

Deadly Pleasures *Mystery Magazine*



Mark Greaney
Thriller Writer
Extraordinaire

Mark Greaney

Great Thriller Writer

Mark Greaney by George Easter

Mark Greaney grew up in Memphis, heavily influenced by his father, a prominent local NBC news executive and World War II veteran who sparked his deep interest in news and military history. Driven by a goal to work for the U.S. State Department, Greaney earned a degree in political science and international relations from Memphis State University. Although he passed the written Foreign Service exam, he did not pass the oral portion, leading him to work various “regular jobs” for over twenty years while quietly harboring dreams of writing thrillers.

Greaney's literary breakthrough came in 2009 with the release of his debut novel, **THE GRAY MAN**, which introduced the iconic freelance assassin Court Gentry. The fast-paced thriller caught the attention of Tom Clancy's estate. Greaney was brought on to co-author Clancy's final three novels — **LOCKED ON**, **THREAT VECTOR**, and **COMMAND AUTHORITY**. Following Clancy's death in 2013, Greaney continued to expand the “Ryanverse” by writing four additional Jack Ryan franchise novels, solidifying his status at the peak of the action thriller genre.

Renowned for his commitment to realism, Greaney travels extensively to dozens of countries and trains alongside military and law enforcement personnel. He routinely takes courses in advanced firearms, scuba diving, battlefield medicine, and close-range tactics to ensure his intense action sequences remain fully authentic.

His signature series gained massive

mainstream exposure in 2022 when Netflix adapted **THE GRAY MAN** into a major motion picture starring Ryan Gosling and Chris Evans. Beyond his 15+ Gray Man novels as of 2026, Greaney has also authored independent military thrillers like **RED METAL** (2019) and the **Armored** series (2022–2024).

He continues to reside in Memphis with his family.

My Impressions. I can still remember exactly where I was when I picked up and bought a copy of Mark Greaney's first book **THE GRAY MAN**. It was published in a large mass market paperback and sold for \$9.99. I went home, read it in a blur and started calling all my friends to tell them to get a copy. They all raved about it as well. I remember Steele Curry saying that it was the best thriller he had read in five years. I find it comical now that some of these same friends insist now that they found **THE GRAY MAN** first. Don't believe them. I know the truth.

Not long after that, while attending a Bouchercon, I went to a dinner arranged by “Mystery” Mike Bursaw, who had also invited Mark Greaney, Mike Lawson and his lovely (and I mean lovely) wife Gayle. It was an evening to remember, spending time with my best friend “Mystery” Mike and two of my favorite authors.

Besides being one of the most handsome (sorry, girls – he's happily married) and congenial authors out there, Mark Greaney is my favorite action thriller writer. Why? Because he writes the most exciting thrillers I've ever read and his action scenes are so realistic and believable – something for which I give him high marks.



Here is my review of his latest book.

THE HARD LINE
by Mark Greaney
Berkley, \$31.00, February
Gray Man #15
Rating: A

Court Gentry (The Gray Man) is asked to join a secret intelligence group by his former boss Matt Hanley. Their mission is to find out who in the upper echelons of government is leaking classified information to America's enemies.

Court's first mission is to go to Nicaragua to rescue an imperiled intelligence asset. The pick-up mission goes horribly wrong due to leaked information and Court encounters two Chinese soldiers



and barely makes it out alive with the asset.

Meanwhile, the leaker is revealed to the reader. It is the wealthy and influential James Westwood who has his eye on the U.S. presidency and has cut a deal with the Chinese for their help in attaining that goal. It's up to Gentry and his teammates to identify Westwood and foil his plans.

Two side plots: 1. Two dangerous men with reasons to hate Court have come to the U.S. to find and kill him. 2. Zack Hightower, Court's right-hand man, has gone to Boulder, Colorado to check on the well-being of his ex-wife and daughter who are in the Witness Protection Program. He gave up all rights to his daughter years ago and she doesn't know him and would not be able to recognize him. When Zack discovers that her life is in danger, he steps in, as any good father would.

Mark Greaney really knows how to get my heart rate elevated. **THE HARD LINE** is full of vividly described action scenes and page-turning plot lines. Not all of Greaney's books get an A rating from me (although most get A's or A-'s), but boy do they entertain!

What is a Thriller?

In 2001 (*DP* Issue #31), Larry Gandle and I attempted to come up with a definition of the off-used term "thriller." Over the last twenty five years since, publisher publicists have over-used the term "thriller" to such an extent as to render it meaningless. Every psychological suspense novel is called a "thriller." So nowadays, I use the phrase "action thriller" to describe what I used to call "thriller."

In that long-ago article, we defined "action thrillers" as novels that include many of the following elements:

1. Lean and mean prose, devoid of much description
2. A fast-pace with a high degree of suspense
3. Action throughout the novel -- this requirement eliminates most legal, psychological and medical "thrillers" from the action thriller subgenre.

4. The protagonist(s) or those close to the protagonist(s) face danger in one form or another

5. A chase

6. A deadline for saving something or someone (examples, a train, a person, a world)

7. Specialized training or knowledge that enables a protagonist to solve or overcome challenge

8. There can be some detection, but the emphasis is on action.

More often than not a suspension of disbelief is required of a reader of an action thriller. The more realistic the action is described and the more believable the dangerous situation is depicted, then the less disbelief suspension is necessary.

Male Action Thriller Writers and Female Action Thriller Writers

This subgenre of fiction used to be male-centric. It was written by male authors for an audience of male readers. It is still dominated by male authors, even though female action thriller writers do appear from time to time.

But in the last couple of decades there have been some very good female action writers come along. We've recognized the following female action thriller writers with Barry Award nominations: Jamie Freveletti, Ruth Ware and T. J. Newman. Three such writers have won the Barry Best Thriller Award: Meg Gardiner, Deanna Raybourn and Taylor Stevens (3 times).

If an author writes a good action-thriller I couldn't give a hoot whether that author is a male or female writer.

But I have noticed one thing. Female action thriller writers seem to have a hard time sustaining a career in writing thrillers. Most fizzle out after a few books. It's a shame because I have liked their books.

I have a theory about that, but have no evidence to back it up, so take it for what it is worth. I think there is some bias among male readers who have their favorite male authors and don't feel the need or the want to experiment with a

female writer. Also I think there is a large chunk of female readers who just aren't interested in an action thriller if it doesn't have Jack Reacher in it. They'd rather read a cozy, traditional mystery or a psychological/domestic suspense novel. So female action thriller writers don't sell enough of their books to sustain a career writing in the subgenre. Of the writers listed above, Ruth Ware is an exception because the book that was nominated for a Barry Award was an action thriller, but the rest of her books are not and she is having a very successful career.

I hope this situation changes in the future.

Other 2026 Action Thrillers of Note

CHOKER POINT

by Brad Thor

Atria/Emily Bestler, \$30.00, June

Scot Harvath #25

Rating: A-

The novel opens with a series of coordinated, catastrophic bombings that tear through Bangkok, Thailand. The attacks leave scores of innocent people dead, including numerous American citizens. While the FBI dispatches its Evidence Response Team to officially assist the Thai government, the President of the United States realizes a standard legal investigation is too slow and quietly activates a "Plan B": top black-ops spy Scot Harvath. Harvath is tasked with hunting down the mastermind behind the blasts using whatever extra-legal means necessary.

As Harvath and his elite team—in-



George & Brad Thor

cluding operators Mike Haney and Tyler Staelin—begin tracking the bomber, they discover a chilling detail: the perpetrator is not a foreign radical, but a highly skilled American traitor named Kevin Kobler. Kobler is a disillusioned former Navy SEAL and expert bomb maker who served alongside Harvath in the past. This personal connection and sense of betrayal turn the mission into an intense, deeply personal hunt for Harvath as he navigates the seedy underbelly of Thailand to find his rogue former teammate. But is there more to the bombings than someone with a personal agenda?

Simultaneously, a parallel storyline unfolds back in Washington, D.C., where a former U.S. Marine finds himself targeted and hunted by unknown operatives. Confused and running out of time, he turns for help to his ex-fiancée, a rising political star working inside the White House. As she struggles with whether she can truly trust him, their desperate search for answers begins to interweave with the high-stakes intelligence crisis that Harvath is fighting to stop on the other side of the world.

Brad Thor is an old hand at writing this type of exciting and topical action thriller. And fortunately for us, there seems to be no slowing down in his plotting and writing – even after twenty five books. I was a little disappointed that his new wife didn't appear in **CHOKES POINT**. She's a great character and deserves more space, but she has her own job in Norway and I suspect it would be difficult for the author to insert her into all of Scot's missions without it being deemed unrealistic.

THE DARK TIME

By Nick Petrie

Putnam, March 2026, \$30.00

Rating: A-

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

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

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.

DARK COUNTRY

by Adam Plantinga

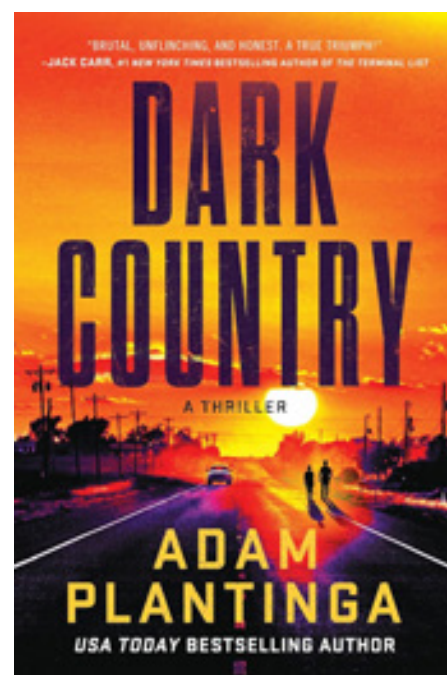
Grand Central, \$30.00, October

Kurt Argento #3

Rating: A-

Following a violent showdown in Fenton, Arizona (detailed in the previous novel, **HARD TOWN**), Kurt Argento flees the law and a vengeful cartel. He resurfaces in the small town of Barton, South Dakota, adopting a fake identity. He secures a quiet job living in a church basement and serving as a handyman, seeking peace to deal with his grief and traumatic past.

Argento's quiet existence shatters when he crosses paths with Majed, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee living in Barton with his single mother. Majed is running for his life from two aggressive trackers who claim the boy stole a wallet. Argento intervenes, forcing the men to retreat. Recognizing that the men's cover story is a lie, Argento investigates and discovers that Majed is actually the



mark of a deadly, professional manhunt orchestrated by an influential billionaire.

Realizing Barton is no longer safe, Argento takes Majed and hits the road, pushing west in a desperate cat-and-mouse game across America. As they flee, it becomes clear that Majed possesses lethal information or a valuable asset that powerful forces will commit mass murder to retrieve. Bound by an unyielding promise to keep the boy alive, Argento utilizes his brutal street-cop survival instincts to battle a relentless wave of contract killers, corrupt elements, and tracking teams.

Adam Plantinga is a rising star in the subgenre of action thrillers as evidenced by his second novel, **HARD TOWN**, being nominated for the Edgar Best Novel Award. Kurt Argento is certainly cast in the drifter mode of Jack Reacher and Peter Ash, who seem to be trouble magnets no matter where they go. Fortunately, like Reacher and Ash, Kurt Argento has the skills to handle whatever he encounters.

THROW AWAY THE KEY

by Jason M. Hough

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, July

Rating: B

Lars Bergman was once part of the

CIA's infamous Surreptitious Entry Team. He has never met a lock he couldn't pick—except for one secure briefcase during a botched, end-of-the-Cold-War operation in Warsaw, Poland. Decades later, Lars is cruising toward a quiet retirement, managing the standard locks, safes, and secure doors at CIA headquarters. His mundane life is upended when a senior official—Deputy Director Irene Johannsen—goes missing and is subsequently found dead.

Before her death, Lars is called to crack open the personal safe in Irene's office. Inside, he doesn't find typical state secrets; instead, he discovers a receipt and an old photograph of himself and Irene together in the field during their heyday. This highly specific clue was left intentionally for him. It points directly back to their failed Warsaw operation, signaling that the mysterious lock that eluded him all those years ago has resurfaced.

Realizing he has a second chance to solve the mystery of his greatest failure, Lars goes back into the field. His investigation takes him across Europe, from Poland to Switzerland, in a desperate bid to track down the long-lost briefcase and finally crack its lock. However, the stakes quickly skyrocket when Lars realizes he is not just hunting a relic; the CIA itself turns against him, forcing him to rely entirely on his niche lock-picking skills and field wits to survive.

With its clever plotting and exciting thrills, **THROW AWAY THE KEY** worked for me right up to the ending, which required too much suspension of disbelief.

DIRECT ACTION

by Stephen Leather

Independently Published, \$22.82, May
Spider Shepherd #23

Rating: A-

A group that calls themselves the New Crusaders are targeting immigrants who have committed heinous crimes and yet have not been deported from the U.K. This is to protest the policies of the government and its legal system that haven't dealt properly with these criminals in order to protect the

British public. A kangaroo court with masked judges is held virtually and punishment fitting the crime (even execution) is meted out – all for social media consumption. The videos have gone viral and there are many citizen who approve of the actions of the New Crusaders. But not the government and specifically MI5, who assigns Dan “Spider” Shepherd to go deep undercover to find out the identities of the members of this highly secretive group of vigilantes.

On another track, Spider and some of his former cohorts in the SAS are worried that some of their past actions (for which they feel totally justified), may be called into question by overly woke elements of the current government. So steps are taken to impede any further investigation into the matter.

As Spider gets deeper into his undercover role, he encounters heightened danger and a deeper plot than what appears on the surface.

Readers of my reviews are aware that I am a big fan of the Spider Shepherd series, which delivers all the elements of a good thriller: danger, action, fast paced plotting and admirable characters with great skills.

It is interesting to note that two of his most recent Spider Shepherd novels (**FIRST STRIKE** and **DIRECT ACTION**) had to be self-published because Stephen's long-time publisher Hodder & Stoughton rejected the manuscripts. Apparently they were uncomfortable with how certain social demographics and real-world issues were depicted and didn't want to experience a public backlash. But it appears that with his next Spider Shepherd novel, **BROKEN PROMISES**, coming out in April of 2027, he will be back with his traditional publisher, Hodder & Stoughton. I'm just grateful that they get published at all so I can continue to read this great series.

ICARUS 17

by Charles Cumming

Mysterious Press, \$27.95, July

Box 88 #4

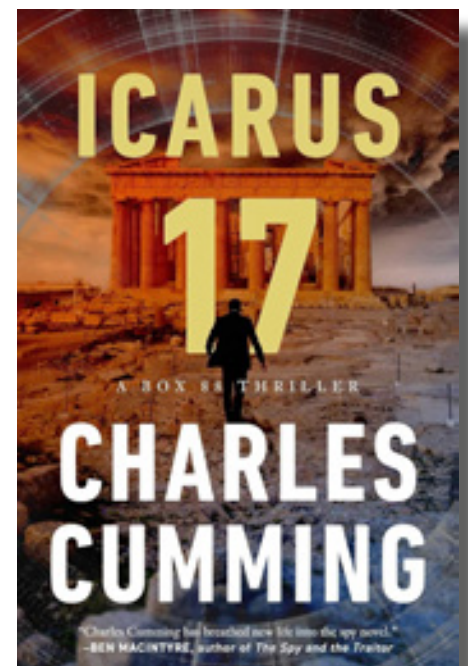
Rating: A-

Lachlan Kite is now the director of BOX 88, a highly covert Anglo-Amer-

ican intelligence agency that operates entirely below the radar. He intends to leave dangerous fieldwork behind, but his plans change when Martha Raine, a former lover he has not seen in over twenty years, contacts him in desperation. Her 20-year-old son, Max Radinsky, has suddenly vanished without a trace while living in Athens, Greece.

