collection of plant seeds collected by scientists. The ocean water is rapidly rising and the seeds will soon be collected and moved to the mainland to protect them. In the meantime, during an awful storm, a mysterious woman is washed ashore. They nurse her back to health and discover her name is Rowan. She is never clear as to why she sailed to Shearwater. When she discovers a freshly dug grave and a possible blood splattered room, she realizes there are secrets being kept from her. However, Dominic realizes Rowan is not being truthful with them either. Very slowly the truth comes out and it becomes quite deadly.

This is a beautifully written book. The locale is carefully depicted, overall. The characters are well rounded, realistic and deep. The pacing of the story is initially languid- at least in the first two-thirds of the book. As circumstances are slowly revealed, the pacing picks up eventually to a relentless pace. This author is an exceptional writer. I will admit, that as beautifully as the author described the immediate settings, I never got a feel for the whole island and where the various events took place. A map would have been very helpful. Nonetheless, this is a worthwhile, well written story and is highly recommend-

ed.

FAGIN THE THIEF by Allison Epstein (Doubleday, \$28.00) **Rating: A-**

One of Charles Dickens immortal characters is brought back to life in this very clever retelling of a part of *Oliver Twist*. Fagin's early life to his later life is covered in this atmospheric tale. His relationships with the dangerous Bill Sykes, Bill's girlfriend Nancy, along with the Artful Dodger, *Oliver Twist* and others from the Dickens tale are all covered here. The reader will witness how Jacob Fagin became one of London's best pickpockets and how he eventually mentors young boys in the art.

Though the characters and the story line lacks originality, the perspective and the writing is unique and is a fresh viewpoint of familiar events. The pacing never wavers, and the plot is always interesting. London at the first half of the nineteenth century is very much brought to life. The book is a worthy addition to the Edgar shortlist for best novel.

THE INHERITANCE by Trisha Sakhlecha (Pamela Dorman Books, \$29.00) **Rating: A-**

A wealthy Delhi business owner and his family meet on a remote island off Scotland. It is to be a birthday celebration as the patriarch is about to retire and his three children are there to protect their own interests. Greed begins to intercede in their relationships. We know right from the beginning someone will die as a result of the scheming. Who will it be?

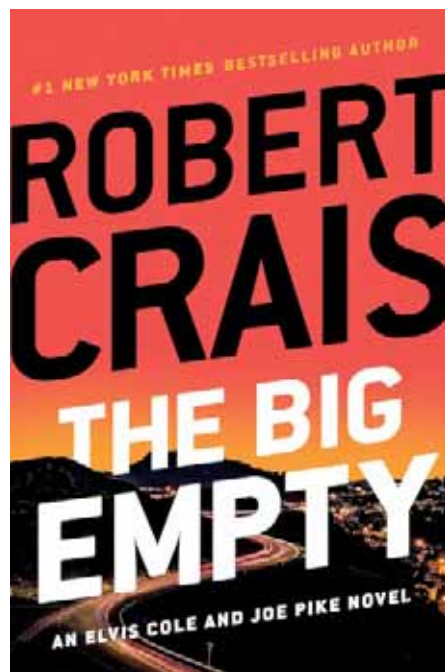
This is the most odious group of characters I can remember spending time with in the pages of a book. They are all really bad people- self centered liars. Most of all, they are desperate- they need the money. It takes awhile to get to know every one of these characters after which the plot really picks up. The story is quite clever and this really is a good example of a domestic suspense book that is well done. The final twist at the end is extremely effective. A solid pick for the Edgar Best Novel.

HARD TOWN by Adam Plantinga

(Grand Central, \$30.00) **Rating: B**

Kurt Argento is an ex-Detroit cop who is recovering from a particular harrowing experience including the recent death of his wife. He is living off small handyman jobs in Arizona when he is approached by a young mother and her infant son. She requests him to find her husband in nearby Fenton, Arizona. He initially wavers but decides to meet her in Fenton. When he arrives, he discovers she has disappeared just like her husband. Argento's subsequent investigation begins to reveal a government conspiracy in which human life has no value. Argento will risk his own life to stop it.

HARD TOWN is a solid thriller novel but, IMHO, nothing extraordinary. Honoring the art of a thriller novel is a really positive thing, however, in this category, I would look for something really special. As is typical with thrillers, reality must be suspended. The characters are, overall, superficial and stereotypic. The plot does occasionally wane but is never dull. It does go into some major tangents which primarily serve to bulk up the book. The book is recommended for pure entertainment but I question it's inclusion on the Edgar shortlist.



THE BIG EMPTY by Robert Crais (GP Putnam, \$30.00) **Rating: B**

Tracy Beller is a very popular influencer known for her baking ability. Her father disappeared when she was thirteen. It appears that her father, Tommy Beller, abandoned his family, but, Tracy doesn't believe that. She hires PI Elvis Cole to discover the truth. Elvis takes the case but soon finds himself with some vicious adversaries. The question of what happened to Tommy Beller becomes a very dangerous one as Elvis soon discovers. He must request the aid of his partner, the elusive and dangerous Joe Pike to help out.

First of all, I must add a caveat here- I hate PI novels and this one is no exception. I find PI novels to be antiquated in that they are incredibly formulaic. Each PI novel is like another, to me. They all start out the same, get increasingly complex and convoluted and eventually there is a resolution. Almost every one of them are forgettable. I was reading Robert Crais's Elvis Cole books back in the 1990s when I first started reading crime fiction almost exclusively. I enjoyed the books back then. Yet, almost every PI novel featured a wisecracking PI and his or her mysterious sidekick who can kick any villain's butt and has to get the PI out of danger multiple times. Like any trend, they soon get old. I am surprised Robert Crais still writes an identical novel to the twenty before it.

The characters are fairly well created but most are stereotypic. Dialogue is unrealistic. The plot often borders on the ridiculous. The pacing often lags. The plot gets increasingly ludicrous. Surprisingly, the solution is satisfactory. I can't recommend this book over any other Crais novel. I am still embarrassed that the *Deadly Pleasures* book of the decade was a Crais novel about a police dog. It is so incredibly low brow for such an important selection. This book is on the shortlist for Best Novel Edgar Awards. I simply do not understand this selection.

**Barry Awards Shortlist --
BEST NOVEL 2026**

PRESUMED GUILTY by Scott Turow-- see above. This book is easily my top pick in this category and, also, my top pick for the Edgar Award.

KING OF ASHES by S.A. Cosby (Flatiron Books, \$28.99). **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?

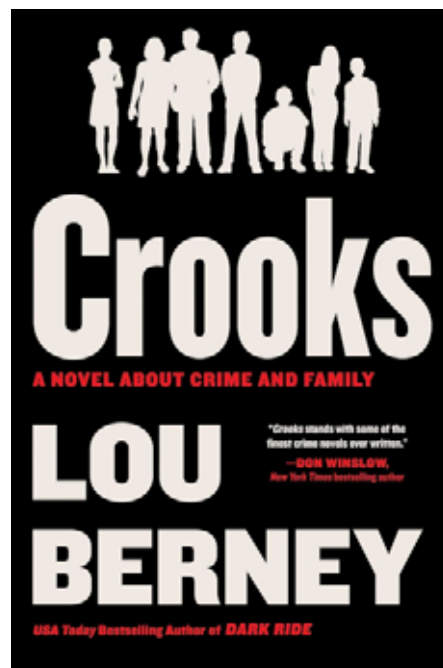
This is another fine crime fiction novel by one of the stars of the genre. The plot is totally compelling and the book is hard to put down as a result of that. Characters range from well-developed to stock figures. There is a lot of dialogue while the hero is held hostage. It goes on for pages. There 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.

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING by Belinda Bauer (Atlantic Monthly, \$27.00). **Rating: B+**

In 1926, on the cliffs of Yorkshire, several groups of men extract large colorful eggs from the multitude of nests there. On one small ledge a young girl manages to get a very rare red egg. It will change her life.

In the present, in Wales, Patrick Fort discovers his friend Nick and Nick's mother bound and gagged in their own home. It turns out they found the red egg in their attic and Nick placed an ad on Ebay to sell it. It was stolen by two men wearing masks. Patrick and Nick decide to find out who stole the egg and why. They soon discover themselves in the midst of some really rough people all over some highly prized eggshells.

I very much value uniqueness in a novel especially in the so very formulaic crime fiction genre. This tale is very unique. There are some really bad characters who would have little issue with seriously injuring others in the name of obsession and greed. The plot moves at a rapid rate alternating between 1926 and today. Slowly answers come and things make more sense. Characters are well constructed and realistic. The conclusion is clever and neatly ties up loose ends. The writing is quite exquisite describing the locales. A strong recommendation.



CROOKS by Lou Berney (Morrow,

\$30.00) **Rating: B**

This is a unique book about a crime family, the Mercurios. Buddy is a mobster living in Vegas doing well for himself. He meets and marries Lilian, a pickpocket. They are forced to flee Vegas and end up in Oklahoma City where they remain. They have five children who all must deal with being the prodigy of a morally bankrupt couple. Through a series of short stories, each of the offspring's lives are examined and none of them lead normal unencumbered lives except for Piggy, the youngest.

As with any book of short stories, not all of these stories are truly compelling. They are a bit uneven. None of them are remotely similar. The characters are not a truly likeable bunch but all are very well rendered. I am not a fan of short stories and, therefore, never felt connected to any of the characters. Just when the plot becomes increasingly compelling, we are onto another family member's tale. This is a good but not great read.

THE WHITE CROW by Michael Robotham (Scribner, \$28.99) **Rating: B-**

Philomena McCarthy is a young London constable who notices a young girl on the street on a night patrol. The girl has blood on her nightgown. She returns the girl to her home where she discovers the girl's dead mother. In the meantime, the girl's father is tied to a chair with a bomb attached to him in a jewelry store. The safe in the store is open and empty. These events begin this investigation which will impact Philomena's career and set off two criminal gangs against each other.

In judging this book 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 will 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 in-



So, in my opinion, this year the Edgar shortlist wins easily. Five out of the seven Edgar titles I rated as excellent. There were only two Bs. The Barry list has only one A title and it is the one title I pushed for which is **PRESUMED GUILTY**. It is also the only book in both lists and in both of them I picked it as my favorite. The remainder of the Barry titles were Bs except for **THE BLACK WOLF**, the only DNF in either list this year. I have to commend the Edgar committee as this is the best list that they had since I could remember.

We must keep in mind that there is a huge difference in the selection process of the two lists. The Edgars are selected by a committee which eventually will read and rate every single book on the shortlist. This committee changes its members each year. There is a much greater chance of some relatively obscure books being selected as it takes one judge to bring a particular book to the attention of all judges.

The Barry Award Nominating Committee has the same core members from year to year. Whereas the Barrys is a fan award with few voters actually reading and comparing all the nominated books. The voting is based on what people read and enjoyed the most only of what they read. Usually, in my opinion, the Barry Awards get it right. I am not sure what happened this year. George feels it might be because, in his opinion, it wasn't as strong a year for crime fiction novels, as, say, last year. Well, for whatever reason, this year the thumbs up goes to the Edgar Awards.

capacitated hero or, in this case, heroine. Characters, apart from Philomena, are stock figures with unrealistic dialogue. 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.

THE BLACK WOLF by Louise Penny (Minotaur Books, \$30.00) **Rating:** DNF

Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Quebec police just stopped a terrorist attack in Montreal. He arrested an individual known as the Black Wolf. Now he is healing from wounds he received in the last book. He feels he made a mistake and did not, in fact, apprehend The Black Wolf who still appears to be out there with some powerful allies. He again finds himself in the position of stopping an even bigger terrorist attack.

I am aware Louise Penny is a very popular author. I have read a couple of early novels of hers and didn't particularly like them. I didn't have high hopes for this one either and I was right. On starting this book, I felt like I opened a very complex novel with a whole host of characters I am supposed to know. There are multiple references to the prior book, **THE GREY WOLF**, which I did not understand. There are multiple subplots going on at the same time. I actually made it through thirty-three percent of the novel then, with great relief, decided to put it down. I simply could not fully comprehend what was going on. Furthermore, I have no idea why this was not placed into the thriller category. There is certainly a sense of desperation indicative of a thriller. If Mick Herron's book is a thriller, given that we have changed our definition of a thriller, this one should have definitely been included. If you are not familiar with this series of which this is the twentieth, please avoid this book. If you are hell bent on reading Louis Penny, start with an earlier volume.

Best of the Best 2025 Lists Edgar Awards vs. Barry Awards

In this listing, we compare how many mentions there were of the Edgar nominations for Best Novel compared to how many mentions there were for the Barry Award nominations for Best Mystery Novel.

Edgar Awards Best Mystery Novel

THE BIG EMPTY,
Robert Crais -- 0
FAGIN THE THIEF,
Allison Epstein -- 0
THE DREAM HOTEL,
Laila Lalami -- 5
WILD DARK SHORE,
Charlotte McConaghy -- 8
HARD TOWN,
Adam Plantinga -- 0
THE INHERITANCE,
Trisha Sakhlecha -- 5
PRESUMED GUILTY,
Scott Turow -- 3

Barry Awards Best Mystery Novel

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING,
Belinda Bauer -- 14
CROOKS, Lou Berney -- 13
KING OF ASHES, S. A. Cosby -- 32
THE BLACK WOLF,
Louise Penny -- 15
THE WHITE CROW,
Michael Robotham -- 7
PRESUMED GUILTY,
Scott Turow -- 3

What conclusion can we draw from this comparison? Only that more experts put the Barry Award nominees (overall) on their Best of the Year lists than the Edgar Award nominees. My opinion is that both lists of nominees represent some of the best crime fiction published in 2025 and are worthy recommendations for our reading pleasure.

— George Easter

Editor's Message



When Is a Debut Novel Really a Debut Novel? This issue's Reviewed to Death title, **MISSING** by E. A. Jackson is being billed as a "First" or "Debut" mystery novel. But upon further reading about the author I discovered that she has written a three-novel Death in Paris series under the name of Emilia Bernhard. So, in my opinion, **MISSING** is not a first novel, but a novel written by an established author under another name. Another example is **THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF**, Evelyn Clarke (Harper, April), which is also being billed as a "first" mystery novel. But upon further investigation, it is revealed that "Evelyn Clarke" is a pen name for the writing duo of Cat Clarke and V. E. Schwab, both established, published authors. I'm more inclined to consider **THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF** a first novel because it is the first work by the duo, but if it proves worthy of award consideration I probably would not put it under the category of best first mystery novel. I do make a distinction for authors who make a jump from young adult fiction to adult mystery fiction. Two recent examples of that are Amy Tintera and Ashley Elston who were nominated for the Barry Best First Mystery Award last year.

Why should we care? If a book is good, it is good whether it is a first novel or not. Well, it matters to someone like me who oversees the nomination process for the Barry Awards. And it matters to readers who like to dabble in first mystery novels to see who the future stars will be. Just think back to when you read **THE DRY** by Jane Harper and were blown away by the author's skill and potential.

New Reviewer. Marilyn Brooks has maintained a successful reviewing blog (marilynmyysteryreads.com) which has just passed its sixteenth birthday. She also teaches mystery fiction courses at

Brandeis University. I've been getting her regular emails (each with a review of a recent read by her) for some time now and have enjoyed reading her opinions on certain books.

Each review has a few highlighted sentences that emphasize important points in the review and I have kept that format for her. Welcome, Marilyn!



Marilyn Brooks

Why We Have An Australian/New Zealand Column. Some *DP* readers may wonder why we have a column reviewing crime fiction from Australia and New Zealand when it may seem difficult for American readers to get copies of the reviewed books.

Here are the reasons for it:

1. Jeff Popple (Australia) and Craig Sisterson (New Zealand) are from there and have rare insight into the crime fiction from that region. Their excellent reviews point to quality crime fiction that we might otherwise ignore and often give us the impetus to do a little work to get and read the books reviewed. (It's worth it!)

2. Australia and New Zealand are experiencing an explosion of new, qual-

ity crime writers coming on the scene – equal in many ways to the best of the U.S. and the U.K. I have become a fan of quite a few of them and often Down Under crime titles will appear on my year-end Best Lists.

3. Many Australian writers' works are available in the U.S. and some are published by U.S. publishers. For example, the great debut novel **STILLWATER** by Tanya Scott (2025) was recently published here by Atlantic Crime. Some of them are published in the U.K. and are easily purchased from there. A recent example from my own experience: in the last issue, Jeff Popple reviewed **SOFTLY CALLS THE DEVIL** by Chris Blake and gave it a rating of A. Then in this issue, Craig Sisterson also reviewed that title and rated it A+. Both of those reviews got my attention. So I looked on amazon and downloaded the Kindle edition for \$7.99. Easy peasy. See next issue for my review. Sometimes I have to order copies from Blackwells in the U.K. but they come postage free and usually cost less than most U.S. books. I have the latest title from Natalie Conyer (reviewed by Jeff in this issue) coming my way and I can't wait to read it. The only ones (just a few) that I have a real problem getting are those few published only in Australia or New Zealand and nowhere else.

4. It's always fun to read books set in faraway places with different customs and language quirks -- especially when the writing, characterization and plotting are sooo good.

RETURN OF THE MALTESE FALCON by Max Allan Collins. This book was reviewed three times in the last issue so I thought I would give it a try. Al Collins does an admirable job in recreating the world of Sam Spade, but I found my mind wandering as I read it. Nothing much of interest happens for the first 100 pages except setting up the plot and characters for a satisfying ending. It should be noted that the author has signed up to write two more Sam Spade novels, now that the copyright on the original **MALTESE FALCON** has expired. **Rating: B**

A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



THE EXES

By Leodora Darlington
Dutton, February 2026, \$29.99

Rating: B-

First line: What they don't tell you about betrayal is that it eats you slowly.

Remember the Job story in the Bible? Now, reimagine Job as an attractive, well-educated, professional Black woman in London and you have **THE EXES**, an exciting debut novel from Leodora Darlington that almost works. It is either about the world's most victimized woman or the world's most successful serial killer. You choose.

Natalie is preyed upon, abused, betrayed, and victimized by everyone in her life. Everyone. That includes her family, her high school and college boyfriends, her boss, her husband, and even her therapist.

The trouble with books about gaslighting, or being made to doubt your own judgement and maybe even hard evidence, is that the readers must inevitably be among the victims of gaslighting, themselves. So when you see the signs of abusive behavior in a character but nothing comes of it, you begin to doubt your intuition. Unless the writer has a sure hand, this can be annoying. For me, the book jumped the shark with the therapist. The therapist!

But the writer is one to watch.

THE DARK TIME

By Nick Petrie
Putnam, March 2026, \$30.00

Rating: A-

First line: Katelyn Thorsen, known as KT to friends and enemies alike, stood inside the glass doors of Anchor-

head Coffee, just down the way from Pike Place Market, staring out at the rain pouring down.

Nick Petrie's latest Peter Ash thriller, **THE DARK TIME**, is set, as they often are, in the Pacific Northwest. Peter's girlfriend, June Cassidy, gets a call from a colleague in Seattle, also an investigative reporter, asking for help. June calls Peter. When Peter Ash turns up, he isn't in time to prevent an act of violence, but he can mitigate it. And he can pursue the perpetrators. With scant evidence, he goes to work. He is helped by his old Army buddy Lewis. He is hampered by a teenager he has to protect.

What sets Nick Petrie's Peter Ash thrillers apart from the rest of the pack is: 1. the strong emotional component, and 2. the domestic setting. Very seldom does Ash venture beyond the northwest United States. The series has sent him to places as disparate as Iceland and

Memphis, Tennessee, but he usually sticks to his home territory. His character much more grounded than the usual ex-Navy seal who is at the heart of the testosterone-fueled action adventure. Ash is fleshed out with anxieties, issues, and PTSD symptoms. So when he kicks ass, it takes brains and heart as well as mad skills.

Like Jack Reacher, who he's often compared to, Ash is a thinking person's action hero. I love it.

HEARTWOOD

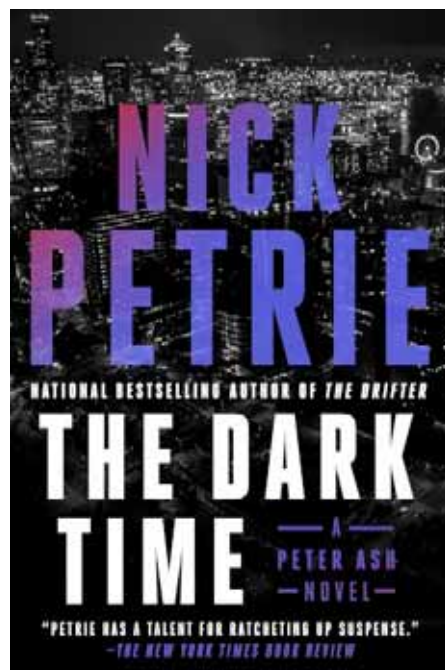
By Amity Gaige
Simon & Schuster, 2025, \$28.99

Rating: A

First line: Dear Mother, you used to call me Sparrow.

Amity Gaige's gorgeous thriller **HEARTWOOD** is the literary mystery of the year. Taut and suspenseful, introspective and uplifting, **HEARTWOOD** traces the course of a few days in the lives of maybe a dozen people. Valerie Gillis, an amateur hiker, has gone missing while hiking the Maine section of the Appalachian Trail, a rugged 2,000-mile span from Georgia to Canada that has challenged and punished accomplished outdoorsmen and aspiring amateurs alike.

The main protagonists are Valerie and the woman in charge of finding her, Lt. Bev Miller of the Maine Game Warden Service. But the book ranges far and wide not unlike the Appalachian Trail, itself. There are mothers, husbands, lovers, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, children, and onlookers. There are meditations on mother daughter relationships, deep dives into marital dynamics, solitary musings on



what drives us, why we do what we do, how we make decisions, the way we put ourselves at risk. There is also action, adventure, danger, and death.

An excellent literary thriller.

NEVER LIE

By Freida McFadden
Poisoned Pen, 2024, \$17.99

Rating: B

First line: Everybody lies.

Frieda McFadden's **NEVER LIE** is a about a newly married couple who get trapped in their dream home and learn that it holds many terrible secrets. A mash-up of real estate porn and classic locked-room mystery, **NEVER LIE** establishes itself right away. Newlyweds. Check. Driving far enough out of the city to lose phone service. Check. Snowstorm. Check. Empty house with no real estate agent? Check. So, they're trapped. What's the worst that can happen?

Fans of Freida McFadden's formulaic thrillers will love this. The rest of us, perhaps not so much. When the set-up's seams are showing to this extent, it's hard to suspend the necessary amount of disbelief. So, when you find out that the former owner of the house was a famous psychiatrist who has disappeared, you will just shrug. Of course. Of course.

DOG DAYS

By Wendy Corsi Staub
Seyn House, 2024, \$29.99

Rating: B+

First line: "...and I miss my bed, and I miss running through the sprinklers, and I miss swimming in the lake," seven year old Max ticks off on his fingers.

I don't usually read cozies, but Wendy Corsi Staub is an excellent writer, and I thought I would dip into her cozy series and read **DOG DAYS**. I'm not exactly a convert but it was a pleasant dive into a series set in Lily Dale, the fictional village in Upstate New York in which almost all the residents are psychics or mediums or other spiritual practitioners.

Bella Jordan, a young mother and recent widow, is one of the few residents of Lily Dale who is not involved in the paranormal. She runs a bed and breakfast for guests, most of whom come for the quirky other-worldly residents of the charming little town. But when Bella is returning home from a relative's wedding in Chicago, something strange happens. She sees her dead husband at the airport. And, even more troublingly, so does her son, Sam. And he is staring right at them.

Beautifully written and loaded with charm, **DOG DAYS** has a lovely cast of characters including two children—an achievement almost impossible to get right. Bella struggles to cope with her sighting of her dead husband, the owner who may want to close her failing country inn, and her relationship with a handsome veterinarian and the bunch of rescue dogs he has asked her to babysit. And this list doesn't even include Bella's neighbors who all claim to be mediums, or other paranormal adjacent entrepreneurs.

If you are a cozy reader or are in the mood for a change from procedurals or action thrillers, give **DOG DAYS** a try. Two paws up.

LAST ONE OUT

By Jane Harper
Flatiron Books, April 2026, \$29.99

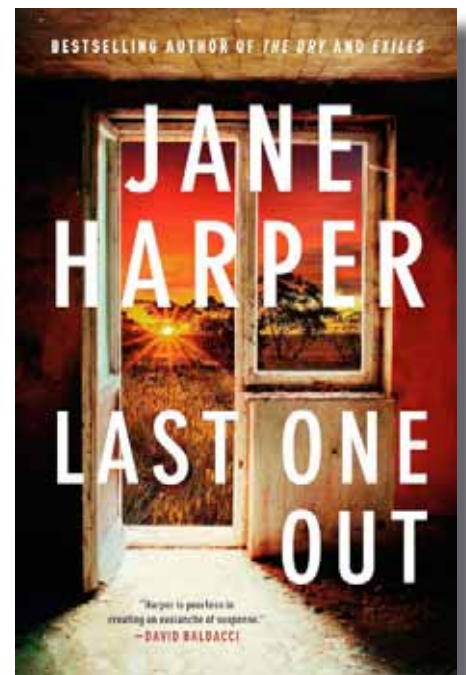
Rating: B

First line: He had been here, that was clear from the marks in the dust.

Jane Harper is arguably one of our great writers whose literary thrillers routinely go beyond the usual limits of the genre. However, even the best writers sometimes make a misstep. For me, this is one of those times.

As a reviewer, I like to say that my least favorite four words when looking at a new book are these: A child is missing. And **LAST ONE OUT** is a long, slow meditation on a child is missing. Actually, Sam Crowley was an adult when he went missing. He was twenty-one and had disappeared on his birthday.

In the small, dying town of Carralon Ridge, a four-hour plus drive from



Sydney in Australia's rugged interior, the Crowley family waited for Sam to come home for his birthday dinner. He never arrived. Now, five years later, Sam's mother, Ro, has come back for the annual memorial of his disappearance. The stress of Sam's disappearance had ended her marriage, and she left to find a job in Sydney. But she always returns the mark the anniversary of Sam's disappearance. Her daughter, Della, also comes home. Her former husband, Griff, has never left.

Beautifully written, **LAST ONE OUT** is a clear-eyed, unsentimental look at small town life, family dynamics, grief and loss. Sam is not the only thing that's gone. The town itself, unfortunately close to a profitable coal surface mine, is being bled dry. Residents have either been bought out by the mine owners or forced out by the noise, the pollution, and the greed of the mine owners who have built an entire infrastructure to house the mine workers, completely separate from the town they are slowly killing.

This set-up could have easily lent itself to an Erin Brockovich-type investigation into corporate malfeasance and human suffering, but Jane Harper does not take that road. The mine owners are alluded to but never become characters in the story of Sam and what happened

to him.

Ro and Griff and Della have mourned Sam's loss but they never got over it. They assume he is dead but no body has ever been discovered. The not knowing has torn them apart.

This particular year, Ro starts compulsively going over the evidence they have of Sam's last days. She reads and rereads his journal, examines his notes for a college paper he was writing on the effects of a corporate juggernaut on a small town that gets in the way, and retraces what they know of his steps on his birthday, talking to neighbors and friends he met during that day. Somewhere, she still believes, she can find answers.

I found the saga interesting but not compelling. The mystery of Sam's disappearance kept me going, but it's a slow burn. The end, finally, was rewarding, but nothing can bring back a lost child. And nothing can bring back the many hours lost to reading about it.

THE TURING PROTOCOL

By Nick Croydon

William Morrow, December 2025,

\$30.00

Rating: B

First line: The bomb's massive explosion shook the ground, shattered electricity substations and destroyed apartment complexes and hospitals, killing hundreds of Kyiv civilians.

THE TURING PROTOCOL is an alternative history thriller by former publishing executive Nick Croydon. It's got an interesting time machine premise: what if the truth about history is actually worse, but a helpful time machine has made it so much better.

I have chosen books to read and review in a number of ways: by author, by topic, by recommendation, by interesting pitch from the publicist. Very rarely do I choose a book solely by its title. But when you put "Turing" on the cover, it definitely gets my attention. Alan Turing, the British code cracker whose Enigma machine was the precursor to the modern computer, has long been a

topic of interest.

Set mostly in London, the book skips around in time from the Second World War when Alan Turing was working on his code reading apparatus, to 2022. It spans three generations and focuses on the biggest historical crux points along the way. Turing and his heirs (the book posits that although Turing was gay, he had a secret love child with fellow mathematician Joan Clarke) have the responsibility for a secret machine Turing invented. The machine has the ability to send a message back to the past but is limited to a span of only six weeks. So when a disaster occurs, the caretaker has a short window to decide if intervention is warranted, craft a message outlining the steps that need to be taken to prevent it, and leave enough time for the solution to be implemented.

In its outlines, the book works surprisingly well. The remarkable premise lives up to its possibilities and the historical nodes are chosen perfectly. My only problem with the novel is that the human story fails to live up to the historical one. The characters are bland. They are all equally brilliant, the women all beautiful, the men uniformly strong and kind. This creates a strange imbalance, like the marriage of a romance novel with a mathematical puzzle book.

But if you're a history buff and you can overlook the disparity, you will be rewarded.

ONLY WAY OUT

By Tod Goldberg

Thomas & Mercer, December 2025,

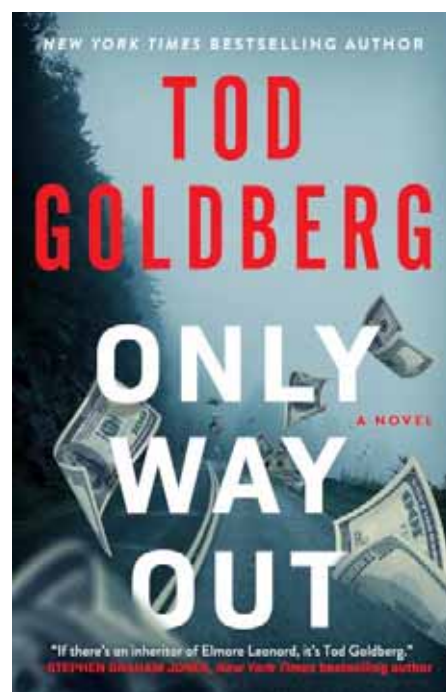
\$28.99

Rating: A

First line: The problem with being a crooked cop?

Tod Goldberg's **ONLY WAY OUT** is so many contradictory things: a literary thriller that's funny; a story about family that's fresh; a crime story that defies the usual pigeonholes; a love story with every possibility that it will end in murder. It's all these things and more.

When the most corrupt cop in the world ends up saving an entire town, you know you're in for a wild ride.



When the smartest woman in recent memory can't figure out a puzzle so obvious that you want to reach into the book and shake her, you know you have to keep reading.

In a dying small town on the Oregon coast, siblings Robert and Penny Green cook up a plan to get rich and get out. It involves stealing a great deal of money and other assets from people who won't go to the police when it's gone. Some of them might not even notice. Of course, something goes wrong. Robert and the money disappear. Penny does some time. But she is determined to find out what happened and she teams up with a man who is just as invested in solving the mystery of what happened to Penny's brother. The corrupt town police chief, of course, has other ideas. And solving the crime is not one of them.

Typically, when a noir mystery elicits a genuine laugh or two, someone says the author is the new Elmore Leonard. Then we have **ONLY WAY OUT**. In fact, Elmore Leonard would be proud to be called the old Tod Goldberg. It's that good!

THE LIBRARY AFTER DARK

By Ande Pliego

Bantam, May 2026, \$30.00

Rating: D

First line: The guillotine blade glinted, lodged halfway through her shoulder.

If you are thrilled to learn that a new way to die has been added to the long list of methods of murder, this book is for you. Poisonous wallpaper. If that news makes you shake your head and swear off reading, you're like me.

Ande Pliego's overwrought gothic thriller, **THE LIBRARY AFTER DARK**, is a classic locked-room mystery tarted up with layer after layer of baroque flourishes. The writing is so ornate and the plot so overly complicated that reading it is more like excavating the story at the core of this monstrous tome. Somewhere under all the overcharged descriptions and convoluted plot points there is the story of a group of eight people who have been invited to take an exclusive, after-hours tour of an infamous private library in Midtown Manhattan. Evangeline Riordan, the longtime owner of the Daedalus Library, with its priceless collection of strange and sinister items, is dead, possibly murdered, and her estate has not yet been unraveled, revealing who exactly will inherit the building and the collection.

Set in a hellish building in the East Thirties within blood spattering distance of the Morgan, the Daedalus Library is home to one particularly gruesome item, a book entitled **THE DARK HEARTH TALES**, with a collection of stories that predate the Brothers Grimm in the 18th century and whose tales are even darker and more sinister.

A librarian begins to lead the tour of seven, but very quickly the doors are found to be locked, sections of the building are sealed off, security personnel are missing, and the lights go out. Then the members of the tour start dying in mysterious ways. And, did I mention that every single person on the tour is someone else, someone with a sinister connection to the library and its dead owner?

Told in chapters headed by the name of the person whose point of view is invoked, the tale churns along as every person on the tour is found to be someone who has been connected to the Riordan family, the library, or the spe-

cial book. For a book that is pretty much limited to people walking and talking, the author does her best to accomplish the required number of murders with the most bizarre and ornate methods while keeping the killer a secret. But the trouble with locked-room mysteries in a limited time frame is that you are stuck with a small number of possibilities. No amount of poisonous wallpaper can help you now. Pliego does her best but no matter how much she dresses up the crimes, there's only so much ersatz horror she can milk them for.

The writing is, of course, overwrought. Hyperbolic. And very visceral. No one simply feels the blood coursing through their veins—and, really, does anyone? —it must be worming its way, freezing like chunks of ice, hot like lava, like a live wire, or boiling and roiling. The victims bleed, vomit, and asphyxiate on cue, but eventually it palls.

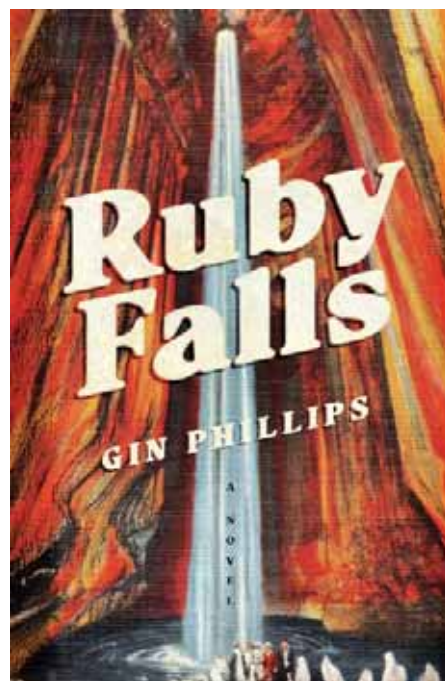
If you love over-stuffed pastiches like the *Knives Out* movies, or *The White Lotus* TV series, or wish you could play Clue on amphetamines, you might like this one. I, myself, did not.

RUBY FALLS

By Gin Phillips

Atlantic Crime, March 2026, \$28.00

Rating: A



First line: The gray bat skims along the cave floor, missing the man's forehead by millimeters.

Gin Phillips' **RUBY FALLS** is a gorgeous example of a literary mystery. I can't think of another thriller with such an unusual setting except perhaps Belinda Bauer's **THE IMPOSSIBLE THING**, which took place primarily on the cliffs of northern England where small children were lowered on ropes down cliffs over a dangerous rocky sea to collect valuable sea bird eggs. **RUBY FALLS** takes place almost entirely in a series of caves in Tennessee in the 1930's, where an enterprising businessman has built a tourist attraction underground.

A classic locked-room mystery, **RUBY FALLS** puts six people underground, over the course of a very long day, which is made even longer by various human and geologic factors. When one of the party turns up dead, it becomes clear that all of them had a motive. A combination of psychological suspense, it incorporates a who-done-it with a historical slice of life, and even manages to include an exquisite and memorable love story.

SERVED HIM RIGHT

By Lisa Unger

Park Row Books, March 2026, \$30.00

Rating: B+

First line: She really needed this job.

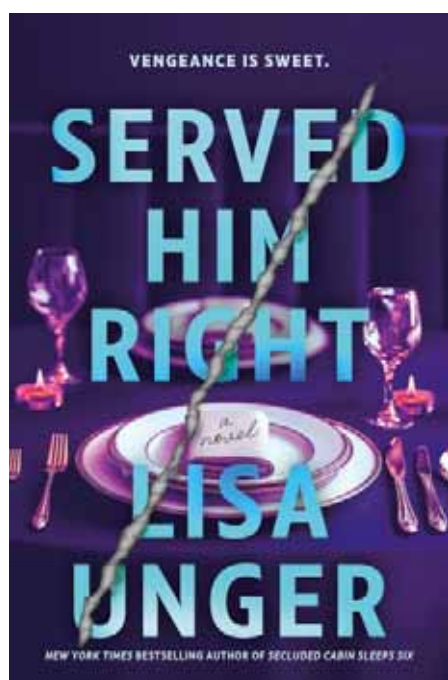
Lisa Unger's **SERVED HIM RIGHT** is a modern witch story, one where whenever someone asks, "Is she a witch?" they are answered, "She's a florist." Today's witchcraft seems to be basically herbology—home grown ingredients served up as cures and curses and sometimes methods of killing—with a little moon-dancing and heightened intuition thrown in.

I'm not usually a fan of books about witches, ranking them with vampires, werewolves, and zombies as outdated tropes more yawn-inducing than fear-inspiring. (Exceptions include Steven King and Stuart Neville, of course.)

But Lisa Unger's **SERVED HIM RIGHT** is so well-written and so full

of female rage that I make another exception. There is retaliation for every modern feminist complaint from male workplace dominance to harassment, from sexual abuse to marital neglect. Turns out there is a recipe for everything.

Ana and Vera Blackmith are adult sisters, both beautiful, who are still very close despite their differences. Vera has the perfect life with a wonderful husband, two great children, and a perfect home in a wealthy suburb of an unnamed city. Ana is a mess. She's volatile, deep in debt, in and out of work, and sexually promiscuous.



Vera gives a brunch for a group of women friends to help Ana get over her latest boyfriend, an especially bad choice with a history of terrible behavior toward women, including some of the party guests. The brunch is interrupted by the news that Ana's ex has been murdered. Uh oh. Ana is the chief suspect.

A further complication is that nearly everyone had a reason to wish the guy dead. And then there's the fact that Ana just had sex with the investigating police officer.

Deliciously twisty, you'll like it if you like witches or just women who rhyme with them.

The Jacobs Report

Lon Jacobs



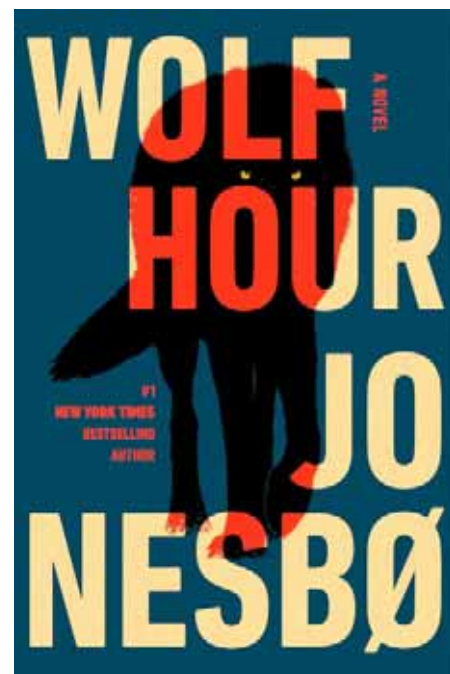
WOLF HOUR

by Jo Nesbo
Knopf, \$30.00, February
Standalone
Rating: A

The most successful Norwegian author returns with another probable award-winning gritty crime thriller. Noted for his legendary Nordic noir, he translates it to the streets of Minneapolis with his main characters immersed in their Norwegian heritage. Intricately plotted across two timelines, the 2016 crime spree will be investigated by a Norwegian true crime writer in 2022. He is intent on exploring the Tomas Gomez murders for an upcoming book. Gomez had known links to the city's violent drug cartel, and was given credit for several brutal murders. His motivations will be tied into the traumatic demise of his family. The main protagonist, homicide detective Bob Oz, is somewhat of a misfit. Although a brilliant investigator, he is an alcoholic and womanizer, who is thought to be a coward by fellow police, because he refuses to carry a gun. He is drawn into the case, while responding at the crime scene, where a known illegal arms dealer is shot by a long range sniper. Detective Oz becomes obsessed with the case as the body count rises.. all involving the elimination of the criminal element behind the illicit use of firearms. Somewhat disturbing, Oz at times sees in the killer, emotions that resonates with himself. Is he on the trail of a vigilante killer?

Nesbo explores the themes of the sorry state of gun control, grief, loneliness and the nuanced justification of violence and retribution. He drops bread crumbs along his narrative

providing the reader an opportunity to slowly piece together the truth much like a detective reconstructing a crime. His dark and bleak atmospheric descriptions along with frequent misdirections eloquently escalate the tension and intrigue. He once again uses a crime narrative to comment on the foibles of modern society. This layered dark mystery is a true page turner, and is equal to his best Harry Hole novels.



AN ORDINARY SORT OF EVIL

by Kelley Armstrong
Minotaur Books, \$29.00, May
Rip Through Time #5
Rating: B+

Bestselling author Kelley Armstrong returns with a psychologically layered historical mystery in her beloved Rip Through Time series. In this tale, the time travel element takes a back seat to delving into the nature of evil and

character development and entanglement. Modern-day Vancouver homicide detective Malory Atkinson has become fully invested into her new life in Victorian Scotland. By an inexplicable event she was transported from 2019 back to 1869 Edinburgh Scotland, and awoke confused and startled in the body of an eighteen year-old blond girl, Catriona Mitchell. Both were being strangled in the same location 150 years apart. Mallory now enjoys her expanding role, from housemaid to assistant to undertaker and medical examiner, Dr Duncan Gray, and actively aids in the investigation of crimes, along with his colleague, Detective Hugh McCreadie. Armstrong seamlessly supplies the necessary backstory, allowing this story to be enjoyed as a standalone - but, I personally would recommend reading them from the begging to appreciate the growth of the characters.

In this fifth adventure, Dr Gray and Mallory are summoned late at night to the home of a loyal patron, Lady Adler. While they assume there has been a crime, they find themselves in the midst of seance. A very popular occurrence in the nobility of everyday Edinburgh. It seems that a "ghost" has requested the presence of Dr. Gray, by name. It appears that the ghost is one of Lady Adler's maids, who has gone missing and requests Gray to investigate her murder.

Duncan, although skeptical of ghosts and seances, feels compelled to investigate her possible murder. He distinctly considers the possibility that the medium or her staff are implicated. As the list of suspects and motives grow, the investigation branches off into diverse paths. Along the way multiple ethical boundaries are uncovered in a multitude of characters, while realizing that "evil" is not always diabolical.

Kelley Armstrong weaves a delightful and entertaining yarn that provides extensive plot twists and turns, and yet escalates into a thrilling denouement. She retains the wonderful historical framework and setting of Victorian Scotland, and explores their societal limits in regards to women's rights and place, as well the tempered acceptance

of Dr. Duncan. Although well educated, he after all is black and a bastard son. It appears hard for them to merely accept his competence, humor and intelligence. This latest installment in her series is distinctly more nuanced, and more psychological relevant, while pushing forth the growth of her main protagonists. This wonderful series will appeal to aficionados of time-slip mysteries, like Deanna Rayburn's "Veronica Speedwell" novels.

ANTIHERO

by Gregg Hurwitz

Minotaur Books, February

Audible Version by Macmillan Audio

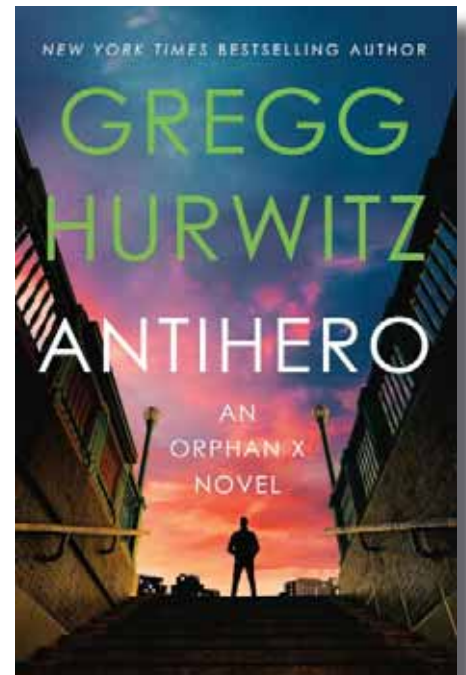
Narrated: Scott Brick

Duration: 13 hours

Orphan X #11

Rating: B+

He's back! Evan Smoak, aka Orphan X returns for a highly anticipated eleventh high-octane breakneck-paced thriller. Evan isn't a superhero, but rather a cross between James Bond and Robin Hood. He's a highly skilled assassin, but with a moral compass and a highly honed desire to retain his humanity. Evan was a twelve-year-old boy, rescued from the projects of East Baltimore, only to undergo a seven-year grueling training course under the tutelage of his handler, Jack Jones. Jack was the closest thing to a father and family he had ever known. This was part of a clandestine black ops, "Orphan Program," created by the Department of Defense. It created a cadre of assassins with unparalleled abilities that were both deniable and expendable. Each was sent out on a mission to destroy a "high-value target" without backup. As his trainer and a man of principle, Jack knew it was easy to train Evan to kill, but hard to have him retain his sense of humanity. Eventually, Evan wanted out after a decade of covert killing, no longer wishing to be a lethal weapon of the government. He embarked on his own program as a pro bono freelancer, helping those innocents, who found themselves in an impossible situation. He became known to his enemies, The Nowhere Man, remains on call 247 for the unfortunate,



awaiting a 1-855-2-NOWHERE call on his high-tech, untraceable, an indestructible Roam Zone phone.

In this action-packed eleventh adventure he is summoned to the ultra-high tech lair of Luke Devin. Devin is a world class influencer and problem-solver of epic proportions. However, he is presently in a psychotic break-down and summons Evan to his side to temporarily take over his duties of managing volatile world events. Evan has also just learned of a devastating situation. An innocent young woman, in the throes of a seizure on the New York subway system, had been kidnapped and brutally beaten and raped by a group of soulless thugs. He had to take over from Devin and at the same time find this victimized woman and seek out the animals to mete out justice. After finding the location of the woman with the aid of high tech surveillance equipment, he found it necessary to foster her physical and emotional care, and still abide by her highly principled values. He would've preferred to seek out these animals and kill them to prevent further victimization. She insisted that they should not be killed. Evan faced the dilemma of his life, completing his mission to eliminate their further potential threat and yet abide the wishes of the victim. All going against his usual methods fostered by

his rigid training. How to balance the scales of justice and avenge the victim without eliminating these animals. This exposes emotions and actions very foreign to his usual missions.

Hurwitz proves to be a masterful storyteller, as he uncouples this riveting barnburner of a thriller. This tale is exquisitely plotted with unexpected twists and deceptions, laced with cinematic fight scenes, brimming with violence and suspense. Each sequential tale of Orphan X reveals the emotional growth in this complicated and flawed man. This eleventh installment can certainly be enjoyed and devoured as a stand-alone, as Hurwitz seamlessly supplies any necessary backstory. Be warned, fellow readers... you will be forced to quench your thirst and gobble up the previous novels.

I personally switched back and forth between reading on my kindle and listening to the audio version. But, for the last half, I couldn't tear myself away from the audio, narrated by the amazing Scott Brick. Scott is a multi-award-winning narrator of over 800 books, with a background as an actor and writer. His wonderful voice inflections brought the multiple characters to life in the "theater of my mind." He is a natural storyteller with a mesmerizing quality that reflects the ongoing emotion and passion of the book.

BLACK SUN RISING

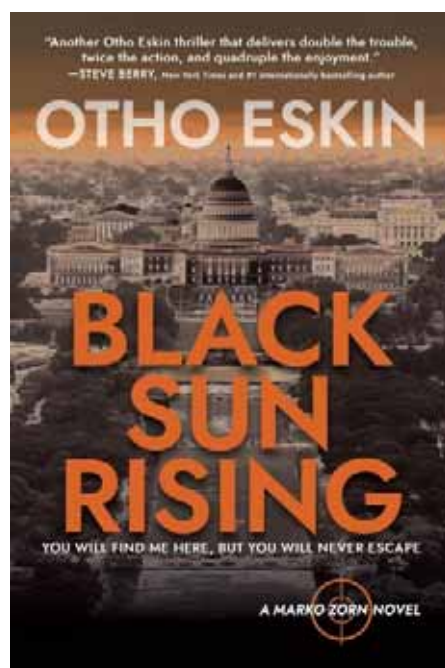
by Otho Eskin

Meridian Editions, \$35.95, June, 2025

Marko Zorn #4

Rating: B

This is the Fourth Installment in the ongoing series involving Washington, D.C., Detective Marko Zorn. This guilty pleasure can however be enjoyed as a standalone due to Eskin's seamless insertion of relevant backstory. This fast read is the equivalent of eating dessert before the entree. In the vein of Tom Clancy or David Baldacci, jump on this exhilarating roller coaster ride involving Nazi-like villains, wealthy morally compromised elites and secret networks. In the waning hours of World War II, Nazi scientist developed a highly potent



nerve gas that would've wreaked havoc. Fortunately it was never deployed.... But now a cache of those deadly cylinders were discovered by a Neo-Nazi group, calling themselves Black Sun. Twenty of those deadly payloads have been successfully smuggled into Washington, D.C. The plan is to assassinate the newly elected President of the United States during his inauguration and throw the world into chaos. The sardonic, intelligent, and unconventional Detective Marko Zorn has been charged with infiltrating this neo-Nazi group and thwart their catastrophic plans. Can Marko save the country from annihilation? I cannot help but envision Nelson DeMille's John Corey when I'm reading the tales of Marko Zorn.

Ortho Eskin's long history in the US Foreign Service lends this riveting tale of political corruption and conspiracy a masterful level of authenticity. Zorn will have to contend with the ominous "Bride of the Apocalypse" and the megalomaniacs behind the Black Sun movement. Eskin effortlessly weaves into the plot the historical relevance of the tumultuous ending days of World War II. This page turner is accomplished with short chapters, rapid pacing and witty dialogue, propelling this high stakes thriller with plot twists and escalating tension and intrigue.

The narrative hits home with rampant modern day concerns of domestic terrorism, far right extremism, and ideological radicalization. I look forward to the further action packed adventures of Detective Marko Zorn.

A KILLING BREATH

by Faye Snowden

Flame Tree Press, \$26.95, April

Rating: B+

Snowden returns with her third installment involving the flawed and conflicted homicide detective, Raven Burns. She has returned to police investigation in her home town of Byrd's Landing after leaving her position as homicide detective in New Orleans. She is the daughter of the notorious serial killer, Floyd Burns, who has committed suicide while in prison. She is convinced that a serial killer is stalking her home town, when her nephew is kidnapped, shortly after a doctor and police officer are killed. Unwelcome memories surface, as she recalls early childhood trauma involving her father in the brutal murder of a beloved elderly neighbor. She struggles with the possibility that she has inherited the violence of her father. He continues to live in her mind, offering his unwanted opinions at crucial points in her investigation. She has spent her entire life, attempting to make amends for the sins of her father.

Snowden effectively combines the swampy Southern atmosphere with psychological gothic noir. The environment wreaks of decay, corruption and violence. While pursuing justice our protagonist fears her own bloodline. Raven is haunted with resurfacing traumatic childhood memories. Snowden's dark noir style invades the dialogue and atmospheric setting, creating an escalating psychological tension. Raven continues to wrestle with the proposition of evil being inherited.

I sincerely look forward to the further tales of Raven Burns, as she fights against the legacy of violence.

Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith



A few books that got to me this time, though I must confess, while I'm always up for a PI yarn that pushes the Shamus Game around a little, I was left nonplussed by a few of these, and not always in a good way. Maybe it's just the luck of the draw. Or maybe it's me...

BROKEN KITE

by Timothy J. Lockhart

Stark House Press, \$15.95, January

A solid effort, for sure, but this second outing for Lockhart's thirty-something Chinese-American private eye Wendy Lu didn't quite grab me the way 2022's **UNLUCKY MONEY** did. Maybe the author used up all the really juicy cultural stuff in that first shot, but this sequel too often simply skims the surface. Oh, Wendy gripes about things like the predictable typographic choices associated with Chinese restaurants and like matters, and as an immigrant myself, it's always good to see things from another outsider's perspective, even the minor annoyances, but still...

Likewise, the promising scenario of the Virginia-based Wendy tracking down the missing kid sister of her domineering mother's friend — at her mother's insistence — fails to quite stick the landing. The young woman and recent immigrant, Wang Zheng, doesn't speak English very well, and seems to have had an, uh, interesting if limited string of career choices — a slippery slope that finds her sliding from waitress to stripper to online porn to masseuse before she disappears. Reluctant at first, but egged on by her mother, Wendy convinces her boss, Marcus Jefferson of Reliable Investigations, that it's a viable (ie: profitable) case worth taking on, and she gets to work. Not that I neces-

sarily want to wallow in endlessly juicy details of being a sex worker, but the dry coverage and sparse details flies by with surprising speed. Is that all there is?

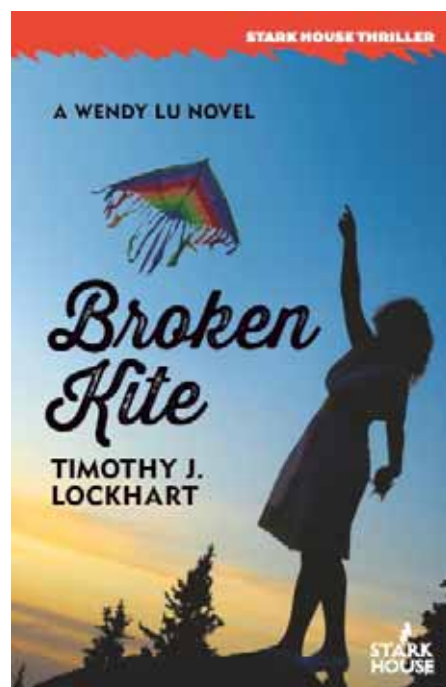
Sure, Wendy hums the immigrant song and dishes out plenty of family drama (Wendy's sister is depressed, mom's always on her back, etc.), but most of what makes Wendy interesting has more to do with her own personal backstory than her second-generation ethnic peeves. She served in the US Navy and did fine, but as a rookie cop, she screwed up big time. A momentary rookie mistake resulted in the death of her partner Bobby. Who was also her lover.

She pretty much hit rock bottom after that. Grief. Depression. Guilt. The feeling she's disgraced her family. Disappointed her parents. So she hit the booze, and it hit back. But she climbed out of that hole, cleaned herself up, went

to work for Marcus, and now serves in the Navy reserve on weekends. She tries to stay on the straight and narrow, and her journey to recovery has more to do with her than where her family came from.

That's because Wendy proves to be a stubborn and determined (if sometimes rash) investigator, betraying a surprising empathy at times, but also displaying a little too much eagerness for cutting corners — most notably an astonishing lack of reservations about breaking and entering. She does know it's illegal, even for private investigators, right?

Of course, the struggles to meet the always present demands and expectations of society and her much more conservative, tradition-bound family, of fighting to hold on to her own identity while trying to rewire it completely, are always there, but maybe it's time that Wendy breaks free. A third outing ought to be interesting.



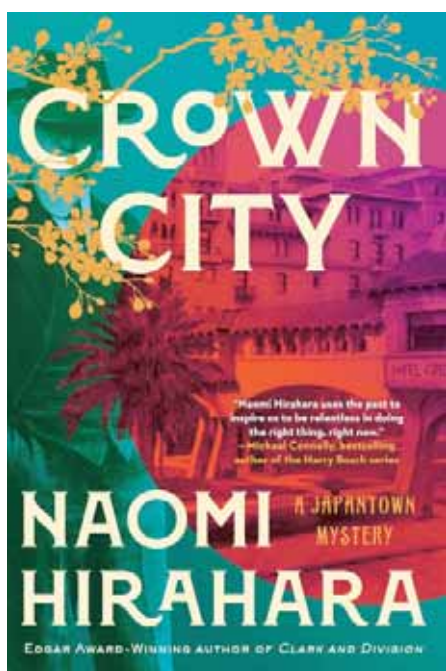
CROWN CITY

by Naomi Hirahara

Soho Crime, \$29.95, February

If **BROKEN KITE** served up the struggles of the immigrant experience from a modern day, second generation point-of-view, Naomi Hirahara's historical mystery **CROWN CITY** (the third in her Japantown series of novels) offers a far more immersive experience, dishing out a tasty history lesson we can all sink our teeth into.

Or at least it did for me, a relative newcomer to Southern California, who enjoyed a whole new perspective on nearby Pasadena — a nearby burg which has always seemed like a relatively sleepy, slightly snooty city. A few miles northeast of big, bad Los Angeles,



it's best known (to me, anyway) for its postcard-ready Victorian and art deco architecture, a few very cool bookstores, and a rose fetish.

But once upon a time, the "Crown City" was apparently a hot bed for Asian immigrants, although not all were treated equally. In the aftermath of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese immigrants who arrived for railroad and agricultural work were generally, if warily, welcomed (early Pasadena went relatively gaga over Japanese arts and architecture around the turn of the last century), while Chinese newcomers were less favorably received, at one point even restricted from the downtown area. The result was that the relationship between the two Asian communities was strained, to put it mildly.

Into this whirl of suspicions, racial tensions and changing times wanders Ryunosuke Wada. It's 1903 and eighteen-year-old "Ryui" (soon to be Americanized to "Louie") is just off the boat — literally. The orphaned son and apprentice of a celebrated Japanese master craftsman and architect, he's left it all behind in Yokohama, ready to make his own name as a carpenter, and hoping to cash in on the city's current penchant for all things Japanese. Initially he finds work as an art dealer's apprentice, and moves into a boarding house, sharing

the room with an erratic and moody photographer, another Japanese immigrant. Torajiro "Jack" Baba is older, has been in the States for a while and knows the ropes, but you know it ain't easy... and please don't ask him about Eddie, his *old* roommate.

Desperately homesick, Ryui clutches his *kobo*, a small chunk of wood, hand-polished over the years, as a sort of talisman, as he goes through soul-crushing culture shock. His "friendship" with his mercurial roommate is strained, at best, while his growing attraction to another boarder, Gigi, a white seamstress, only underscores how lonely and out of place he is. When he's the victim of what seems to be a racist attack on the street one night, he wonders if he's made the biggest mistake of his life.

And then a painting is stolen from Toshio Aoki's studio, a very successful local Japanese artist, who hires Ryui and Jack to find and retrieve it, despite their lack of any notable investigative skills. (Although carpenter "Louie" sure does know his trees, displaying an almost Sherlockian knowledge of various woods — his ligneous lust is right up there with that Nicola Griffin's sleuth Aud Torvingen).

That Ryui and Jack more or less succeed, despite their uneasy alliance and their amateur sleuth awkwardness, makes for a compelling and often eye-opening read, meticulously researched, populated with real historical figures (including the real-life force behind the still-standing and much loved Vroman's bookstore) and a kick-ass look at a significant era in SoCal (and American) history.

THE CLIENT THAT WASN'T THERE

by Christopher G. Moore
Heaven Lake Press, \$17.95, April

Moore allegedly stuck the fork in his long-running series character Vinny Calvino, a former New York City cop scrounging out a living in Bangkok as an ex-pat private eye, in 2020's wonderful **DANCE ME TO THE END OF TIME**, the seventeenth book in the

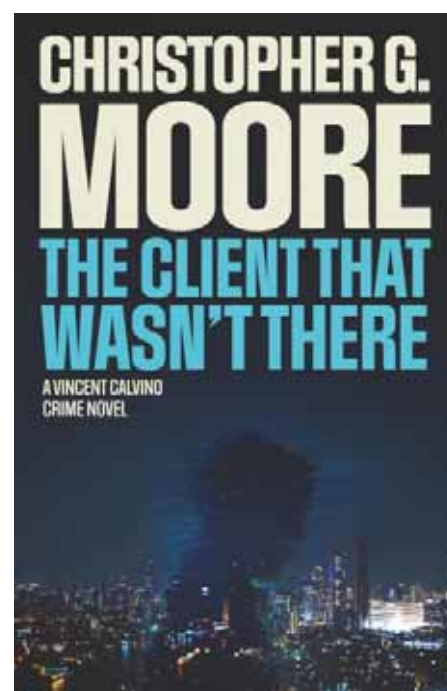
long-running series.

That was supposed to be the end of the series, but apparently Moore never consulted Calvino, because it turns out the world weary ex-pat wasn't quite ready to retire. Instead, he took a bold step into the near future with 2024's **DISTRICT #3**, a widely acclaimed deep dive into ego and celebrity and the high-tech power brokers that manipulate it, and us. And now he's back to the future once more, in book number nineteen, set in an AI-dominated hellscape that that's closer to William Gibson's 1984 cyberpunk classic **NECROMANCER** than Raymond Chandler's **THE BIG SLEEP**.

Not that Chandler's influence and spirit has gone too far:

"Girls in photonic fabric and tourists in mood-drift shorts moved along the narrow street, escorted by their own private weather of augmented overlays. Ads floated like dragonflies: discounts, promises, anonymized fantasies branded by corporate logos and TempleCloud karma credits."

It's all a bit bewildering at first, this vividly drawn, tech-driven Bangkok a mere ten years from now, where reality is only one option, and everyone's data (physical, emotional, even psychological) is sampled, spun and manipulated;



used to endlessly entice, appeal and mostly... *control*.

It's here where the defiantly old school Calvino, aided by world-weary old cop Colonel Pratt and weathered California ex-pat party boy McPhail, sets out to understand why his secretary Ratana's husband, Kiet, was killed. He was an Echo worker for some government ministry or another; one who'd grown increasingly disillusioned about the data he monitored and analyzed, and what it was being used for.

"Even when they tell you it's about loyalty or duty or national security, it's still an Excel sheet somewhere," he warned Ratana shortly before he achieved permanent room temperature. But he hadn't just shuffled off this mortal coil — his job and his very existence seems to be slowly erased.

The trio and Ratana are soon joined in their "ghost chase" by Nirán, an AI entity that attaches itself to Calvino, presenting herself as female and communicating with him through various pieces of tech (his left contact lens, a TV screen in a bar, a monitor in an underground bunker, etc.). Nirán's been built to collect, observe and analyze human emotional data, but not to understand and certainly not to get involved. Somehow, however, wires got crossed, and Nirán's developed a fatal flaw: she's beginning to feel.

But she's not the only rogue AI apple in the bunch. Another, more dangerous AI, Cael, trained on "profit curves and status ladders," has become aware of Nirán and seeks to erase her. *It? Whatever?*

Like I said, bewildering. The setting is vividly drawn, the jargon often hard to grasp and a reality overlaid by a ghostly layer of high-tech future tense. What started as a *Bladerunner*-type odyssey becomes something more; a troubling, philosophical exploration of consciousness and knowledge where the boundaries of self itself are open-sourced, and the notion of free choice is just another construct to be manipulated.

Much of the action, such as it is, is more cyber than punk; flitting ones and zeroes replacing fisticuffs and shootouts,

but for those willing to plug in, **THE CLIENT THAT WASN'T THERE** offers plenty of troublesome food for thought.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DETECTIVE

by Bob Reiss

Regalo Press, \$19.99, January

For those of you apprehensive about the future Moore's **THE CLIENT THAT WASN'T THERE** foresees, I'm not sure you'll be reassured by Bob Reiss' new one.

Still, he definitely shows some chutzpah in the convoluted but **ENGAGING THE IMPOSSIBLE DETECTIVE**, boldly linking Mark St. John, his celebrity NYC private eye, a specialist in "impossible crimes," to both the past (he's the grandson of legendary sleuth The Falcon (you've seen the movies), lives in a fancy Upper West Side brownstone (on Edgar Allan Poe Street, no less) with his small team of associates (just like Nero Wolfe, etc.) — and to a present that is slipping, slipping into the future.

Seems a precocious twelve-year-old, Abani Singh, has witnessed a murder, but nobody — not her protective mother, not the cops, not anybody — believes her. Mostly because she claims the man was a hit-and-run victim, killed by a car without a driver.

Even St. John is skeptical — until somebody tries to kill Abani.

There's an awful lot of world-building going on here (groundwork for a possible series?), as Reiss dutifully introduces a large cast, an unnecessary love triangle, numerous childhood flashbacks that add little, and a barrage of punny movie titles. Most of it is fun enough, but hardly essential.

Fortunately, Reiss eventually abandons the most of the gimmicky side-shows to focus on St. John and his investigation, which actually is worth following. It's a provocative son of a bitch, full of sometimes unexpected slam bang action and some provocative ideas about technology, featuring a dangerous cult, professional assassins, amateurish thugs, mental illness, terrorism, biological warfare and assorted government agencies. Also raised: actual



questions about morality, faith, the potential dangers (real or imagined) of AI, the nature of evil, and maybe, just maybe, God.

Not bad. Not bad at all, although I'm not sure where a sequel could possibly go after this.

THE HADACOL BOOGIE

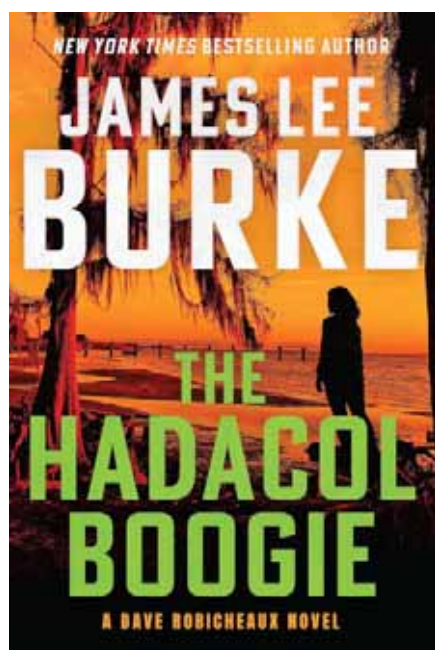
by James Lee Burke

Atlantic Crime, \$30.00, February

There's no AI, and something's definitely happening here, but I don't know what it is...

Burke's alcoholic police detective series character Dave Robicheaux doesn't touch a drop in this one, but you'd swear he was drunk off his ass, the way this confusing, cock-eyed yarn plays out. Oh, as always, the writing is to die for — evocative musings on mortality and morality and the heartbreaking beauty of Louisiana and its bayou country. Of course, the past is always part of Dave's story, but this time the past just will not shut up.

What the hell is going on? Burke has long successfully straddled the line between reality and the supernatural, and meandered back and forth from past and present in this game-changing series, but usually he manages to rein in his own excesses and throw readers a rope to cling to. This time, though,



what starts with the dumping of a body in Dave's backyard stretches into a long-winded fever dream that rounds up Joan of Arc, racist cops, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, Dave's dead parents, Jimmie Rodgers, dead soldiers, buried treasure, and Joan Baez's cover of *The Band's The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*, and tosses them all in the air, letting them fall where they may.

Plots rise and fall like the tide and much of it simply flows out to sea, some of it never to return, and the entire cast of characters: Dave, his private eye best bud Clete, his long-suffering boss Sheriff Helen, new rookie cop Valerie, a creepy handyman, a New Jersey gangster determined to bring gambling to Louisiana, a boyhood friend of Dave's turned pimp, Dave's adopted daughter Alafair (home for a visit) — none of them seem capable of answering a simple question without multiple digressions, meandering off topic into... I'm not even sure what at times. They all speak and often act like illogical, stubborn, defiant mush brain drunks at four in the morning, even those who haven't touched a drop. And Dave stopping more than a few times to speak directly to the reader, almost like he's challenging us to call him on this bullshit, doesn't help.

Oh, there's action. Fistfights, gun battles, chainsaws, Gatling guns, flame-throwers and a chopper battle right out

of a Vietnam flashback — they all make appearances, but none of it makes much sense. There don't seem to be any real good guys here — only varying degrees of stupidity and cruelty, even from the purported "good" guys. Sure, Dave and crew want to solve a murder, put a kibosh on a mob-planned casino, avenge an old wrong or two, maybe save the planet, and rescue a hostage, but their questionable motives and often dubious methods frequently seem incidental to any real plot or plan.

I love this series, and these characters, so vital and alive, so flawed and human, and the vividness of Burke's prose, poetic as a heart beat, makes me heartsick for a homeland I've never been to. This time, however, in this impressionistic misstep, he's swung and missed.

THE COMPLETE CASES OF JIM BENNETT, Vol. One

by Robert Martin

Popular Press, \$24.95, November 2022

Of course, not everything has to push envelopes or buttons — and after the last few books, I just wanted some good ol' meat-and-potatoes private eye stuff. And this collection of four novellas featuring Cleveland, Ohio PI Jim Bennett, who appeared in a string of pulp paperbacks and short stories in the forties and fifties, certainly fits that bill.

Mind you, you could argue Jim was a bit of a rabble rouser in detective fiction for his time. He was, of all things, an adult male in an adult relationship with an adult woman.

Thomas Dewey, Bart Spicer and James M. Fox are about the only other writers of the era I can think of who seemed to stray from the whole lone wolf/P.I. thing. The long-suffering Sandy Hollis served as Jim's secretary — and eventually his girlfriend — through most of the series; with their constant struggle to pick an actual wedding date a gag that stretched through much of the series. She was routinely described as long-legged, with a "generous mouth" and a few freckles on her short nose.

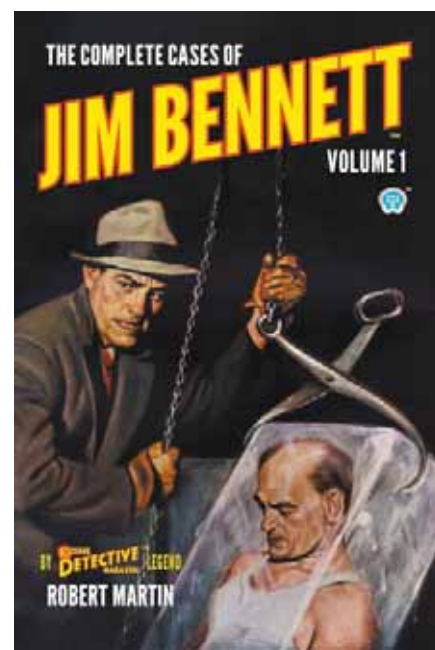
But Jim and Sandy aren't a thing quite yet, in this long-overdue col-

lection. She makes her debut in the third story, "Killers Can't Be Careless" (from 1946). You can see the growing attraction, though, and the easy-going camaraderie, but there are several other classy ladies in these tales to pique Jim's interest.

But then, we're not reinventing the wheel here. For those who dig this stuff, it's a familiar world, one where booze cures almost any pain, everybody smokes, steaks are thick and served medium rare, and men stand when a certain type of woman enters the room, even as most women are invariably identified, of course, by their hair colour.

But the stories are great; solid, fast-paced, and pleasingly Chanderlesque, given to perhaps a tad more characterization than was common for the time, but not shy about the private eye action, either. Jim is, to borrow a rather shopworn phrase, everything the respectable private detective should be. A company man, he's the head of the New York-based Cleveland branch of the American-International, Inc., and at ease in his own skin, partial to poker, hunting, trout fishing, hunting and dry martinis. He was kind and empathetic, a genuinely nice guy, but no cream puff.

He walks the walk, and talks the talk, and sometimes, that's all a reader wants.



Marilyn's Mystery Reads

Marilyn Brooks



FIRST DO NO HARM

by S. J. Rozan

Pegasus Crime, \$27.95, January

Lydia Chin & Bill Smith #16

There is a lot going on at River Valley Hospital in midtown Manhattan, and not all of it is good.

Lydia Chin's older brother Elliot is head of Emergency Medicine at the hospital, and a generous donor wants to make a substantial gift to honor him for saving his daughter's life a year earlier. However, there are two problems concerning the donation. The philanthropist wants his gift to be used for a new ER pavilion, with Elliot's name featured on it, but Dr. Chin doesn't want it. The hospital doesn't need a new wing, he tells Lydia and her partner Bill Smith; instead, he wants the money to be spent on things that are actually necessary.

There is a nurses' strike on the horizon, and Elliot would prefer that the money be spent on raises for them. Many nurses have been working double, even triple, shifts, and they are determined to get raises corresponding to their workload. Both the administration and the nurses' committee are standing firm in their positions—minimum raises offered by the River Valley's board vs. the promise of a prolonged strike by the nurses.

Dr. Chin calls his sister and her partner, asking for their help in investigating the murder of a hospital employee. Jordy Karazim is a diener (a morgue assistant) at the hospital. He is accused of killing Sophia Scott, a nurse, and although she was on the nurses' bargaining committee, she was totally against the strike and sided with the management on every issue. When Jordy finds her body in the hospital's

unofficial "nap room" in the basement, he's arrested.

He's quickly released due to a lack of physical evidence, but the detective in charge of the case still believes he committed the murder. Jordy is getting no support from his father or his brother, both physicians at the hospital, who believe he is guilty. There is intense animosity between Jordy and his family, so strong that Jordy has taken his late mother's maiden name rather than be connected to the DeBrenghs, father and son.

With the help of Lydia's cousin Linus and his girlfriend Trella, internet searchers extraordinaire, Lydia and Bill get more information about what's going on at the hospital—extortion,

administration; there's a lot they would like to stay hidden.

The mystery's title, **FIRST DO NO HARM**, is taken from the writings of Hippocrates. It's not from his famous oath but from another of his writings and requires the physician ensure their actions do not cause injury or harm to the patient. Somehow the hospital's administrators and management are able to disregard this part of patient care when it interferes with the bottom line.

S. J. Rozan has written another outstanding mystery in the Lydia Chin/Bill Smith series. Both the protagonists are believable, intelligent, and determined to get to the bottom of the murder of Sophia Scott and what is going on behind the scenes at River Valley Hospital.