Max had been living a seemingly peaceful life in Athens, but his world is upended when his girlfriend, Yasmine, is forced to flee the city. Max joins her on a frantic escape across Greece. Untrained in tradecraft and moving purely on instinct, the young couple finds themselves the targets of a massive international manhunt. As they evade capture, Max and the reader discover that Yasmine is harboring a dangerous secret—linked to the death of an individual named Chevalier—that possesses the power to destabilize the Middle East (as if it weren't already highly unstable).

As Kite initiates a tracking operation using BOX 88's extensive resources, he quickly realizes this is not a simple missing persons case. Multiple powerful state actors have mobilized: A team of ruthless Israeli intelligence agents (Mosad) has been issued explicit orders to eliminate Yasmine on sight to keep her secret buried. A second, rival intelligence agency is simultaneously pursu-



ing the couple to capture Yasmine and exploit her information.

Kite and Martha team up to track the missing couple, always trailing a few steps behind the frantic lovers. Their atmospheric pursuit moves from Greece into Albania, and ultimately reaches its climax in Sarajevo.

I have read all of the books in this series and consider it to be one of the best espionage/action thriller series being published today. Charles Cumming writes with great intelligence and pacing. His plots are fresh and highly creative.

THE FRENCH ILLUSION

by John Grisham

Doubleday, \$35.00, September

Rating: B

With this book, Grisham takes a break from his usual courtroom or law practice settings to provide us with a tale of kidnapping and revenge. He says that “**THE FRENCH ILLUSION** is my first attempt to follow the craftsmanship of some of the great international suspense novelists.”

Chelsea and Paul are experiencing a storybook honeymoon in Paris and its environs when the unthinkable happens. They are drugged, kidnapped and held for ransom.

When news of this reaches their parents, they jump into action to raise the money needed for the ransom. The parents are warned not to involve police or FBI and they heed that warning. Paul’s wealthy parents have no problem coming up with their \$2 million, but Chelsea’s parents have to quick-sell their home and they still come up short of their own \$2 million. Much of the first 100 pages of the book is taking up with the details of money raising and it really slowed the pacing of the book down for me.

Only one of the two kidnap victims is released and at that point the FBI, CIA and French authorities get heavily involved. It turns out that this is not a one-off situation.

But the kidnapping operations are so well planned that the kidnappers leave

no clues behind. The authorities are stumped as to how to go forward with the investigation. Then someone comes up with the idea of setting up a sting operation.

There are some exciting moments in **THE FRENCH ILLUSION**, but overall, it was somewhat of a disappointment for me – especially the ending which left so much unresolved. This seems to be Grisham’s first foray into a non-legal thriller. Stick with what you know and are good at is my advice to him.

STORM TIDE

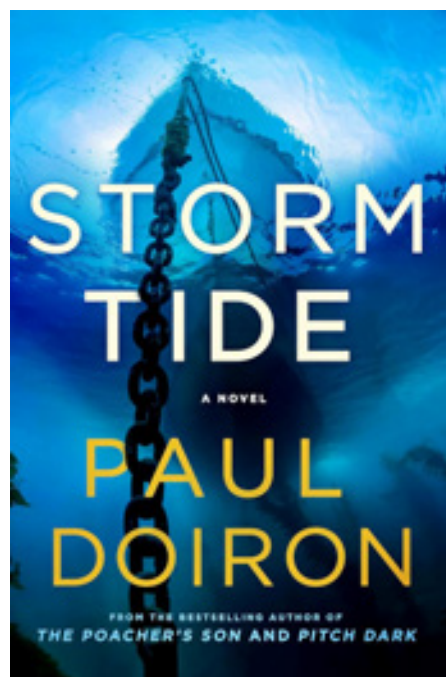
by Paul Doiron

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, 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!

ANTIHERO

by Gregg Hurwitz

Minotaur Books, February

Audible Version by Macmillan Audio

Narrated: Scott Brick

Duration: 13 hours

Orphan X #11

Rating: B+

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs

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 as the Nowhere Man, who remains on call 247 for the unfortunate, awaiting a 1-855-2-NOWHERE call on his high-tech, untraceable, and 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.

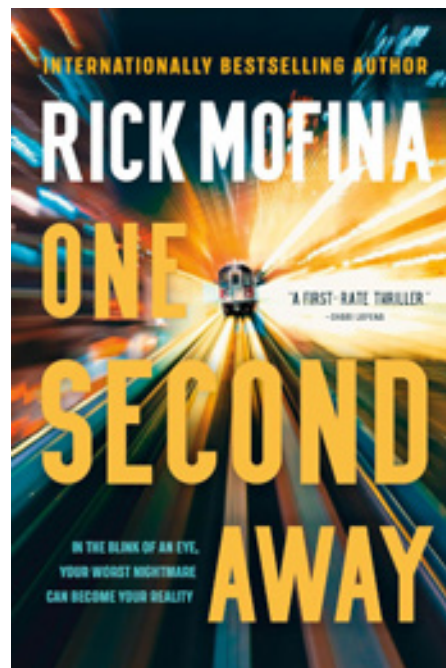
Evan has also just learned of a devastating situation. An innocent young woman, in the throes of a seizure on the New York subway system, had been kidnapped and brutally beaten and raped by a group of soulless thugs. He had to take over from Devin and at the same time find this victimized woman and seek out the animals to mete out justice.

After finding the location of the woman with the aid of high tech surveillance equipment, he takes on the task of fostering 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 faces 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.



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 place of arrival.

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.

THE SURVIVOR

By Andrew Reid

Minotaur, March 2026, \$29.00

Rating: A

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: At the entrance to the subway station, the stairs lead down from the street until they are swallowed by darkness.

Set during one day on a New York subway train, **THE SURVIVOR** is a terrific debut thriller by Andrew Reid. (He had another novel published in the UK, but this is his American debut.) A real thrill ride! Taut and propulsive, **THE SURVIVOR** hurtles down the track and you will hang on for dear life.

Adam Crane is already having a bad day. He'd just been hired by a firm in the Financial District, but when he reports for work on his first day, he finds himself already summarily fired. No explanation. In shock, he leaves and catches the 1 train at Rector Street, heading north. His phone pings and the messages start. The first one tells him that if he ignores instructions, someone will die. He ignores the message. At the next station, a man exiting the train is shot dead on the platform. Inside the train a transit cop tries to intervene.

As Adam is given instructions and performs a series of tasks, a series of

flashbacks illuminate Adam's troubled past. The violence escalates. The train is commandeered. And Homeland Security takes over the incident.

As the plot coalesces, the suspense ratchets up. And up.

When I finished the book and my heart rate returned to normal, I watched the 2009 remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123*, an excellent subway thriller with Denzel Washington and John Travolta. **THE SURVIVOR** is a great, solid update. Bravo.

Highly recommended.

**PENDERGAST:
THE BEGINNING**

By Doug Preston and Lincoln Child
Grand Central, January, \$30.00

Rating: A

Reviewed by Meredith Anthony

First line: It was a sweltering October morning when Austin Landry and the rest of the crew drove through the gates of Savior's Rest Cemetery, the rust-black of the wrought iron spikes almost invisible under a coating of lichen and moss.

The brilliant team of Doug Preston and Lincoln Child have gone back to the beginning of Pendergast's strange and wonderful saga. Not an origin story, rather it gives us an early episode when Pendergast, already an FBI agent, solves a grisly crime spree in New Orleans. It actually ends when he meets D'Agosta who will be his partner in so many adventures.

The plot begins when novice agent Pendergast is teamed with veteran agent Chambers and immediately gets them both in trouble with their superiors. Told to pick a cold case and pursue it, they investigate a strange killing that turns out to be part of a well-disguised series. Their pursuit of the serial killer takes them from the swamps of Mississippi to the moneyed precincts of New Orleans. Equal parts opulent and macabre, the setting is integral to the mysterious milieu that Pendergast seems to thrive on.

The great thing that differentiates these excellent novels from other thrill-

ers is the handling of the perfect mix of realism and the supernatural. The elements of the otherworldly never overpower the well-grounded procedural endeavors. For those of us who are not huge fans of sci fi or horror, this makes these novels accessible and enjoyable.

A must read for fans of the Pendergast series, and an excellent starting point for readers just discovering this amazing body of work.

THE ASSET

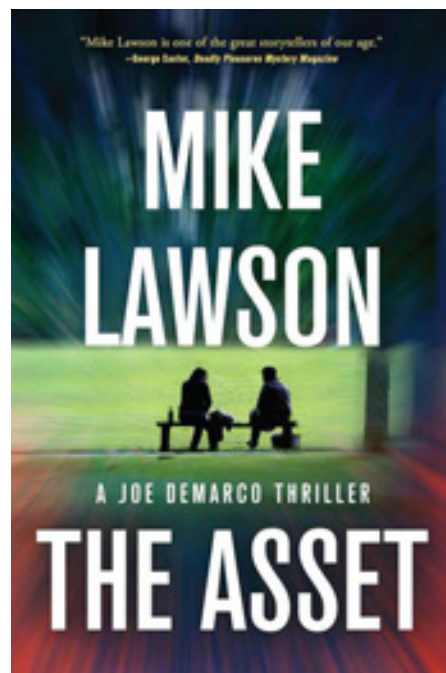
by Mike Lawson

Atlantic Crime, \$27.00, February

Joe DeMarco #19

Rating: A

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 dis-

cover that Lydia Chang is being blackmailed with a disturbing video of her daughter, a young Georgetown University student.

DeMarco tries to find a way to resolve this problem without destroying the lives of the Senator and his family.

There are a handful of authors whose books are not only must-reads, but must-reads the minute I get a hold of them. I'm usually content with reading 5 or 6 books at a time, switching between them for variety's sake. But when I get a new Mike Lawson book, I sit down and read it exclusively until I finish. In this case, it took less than a day to accomplish that. You should be able to figure from that my opinion of Mike Lawson's superior writing/story-telling chops. Mike never tells the same tale twice -- each story is unique.

THE CORMORANT HUNT

by Michael Idov

Simon & Schuster, \$29.00, January

Ari Falk #2

Rating: A

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs

Michael Idov, noted novelist, director and screenwriter delivers his second cinematic spy thriller (after **THE COLLABORATORS**), which is steeped in realistic, relevant international plots with fresh vibrant multi-dimensional millennial characters taking center stage. His portrayal of international spy craft is amplified by his witty and sarcastic dialogue. This novel finds the morally complex CIA operative, Ari Falk, forced out of his self-imposed exile in the Republic of Georgia. He felt disillusioned after suffering the fall-out from uncovering the hidden CIA conspiracy involving his boss, Rex Harlow.

Any necessary backstory is seamlessly woven into this intriguing narrative. His friend and previous asset, Allen Keegan, the founder and brains behind the "whistle-blowing" podcast, "Flea-Collar" is assassinated along with several staff members of Radio Free Europe in Prague. Suspicion is cast upon him as well as the CIA. He is flushed out of hiding by the new Deputy Director of Covert Activities, Asha Tamaskar. After

a brief contentious meeting he is cajoled into taking a new and obviously dangerous mission on behalf of his old bosses. Hints abound suggesting an underlying mutual romantic attraction.

He is tasked to infiltrate a multinational extremist group operating under the aegis of the slippery charismatic leader, Felix Burnham (alias Philip Brenner, of East German parentage.) Burnham has crafted his charisma, as a natural born cult leader, into forming a vast geopolitical enterprise that can shape and alter geopolitical alliances. Russian backing is a probability. Falk positions himself to be recruited on the basis of his status as a disgruntled and disgraced CIA operative.

Idov excels at exploring the themes of betrayal and extremism, with scintillating and sarcastic prose. Realistic episodes of globe-trotting conflicts in ever-changing authentic world settings are on full display. The intrigue and suspense is agonizingly escalated as the consequences of relevant international issues are explored. All the elements of great storytelling are here.... conflict, crisis, chaos and ultimate resolution into a present day meaningful and relevant denouement.

Idov masterfully weaves together a globe-trotting adventure, laced with authentic tradecraft. This propulsive thriller is accented with humor and a touch of romance and culminates in a twisty satisfying denouement. This immensely entertaining yarn is not to be missed. I could easily see Ari Falk as Mick Herron's character River Cartwright in **SLOW HORSES**.

This series is billed as a trilogy, with one more novel to go.

THE DELIVERY

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

We were introduced to Mercury ("Merc") Carter in last year's **THE MAILMAN**. The former postal inspector has created a niche business in a personal delivery service which guarantees delivery of important and/or valuable

items and people. Merc has never failed to deliver and is obsessed with keeping that record pristine.

His current delivery has taken him to Providence, Rhode Island, but his trip is interrupted when he comes upon a road accident in a pouring rain. He sees a badly wounded woman and goes to help but is warned off by a man with a gun. No stranger to dangerous situations and not one to be intimidated, Merc disarms the man and rescues the woman. In dealing with the aftermath of the accident, Merc finds himself embroiled in a mystery involving a web of criminal activity.

Mercury is just like the reader – just wanting to figure out what is going on. The plot meanders a bit and I have to admit I grew a little impatient for "the big reveal."

I liked **THE DELIVERY**, but not as much as the first in the series. However, I will continue to read the series because Mercury Carter is such an interesting character.

TARGET ECHO

by Alex Shaw
Boldwood Books,
Kindle, \$4.99, February
Wolf Six #3
Rating: A-

When a routine contract in Argentina turns from simple to complex in the squeeze of a trigger, Akulov is thrown into a complex web of deceit and dangerous tests of loyalty.

Along the way he encounters one of his old colleagues whom he believed to be dead – another former Wolf, whose family has been kidnapped to force him to do something he doesn't want to do. Of course, Akulov jumps in to help.

And a chance encounter on a train brings him in contact with French intelligence operative Sophie Racine, who quickly becomes an ally.

At stake is a planned terrorist attack by an old Basque terror movement, which has new legs.

Shaw's antihero/assassin series is a winner on all counts. His books are now must-reads for me. In this one, I really enjoyed the inclusion of Sophie

Racine, a character just as strong as Akulov. I was pleased to find out that she appeared as the main character in one of Alex Shaw's previous books (**TRAITORS** – 2021), which I have read and enjoyed.

Keep 'em coming, Alex. And in the meantime, I'll go back and read some of his previous works.