ANTIHERO

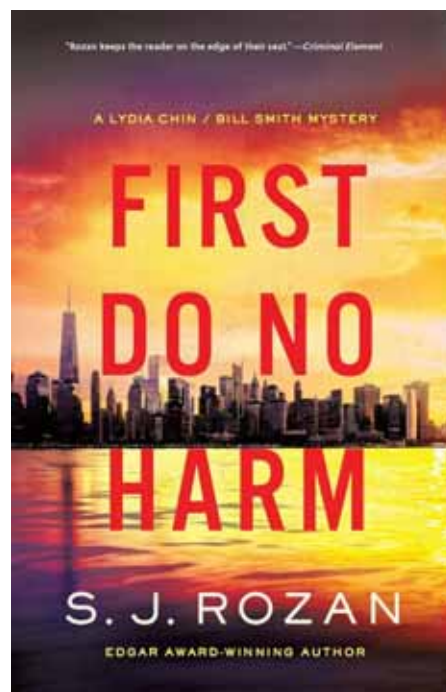
by Gregg Hurwitz

Minotaur, \$30.00, February

Orphan X #11

One of the issues that the author of a series must face is how to keep the books fresh and vibrant while not changing the basic characteristics of the protagonist. They must grow over the course of the novels but not so much that their essential personality is altered or that they do something so out of character that the reader can barely recognize them.

Gregg Hurwitz is a master storyteller, and in Orphan X's latest adventure, *Antihero*, we can see the hero facing major possible transformations in his behavior and ethics. This evolution does not come easily to him; indeed, he questions the need for change. But if he is to continue to be a realistic, evolving character, he needs to take stock of himself and his beliefs as portrayed by Hurwitz.



blackmail, extra-marital affairs, and more. No wonder Lydia and Bill's every move is thwarted by the River Valley

ANTIHERO opens with a frightening scene. A young man is brutally beaten by five men, losing part of his left arm in the process, in a case of mistaken identity. As the gang members get ready to kill him, a truck door opens and X, also known as The Nowhere Man or Evan Smoak, steps into the street. First he calls 911 and requests an ambulance be sent to the scene, saying that there are six wounded men needing assistance. Before the gangsters can really understand what is happening, X has incapacitated all of them so that not one of them is left standing.

The scene shifts to a New York City subway car where a young woman is having a seizure. She has a card with her to tell anyone who is helping her what her condition is and what to do, but the only person to notice her says some encouraging words and then leaves, and no one else either notices her condition or wants to get involved. The seizure takes over.

The woman who had wanted to help is now having guilt pangs. She's at the home at Luke Devine, an extremely powerful and wealthy man with major psychological issues, but when the woman tries to tell him about the subway incident, it comes out as a meaningless jumble.

Devine, whose mental state is compromised by alcohol and pills, would like to ignore what's happening, but somehow he can't. He manages to dial a phone number, and when it stops ringing a voice says, "Do you need my help?" **Enter The Nowhere Man.**

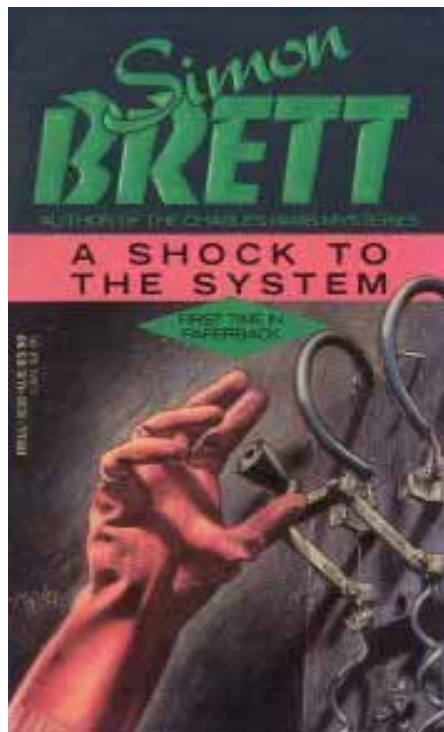
All these things connect to each other and to Orphan X. He is being pulled into several situations that are outside of his usual sphere. What happens when you save someone's life or get them out of a dangerous situation? Does your obligation end there, or are you bound to them forever? Can this shift in his thoughts lead to a different behavior model? Can Evan Smoak find a new morality and still be the man people turn to in extremis? And, how do his relations with the few people who are close to him, including his "foster" teenage daughter Joey, change in response to his changes?

ANTIHERO is a thought-provoking thriller with questions about responsibility and morality at its center. Gregg Hurwitz has crafted another fascinating novel in the Orphan X series.

Golden Oldie

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

by Simon Brett
1985



Is it as simple as it appears in a SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM to become a killer, even a serial killer? Can someone live thirty or more years as a law-abiding citizen only to have a seemingly insignificant action be the beginning of a series of murders? In this English novel published in 1984, the answer is yes.

Graham Marshall was, in his own mind and that of his proud parents', "a success." With a great deal of sacrifice on the latter's part, he was sent to a public school (what in the United States is a private school) and then to a university, all to put him on the road to a meaningful career.

He is now the assistant director of

personnel in a multi-national firm with a near certainty to be made director upon the upcoming retirement of the present director. But then it all falls apart as the job is given to a much younger man, new to the firm.

Stopping into a pub for a few drinks after receiving the bad news, Graham is on his way home when he's accosted by a vagrant asking for a quid. When the man demands money for the third time, Graham reacts angrily and hits the man with his umbrella, then throws the unconscious body into the river. After a few days of remorse and fear, Graham puts the death out of his mind...that is until he thinks about how much better his life would be without his wife. **As they say in mystery novels, the second murder is always easier than the first.**

At the beginning of the novel, the reader may feel some sympathy for Graham. He's been at the international oil company for nearly two decades, certainly long enough, in his mind, for him to prove his worth. His self-value is determined by his position there, to say nothing of the five thousand pounds he was expecting to receive on his promotion, and now he has to pretend in front of the other corporation members that he's fine with being passed over for a younger, less experienced man.

At home, there are more problems. He and his wife overspent on their house, anticipating Graham's rise in the company, and now they are very close to having major financial problems. Their two children are in public schools, his wife doesn't want to go out to work, and her mother, a difficult person at the best of times, has moved into their house almost full time. **There's only one way out of this situation, Graham thinks.**

The author has written a novel in which we know from the start who the villain is and why he is committing these murders, but readers nevertheless will be inexorably driven to read to the end. Graham's slow descent into becoming a serial killer, and his self-deluding rationale, make *A Shock to the System* a terrific read.

Simon Brett is the author of five detective series and many stand-alone novels. In 2014, Brett was chosen as the

recipient of the Cartier Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers' Association for "an outstanding body of work in crime fiction."

WITH A VENGEANCE

by Riley Sager
Dutton, \$30.00, June, 2025

Anna Matheson, the only surviving member of her family, is about to make her years-long plan come true. She will invite all those who are responsible for the deaths of her father, her brother, and her mother to take a trip on the train that belonged to her family for years, the Philadelphia Phoenix, and then take them to Chicago, where the FBI is waiting to arrest them. Anna has the proof of their crimes; now she has to make certain they all arrive in one piece.

Twelve years before **WITH A VENGEANCE** opens, America had just entered World War II. A train filled with young servicemen, accompanied by Anna's father Arthur, president of the Union Atlantic Railroad, is on its way to the camp where the soldiers will start their basic training. Tommy, Arthur's son and Anna's brother, is among them. **Then the Phoenix, the pride of the company, explodes; thirty-seven men are killed, including Tommy.**

Anna sends six people unsigned invitations to join her on the Philadelphia to Chicago journey, and whether because of curiosity or fear they all accept. Sal Lawrence was Arthur's personal secretary; Lt. Col. Jack Lapsford was in charge of giving contracts to various railroads; Kenneth Wentworth was Arthur's business rival; Herb Pulanski was head of the railroad's workforce; Edith Gerhardt was the Matheson family's housekeeper and nanny; and Judd Dodge was the builder of the train's engine.

One way or another, each was connected to the Mathesons, and each received a huge sum of money to help Kenneth Wentworth blow up the train and/or assist in the following coverup that sent Arthur to prison on the charge of deliberately engineering the explosion. While imprisoned, he is killed by another inmate, and then Mrs. Mathe-

son commits suicide.

The only person on Anna's list who does not show up at the train station is Kenneth Wentworth. His son Dante saw the invitation first and took it, having his own reasons to board the Phoenix.

Anna wants each passenger to confess why they did what they did; then she can rest assured that their admissions, in front of the entire group, will make certain that when they reach Chicago there will be no chance that they will escape justice. But apparently one of the invited "guests" has a different plan in mind, and within a few minutes of the Phoenix pulling out of the station, a passenger will be dead. And that is only the first death.

The trope of a mystery on a train is a familiar one to fans of crime fiction. It's the perfect setting for a "locked-door" mystery, when someone, in this novel's case Anna Matheson, has made certain that the train is not stopping before it reaches the Windy City and thus no one can leave. But sometimes even the best laid plans go awry.

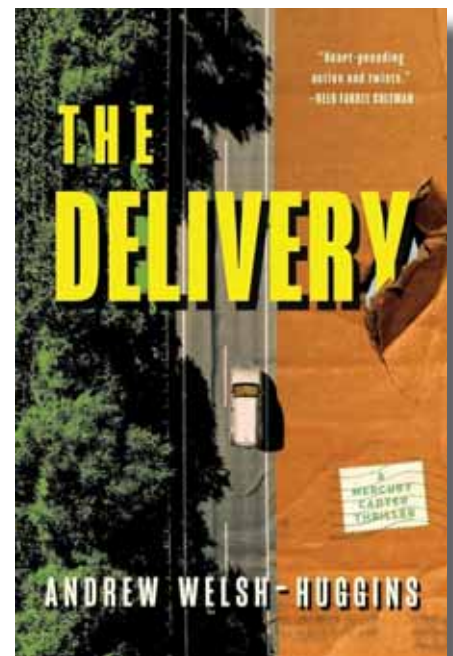
Riley Sager has written a spellbinding thriller, with a protagonist who believes she has every right to punish those who killed her brother and destroyed her family. The reader can understand Anna even while knowing that she's getting retribution the wrong way. She's sympathetic and believable, the passengers are greedy and/or evil, and **WITH A VENGEANCE** will keep you on edge until the final page.

THE DELIVERY

by Andrew Welsh-Huggins
Mysterious Press, \$26.95, March
Mercury Carter #2

When Mercury Carter promises to deliver a package, you may be sure it will arrive.

The novel opens with a heart-pounding scene. It's a rainy night in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and the former postal inspector is on his way to deliver the package slated for arrival the next day. **As he rounds a curve in the road he sees a car almost cut in half by a utility pole, and there's a woman, apparently**



unconscious, in the front seat.

Grabbing a crowbar from his car to force the driver's side door open, Merc is momentarily relieved when a van stops. The motorist gets out of his vehicle and demands that Merc get away from the damaged car, pointing a gun at him. Carter uses the only weapon at his disposal, the crowbar, and flings it across the space separating them, breaking the man's nose.

The man leaves, though not without threatening Merc, and Merc waits for the police to arrive to tell his story. Although the officer is suspicious, he has no reason to hold him, so Carter goes to a nearby motel for the night and the woman is taken to a local hospital. **The next morning, checking the many pockets in his utility vest, he finds a small ruby ring and a business card with a phone number and the word Help written on the back of the card.**

Merc calls the phone number on the card and asks to be connected to Jason Shulte; when a man answers he's told there's no one there by that name. Carter goes on to say that he got the name and number, along with a small ring, from a woman involved in an accident. The man is obviously distraught and emotional when he hears that, saying that the ring belongs to his daughter, and he invites Merc to his home so they can talk about the situation.

Visiting Valerie and Jim Watkins the next morning, Merc learns that the ring is Terri's, whom they haven't seen in eighteen months. She's addicted to drugs and wanted money from her parents, which they refused to give her. She stormed out of the restaurant where the three were eating, and that was the last time they saw her. **They hire Carter to find her.**

Then we meet Monica, her husband Randy, and Vickers, the man with whom she's having an affair. They're looking for a laptop that belongs to another man, now deceased. It's part of a scheme that will bring them money, more money than they've ever had. So they'll do anything to find it.

There is a lot going on in **THE DELIVERY**, including a number of subplots that tie together at the end, thanks to Merc. Since he had been a postal inspector, he had completed the training that all other federal officers do when faced with an emergency. Now he will have to use all his skills to help Valerie and Jim Watkins locate Terri and to foil the three people looking for the missing laptop.

Andrew Welsh-Huggins has created a terrific character in Mercury Carter. Carter is warm, dependable, and capable of handing himself in any situation. This is the second book in the series, and I'm looking forward to the third.

GUILT

by Keigo Higashino
Minotaur Books, \$29.00, April
Standalone

"I can't believe Mr. Shiraishi had any enemies." That is what Tokyo Homicide Detective Tsutomu Godai hears from everyone he interviews following the murder of Kensuke Shiraishi. Several people do mention, however, that lately the lawyer seemed preoccupied, not his usual cheerful self. Could that have anything to do with his death?

Shiraishi's body was found in the back seat of his car at the Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine, with the murder weapon still protruding from his abdomen. Since he obviously hadn't driven himself to the Shrine, the questions De-

tective Godai asks is who drove the car there and why? And why were his two phones taken (the police discovered that one was for business, the other personal) but not his wallet?

After four fruitless days of investigating, Godai and his assistant Detective Sergeant Nakamachi are sent to interview Tatsuro Kuraki, a man they found through telephone records of the lawyer's phone. Kuraki seems friendly and open, explaining that although he had spoken to the attorney on the phone, the two had never met. He refuses to tell the two detectives what they had talked about on the grounds that there are other people involved, but otherwise he answers their questions.

However, Godai notices a discrepancy when he asks Kuraki about his visits to Tokyo. The latter says he goes a few times a year to visit his son and doesn't go sightseeing, especially not to shrines or temples. But immediately before starting the conversation, the detective notices a votive strip hanging from a pillar just outside the room where they are talking; it shows the name of the Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine and a message wishing the visitor good fortune.

When Godai asks Kuraki about the votive strip, Kuraki denies going there, saying it was a gift from a friend who

had visited the shrine. When pressed, he says he can't remember who gave it to him, trying to make his denial more plausible by saying it "must be an age thing." Godai is not convinced by this, and his doubts about the story grow when upon leaving the house he notices a charm hanging from the rearview mirror in Kuraki's car; it's an amulet from the same shrine. Is that another thing that the man "forgot"?

Then, because nothing happens in a vacuum, a thirty-year-old case brings the detective much needed information. A sleazy financial planner, Shozo Haitani, had been murdered, stabbed to death, and a man named Junji Fukuma was arrested for the crime; four days later Fukuma was found hanging in his cell. Further investigation gives the police information about his family, and when doing due diligence Godai discovers that the Fukuma women own a restaurant in Tokyo that Kuraki visits every time he comes to Tokyo, ostensibly to see his son.

Even more interesting is that Fukuma's daughter Orie tells Godai she has given Kuraki various gifts from the shrine over the years in appreciation of the presents he has brought from his hometown. That makes Kuraki's "forgetfulness" of the giver of the votive strip and amulet even more unbelievable.

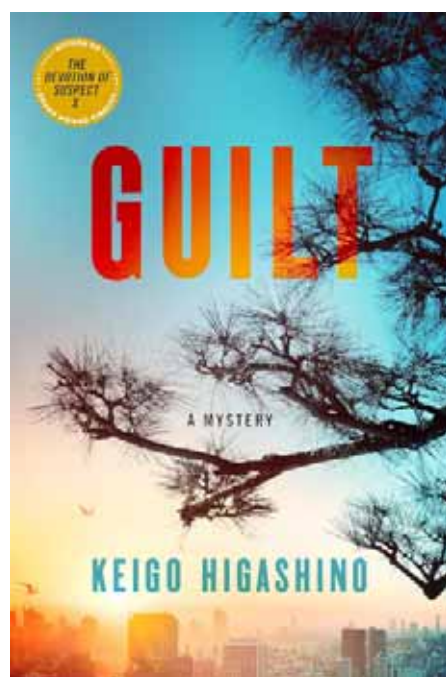
Keigo Higashino is one of the bestselling novelists in Japan. He has won the Edogawa Rampo Prize for best mystery and the Mystery Writers of Japan, Inc. Prize for best mystery, among other awards. His plots are outstanding, and the characters in **GUILT** are totally believable.

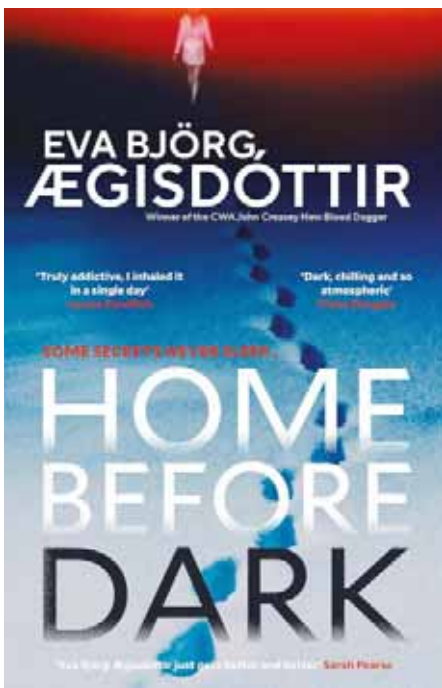
HOME BEFORE DARK

by Eva Björg Aegisdóttir
Orenda, \$26.99, November, 2025
Forbidden Island #6

Marsí and Stína are teenage sisters living with their parents in a small town in Iceland. One is pretty and popular, the other not-so-pretty and not as popular. It's Stína, the pretty, popular one, who disappears and is never found.

HOME BEFORE DARK is narrated





in turn by each sister. **The story opens in 1977, exactly ten years after Stína disappears and is presumed dead.** When Marsí returns home from work, there's a letter with her name on it inside her apartment. And although she hasn't received a letter from the writer in years, Marsí immediately knows who wrote it.

Ten years earlier a copy of *The Week*, a weekly Icelandic publication for teenagers and young adults, is delivered to their house. At first both girls read the new magazine voraciously, but then Stína outgrows it and Marsí has the future copies all to herself. One week a new column appears, one which immediately catches the younger girl's interest. It's called Penpals, and it offers interested readers the opportunity to write to other Icelandic youth from anywhere in the country.

Marsí is then thirteen, but she decides to tell her new penpal Burgur that she's sixteen and lists all her sister's hobbies and interests as her own. She also signs the letter with her sister's given name, Kristín, Stína being the common nickname for Kristín.

Finally, after a year of correspondence between Marsí and her penpal, they agree to get together. Burgur writes that he hasn't been "entirely

straight" with her and "really wants us to meet." Although she's apprehensive, Marsí also wants to meet, so they arrange to link up at a bridge near her home. She's obviously very excited, but somehow she falls asleep and misses the appointed time.

That same night, Stína's bloody jacket is found by the bridge, but Stína isn't there. She never returns home, and her body is never found. Ten years later, there is no solution to her disappearance.

Marsí goes to visit her parents, as she always does, on the anniversary of Stína's disappearance, although it's a date they would all like to forget. **And after all those years, everything comes together for her—the truth about her mother's past and her problems, the truth about her sister's last evening, and the truth about her own penpal.**

Eva Björg Aegisdóttir is another of the outstanding Icelandic mystery authors, a list that includes Ragnar Jónasson, Arnaldur Indridason, and Yrsa Sildurdardóttir. On the Crime Fiction site, it's noted that although Iceland has the lowest crime rate in the world, it has an amazing number of outstanding crime writers. Could it be that since there's so little violent crime in the country, talented writers have had to create their own literary versions of it?

HOME BEFORE DARK is a compelling mystery, with characters dealing with issues readers will understand even if they don't agree with the manner in which they're handled. Marsí and Stína are very recognizable as teenagers with their individual problems, some of which take them into dangerous territory.

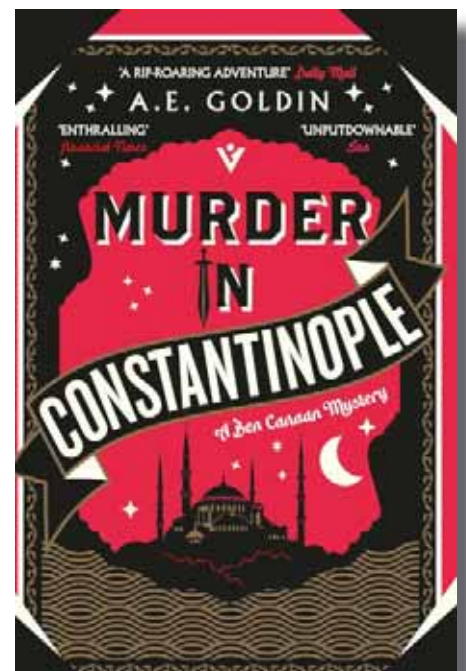
MURDER IN CONSTANTINOPLE
by A. E. Goldin
Pushkin Vertigo, \$18.95, October, 2025
Ben Canaan #1

It's London, 1854, and the continent is in the midst of the Crimean War. Britain has joined the alliance of France and the Ottoman Empire against the Russian Empire, but Ben

Canaan, son of a poor Jewish tailor in the city's East End, is too busy having a good time to think much about it. His family loves him, but they are aghast and embarrassed by his behavior and his non-observance of his religion's laws.

Then an incredible opportunity changes Ben's life. He and his father are asked to make a suit for Viscount Palmerston, Home Secretary of the United Kingdom, and after Mr. Canaan measures the viscount they are loaned one of his jackets to use as a model for the new suit. When Ben and his father return home, Ben brings the jacket down to their workroom (the basement) and feeling something stiff in one of the pockets, he takes an envelope out of it. The temptation is too great to resist, so Ben carefully opens the envelope. He was obviously given this jacket in error.

The photo inside the envelope takes Ben's breath away. It's a daguerrotype of a beautiful woman smiling at the camera, and it's dated JUNE 1854. He rushes to his attic room and removes a tin box from under a floorboard. There he compares the daguerrotype he took from Palmerston's jacket to one that's been hidden in the box. It's the same woman without question, and the caption beneath the image reads Elizabeth.



Ben thinks back to their meeting three years earlier. Elizabeth de Varney had approached him, and before long a passionate love affair began. But one morning Ben awoke to find himself alone; Elizabeth had left without a word or a note of explanation. Six months later he received a letter from a man claiming to be Elizabeth's father saying that he understood that his daughter and Ben had been together and that he regretted to inform Ben that Elizabeth had passed away from smallpox.

But that letter was dated March 1852, two years earlier than the daguerrotype from Palmerston's jacket. Even stranger, there's a note on the back of the more recent daguerrotype from someone named Heathcote. **It reads "The White Death—more to come—trust no one."**

That is the beginning of Ben's search for Elizabeth that will take him over the water on a British steamship headed to Constantinople. He'll contend with seasickness and barely edible food on the HMS Midas, mysterious deaths when he gets to the Turkish capital, and police who don't believe his reason for being in Constantinople. The more he looks into Elizabeth's life and alleged death, the greater the danger he finds himself in.

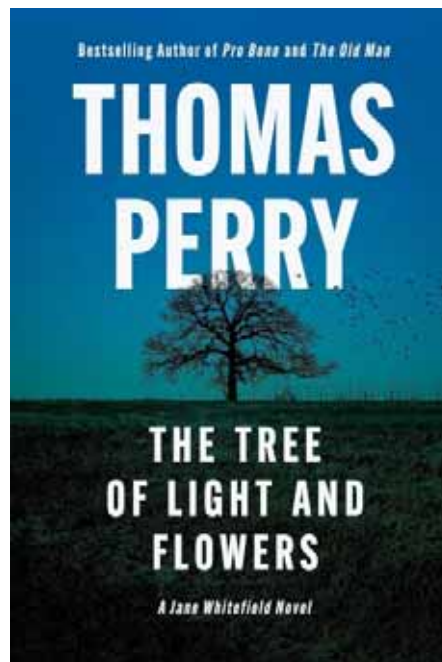
MURDER IN CONSTANTINOPLE is a fascinating read with its mix of history, mystery, and religion. Ben Canaan is a terrific character, and I am looking forward to the second book in the series that will be published later this year.

THE TREE OF LIGHT AND FLOWERS

by Thomas Perry

Mysterious Press, \$27.95, March
Jane Whitefield #10

When a series featuring a favorite character ends, it's a sad time for readers who have followed the protagonist through several novels. It becomes truly sad when it turns out that it's the author's last book. **When I read THE TREE OF LIGHT AND FLOWERS featuring Jane Whitefield, which was**



published shortly after Thomas Perry died in September, I felt as if I had lost two friends, not just one.

Over a thirty-one year period, Perry published ten books that tell Jane's story as a runner. She is a member of the Wolf Clan, Seneca Tribe, and as such has absorbed the knowledge of her ancestors and their ways of making people "disappear." For Jane, this means that when she is approached by an innocent person who is being stalked and in danger of being killed, she must find a way to invent a new persona for that individual and help them leave their old life and begin a new one.

Jane's own life is now more complicated than it was when she began aiding people. She's married with an infant daughter, and she's basically promised her husband Carey that she is done with her dangerous previous life. But somehow people in need of her assistance always locate her.

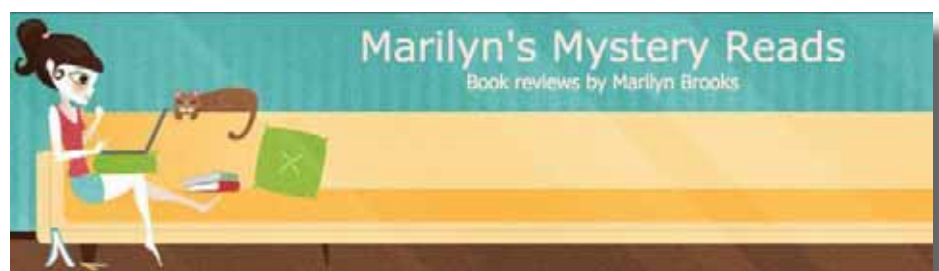
A young Seneca woman, Clare

Markham, has come from Oklahoma to find Jane. She is running from the police, fleeing a charge of murder. She had been sexually assaulted and stabbed her attacker with his own knife, but before he died he told the authorities that she had propositioned him and that is what they believe. Because she had heard of Jane from her grandmother, she took a very circuitous route via a series of busses and made her way to Buffalo, New York, Jane's home.

Jane is drawn to Clare, gives her the name Katie Barnes, and takes her home to act as nanny for baby May until she can decide on a permanent solution. That works out well and probably would have eased the way for Jane to make Katie a person with a complete set of papers to prove her identity but for one additional problem. **A group of Russian agents whom Jane had outwitted four years earlier has just discovered that, contrary to what they believed, she is still alive, and thus they have returned to the United States to kill her.**

Part of the enjoyment in reading Jane Whitefield novels is following the intricate planning that she must do to make certain that anyone who comes to her for help has what they need to become a "new person." In Katie's case, because she is a teenager, she'll need to enroll in school, have records in her new name from her former (fictitious) school, a new family history, and more in a similar vein. Jane has done this before, with help from friends but not with a baby and a group of Russian gangsters tracking her down.

Thomas Perry was a gifted writer whose protagonists (not only Jane Whitefield but many others) were believable and realistic. He left a huge legacy behind him—he will be missed by his many readers.



Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



DEPARTURE 37

by Scott Carson

Atria, \$28.99, August, 2025

Rating: B+

Discerning readers know that Scott Carson is an alias of Michael Koryta, who uses the pseudonym when he pens supernatural thrillers like 2020's **THE CHILL**, 2021's **WHERE THEY WAIT**, and 2024's **LOST MAN'S LANE**. In his latest Scott Carson joint, Koryta goes full Twilight Zone, delivering a ghost story flavored by the science fiction trope of time travel, which spans five decades, stretching across the years between the beginning of the Cold War and today. To give you an idea of the territory it covers, it begins in the present with aviators receiving phone calls from loved ones, some of whom have been dead for years, warning them off taking to the skies, and ends with a B52 launched during the October 1962 Missile crisis speeding towards modern day Cuba to drop an atomic payload. It's a daring concept that Carson executes with great skill and panache, delivering a truly satisfying read.

THE LIST

by Steve Berry

Grand Central, \$29.00, July 2025

Rating: B+

THE LIST is actually a Steve Berry "trunk novel," a book he was inspired to write by the success of John Grisham's blockbuster **THE FIRM**, but which he felt at the time was not ready to be submitted to a publisher. Having revisited and improved the manuscript during the dark days of the COVID-19 lockdown (taking advantage of a skill set which had expanded considerably

during the three decades that had ensued), Berry decided the time was ripe for **THE LIST** to finally see the light of day. I thoroughly enjoyed the result.

Within, Berry posits a paper company (the Southern Republic Pulp and Paper Company of Concord, Georgia) that takes the concept of self-insurance to an unfortunate extreme; the company's Board, acting like one of the so-called "Death Panels" so feared by conservative politicians, authorizes the literal termination of employees and retirees, controlling costs by eliminating those with especially heavy medical expenses. Their discussions about which employees will face elimination are on the whole cold and calculating, and scarily impersonal, recalling the iconic phrase from *The Godfather*: "It's not personal Sonny. It's strictly business." The plot resonated with this reader, as I once worked for a paper concern during the

time in which the book is set, and have also worked for any number of companies who I could easily see choosing profit over people every time.

AFTER THAT, THE DARK

by Andrew Klavan

Mysterious Press, \$26.95, October 2025

Rating: B+

The fifth Cameron Winter novel finds the ex-spy turned English professor investigating the strange case of one Owen McKay, an ordinary man who suddenly turned murderous, killing his wife and small child. That case seems open and shut; what intrigues Winter are the facts surrounding McKay's demise immediately after his arrest, purportedly by suicide, with a device he somehow snuck in on his person. McKay looks into things, finding troubling information connecting the tragedy to other incidents, as well as to his past life as an assassin, working for the man he calls The Recruiter.

This was my first Klavan in quite a while, and I had a good time with it. Klavan is a master of pacing, and of getting you to keep turning the pages. The addition of snippets of Winter's regular sessions with psychiatrist Margaret Whitaker, a subplot involving a new love interest for Winter, and glimpses into the dog-eat-dog world of Academia that Winter currently struggles with in his second career add spice to an already compelling narrative.

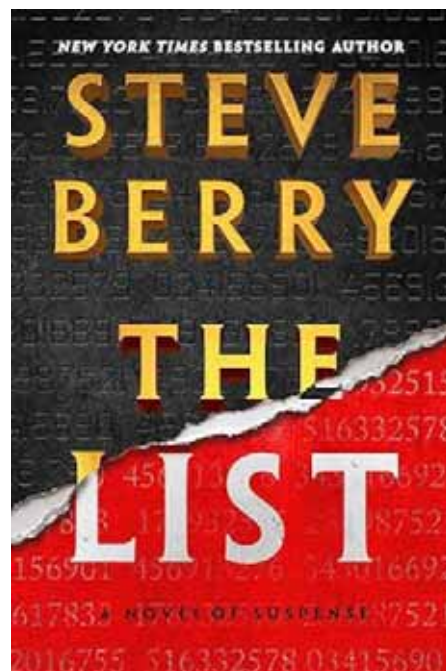
DOUBLE OR NOTHING

by Kim Sherwood

William Morrow, \$30.00, April, 2023

Rating: B

Authorized by Ian Fleming's estate,



this book, the first of a trilogy, is an attempt to update and expand the Bond Mythos, showing Bond working with a very diverse group of “Double O” agents to protect the United Kingdom against more modern threats. The only problem is that the seasoned agent disappeared while on assignment some months prior to the start of this story, leaving his colleagues to soldier on alone against the forces of evil, even as they scour the earth for their friend and mentor.

I believe that Sherwood “understood the assignment” given to her by the Fleming Estate, delivering a book that is respectful of what came before, even as it attempts to shift the terrain a bit. Having enjoyed this effort, I will be seeking out the next book in the series, 2024’s **A SPY LIKE ME**, and the upcoming **HURRICANE ROOM**, scheduled for May of this year.

It feels logical to me to present the next few books in pairs. The first duo is:

IN TOO DEEP

and

EXIT STRATEGY

by Lee Child and Andrew Child
Putnam, 2024/2025, \$30.00/\$30.00

Rating: IN TOO DEEP B-

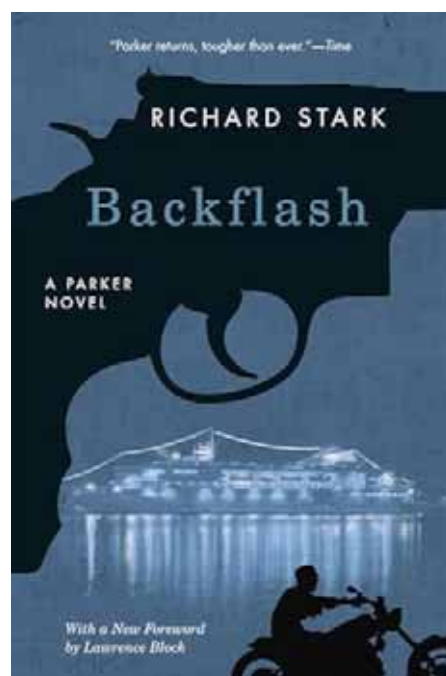
Rating: EXIT STRATEGY B+

These are Reacher numbers 29 and 30 respectively, number 31 is scheduled to be published in October 2026. Next year marks the 30th anniversary of Lee Child’s first Reacher book, the classic **THE KILLING FLOOR**. So, by now, you probably know where you stand in regard to this legendary character. For me, he is an old reliable, especially since there are no new Travis McGee or Repairman Jack books anymore. Reacher books are “review proof” at this date, so the only logical analysis of new books lies in how they compare to the other books in the series.

Amazon summarizes **IN TOO DEEP** as “Reacher awakens captive but his enemies make a mistake,” and **EXIT STRATEGY** as “Mysterious note draws Reacher into danger.” Both descriptions are accurate, if general, as far as that goes. IMHO, **EXIT STRATEGY** is the

superior book, more in keeping with the overall quality of the series; I lost interest in **DEEP** early on, as it meanders a bit too much for my liking. In the end, I am generally pleased with the quality of the books since the brothers Child began collaborating back in 2020, but hope for books more like **EXIT** and less like **DEEP**.

The second set of books comes from the fertile mind of the late Donald E. Westlake. They also happen to be installments in long running series. They are:



BACKFLASH

by Richard Stark (Donald E. Westlake)
Mysterious Press, 1998, \$25.00

And

WATCH YOUR BACK!

By Donald E. Westlake
Mysterious Press, April 2005, 320 pages,
\$24.95

Rating: BACKFLASH B+

Rating: WATCH YOUR BACK B+

I am SO grateful for the existence of Donald E. Westlake, and doubly grateful that I still have yet to read books in his quite considerable canon. He was a true talent, one of a kind.

BACKFLASH is the 18th book (out of 24) in the Parker series, the second Westlake (writing as Richard Stark) delivered after returning from a 23-year hiatus from the series. Within, Parker and his current crew attempt to loot a night’s take from a transplanted riverboat casino operating on the Hudson River. Absolutely terrific reading. Also, note what Westlake did with the first five titles after the hiatus: **COMEBACK** was followed by **BACKFLASH**, which was followed by **FLASHFIRE**, which was followed by **FIREBREAK**, ultimately followed by **BREAKOUT**.

WATCH YOUR BACK is the 13th book in Westlake’s Dortmunder series, which eventually totaled 15. Here, Dortmunder again teams with Andy Kelp, Stan Murch (and Murch’s Mom), and Tiny Butcher, and other assorted, very colorful individuals, to strip a millionaire’s apartment of numerous treasures. They also have to resolve some sticky issues which confront the current management of AJ’s, the local dive where they have their initial meets, which open every novel.

Although both deal with heists, **WATCH YOUR BACK** is humorous and light, and **BACKFLASH** is as serious as a heart attack. Viewed as a pair, they stand as a tribute to Westlake’s great range and his sheer talent, bravura performances both.

I link the next two books because of their covert commentary on the Internet and modern existence.

SUCH A BAD INFLUENCE

By Olivia Meunter
Quirk Books, June 2024, 331 pages,
\$24.99

Rating: B

Hazel Davis has mixed feelings about her youth, as she never received the proper attention from her mother, who spent most of her time developing her much younger daughter (by ten years) into an Internet superstar. Eve has reached the top of the food chain after 8 years as an influencer, and their parasit-

ic mother feels she most devote all her time to promoting the family brand. Hazel has gotten used to feeling left out and being ignored.

Things change when Eve simply vanishes shortly after creating some disturbing content. Theories abound, some seeing it as a sabbatical of sorts, others claiming that something bad has happened to their idol. Hazel, off pursuing her own path, is drawn back into her family's orbit, dedicating herself to discovering her sister's whereabouts. Her investigations reveal some very dark secrets about her sister's life as a celebrity, but also provide chilling insights into her relationship with her family.

Muentner's first novel is quite entertaining, both for its compelling story, and for its covert commentary on today's Internet culture. It takes a long hard look at the meaning of what it is to be "successful," while also examining the personal cost of pursuing such goals.