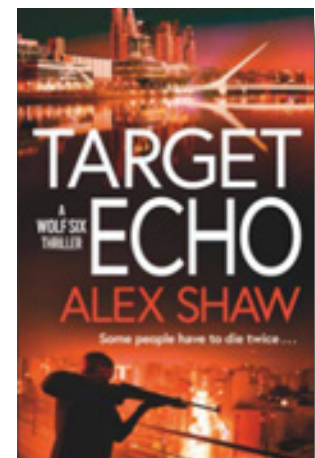
CODENAME: 61

by Alex Shaw
Boldwood Books, \$18.99, August
Jim Tate #1
Rating: B+

The story moves between 1940s World War II and 1961, following Jim Tate, whose life is forever changed after losing his wife and family during the German bombing of England. Determined to seek vengeance, he joins the elite Special Operations Executive (SOE) and undertakes a dangerous mission into Nazi-occupied France

Years later, after building a quiet life as a railway engineer in Kenya, Jim is unexpectedly pulled back into the world of espionage when his former colleague Adrian Snow arrives with a mission tied to events from the war.

As a first novel in a proposed series, a lot of ink was spent fleshing out what will undoubtedly be the two main characters going forward. There was a fair amount of jumping around between two different timelines. But overall, it was a satisfying read and a series that I will follow.



Reviewed to Death

McKENNA'S GUY

by Mike Lawson
Blackstone Publishing,
July 2026, \$29.99

Plot Summary by Meredith Anthony

Roger Smith is a regular guy. He has lived a good life. He lives in Washington, D.C., where he has worked hard at a minor government job, raised a daughter, loved his wife. When his wife needed expensive cancer treatment that wasn't covered by his insurance, he didn't hesitate to spend his savings. Now he is nearing retirement.

It is only by accident that he hears the assassin coming for him in the middle of the night, and it is only dumb luck that allows him to kill the killer first. So begins Mike Lawson's excellent **McKENNA'S GUY**, which follows the hapless Roger Smith (even his name is generic) as he deals with being a target. Someone is out to kill him. He has to figure out who and he has to figure out why. And he has to figure it out before the particularly dogged detective, Grace Lillinthal, unearths his secret. She just doesn't buy it that a modest government worker was an assassin's target.

There is only one thing in Roger's life that could have brought an assassin to his door, and that is his association with a local bar-owner named McKenna. The book is a cat and mouse game as Roger tries to figure out what's going on and what to do about it. As the details of Roger's transgressions come out, we follow his adventures as he struggles to stay alive and out of prison.

Meredith Anthony

I very much liked this charming thriller in the everyman-in-trouble sub-genre. Like most serious mystery and thriller readers, I enjoy identifying with

the skilled assassin as much as the hero with mad skills. But I think we can all relate best to the regular guy who has made one bad decision and has to live (or die) by the consequences. If Lawson had leaned into the humor of the situation a little more, he could be a new Elmore Leonard or Donald Westlake. He doesn't and he isn't. But it's still a good read. **Rating: B+**

Mike Dillman

McKENNA'S GUY is a great book and one that I highly recommend to everyone, no matter what your tastes in mysteries are. I have read and enjoyed all nineteen of his novels featuring Washington D.C. fixer Joe DeMarco. One of the books in the series had an extremely humorous and memorable ending when Jimmy Hoffa showed up. Mike Lawson (under the name M. A. Lawson) also has written an excellent 3-book series about Kay Hamilton, a DEA agent.

With **McKENNA'S GUY**, his second standalone, he continues to exhibit a high level of writing excellence – sympathetic characters, smooth writing, and creative plotting. If you haven't tried a Mike Lawson book, you are really missing out. **McKENNA'S GUY** would be a good place to start. **Rating: A**

Larry Gandle

This is another solidly entertaining book by Mike Lawson. I have never disliked one of his books and this one is no exception.

The book is fast-paced and fun. The plot is clever though a bit far fetched. The book's dialogue can be a bit stilted at times. In spite of that minor criticism, the book is truly perfect for a summer read around the pool or on the plane. It will fully occupy your mind and not tax your brain too much. Recommended.

Rating: B

George Easter

There are a few writers that I can rely on to always deliver a wonderful reading experience (with no clunkers along the way). Michael Connelly is one and Mike Lawson is another. I have read all 25 of Mike Lawson's books and still get excited when I get a hold of a new one. **McKENNA'S GUY** is the latest example of his seemingly effortless prose and his ingenious plotting. **Rating: A**

Lou Jacobs

Not since I've devoured the crime novels of the master, Donald E. Westlake have I enjoyed the crisp, clear, and concise narrative of an author with such straightforward unique characters and unusual ability to build relentless suspense. The forged partnership between our everyman character of Roger Smith and the crime fixer of John McKenna is an amazing means of exploring the possibility of crime being useful and un-



Mike Lawson



derstandable in the face of overwhelming pressures.

Forget about unnecessary subplots and conspiracies, delve into the intricacies of loyalty and family. Dialogue and humor are the driving forces to grab the reader's attention in this page-turner. I hope Lawson continues writing such outstanding standalones. Absolutely Loved this Novel: **Rating: A**

Jeff Popple

McKENNA'S GUY is an enjoyable crime story that ventures into Elmore Leonard territory with its plot about a well-meaning crook, an ageing fixer, hired killers and a determined investigator who is trying to work out what is going on. It all moves along at a good pace, and the various elements come together in a tense climax that delivers some good thrills and surprises. The highlights of the book are the well sketched, interesting characters, especially the seasoned D.C. police detective Grace Lillenthal and an enigmatic female killer who makes an appearance towards the end. In all, a solid, entertaining read. **Rating: B+**

Marilyn Brooks

Mike Lawson's latest novel, **McKENNA'S GUY**, captivated me from page 1. Roger Smith is an ordinary working guy who, because he's in desperate need of money to pay his late wife's medical bills, gets involved with John McKenna, the go-to man when you need help that's off the record. Now Roger is being targeted by hit men, an eager police detective is questioning him, and his past transactions with McKenna have come back to haunt him. But who can he depend on except himself? **No Rating.**

Hank Wagner

Mike Lawson can do no wrong, as far as this reviewer's concerned, every new book is a cause for celebration. I started reading him via a couple of the recent Joe DeMarco thrillers, namely **KINGPIN** (2024) and **UNTOUCHABLE** (2025), which feature unlikable and unredeemable (and therefore perfect) villains who seem to be channeling the most repugnant traits of our forty-fifth and forty-seventh presidents. It pleases me no end that eighteen books in the series remain for me to catch up on.

I found his recent standalone, **McKENNA'S GUY** no less enjoyable, primarily because I strongly identify with its main character, Roger Smith, an "everyman" who, while trying to make ends meet, strayed just far enough off the beaten path to break a few laws. He feels like someone I know, or even a little like me, because I fully understand his rationalizations; I also thrilled to his reasoned, practical solutions in solving the seemingly intractable dilemmas he's suddenly facing. Add in Lawson's flawless pacing, his highly readable prose, and a stellar supporting cast, and you end up with a truly pleasant reading experience, a book that evokes the best of Elmore Leonard, or Lawrence Sanders, even while proudly standing on its own merits. **Rating: A**

Mike Lawson Bibliography

Joe DeMarco Series

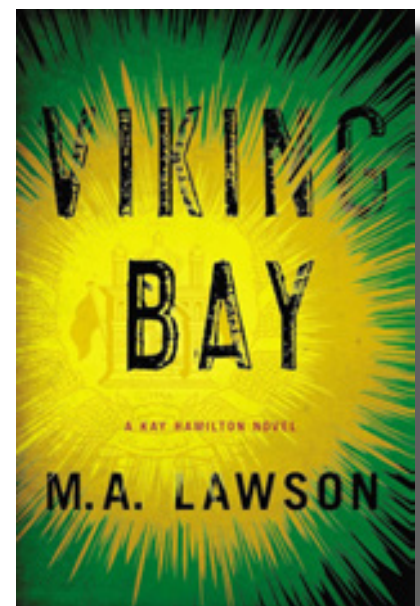
THE INSIDE RING (2005)
THE SECOND PERIMETER (2006)
aka **THE PAYBACK**
HOUSE RULES (2008)
aka **DEAD ON ARRIVAL**
HOUSE SECRETS (2009)
aka **DEAD MAN'S LIST**
HOUSE JUSTICE (2010)
HOUSE DIVIDED (2011)
HOUSE BLOOD (2012)
HOUSE ODDS (2013)
HOUSE RECKONING (2014)
HOUSE RIVALS (2015)
HOUSE REVENGE (2016)
HOUSE WITNESS (2018)
HOUSE ARREST (2019)
HOUSE PRIVILEGE (2020)
HOUSE STANDOFF (2021)
ALLIGATOR ALLEY (2023)
KINGPIN (2024)
UNTOUCHABLE (2025)
THE ASSET (2026)
THE OPERATOR (2027)

Standalone Novels

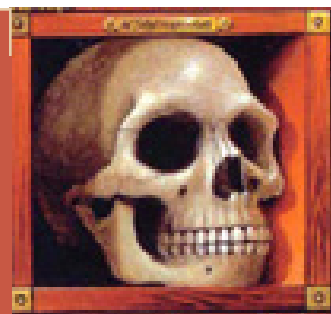
REDEMPTION (2022)
McKENNA'S GUY (2026)

Kay Hamilton Series written as M. A. Lawson

ROSARITO BEACH (2013)
VIKING BAY (2015)
K STREET (2017)



Deadly Pleasures Best of 2026



Best Mystery 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 ITSELF**, 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 seventy-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**

*****WE WILL SEE YOU BLEED,** Ron Currie (Putnam, \$30.00, July). It's late summer 1984, and Babs Dionne's hometown of Waterville, Maine is on the verge of collapse. A strike at the paper mill has dragged on for a year, pitting neighbor against neighbor, leaving everyone broke and exhausted. As head of the union local, Babs has presided over Little Canada's decline. She's sworn off violence since killing a man when she was a teenager, and has stuck to this vow even as it's become clear that only violence can save their community. When Babs' best friend Rita returns home after five years away, she is shocked by the state of things. And as the strike comes to a head, Rita notices something else: the men may be broken,

but the women are furious, ready to do whatever necessary to take back Little Canada. **AZ & PW**

*****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 & DP**

*****KILLER VIBES,** Jack Friday (Minotaur, \$29.00, July). Meet Peter Key: self-proclaimed "laziest private investigator in Texas" (it's harder than it looks), unapologetic bisexual, dedicated stoner, and the surprised recipient of a windfall inheritance from an uncle he barely knew. Peter's life was a mess before, but now as the owner of a dilapidated house in one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Austin he has a mountain of debt to deal with and pressure to sell from every side. But Peter doesn't like to be pushed around. And when he discovers a bag full of cash, he starts to suspect his uncle's death wasn't an accident. **BL & PW**

****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, DP & 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.

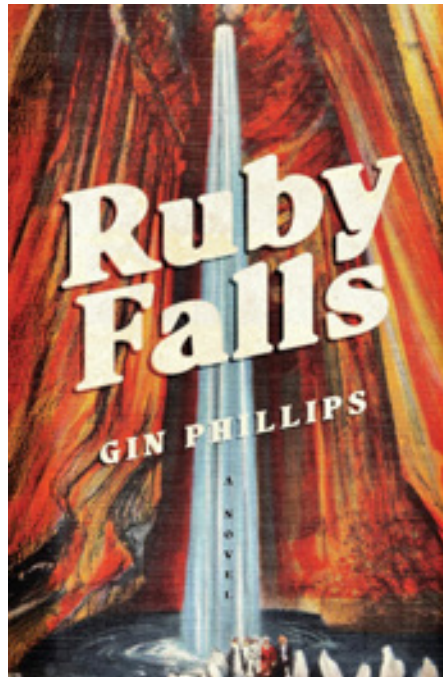
But she's ordered to close the investigation. Thirty years later, Nell Beatty is found dead. Now a superintendent, Allen has never really gotten over her doubts about the Carpenter case and can't resist doing a little digging on her own time. **PW & DP**

*****AN ARTFUL DODGE**, Karen Odden (Soho Crime, \$29.95, June). London, 1879: Twenty-year-old Kit Jimeson is a nimble-fingered thief, a member of an all-female ring of thieves. She is saving up so that she and her younger sister can go and live a proper life. But when Maggie O'Connell takes over the ring and blackmails Kit into performing a dangerous mission, all of Kit's future plans may be for naught. **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 Utalos, 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, DP & 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). Lydia 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, Tommy, 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**

*****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 hometown 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. **Kirkus, LJ, PW & BL**

*****WISDOM CORNER**, David Heska Wanbli Weiden (Ecco, \$30.00, July). Virgil Wounded Horse is desperately trying to escape his past as a hired vigilante on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. But when a legendary figure from the reservation is murdered, Virgil is forced to return to the job. 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. **AZ & DP**

*****COOL MACHINE**, Colson Whitehead (Doubleday, \$30.00, July). In 1981, New York City is emerging from financial ruin while reluctant fence and furniture salesman Ray Carney gambles on one last heist. In 1983, seasoned criminal Pepper takes on a gig as a bodyguard, plunging into the alien territory of the East Village art and club scene. And by 1986, the two have teamed up together for one last job and one final shot to get it all right. **Kirkus, BL, AZ & PW**

*****PROMISED LAND**, Henry Wise (Atlantic Crime, \$, September). One morning, a pickup truck is found jammed into the mud, the driver’s door open amidst scattered bullets and bloodstains on the seat. The driver, Rainbo Boon, is nowhere to be found, but his tracks lead Deputy Sheriff Will Seems and his partner, Tania Jameson, into the swamp. **Kirkus & PW**

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**

*****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 Kempt (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

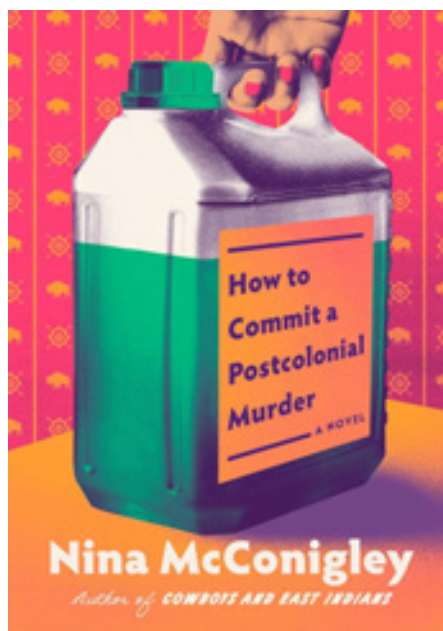


whom he had sworn to protect. Her death dredges up demons he thought he'd buried along with the scars of a fractured marriage and the aching divide between him and his estranged daughter. **BL, PW, DP & AZ**

*****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**

*****DISSECTION OF A MURDER**, Jo Murray (Dutton, \$19.00, May). When Leila Reynolds is handed her first murder case, she's shocked by the victim: a well-known, well-respected judge, whose death sent shockwaves through the legal community. She's also incredulous—she's nowhere near experienced enough to handle such a high-profile assignment—but the defendant is insistent: he wants her, and only her,

to represent him. Except he's refusing to talk. And if that wasn't complicated enough, Leila soon learns her opponent is the most ruthless prosecutor she's ever known: her husband. It's an impossible situation, yet Leila is determined to sway the jury—until she's blindsided once again by a shadowy figure from her past **PW, DP & BL**