YOURS ALWAYS

By Corrine Sullivan

Thomas & Mercer, April 2026, \$16.99

Rating: B

There are several points of view in Sullivan's second novel. We first meet Fuller Townsend, a spoiled rich kid just emerging from a failed relationship, who reconnects with an ex-girlfriend, Talia Danvers. Talia, a machine learning engineer, working on a cutting-edge dating app, hopes to rekindle her romance with Townsend, who appears to have outgrown the flaws she made her leave him previously. But, people in their orbit have some problems with her plans. For starters, there's Amanda Reade, Fuller's most recent ex, who disappears shortly after sending him some disturbing texts. Amanda's sister Kaitlyn suspects that Fuller might be behind Amanda's disappearance, and sets out to confirm her suspicions. Another charter member of the I hate Fuller Club is Talia's colleague Meera Ratnam, who goes out of her way to dissuade Talia from renewing her spark with Fuller. Sound complicated? Well yes, it is, but that's why **YOURS ALWAYS** holds your attention throughout. The narrators

are anything but reliable, and the plot is anything but predictable. A nice, solid, twisty tale.

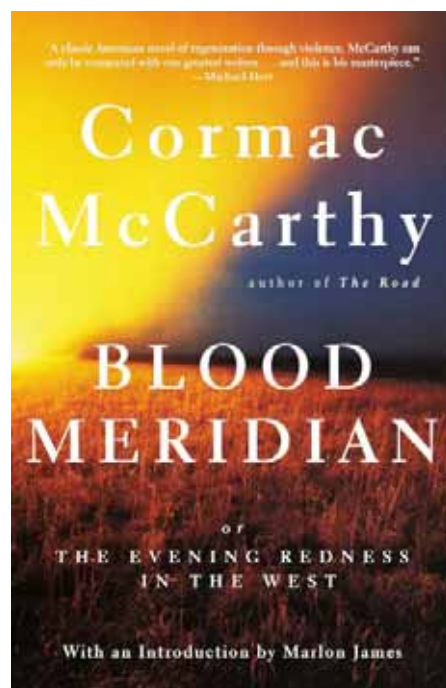
The fourth pairing is simply because I made an error in reading two depressing books in a row.

BLOOD MERIDIAN, or THE EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST

By Cormac McCarthy

Random House, 1985, 337 pages, \$17.95

Rating: BLOOD MERIDIAN: A



BLOOD MERIDIAN is a truly stunning piece of work, a subversive Western thriller that can easily be read as a crime novel; I kept thinking about books like **HELTHER SKELTER** and **IN COLD BLOOD**, in that all these books explore themes of senseless carnage, primordial violence, and nihilism in great detail, shedding light on things most of us would rather ignore.

The book's ostensible antagonist is "The Kid," fourteen years old at the start of the novel, and forty-five when he meets his demise, a young man whose main talent is survival, doing whatever he needs to do to stay alive. After some initial drifting, he first joins an American militia intent on invading

Mexico. After that group is wiped out by Comanches, he allies with the Glanton Gang, who contract with Mexican authorities to hunt Apache for their scalps. The gang looks to two men for leadership, John Joel Glanton and the unfathomable giant Judge Holden. These two are evil and amoral, and lead their men down paths of almost inconceivable depravity and wickedness.

BLOOD MERIDIAN deserves every iota of the attention and praise it has garnered over the last forty years. Dark, unrelenting, merciless, it chronicles man's inhumanity to man, exploring perverse depths of evil. McCarthy would go on to explore similar themes in bleak novels such as the classic **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN**, and **THE ROAD**, but never again so successfully and disturbingly.

DOGS

By C. Mallon

Scribner, August 2025, \$26.99

Rating: DOGS: B+

One thing I know for sure is that no one should read **DOGS** after reading **BLOOD MERIDIAN**, at least not if they want to try to maintain a happy outlook on life. Both are dark, depressing, and harrowing; but where **BLOOD MERIDIAN** is bloody and bold and epic in scope, **DOGS** is almost suffocatingly intimate, and brooding. It focuses on a few hours in a troubled young man's life, as he goes riding with friends in a beat-up old car with a quirky history. During their evening together, the young narrator Hal reflects on life, his sad backstory, his friends, his seedy home town (called Carbon), all the while trying and failing to find a trace of hope in his dismal existence. The events of their brief sojourn lead to a fracturing of their group, and, ultimately, to tragedy.

This dark little gem reads like a true crime novel, in that you just know bad things are in the offing, but can do nothing but watch from a distance. Hal's internal soliloquy is sad, and moving; his futile attempts to make sense of his life, and his utter impotence brought to mind Benji Compton's sad ramblings in Faulkner's **THE SOUND AND THE**

FURY. Paraphrasing the Bard, Hal is a damaged innocent, telling a tale of sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing.

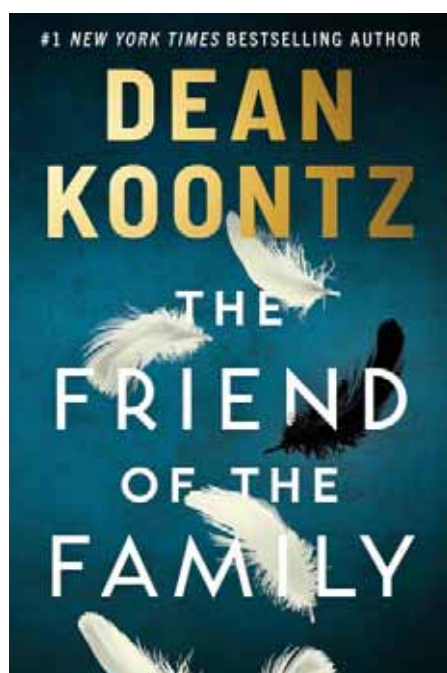
Finally, two non-thrillers (although both certainly exploit tropes and structural elements of thrillers), which I recommend for your enjoyment, not only for their sheer readability, but for reminding me what hooked me on reading in the first place.

THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

By Dean Koontz

Thomas & Mercer, January, \$28.99

Rating: THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY: B+



The first, Dean Koontz's **THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY**, is more recent, published in the early weeks of 2026. Koontz expertly channels Charles Dickens in this tale, set in California in the 1930s, chronicling the trials, travels, travails and triumphs of Alida, a young lady, fair of face, but otherwise horribly deformed. Once exhibited in a freak show, she eventually finds happiness after she is rescued from her tormentors by a wealthy Hollywood power couple.

It's a modern fairy tale, by turns dark and despairing, then sentimental and uplifting. I have to admit I've wearied of Koontz's "too good to be true" heroes and heroines over the years, but found the big hearted Alida a compelling antagonist, one any reader can root for.

The second, **RIDERS**, a big, big book whose primary focus is the competitive world of international show jumping, was published WAY back in 1985. This reading experience was retro in a big way for me. While later printings are readily available online, I got my copy from my local library, through our county's inter-library loan system, something I have not done in years.



Jilly Cooper

RIDERS

By Jilly Cooper

Arlington Books, January 1985

Rating: RIDERS: B+

RIDERS (the initial book in Cooper's popular Rutshire Chronicles) was considered one of the first "Bonkbusters," tawdry novels that focused primarily on sex, scandal, and glamorous high stakes lifestyles. I enjoyed the book's good humor, the glimpses it gave into horsemanship and the world of show jumping, and its general, good-natured bawdiness. If you find that you've been missing old TV shows like *Dynasty* or *Dallas*, or novels from the likes of Jacqueline Susann, Harold Robbins, Jackie Collins, or Sidney Sheldon, **RIDERS** definitely falls within your wheelhouse.

On George's Nightstand

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

SOFTLY CALLS THE DEVIL

Chris Blake

DARK COUNTRY

Adam Plantinga

DIE FAMOUS

Michael Koryta

THE SECRETS WE HIDE

Karin Slaughter

THE BUTCHER'S LEGACY

Alaina Urquart

THE PINACLE

Abir Mukherjee

THE ARTFUL DODGE

Karen Odden

BACKTRACK

Marc Cameron

RUBY FALLS

Gin Phillips

Already read for the next issue --

THROW AWAY THE KEY

Jason M. Hough

PAYBACK

Lawrence Light

ICARUS 17

Charles Cumming

CODEBREAKERS

Adam Plantinga

NOT A WORD

Linwood Barclay

ONE GOOD EYE

Kevin Wade

NO SONG FOR THE DEAD

Jussi Adler-Olsen

FIGHTING EDGE

Margaret Mizushima

A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES

Jonathan Ames

DECEPTION

Alan Parks

The Cozy - Traditional *Mystery Cafe'*

Robin Agnew Reviews



THE PIE AND MASH DETECTIVE AGENCY

By J.D. Brinkworth
Berkley, \$19, March
Debut/paperback original
Rating: A

This charming, funny book, set in present day London, follows the adventures of Jane Pye and Simon Mash, a dating couple who decide to take a detective class at their local learning center. (To a US reader, this will translate as a community college course.) Jane is between jobs, aka unemployed, and while Simon is working, he's still willing to go along with Jane on her lark, which started with a book on detection that proved only too inspiring.

As a final assignment, the teacher (and working private eye) Gavin, assigns each team in the class a case to be solved. He gives the only unsolved case to Jane and Simon, and, as it later becomes clear, it's one he himself has been frustrated by for decades. Jane and Simon plunge right in, going to interview the witness, Dev, whose girlfriend has vanished. The only problem is that the police don't believe she ever exist-

ed as Dev doesn't have a photo of her, she doesn't seem to be a voter, be on National Health, or have a passport or driver's license.

Jane and Simon do the best they can though, but as they are new to the job, they have yet to become very proficient at detection. However, Jane finds the sleuthing life preferable to the grind of the series of job interviews she has with a gambling app company. The pair's interview with Dev and a later stakeout in the woods yields few results, as does a meeting with a local ghosthunter. In an extremely troubling pattern, it turns out that Dev's missing girlfriend has the same name (and appearance) as several other women who have disappeared throughout the decades. These mystery women would form an attachment, then vanish, never be seen again.

The dead ends only make Jane ever

more determined to crack the case, and, to the astonishment of Gavin, she and Simon edge ever closer to a solution. Working a parallel path, he never seriously expected the newbies to uncover the answer to the mystery.

That solution, when it comes, is achieved through genuine detective work and keen deduction on Jane's part, with the story adding on delightful sidebar characters, like the retired policeman, the goth librarian, Simon's mum and her cougar pals, and even Dev himself, who seems to ultimately be getting over his presumed breakup with the missing woman.

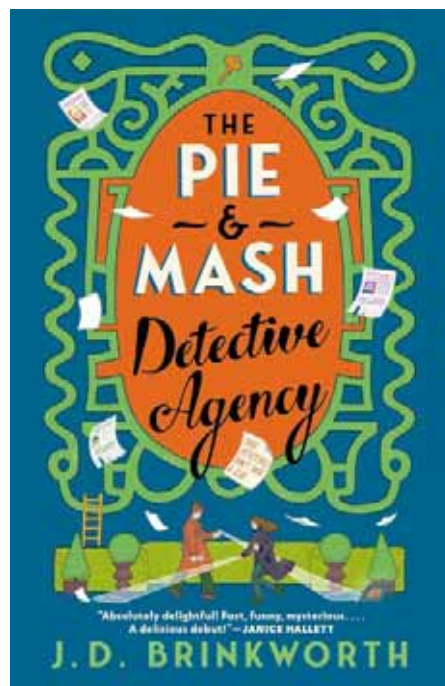
This is more of a detection/adventure story than a classic murder mystery (there's no murder for one thing) as well as a humorous take on the private eye novel, millennial style. I came to be quite fond of Jane and Simon, fretting about their relationship, and rooting for them to beat Gavin to the solution. Thankfully, all ends well in Adventureland, with a nice set up for the next installment. I can only imagine Jane and Simon will get better at detecting with time – but not too much better. I find watching them try to figure things out like us regular folks is way more relatable!

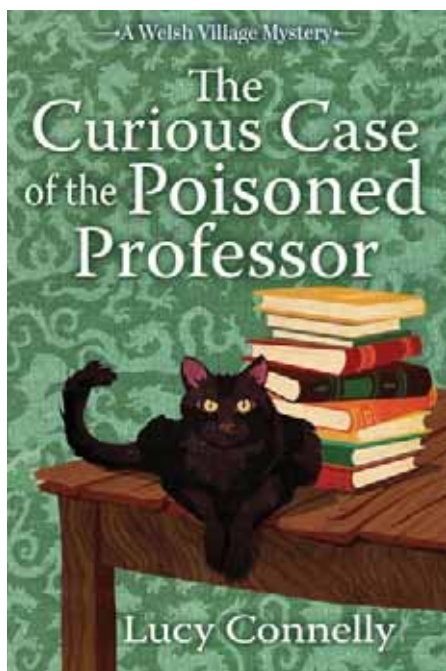
THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE POISONED PROFESSOR

By Lucy Connelly
Crooked Lane, \$29.99, February
Series debut
Rating: B+

You can't help devouring Lucy Connelly's yummy books like a really good bar of chocolate. This first installment of her new series finds the central character, former journalist Dr. Gwen Griffiths, returning to Wales to become a professor at the very place where she attended university. After the layoffs and contractions endured by newspaper staff everywhere, she's certain she's found a secure berth at a new place when her old friend Carolyn, now the dean, recruits Gwen to run the journalism department with a real-world edge.

It's almost a fairy tale situation –





Gwen's job may be pretty good, but her living and working conditions are even better, as she will not only live rent free in a gorgeous apartment in a building with a concierge filled with fellow professors, but she has a student assistant to drive her around. She doesn't even have to take out the trash, as it's only necessary to gently place her can outside the door. Remember what I said about chocolate bars? When she gets to her office, it's just as dreamy, huge and beautiful, with a staff secretary to make sure there are tea and biscuits to be had all day long. Makes you yearn to go back to school yourself.

Unfortunately there's trouble even in Welsh Paradise. The night Gwen arrives her old buddy gives her a welcome party with most of the faculty in attendance, and as she's introduced around, she notices a definite hostility on the part of another professor, Dr. Alice Rice. Her rude behavior only confirms the chatter about her unpleasant personality, somewhat explained by the fact Alice had wanted Gwen's job. But, like the hard-nosed journalist she is, Gwen is able to roll with the punches, and heads home to collapse after her trying day.

As she's sharing a post party drink with one of her fellow professors her doorbell rings, and she opens the door

to discover Alice, who collapses in her arms, only managing to utter the word "poison" before she expires. This unsettles even the tough Gwen, who does her best with CPR, though to no avail.

As the shock waves reverberate through the department Gwen finds her new colleagues welcoming, and her assistant, a young student named Ellis, is not only eager to show her around, but also to write about Alice's death for the school paper. Gwen takes the budding journalist under her wing, helping him with interview questions, and accompanying him on a trip to a local newspaper office where they search the back issues for clues.

This is a classic set up – the most reviled person on the page is naturally the one taken off of it, and the almost pleasant investigation that follows, which includes a bit of gentle danger for Gwen, is smart enough and so, so much fun to read. The resolution is golden age worthy, and just as yummy as the rest of the read. While you might figure out whodunnit, you'll enjoy the journey to the solution anyway, as you unwrap this homemade chocolate bar, Welsh style.

THE GARDENER'S CLUB

By Marni Riches

Pegasus Crime, \$28.95, March

Rating: B+

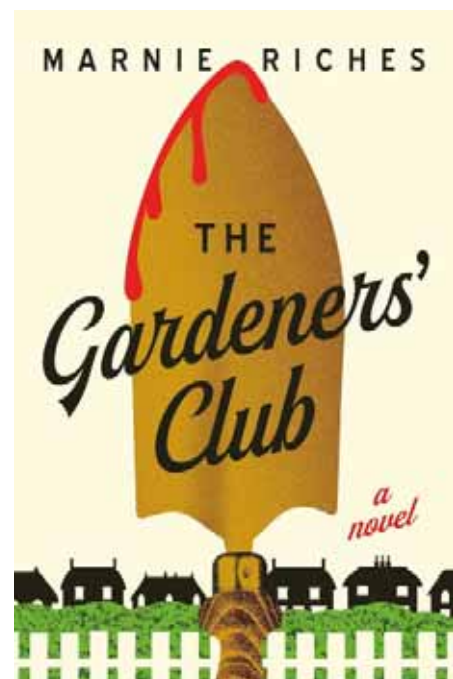
This charming, sweet novel is set in the world of the competitive gardening clubs in the UK. The main character, Gill Swanley, a widowed single mom, is juggling a burgeoning teen, a horrible job and a difficult and aging mother. Her job seems especially soul crushing, as she's in charge of a group of insurance call centers, ordered to cull her workforce by uncovering the slackers.

Riches manages to find humor in this situation, especially in the texts from Gill's teenaged son (the one where he can't find the lasagna she left for him to heat up for dinner is a classic). For respite, she decides to try joining a garden group called the Bromley Botanists. Her first get-together sounds a bit like an AA meeting with everyone

sharing their feelings, but the main thrust of the discussion becomes the "Golden Trowel," a gardening award which the Botanists have never won, something they are determined to change in the coming year. Gill is just beginning to form alliances and friendships with members of the group when she and Marjorie, the Queen Mum of the group, discover a dead body in the community greenhouse and all heck breaks loose.

The dead woman turns out to have left a golf course she owns as the prize for the Golden Trowel, which ups the stakes immediately. While this book is a mystery, with a murder at the nexus of the action, it's also an identity journey for Gill as she comes to terms with being a widow with a cranky mom, demanding boss, and an exasperating teenage son (who is really quite a nice kid).

But it's the gardening parts that make this book really stand out. There's pretty specific stuff about composting, dealing with bugs, starting seeds, planning a garden, etc, which make it the perfect winter's read if you're itching to get your hands back in the warm dirt of your garden. Unless you are already an advanced expert you'll find yourself picking up gar-



dening tips at the same time as Gill does. There's even a golden Cinderella moment when one of the club members takes over her sad looking back garden and transforms her compost pile into something magical.

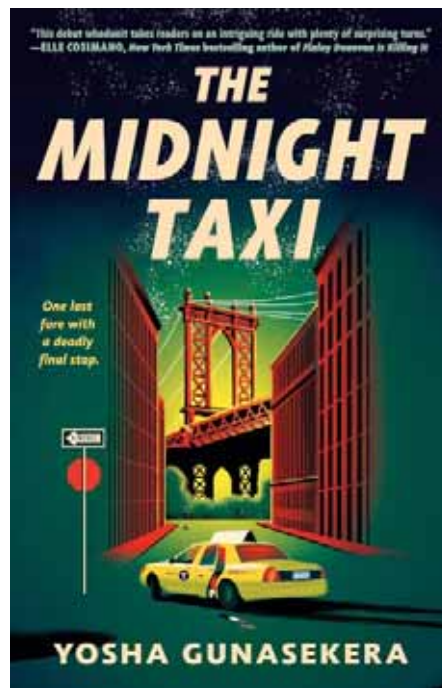
The relationships between members of the group, especially between Gill and a fellow single parent, the nerdy John, are what makes the book sing, as does the central character herself. The author keeps the detecting very hands off, with the amateurs standing back to let the police do their work. While a more realistic approach to actual murder investigation, for lovers of the amateur sleuth it may prove a slight disappointment. But what's important is Gill's journey – and the gardening!

THE MIDNIGHT TAXI

Yosha Gunasekera
Berkley, \$18.99, February
Debut
Rating: A

This is a sparkling debut. The main character, Siriwithi Perera, is a New York City cab driver in the age of Uber and Lyft. It's a tough job but she works the late shift to keep her family afloat. As she's cruising by night court late one night, she spots two possible fares: a white, male lawyer and a woman who looks more like herself, obviously on her way home. She picks up the woman and the two of them bond as they discover they are both Sri Lankan. The woman, Amaya, is a public defender, and the quick bond the two women form is enough that Amaya presses her business card in Siri's hand before she gets out of the cab. Little does Siri know how much she will need it.

Her next fare is a scraggly looking gentleman who wants to go to JFK, departing for Paris. Before he gets in the cab, Siri had noticed him carrying a long case with holes in it. She's puzzled by the case but readily accepts a fare that provides a quiet customer who doesn't bother her – the man quickly falls asleep. When they get to the airport, however, Siri can't wake him, and



when she opens the door of her cab, she sees the man has been stabbed in the chest – and he's dead.

All Siri can think to do is call Amaya, who appears but informs her she surely be arrested, and this is in fact the case. The humiliations accompanying arrest and jail are described in detail, and by the time Siri is released, her exhausted and worried parents looking on, you'll be fully on her side. As she's the heroine of the novel I never thought she was guilty, and first time author Gunasekera has deftly introduced what is basically a locked room mystery, 21st century style.

The women have a very short time before a grand jury assembles to decide Siri's fate, and Siri finds herself functioning as Amaya's defacto investigator. Though she's told each and every time not to speak, she of course does, and the investigation that follows is a very traditional one. It's very well done with each plot element growing organically out of the one before. This was the kind of book where I got halfway through and wasn't sure what was going to happen.

As the story progresses, the author teases out Siri's somewhat tragic backstory but also finds the bonding of the two women and the ultimate gathering over food, at a Sri Lankan feast pre-

pared by Siri's mother. Both women are incredibly appealing characters, and I also loved the look at New York and the essential nature of the service workers who make the city function. I loved the story and was feverishly turning pages to find out just what happens to Siri and Amaya.

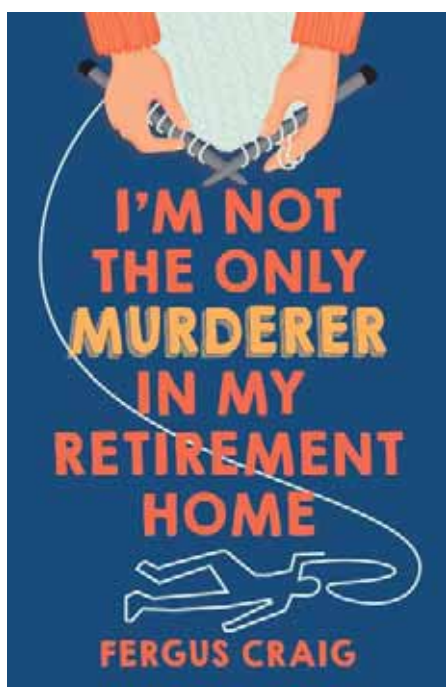
This book is hard to categorize. The details of the nonfunctioning and somewhat horrific justice system as well as the details of Siri's home life aren't cozy; but the investigative threesome that ultimately forms – bound by the cozy elements of culture and food – are more cozy, and the resolution, which could have been dark and traumatic, goes another, softer, way. Both plot and character are strong here and I very much hope there will be another book featuring Siri and Amaya.

I'M NOT THE ONLY MURDERER IN MY RETIREMENT HOME

By Fergus Craig
Berkley, \$30, February

Serial killer Carol, just released from prison, has found a cozy apartment at a fancy retirement home, and is looking forward to enjoying freedom and perhaps making new friends. She takes a baking class and is beginning to feel comfortable, when someone discovers her past and the other residents begin to avoid her. It's heartbreaking. As she's sitting alone on her balcony with her morning coffee one day, a body falls past her to his death, and she hears a scuffling sound on the roof. She's sure it's murder, the police are sure it's suicide. When she puts herself forward, the police arrest her, simply because of her past.

She reaches out to one of her new almost friends, Margaret, a fluffy old lady with crumbs on her cardigan, who also happened to have been the home secretary before she retired. She gets Carol out of jail pronto and the two decide to investigate the murder themselves and clear Carol's name. They are somewhat reluctantly joined by Geoffrey (a retired policeman) and Catherine, all from the



baking class.

As Carol investigates, she discovers another killer she'd encountered once burying a body (business like nod for them) as well as a welter of clues, helped a great deal by Margaret's connections and insider access. The two police detectives in charge of the case are halfway efficient – one is an older guy blowhard who goes for the obvious solution, the other a younger woman who is trying to investigate in a coherent manner. Carol is still a tempting suspect, so it takes lots of work for the four sleuths to get to the truth.

There are some pretty funny red herrings and, as in Richard Osmond's books, a pretty clear-eyed look at the mechanics of aging and its limitations. The new owner of their swanky retirement home has cluelessly installed a climbing wall – for 70+ and 80- year olds – but the most popular activities are croquet, baking, and karaoke. The bittersweet with the actually sweet makes this a lovely read as the four sleuths begin to trust each other as friends.

When Carol does solve the case (as of course she does) she insists on a denouement, Poirot style, with everyone assembled at karaoke. This involves

the discovery of another body or two. The resolution is as bittersweet as the entire story, but what will remain with me is the humor (author Craig does stand up) and the budding friendship between the four main characters. Finding friendship at any age is a miracle, and Craig seems fully cognizant of that fact. This was a completely enjoyable, well plotted read.

AWAY TO ME

By Patricia B. McConnell
Kensington, \$26, February
Debut
Rating: B+

This is an excellent debut from animal behaviorist Patricia McConnell, whose main character, Maddie McGowan, is also an animal behaviorist who goes to sheepdog trials in her spare time. She takes her beloved dog, Jack, to trials, and he is still learning the ropes a bit. The book opens with a bang. Maddie is at a trial with her mentor, George, who offers her encouragement before her “run” with Jack, and then the worst happens. George is shot and dies, and everyone at the trial feels it must have been a hunting accident.

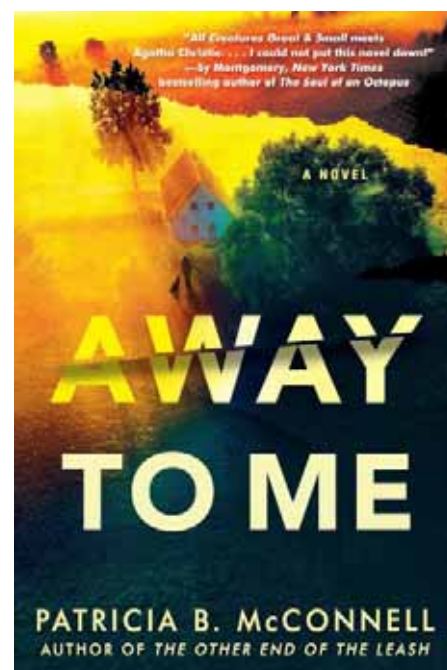
Maddie deals with her grief by staying centered and working, so we as readers are treated to her animal clients, and these parts of the book are completely fascinating. If you like animals at all (but especially dogs) you'll no doubt enjoy these parts as well. Like fellow “dog” writers Paula Munier and Margaret Mizushima, McConnell obviously loves dogs and understands them. It shines through in her writing.

Maddie also volunteers at the local animal shelter, and it's there she meets a bag of bones named Cisco. The shelter is about ready to put him down, but they call on Maddie as a last resort. He won't let anyone get near him – however, not only is Maddie able to get near him, she falls in love with him and wants to take him home as a foster. She also realizes that Cisco must

have been some kind of drug detection or K9 dog.

McConnell is excellent at setting up Maddie's matrix – the people around her that she works with as well as her dog related friends and her neighbors. After a life trauma, Maddie has found a Wisconsin farm to call home, where she lives in isolated beauty with sheep, a horse, a couple dogs and a couple cats. Cisco is added to the mix. And then there are the flashbacks to what happened to her in the past – these are teased out throughout the narrative, adding complexity to the mystery of George's death but to another later death as well.

The mystery part of this is not as strong as the characters and setting, but those parts are so outstanding that I didn't really care. The resolution was not unexpected, but the path McConnell takes to get to it is. She creates a suspenseful story grounded in her life and the life of her animals – again, similar to Munier and Mizushima – but she has a few pacing issues to sort out. Still, this was a really enjoyable read and I learned as I read, but in a way that was organic and not shoved in front of me. Maddie is a wonderful character, and I would definitely be interested in her next adventure.



Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



BITTER FALL

by Bruce Robert Coffin

Severn River Publishing, \$19.99, January

Brock Justice #2

Rating A-

Detective Brock Justice is called out to a crime scene with a number of puzzling elements to it. A woman lies dead, the apparent victim of a lethal roadside crash, caused by a negligent drunk driver. But then a stab wound is found hidden beneath the victim's clothing. Two possible causes of death.

Reunited with his partner, Detective Chloe Wright, Justice begins pulling at threads too many people want left alone. The victim had secrets—the kind worth killing for. And each suspect carries enough baggage to sink a body in Moosehead Lake. An ex-boyfriend with a violent past. A married fitness trainer with too much to lose. A combat veteran living off the grid, haunted by ghosts of his own.

BITTER FALL is another fine novel of police detection and police procedure from the pen of former police detective Bruce Robert Coffin. Read this one and then look out for the third in the series, **DARK HARBOR** coming out in August.

ONE SECOND AWAY

by Rick Mofina

Doubleday Canada, \$17.95, April

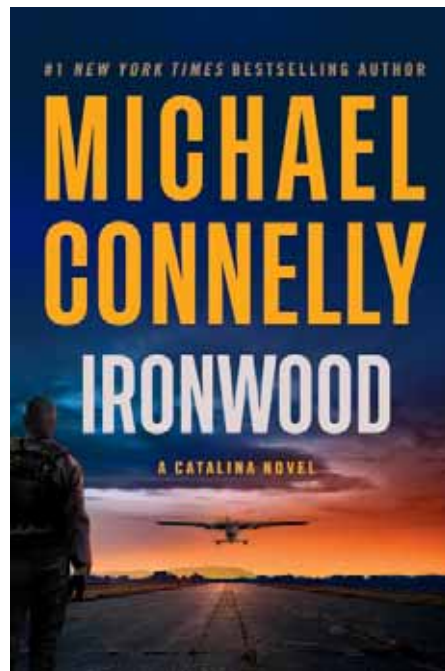
Rating: A-

Jessie is a successful entrepreneur living in California with her nine-year-old son, Dylan. She's soon to be divorced from her husband and is sending Dylan to New York to be with him and his parents for a visit. Several hours later Jessie receives a call from her mother-in-

law that Dylan is missing. The grandparents were diverted to another gate, while another couple impersonating the grandparents picked up Dylan from his arrival gate. Several hours later, Jessie gets a frantic call from Dylan's grandmother in New York. Dylan is missing. A nation-wide search begins.

Meanwhile, the reader is privy to a series of seemingly unrelated attacks on railway train systems around the globe.

Rick Mofina skillfully ties these two story arcs together in an exciting and well-conceived thriller. I'm always impressed by Rick's attention to detail (his news reporter skills coming out), which add a high degree of believability to his narratives.



IRONWOOD

by Michael Connelly

Little, Brown, \$32.00, May

Stillwell #2

Rating: A

The story begins with a tip about a drug drop in the middle of the night at the small Catalina Island airstrip. Detective Sergeant Stilwell and two of his colleagues plan to intercept the drop and arrest those involved, but things don't go as planned and one of Stilwell's colleagues is killed and the other seriously injured. All the criminals escape. None of this is Stilwell's fault but he receives the majority of the blame. He is told to stay out of the ensuing investigation but that's like telling a revved-up dog not to eat the red meat sitting right in front of him.

His boss is watching him on the police station cameras to make sure he stays "at home." So to appear to be following orders, he decides to clear out the lost and found items that have accumulated over time. One of the items is a recently found high-end back pack which contains, among other things, a set of keys. One is a key to an expensive lock that has a registration number on it. Stilwell calls the manufacturer to find out the identity of its owner and is dumbfounded to find out it belongs to a woman who disappeared some four years ago and who was the subject of a much-publicized search.

He reaches out to the LAPD's Open-Unsolved Unit headed by Renee Ballard and the two start working the case together. In the meantime, Stilwell continues to work the airport killing case on the down low.

Michael Connelly's tight plotting and free-flowing prose are gold standards for mystery fiction writers. No one does this better.

CITY ON FIRE

by Simon Elegant

Pegasus Crime, \$27.95, May

Rating: A-

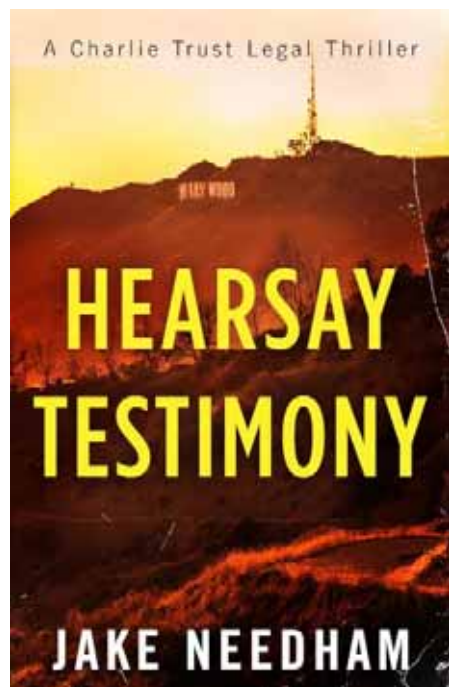
Hong Kong's riots and political unrest in 2020 are the backdrop for this excellent murder mystery. Central to the story is biracial Superintendent Killian Tong, who accidentally shot a protestor, thereby endangering his career in the police department.

Due to a shortage of available de-

tectives, Killian is assigned a puzzling murder case. The dismembered torso of a corpse, missing arms, legs and head, is found in a garbage dump. No clues as to its identity. Soon Killian is being pressured to close down the case by higher-ups, but that goes against his nature.

On the personal front, Killian's sister Jun becomes a committed rioter and she won't listen to his warnings that she could ruin her life.

The writing is top notch and the protagonist Killian Tong is one to be admired – in the long tradition of committed detectives who will walk through fire to solve a case and bring justice to the victim.



HEARSAY TESTIMONY

by Jake Needham

Half Penny Ltd, \$17.99 Trade Paper;

\$6.99 Kindle, May

Charlie Trust #3

Rating: A-

Transplanted Florida attorney Charlie Trust has found a sweet life in Malibu Beach. His friend, the owner of a beach-side home in Malibu, California has died and left him the house. In the last case, **RELUCTANT WITNESS**, Charlie became friends with the legendary attorney, Sandy Bouchier and they have decided to set up a law practice

together.

One morning Charlie's view of the beach is disturbed by the appearance of a number of cops who are carrying two body bags from a neighbors house. Arnie Duncan and his wife have been shot and the prime suspect is their only child, 23-year-old Jerry Duncan who found the bodies and phones 911.

Charlie is talked into giving advice to Jerry Duncan, whom he believes is probably innocent. He soon realizes that another case in the headlines – the Menezes brothers accused of killing their parents – will inevitably increase the media's interest in the Duncan case. So he does what he can to shield Jerry from that media.

As with the first two books in the series, there is a clear and informative explanation of the legal issues and ethics involved as well as non-traditional resolution to the mystery. I found the revisit of the late 1980s and early 1990s an enjoyable, nostalgic trip. I want Charlie's Mustang. I owned a 1970 Mustang, but I always liked the 1969 more.

The Charlie Trust legal thrillers are not as complexly plotted as the author's Inspector Tay mysteries, but they are just as enjoyable on a different level.

DEATH AT THE CASTLE GATES

Nick Oldham

Severn House, \$29.99, June

Jessica Raker #3

Rating: B+

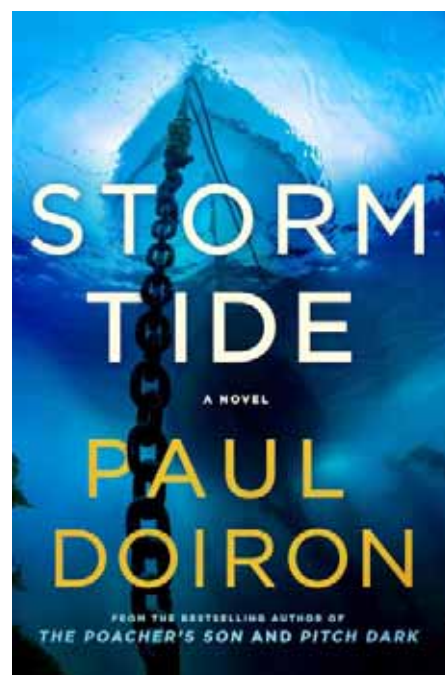
The story centers on two parallel investigations that force Jessica Raker to navigate a "deadly web of deceit" in her rural Ribble Valley of Lancashire.

With her colleague Dougie Doolan's health rapidly failing, Jess takes over his long-standing hunt for a local criminal named Rory Walton. Walton is the prime suspect in a devastating arson attack that claimed the life of a young mother. As Jess pursues Walton, she discovers that he and his brother are not just local thugs, but are actively moving to challenge the Ribble Valley's reigning crime matriarch, Mags Horsefield, whom Jessica has her own issues with. This power struggle puts Jess directly in

the crossfire of a burgeoning gang war.

While managing the Walton case, Jess is also fulfilling a personal "dying wish" for Dougie. He asks her to solve a cold case that has haunted him—and Jess—for decades. This secondary investigation forces Jess to confront a terrifying event from twenty years ago in her own past.

Nick Oldham's novels are always fast and satisfying reads for me. His Jessica Raker series is excellent, but I have to admit that I miss Henry Christie as a character.