*****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**

*****NIGHT OBJECTS**, Eli Raphael (Grand Central, \$29.00, May). Lenny Winter is fifteen years-old when she moves with her parents to an aging houseboat off the rugged coast of Washington. She imagines a quiet life spent charting constellations and chasing her dream of becoming an astronomer. Instead, a sudden tragedy shatters her world and catapults her to Blanchard, a renowned boarding school for the Pacific Northwest's elite, where wealth and tradition rule. Blanchard is dazzling, insular—and haunted by its own legends. At its heart lurks the Pascalianum Club, a secret society known to shape the school's greatest and most notorious students, and whose influence stretches far beyond campus walls. Hungry to belong, Lenny is drawn into its orbit, even as she senses that the club feeds on the very vulnerabilities she is desperate to hide. **PW, LJ & AZ** (Best Mystery of 2026 So Far)

*****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. **IJ & 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**

*****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.

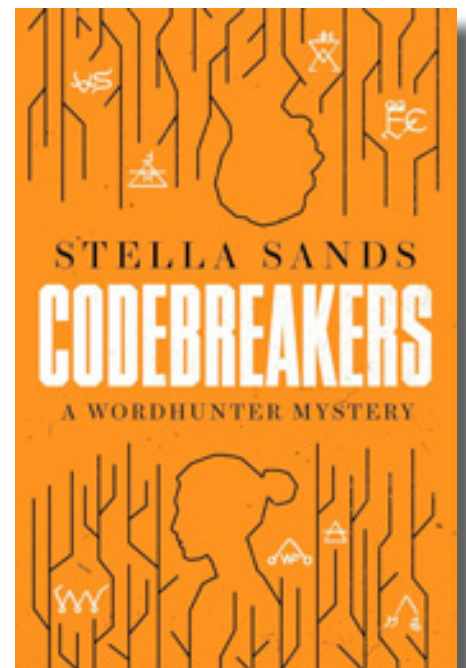
The true-crime podcasts that keep Siri company as she drives don't do much to make up for the legal career she imagined for herself, or the brother she's grieving. When public defender Amaya Fernando gets into her cab, they make a quick connection through their shared Sri Lankan roots. Siri, whose social 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 dispos-

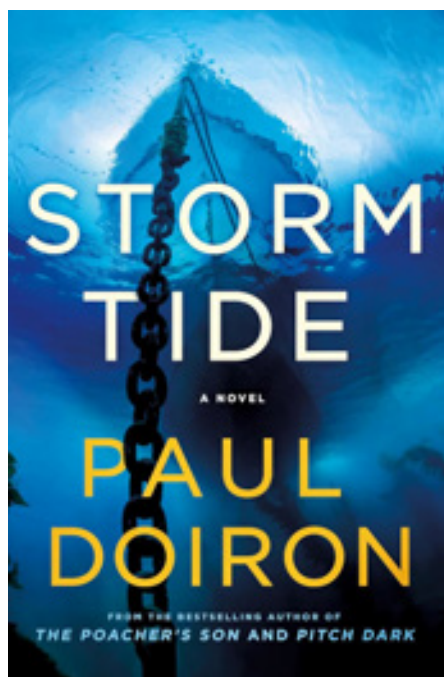
essed. He is determined to defy his bosses and re-open the investigation. **DP**

*****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

*****STORM TIDE**, Paul Doiron (Minotaur, \$29.00, June). Mike Bowditch #16. 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. **BL & DP**

*****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, \$29.909, 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 Lillinthall 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 precalm 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(2)**

DARK COUNTRY, Adam Plantinga (Grand Central, \$30.00, October). After the bloodshed in Fenton, Arizona, former Detroit cop Kurt Argento had to disappear. He reemerges in the small town of Barton, South Dakota, working under an assumed name as a church handyman. It's a serene existence of tending to the church grounds and avoiding questions. Until he meets seventeen-year-old Majed, a Syrian refugee trying to build a life in Barton with his single mother, as he's running for his life. Two men with hard eyes are close behind. Argento steps in, and Majed's pursuers retreat with a thin excuse about a stolen wallet. It's a story Argento doesn't buy for a second. Digging deeper, he uncovers something far more lethal than a street-level shake-

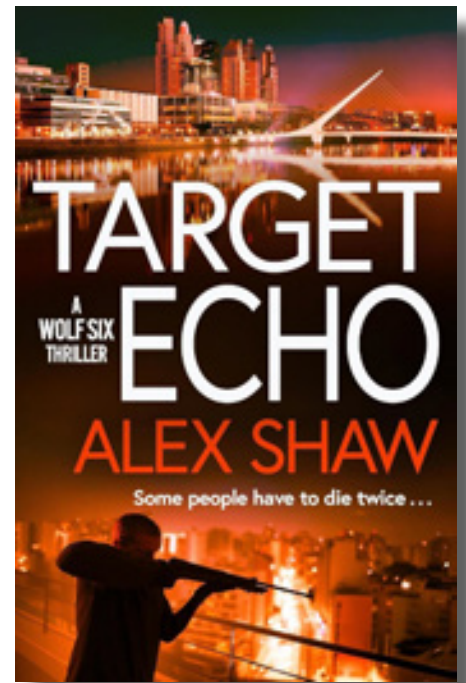
down. Majed isn't just in trouble—he's a target. And the hunters are closing in. **DP**

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. 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**

RANSOM, Daniel Silva (Harper, \$32.00, July). Alice Winter, one of Britain's most dazzling socialites, seemingly has the perfect life—a lavish home in posh Knightsbridge, a grand estate in Devon, millions of followers on social media who eagerly await her next post. But when she disappears without a trace while on holiday with three old



friends from Cambridge, her desperate husband, the real estate baron Edward Knight, turns to none other than Gabriel Allon to find her.

He soon discovers that Alice Winter is not the woman she appears to be, that she has a reckless side, that she has secrets. But Edward Knight has a secret too, a secret so dangerous that Gabriel will have no choice but to return to the life he thought he had left behind. An old enemy lurks there, waiting for him to make one misstep, waiting for the perfect moment to exact vengeance.

The 26th Gabriel Allon thriller. **DP**

CHOKE POINT, Brad Thor (Atria/Emily Bestler, \$30.00, June). Scot Horvath #25. A devastating series of bombings tears through Bangkok. Scores of American citizens are dead. The attacks send shock waves around the world. As global assistance pours into Thailand—including the FBI's famed Evidence Response Team—the president of the United States quietly prepares a plan B: Scot Harvath, America's top spy, trained to operate outside the law and probe the dark corners others can't...or won't. But the bomber Harvath is pursuing isn't a terrorist. He's something far more dangerous—one of ours. **DP**

Editor's Message



Free, Free At Last. With this issue, #112, I'm doing away with subscriptions. The magazine will be free to everyone who wants it. I've been handling subscriptions for 45 years (30 with my wife Michele's consumer magazine and 34 years with *DP*, with some overlap) and I'm burned out. I want to simplify my life. It doesn't cost much to get each issue out and I can handle that just fine. Also no more filing a tax return for *DP*. Hooray! Those of you who still have current subscriptions with future issues paid for will still get those issues and just think, you'll get free ones from that point on.

For the next year or so, I'll still email you the link, but the link will also be posted on the website, so if you don't get my email, you can also go to the website. I will also be posting all of the links to the past digital issues from *DP* #85 through *DP* #111. You can expect to get issues close to these dates each year: February 10, May 10, August 10 and November 10.

When you get the link to the issue, feel free to post it on websites and/or social media. Also, please share it with your book club members. The more readers, the better.

Barry Awards. Please vote. See page 23 herein. One vote per category. Send your four picks to me at george@deadlypleasures.com.

Reading Physical Books vs. Digital Books. There are two websites, Edelweiss + and Netgalley, that offer to approved reviewers digital advance reading copies of upcoming books. I download a good number of the books that I review herein from those sites and read them on my iPad. I've noticed a few differences between reading physical vs. digital books.

1. For some reason, the details of a book I read digitally don't stay fixed in

my mind as well as they do with reading a physical book. I generally read on my iPad late at night as I'm going to sleep and that may have something to do with it, but I think there's more to it. I've read that the fixed physical layout of a physical book helps the brain map text spatially, which often aids memory and deep focus.

2. If I want to go back in the physical book to check some detail or name I'm not clear about, it's an easy matter of flipping pages. But I find it very difficult to do the same with a digital book. But on the other hand, you can search a digital book for a name or other data – I just haven't gotten used to that yet.

3. The digital advance copies are only available for a 2 or 3 month period and then they expire and one no longer has access to them. You have access to physical books for as long as you want unless you borrowed them from a library. Of course, if one buys an e-book, one has permanent access to that e-book.

4. The cost of an e-book is generally less than the cost of a new physical book and you can get an immediate download – no trip to the bookstore necessary.

5. Some e-book editions of foreign books are available in the U.S., whereas the physical books are not.

6. E-books are quite practical when traveling. Your e-reader is quite lightweight when compared to lugging 4-6 physical books.

7. One can adjust the size of the type in an e-book to any readable size. With a physical book you are stuck with the size of the print in the book.

8. It's hard to lend an e-book to a friend unless you lend them your e-book reader as well. No such problem with a physical book.

9. E-books take up no space on your already overcrowded bookshelves.

10. If you're into collecting signed

books, you're limited to physical books. There is a certain pride of ownership in owning certain valuable first edition physical books.

11. There's a sensory appeal to a physical book – the feel of paper and binding, the act of turning pages and the distinct look of a growing bookshelf of books.

12. Some older books that went out of print a long time ago may not be available in e-book editions.

Just some random thoughts. The bottom line is that there are advantages and disadvantages to both physical and e-books. I still prefer reading a physical book but cannot deny the convenience of e-books.

Amazon's Best Lists. In the past I was quite impressed with the quality of amazon.com's Best of the Month and Best of the Year lists. The amazon editors seemed to know what they were doing. One editor in particular, Vanessa Cronin, did a very good job with her picks. But Vanessa Cronin is no longer there and the new amazon editors don't seem to have same expertise or tastes. In other words, I don't agree with most of their picks. But what disturbs me more is how many excellent mysteries they are missing by omitting them from their lists. The most recent amazon lists are weighed heavily in favor of psychological/domestic suspense (I know – that's what is selling now) and female authors.

About a month ago, amazon came out with their Amazon Best Mysteries, Suspense and Thrillers of 2026 (So Far) list of 25 books. Only five of the twenty five books were written by male authors. I only recognized a handful of authors names and most on the list were unknown to me. So, at least for now, I'll not be posting any more amazon Best of the Month lists unless I see a really good one. If you still want to see them, just go to the amazon site on the 1st of the month when the new list is posted and look under the Books tab.

Letters



Kim Hays

I wanted to let you know what delight your book recommendations have given me. I printed out your list of the Best Mystery and Thriller Fiction of 2025, along with the newest Barry Award nominations (although I know they weren't all your choices), and I've been working my way through them.

Despite his being a favorite of yours, I'd never read a Deon Meyer. I started with **LEO**, and I thought it was excellent, so I'll go back and read more. As for the rest of your list of 2025's best crime novels, I've now read all but three. My two favorites are **THE IMPOSSIBLE THING** by Belinda Bauer and **THE GOOD LIAR** by Denise Mina, but I liked the others very much, too, and will still read **WITNESS 8** by Steve Cavanagh and **THE WHITE CROW** by Michael Robotham (after I finish the first Philomena McCarthy book, which I'm reading right now). As for the Anthony Horowitz series, I haven't enjoyed the earlier ones, so I'll give this one a miss.

Among the nominations for best first novel, I loved Tanya Scott's **STILLWATER**—what an appealing main character Luke Harris! As for the nominated Action/Thriller novels, I've read four and was very sad not to see **WOLF SIX** by Alex Shaw on the list, which I think is better than any of the others I've read so far. Perhaps after I read **WITNESS 8**, I'll know what to vote for.

In my own category, Best Paperback Original, I will, of course, vote for MY book, and I actually wasn't a great fan of the books by Coffin and Mofina. I like **WOLF SIX** (as I said), **MAKING A KILLING** by Cara Hunter, and **THE DENTIST** by Tim Sullivan (although I confess I'm getting a little tired of all the neurodivergent detectives and their struggles with relationships—and **HEAD CASES** by John McMahon --

has yet another one!)

In any case, this doesn't count as my vote—I have more to read and may change my mind about everything except my own book **SPLINTERED JUSTICE** before September 15. I just wanted to tell you what fun I've been having going through the lists.

[Editor's Note: I love getting feedback like this.]

Trevor Magee

Thanks for your email. [*I sent an e-mail to those whose subscriptions were about to expire, so they wouldn't send \$\$ to renew*]

As I started reading it, I feared that the **BIG NEWS** might be that you were ceasing to produce **DP** as has been the case with so many other magazines on crime fiction in recent years, so I was delighted to read on that you plan to continue producing **DP** on a quarterly schedule going forward. I greatly enjoy reading the magazines and following up with buying the books reviewed which appeal to me most. I have a complete collection made up of the issues from when my subscription started and then completed by buying all the earlier issues I didn't have from Marv Lachman as part of the book sale that I read about in **DP** some years ago.

I give my best wishes to you and your family for the years ahead and I look forward to getting each new issue of **DP** for as long as you continue to enjoy producing it.

[*Editor's Note: I love producing this magazine and intend to keep doing it as long as I can. Health-wise I feel great and am just about to leave on my 1.3 mile walk with my wife Michele. There are no health issues on the immediate horizon. My goal is to reach age 90 and I'm trying to live a healthy lifestyle to reach that goal.*]

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.

RANSOM

Daniel Silva

THE TAILOR

Tim Sullivan

DIE FAMOUS

Michael Koryta

A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE

Jordan Harper

LONDON STATION

David McCloskey

YESTERYEAR

Caro Claire Burke

WE CHASE SHADOWS

Richard Osman

BACKTRACK

Marc Cameron

MAD MABEL

Sally Hepworth

Already read for the next issue --

DEAD IN THREE TWO ONE

Peter James

SPLIT SCREEN

Lee Goldberg

WHERE THE ROAD ENDS

Brian Freeman

THE BODY IN THE BATH

Ragnar Jonasson

TELL ME SOMETHING TRUE

Michael Robotham

COLD SUNSET

Willaim Boyd

QUARRY'S REUNION

Max Allan Collins

THIS NEVER HAPPENS HERE

Wanda M. Morris

THE RIDDLE MAKER

Bruce Borgos

DECEPTION

Alan Parks

Associate Editor's Message



I have been reading crime fiction almost exclusively for over thirty years. The genre is varied enough that a reader could find a subgenre that would appeal to them at the moment, be it a cozy, police procedural, P.I. novel, psychological suspense or thriller. These books can be supremely entertaining and, of course, they are incredibly popular as the various bestseller lists indicate.

However, after all these decades, I find myself in an existential crisis as a reader of crime fiction. Perhaps eighty percent of the books in the crime fiction genre are driven only by the plot or series character. The writers care much more about putting out a book with a storyline that will interest the reader. The actual writing style becomes secondary and often by a large margin. These books can be read, trashed and promptly forgotten. Hopefully they fulfill their purpose in providing a modicum of entertainment to the reader. These are the books you could take to the beach -- and leave them there. There is nothing wrong with this, but some readers really want more from the books they read. They want to read books in which the author actually cares about the writing in addition to the plot and character. These literary books just feel like a more fulfilling read to me than the usual books written by those who are only plotmeisters.