STORM TIDE

by Paul Doiron

Minotaur, \$29.00, June

Mike Bowditch #16

Rating: A

Mike Bowditch is in trouble with the Maine Warden Service for crossing over the border with Canada in search of a fugitive. For this, he has been demoted pending a disciplinary hearing on the matter and he has returned to regular game warden duties. The silver lining to this is that Mike can stay closer to home to be with his pregnant wife. – Or so he thought.

When the magnificent home of entrepreneur Brian Malloy mysteriously goes up in flames, Maine game warden Mike Bowditch tries to pull Malloy's

burning body from the fire but is too late. Malloy was suspected of murdering his young, illegitimate son. Now it looks like someone else has delivered a verdict.

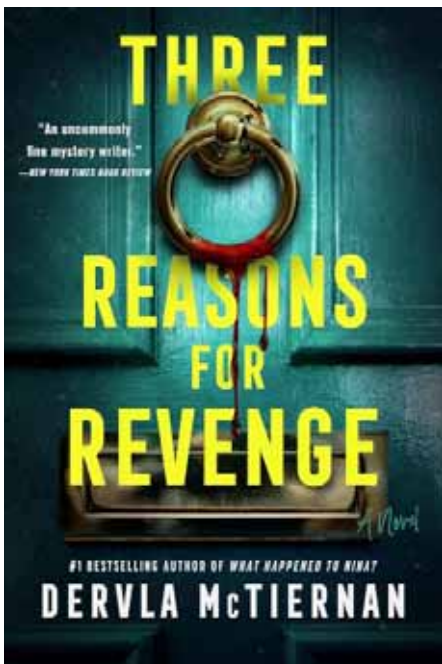
Miles away, on a lonely stretch of icy railroad track, the body of Axl Deming, once accused of a brutal rape, is found literally cut in half. Though the two murders seem unrelated, a cryptic text from an unknown number draws Bowditch to the scene – and hints at a chilling connection. He suspects someone is orchestrating the executions of criminals who escaped justice.

Paul Doiron is one of the best action thriller writers of the present era and his character Mike Bowditch is right up there with Jack Reacher James Reece, Joe DeMarco and the Gray Man. All the elements of a good action thriller are found here, but the author sure does put his protagonist through the ringer!

THREE REASONS FOR REVENGE

Dervla McTiernan
Morrow, \$30.00, July
Standalone
Rating: A-

Alexis Turner walks into the police station to report an assault to DS Judith Lee. By the end of the day, she is nowhere to be found.



Soon after she disappears, three identical packages arrive at three very different doors: a respected psychologist's home, a socialite's mansion, and a struggling single father's run-down apartment. Inside, each gift is perfectly tailored to its recipient — and each will tear apart the life of its intended victim. The structure worked well, moving between the three recipients while slowly building the bigger picture. The connection between the three victims seems illusive.

Detective Sergeant Judith Lee is smart and experienced, but this is no ordinary case. Someone with intimate knowledge of their targets is orchestrating these attacks. Someone who knows exactly how to hurt each victim where they're most vulnerable.

THREE REASONS FOR REVENGE is brilliantly conceived and plotted. Dervla McTiernan greatly impressed me with her first novel **THE RUIN** and continues to impress me with books like this one.

JANUARY AND JULY

by Jeff Abbott
Blackstone, \$29.99, July
Rating: C+

A disgraced intel officer anxious to redeem herself after a disastrous mission, January Holte vows to uncover the identity of a traitor who is selling her agency's secrets. The few clues she's found have led her to a sleepy river town: Lethy, Texas--and to Bill Connors, the one man who might know the truth. But no one seems to know where Bill Connors has gone to.

July Whitlock, a rookie bodyguard, searches for his one and only client, who has suddenly disappeared. He follows a trail to Lethy to find his missing protectee--Bill Connors.

Then there is the town of Lethy itself. It seems that the small town's primary economic activity is crime.

I've read and enjoyed mysteries by Jeff Abbott in the past but **JANUARY AND JULY** just didn't work for me. The plot simply isn't believable – quite over the top. Too much setup and not enough satisfactory pacing.

WISDOM CORNER

by David Heska Wanbli Weiden
Ecco, \$30.00, July
Virgil Wounded Horse #2
Rating: A

The long-awaited sequel to the award-winning **WINTER COUNTS** is finally here (well, in a month or so) and it is well worth the wait.

Virgil Wounded Horse is trying to make a living as a process server after promising his partner Marie that he would turn his back on his past profession as a hired vigilante on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. But when Jerome Iron Shell, his mentor and a legendary figure from the reservation, is murdered, Virgil is forced to return to dangerous work.

Making matters more complicated, threats are coming from the Pine Ridge 705—a street gang from a neighboring reservation who want to expand their reach into Rosebud—and Mitch Gagnon, a shady politician who will stop at nothing to gain more power.

With a heated tribal council election looming (Marie vs. Mitch Gagnon), as well as new revelations regarding past injustices at the local Native boarding school, the stakes grow even higher for Virgil and his family.

Weiden has a gift for depicting reservation life with its many issues in a clear way that even a whitey like me can understand and find empathy for. And to top it off, he is quite the story teller. David, don't make us wait quite so long for the next one, please.



Crime Jazz

Ted Fitzgerald



THE MIDNIGHT TAXI

By Yosha Gunasekera
Berkley, February, \$19.00

What a pleasure it is to welcome a new and very appealing protagonist – one with a winning personality and an involving backstory – to the crime fiction world!

Siriwathi “Siri” Perera is a female Sri Lankan American New York City cab driver, an erstwhile law student who binges true crime podcasts while on her nightly rounds. One night, her fare is a fellow Sri Lankan American, public defender Amaya Fernando. The two bond, exchanging contact information, unaware that Siri will need Amaya’s professional services almost immediately: Her very next passenger enters her cab but is somehow fatally stabbed on the way to Kennedy Airport, leaving Siri, the only other person in the cab, as the obvious suspect.

Siri becomes Amaya’s spontaneous and not always welcome co-investigator as they face a tight deadline to identify and investigate the victim, explore connections to conspiracy and big business and find a killer. Their probing reveals Siri’s untapped investigative talents, the podcasts having substituted for the legal career she put on hold due to family circumstances and her own doubts in herself. During this journey, Amaya schools Siri in the realities of the justice system versus the assumptions of podcasts, impressing upon her the seriousness of her situation and the tall odds against her, but also providing support and coming to appreciate some of Siri’s methods.

THE MIDNIGHT TAXI combines a good whodunit/howdunit plot with a sharp-eyed look at a flawed and hazardous judicial system, two strong and

sympathetic leads, an empathetic look into family, friendship and community, betrayal and trust and the challenge of finding one’s way in life and the world. It’s buoyed by Siri’s unspoiled narrative voice and contagious and courageous spirit. You’ll find yourself rooting for her from the beginning. Siri is a keeper.

Author Yosha Gunasekera, a Sri Lankan American attorney and former public defender, makes an exceptional and entertaining debut with **THE MIDNIGHT TAXI**. If there’s any justice in the book world, we’ll be hearing from her and Siri again.



PAYBACK

By Elizabeth Rose Quinn
Thomas & Mercer, May, \$16.99

Agatha Christie’s **AND THEN THERE WERE NONE** set up the classic and irresistible scenario of a group of in-

dividuals of dubious backgrounds, isolated in a remote or closed environment, realizing that they are being murdered sequentially by one of their own.

Elizabeth Rose Quinn’s **PAYBACK** is set in present-day Los Angeles in a minimum security “Pay to Stay” jail (only in the City of Angels!) in which non-violent female offenders pay for the privilege of serving their sentences on weekends, allowed their own food and clothes and other personal luxuries in exchange for performing community service. It’s a group of women of varied ages and backgrounds, including an unreconstructed hippie, a disgraced political consultant, a dubious nun, a name-dropping physician’s wife and a glammy Gen Zer who’s considered not too bright (or is she?).

Overseeing them is Steven Bard, a galactically sadistic corrections officer, described memorably as “effervescent with malice” (Boy, is that an understatement.), who has subtly dominated and humiliated them psychologically for months. The extended New Year’s weekend, which includes the unexpected addition of a male prisoner, promises to be Bard’s ultimate opportunity to gratify himself by breaking his prisoners’ hearts and minds and spirits, until he’s inconveniently murdered in his office on the first night.

When his charges, who have avoided interacting with each other over the months of shared weekend captivity, discover his body the next morning, they know they need to work together and have only the weekend to solve the killing and avoid being tagged for it. But, of course, one of them is likely the murderer and, inevitably, more blood is shed. . . .

PAYBACK is structurally fine. Author Quinn adroitly mixes points of view and details to keep the reader guessing, includes some humorous situations (Did I mention that one of the group has an emotional support iguana?) and pointed satire about class and assumptions of privilege. But it is at heart a mystery, a fair play puzzle, a tense story of survival and ultimately a fable of redemption. In the best tradition of Ellery Queen, Quinn proffers multi-

ple solutions before nailing the killer. It's a clever denouement, one I think Fred Dannay and Manny Lee would appreciate.

JUST A CORPSE AT TWILIGHT / CATCH A KILLER

By Robert Martin

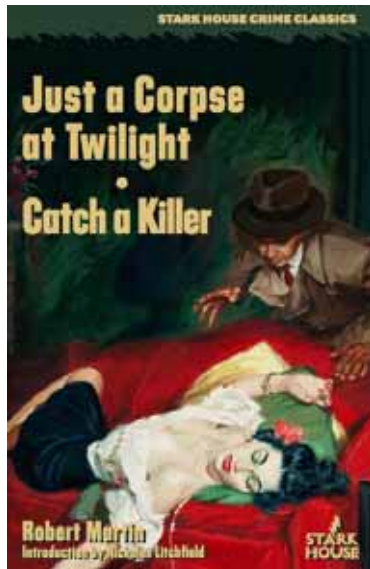
Introduction by Nicholas Litchfield.
Stark House Press, February, \$19.95

A mainstay of private eye fiction in the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when many critics and the public defined the genre in comparison to Mickey Spillane and Mike Hammer, Robert Martin's Jim Bennett was often described as what he's not: The Ohio-based investigator was not a ferocious avenger, nor a bulldozer laying waste to anything and anyone in his path, nor a sexual conquistador. Bennett is a fairly solid middle class burgher, an agency man who takes his work seriously, likes his steaks and cocktails, likes women and is aware of his impact on those he encounters in his work. But, as the novels reprinted in this Stark House twofer show, he's a character with his own frustrations and obsessions.

JUST A CORPSE AT TWILIGHT finds Jim under contract to the state of Ohio conducting workers' compensation claims investigations. He comes to the village of Beach Tree to secure a new autopsy for Frank Osborn, a worker who was receiving compensation for silicosis contracted on the job but died of an apparent heart attack. If an autopsy confirms silicosis as the cause, the benefits go to his widow. To Jim, it seems to a simple bureaucratic matter but the uncomfortable and uncooperative reactions of the locals, including a talkative undertaker, a somber physician, a canny sheriff and Frank's widow both baffle and frustrate Jim. He eventually secures the widow's cooperation only for her to be murdered. Martin takes his time building his characters and the resolution is both shocking and sad.

In **CATCH A KILLER**, the client is Lavinia Hopkins, a dying woman of means who wants to reconcile with her estranged daughter Francine before she passes away. Lavinia is offering Jim and

his agency a significant bonus if Francine is returned in time. Jim finds the daughter in Columbus easily enough, but a bitter Francine refuses to see her mother under any circumstances, angry over her mother's banishing of her after she ran off with a traveling musician, Johnny Wingate, who abandoned her. Johnny's now a successful bandleader with an unhappy entourage and a possible marriage in the offing. It's a combustible mixture and violence results. Jim likes and respects Francine but is tempted by the bonus her mother offers. Can he maintain his integrity and self-respect and still get mother and daughter back together and in time? The novel's tension is emotional, rooted more in the combustibility of human nature than in hard core criminality, and Martin renders his characters, a number of whom



have their own difficult choices to make, with empathy.

Nicholas Litchfield's introduction is a satisfying and comprehensive overview of the Jim Bennett series and its critical reception during the 1950s and 1960s. Stark House Press is reprinting the books in order (this third volume collects the fifth and sixth of 13 published novels), a worthwhile investment for readers interested in strong plotting and solid characterization.

THE COMPLETE CASES OF MALACHI MANATEE

By William R. Cox

Introduction by William Lampkin
Popular Publications, 2025, \$29.95

William R. Cox, whose body of work ranged from the 1930s to the 1980s, including the pulps, slick magazines, hardcovers, paperback originals and television, encompassed private eyes, crime stories, westerns, historical and sports fiction. Among his markets was **Dime Detective**, for which he wrote frequently, including this nine story series, published between August 1944 and September 1946, now collected 80 years later in **THE COMPLETE CASES OF MALACHI MANATEE**.

The setting is Florida's Gulf Coast, the hero is the vividly named Malachi Manatee, an outsized native son of independent wealth and large appetites, discharged by the Marine Corps along with his friend (and narrator) Tack Hinton, after both were severely wounded in the Battle of Tarawa. With time on his hands and no need to work a conventional job, Malachi levels a sniper's focus on endemic political corruption, cleaning up The Alligator State, one humid hellhole at a time.

If the plots of each story follow a similar format, the pleasure is in the storytelling, with Malachi, Tack and the extremely capable and gorgeous Ilene Carver (Malachi's "are they or aren't they?" significant other) enthusiastically pile-driving their way through plotters and power grabbers both dubious and profane for the sheer "what the hell" joy and challenge of it. William Lampkin's informative introduction provides more details about Cox, **Dime Detective** and how the series came to be. The stories are grand fun and the underlying theme of the need to stand up against corruption is, unfortunately, timeless. One wishes the intrepid trio was still around in real life today. I can think of at least one spot in Florida that could benefit from the Manatee Cleaning Service.

BADGE OF EVIL (*Touch of Evil*)

By Whit Masterson

Introduction by Nicholas Litchfield
(Film Noir Classic #15)
Stark House, May, \$15.95

When it comes to novels or stories adapted to film I usually prefer to see the movie before reading the book. In most cases, I'm impressed favorably by how the filmmakers translated the prose work into the visual medium and appreciate more the book's style and nuance; Reading Raymond Chandler's **THE LONG GOODBYE** after seeing Robert Altman's 1973 adaptation, I was excited not only by Chandler's prose but by how well Altman and screenwriter Leigh Brackett stayed true to Chandler's themes of friendship and betrayal in a movie that varied more than a bit from the novel.

What surprised me in reading Whit Masterson's **BADGE OF EVIL** (the source material for Orson Welles' classic 1957 noir, *Touch of Evil*), was how much of the novel was retained but altered by Welles. For those who haven't seen the movie or read the book: A power broker in a southern California city near the Mexican border is murdered by dynamite. An honest investigator (a vacationing Mexican policeman on honeymoon with his American wife in the movie; an Anglo D.A.'s investigator with a Mexican-born wife in the book) assists the local cops (including one named Hank Quinlan). A suspect confesses, evidence appears planted. The honest investigator suspects the locals are framing people. His probing results in threats to his wife and a growing awareness of their vulnerability. For the movie, Welles took these elements and shook them up into a frothy neon cocktail of menace and style all his own that still fizzes today.

A reader expecting a story that follows the movie's narrative will be surprised, though they will not be disappointed. Authors Bob Wade and Bill Miller (who also wrote as Wade Miller) knew how to write an exciting story and, as Nicholas Litchfield's introduction notes, they were no strangers to Hollywood. By my count, at least a dozen of their novels and stories were adapted to film or television, so I suspect we'll see more of their work in future Stark House's Film Noir Classics volumes.

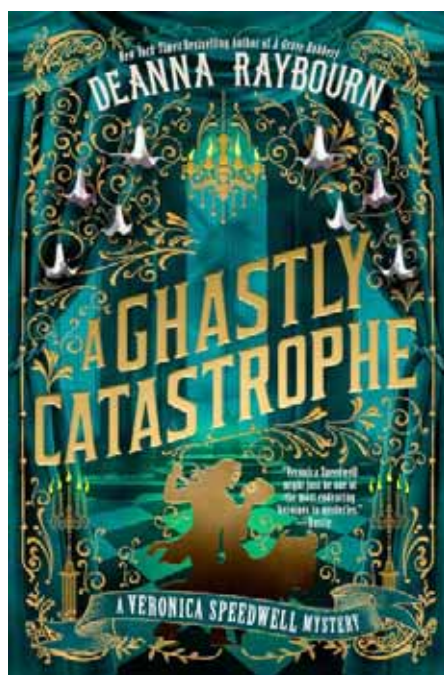
HISTORICAL EMPORIUM

Robin Agnew



A GHASTLY CATASTROPHE

by Deanna Raybourn
Berkley, \$30, March
Veronica Speedwell #10
Rating: A



Although she certainly owes a debt to Elizabeth Peters and her character Amelia Peabody, Deanna Raybourn has managed her own memorable creations in the amusing Veronica Speedwell and her intriguing partner, Stoker. Veronica is an intrepid explorer and sleuth in London in the late 1880s who specializes in the study of butterflies. Her unmarried partnership with taxidermist and fellow explorer Stoker is beyond unconventional, but their shared aristocratic lineage lets them get away with a lot. They live on the estate of Lord Rosmorran as they catalogue his extensive collection of objects, but this idyllic existence seems fated to be interrupted by the murders and mysteries that inevi-

tably come their way.

In this outing a friend at Scotland Yard brings them a particularly mysterious case in which a man has been found exsanguinated with two very suggestive puncture marks on his neck. Soon after the discovery of the first man's body, another man finishes his coffee and with no explanation leaps to his death off his balcony. There was a social connection between the two men, and Scotland Yard wants Veronica and Stoker to see what they can uncover.

Their investigation takes them to a certain Ruthven, who by Raybourn's delicious description has the appearance of a vampire, while his handmaiden, Asphodel, more resembles a witch. Over tea with the spooky pair many questions arise, and while Veronica may entertain the possibility of an actual vampire, Stoker remains more practical and skeptical. He also becomes enraged at Ruthven's manipulative machinations, including attempts at mesmerism and hallucinogens, and forges forward with the investigation.

The two uncover another mysterious death buried in Ruthven's background and things get more dangerous and the stakes higher the deeper they dig. Raybourn uses every gothic trope possible in her storytelling, leaving it up to the reader to express skepticism or belief. You have to pay attention and use your head with her books, which is one of the reasons I enjoy them so much.

Another reason is that Raybourn is a flat out great storyteller, with unmatched skill in pacing, twists and setting the historical background. She's also wonderful with character, keeping Veronica and Stoker interesting and fresh even ten books in. All her stories explore a different place in the Victorian

world and imagination, with this book slyly referencing Bram Stoker and his *Dracula*, as well as the greater Gothic tradition.

None of the research in these books is hammered into the reader's head, but simply becomes a delightful part of the storytelling, and both the reader blissfully unaware of vampires or the one obsessed with them will be informed by Raybourn's context and research. Even the undead will find "A Ghastly Catastrophe" a wonderful read.

THE WIDOW HAMILTON

by Mollie Ann Cox

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, February

Eliza Hamilton #2

Rating: B+

I had never given much thought to what became of Alexander Hamilton's widow, but Mollie Ann Cox is here to provide readers with the details of this remarkable woman's life. Though she wasn't actually a sleuth as posited here, she did live a long life with her many children, founded a large orphanage, and dedicated much of her life to preserving her husband's legacy, organizing his papers and keeping him in the public eye. Along with Dolley Madison and Louisa Adams, she raised the funds for the Washington Monument.

But back to this novel – in this story, Eliza has only been a widow for a year, has a houseful of children, and is worrying that the home she built with Alexander will be repossessed by the bank. Meanwhile, she continues visiting friends of hers – women who live together, making a living with their sewing (lacemaking, embroidery, quilting, etc.). Two of the women have disappeared, and one of them is found dead, the other remaining missing. The woman who is the defacto head of this all female household, Alice, is not letting things lie, however, and neither is Eliza, who uses her position to insist that the police investigate.

One of the things I appreciated about this book was simply the portrayal of women's lives. Eliza is not ordinary herself but like many a mystery heroine,



she can straddle several social and economic groups, with the difference that when she is introduced as "Mrs. General Hamilton" she is granted respect, an audience, and sometimes, answers. Helping her in her sleuthing is her sister Angelica, who is a bit more bold than Eliza.

As the two women visit the apothecary where the women were last seen, the constabulary, and the home where the women sewers make their living, a portrait of early New York City is formed: a small town growing into a large one. Eliza's sons bemoan the fact that they used to know every alleyway, but continual change and building is changing the town where they grew up. They are some help in the investigation but most of it belongs to Eliza.

The investigation leads to the discovery of several nefarious activities that find Eliza charging all over town, to the dismay of her coach driver, and to the dismay of her children who are merely wanting to celebrate Advent and Christmas as a family. This dynamic is as powerful in the 1800's as it is now. It's really the characters and the portrayal of their lives that drive the novel. The sleuthing is on the gentle side, the characters, on the memorable side.

As I read this book during a snowstorm I appreciated Eliza's search for

warmth in a cold city, and I enjoyed meeting the many women she encounters. The wrap up to the mystery is a good one and quite surprising as well, which is a neat trick for any author to pull off successfully. This is a real bit of armchair time travel.

MURDER BY MOONRISE

By Patrice McDonough

Kensington, \$27, February

Dr. Julia Lewis #3

Rating: A-

In 1867 London the Isle of Wight was a holiday destination for the inhabitants of London, including Queen Victoria who had a home there and was often in residence. In this story, Dr. Julia Lewis is vacationing on the Isle of Wight with her grandparents and missing and wondering about her crush Detective Richard Tennant, who has been abroad hunting a villain for months. Not having heard from him, she's worried, not only about his health but about the health of their relationship, afraid that she's been too aggressive with a man who may not return her affection.

While she's on the Isle of Wight she's asked to do an autopsy on a drowning victim, a girl who turns out to have been a member of the royal household. Back in London, that royal household in the form of the Princess of Wales' lady in waiting, Susan, Lady Styles, not only gives Julia some work in the form of private patients from the royal household but shares that she's been waiting to talk with the dead girl's sister. The sister never appears, and when her body turns up, the returned Detective Tennant asks Julia to take the case.

Part of this story is the renewal of the relationship between Julia and Richard, and while at first the reunion is awkward, things warm up nicely by the end of the book. Meanwhile, McDonough's portrayal of a working doctor in Victorian London, a female one no less, is excellent. Julia's grandfather is technically retired, and she runs his clinic while also acting as a consul-

tant to the police, performing autopsies for them.

Meanwhile, her connection to Lady Styles blossoms as she brings different members of the royal household to Julia's private offices for a consultation. The most prominent royal in the narrative is Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's sixth child, and something of a free spirit. She also sees the Princess of Wales, Alix, who was experiencing mysterious lameness and increasing deafness at a young age. The fact that Julia is a woman allows her to diagnose issues the women are experiencing that have previously been discounted by male doctors.

Though they are side characters, McDonough vividly illuminates both the widowed and reclusive Queen as well as her – what we might now think of as a “body man” – John Brown, who appears to be heartily disliked by the royal household as well as the Queen's family.

The plot involving the two dead girls appears to be tied to Irish unrest and attacks in London, and McDonough narrows the focus to a clever assassin, which tightens the plot and amps up the suspense. This is a superior series and I love the main character, and find her work as a London doctor fascinat-

ing, as was the insight here into the royal family. These books very much remind me of the late, great Victoria Thompson's wonderful gaslight series, sharing with those books vivid characterizations and settings as well as tight and interesting stories. I found this instalment much better paced and focused than the previous one, and it's favorite in the series to date.

THE STAR FROM CALCUTTA

by Sujata Massey

Soho Crime, \$29.95, March

Perveen Mistry #5

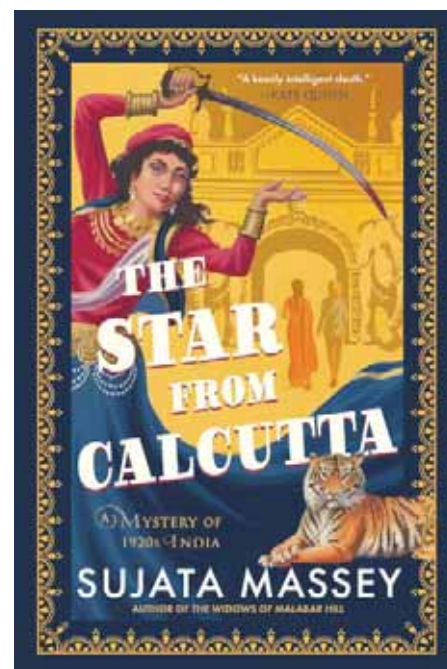
Rating: B+

One of the best written and smartest historical series being created these days are the books by Sujata Massey featuring female lawyer Perveen Mistry, who navigates the turbulent waters of India in the twenties. While never giving way to scolding polemic, the issues Perveen experiences become an organic part of the story, allowing Massey to highlight women's issues in a way that resonates with the reader of today.

More of a straight up traditional mystery than some other instalments but no less enjoyable for it, *The Star from Calcutta* opens, with Perveen and her father – whose firm she works for – meeting with a movie producer named Subhas. He's worried that his most bankable star (and wife) is in breach of contract and asks them to see what they can do to resolve the issue, inviting Perveen to a party and screening at his home slash movie studio to see what she can uncover.

Although her father is uninterested in the cinema, Perveen couldn't be more excited, particularly at the prospect of meeting Subhas's wife, the movie star Rochana. She invites a fellow big-time fan, Alice, a friend since university, to accompany her. Alice has relocated to Bombay, but unfortunately so has her snooty Anglo-Indian family, who find their relationship socially suspect.

Nevertheless, the women head to the party where, to Perveen's puzzlement, Alice and Rochana seem to bond im-



mediately. However, Perveen is distracted by a request from their host to take a close look at another guest, a rude man who's a film censor. After getting an earful about him from the bartender she's less than sympathetic when finally able to talk to him in person.

The film is finally screened, as, to Perveen's dismay, Alice's drunkenness progresses as well as the mutual, sudden and mysterious attachment between her and the movie star. Eventually both women press Perveen to spend the night as they claim Alice's dog, Diana, will be needed for a film test first thing in the morning. Reluctantly, Perveen agrees, leaving their company for bed, but not before sending her driver home with the signed legal contract and payment from Subhas.

When she wakes up, she can't find Alice, though she does discover dog Diana, who leads her to a small zoo on the property where she finds the film censor's body. This introduces the most traditional element in this traditionally told tale, the one in which the most unpleasant person, the character everyone hates and has a motive to kill, is taken off the board early. This frees the rest of the tale to concern itself not just with the complicated mystery, but also with Alice and Perveen's longstanding but now equally complicated friendship,



strained and endangered by miscommunication and misunderstanding.

That friendship becomes the heart of the book. Massey is incredibly gifted at portraying emotional relationships, a gift that doesn't fail her here. While Perveen has her own secret and socially unacceptable relationship with Colin (first encountered in *The Satapur Moonstone*), Alice's same sex inclinations are even more taboo. Her oblivious mother constantly throws men her way with no success, as Alice makes her own way as a dean at a local college. Certainly both she and Perveen would have been anomalies in that place and time, but Massey makes them seem absolutely at home exactly where they find themselves.

The resolution of the crime is entangled with Perveen's friendship with Alice, allowing her to take another step in her growth as a human being as she learns both the value and the limitations of intimate friendship. Of course, there's also the entertaining portrait of Bollywood in its infancy as it struggles to break free of the Western filmmaking monopoly. With her expert use of these and many other elements, Massey is able, as usual, to offer grateful readers like me a deeply intelligent and satisfying read.

CROWN CITY

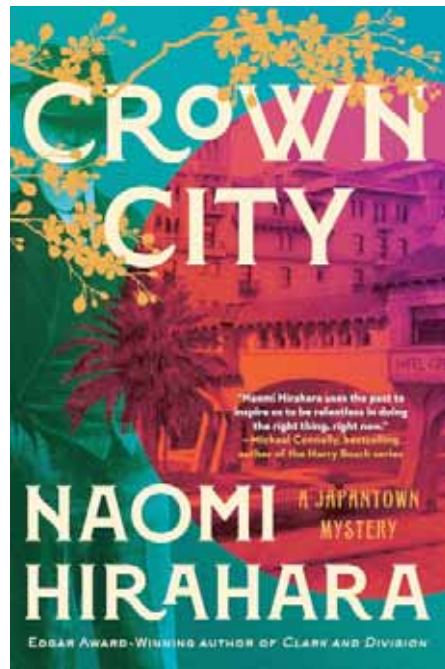
by Naomi Hirahara

Soho Crime, \$29.95, February

Japantown #3

Rating: B+

I've enjoyed all the books in this series, but in some ways I would say Naomi Hirahara is almost more of an historian than a mystery writer, evidenced by this latest installment of this extremely enjoyable series. There is in fact a mystery in *Crown City*, but the time period and setting are the real stars of the show. Another attraction is main character, Ryui Wada, an accomplished carpenter who emigrated to America from Yokohama in 1903 after the death of his father. Although he has a job waiting for him, he's just 18, speaks little English, and has a lot



to learn, something that's brought home when he discovers Pasadena, the "Crown City," a place that astonishes, fascinates and horrifies.

Quickly given the name "Louie" by those who can't pronounce the real one, he's lodged in a rooming house with an assortment of other workers, some Japanese, some not. His work is the only place where he feels comfortable – the wood joints he assembles join together seamlessly, but he has trouble connecting with the strange food and the rude familiarity of his Western cohorts.

His roommate is a Japanese photographer, Jack, whose previous roommate, Eddie, has vanished, an absence that hangs over the narrative. Quickly assigned to work a fancy party, called the "Cherry Blossom Party" as it celebrates all things Japanese, he accepts, despite being puzzled by the theme. As he's taking out the kitchen trash at the end of the day he's assaulted by a bicyclist wearing a mask who knocks him over and leaves a note saying "Die Jap." He's so unsettled he hurries home, forgoing his pay, and never telling anyone.

The artist who hosted the party, Toshio Aoki, approaches him a few days later, telling him that he wants Jack and Louie to try and find a stolen

painting of his. The two anoint themselves detectives and set out to crack the case, as well as attempting to discover the whereabouts of the missing Eddie. Their earnest efforts land them in some very unsavory spots and perilous situations, evidenced by Eddie's body turning up mid-investigation.

One of their housemates is arrested for shooting an arrow at someone during an archery competition (it only takes out the man's hat), but because the competitors are wealthy, the police arrest a likely and convenient suspect and toss him in jail. It's kind of an outdoor hut, and Louise takes to visiting his incarcerated neighbor and sharing his food. He also has an altercation with Jack, leaves the rooming house and taking up residence on a sofa in Aoki's studio.

And that's just the main plot. What can't be conveyed in a short review is the depth of Hirahara's depiction of 1903 Pasadena, of how the Japanese workers fit into the city, and the irony of their culture being celebrated while they themselves suffer hateful prejudice. She also sketches in different cultural touchstones and future icons, such as a certain Mr. Vroman (founder of the famous Vroman's Bookstore), a collector of netsuke. I kept my phone out to look up the landmarks Hirahara describes and the influence of Japanese culture on the architecture of the West was easy to see.

I also grew fond of Ryui, who comes to life on the page as not just a poor immigrant with no family or connections, but also as a skilled carpenter, a man looking for love, trying to figure out how western relationships function, and simply looking for a path forward. This is certainly an identity story, not just Ryui's but of early Pasadena as well. A deft storyteller, Hirahara frames her narrative with letters between Ryui's children written after the events of the book. She creates a narrative that's both a bittersweet race through Ryui's life and a loving look at the early years of the city of Pasadena.

But I Digress...

Ali Karim



PLAYED TO DEATH

by Mike Ripley

Severn House, \$29.99, June

Rating: A

Writer, Reviewer and Literary Commentator Mike Ripley *is perfectly suited as the author of this affectionate deconstruction of the golden age crime fiction novel. Layered with an observational eye toward the absurdity in the mystery sub-genre, as well as in contemporary British society, PLAYED TO DEATH as a narrative becomes surprisingly more than the sum of its moving parts.*

The plot centres on the concerns of local Solicitor Adam Cunningham and his involvement with the Hopewell Players – a local theatre group. Though a partner at Allenby, Barwick and Cunningham, Adam's real passion is for amateur dramatics, rather than law. When he reads the script for an upcoming production [a crime fiction play *Death for Dessert*] allegedly written by the late Othniel Soulby, he seeks assistance from local librarian Roland ['Roly'] Wilkes. Adam considers Soulby's play not only shoddily written, but a nonsensical work of plagiarism. Though nearing retirement, Roly is the library's expert on crime fiction [due to his former career as an editor at a small publishing house specialising in genre fiction]. Roly agrees to read *Death for Dessert*, and compile a report for Adam vis-à-vis plagiarism, all for the princely sum of £300.

Mike Ripley manages literary insights and amusing asides using his foil Roly Wilkes. An example being how a detective novel can be differentiated from the thriller using 'tense'. *"With the traditional detective novel, the important thing is what happened in the past – usually a murder. With the thriller, the*

key thing is what happens next. Some readers like the slow burn puzzle, others prefer blood-and-thunder action" - from which Adam Cunningham replies "I've clearly come to the right man," looking at Wilkes.

The author manages a large cast of flawed characters [from small-town England] and sprinkles mischievous observational humour to keep the pace brisk.

Added to the brew are the machinations of local politics with the pompous Councilor Jemma Soulby, and the hierarchy of English class structures with the wealthy and their side of town, annexing the poor on the opposite side.

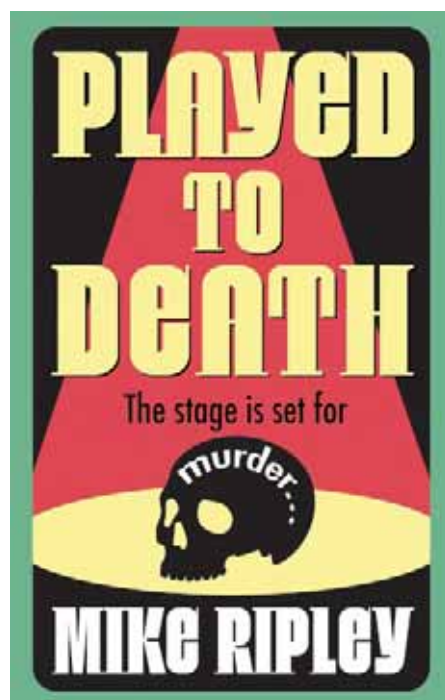
There are political issues and small-town grudges festering within the repertory company with sibling actors Harry and Tansy Coombes, university drama student Regina Mammon, Hazel Scott [with her school-girl crush on Adam –

much to the irritation of her rough-neck husband Bobby] as well as professional jealousy from Glen Muir, a low-level clerical officer who yearns for top billing, not the side lines. While off-stage, the theatre director Fiona Mopp-Groton appears to be principal sycophant to the Councilor, as are the technical team of Stage Manager [and Electrician] Spliffer Bryn Brookes and his assistant Nicolas Smith [aka Theophilus Keene the reviewer/critic from the local newspaper].

When one of the members of the Hopewell [aka 'Hopeless'] Players is found hanging from a noose inside the theatre – centre stage -- in what appears as either a tragic accident or suicide, the local police are called and the game is most definitely afoot.

Enter Detective Inspector Ms Toni Walker who believes that the suicide / accident is concealing a murder. Her superior Superintendent Brennan is initially sceptical due to Walker's previous investigation into the death of Jacon Archer [a crime-fiction blogger] who she was convinced was murdered, but was ruled a death by misadventure. Superintendent Brennan takes care with DI Walker, in case he becomes accused of sexism by the all-seeing eye of Police HR. He asserts what he terms the 'four horseman of motivation' when it comes to a murder investigation, namely Greed, Sex, Revenge or Jealousy.

There are also the questions of racial motivation with **AND THEN THERE WERE NONE**, as well as possible group involvement ala **MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS**, and plenty of nods and winks at crime fiction's Golden Age royalty Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh and Josephine Tey.



The novel [like the play] is structured into acts, with an intermission, epilogue and appendix. There are alternating first person[s] as well as third person viewpoints that make the reading of the short chapters slippery, so the reader is trapped as the pages fly by as if the author is a well-read magician.

The humour is sharp, with the author's observational wit channelled via Librarian Roly Wilkes "...and [I was] clearly not doing anything of national importance, other than *holding a pile of returned crime fiction and mentally despairing about the lack of imagination in cover design these days, not to mention wishing I had shares in Shutterstock images of young females in red coats walking off into a threatening landscape.*"

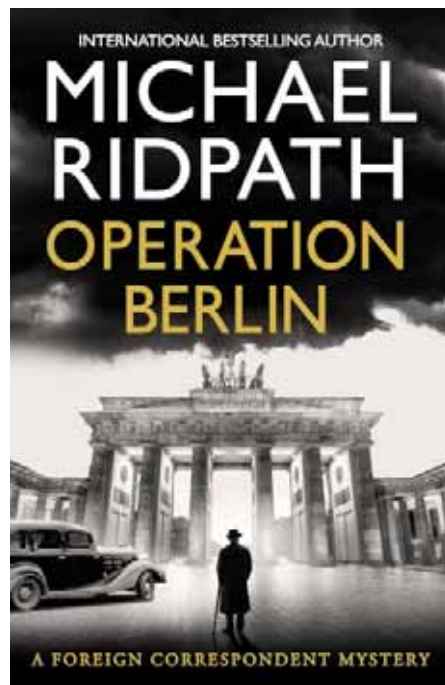
Rarely have I enjoyed myself as much as I have reading through this piece of narrative metafiction. Though you have to work for your money, because despite its concise size, the novel has significant *heft* in provoking thought – which it does with a smile.

No crime fiction convention, cliché, hackneyed stereotype, threadbare platitude or old chestnut is left unexamined. Ripley's alter ego Roly Wilkes bemoans the fact that golden age crime fiction always ties up the conclusion in a bow, allowing the disorder created by the murder[s] to be neatly explained away, with a restoration of order – unlike real life, where there is no fully coherent conclusion, as reality as is messy as it is complex.

In *Death for Dessert*, the conclusion is satisfying, with order appearing to be fully restored; however Ripley allows a couple of loose ends for the reader to ponder upon, and perhaps returning to the beginning, to re-examine the sequence that the narrative cards fell.

The novel is much darker than it appears from the surface, much like life.

If you enjoyed Rian Johnson's 2019 film *Knives Out*, or his 2025's *Wake Up Dead Man* which featured Daniel Craig as eccentric private detective Benoit Blanc – you will love Roland Wilkes in *Death for Dessert* because like the absurdity of life – *everyone has a motive, but no one really has a clue.* In a word "Wonderful".



OPERATION BERLIN

by Michael Ridpath

Boldwood Books, \$18.99, April

The Foreign Correspondent #2

Rating: A

The latest work from Michael Ridpath is one of the most engrossing narratives I have had the good fortune to read this year – or rather live through. I found myself immersed completely into this golden age mystery escaping the anxieties of today, for the machinations of the German Weimar Republic between the two World Wars.

Vivid characterisation is on full display with the two main protagonists, [Sir] Archie Laverick and Esme Carmichael. Laverick is the heir to Yarmer Hall in Yorkshire's West Riding -- a British Aristocrat who survived the horrors of trench warfare in World War One, but returned with both physical and mental scars. His muscular manservant [cum-Batman] Arthur Lister is always by his side managing his episodic fugues [induced by 'shell-shock']. Haunted by his war service, which claimed the life of his brother Fred – Archie manages his demons by researching and writing about former historical wartime generals [which he publishes to much acclaim].

Via his cousin Duncan Mandeville,

Archie travels to Berlin [with Lister] to research a biography of a Prussian General [Field Marshall Blucher] who fought the French forces during the Napoleonic Wars. There is a curious synchronicity, for the French remain foes in the eyes of 1930s Germany, due to the reparations [and restrictions] imposed by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

Archie requires an Anglo-German speaking assistant to help him research the Prussian General. This secretarial support comes in the form of Esme Carmichael – a young American woman [and German speaker] aspiring to become a Foreign Correspondent for a Chicago Newspaper. What better place than the hot-bed of political and social intrigue than 1930s Berlin for an aspiring young journalist from Montana.

Esme Carmichael has accompanied her University friend Harriet Dryden, [the daughter of Diplomat Walter Dryden] to Berlin with hopes that her connection with US Counselor Dryden may assist in facilitating a political interview that she could sell to the American Press – launching her career as a Foreign Correspondent. While living with the Dryden's she augments her dwindling savings agreeing to assist Archie Laverick in his research of Field Marshall Blucher, who she refers to mischievously as General 'Bluey'. The stage is set.

A mystery is about to unravel at the ancestral Burg of the Von Adlerstein clan, where the family have organised a party for a cabal Journalists and Political Commentators. Harriet Dryden brings her friend Esme Carmichael to introduce her to the gathering of Foreign Correspondents in the hope of getting contacts.

The following morning there is a murder, one with political motivation[s] as the murderer [a young Jewish woman with communistic sympathies] has been captured by the police. Esme Carmichael [who witnessed the murder] has doubts as to murderer's identity, which she shares with Archie and so the game is soon afoot.

The vivid characterisation is not restricted solely to Esme and Archie, for

Ridpath deploys deft literary flourishes with an array of supporting players, as well with the backdrops. The Adlon Hotel and streets of Berlin, the railways and countryside of Weimar German play a role in making this novels' atmosphere edgy and dangerous.

Esme and Archie's private investigation into the murder is conducted delicately due to the political turmoil of the time, as well as the dangers that they have to confront. There are powerful forces at work behind the scenes who wish the Jewish woman to be convicted for the murder, and hang, thus obscuring the real motive for what Esme and Archie believe is a premeditated assassination. There are insights into Laverick's past which strain the relationship between our investigators, as well as an aside into book collecting which provides an unlikely ally for the duo.

Rich on detail and atmosphere, Ridpath's meticulous research does not impede the velocity of the plot, in fact it paradoxically enhances the measured pace. Period detail is gently striated over the proceedings with mention of Hindenburg, Goering, and even an appearance by Adolf Hitler. We experience the lake and riverside south of Berlin as a tourist area, prior to the 'Wannsee' name being associated to the 1942 conference that formalised the mechanics of 'the final solution'. We see political turmoil [prior to Hitler and the Nazi Party coming to power] with street fights between Communists and Nazis giving way to Soviet alliances with the Weimar Republic - all feeding the international journalists gathered in Berlin.

But all the while a young Jewish woman languishes in a Dresden jail-cell accused of a murder that masks a more perplexing reality. Her fate relies on the guile of a British Aristocrat recovering from the horrors of World War One, and the tenacity of his side-kick - an ambitious young American Woman who wants to become a Foreign Correspondent.

I can see how Michael Ridpath's latest work has been compared to Alan Furst, Robert Harris and Robert Goddard - however because of the dialogue that adroitly peppers the proceedings, I see a closer link to the work of the late Philip Kerr.

As a literary mystery, **OPERATION BERLIN** is in the front rank of historical thrillers - A Bloody-Good Read.

BUCKEYE

by Patrick Ryan

Bloomsbury Uk PB, September;
in U.S., Random House, 2025

Rating: A

This is a novel that when concluded leaves the reader bereft, but enriched by the themes, characters and insight it reveals. The novel is one that unravels slowly, but provokes such deep thought, I found myself annotating it as I read - marking paragraphs for re-examination and future reflection.

Buckeye is an account of two couples [the Jenkins and the Salts], and their associated families in small-town America. Set in the fictional town of Bonhomie, Ohio - it vividly marks the passage of time between the overseas wars that stained the two families, and of their community [and country].

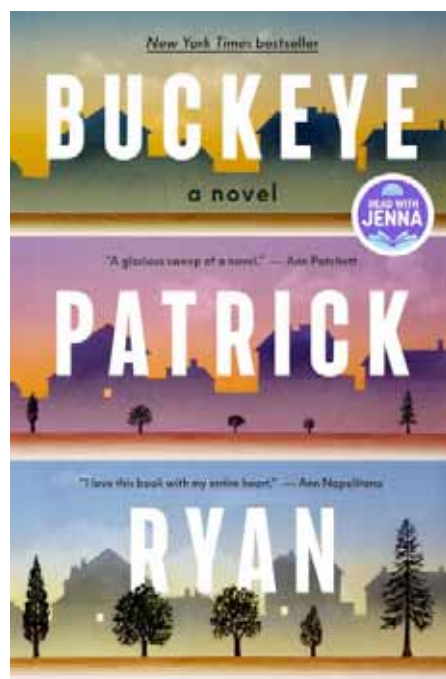
Everett Jenkins returns from the First World War in Europe damaged in what we now term PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Distress], but back then was termed 'shell shock'. Fate further damaged him, by taking his wife Dora, and two of his children by Pneumonia and Influenza, leaving him with his remaining child, Cal ['Calvin']. The boy has a congenital deformity. One leg is a couple of inches shorter than the other, bestowing him with a limp. After the attack on Pearl Harbour, Cal attempts to enlist when an outraged America enters World War Two - but is illegible as he is denoted a 4F after failing the army medical [much to the relief of his father Everett]. When he turns 18, Cal moves out of his father's house on Compton Road, unable to cope with Everett's increasing erratic behaviour. He will meet Becky ['Rebecca'] Hanover and thanks to her father Roman, starts to work in their hardware shop.

Meanwhile a baby girl is left outside 'Open Arms' orphanage in Doyle [a nearby Ohio town] in a basket for the kindly manager Lydia. The baby girl is given the adopted name 'Margaret' though referred to trivially as 'firefly' due to her shock of red-hair. When she grows, Margaret leaves the small town Doyle heading for the Big City. She will meet the handsome Felix Salt in Columbus, and they will marry. Felix works in Production for Tuck and Sons in their Aluminium smelter and is soon promoted which entails relocation from big city Columbus to small-town Bonhomie, a move that poses issues for Margaret.

Ryan's novel then weaves to the life in Bonhomie while WW2 reverberates in Europe and the Pacific. The two families lives' collide, and their fates intertwine as the War intrudes. Children are born, and the Salts and Jenkins lives become striated as both families try to make sense of the world around them.

Then we will see America, tarnished by further conflicts in South East Asia as tragedy and hope merge.

When I put the book down, my eyes were wet. Thank you, Larry Gandle, for the recommendation.



Digging Into The Global Crime Spree

Craig Sistierson



Kia ora and giddyay fellow mystery lovers, I hope that you've all been enjoying a lovely spring in the northern hemisphere, or autumn (Fall) in the south, and that along the way you've also dived into a few fabulous reads so far in 2026, whether brand new releases or older mystery and thriller tales.

I was recently back home in Aotearoa New Zealand for a few weeks, over Easter and the school holidays; a great chance to catch up with friends and family, and also some cool Kiwi writers. I even managed to be part of a Mystery in the Library event – a free/donation author panel series bringing together local writers and readers and supporting local libraries that I helped start back in 2015.

Over the past decade I've helped organised more than 130 Mystery in the Library events, featuring 200+ different mystery and thriller writers at 50 libraries spread across both islands and most regions of my home country – but due to distance and circumstance, until

my recent trip I'd only ever managed to attend one of them in person. The very first, in Auckland, in 2015. So it was really lovely on 1 April to be get to chair 'Miscreants in Motueka', an author panel chat (or korero, as the Māori people say) that happened just down the road from the town where I grew up, and where I fell in love with reading myself thanks to my parents, teachers, and librarians at my school and local public library. A cool full-circle moment; one of my grade school teachers was even in the audience, alongside my daughter, mother, and some old grade school and high school friends. I'm grateful.

It's pretty cool to get to be involved around the edges of the books and publishing world, in a variety of ways, whether as a reviewer or features writer, or interviewing authors onstage at book events and mystery and thriller writing festivals – along with for magazines, newspapers, or podcasts, or as an awards judge on three continents who gets a steady diet of some of the most intriguing voices out there, whether the popular bestsellers we hear plenty about, or hidden gems that emerge.

I'm also working on a third installment in our **DARK DEEDS DOWN UNDER** anthology series of mystery and thriller short stories from Australian and New Zealand crime writers. I wonder what that wee kid who loved sports and books would have thought, growing up in the top of the South Island of New Zealand in a small town, if he knew that decades later he'd get to regularly chat with and interview some of the biggest names and coolest rising stars penning exciting mystery and

thriller tales?

Both in New Zealand and the UK, and elsewhere, we're gearing up for awards season, along with events and festival season. Even though the seasons are opposite 'Down Under', many of the biggest books festivals also occur between April through September, rather than over their summer months.

I'm writing this a few days after this year's Edgar Award winners were announced in New York. The legendary Bob Crais, who began his crime writing career penning teleplays for iconic TV shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *Cagney & Lacey*, and *Miami Vice* back in the 1980s, scooped the Edgar Award for Best Novel for **THE BIG EMPTY**, while Australian author Vikki Wakefield nabbed Best Paperback Original for *The Backwater*, and San Francisco tech lawyer and comms exec Jakob Kerr won the Edgar Award for Best First Novel by an American Author for his debut thriller **DEAD MONEY**.

Among other winners and honorees on the night.

It was pretty cool to see Crais win for **THE BIG EMPTY**, especially given it's the twentieth novel (in nearly 30 years) in his series starring Elvis Cole and Joe Pike. As a mystery and thriller 'geek' along with a long-time awards judge – not for the Edgar Awards, but several other book and other prizes in the USA, Europe, and Australasia – I'm aware that even though mystery and thriller readers collectively really love long-running series, often such books don't fare quite as well for awards.

At the Edgars themselves, for instance, almost all of the Best Novel winners (and many of the nominees) of the past 20+ years have been stand-alones or the first book or two in a new series. Even where the Best Novel winners are writers of highly regarded, well-reviewed, even beloved series – e.g. James Lee Burke, Elly Griffiths, William Kent Krueger, Walter Mosley, or Dennis Lehane – their winning books have been standalones or series-starters, not 10+ novels deep for a main character.

Along with the Edgar Awards, the longlists for the CWA Daggers and the Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel

of the Year and the Barry Awards have also been announced in recent times, showcasing a wide array of fascinating mystery and thriller voices, established and new, from all around the world. The longlist for the Ngaio Marsh Award for Best Novel, New Zealand's annual prizes, will be announced in June.

Writers don't write for awards, of course, but it can be nice to see great voices getting spotlighted a little – and hopefully awards nominations and wins may encourage new readers to try some new-to-them authors. I've certainly found new favourites over the years from books I first saw listed somewhere.

Here at *Deadly Pleasures*, we try to do some of the same kinds of things: highlighting books we like and love – from among the great sea of mystery and thriller titles out there – and hopefully encouraging some of you to try some fantastic authors and novels. We all have different tastes of course, and not everyone will like the same things, but I feel confident any keen mystery and thriller reader, regardless of sub-genre leanings or preferences, can browse this or any issue of *Deadly Pleasures* and come away with a good list of authors and books they may wish to try for themselves.

Enough from me, let's dive right in.

An Interview with Icelandic crime queen Lilja Sigurðardóttir



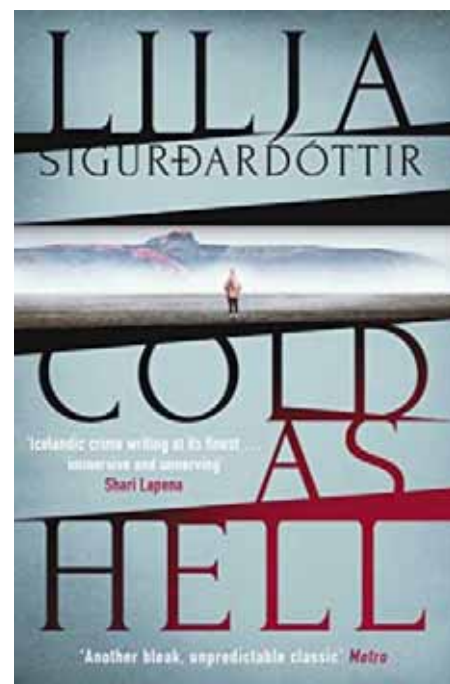
Born in the port town of Akranes, around 30 miles north of Reykjavik

on the west coast of Iceland, Lilja Sigurðardóttir is a mystery writer, playwright and screenwriter who grew up in Mexico, Sweden, Spain, and Iceland. She has written ten crime novels, including the bestselling Reykjavik Noir trilogy (the first in that series, *SNARE*, was longlisted for the CWA Daggers and the third, *CAGE*, won Icelandic Crime Novel of the Year), and standalone thriller *BETRAYAL*, which was shortlisted for the prestigious Glass Key Award, and also won Icelandic Crime Novel of the Year. Her latest novel translated into English is *BLACK AS DEATH*, the fifth installment in her acclaimed 'Áróra Investigates' series (a very fine tale that was reviewed in our November 2025 issue of *Deadly Pleasures*).

BLACK AS DEATH is the culmination, for now at least, of your five-book 'Áróra Investigates' series. When you began writing about Áróra, did you know from the start it would be a five-book cycle, or where it might go, or did that evolve throughout the writing of the series?

It was kind of an experiment for me, because I'd written a trilogy before, and the standalone. At the beginning of my career, I was a very disorganized writer. I just sat down and started - with *SNARE*, *TRAP* and *CAGE*, that Reykjavik Noir trilogy, I just went from page one and then I saw it afterwards that I could have maybe organized the story a little bit better. So when I wrote my standalone novel, *BETRAYAL*, I kind of plotted it, to see if that would work for me. Because so many authors were recommending to do that. And it actually worked very well, so I plotted the novel through, but then in the middle of it, it started changing. So nowadays I plot like half a book. I know where I'm going, and then I let the magic take over, like midway. But with the Áróra series, I had this big story arc decided beforehand, and I knew it would be five books, and I wanted to do like an ongoing series that you would keep with the characters and the greater story arc, but you'd have individual cases to work on in each book. So each book would give the reader the satisfaction of a case

solved, but I kind of decided where I was going [overall] before I started writing the Áróra series. But then again, I look at my notes from when I started, and I smile to myself, like 'Oh, this is where I was planning it', because writing is such an organic thing that it always changes as you go, anyway.



The series began with COLD AS HELL, translated into English a few years ago, where Áróra came back to Iceland because her sister Isafold was missing – and that thread runs throughout all five books, coming to a stirring conclusion in this one. Because you're also a screenwriter, was that something you took from TV etc, where you may have a crime drama with individual cases often solved each episode but there's larger storylines that run across several episodes or a whole season?

Yes, and you can see this too with the authors that I read a lot myself, like Val McDermid, Ian Rankin, Jo Nesbo, Satu Rämö, whomever. This is the thing that works well in ongoing series and also works on TV, because that's like a similar structure of storytelling like TV series, that people, the reader – and I do myself when I'm reading – bond with the characters, and then follow them in a plot. The plots get solved, and you feel

a sense of satisfaction, but you're still curious about the characters. You want to follow them, because you care about these people. You're curious, you want to learn more, you want to know what happens to them and how their relationships and lives develop. So it's a thing with both serial fiction and TV that I think is very popular and satisfying as a reader or viewer.

As an author who writes in Icelandic and is translated for readers in other languages – English and several other languages – how important is the relationship between an author and translator, and how much do you interact with any translators? I imagine it may be different with different languages and publishers, but how do you view translators and how do you work with them, if you get a chance to work with them during the international publishing process?

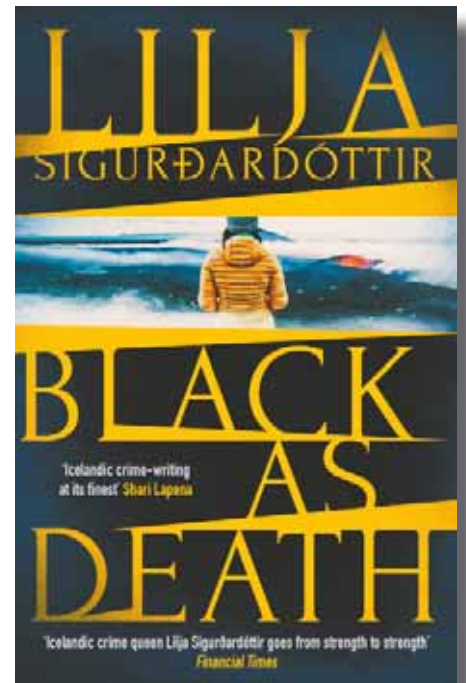
Yeah, I'm translated into, I think, 20 languages, so I know some of my translators, but not all of them. Some of them translate from English [rather than the original novel in Icelandic], so the English translation has to be really good. So that's the one that, let's say, my agent and my original publisher here in Iceland stress most about. And I read it over, because I can read English, but I cannot really read French or the other languages I'm translated into. So, it makes the relationship with my English translator a bit special. I've had two translators into English, firstly Quentin Bates, who is my dear friend, and who is also a crime author himself, and writes stories that take place in Iceland. And he knows Icelandic culture very well. He lived here for years. He's married to an Icelandic lady, and they have half Icelandic children. So they spent part of each year here in Iceland and so many things did not need explanation for him. So it was quite an easy relationship, really. Now I have a new translator called Lorenza Garcia, and she's fantastic, also very meticulous, and I trust her like 100%.

Then comes in the editor; so the books into English are really edited twice, they come from Iceland, edited

and ready, then they are translated, then the editor kind of line edits the English version of them as well. So I have a relationship with both my translators and my English editors. So that's kind of quite special. Into French, I have a fantastic translator called Jean-Christophe Salaün, and we have our own working traditions as well. He sends me questions, and I answer them, and it's kind of a ping pong. So it's different for different countries, but I'm in the closest relationship with translators that translate from the Icelandic because then I can be of use to them if they have questions and so on and need explanations. I really enjoy it when I get questions from translators or comments and it's nice to be able to help them, and get a little insight into how they are doing it, and how they work. And it's very also reassuring, because it gives me a feeling that they're really being diligent about what they're doing. It's a relationship of trust. You just have to trust that the translator does their thing very well and hope that they get your voice across. Because it's a tricky thing, it's not just translating the words like ChatGPT could do, but about trying to catch the voice of the author and essence of the story, getting it across into another language, because language is a reflection of a way of thinking. Sometimes you need to adapt certain things so another culture can understand the wording. This is something that only a human can do and so I have huge respect for translators, and we Icelanders are absolutely dependent on them, for our work to travel to a bigger readership.

Could you tell us more about Jolabokaflod, a book-related annual tradition in Iceland that sounds absolutely wonderful?

Yes, well, Jolabokaflod is the Christmas book flood. In Iceland, books and Christmas are very, very strongly connected. So, books are only published here in October and November, they are all thought of as gifts, originally Christmas gifts. They are all published in hardback - crime novels, love stories, everything is published in hardback, so people can give it as a gift. So it's an ex-



pensive, chunky, respectable Christmas gift, and the traditional Christmas gift in Iceland is a book, it's the most common, common gift here. And it started in the Second World War. It's not an ancient tradition, but it was because the country was kind of closed off. We are an island. We didn't have anything, but the only thing that was not lacking was paper. So there became a lot of emphasis on just printing books. And everyone started giving books as Christmas gifts, because it was the only thing that you could get at that time. So that was the start, and now it is a tradition.

Like in my house, we mostly give books and receive books. So on Christmas Eve, we have a nice dinner, we open our presents, then we go to bed with a stack of new books and stay up in the bed late at night to read. Then you kind of go into your kitchen in your pyjamas and get some snacks, and you kind of just continue reading. When I was little, Christmas morning breakfast was the only meal of the year we were allowed to read at the table. And so on. So it's like a tradition that gives this kind of coziness with books and Christmas. Jolabokaflod, in the months of November-December, is basically a lot of book events. Icelandic culture is all about books in these months, so I have a lot of readings of all kinds. There's also a

tradition for authors to go into workplaces, which have lunches or nice coffee hours with hot chocolate, and they get a writer to read. So it's so nice to go into a workplace where the staff are sitting with their hot chocolate, and you read to them in the candlelight, it's something very special, and Icelandic. I love this season.

Reviews

THE CROSSROADS

by C. J. Box

GP Putnam's Sons, \$32.00, February

Rating: B+

Diving into a new novel starring Wyoming Game Warden Joe Pickett has become something of an annual tradition for plenty of crime readers over the past quarter century, as C. J. Box's likable protagonist, wild settings, and some fascinating storylines and family dynamics have built up a large following since an excellent debut with **OPEN RANGE** back in 2001.

Family has always been vital to Pickett; he's something of an antithesis of the troubled, loner detective we often see in the genre (though he regularly works alone, and still finds plenty of trouble along the way). In **THE CROSSROADS** the Pickett family has to come together in a way they never have before, when Joe is shot in the head on a road near the ranches of three powerful families.

While Marybeth keeps watch over her husband, barely clinging to life in hospital, their daughters Sheridan, Lucy, and April turn investigators, digging into the families and trying to work out who wants their Dad dead. In the 26th Joe Pickett novel (to go along with several short stories, and two good seasons of a sadly short-lived Paramount+ screen adaptation, starring Michael Dorman as the titular hero), Box throws readers a bit of a googly, mixing in familiar aspects with new.

With Box's usual star somewhat sidelined – something that admittedly could frustrate some series readers, while others may really enjoy the change-up Box pitches – other characters come more to the fore, and the author once again

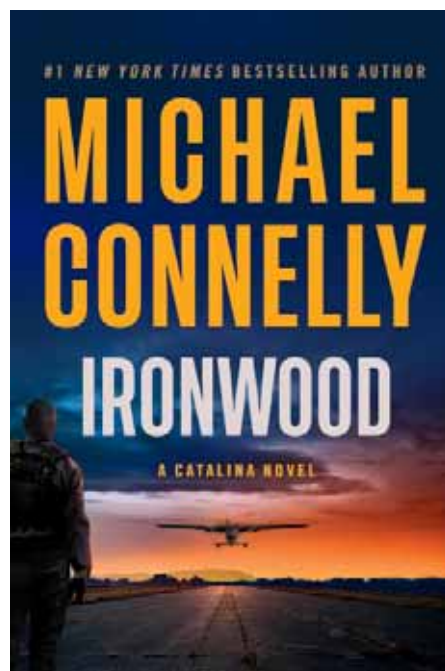
demonstrates his very fine touch for rural landscapes and life, and the people and pressures that come with it. Another good read in a very good series.

IRONWOOD

by Michael Connelly

Little, Brown, \$32.00, May

Rating: A-



Michael Connelly has been entertaining readers and impressing reviewers and awards judges for more than thirty years now, and thankfully shows no signs of easing up. With new audiences also coming to his Los Angeles-set tales through the *Ballard* and *Lincoln Lawyer* screen series, alongside ten outstanding seasons of *Bosch* and *Bosch: Legacy* starring Titus Welliver as Connelly's relentless investigator and first-ever series hero, Connelly last year introduced a new series detective.

We first met LA County Sheriff's Detective Stilwell in **NIGHTSHADE**, where he was serving on scenic Catalina Island, among the other 'broken toys', and doggedly pursuing the truth behind the body of an identified young woman being pulled from the local harbour – despite being sidelined from the murder investigation being led by his nemesis. Now in **IRONWOOD**, Stilwell is confronted by a murder that hits very close to home, after he and his deputies

Ramirez and Quigley are ambushed when a tip-off about late-night drug trafficking at a remote airstrip goes horribly wrong. Benched while an internal inquiry is underway, Stilwell can't sit still. Determined to find out who set up his deputies, he starts his own off-the-books investigation, while also looking into an item of recently turned in lost property that he ties to a woman who reportedly went missing on Catalina Island four years ago.

Both new and longtime fans of Connelly's storytelling will find plenty to savour in **IRONWOOD**, which expands and adds extra threads to the 'Bosch universe' he has built over the past 30+ years on page and screen. It's a propulsive, one-sitting kind of read that doesn't feel 'thin' or breeze by too quickly; there's depth to the characters and sense of place, alongside intriguing storylines. Stilwell has many of the qualities we've come to admire in Connelly's other key heroes – Harry Bosch, 'Lincoln lawyer' Mickey Haller, crime reporter Jack McEvoy, and Renee Ballard – in terms of his determination to uncover the truth and find justice, no matter the personal cost, while also having his own traits.

In **IRONWOOD**, Stilwell is fully welcomed into the Connelly universe, briefly encountering Bosch, then working on the case of the missing hiker with Detective Ballard and her LAPD Open-Unsolved Unit. Both cases get increasingly complicated, and dangerous. Meanwhile Stilwell must still deal with other policing and political matters on the island, including spraypainted monuments and vandalised grapevines. Less life-and-death, perhaps, but vital to his tenure nonetheless. Overall, Connelly spins another very fine yarn, blending cases and characters into a propulsive, satisfying tale and a climax that will have readers wanting another Stilwell book asap. The 2023 recipient of the MWA's Grand Master Award, Connelly in a way is like the LeBron James or Tom Brady of American crime writing – continuing to not only perform at a high level, but evolve and lead the way even as younger, exciting new voices are welcomed to the mystery and thriller genre, and 'change the game'.

THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF

by Evelyn Clarke

HarperCollins, \$30.00, April

Rating: B

One of the year's most-hyped mystery releases sees #1 *New York Times* bestselling fantasy author VE Schwab teaming with editor turned YA author Cat Clarke as 'Evelyn Clarke'. I've been hearing about **THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF** since early 2025, as it was heavily pushed at various British crime writing festivals last year, before and after the reveal of the authors behind the pseudonym.

So, what's the actual read like? The premise may seem familiar for die-hard crime and mystery fans or anyone who's read masterful Japanese author Yukito Ayatsuji's **THE LABYRINTH HOUSE MURDERS**: several not-so-successful writers are invited to the secluded residence of a renowned bestselling author, with the opportunity for one of them to write their way to a new life at a whole new level of success, if they can survive a writing competition that becomes increasing life or death.

Swap Japan for Scotland here, and the dead bestseller is Arthur Fletch, the contestants have 72 hours to win a two million dollar contract, and they come from a range of writing genres: romance, sci-fi, YA, crime. There's even a writing duo in the mix. Among the mystery, 'Clarke' leans into some interesting 'inside baseball' of the publishing world -- which could intrigue casual readers and aficionados alike -- and evokes the tension of the setting and setup pretty well. The contestants can at times feel like moving parts in a sometimes clever game, rather than nuanced characters.

Written in prosaic style, **THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF** will be a pleasing read for many whodunnit fans and casual readers, while perhaps not being as unique or thrilling as the pre-release hype suggested.

A GIFT BEFORE DYING

by Malcolm Kempt

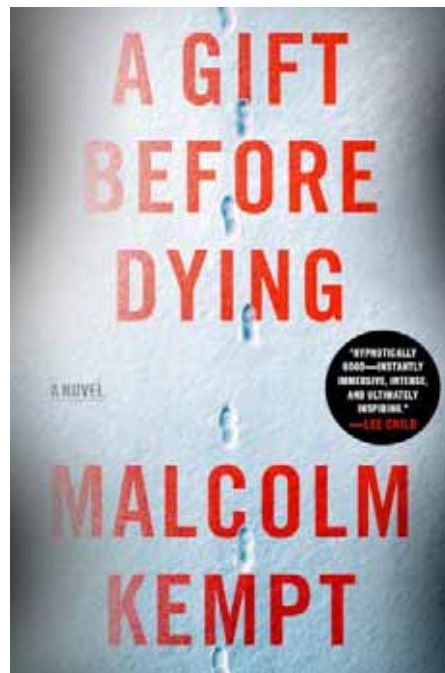
Crown, \$28.00, January

Rating: A

Newfoundland author Malcolm Kempt immerses readers in the harshness of Arctic landscapes, and the lives lived among them, in his terrific debut **A GIFT BEFORE DYING**.

Sergeant Elderick Cole is enduring a frigid exile in Cape Dorset, a tiny hamlet perched among the vast, rugged expanses of Nunavut, after botching a high-profile murder investigation on mainland Canada. Exiled to an outpost more than 2,000 km north of Toronto.

Cole's tough, haunted existence becomes even tougher after he discovers the hanged body of Pitseolala, a troubled Inuit girl that he knew. Seemingly just another suicide in a bitter, desolate place; Cole thinks something more may be going on, though is he just fooling himself, or trying to atone for past mis-



takes, professional and personal?

Meanwhile, Pitseolala's adolescent brother Maliktu, often bullied due to his facial scars, believes he's being visited by her ghost. Can the damaged duo find a killer, if one even exists?

Kempt, who worked as a criminal lawyer in the remote Arctic north for seventeen years, dealing with violent crime in a violent place, draws readers in with his vivid, authentic storytelling. You can almost feel the frigid air and the weight of the weather and isolated

landscapes bearing down on characters as you read. Commendably, in **A GIFT BEFORE DYING**, Kempt also bravely marches into some places many other crime writers and publishers may avoid, from bloodstained circle of life to the trauma and weight carried by those whose careers accept violence and death as commonplace.

Bleak yet brilliant; an excellent first outing.

George's Take: *There's no question that Malcolm Kempt has serious writing chops. But I have had a very difficult time reading **A GIFT BEFORE DYING** because the setting is so dark and the characters' lives so hopeless. I'm 2/3 of the way through the book and am struggling to finish. But I can totally understand why Craig praises the book.*

THE KEEPER

by Tana French

Penguin, \$32.00, March

Rating: A-

Almost 20 years ago, Vermont-born author Tana French, who has lived in Dublin since she was a teenager, burst onto the crime writing scene with **IN THE WOODS**. It was an astonishing debut that melded police procedural and character-centric psychological thriller with literary style, swept 'Best Debut' at several major awards, and introduced the Dublin Murder Squad, which rather than a singular series lead or duo had a rotating cast where supporting characters in some novels are main characters in others.

More recently, French has soaked readers in the smalltown secrets and local feuds of Ardnakelty, a rural farming hamlet in Ireland where former Chicago cop Cal Hooper now lives. **THE KEEPER** is the third such tale, and finds Hooper caught up in a town split asunder following the death of local woman Rachel Holohan, who'd been engaged to Eugene Moynihan, the son of the local power broker, before she washed up on the banks of the local river.

A tragic suicide, or something more sinister?

The Moynihans have run things around Ardnakelty for centuries, and aren't used to hearing no for an answer,

as Cal and his fiancée Lena quickly find out. Was Rachel really Eugene's true love, or was she standing in Tommy Moynihan's way?

French masterfully draws readers beneath the surface of the town and its populace, with strong evocation of place and the people who inhabit it. She has a marvellous touch for character, and the messiness of humanity. Tension ratchets to breaking point. *is* a book about a young girl's death, but also about a community and a lament for a way of life that may be increasingly endangered. Very good.

MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT

by Alessandra Ranelli

Gallery/Scout Press, \$30.00, May

Rating: A

With her corsets and curves, trail of lovers, and mysterious past, Sterling Lockwood would have made a fine femme fatale in a classic crime novel. Instead the night concierge at an infamous Vienna hotel is the captivating heroine and amateur sleuth at the heart (or loins?) of Alessandra Ranelli's debut whodunnit, **MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT**.

It's a fantastic read that joyfully upturns expectations; draped in some timeless Golden Age mystery threads, while weaving in plenty of raunchiness and modern sensibilities too.

Sterling is a keeper of secrets; of the hotel guests, and her own. At the Hotel Orient, cameras are banned, aliases are required, and every guest has something to hide. But when two guests are found murdered, including one of her past lovers, Sterling must go beneath the falsehoods to find the truth. Inveigling herself into the official investigation alongside police detectives Andreas and Beata, a male-female duo who each make her pulse race, can Sterling keep her own dangerous secrets hidden as she digs into the private lives of others?

Ranelli, a Vienna-based American author, writes with zing and spark; there's a strong sense of personality and style in **MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT**. She crafts a strong sense of the world of her story, bringing Vienna to life from its bureaucracy to swingers clubs, alongside

a fascinating cast of characters. There's plenty of craft and cleverness beneath the seductive façade, too. Recommended.

THE FINAL SCORE

by Don Winslow

HarperCollins, \$30.00, January

Rating: A+

Masterful storyteller Don Winslow has shown in **THE BORDER** and **THE CARTEL** that he can write epic literary crime novels that tilt the scales around 700 pages, maintaining multi-layered, crisp and compelling storytelling throughout (unlike some bloated tomes from other bestsellers). Now, in *The Final Score* he underlines that he's also a dab hand at pitch-perfect short stories; intense tales, memorable characters, high-pressure situations.

In the titular tale, a legendary thief on the cusp of a life sentence plans an audacious casino heist to secure the financial future of those he loves. Elsewhere, we meet an ambitious teen looking to raise college funds by delivering illegal liquor to his town's residents ("The Sunday List"); two gangsters before a hit sharing breakfast and reminisces ("True Story"); a promising cop facing a life-changing dilemma for love of family ("The North Wing"); and surfer-private eye Boone Daniels and his crew - who feature in earlier Winslow novels like **THE DAWN PATROL** --- battling with the high-maintenance, drug-addicted film star they're hired to protect ("The Lunch Break").

All building to the lengthiest story, "Collision", where a moment of madness unfurls a whole new life for a high-achieving hotelier and family man. Short story collections can be tricky to review, as often quality can vary, and different readers may prefer different tales, but in Winslow's case he knocks it out of the park each and every time. Sharp dialogue, unforgettable characters, tight storytelling.

THE FINAL SCORE is a delightful buffet of humanity caught up in dark deeds where every morsel is moreish. A treat for longtime Winslow fans, and great entrée for those new to his talents.

THE ARK

by Haruo Yuki, translated by Jim Rion
Pushkin Vertigo, £14.99 GBP, February

Rating: A

For more than a century, American and British authors have rather dominated the global mystery and thriller fiction scene, even among a few stunning books and star authors from other countries. In more recent times publishers, readers, and booksellers have been spreading the net more widely, with the Nordic Noir boom from the mid-2000s, Outback Noir in the 2010s, a wider range of European translations, the growth of Irish and New Zealand crime writing, and more.

Lately it seems the (long overdue) turn of Japanese crime writing, which has a terrific century-plus legacy but is now experiencing a translation boom alongside skyrocketing bookseller support and is becoming far more widely available for English-speaking readers around the world. From classic *honkaku* (puzzle-like whodunnits ala Agatha Christie or Ngaio Marsh) to darker tales ranging from serial killers to psychological thrillers and more; fresh translations aplenty, of books old and classic.