By comparison, the recently read **COOL MACHINE** by Colson Whitehead highlights to me how badly written so many crime fiction novels are. This book is superb, not just with the writing style, but the depictions of the characters, the locale and the setting of the 1980s New York City. The plot comes to life through the writing. It is the apex of a literary crime fiction novel. I find myself only wanting to read these kinds of books where the author truly cares about more than just a compelling plot

or interesting characters. These are the books to take to the beach -- but take them back home afterwards. Now, don't get me wrong, I will always make room for those plot-driven books if the author is a favorite of mine or the book is highly praised by reviewers, whose tastes are somewhat similar to mine.

Another problem with today's crime fiction is the overwhelming repetition. It appears every other novel is a psychological suspense novel with dark floral covers, largely written by authors I've never heard of. They greatly vary in quality. These books are also very popular and fill the bestseller list. The other subgenres are repetitive, as well. I simply cannot read a PI novel (too formulaic) or a police procedural (often dull and dreary). Yet, we cannot forget that crime fiction series are that which draw fans who have followed these series characters through many books and care about what happens to them. To these readers, they have become real people and many consider them friends. Thrillers can be fun but often in the same way comic books can be fun. These books concentrate almost entirely on plot. The writing is relatively pedestrian. It is the plot and pacing the authors concentrate on.

Today, I find myself wanting more than that. I like realism, deep characterizations and perhaps something that can make me look at the world differently. I will admit that after reading literary work for a number of weeks, I come back to crime fiction just for some light entertainment.

Some crime fiction authors do attempt literary fiction. I have heard Dennis Lehane say that his message is best told through crime fiction. That is the reason he writes in the genre but his books have transcended it. In Michael Connelly's books there are passages so beautifully written, with such depth that I asked him about writing them. He's

told me that he must have been having a good day on that day. He is fully capable of writing in a literary style but that is not what his legion of fans are looking for.

Crime fiction can be literary. I look for those type of books. Besides **COOL MACHINE** by Colson Whitehead, I also recently read and recommend **ON EARTH AS IT IS BENEATH** by Ana Paula Maia, and **THE ELEMENTS** by John Boyne. All great books. Of course, I will dip into the latest Steve Cavanaugh just for pure relaxation. I consider his books great, but in another way.

Some modern literary crime fiction to consider:

IN THE WOODS by Tana French
MYSTIC RIVER and
GONE BABY GONE by Dennis Lehane
THE SECRET HISTORY
 by Donna Tartt
CASE HISTORIES by Kate Atkinson
NEON RAIN and **BLACK CHERRY**
BLUES by James Lee Burke
FACELESS KILLERS
 by Henning Mankell
THE NAME OF THE ROSE
 by Umberto Eco

Some classic crime fiction:

THE BIG SLEEP and **THE LONG GOODBYE** by Raymond Chandler
THE MALTESE FALCON
 by Dashiell Hammett
THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY
 by Patricia Highsmith
THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE by James M. Cain



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. This is the 30th year of the Barry Awards presentation.

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)

A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE

by Jordan Harper

Mulholland Books, April 2026, \$29.00

Rating: A

First line: He tells them, “This place is a crime.”

Jordan Harper’s **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** is a gut punch of a novel. A shock to the system. A shot of adrenaline.

Last year, Jordan Harper’s **EVERYBODY KNOWS** was my choice for book of the year. Now, **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** takes over that number one slot. It is an amazing novel. It is completely of the moment.

EVERYBODY KNOWS was one of the first books to squarely address the Jeffrey Epstein issue, **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** goes even farther. It starts with Epstein and the Epstein files and ends up in Armie Hammer territory. It is a monumental book, and a wild ride.

Two people, neither one above reproach, team up to unravel a set of circumstances that could only happen in LA. And could only happen today.

Jake is a podcaster, a night crawler who rides around LA, dash-cam transmitting footage, listening to the police scanner, looking for fresh crime scenes. He broadcasts a continuous hyped-up commentary on culture and crime for a subscriber audience. He broadcasts crime scenes, when he finds them, saving closeups of wet blood for a high-paying, premium audience. His Creepy Crawl podcast also has a coterie of stringers who sell him fresh crime photos that he can then re-transmit.

The cops look the other way. He finds what he needs when an up-and-com-

ing rapper is shot to death in a chicken restaurant. Fresh blood.

Kara is a high-level fixer for a concierge firm, Sub Rosa, providing whatever the celebrity clients need, including boys, girls, drugs of every stripe, access to everywhere and everything, every sensation, every spectacular high. Her best friend has disappeared, and no one seems to care but her. She herself is high but she manages her drug cocktail so that she can function. On this particular night, she is in pursuit of a Norwegian movie star who walked away from a photo shoot wearing a million-dollar diamond necklace he forgot to give back when he disappeared into the LA night looking for the next sensation.

Then there’s Gibson, a middle-aged attorney with a low-end clientele who is summoned to Men’s Central Jail by a potential client and instead of the usual lowlife miscreant, he finds himself face

to face with an Epstein lookalike, a top tier movie producer who has been arrested for pedophilia and who, improbably, refuses to talk to any lawyer other than Gibson.

When Kara and Jake team up and eventually intersect with Gibson, they find they have a common pursuit. A conspiracy of wildly famous and wildly wealthy LA figures is orchestrating a crime spree that dwarfs the usual LA mayhem. City officials and top police brass have been bought off and there is no one to stop them.

The novel is a demon’s tour of Hollywood that includes a hellish, super-elite party.

Don’t miss it.

IRONWOOD

by Michael Connelly

Little Brown, May 2026, \$32.00

Rating: A

First line: Stilwell could hear the plane but couldn’t see it.

I have reviewed hundreds of mysteries and thrillers, and I do my best to convey the pros and cons of each one so that readers, who may have criteria that differ from my own, can decide whether to read them. But I have never come close to explaining what makes Michael Connelly one of the great writers of our time.

His prose is clear and unembellished. His characters are relatable but not adorably quirky. His situations have structure and logic, no withheld information, no jump scares. The action is easy to follow but not breathtaking. But all this shouldn’t add up to the sheer brilliance of his craft.

IRONWOOD is a great novel. With



Detective Sergeant Stilwell, known as Stil, Connelly introduces the first new central character since Rene Ballard. Like Ballard, Stil is almost underwritten. His character is revealed so gradually that it seems as if we always knew him. His dogged determination is one of the familiar hallmarks of all the investigators Connelly's oeuvre. His attention to detail and keen intuition drive the action. His strong moral compass steadies the plot.

Set in on Catalina, an island off the coast of Los Angeles, with its own culture and its own problems, the story begins with a drug bust gone wrong. At a remote airstrip in the middle of the night, two detectives who reported to Stil are gunned down, one of them dead and the other grievously injured. Stil is benched since he led the raid that went wrong. But Stil can't help but investigate, even as he tries to stay under the radar.

IRONWOOD also has a feature in common with many of the best Connelly books: there are actually two crimes, one present and one past, that intertwine. The solutions to these cases are surprising and deeply satisfying. The straightforward narrative doesn't need the bells and whistles that so many lesser writers use to entice the reader: flashbacks, flashforwards, unreliable narrators, withheld information. The plot, of course, takes twists and turns, and effortlessly stuns us.

Do not miss **IRONWOOD**.

THE DENTIST

by Tim Sullivan

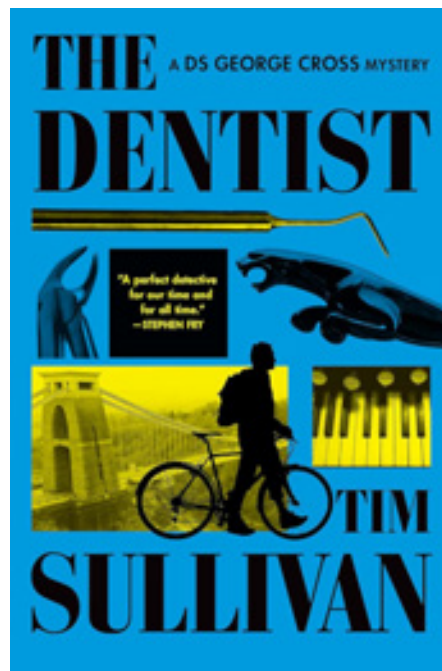
Atlantic Crime, October 2025, \$10.80
(first published in Great Britain 2021)

Rating: A-

First line: The young woman standing in front of him was smiling.

The UK seems to have an inexhaustible supply of excellent police procedurals, each with their own quirky cops and nefarious criminals and twisty plots. Tim Sullivan's DS George Cross is, like so many fine cops these days, on the spectrum.

Cross is called to a case that involves



the death of an elderly homeless man. It was almost written off as a random case of homeless-on-homeless violence, but Cross, being Cross, notices some anomalies. The man, while filthy and disheveled, had expensive dental work and prescription contact lenses. Cross begins to investigate in his dogged, focused way, and eventually uncovers a series of crimes that span many years and involve several people. Bit by bit, he unravels the tangled web of crimes, cover-ups and lies, until he brings the truth to light and the perpetrators to justice. And all the while, he must negotiate the world of "normal people" who don't live on the autism spectrum. This story line is touching and informative. Very satisfying.

The title, as always, refers to the occupation of the victim, in this case, a dentist. This is an excellent series!

THE KINGS OF VEGAS

by Karen Mack and Jennifer Kaufman
William Morrow, June 2026, \$30.00

Rating: A-

First line: Josie King couldn't think of one reason why she ended up in this man's bed.

THE KINGS OF VEGAS is an excellent thriller about a casino owning fam-

ily in Las Vegas. Josie King lives in Los Angeles but drives back for her father's funeral after his sudden heart attack. Her siblings assemble and the bickering begins right away.

On the way to the family ranch, Josie stops at a small casino and wins at blackjack. She is a brilliant mathematician but doesn't have to try too hard in this small-time setting. She picks up a handsome stranger and has staggeringly good sex with him in his hotel room above the casino floor. They only exchange first names and in the morning, she drives the rest of the way home.

So **THE KINGS OF VEGAS** starts with a bang. And the consequences of that one-night-stand reverberate through the remainder of the book.

Josie's father has left complicated instructions in his will about which of his offspring will run the casino, live in the ranch, and share in the proceeds. Stuffier older brother Frank and his nasty wife seem to be in charge. Josie's charming but feckless younger brother Sam is left mostly to his own devices. And Josie's sister, Sunny and her husband Trent are doing well on their own but do not want to be left out. The will specifies that each of the siblings work at the family casino for three years or they get nothing.

Josie reluctantly agrees to stick around and gradually sees signs that the casino is in serious trouble. When her one-night-stand turns out to be the heir to a rival casino, he teams up with Josie to try to save the King family business.

Josie King is a very nice creation, smart and capable and intuitive. She is pitted against a violent mob and it takes all her resources to keep her family members alive and healthy and save the family legacy. It's fun to watch her in action.

Recommended.

MURDER BY DESIGN

by Lee Goldberg
Thomas & Mercer, May 2026, \$28.99
Rating: B+

First line: There are some things you need to know before I start telling you this incredible, improbable, but absolutely true story.

The very prolific Lee Goldberg is back with a new series about a brain-damaged detective, Edison Bixby, who is also a design expert. In true Sherlockian fashion, the novel is narrated by Bixby's new partner, a struggling actor named Wally Nash. Wally is hired to assist Bixby since Bixby's brain injury has left him without filters and he blurts out insults that occur to him without regard to their effect on his interlocutors.

Wally is more circumspect and, since he is an actor, can also assume any identity needed during the course of their investigations.

Bixby, who is a genius, is also a student of architecture. His expertise leads him to examine the way environments influence, and sometimes solve, crimes. This ranges from the fairly obvious plan of the shopping mall which subtly leads shoppers to stores, to the more obscure way a person's desk can explain their movements and even their thinking.

This merging of design philosophy with crime detection is pretty interesting for a start. And add to it Goldberg's witty writing and charming characters, and you have the makings of an engaging series.

MY NAME WAS GERRY SASS

by Tiffany Hanssen

Atlantic Crime, 2026, \$27.00

Debut Novel

Rating: B

First line: Gerry woke up gasping for air.

Tiffany Hanssen's debut novel, **MY NAME WAS GERRY SASS**, is a mean-spirited, nasty little book. It makes most noir novels look like Mary Poppins. And, there's a downside.

I loved it.

Gerry Sass (and, no; no one ever comments on the lack of an apostrophe in his name) is a terrible, selfish, vicious, violent, small-time mob hit man. He has no affection for his family, his wife, the mother of his illegitimate son, or anyone else in his life, except for his only daughter, Early. He rarely hits or curses

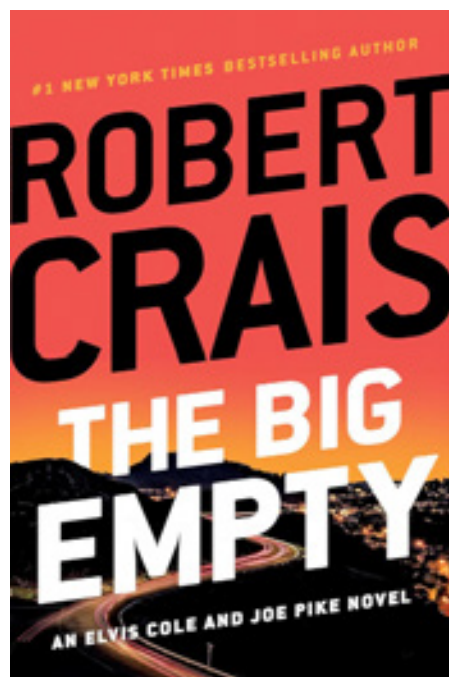
at her and he teaches her about guns. Fatherhood at its finest. He also has one friend, a local priest named Dan. They are drinking buddies. Then Gerry Sass is killed.

Early catches a glimpse of her father's murder and decides to follow the killers. Father Dan, too, witnesses the killing and he also follows the trail.

The road trips these two take are separate and they don't meet up until the end. The violence and depravity they encounter is epic.

Throughout, Gerry Sass is revisited. Unfortunately, these provocative drop ins lead nowhere. To paraphrase Chekov, when you hear from a corpse in the first act, you should get a sustained message before the book is over. This doesn't happen. Pity. If Gerry Sass had been given a tiny moment of intervention, this would have been a much better book.

That said, if you have had a steady diet of earnest cops, determined women, and improbably skilled action heroes, you might need a dirty little palate cleanser like **MY NAME WAS GERRY SASS**.



THE BIG EMPTY

by Robert Crais

GP Putnam's Sons, 2025, \$30.00

Rating: A

First line: Sadie Given woke from a troubled sleep, the stupid phone babbling like an angry turkey, gobble-gobble, gobble-gobble.

Robert Crais' **THE BIG EMPTY** won the 2026 Edgar Award for Best Novel. I was puzzled. Robert Crais? Seriously? For the umpteenth book in a series? I couldn't remember the last Elvis Cole and Joe Pike book I read. So, I picked up **THE BIG EMPTY** and read it. In a day. It's that good.

It's a remarkable achievement when a long-running series produces a truly brilliant book. Lee Child and Michael Connelly and Louise Penny have all done it. Now, so has Robert Crais.

THE BIG EMPTY, book twenty in the series, starts when a social media influencer called, improbably, The Muffin Girl, hires private eye, Elvis Cole, to find her missing father. He's been missing for ten years.

Cold case investigations start slowly. Old files are reopened. People are reinterviewed. Details are noticed and pursued. Eventually a picture starts to emerge. Someone doesn't want the case reopened. Violence happens.

It's hard to explain how gripping this book is. It takes its time. Beautifully written, heartbreakingly plotted, peopled with relatable characters, **THE BIG EMPTY** gets its hooks in you and does not let go.

The end, finally, is satisfying. But the coda is absolutely wonderful. One of the most touching scenes in fiction today. Two women get together to talk. We don't eavesdrop on them. But it's quietly devastating.

Do not miss this book.

THE MURDER AT WORLD'S END

by Ross Montgomery

William Morrow, 2026, \$30.00

Rating: C

First line: Comet Halley reached perihelion—the far side of the sun—on April 10, 1910.

A variant on the locked room mystery, **THE MURDER AT WORLD'S END** by Ross Montgomery, is set in a

vast British estate in 1910, when Halley's Comet was creating a sensation and spawning crazy theories faster than the Trump Administration or Taylor Swift's wedding.

Young Stephen, a former convict with no family and no money, has unexpectedly been offered a job on the staff of a stately home in Cornwall. He arrives during the comet's appearance. The house is in chaos. The owner, Lord Conrad Stockingham-Welt, has barricading himself and his family and servants and a few guests in Tithe Hall, on the aptly named island of World's End. He's sure that the comet's passing close to the earth will release poisonous gases and kill every living thing on the planet, except those in Tithe Hall, which he has sealed up to protect the inhabitants. He's sure they will emerge in the comet's wake to rebuild the world.

In the meantime, Stephen is assigned to attend the Viscount's cousin, Miss Decima Stockingham, her brilliant scientific mind trapped in a frail, elderly body. Needless to say, she considers her cousin insane. And she has theories of her own. Stephen proves to be an ideal companion for her. He's smart and resourceful and kind. She's profane, imperious, but ultimately good-hearted.

But when the Viscount is found dead the next morning, with an arrow through his eye, in his study which had been sealed and locked the night before, Stephen and Decima are plunged into solving the mystery of his locked-room death. And it won't be the only death that needs solving.

Well written and nicely paced, **THE MURDER AT WORLD'S END** is a very cinematic novel, a kind of *Clue* crossed with *Downton Abbey* with a hefty dollop of *Knives Out*. I can just see them casting Harry Styles and Helen Mirren. Not my favorite sub-genre, but a pretty good example of its kind.

THE KEEPER
by Tana French
Viking, 2026, \$32.00
Rating: A

First line: Cal gets the first whiff of trouble when he's in Noreen's shop on a



Saturday afternoon, buying eggs.

One of our finest writers, Tana French, is always a pleasure to read. And the Cal Hooper trilogy is French at her best. The three books, **THE SEARCHER**, **THE HUNTER**, and **THE KEEPER** are probably best read in order. The picture that unfolds is that of an American learning to live in a completely foreign environment and of a village that is perhaps not as backward as it seems.

Cal, a divorced Chicago cop, tired of the big city crime beat, has retired to Ireland, to a rural village, where he opens a small business as a cabinet maker. **THE KEEPER** is the third and final book in the series and it is a lovely finish to a beautiful story, well told.

Cal doesn't struggle to assimilate. He is content to just let it happen. And as his skills as a carpenter gain him attention, so does his past in law enforcement. He becomes the go-to person in the village of Ardnakelty when the issue is too big or too complex for the local constabulary.

In **THE KEEPER**, a lovely local girl goes missing and the entire area mobilizes to find her. Her death, when it is discovered, spawns a variety of theories including suicide, accident and murder. Cal tries to stay out of the investigation, but he can't help but get involved.

In French's world, the village not

only contains many memorable characters, but also serves as a character in its own right. The village has needs, and demands, and attention must be paid. Cal's part of it now and can't sit on the sidelines.

Tana French manages to do two contradictory things with these books: she paints a lyrical picture of a place that resists time and modernity with a ferocious need to stay as they always have. But her village is also part of the world, and politics, economics and other modern impedimenta can't be quashed completely. I can't think of another writer who so successfully juggles past and future and enlists our emotions so completely in both.

Highly recommended. All three of them.

THREE HITMEN AND A BABY

by Rob Hart
Putnam, 2026, \$30.00

Rating: B

First line: A bullet slams into the façade of the building next to me, narrowly missing my head.

Rob Hart's **THREE HITMEN AND A BABY** is a charming mashup of violent assassins and adorable toddlers that land it in a sweet spot between cozy and thriller. It is the third book in the Assassins Anonymous series, and, although it is the first one I've read, it's a solid addition to the funny meets violent subgenre.

Four former assassins meet each week to reinforce their determination to stop killing. Modeled after AA, they testify, recite goals, and support each other over coffee in a church basement. Valencia brings her toddler, Lucia, who is given earphones and an iPad to watch cartoons while the adults talk about not killing people.

When Valencia has to leave to tend to a family emergency, she asks Booker, Mark and Astrid to babysit. Of course, the minute she leaves, the mayhem starts. So the novel follows three former assassins who try to deal with a lethal situation without resorting to violence, and while trying to amuse a three-year-old.

Fun.

The Jacobs Report

Lou Jacobs



THE DEATH ROW CLUB

by V.A.Vazquez

Gallery / Scout Press, \$29.00, July

Debut Novel

Rating: B+

Offered for your entertainment is this stunning debut psychological thriller that combines a murder mystery with an authentic exploration of the theme of inherited evil.

Nicola Fischer's life is spiraling out of control after her father is exposed as the Ellicott Creek Ripper, killer of five women including her best friend. She loses her teaching job, she is ostracized by her community, and many assume she aided in her own friend's demise. Greer Woods, her so-called friend was instrumental in outing her father on her shocking true crime podcast. While battling her insecurities and feelings of exploitation, Nicola receives a weird invitation in the mail from Greer. An all expense paid trip to the annual retreat for the Death Row Club -- for those who share the burden of having infamous, heinous killer parents. She accepts and views this as an opportunity for possible camaraderie, healing and understanding.

Nicola finds herself in a remote cabin in upstate New York, surrounded by a group of individuals who've been placed in the similar situation of being shunned for the evils of their kin. All victims of the commercialization of crime. (This is more a book about them than their serial killer parents).

All is going smoothly until a mysterious, uninvited, female stranger arrives. After a bitter confrontational episode this stranger disappears, only to discover one of group's members is found dead.

Debut author Vazquez ratchets up tension and intrigue as a nightmarish hunt for the murderer ensues, throwing suspicion on all attendees. Who will die next?

The author explores themes of inherited evil, a critique of modern true-crime culture and exploitation and society's fascination with serial killers. The claustrophobic setting in a remote area contributes to her relentless fast pacing and unsuspected twisty reveals that ultimately lead to an exhilarating denouement. Ambiguity reigns supreme as secret motivations converge. This gem will appeal to the legion of Riley Sager fans. I certainly look forward to further additions to her oeuvre.

138 MAIN

by Gavin Bell

(pen name of Mason Cross)

Scout Press, \$30.00, June

Rating: B+

Be prepared to be immersed for several sittings in this propulsive high stakes crime thriller. This is the first time this marvelous Scottish writer is being published under his own name. He has written since 2014 under several pseudonyms.

With this catchy premise, a serial killer is targeting residents at 138 Main Street, all without apparent connections or motives. The FBI faces an almost impossible task to frantically investigate this national crisis with over 7,000 Main Streets across America. Who will be the next victim? The killer is always at his next kill site before any clue suggests his victim.

This clever premise will breed escalating suspense and terror nationwide as the body count rises. FBI Special Agent

Ben Walker and his protege, rookie officer Zoe Hill are tasked with leading the investigation to uncover clues and the potential next victim. Their team races across America as the puzzle pieces fall into place. National terror crescendos after the killer's manifesto is published demanding radical social change. The media relentlessly stokes fear and distrust daily.

Bell proves to be a masterful storyteller with his fast pacing, short chapters, multiple points of view and frequent cliff hangers. He successfully explores themes of fear, and mass hysteria, compounded by media influences. This twisty thriller will appeal to fans of Michael Connelly, and aficionados of FBI procedurals and television crime thrillers. I think I've found another excellent writer to add to my list of must reads.

THREE HITMEN AND A BABY

by Rob Hart

Putnam, \$30.00, June

Assassins Anonymous #3

Rating: B+

This is Rob Hart's third installment in his ingenious Assassins Anonymous series. Imagine highly skilled world class killers trying to desperately "recover" from their addiction of killing, and



forming a family that holds regularly scheduled meetings to connect with their feelings and need for redemption.

Hart seamlessly provides the necessary backstory. A word of warning: Elite Killers make poor babysitters. Valencia rushes off to L.A. to find and aid her brother. She must leave her precious baby girl, Lucia in the care of her three “killer” friends, Mark, professionally known as the “Pale Horse,” Astrid, known as Azreal, and Booker, the equally notorious “Ryan Holt.”

The absurdity commences when this lovely cute toddler spikes a fever, throwing the three into a tizzy.

Mark is contacted by a Russian crime boss, Zmeyya, who he has dealt with in the past, and is calling in a chip for past debts. He is instructed to kill his friend Astrid for fulfillment of a prior debt or risk the mob killing his previous girlfriend and their son, Bennett.

At the same time, the clueless Astrid and Booker rush Lucia to the urgent care for treatment. They are so used to aliases and false identities, they cannot come up with Lucia’s full name and age. The nurses immediately expect a kidnapping situation and the authorities are notified. As they flee the urgent care, a citywide manhunt ensues, now making them fugitives from the police, the Russian mob, and surveillance cameras.

Rob Hart masterfully blends suspense with almost slap-stick comedy and wit. His economical prose is balanced with breakneck pacing and short chapters, that force the pages to fly by. He explores the themes of redemption, recovery and necessity of family with clever development of emotional bonds to the characters. The reader cannot help but root for this lovable cadre of “killers” to succeed. I certainly look forward to the further travails of Assassins Anonymous.

YOU FIRST

by Caroline Kepnes

Random House, \$30.00, June
Prequel in the Joe Goldberg series

Rating: B

Caroline Kepnes has garnered a legion of fans with her five-book series featuring everyone’s favorite psycho killer, Joe Goldberg. The series was the inspiration of the much-heralded Netflix series, *You*.

Joe will not let any mortal stand in the way of his romantic pursuits. Typically bodies drop as Kepnes weaves a delightful narrative, filled with satire and wit, along with the inner twisted mind and musings of Joe Goldberg. But, how did it all begin?

As the title hints at ... this is the origin of our twisted antihero. He’s 17 years old, and working in Mr. Mooney’s bookstore in New York City. Not in school and literally falling in love with every girl he sees on the subway. Soon he realizes he needs to get his GED and hopefully find his true love. Then he spots in a chat room the message: MISSED CONNECTION, NYC Bookstore Babe. Someone has noticed him!

With a great deal of cyber digging he uncovers the identity of his first romantic pursuit. Vail Gunderson, a twenty-four year old production assistant, who he soon learns has no actual interest in books, but loves rom-coms. He is determined to convince this older woman that he is her “true love.” Joe must lie about his age and many other things, as he enters the tricky waters of dating. Joe will develop a deeply flawed and fake persona in order to trap his prey. Unveiled are his inner musings and anxiety as he manipulates the situations that will ultimately shape his dark worldview, long before his first kill.

Kepnes provides a satisfying but deeply disturbed origin story of our anti-hero through the inner musings of his warped psyche. Her incisive prose, laced with wit and satire, captures the emotional chaos in his manipulative, psychological development. She weaves together an exploration of obsession and distorted self-perception, and its consequences. The reader can’t help but be submerged in the twisted mindset of Joe. The state of affection and love will inevitably warp into possessiveness and selfishness. What originally is perceived as a narrator with intelligence, wit, and empathy morphs into revealing

a mind that is plagued with distorted and unacceptable morals. His actions and obsessive behavior become increasingly distorted in reality. The lines between desire, love and control will be breached.

I would hope that a further expansion of his psychopathology will develop with another follow up to this prequel. The quality of Kepnes’ writing is exceptional in her ability to capture the essence of this deeply flawed persona, and at the same time face the effects of desire.

IRONWOOD

by Michael Connelly

Little, Brown, \$32.00, May
Detective Stilwell #2

Rating: B+

Another marvelous gem that allows Connelly to expand on the exploits of a new character that rivals his beloved Harry Bosch. L.A. County Sheriff’s Detective Stilwell, has been semi-exiled to offshore Catalina Island, after a dust-up with another detective of questionable repute. This idyllic location is twenty miles off the coast of L.A., and supposedly is immune from the violence and vice of the mainland. Stilwell is an excellent investigative detective with a strong sense of obtaining justice at all costs, while being noticeably less edgy and abrasive than Bosch. Will our dutiful detective be confined to petty thefts, and drunk and disorderly crimes, instead of pursuing justice in more meaningful cases? I think not!

Connelly provides a thrilling crime police procedural in this second installment in his Catalina Island series. This can be devoured as a standalone with his effortless insertion of any necessary backstory.

This tightly plotted and paced narrative involves two intertwining crime investigations that cinematically converge into an explosive denouement. Initially, Stilwell and two detectives, based on a confidential informant tip, find themselves staked out late at night at the Airport In The Sky, a remote airstrip in the mountains, awaiting a drug deal. A small plane lands and drops a duffel

bag off on the tarmac. The two deputies move-in while Stilwell chases the pickup man on his ATV. His pursuit is unsuccessful while the deputies are ambushed by a lone gunman ...killing one and seriously injuring the other.

Stillwell is instructed by mainland officials to stand-down and let them pursue the investigation of the failed drug bust. Nevertheless he secretly investigates on his own. Inadvertently, he uncovers a backpack, turned in several months ago, that traces back to a woman who disappeared while hiking on the island four years ago. His investigation leads him to teaming up with the LAPD's Open-Unsolved Unit and Detective Renee Ballard. (Another favorite character in Connelly's crime universe).

The hunt for a serial killer that taunts the authorities, will intertwine with the failed drug bust investigation. This page-turner will progressively ratchet up tension and intrigue as twists and turns culminate in intense action sequences.

Connelly expertly explores the themes of corruption and violence being ever present in our society. The supposedly idyllic island of Catalina is not exempt from the ills of society. At times, the bureaucratic and political issues of liability and accountability will actually obstruct the ability to find truth and justice. I eagerly await the further travails and cases of Detective Stilwell.