THE ARK is a terrific, darker novel that blends honkaku elements with disaster thriller, as a group of seven university friends - an engineer, office worker, yoga teacher, a married couple, etc -- go on a reunion hike only to be trapped in a mysterious abandoned bunker with a family of three when nature roars. As the waters rise, one person may need to sacrifice themselves in order to help the others escape. Before any decision can be made, one of the party is found strangled. It won't be the last murder. Engineer Shuichi and his cousin Shotaro try to find the killer before they all die underground.

As translated by Jim Rion (who also translates the popular Uketsu pictorial mysteries, e.g. **STRANGE BUILDINGS**), Haruo Yuki crafts a fascinating, page-turning tale that melds claustrophobic atmosphere and ticking clock stakes with timeless storytelling, seasoned with a darker edge. A palpable sense of jeopardy, and a final act that will stay with readers far beyond the final page. Highly recommended.

Down Under Crime



Jeff Popple Reviews

FINDING THE BONES

by Natalie Conyer

Echo, \$A34.99

Rating: A-

Natalie Conyer builds on the promise of her first two novels, with another engrossing tale in **FINDING THE BONES**. Set in Sydney, it follows Homicide Detective Jackie Rose, who we previously met in **SHADOW CITY**, as she investigates a high profile case that has severe implications for her family and herself.

The story is told through two time frames. In the 1980s, Belle Fitzgerald, young, rich and spirited, lives in Kings Cross, the city's bohemian heart. When she learns of plans to demolish her street and evict its residents, she commits to fighting the development, even though this brings her up against the Cross's crime lords and their servants, the notoriously corrupt local cops. Recklessly, and against her better judgment, she embarks on a secret affair with one of those cops, Sergeant Stanton Rose. When she goes missing, her disappearance becomes one of the nation's great mysteries.

Almost forty years later and the retired Stanton Rose is an Australian icon, celebrated for his undercover work in the Cross. Jackie Rose, his daughter, with some reservations, has followed in his footsteps. When Belle Fitzgerald's bones are discovered, Jackie is given the very cold, and very public case. This is her chance to shine, but what she finds threatens everything she cherishes.

FINDING THE BONES draws its acknowledged inspiration from the infamous disappearance of Juanita Nielsen in the mid-1970s and the rogue's gallery of characters suspected in her demise, but the story is very much Natalie's own. The opening chapters are perhaps a little clunky, but once underway the plot quickly finds its feet and the rest of the novel flows very smoothly. The twists and turns keep the reader on their toes, and the ending delivers some genuine surprises.



Natalie Conyer

Central to the book are the strong-willed characters of Belle Fitzgerald and Jackie Rose, both of whom are well fleshed out and nuanced. Sydney features heavily in the story with Natalie bringing to life its dark corners and darker history. There are also some nicely placed jabs at the media and recent political events. An enjoy-

able and thought provoking read.

THE GAMBLER

by J. P. Pomare

Hachette, \$A34.99

Rating: A

J. P. Pomare is a master of the twisty, unpredictable story and his latest novel, **THE GAMBLER**, is another tightly plotted tale that takes you down unexpected paths to an exciting conclusion.

THE GAMBLER features American private eye Vince Reid, who we first met in **THE WRONG WOMAN**, in a new case involving some very dangerous players. Reid is visiting his old friend and mentor, Nick Lark, when he is offered a case that he cannot refuse. A young university graduate was recently shot at a political rally by a respected local woman who inexplicably opened fire at the attendees, before being killed herself. The victim's parents want to know what motivated the woman to shoot their daughter. Reid is told that it is easy money, but as he delves further into the event, he finds some curious inconsistencies, and has questions about the victim's supposed boyfriend who killed the shooter and has now disappeared.

The story is largely told from Reid's perspective, although it is complemented by other viewpoints from shortly before the shooting and by a link back to the 1990s. The various strands work well together to generate early interest and mystery, and book has a good momentum to it. Pomare is an accomplished entertainer, and it is very easy to become caught up in the

story and to keep turning the pages to find out what happens next.

The characters are simply, but effectively, described and Reid is a compelling and believable central narrator whose commitment to the case keeps the story moving along nicely. The background information on mathematical theory, grassroots American politics and the local Amish communities is interesting and seamlessly woven into the story, and Reid's reflections on life are judiciously managed.

In all, an enthralling and enjoyable book, and probably one of Pomare's best.

OLD GAMES

by Fiona Hardy

Affirm, \$A34.99

Rating: B+

Fiona Hardy's **UNBURY THE DEAD**, was one of my favourite Australian crime tales of 2025. Fresh and witty, it featured a great central character pairing in the form of dodgy Melbourne investigators, and marginal criminals, Alice and Teddy.

Now the pair have returned in **OLD GAMES**. Still carrying the physical and emotional scars from their last case, they are much more cautious now. When they are hired to find the stolen ashes of a long-dead celebrity tennis player they are expecting a simple job and a quick pay day, but things quickly escalate and they find themselves caught up in a complex web of old rivalries and violence.

OLD GAMES maintains the feel and edginess of the first book, and certainly keeps the reader entertained as they travel with Alice and Teddy in search of the ashes. The descriptions and observations are sharp, and Fiona creates a strong sense of place along the way.

Importantly, the plot plays out in a subtle way and Fiona keeps it interesting without spoon feeding the reader. Some minor side stories add to the pleasure, and it will be interesting to see how these are resolved in future books. If I had a complaint, it is that the case at the core of the book lacks the substance

and import of the storyline in the first book. For a long time, there does not seem to be a lot at stake, which reduces the tension, and the book occasionally meanders. The pace picks up as the story progresses, and the finale provides some good twists and a strong dose of excitement and page turning action.

As with **UNBURY THE DEAD**, Teddy and Alice are again the stars of the book, and their laconic banter, flexible morals and genuine affection for each other help to lift **OLD GAMES** well above the rest of the pack. I can't wait for their next adventure.

CLICK

by Sarah Bailey

Allen & Unwin, \$A34.99.

Rating: B+



Set on the eve of the COVID pandemic in Australia in early 2020, **CLICK** brings back journalist Oli Groves, and other characters, from my favourite Sarah Bailey book, **THE HOUSEMATE**.

CLICK opens with Oli receiving potentially terrible personal news, which she tries to ignore while focusing on the wave of potential murders and disappearances which seem to be gripping Melbourne. The police are on the trail of a possible serial killer, who is sending cryptic notes and photos to media

outlets. Oli and her partner TJ, founders of a fledgling digital news site, see an opportunity to cement their early commercial successes, by offering a fresh and alternative source of reporting on the murders, and hopefully some inside details. Meanwhile, young police detective Penelope (Pen) Kibbs is determined to stop the violence before more women are killed, and to make her mark in the investigation.

The story mainly alternates between Oli's and Pen's viewpoint, with Sarah skilfully using the young detective's role in the investigation to keep the reader involved in the pursuit of the killer, while Oli largely acts as an observer in the early stages of the book.

The pace is a little slow to begin with, as Bailey pursues issues around online abuse and domestic violence, but steadily improves as more deaths occur. The background information on the changing nature of news reporting in Australia is interesting, and Bailey's vivid descriptions of Melbourne and its surrounds also add to the pleasure. The knowledge that COVID is just around the corner for Oli, and the rest of Melbourne, also adds to the unsettling sense of doom and helps to put things into context.

The tension certainly picks up towards the end when Oli becomes more involved, and the plot delivers decent twists and some gripping flashes of violence. It also leaves some things curiously unresolved, which may mean that another book is on the cards.

In all, **CLICK** is an enjoyable crime novel with well fleshed out characters and a strong sense of place and time. Warmly recommended.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

SOFTLY CALLS THE DEVIL

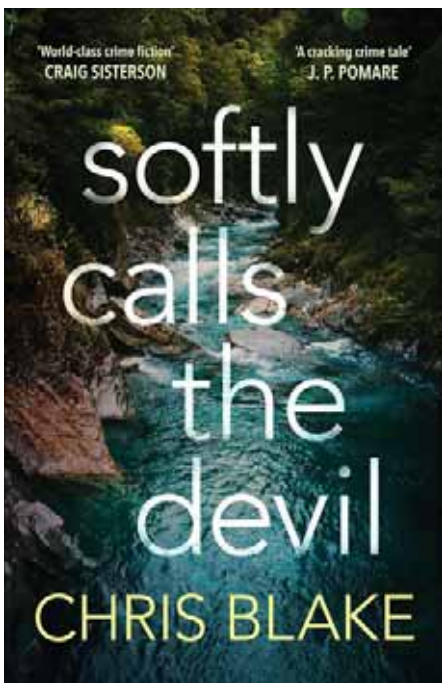
by Chris Blake

Echo Publishing, \$37.99 NZD,

November 2025

Rating: A+

Several years ago, before COVID upturned the world, a very exciting fresh voice popped up in New Zealand



crime writing, aka #yeahnoir, with a compelling debut, **THE SOUND OF HER VOICE**, that dripped authenticity as it delved into the darker side of modern-day policing. It was written by 'Nathan Blackwell', a pseudonymous author who'd spent a decade with the New Zealand police, including covert operations and investigations into drug manufacture, child abuse, corruption, rape, and murder. That real-life experience poured onto the page, matched with quality writing, and insights into the toll such crimes take on law enforcement. In **THE SOUND OF HER VOICE**, Detective Matt Buchanan fears he's been on the job too long, accumulating pain from all the sickness he's seen, the unsolved murders and missing young girls. As he chases leads and finds connections, can he survive looking into the abyss? The book went on to be shortlisted for the Ngaio Marsh Awards, was picked up for publication in the UK, and was a 'Thriller of the Year' for a leading British newspaper.

We've been waiting ever since for a new story from 'Nathan Blackwell', starring Matt Buchanan.

While we don't get the former, thankfully we now have the latter as Buchanan is back in this terrific new novel from Chris Blake, the real-life sleuth behind the pseudonym. **SOFTLY**

CALLS THE DEVIL is a superb where Chris Blake harnesses his insider perspective alongside substantial storytelling chops to craft a layered rural noir tale set on Aotearoa New Zealand's wild West Coast. A remote place of ancient forests, rugged coastlines, small towns, and plenty of places for bodies to be buried.

After some tough times, Buchanan has found a new equilibrium as the sole-charge police officer for the small, isolated settlement of Haast, a largely peaceful hamlet surrounded by nature, far away from the serial killers and horrors of Buchanan's former life as a detective. Things are going pretty well – Buchanan's even made friends among the locals, and seemingly won their trust – until his beloved predecessor as the tiny town's 'local copper', Gus, is found dead by the river.

With a bullet in his head.

What's going on? Gus had been digging into a disturbing murder-suicide case from nearly fifty years ago. With backup called in from the big city, Buchanan pursues a case that's far outside his usual duties in Haast, and must confront some dark secrets and hidden truths about his new home. He's not the only person who has been trying to escape their past on the West Coast, and things quickly become complicated, and extremely dangerous.

SOFTLY CALLS THE DEVIL is a superb crime novel that's about much more than the investigation of a crime (or crimes), where Blake illustrates the shards of trauma that police absorb over the course of their careers, and the importance of connection and community. Set against the rainswept rugged beauty of Haast and its surrounding forests, lakes, and sea, **SOFTLY CALLS THE DEVIL** delivers welcome insights into the human side of policing rather than focusing too strongly on procedure or the growing use of technology to solve crimes. The impact of crime, alongside its investigation.

After several years, it's wonderful to have Matt Buchanan back on the page, and Blake (aka Nathan Blackwell) delivers on the promise he showed with

his excellent debut. This is world-class crime fiction, set in a less-explored yet fascinating corner of New Zealand. With *Softly Calls the Devil*, Blake deftly conducts a rural noir symphony, luring us in with character and place before escalating events with a murder that shocks the small community, then layering in a variety of issues and insights – plus a few more bodies, and a twist or two along the way – before building to a dramatic crescendo.

LIKE FOLLOW DIE

by Ashley Kalagian Blunt

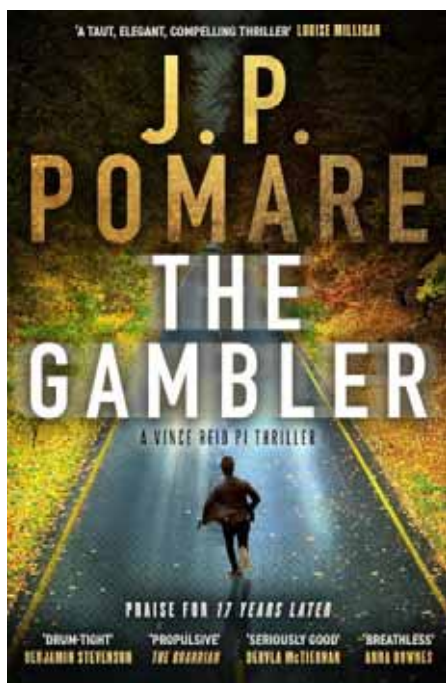
Ultimo Press, \$34.99 AUD, February

Rating: A-

Canadian-Australian author and podcaster Ashley Kalagian Blunt draws readers into a horrifying and all-too-believable situation in her compulsive new novel **LIKE FOLLOW DIE**, which was first released as Audible Original last year and is now pleasingly available in print. In her terrific earlier thriller **DARK MODE**, Blunt explored some of the dangers of our oh-so-connected (online) lives, in terms of the Dark Web, surveillance and loss of privacy. Now she ratchets up the parental fears, in terms of the internet's potentially devastating impacts on our children's growth and development.

When he was a youngster, Sydney teenager Ben wanted to grow up to swim for Australia at the Olympics. Instead one rainy morning, his mother Corinne gets a knock on her door in the Eastern suburbs, from homicide detective Kyle Nazarian. She knows why he's here. How did her beloved son go from typical teenager, juggling school, dating his first girlfriend, and trying to find an after-school job for some extra money, to what he became. Or what he did?

Blunt is unafraid to take readers into some harrowing places, as we switch perspectives between central characters, including the worrying evolution in Ben's diary entries as he gets sucked into the web's darker corners. **LIKE FOLLOW DIE** is a tense, tough read from a talented storyteller who always has something important to say. Well worth a read.



THE GAMBLER

by JP Pomare

Hachette Australia, \$34.99 AUD,

February

Rating: A

Back in early 2019, Melbourne-based Māori storyteller JP Pomare (Ngā Puhī) announced himself as a ‘sit up and take notice’ fresh voice in crime and thriller writing with what went on to be an award-winning psychological thriller debut, **CALL ME EVIE**, set in the small coastal town of Maketu near New Zealand’s volcanic plateau where Pomare grew up. Since then, Pomare has only bolstered that first impression with a string of terrifically written, quite different standalone thrillers.

His second novel, **IN THE CLEARING**, was inspired by a real-life matriarchal Australian cult from the 1970s and was later adapted into Disney+ series *The Clearing*, and last year his fourth novel was adapted – to more middling results (deleting chunks of what made the novel great) – into TV series *Watching You*. Now Pomare is embarking on something new, for him at least: a book series.

THE GAMBLER sees the return of private investigator Vince Reid, who first appeared in 2022 novel **THE WRONG WOMAN**. Reid is called in

by an old friend on a supposedly ‘easy money’ case. Political staffer Katie Marshall was shot at a peaceful rally for US Congressional candidate Ana Gutierrez. The unlikely assassin was respected local woman Barb Aldridge, who had no criminal record, and was shot dead by Katie’s fellow staffer Jason. No whodunnit here, but Katie’s parents want to know why their daughter died. Was she the real target, or did she catch a fate meant for someone else?

Put simply: **THE GAMBLER** is further evidence that if you like twisty thrillers that combine great characters, explorations of wider issues, and fabulous writing, you should be reading JP Pomare. It’s a novel packed with lots of elements, from scams and sports betting to AI, cold cases, and the Amish community. The perspective switches between Reid and other characters. Everyone is keeping secrets, even Reid. Frankly, in many hands, this could become a bit of a mess. But Pomare has a masterful storytelling touch, and instead it’s a compelling, masterful tale. A home run.

THE SHARK

by Emma Styles

Pegasus Books, \$27.95 USD, June

Rating: A-

Almost four years ago, British-Australian author Emma Styles burst onto the crime (writing) scene with the fresh and fantastic **NO COUNTRY FOR GIRLS**, a riveting tale of two young women thrust together in Western Australia, at the wheel of a dead man’s twin-cab ute with a bag of stolen gold bars under the seat, with little idea where they were heading, or how they’d survive.

That helter-skelter thriller saw Styles hand-picked, alongside Māori storyteller Michael Bennett and American author Stacy Willingham, by modern-day Queen and American author of *Crime Val* McDermid as one of the most exciting new voices in all of global crime fiction and get spotlighted on the ‘New Blood’ panel at the iconic Theakston Old Peculier Crime Writing Festival in Harrogate, UK.

NO COUNTRY FOR GIRLS went on to be shortlisted for several awards, and win the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize. What next? Second-time around Styles returns to Western Australia, where she grew up, with another duo of troubled young women who find themselves in deadly circumstances. **THE SHARK** is a serial killer thriller, with a difference.

A hot Australian summer. A year ago, self-confessed ‘gutless wonder’ Raych’s best friend Piper vanished, taking with her any hope Raych may have harboured for ‘more than friends’. Unlike some other young women who’ve gone missing, Piper’s body hasn’t been found, but Raych is sure she was taken by the same local serial killer that has been terrorising Perth’s coastal suburbs. The police have a suspect, but don’t seem to be getting anywhere. So what’s a girl to do?

Meanwhile, high schooler Carmen wonders about a disturbing connection to the killer. Raych and Carmen met on the psych ward in the past, but now they’re out, and the duo end up forming an unlikely (and untrusting) alliance. They both desperately need answers, and desperate times call for desperate measures. A man cable-tied to a chair. An abandoned garage. A bag of tools.

But what if they’ve got the wrong man?

Alternating between Raych and Carmen’s unreliable narratives, Styles takes readers on an engrossing ride where the real villains are unclear, all building to a harrowing and action-packed finale. **THE SHARK** is a strong sophomore effort from a rising star in



DP Calendar



Guests of Honor: S. A. Cosby, Martin Edwards, Laura Joh Rowland, Laura Lippman, George Pelecanos, Barbara Neely, Art Taylor
Website: bouchercon2027.com



May 5-9, 2026
ThrillerFest XXI
 New York City, NY
 Guests of Honor: Lisa Scottoline, Harlan Coben, Douglas Preston, Rachel Howzell Hall, Luis Alberto Urrea
Website: thrillerfest.com



Stirling, Scotland
 Guest of Honor: Denise Mina
Website: bloodyscotland.com



June 18-20, 2026
Capital Crime
 London, England
 Details to Follow
Website: <https://www.capitalcrime.org/capital-crime-26>



October 21-25, 2026
Cross-Border Crimes
Bouchercon
 Calgary, Canada

Guests of Honor: Louise Penny, Kathy Reichs, Abir Mukherjee, Mark Greaney, Jennifer Hillier, Vicky Delaney, P.J. Vernon
Website: bouchercon2026.com



July 23-26, 2026
Theakston Old Peculier
Crime Festival
 Harrogate, England

September 18-20, 2026
Bloody Scotland



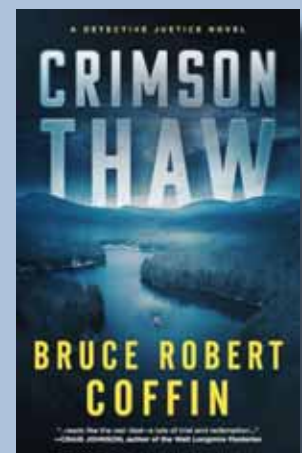
September 1-5, 2027
Bouchercon 2027
 Washington, D. C.

Anthony Award Nominations 2026

Best Hardcover Novel
 ALL THIS COULD BE YOURS, Hank Phillippi Ryan
 THE BLACK WOLF, Louise Penny
 CROOKS, Lou Berney
 DEATH OF AN EX, Delia Pitts
 KING OF ASHES, S. A. Cosby

Best First Novel
 HISTORY LESSONS, Zoe B. Wallbrook
 JULIE CHAN IS DEAD, Liann Zhang
 MASK OF THE DEER WOMAN, Laurie L. Dove
 THE RETIREMENT PLAN, Sue Hincenbergs
 VOICES OF THE ELYSIAN FIELDS, Michael Rigg
 WHISKEY BUSINESS, Adrian Andover

Best Paperback Original/ E-Book/Audiobook Original
 CRIMSON THAW, Bruce Robert Coffin
 EDGE, Tracy Clark
 RIVER OF LIES, James L'Etoile
 THE VIOLENT HEART, Heather Levy
 TRICKS OF FORTUNE, Lina Chern





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INTERNATIONAL GUEST: ABIR MUKHERJEE

AMERICAN GUEST: MARK GREANEY

CANADIAN GUEST: JENNIFER HILLIER

COZY GUEST: VICKI DELANY

KIDS' GUEST OF HONOUR: KEVIN SANDS

TOASTMASTER: P.J. VERNON

FAN GUEST: STEELE CURRY (POSTHUMOUS)

OCTOBER 21-25, 2026



What's New In the U.K.



BODY OF LIES, Jo Callaghan (Simon & SchusterUK, £18.99, April).

Kat & Lock #4. DCS Kat Frank returns to work at the Future Policing Unit after a tragic loss, only to find herself thrust into a new high-profile case. On the night of Halloween a local MP is found murdered, with a taunting message written in binary code that seems to target Kat specifically: Catch me if you can. The victim's anti-AI sentiments suggest a political motive, and as Kat investigates with her partner AIDE Lock – the world's first AI detective – she finds herself once again battling her own prejudices about the technological future he represents. But when a cyber-attack takes out the National Grid, Kat and Lock have to race against the clock to track down the hacker before thousands die. (Described as the last of the

where could be less likely than a fan convention on a cruise liner celebrating a contentious Sixties TV series? But unlike the media family exploiting their show's renewed relevance, he's not there to stoke controversy: he's there to solve a murder. Already in deep water with his employer, Jack desperately needs a win, and solving this decades-old mystery could be it. Problem is, he's in the middle of the Atlantic, and someone onboard has already killed once to keep their secret.

could blow his whole world apart: he wants them to take over the entire drug trafficking network in Leeds and Bradford, and rule together.

THE ARISTOCRACY, Patrick Worrall (BantamTransworld, £18.99, June). Darren Sinfield, the most notorious inmate at Lower Marston maximum-security prison, has gone over the wall and is thought to be holed up in nearby Avonford, a decaying town with a squalid underbelly. The intelligence officer tasked with hunting him down, Declan Rennard, was an Avonford man himself back in the day. But times have changed. He used to know where the bodies are buried. Now he's in danger of becoming one of them. To catch a criminal, Dec is going to have to start thinking like one and that means entering his own dark history to engage in a twisted game of cat and mouse with a man who plays it better than anyone.

OUT OF THE ASHES, M. J. Arlidge (Orion, £16.99, June). Helen Grace #14. As her best friend fights for her life, DI Helen Grace hunts her attacker in unfamiliar territory. Under pressure as never before, Helen knows that this time everything is on the line. Her boss has told her that failure is not an option, whilst the Dutch underworld will stop at nothing to protect one of their own. But for Helen this mission is personal. Which is why she has vowed to catch the desperate fugitive or die trying



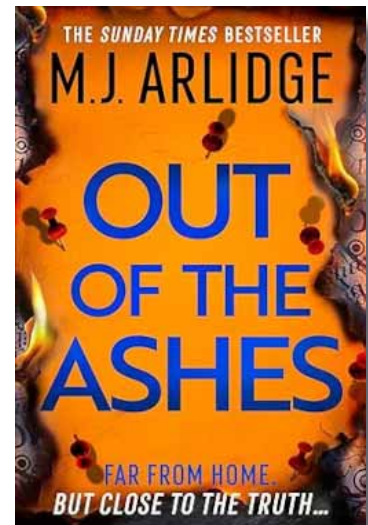
Kat & Lock series.)

QUITE UGLY ONE EVENING, Chris Brookmyre (Abacus, £22.00, May). Jack Parlabane #9

Reporter Jack Parlabane thrives on chasing stories in unlikely places, and



THE KINGPIN, A. A. Dhand (HQ, £16.99, May). Idris Khan #2. Idris Khan is no longer the man he used to be. How can he be? Murder changes people – and it has changed him. Once a respected pharmacist, Idris now walks a fine line between survival and destruction. He craves something normal in a world gone to hell – but then Zidane, his estranged brother, walks through the door. Freshly released from prison, Zidane's presence is radioactive. Truths are laid bare. New alliances are formed. And Zidane has an offer for Idris that



U.K. Reviews



Jeff Pople Reviews

THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF

by Evelyn Clarke
Harper Collins, £16.99
Rating: A-

THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF

by the pseudonymous Evelyn Clarke, is unashamedly a high concept novel that relies heavily on a very contrived set-up. Nevertheless it is very good fun.

A collaboration between bestselling fantasy author V.E. Schwab and her friend and screenwriter Cat Clarke, **THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF** uses the frame of a murder mystery to poke gentle fun at the worlds of publishing and writing. Six struggling authors from the across the genres are invited to a private island off the coast of Scotland. The island is owned by the world-famous mystery author Arthur Fletch. When the authors arrive, they discover that Fletch is dead. His final novel, the most anticipated book in history, remains unfinished. But the ending won't write itself. The authors are given seventy-two hours to write their version of the ending, with the author who writes the best one winning a large financial reward and the opportunity to restart their flagging career. Of course, things soon go awry.

It would be a crime to reveal the machinations that occur, or the bloody events that unfold, other than to say that the twists and turns come at a brisk pace and the deaths are often unexpected. The story telling is breezy and fun, with a good touch of humour, and the insights into the various genres represented by the assembled authors: romance, crime, youth adult, horror, etc, are interesting. The mystery elements are

well handled, with Schwab and Clarke avoiding some obvious twists, and the clever epilogue nicely wraps everything up.

Some suspension of disbelief is needed around the premise and the conclusion, but it is easy to just settle back and be entertained by two very capable authors.

A DEADLY EPISODE

by Anthony Horowitz
Century, £22.00
Rating: A-

Anthony Horowitz's excellent series about former police detective Daniel Hawthorne, in which Horowitz himself plays a major role as Hawthorne's chronicler and assistant, are an absolute treat.

In the latest book, **A DEADLY EPISODE**, a murder takes place on the film set where the first book in the Haw-

thorne series, **THE WORD IS MURDER**, is being filmed. The actors have been cast, the script written, and filming has already started in Hastings. However, when Hawthorne and Anthony visit the set, they find a far from happy family. The director is pretentious, the screenwriter is an eco-warrior, the two stars hate each other, and the producer has run out of money.

And things are about to get much, much worse. In the middle of shooting, the actor playing Hawthorne is stabbed, which leaves the real Hawthorne with no choice. He has to step in and investigate his own murder. Because the killer may not have got the right man. Was it Hawthorne himself who was meant to be the target?

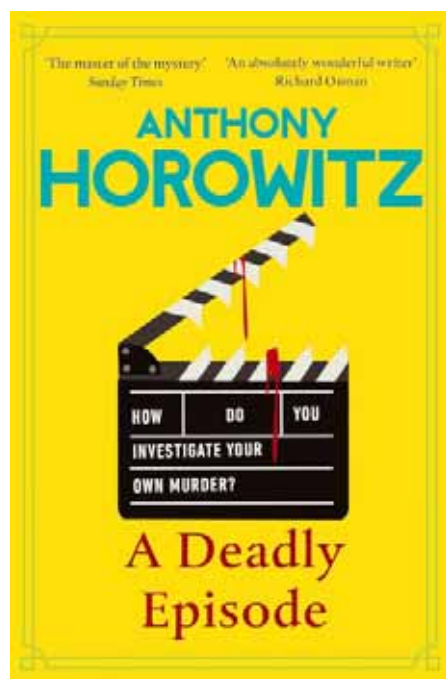
A DEADLY EPISODE engages from the opening pages. Horowitz's unassuming narration drives the story along at a good pace, as it smoothly weaves its way through a typically labyrinthine plot. The book takes an unexpected detour around the midway point, as older crimes are introduced, and there are an abundance of twists and turns as the two investigations unfold. Horowitz's solo attempts at detection add some good context to the story, as well as some amusing diversions, and his wry asides on the writing life are always interesting.

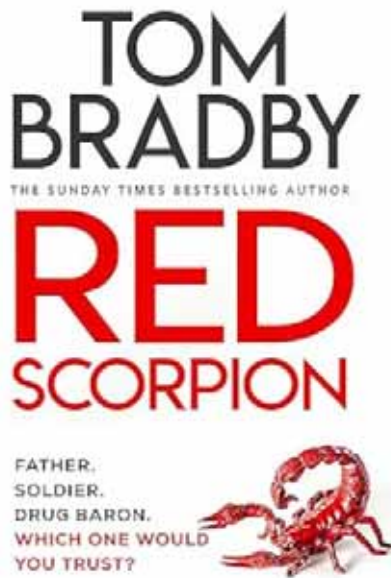
Horowitz is no stranger to television and film sets, from his time on **FOYLE'S WAR** and other productions, and **A DEADLY EPISODE** is filled with interesting snippets of insider information and a credible background of sniping actors, greedy agents and frustrated directors. The ending perhaps lacks the energy and tension of the previous books, but it is still cleverly worked out and typically surprising. An enjoyable piece of entertainment.

RED SCORPION

by Tom Bradby
Bantam, £16.99
Rating: B+

Tom Bradby's **RED SCORPION** revolves around an upright and admirable young doctor, Laura Strong, who finds herself in a terrible situation. Her nights





are spent working thankless A&E shifts, as she tries to find the money to support her much-loved disabled brother. Exhausted, and with loan sharks at her door, Laura needs a miracle to stop her life from collapsing around her.

The arrival of South American coffee magnate Rafael Fernandez appears to be the answer to her prayers. A devoted father with a sick son requiring a 24/7 care, he is prepared to pay any price for the expertise he can trust. For Laura it is a remarkable escape from an impossible situation, however, behind the façade of Rafa's gilded existence lies a dark family history which he has been doing his best to avoid. The death of his estranged father brings the wolves to Rafa's door, and Laura, already recruited by the British security services to spy on Rafa, finds herself in far greater jeopardy than she ever imagined.

RED SCORPION is a slow burn of a thriller that gradually tightens its hold on the reader's attention. The opening sections drag a little, but once underway the pace picks up and the final chapters provide plenty of excitement and suspense. Laura's dilemma is well established by Bradby, and the depth of her character adds considerable emotional tension to the story.

As with all his books, Bradby infuses **RED SCORPION** with convincing

detail on a range of subjects and sets the story against a vivid backdrop of well limned locations. There is a strong sense of authenticity to the story, although the basic set-up requires some suspension of disbelief. In all, an engaging read that provides a dark picture of the modern illegal drug trade.

THE SECRETS OF STRANGERS

by Jess Kitching

Simon & Schuster, £12.99

Rating: B

Following a devastating loss, Janine and her husband, Kamal, decide to leave Manchester and start a fresh in the picturesque village of Bamblethorpe in Lancashire. Janine, a popular thriller author, needs to work on her next novel, but finds herself frozen by writer's block and unable to move past what has happened to her.

Things change, however, when tragedy strikes the village. A long time resident, Alexa Clarke, goes missing and Janine finds herself drawn into the mystery about what happened to Alexa. Suddenly she finds herself caught up in the investigation and tracking down clues, as she comes to realise that there are disturbing parallels between herself and the missing woman.

THE SECRETS OF STRANGERS is a gently paced mystery, with an engaging cast of characters. Janine's mental state is sympathetically portrayed by Jess, and the varying reactions to her situation are well handled. A range of emotional issues are touched on by Jess, including the impact of tragedy on relationships and loneliness, as well as the challenges of writing. The story moves through some good twists, and a clever sleight of hand by Jess helps to deliver an unexpected conclusion.

The reasons for Janine's involvement in solving the mystery, and why people talk so openly to her, never really ring true, but it is easy to move past this and enjoy the story.

George Easter Reviews

A SPY IN THE BLOOD

by Paul Warner

Zaffre, £16.99, January

Rating: B

Mark Wolfe, a legendary British operative who has spent decades maintaining a carefully constructed double life. To the world—and more importantly, to his wife and children—Mark is a nondescript, affable civil servant who struggles with simple modern technology like the TV remote. In reality, he was the premier spy of the Cold War era, a master of "dead-drops" and "dry-cleaning" across Eastern Europe. Now "put out to pasture" at MI6's Vauxhall Cross headquarters, his days are spent behind a desk screening the next generation of agents while dodging lucrative offers from private security firms.

Mark's carefully compartmentalized life begins to fracture when he discovers that his daughter, Jody, has developed a dangerous obsession with the "family business." To Mark's horror, MI6 has been recruiting her behind his back, keeping her training a secret from him.

The situation turns from a family crisis to a nightmare when Jody disappears during a mission. When the Service officially "washes its hands" of her to protect their own interests, Mark realizes that the agency he served for decades is now his primary obstacle.

I was really into this story until the ending, which I found over-the-top and unbelievable – although I may be being too tough in this age of unreasonable behavior. I did enjoy reading about the differences between Cold War spying and spying today. That was fascinating.

UNDERDOGS

by Stephen Leather

Macmillan, £20.00, February

Standalone

Rating: A-

Andy "Deadman" Bird was once a legendary SAS operative, but his life has been systematically dismantled. A catastrophic mission left him with severe hearing loss, resulting in a medical discharge that spiraled into the loss of his career, his marriage, and his home.

Now, Andy lives on the harsh streets of London, surviving on his wits and the protection of his only companion: Tyson, a fiercely loyal and battle-tested dog.

The plot kicks into gear when Andy and Tyson inadvertently witness a chilling murder in a London alleyway. Because of his training, Andy sees details that a civilian would miss—details that suggest the killers are not mere street thugs, but highly trained professionals. By witnessing the hit, Andy and Tyson become the next targets of a relentless hunting party. It quickly becomes apparent that there is more at stake here than just a random hit.

While Andy is trying to make sense of what is happening, he and Tyson are running for their lives. Eventually Andy reaches out to his former brothers-in-arms to even up the odds.

As an avid fan of good thriller fiction, I have been singing the praises of Stephen Leather for a long time. He is top-tier at creating fascinating characters and describing realistic and thrilling action scenes.

THE LOST WOMEN

by Tim Weaver

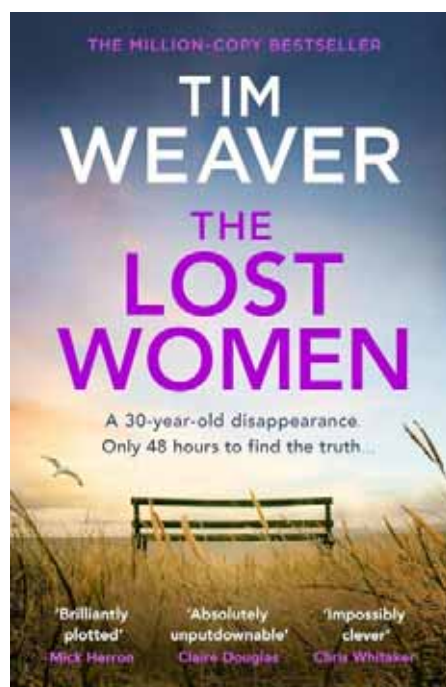
Michael Joseph, £20.00, February

David Raker #14

Rating: A

Two cases are engaging the finder of lost persons David Raker. One is an 18-year-old cold case about the disappearance of three women who were filming a documentary about a student who had gone missing. In an ironic echo of their subject matter, all three women vanished without a trace. No bodies were found, no leads emerged, and the case eventually went cold, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions that once haunted Raker during his days as a journalist.

The other case is a present-day one. Raker is hired to investigate the disappearance of Preston Stewart. Following a severe car accident, Preston underwent reconstructive facial surgery. The operation was a success, but when the bandages were removed, his wife made a horrifying discovery: the man under



the gauze was not her husband. The real Preston Stewart has vanished from a secure hospital environment.

Raker teams up with his long-term ally and former detective, Colm Healy, to find Preston. As they peel back the layers of the hospital disappearance, they find "horrifying connections" leading back to the three women who vanished eighteen years prior.

Tim Weaver is a master at complex plotting and the creation of characters you care about. **THE LOST WOMEN** ends with quite an exciting cliff-hanger so I can't wait to read next year's series entry.

If you haven't read any of this series, it might be hard to go back to the beginning (although the first five entries in the series were published in the U.S. as trade paperbacks). My suggestion would be to start with **THE BLACK-BIRD** (2022) and read the last four in the series, all of which are outstanding mysteries.

THE DANGEROUS STRANGER

by Simon Mason

riverrun, £16.99, March

DI Ryan Wilkins #5

Rating: A

The story begins on a sweltering evening in Oxford, where racial tensions

boil over. A riot breaks out in front of a budget hotel housing asylum seekers, culminating in a horrific act of violence at the rear of the hotel: a young man is set on fire. The event becomes an international scandal, putting immense pressure on the Thames Valley Police to find the perpetrators.