MARION

by Leah Rowan
St. Martin's, June
Rating: B

Is Norman Bates from Robert Bloch's *PSYCHO* back to wreak more havoc? No... but the next best thing in psychological thriller tropes has arrived. Leah Rowan delves into the story with multiple new twists, while exploring the bonds of sisterhood and pent-up rage. Our heroine, under-appreciated and overlooked by her boss and contemporaries finds herself in a dilemma. Her boss has entrusted her to make a bank deposit of a huge sum after they closed a deal with a new client at a Manhattan

ad agency. The client insisted on a cash payment. It's late Friday afternoon, and the weekend is upon her. Unfortunately the bank will not accept even a deposit from an individual not named on the account. She finds herself with a suitcase of cash ... which she is tempted to use to help her sister extricate herself from an abusive marriage.

She heads out on a bus, destined for her sister's house in Saratoga Springs. The bus breaks down late at night in a small upstate town of New York, and the only vacancy is at a small set of cabins, in the outskirts of town.... The Bates Motel. Not wanting to leave a trail, she pays cash, and registers under the assumed name of "Marion." This somewhat parallels the original *PSYCHO*. However, our story diverges with unexpected twists. The proprietor, Norman Billings, nee "Norman Bates", is rather charming, and unexpectedly invites her for a home cooked dinner. While chatting during dinner, she learns he is somewhat hung-up about the health of his elderly mother, who is virtually bed-bound.

After retiring to her room, she decides to shower her troubles away ... when, suddenly the shower curtain is ripped open to reveal Norm standing there with an overhanging knife in his hand. Marion is no patsy, and she quickly knees him and the groin, grabs the knife and precedes to stab him multiple times, until he obviously is dead.

This is the initial awakening of her repressed rage at her conflicted state of life. This however, is only the beginning of her "well-meaning" killing spree. She and her sister will eventually call upon the aid of their mother, to extricate them from a dire situation, recalling their mother's mantra that she would come to their rescue, even if it involved murder, and help them bury the body.

Leah Rowan expertly weaves a complex narrative where the victim actually fights back.

We find ourselves rooting for the killer to "get away with everything." The tension and intrigue are ratcheted up as the twists pile up. The narrative is told in two timelines, in addition to

"Marion's" inner dialogue, alternate chapters unravel the quest of Hannah, a private investigator, working on the case of multiple missing women in the area. As the timelines converge, relevant coincidences emerge.

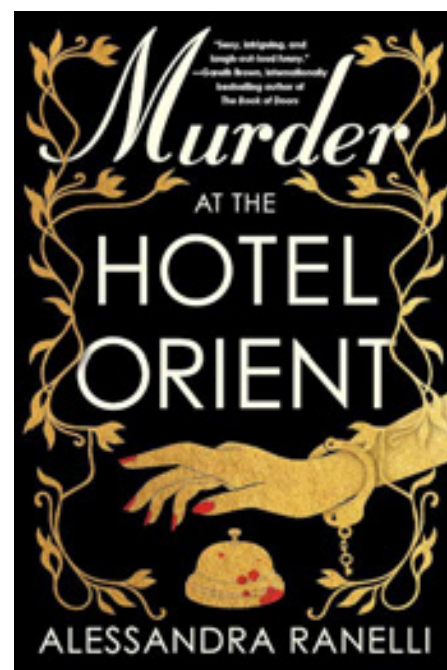
The cinematic prose is both dark and at the same time witty. This certainly is not the usual "last girl" trope. Readers will want to gobble-up this novel quickly, making it a great beach or airplane read. It's a delicious study involving the fragile psyche of a conflicted woman, as she forges her way through seemingly untenable situations.

MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT

by Alessandra Ranelli
Scout Press / Simon & Schuster,
\$30.00, May
Sterling Lockwood #1
Rating: B+

A deliciously decadent debut mystery novel that exudes wit, charm and a touch of sauciness.

The main protagonist is Sterling Lockwood, the alluring concierge of the famous Viennese love hotel, the Hotel Orient ... where illicit affairs occur on a daily basis. The rules are simple. No cameras, no surveillance, pay in cash, use an alias and secrets are sacred. The dark alleys and romantic streets of Vi-



enna provide the mysterious backdrop for the salacious entanglements that pervade the workings of the clandestine and labyrinthine corridors of this luxurious hotel.

Sterling's job is to protect the secrets of the hotel and its guests, while assuring its flawless flow of efficient management. Her status quo is abruptly brought to a halt, when two bodies are found in a locked room. One of the victims is even one of her many ex's... that she still cherished. Trapped between her loyalty to the hotel and desire to know the truth she must become a sleuth. Eventually she even agrees to help Detectives Beate and the beguiling Andreas in their ongoing investigation.

The other victim is a high tech mogul on the precipice of implementing a city-wide surveillance system. She aids in constructing a list of suspects by wading through facts attributed to the aliases of the guests and their possible interconnections. She proves to be a natural sleuth.

Ranelli masterfully weaves together the complexities of the subtle clues with a cinematic noir type of prose.... enhanced with wit and innuendo. This addictive mystery is not only moody and atmospheric, but adds a new dimension to the "locked-room" mystery. The hotel and city of Vienna are as much characters, as Sterling and her detective counterparts. I sincerely hope this is not the last we read of Sterling Lockwood.

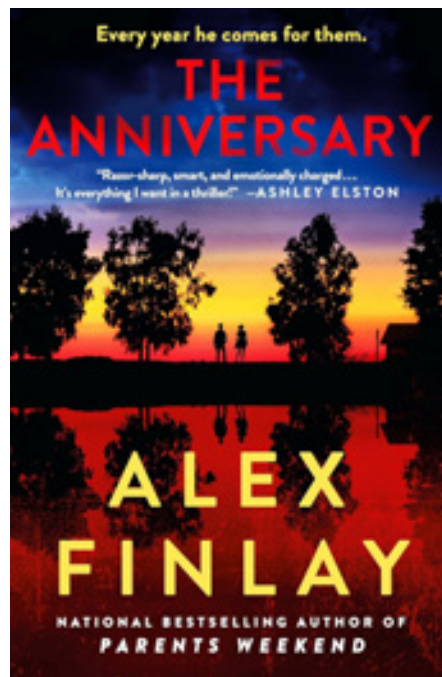
THE ANNIVERSARY

by Alex Finlay

Minotaur Books, \$29.00, May
Standlaone

Rating: B+

This is more than a mystery about the hunt for a serial killer, but rather an exploration of the far reaching effects of trauma, guilt and violence. Every May 1st in small town midwest USA the May Day Killer strikes without leaving any clues. The victims are usually murdered, but occasionally he lets the women go free, while whispering in their ears, that they're one of "the lucky ones."



In this ensemble cast of characters, two are the main focus. They know each other from afar. Quinn Riley is from the wrong side of the tracks. He is saddled with the burden of taking care of his disabled brother, while living in poverty, and protecting him from his mother's violent boyfriend. While shy, he has unwittingly attracted the attention of Jules Delaney, both beautiful and part of the high school royalty scene. They would both experience a deeply traumatic event on May 1st evening of 1992. Quinn heroically breaks up a fight, but inadvertently severely injures an individual. He is arrested and sent away for a year at a juvenile detention center.

On the same night, Jules is brutally attacked by the May Day Killer, but survives the attack being one of "the lucky ones."

Quinn returns home after a year to only hear that his mother has been brutally murdered. Was it the boyfriend or had she been silenced for uncovering corporate corruption?

Over the next decade Quinn and Jules's lives seem to intersect every May 1st. Jules continues to deal with survival guilt and the trauma of violence, while fearing the killer will return for her.

Alex Finlay skillfully provides dual intertwining timelines, with cinematic

prose, and layered reveals and misdirections to build escalating tension and intrigue. Continual rehashing of events, brings into focus the fragility of memory, and its reliability. Secrets are revealed as the lives of Quinn and Jules converge.

This narrative will appeal to those fans of Harlan Coben mysteries. For full impact this should be read in only a few seatings. This is a welcome addition to the oeuvre of Alex Finlay, bestselling author of **PARENTS WEEKEND**,

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 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 eventually 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.

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

by Matt Haig

Viking Press, \$30.00, May

Rating: B+

Jump aboard the magical train that will revisit significant episodes in the life of our 81 year old protagonist, Wilbur Budd.

Through magic realism Matt Haig explores the meaning of one’s life through the metaphor of a journey back in time to pivotal moments in life. Although related thematically to his previous book, **THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY**, it is not a sequel and can certainly be enjoyed as a standalone. The crux is a consideration of what really is more important in life.... work and success or love and warm and enduring relationships. It brings to mind the proverbial quip: Nobody dies wishing they worked more. Wilbur will be faced multiple times with the uncomfortable prospect that he missed multiple opportunities to act toward a more meaningful life. He is forced to repeatedly realize his regrets.

Haig expertly utilizes magic realism to ponder many deep emotional lessons in life. Is it truly wise to neglect love and friendship for the material gains of society. With straightforward prose Haig explores with insight aging and grief, and misappropriation of significance of monetary success over love. Many philosophical issues are considered without becoming pedantic.

His smooth and effortless pacing in regards to discovering the really important things in life, turns this gem into a page turner. I always look forward to explore Matt Haig’s commentary on life in modern society.

THE WOMEN IN WHITE

by Sarah Pekkanen

St. Martin’s Press, \$30.00, August

Rating: B

This is not a thriller but a deep dive exploration of both women’s freedom

and the exploitation of women in the name of “advancement of science.” The mystery unfolds incrementally as how and why some of the participants vanished and why the trials were attempted to be erased from history. Told in two timelines to advance the mystery and appreciation that some things really don’t change that much. This successfully blends historical accuracy with the speculative element of parapsychology.

In 1964 four psychically gifted women, Betty, Helen, Ivy and Kathleen, participate in a series of secret parapsychology experiments at an elite university, administered by a somewhat overbearing scientist. In the present-day timeline, Riley, a down-in-her-luck recent divorcee, takes a job as a live-in caretaker for the elderly Betty Sadler. Betty is a recluse, seemingly trapped in a time warp reflective of the 1960s. For decades she has not left her house, which could have been transported from the ‘60s. She actually is enlisting Riley’s help to investigate and track down her three college girl friends from the experiment. She is unaware that they actually have vanished.

Pekkanen provides a rich character driven narrative utilizing short chapters and cinematic sparse prose, and accurate historical atmosphere to propel the mystery surrounding the erasure of these women and events from history. Why should these women trust these male professors, husbands and institutions and yet not be respected for their skills and inherent worth, regardless of their gender? This story is less about paranormal skills, which may be genuine or a remarkable extension of intuition, and more about the exploration of trauma and human connection. Is it ethical to exploit people, especially women, in the name of scientific progress?

To some extent these dilemmas exist even now. This is a story of reflection and not action.

I always look forward to Sarah Pekkanen’s insightful novels.

Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith



TOULOUSE NOIR, edited by Charles-Henri Lavielle (Akashic Books, \$18.95)

VIRGIN ISLANDS NOIR, edited by Tiphane Yanique and Richard Georges (Akashic Books, \$18.95)

I love noir; I just hate the way the word has been abused for years and years, used now to flog everything from coffee and vodka to nail polish and bug spray, slapped on anything (Books! Films! TV shows! Videogames!) even remotely related to crime fiction, as long as it involves a cop, a private eye, a femme fatale or anyone who smokes or drinks. And maybe in black and white?

Sorry, but that's not the way it goes.

But Akashic Books know noir. Ex-punk rocker Johnny Temple's feisty little imprint kicked the off their acclaimed Akashic Noir series way back in 2004 with Brooklyn Noir (edited by Pete Hamill), and the line has since quietly become a crime fiction juggernaut, numbering over a hundred volumes, spreading its bleak tentacles all over the world. There have been volumes featuring the dark tales from Los Angeles, Manhattan, San Francisco, Montreal, Dublin, London, Paris, Istanbul, Jamaica, Belgrade and cities and even countries I had to look up, mostly written by local authors who know where the subway stops, where the bodies are dumped and when the bars close.

So, Toulouse? The Virgin Islands? Why not?

Noir is unfortunate circumstances, dressed up in atmosphere, peopled by characters who may be good or bad, but who suffer bad choices. And even worse luck. If God answers all prayers, as some say, noir is the color when He says "No."

So don't count on any happy endings.

But if your literary tastes run to the dark side of the street, there's plenty to savour in these two recent additions to the series.

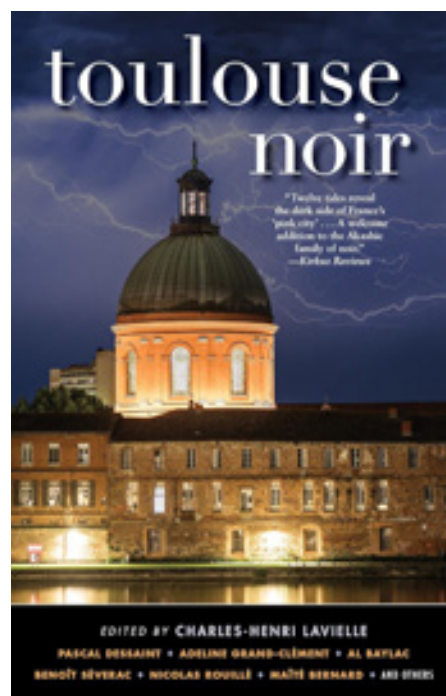
Southern France's Toulouse, often referred to as "La Ville Rose" due to its omnipresent pink terracotta-bricks, is stuck about halfway between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and serves as a major aerospace hub known for its opera house, its universities and its dazzling architectural heritage. But that doesn't mean much to the folks in these dozen stories, all translated from the French by David and Nicole Ball. Nobody's really here to admire pretty buildings or to snap a selfie in front of some magnificent old pile of stones — they're too busy scrambling to survive. It's a motley crew of hustlers, guitar-slinging buskers, desperate students, office workers and the like. There's a

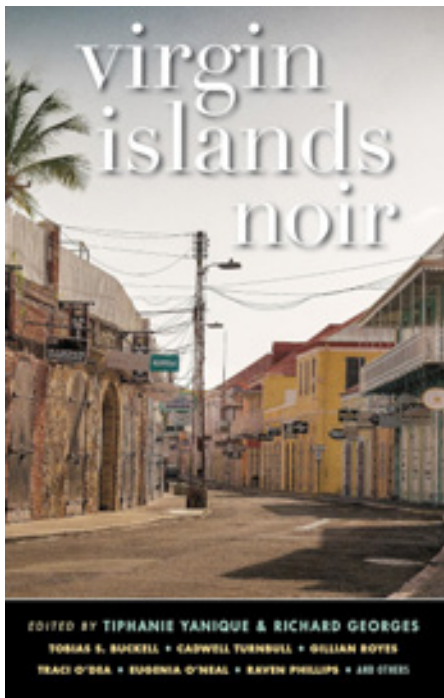
young Muslim woman with a promising future who takes a job working in a local sex shop; a trans social worker out to tip the scales on behalf of the city's many sex workers, a 13-year-old confronting a dead bear at her dancing school, a journalist looking into a murder that may (or may not) involve a band of militant feminist activists, and a bar owner facing debts no honest man can pay. Meanwhile, Gaspard Chauvelot's "Ridgeline" strikes out for more metaphysical territory with "Ridgeline," offering a guided tour (in second person, and accompanied by footnotes, *s'il vous plait*) of the La Roseraie neighbourhood, taking you places no tourist would likely visit. Or at least not on purpose.