The investigation is led by the series' signature "odd couple": DI Ryan Wilkins: A brilliant but socially abrasive detective from a trailer park background, usually seen in a track suit. He is currently struggling with issues surrounding his mental health and insubordination.

DI Ray Wilkins: No relation to Ryan, Ray is Oxford-educated, middle-class, and the polished "face" of the duo. With the recent arrival of twins, Ray and his wife are struggling with finding a workable balance between Ray's work and home lives.

While the Chief Constable views them with deep misgivings, their Superintendent knows they are the only ones capable of navigating the chaos. Initially, the case seems like a straightforward—if tragic—hate crime committed by far-right extremists or "ordinary" citizens swept up in the riot's emotion.

But then comes the discovery that the victim was not an asylum seeker and that the death of the victim might not have been random, but planned.

THE DANGEROUS STRANGER is full of light and dark humor, generally attendant to Ryan Wilkins' unpredictable and sometimes outrageous behavior. The mystery elements are well plotted and often contain surprises. I'm hooked on this series.

TRAITORS

by Alex Shaw

HQ Digital, \$0.99 Kindle, 2021

Sophie Racine #1

Rating: B+

French Intelligence officer Sophie Racine is tasked with traveling into the heart of a warzone in Ukraine. Her mission is to assassinate Sasha Vasilev, a Russian mole who took the French secret service apart piece by piece and gave their secrets to the Kremlin.

Ex-SAS trooper and MI6 Officer Aidan Snow is also in Ukraine. Sent by British Intelligence, he must extract an innocent citizen caught up in the conflict in rebel-controlled Donetsk.

When their missions collide, Snow and Racine find themselves outgunned and outnumbered.

I first encountered Sophie Racine in this year's Wolf Six novel, **TARGET ECHO** and was quite impressed by the character. Then I stumbled upon the fact that she had been featured in an earlier work by Alex Shaw, **TRAITORS**. When I saw the \$0.99 Kindle price it was an easy decision to get it and read it. **TRAITORS** wasn't quite as good as **TARGET ECHO** (Alex Shaw has gotten better over time), but Sophie Racine didn't disappoint.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

THE DROWNING PLACE

by Sarah Hilary

Vintage Publishing, £16.99 GBP, April

Rating: A

After bursting onto the crime (writing) scene in 2014 with *Somebody Else's Skin*, a rare debut to win the prestigious Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year Award (along with receiving

plenty of other UK and US accolades), English author Sarah Hilary produced six novels in her brilliant DI Marnie Rome series, then three high-level standalone thrillers.

Now, with **THE DROWNING PLACE**, she introduces a new series sleuth: Joseph Ashe, a haunted Detective Sergeant operating in the scenic Peak District, a national park area in central England full of limestone valleys, dramatic ridgelines, tiny villages, and stark moorlands.

Almost 20 years ago, Ashe was the sole survivor of a school bus crash where nine children, including his best friend, and three adults drowned in a reservoir. He and the small town of Edenscar have never fully recovered. Ashe still talks to his long-dead best friend, and other residents likewise feel the ongoing weight of the town's dead children. The media may have moved on, but they haven't.

When DS Ashe is called to the scene of a brutal and inexplicable crime – a triple murder of a family – the whole town is spooked. His new boss, DI Laurie Bower, has transferred in from a city in northern England, and has little time for superstitions or spectres. But will her city policing work in a place like Edenscar? Bower and Ashe must learn to work together while trying to solve a horrifying case.

Hilary is a masterful storyteller, crafting an atmospheric and compelling tale laced with humanity and human frailties. A character-centric police procedural. Ashe and Bower are an intriguing duo, and combined with Hilary's writing talents and nuanced touch for character and place, *The Drowning Place* is a very good novel that kickstarts a series with huge amounts of promise.

Good news: they're set to return in April 2027.

JUST KILL

by Remi Kone

Quercus, £22.00, May 2025,

Rating: B+

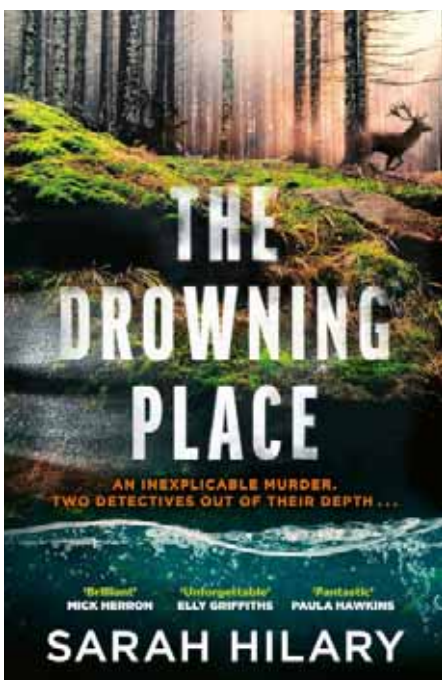
A fresh and fascinating new voice in British crime fiction, Emmy-nominated British-Nigerian television producer Remi Kone (*Killing Eve*, *Spooks*) de-

buted last year with the more-than-solid **INNOCENT GUILT**, which introduced DI Leah Hutch and DS Benjamin Randle, delved into dark corners of the human psyche, and forced Hutch to confront complications in her own upbringing.

Now Kone returns with **JUST KILL**, an exciting second tale in her nascent South London series, where Hutch and Randle quickly get caught up in two strange murder cases during a London heatwave. A man discovers a corpse on his downstairs sofa, 'watching' television. He swears he never met the deceased. Across the city, a troubled maths teacher has been murdered, and the man caught fleeing the scene is a former classmate of Hutch's. Meanwhile Zed Okoro, a 14-year-old boy, is determined to find his missing mother, by any means necessary. Hutch is pulled from her usual Battersea base by the involvement of her former classmate in the Elephant and Castle murder, but during **JUST KILL** she ends up travelling far further afield as she and Randle investigate a conspiracy with roots in Africa.

Kone creates a propulsive tale that switches perspectives between Leah, Zed, and others. DI Hutch is an intriguing heroine; a mixed race detective who was raised by her grandmother (after her father, a policeman, went to prison for killing her adulterous mother), and is abrasive, stubborn, and struggles to trust others. The shadow of her father, Eli, looms large even as she tries to block it out; she's tried to hide her connections to a killer, especially from her boss in London who was a colleague of Eli.

Hutch must try to solve a puzzling case that stirs up her own past, while dealing with her imprisoned father and nightmares about what she may or may not have witnessed as a child. When more deaths follow, and she's told to take leave, will she finally deal with some of her own issues, or try to keep ploughing on through? With **JUST KILL**, Kone builds on her debut and offers another tense, fast-paced police procedural that delves into some darker corners of psychology and society, while setting up some intriguing possibilities for several characters' futures; the ones



who survive.

DISSECTION OF A MURDER

by Jo Murray

Penguin, \$19.00, 5 May

Rating: A-

After penning a couple of ‘women’s fiction’ novels under another name, former British barrister Jo Murray revisits her old stomping grounds (and no doubt some of her own experiences as a working class kid turned young barrister in a profession striped with elitism and misogyny) with **DISSECTION OF A MURDER**, a clever, page-whirring legal thriller.

Leila Reynolds is rather shocked at how high-profile her first-ever murder trial is. A well-respected judge has been killed. The defendant Jack Millman, for whatever reasons, wants Leila to defend him. But despite that request, he otherwise stays silent, offering no help to his own defence. A tough case for Leila gets even worse, for the prosecutor is a formidable King’s Counsel – the elite rank of courtroom attorneys. And this one just happens to be Leila’s former mentor and current husband.

How can Leila earn her stripes in a seemingly unwinnable case?

Unlike US courtroom thrillers, British authors (along with their Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian counterparts) can’t rely on the automatic life-or-death stakes of a capital murder trial, or the inbuilt drama of competing ‘alphabet soup’ law enforcement agencies, or politicised elected judges. Perhaps that’s why the sub-genre isn’t quite so prolific elsewhere; however, **DISSECTION OF A MURDER** is a good example of what is still possible, where authors must find other ways.

Murray does a great job crafting plentiful tension and uncertainty as we flip between the perspectives of defence lawyer Leila, prosecuting barrister Jack, and a mysterious witness.

Details and texture bring readers into the British legal system – which operates differently to its American counterparts in some ways -- and Murray does a great job weaving backstories, a tense trial, and characters secrets

and challenges. A well-plotted, tense courtroom-and-beyond thriller that is reportedly set to be screened as Season 2 of Apple TV’s *Presumed Innocent*, **DISSECTION OF A MURDER** is likely to leave readers wanting plenty more from both Leila Reynolds and Jo Murray.

Interview with Ambrose Parry by Craig Sisterson

Ambrose Parry is the pen name for Scottish duo Dr Marisa Haetzman and Chris Brookmyre. Marisa is a consultant anaesthetist, whose research into the history of medicine inspired their historical mystery series, set in 19th century Edinburgh. Marisa’s husband Chris is an internationally bestselling and multi-award-winning ‘Tartan Noir’ author of over twenty novels, including the Jack Parlabane series, and stand-alones such as **THE CRACKED MIRROR**, which won the 2024 McIlvanney Prize. Beginning with **THE WAY OF ALL FLESH**, Ambrose Parry’s acclaimed mystery series stars Will Raven, a disciple of renowned Scottish obstetrician James Simpson, and Sarah Fisher, an assistant who harbours a dream of becoming a doctor. Their fifth and latest novel is **THE DEATH OF SHAME**.

What was it that originally made you both want to write these Ambrose

Parry books together and delve into historical mystery writing as a wife and husband team?

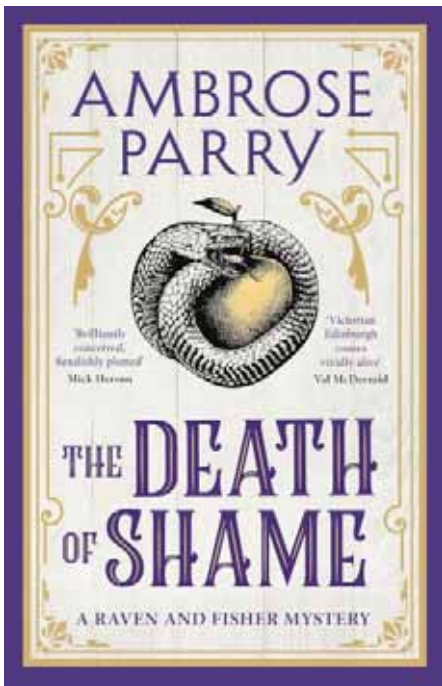
Marisa: I was studying the early use of chloroform in 1840s Edinburgh and reading a lot about James Simpson, a really fascinating man, and telling Chris some of the things I was reading. He said he thought there was a book in it. I didn’t take it seriously at first, but we kept coming back to this notion that perhaps we could write something together, as Chris was quite interested in writing historical stuff, but being so prolific didn’t really have the time to do all the necessary research. So we decided to pool our resources and have a go together.

Chris: When I saw the volume of research Marisa was drawing on, I realised it wouldn’t have worked for me to just come up with a story myself. She had already helped me with various novels, and I knew she had a good editorial mind, so I thought we could collaborate, and I knew her perspective as a woman in medicine was going to be really helpful. It just seemed natural to go from a notion of me writing something on the basis of what she’d researched to something else entirely, and talking her into writing it with me rather than just planning or consulting.

Having spoken to several writing duos in the past, there seems to be a variety of ways of dividing things up



Marisa Haetzman & Chris Brookmyre



to end up to get to a completed novel. What is your process as Ambrose Parry – is one of you responsible for Raven's perspective, the other Fisher's? Do you edit each other's chapters?

Marisa: We always kind of divided up writing depending on what a chapter was about. If there was a lot of medical context, I would write it. While we have male and female protagonists, it wasn't as straightforward as me writing Sarah and Chris writing Raven. Sometimes a chapter just appealed to one of us more. It was very much an equitable split, then we'd swap over and kind of rewrite each other, so there was always a consistent voice. It's evolved a little, but not to the stage of Chris writing medical stuff.

Chris: I've never managed to get that stage. We do plan it out in more detail now, I think, than the first novel. We have different index cards for Raven and Sarah, so we can see how their stories are interweaving or not, and can divide up the tasks according to availability or suitability. Once we've got the story planned, we both know the story we're trying to tell, and we know what Ambrose Parry 'sounds like', yeah, so we can both write that.

Like Australians and New Zealanders, I imagine you grew up in

Scotland reading far more English and American crime fiction than your own local authors (things have thankfully changed markedly in recent times). What drew you to this particular setting of mid-19th Edinburgh?

Chris: Certainly for me growing up, I didn't read a lot of English crime fiction because I preferred the American stuff, which seemed big and streetwise compared to the class-ridden British stuff. So when I came to writing myself,

I wanted to take those types of stories and see them on a page with a Scottish accent and Scottish characters.

Marisa: The reason our Scottish setting was vital was because really important things were happening in Edinburgh at the time, but it's not well represented in literature. The Victorian era is well covered in all sorts of books, but there were no books we knew of that discussed the scientific powerhouse that was Edinburgh of the time.

Ripster's Revivals by Mike Ripley

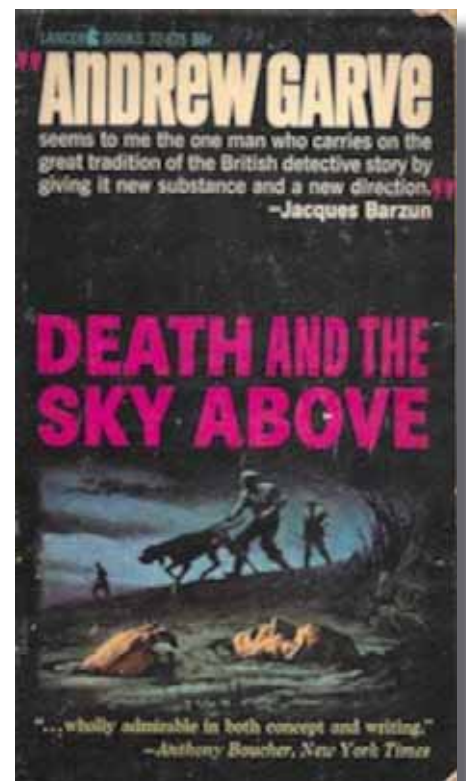
A regularly irregular column of musings on (mostly) crime and thriller fiction both ancient and modern, now divided into two such sections for your reading pleasure. Think of it partly as the ramblings of someone who has read more thrillers than he needed to, and partly as a warning from history.

From the To-Be-Read Pile

I was always in two minds about the fiction of Andrew Garve (pen-name of journalist Paul Winteron, 1908-2001) because I found some of his thrillers a tad too stridently anti-socialist. It was understandable, given that Winteron was the son of a Labour MP, and stood twice for election himself, and had opted for a career in left-wing journalism but his experience of Russian communism as a foreign correspondent in Moscow during WWII disillusioned him and, I think, influenced his espionage-tinted thrillers, or at least the ones I had tried. I was less familiar with his crime novels and have finally got around to reading **DEATH AND THE SKY ABOVE** which, when first published in 1953 received glowing endorsements from Jacques Barzun and Anthony Boucher – names remarkably familiar to students

of the history of crime fiction.

And for what it's worth, I second their applause as the novel is extremely good on several levels. **DEATH AND THE SKY ABOVE** begins with a man seeking a divorce from a shrew of a wife in order to marry his beautiful televi-



sion presenter girlfriend, who offers to give up her career and is prepared to live in sin. (This is 1953 remember.) Before that dread step is taken, the recalcitrant wife is found murdered and our hero is caught bang-to-rights with only the flimsiest alibi for the time of the killing. There follows an extended (and exceptionally good) trial scene where our hero is duly found guilty and sentenced to hang (1953, remember).

As his day of execution looms, a freak accident in the prison allows him to escape and go on the run with his loyal girlfriend, going to ground on the isolated Medway saltings. There follows a cat-and-mouse game with the police worthy of a Geoffrey Household adventure, involving boats, deserted islands and lots of tidal mud, then an escape on a stolen yacht down the Thames estuary only to run foul of a storm in the Channel and be shipwrecked on the Kent coast.

Our star-crossed lovers are certainly put through the mill – the hero ends up naked at least twice – and find themselves sleeping in a haystack among other discomforts. He is rearrested and the hanging rescheduled, but the girlfriend doesn't give up on him and thanks to a novel piece of technology (for 1953) proves our hero's innocence.

DEATH AND THE SKY ABOVE is clever, fast-moving and intelligently written, and just in case you forget it was written in 1953, there is a scene where the heroine pulls her car into a garage, has a conversation with an AA 'scout' (presumably one of their motorcycle patrols who used to salute passing AA members' cars) and asks for four gallons of petrol for which she pays with a pound note and then waits for the change!

Just Published

I am sure there are nice, clean, safe places with all mod cons in Australia, but Australian crime writers seem to delight in describing remote, dying towns or communities in a huge yet claustrophobic outback. And the trouble is they do it so well. None better than

Jane Harper, an established international bestseller, and her new novel **LAST ONE OUT** [Macmillan], set in the dying town of Carralon Ridge where a young man goes out one night but never comes back and presumably that wasn't his choice, will only cement her reputation as a Queen of Outback Noir, if such a title exists.



Another international bestseller, known as 'Ireland's Stephen King' (Daily Express, so it must be true) but not just because many of his books are set in Maine, is John Connolly and his latest sees a return of his regular hero Charlie Parker (no, not that one). **A RIVER RED WITH BLOOD** [Hodder] is indeed a river in the state of Maine and yes, there will be blood, as Parker is called in to investigate what appears to be a homicidal sport. Being Charlie Parker – and John Connolly – you can bet there's something very nasty lurking in the dark, dark woods.

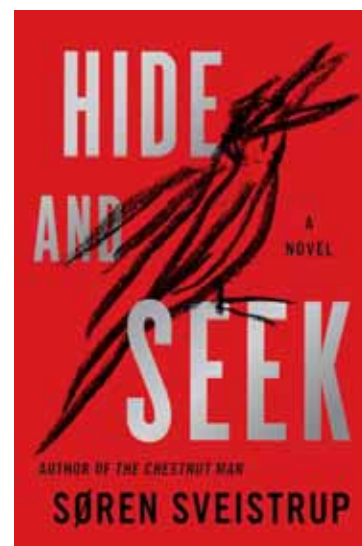
How have I managed to miss the first two novels starring one of Glasgow's finest police detectives, DCI Alison McCoist? Perhaps the better question is how she has survived to make it into a third book; but I am delighted that she has as **RAT RACE** by Callum McSorley [Pushkin Vertigo] is an absolute stonker.

Ally McCoist has plenty to hide due to a dodgy career history and her workload in Glasgow's shadiest police unit is increased by having to look out for Fran Forbes – on the run from a gangland St Valentine's Day style massacre – who made his criminal reputation by an in-

ventive method of distributing two kilos of 'Colombian Sinus Seasoning' during the Covid lockdown. McSorley narrates the story in brutal Scottish dialect with enough obscenities to make Frankie Boyle reach for the smelling salts, a style which will horrify the more genteel reader, but which fits like a second skin on the characters he presents. Reading *Rat Race* reminded me of discovering Jeremy Cameron's **VINNIE GOT BLOWN AWAY**, written in what I described as Walthamstow patois, which, frighteningly, was some thirty years ago.

Just when you thought it was safe to mention 'Nordic' (now the Winter Olympics are over) without automatically adding the word 'Noir,' along comes a 680-page Scandi blockbuster, **HIDE AND SEEK** by Søren Sveistrup [Michael Joseph].

Award-winning Danish scriptwriter Sveistrup, creator of *The Killing* and responsible for the screenplay of the film of Jo Nesbo's *The Snowman*, will undoubtedly attract comparisons with Steig Larsson for his novel's mix of cold case police procedural, political thriller and conspiracy. I understand that a Netflix version is on the way. [Ed. Note: **HIDE AND SEEK** is a sequel to the Barry-Award winning **THE CHESTNUT MAN**. Both books have been adapted to the screen. *The Chestnut Man* series is available now on Netflix and *Hide and Seek* will be available for screening on Netflix later this year.]



Sneak Previews

Upcoming Mysteries



May, 2026

- 5 John, Connelly, **A RIVER RED WITH BLOOD**, John Connolly (Charlie Parker)
- 5 Ilona Bannister, **FIVE**.
- 5 L. M. Kemp, **I, SPY**
- 5 Diane Josefowic, **THE GREAT HOUSES OF PILL HILL**
- 5 Gillian McAllister, **CALLER UNKNOWN**
- 5 Christine Carbo, **THE CONFES-SION ARTIST**
- 5 Simon Elegant, **CITY ON FIRE**
- 5 Uzma Jalaluddin, **MOONLIGHT MURDER** (Detective Aunty)
- 5 Gavin Strawhan, **SLASH** (Honey Chalmers) Australia only
- 5 Steven F. Havill, **REVERSE** (Posadas County)
- 12 Alex Finlay, **THE ANNIVERSARY**
- 12 Lucy Andrew, **A VERY VEXING MURDER** (Harriet Smith)
- 12 James Comey, **RED VERDICT** (Nora Carleton)
- 12 Louise Penny & Mellissa Fun, **THE LAST MANDARIN**
- 19 Rosie Walsh, **THE ONE DAY YOU WERE MY HUSBAND**
- 19 Michael Connelly, **IRONWOOD** (Stilwell)
- 19 Tori Eldridge, **HAWAII RAGE** (Ranger Makalani Pahukula)
- 19 Kim Sherwood, **HURRICANE ROOM** (James Bond)
- 26 Craig Johnson, **THE BROTHERS MCKAY** (Longmire)
- 26 James Byrne, **STORM WARNING** (Dez Limerick)
- 26 Jack Carr & M.P. Woodward, **THE FOURTH OPTION**
- 26 Lee Goldberg, **MURDER BY DESIGN** (Edison Bixby)
- 26 John Katzenbach, **THE ARCHITECT**

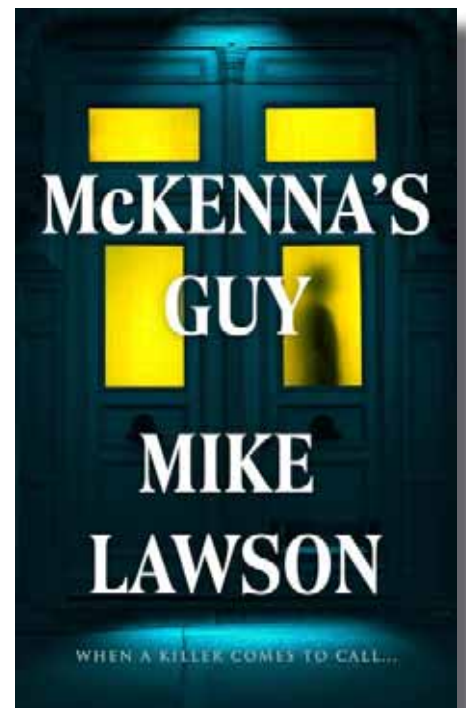
June, 2026

- 2 Ben Coes, **HIJACK** (Dewey Andreas)
- 2 Michael Hogan, **THE DOG WALKERS' DETECTIVE AGENCY**
- 2 Karen Odden, **THE ARTFUL DODGE** (Kit Jameson)
- 2 Nick Oldham, **DEATH AT THE CASTLE GATES** (Jessica Raker)
- 2 Brett Battles, **Stuart Woods' DEEP WATER** (Stone Barrington)
- 2 Emma Styles, **THE SHARK**
- 2 Tim Sullivan, **THE BOOKSELLER** (DS Cross)
- 4 Jane Casey, **EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY**
- 9 Camilla Sten, **THE BREAK-UP RETREAT**
- 9 Jack Murphy, **THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN**
- 9 Alexandra Andrews, **THE FINE ART OF LYING**
- 9 David Handler, **THE MAN WHO LED A DREAM LIFE** (Stewart Hoag)
- 11 D. V. Bishop, **SHADOW OF MADNESS** (Cesare Aldo)
- 16 Martin Edwards, **HEMLOCK BAY** (Rachel Savernake)
- 16 Jessica Payne, **SOMEBODYWORTH KILLING**
- 16 Asia Mackay, **SELF-HELP FOR SERIAL KILLERS**
- 16 Gillian French, **RESTLESS BONES** (Shaw Connolly)
- 16 Rob Hart, **THREE HITMEN AND A BABY** (Assassins Anonymous)
- 16 Martin Walker, **A MURDER IN SPRINGTIME** (Bruno)
- 16 Brad Thor, **CHOKE POINT** (Scot Horvath)
- 16 Jess Kidd, **MURDER AT THE SPIRIT LOUNGE** (Nora Breen)
- 16 Kimberly McCreight, **SOMEONE ELSE'S HUSBAND**
- 16 Clare Mackintosh, **THE BUTLER**

- 23 Anna Lee Huber, **A BITTER CUT** (Lady Darby)
- 23 David Housewright, **FEAR THE REAPER** (Rush Mackenzie)
- 23 Lisa Jewell, **IT COULD HAVE BEEN HER**
- 23 Allison Brennan, **WHISPER CREEK**
- 23 Catherine Steadman, **NINE LIVES**
- 23 Stig Abell, **A TWIST IN THE RIVER** (Jake Jackson)
- 30 Paul Doiron, **STORM TIDE**, (Mike Bowditch)
- 30 Aggie Blum Thompson, **THE NEIGHBORS ARE WATCHING**

July, 2026

- 2 Alan Parks, **DECEPTION** (Joseph Gunner)
- 2 David Heska Wanbli Weiden, **WISDOM CORNER** (Virgil Wounded Horse)
- 7 David Rosenfelt, **DEAD MEN DON'T PLAY FETCH** (Andy Carpenter)



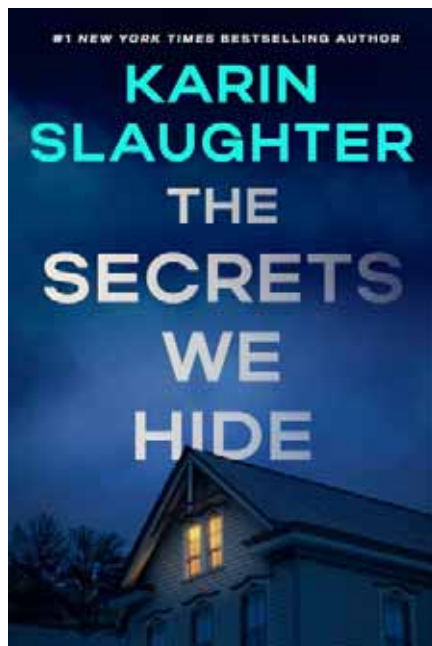
- 7 Mike Lawson, **McKENNA'S GUY**
- 7 Laura Sims, **THE MAN**
- 7 Ron Currie, **WE WILL SEE YOU BLEED** (Babs Dionne)
- 7 Soren Sveistrup, **HIDE AND SEEK** (Naia Thulen/Mark Hess)
- 7 Kelsey Cox, **PRETTY DEAD**

THINGS

- 7 Bridget Walsh, **THE SPIRIT GUIDE** (Variety Palace)
 7 Jeff Abbott, **JANUARY AND JULY**
 7 Robert Thorogood, **THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR OF JUDITH POTTS** (Marlow Club)
 7 Louise Candlish, **A NEIGHBOR'S GUIDE TO MURDER**
 7 Jessica Knoll, **HELPLESS**
 7 Gary Phillips, **THE HAUL**
 14 Ashley Winstead, **HOT GIRL MURDER CLUB**
 14 Lisa Scottoline, **THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING** (Julia)
 14 Jack Friday, **KILLER VIBES**
 14 V. A. Vazquez, **THE DEATH ROW CLUB**
 14 Sam Ripley, **THE LIGHTNING GIRL**
 14 Araminta Hall, **UNRELIABLE NARRATOR**
 14 Abir Mukherjee, **THE PINNACLE**
 14 Jason M. Hough, **THROW AWAY THE KEY**
 14 Teresa Dovalpage, **THE NOVEL DETECTIVE**
 16 Daniel Silva, **RANSOM** (Gabriel Allon)
 16 Yrsa Sigurdardottir, **THE DEPTHS** (Black Ice)
 17 Charles Cumming, **ICARUS 17** (Box 88)
 21 Colson Whitehead, **COOL MACHINE** (Ray Carney)
 21 Rene Denfeld, **THE TALKING BONE**
 21 Ellis Blake, **NO PRISONERS**
 21 Mark Billingham, **THE SHADOW STEP** (Detective Miller)
 21 Liv Constantine, **PROMISE ME NEVER**
 21 Dervla McTiernan, **THREE REASONS FOR REVENGE**
 28 Shari Lapena, **GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER**
 28 Natalie Moss, **THE NIGHT HUNTER**
 28 Mark Cameron, **BACK TRACK** (Arliss Cutter)
 28 Daniel Hurst, **THE DOCTOR'S WIDOW**
 28 Alex Dekker, **DESERT HEIST**
 28 Catherine Ryan Howard, **BUYER BEWARE**

August, 2026

- 4 Donna Andrews, **PROBABLE CAWS** (Meg Langslow)
 4 Brian Panowich, **LONG NIGHT MOON**
 4 Alex Preston, **A STRANGER IN CORFU**
 4 Lisa Gardner, **YOU'LL BE SORRY**
 4 Sarah Pekkanen, **THE WOMAN IN WHITE**
 4 Rebecca Heath, **THE LAST ENCORE**
 4 Riley Sager, **THE UNKNOWN**
 4 George Pelecanos, **THE BLUE FLAME** (Derek Strange)
 4 Ellery Lloyd, **TIME TO BURN**
 4 Robyn Gigl, **ALL WE HIDE**
 4 Mark Edwards, **ONE OF THE FAMILY**
 4 Robert J Harris, **CRESCENDO**
 9 Alex Shaw, **CODENAME: 61** (Jim Tate)
 11 Kevin Wade, **ONE GOOD EYE** (Jeep Mullane)
 11 Archer Sullivan, **BRIMSTONE HOLLOW** (Annie Gore)



- 11 Karin Slaughter, **THE SECRETS WE HIDE** (North Falls)
 11 S. C. Godfrey, **THE ENIGMA CHALLENGE**
 11 Bruce Robert Coffin, **DARK HARBOR** (Brock Justice)
 11 Tim Sullivan, **THE TAILOR** (DS

George Cross)

- 11 Stella Sands, **CODEBREAKERS** (Wordhunter)
 11 Alaina Urquart, **THE BUTCHER'S LEGACY** (Wren Muller)
 18 William Kent Krueger, **GOD'S COUNTRY** (Cork O'Connor)
 18 Will Thomas, **FOR SERVICES RENDERED** (Cyrus Barker)
 18 Gillian McAllister, **THAT NIGHT**
 18 Stuart MacBride, **BLOOD, RUST AND STEEL** (Roberta Steel)
 18 Martin Limon, **STRIP RULES**
 25 Jennifer Hillier, **HEART OF GLASS**
 25 Anya Niewierra, **THE CAMINO**
 25 Janice Hallett, **THE SILENT APPEAL** (Fairway Players)
 25 Sophie Hanna, **THE OPPOSITE OF MURDER**
 25 Linwood Barclay, **NOT A WORD**
 25 Tess Gerritsen, **THE SHADOW FRIENDS** (Martini Club)
 25 Vivien Chien, **AND THEN THERE WERE BUN** (Noodle Shop)
 25 Charlie Donlea, **BEHIND EVERY FACE**
 25 J. A. Jance, **OVERKILL** (Ali Reynolds)

September, 2026

- 1 Jonathan Ames, **A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES**
 1 Chris Chibnall, **THE PARKWOOD MURDERS** (Nicola Bridge)
 1 Hank Phillippi Ryan, **MOTHER DAUGHTER SISTER STRANGER**
 1 James R. Benn, **THE NINTH CIRCLE** (Billy Boyle)
 1 Henry Wise, **PROMISED LAND** (Will Seems)
 3 William Boyd, **COLD SUNSET** (Gabriel Dax)
 8 Jussi Adler-Olsen, Stine Bolther & Line Holm, **NO SONG FOR THE DEAD** (Dept Q)
 8 Margaret Mizushima, **FIGHTING EDGE** (Timber Creek K9)
 8 Laurie R. King, **THOSE WHO ARE GONE** (Raquel Lang)
 15 Richard Osman, **WE CHASE SHADOWS** (We Solve Murders)
 15 Robert Dugoni, **ONE SPLIT SECOND** (Tracy Crosswhite)
 15 Don Bentley, **DOUBLE TAP** (Mitch

Rapp)

- 22 Michael Koryta, **DIE FAMOUS**
 22 S. A. Cosby, **TRUTH TO POWER**
 (Luke Cage – Marvel Crime)
 22 Clare Mackintosh, **IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK**
 29 Michael Robotham, **TELL ME SOMETHING TRUE**



- 29 Ann Cleeves, **THE DYING LIGHT**
 (Two Rivers)
 29 L. M. Chilton, **I THINK WE SHOULD KILL OTHER PEOPLE**
 29 John Grisham, **THE FRENCH ILLUSION**

October, 2026

- 6 Joe R. Lansdale, **PETRIFIED DREAMS** (Hap & Leonard)
 6 Tom Ryan, **RETURN TO BREAK-NECK ISLAND** (Treasure Hunters Club)
 6 Hisashi Kashiwai, **A SERVING OF HOPE** (Kamogawa Food Detectives)
 13 Elle Cosimano & Hannah Morrissey, **HOME FOR THE HOMICIDES**
 (Holly & Mark)
 13 Donna Andrews, **JAY TO THE WORLD** (Meg Langslow)
 13 David Rosenfelt, **BARK HUMBUG** (Andy Carpenter)
 13 David Liss, **THE DEATH AND**

BIRTH OF ILIANA MAREK

- 20 Val McDermid, **1999** (Allie Burns)
 20 Louise Penny, **MISS WOLCOTT'S GHOST** (Gamache)
 20 Lee Goldberg, **SPLIT SCREEN** (Eve Ronin)
 20 Walter Mosley, **HANGING & BURNING** (Joe King Oliver)
 22 Vaseem Khan, **THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN COMPASS** (Q)
 26 Lee Child & Andrew Child, **CHAIN REACTION** (Jack Reacher)
 27 Adam Plantinga, **DARK COUNTRY** (Kurt Argento)
 29 S. J. Bennett, **DEATH ON THE ROYAL YACHT** (Her Majesty the Queen)

November, 2026

- 3 Ian Rankin, **THE HEIGHTS** (Standalone).
 3 Gabrielle Lucille Fuentes, **CLEAR WATER**
 3 Michael Connelly, **THE HOLLOW** (Harry Bosch)
 3 Charles Finch, **MIDNIGHT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS** (Charles Lenox)
 10 Sara Paretsky, **BAD COMPANY**
 10 Ragnar Jonasson, **THE BODY IN THE BATH** (Helgi Reykdal)
 10 Celeste Connally, **MURDER OF A MERRY GENTLEMAN** (Lady Petra)
 10 Brendan Flaherty, **MIDDLEMAN**
 10 Janet Evanovich, **SPLIT SECOND** (Stephanie Plum)
 17 David Baldacci, **ALL IN** (Travis Devine)
 17 Phillip Margolin, **CONSPIRACY THEORY**
 17 Bruce Borgos, **THE RIDDLE MAKER** (Porter Beck)
 17 Phillip Margolin, **TWO DEAD WOMEN**
 17 Jeffery Deaver, **THE COLLATERAL HEART** (Lincoln Rhyme)
 17 Rhys Bowen, **TO CROWN IT ALL** (Royal Spyness)

December, 2026

- 1 Kevin Jagernauth, **THE LONGEST DEATH**
 1 Robin Cook, **BLEED**

The Thriller Award Winners 2026

Best Standalone Novel

Megan Collins, CROSS MY HEART – Winner

Ruth Knafo Setton,
ZIGZAG GIRL
 Gilly Macmillan,
THE BURNING LIBRARY
 Sarah Pekkanen,
THE LOCKED WARD
 Olivia Worley,
SO HAPPY TOGETHER

Best Series Novel

Robert Crais, THE BIG EMPTY – Winner

James Byrne,
CHAIN REACTION
 John McMahon,
HEAD CASES
 Christopher Reich,
THE TOURISTS
 Vincent Zandri,
TERMINAL MIDNIGHT

Best First Novel

Kelsey Cox, PARTY OF LIARS – Winner

Chris Chibnall, **DEATH AT THE WHITE HART**
 Sophie Stave,
COUNT MY LIES
 Zoe B. Wallbrook,
HISTORY LESSONS
 Liann Zhang,
JULIE CHAN IS DEAD

Best Audiobook

THE WHITE CROW
 by Michael Robotham,
 narrated
 by Katy Sobey

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Editor/Publisher
George A. Easter
george@deadlypleasures.com

Associate Editor
Larry Gandle
LGandle@aol.com

Contributors
Jeff Popple
Ted Fitzgerald
Lou Jacobs
Ali Karim
Meredith Anthony
Robin Agnew
Hank Wagner
Craig Sisterson
Kevin Burton Smith
Marilyn Brooks
Mike Ripley



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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