Yet, as beautiful as Toulouse can be, it pales in comparison to the postcard-ready tropical paradise that is the British and US Virgin Islands — that beachy playground for the rich and powerful (and usually white), built on the backs of outright slavery and more subtle culturally forced labour (usually not white), and still simmering (albeit quietly) under the thumb of colonization. The fifteen stories, divvied up among the British and American Virgins, offer a fascinating look at a society that is at times as ugly on the inside as it is beautiful on the outside.

The collection kicks off in more traditional noir territory than its Toulouse sibling, with Johanna Gibson's "Eos and the Copper Coast," which begins with Eos "pulling prickly pear thorns out of her own ass" and ends with murder. That one's immediately followed by Eugenia O'Neal's "An Untimely Death," with a police detective Miles Munroe investigating the homicide of one of Tortola's most powerful men.

And then we're off to the races, with





tales ranging from slice-of-life tragedy and misadventure to the undeniably horrifying, with a little woo-woo worked into a few stories just to keep readers off-balance.

It's an intoxicating brew of slowly fermenting communities, classes, traditions and mythologies, uneasy and often wary. South Asian? Dominican? French? Hispanic? Arabic? Hindu? Why not? Throw 'em together and let's see what happens...

Unfortunately, a handful of the stories stray a little far from the noir template for my liking. Nisha Khiana Savara's "Jellyfish" is pure romance and rather toothless, although Sophia Aubin's "Romancing the Fish Trap," despite its title, ends with a kick in the teeth that noir fans will appreciate.

And so it goes. There's plenty of patois to add spice and colour, a dash of sideways humour (some black) to keep things moving, fiercely guarded secrets, drunken sailors and even, in Tomas S. Buckell's "Off the Rock," the possibility of lost Nazi treasure.

The area's unique culture, and the uneasy existence and daily struggles of the defiant islanders under British and American political thumbs, are constant, and stark reminders that even under the bright tropical sun, noir lurks in the shadows.

You call someplace paradise, kiss it goodbye.

GHOST BARN by John Verdon
(Counterpoint, \$30.00)

Okay, it's easy to make fun of — and believe me I have — the old school locked room/impossible crime mysteries, what with their pompous genius detectives, playing-piece characterization, and often dubiously woozy resolutions. It's arguably the most unwieldy balancing act in crime fiction, incredibly difficult to pull off convincingly, and in a manner that makes you care. Yet, writers keep on trying. So hats off to author John Verdon, who has pulled it off with style and pizzazz in his long-running series featuring Dave Gurney, a retired NYPD cop turned investigative "consultant" in the bucolic Catskills.

That's because Verdon hasn't been afraid to put some actual meat on the bones, writing like he's the long-lost love child of John Dickson Carr and Ross Macdonald. Having some thug come through the door wielding a gun and neatly wrapping things up just won't cut it.

Fortunately, beyond the obligatory sleight-of-hand plotting and the impossible crime gimmick (which Verdon always handles with tactical precision and aplomb), there's plenty more on

offer, not the least of which is some great regional color, credible — if sometimes head-smacking — solutions, bizarre but believable crimes that have actual consequences, intelligent plotting, and characters who are more than mere pawns in the game. People matter here, and the often tender and fragile space between the introspective, methodical Dave and his long-suffering wife, supportive but impatient Madeleine, goes where much crime fiction fears to tread.

In this, the ninth and reportedly final book in the series, however, we find Dave cut adrift, still trying to come to terms with the breakup of his shattered 20-year marriage, following events in the previous book, 2023's **THE VIPER**.

Fortunately, a surprisingly boisterous political squabble in a nearby town offers a timely distraction, as Don Ranzak, a knock-it-all-down real estate developer, squares off against Stuart Wilmot, a tree-hugging librarian, in a run for town supervisor...until some of Wilmot's people start to disappear.

When the local cops seem unable (or unwilling) to do much, Wilmot calls on Dave, suspecting his rival is behind the disappearances. Everyman Dave reluctantly takes the case, even as he tries to put the pieces of his marriage back together.

And then the bodies start to drop. Including an axe murder.

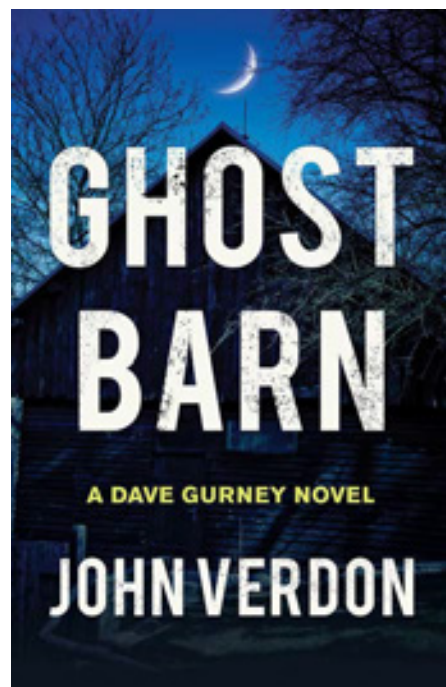
What fun!

HANK HOWARD, PIZZA DETECTIVE by Robert Venditti & David Lapham (Bad Idea, \$5.99 each)

Speaking of fun, there's a new almost-monthly comic out there featuring a private eye worth investigating.

The eye in question, Hank Howard, isn't a man you meet every day. No matter how you slice it.

Sure, he's a private eye, a hard-boiled and slightly rumbled doofus right out of central casting, complete with the obligatory fedora and raincoat, and topped with a steady stream of tough guy cynicism and tight-lipped philosophical insights, but he really only has one client. Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op answered to The Continental Detective Agency; Robert Venditti and





David Lapham's Hank answers to Big Caligula Pizza, an Florida pizza chain with national ambitions.

It's all slightly tongue-in-cheek, offbeat if not off-kilter, an almost-Rockford Files mix of wry skepticism and world-weary humour.

Plus pizza, which Hank takes seriously. Very seriously.

Maybe even too seriously. As he puts it, "My nine-to-five is twenty-four seven."

It's a worldview completely shaped by pizza, topped by such pie-shaped observations as "Too many bakers burn the cheese" and "Pizza is a greasy business." Behind the cynicism, though, lurks a crushed idealist, hoping to bring back the good ol' days when pizza "used to be an honest business."

Hell, the guy carries a pizza cutter in his trench coat pocket.

Writer Venditti has a lot of fun with this, and artist Lapham, whose work seems to be everywhere these days (Stray Bullets, American Caper, Good as Dead), employs his clean-cut, just-the-facts-ma'am style to stories that really don't need any embellishment. The humour lies in it all being all told without a smirk to be seen.

The comic has been popping up more or less regularly since March of this year at your local comics place, in a series of one- or two-issue story arcs,

including The Two Hollywoods, A Slice Of Life, The Inside Job and Fair Play, all under the Hank Howard, Pizza Detective title, and all worth reading. Hopefully some graphic novel collections are in the works.

The Two Hollywoods is a good starting point. It finds our man in California, pitted against an Australian drug cartel, fire-spitting flamethrowers, plenty of gunfire, and a thug kangaroo, while A Slice of Life (my favourite

so far) finds him returning to his hometown of Tampa, Florida, working his first murder case, reconnecting with a lost love, and in a surprisingly heartwarming moment, reflecting on the impact pizza has had on his life.

"Did I choose a life of pizza, or did pizza choose me?" Hank ponders. "I'm not sure it matters. Man can't live on bread alone. But toss on some sauce and cheese, and you might get by."

Words to chew on, indeed.

THE 2026 SHAMUS AWARD FINALISTS

The finalists for 2026 The Private Eye Writers Of America Shamus Awards, for private eye novels and short stories first published in the United States in 2025, have just been announced. The winners will be announced at the 2026 Bouchercon's Opening Ceremonies in Calgary, Alberta.

Best PI Hardcover

THE BIG EMPTY by Robert Crais (PUtnam)

PHOTOGRAPH by Brian Freeman (Blackstone)

HATCHET GIRLS by Joe R. Lansdale (Little, Brown)

GRAY DAWN by Walter Mosley (Little, Brown)

MIRAGE CITY by Lev AC Rosen (Minotaur Books)

Best First PI Novel

CHASE HARLEM by Elise Burke Brown (Rising Action Publishing)

MILES IN TIME by Lee Mathew Goldberg (Wise Wolf Books)

WHERE THE BONES LIE by Nick Kolakowski (Datura Books)

SHADOW OF THE ETERNAL WATCHER by Josh Mendoza (Inkshares)

THE WITCH'S ORCHARD by Archer Sullivan (Minotaur Books)

Best Paperback Original PI Novel

THE HOOK AND THE EYE by Raymond Benson (Ian Fleming Publications)

SUNDAY OR THE HIGHWAY by Cindy Fazzi (Thomas & Mercer)

CITY LIGHTS by Claire M. Johnson (Level Best Books)

MIDNIGHT STREETS by Phil Lecomber (Titan Books)

CATCH ME ON A BLUE DAY by M.E. Proctor (Shotgun Honey Books)



Marilyn's Mystery Reads

Marilyn Brooks



THE NOVEL DETECTIVE

by Teresa Dovalpage
Soho Crime, \$28.95, July
Standalone

As both author and narrator of this book, Teresa Dovalpage returns to Havana, the city of her birth, in THE NOVEL DETECTIVE to try to unravel a mystery concerning two deaths at her former school. Although decades have passed, Teresa has never forgotten the horror of the day when Yoyi, another girl at the school, and Felipe, the Spanish teacher, were found dead. The authorities called both deaths suicides, but Teresa is not alone in wondering if that was the truth.

Teresa is a novelist in New Mexico, and her friend Estrella is a DJ at a Spanish-language radio station in Miami. Unexpectedly Estrella calls Teresa, offering her the opportunity to return to Havana and look into the deaths that occurred when both girls were students at the José Antonio Echeverría Middle School—that of Yoyi, the most beautiful girl in their class, and Felipe, the teacher who was the object of students' and other teachers' crushes. Estrella tells Teresa that the police version of the deaths is that Felipe threw himself out of a window when he learned that his affair with Yoyi was going public. If convicted, he would be facing jail for the crime of having sexual relations with a minor. Then Yoyi took poison because she couldn't live without him. **"So very Romeo and Juliet!" Teresa says.**

Estrella promises to pay for their airfare and expenses while in Cuba, and Teresa, who always has had questions about what actually happened, agrees to the trip. And, she thinks, it may be helpful for the novel she's always wanted

to write about the two deaths.

Estrella says that she has been in touch with Rogelio, a policeman who may be able to assist them with their surreptitious investigation. He is not the officer who originally investigated the deaths, as that officer left Cuba on the Mariel boatlift as Teresa did, so perhaps he is coming to the case with an open mind. At least that is what Teresa is hoping.

The novel takes place both in 2020, just before Covid made travel difficult if not impossible, and 1980, just before Teresa and her mother leave Cuba. **She has never returned to the island, and she is naturally curious about the changes that have taken place since she left.**

Some things in Havana have changed while some things haven't. The two women are met at the airport by Osiris, the owner of the casa particular where

the women are scheduled to stay, and are taken there by the driver of an al-mendrón, one of the American automobiles that have been in the country since the 1950s and are featured in many photos.

The Spanish words that appear in the novel are translated seamlessly by the author without interrupting the flow of the story. In addition, her descriptions of the city, both the changes that have taken place since Teresa and her mother left and the things that have remained the same, make the city and its inhabitants come alive for the reader.

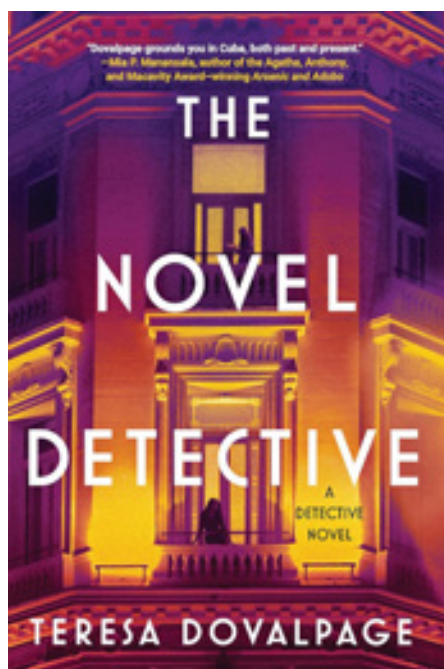
Teresa Dovalpage has written a fascinating and impressive mystery about a country that has played an important part in American history. Her characters are vibrant and alive, and the determination of both Teresa and Estrella to solve the mystery surrounding the deaths of Yoyi and Felipe ring true.

AN ARTFUL DODGE

by Karen Odden
Soho Crime, \$29.95, June
Kit Jameson #1

Step back nearly 150 years to 19th-century London, a city of horse-drawn carriages, men with top hats and women with crinoline cages, and the largest population in the world. Scotland Yard was 50 years old and not held in high esteem, and children as young as ten were put "in service" to wealthy households; a compulsory education law for children ages five to ten was not enacted until 1880, a year after *An Artful Dodge* takes place.

Kit Jameson and her younger sister Sarah are all that remain of their nuclear family. Their father left years earlier, and their mother died shortly



afterward. Sarah, now fourteen, is a scullery maid to a wealthy family while Kit, seven years older, works part time as a seamstress, or needlewoman, as it was called then, but her main job is that of a thief.

The group of women that Kit works with is called a ring, and it's headed by Amelia Lyle. The women are adept at stealing necklaces, earrings, rings, cuff links, and other pieces of jewelry from London's wealthy women and men and concealing them in their voluminous clothing. They work in pairs, distracting their victims and quickly changing their appearance after the theft has taken place by turning their cloaks inside out or carrying spectacles or paste-on moles to change their appearance.

Amelia is respected and admired by Kit and the other women in the group, and they are stunned when she announces that she's retiring and giving the leadership to Maggie Wirth O'Connell, the daughter of the former head of the ring. Maggie had been transported to a penal colony in Australia to serve a twenty-year sentence but was released early and now has returned to London to take "her birthright," as Amelia explains to Kit.

There's something about Maggie that sets off emotions that are negative and creates tensions among the women that weren't there before she arrived. That's definitely something for Kit to worry about, and it's not the only thing that's preoccupying her.

Sarah has told her that a night earlier she saw several Castle men (members of a local gang from the Elephant and Castle pub) on the street, and although it was a dark night she's worried that they might have seen her as well. And there had been a robbery and a double murder in the area. Could that be, Kit wonders, what is making her sister so nervous?

AN ARTFUL DODGE is a fascinating look into Victorian London. **In fact, there was an all-female gang of thieves operating at that time, specializing in shoplifting from high-end stores, and not shunning a bit of violence when they felt it was necessary.** Mary Carr was the leader of The Forty Elephants, a group of female thieves who operated in

the area around the aforementioned pub for more than fifty years.

Karen Odden's mystery is spell-binding. Her characters, including Kit, Sarah, Maggie, and Kit's love interest James, are wonderfully depicted, and there is no doubt that readers will be drawn into a world so different and yet so similar to our own.

STORM WARNING

by James Byrne
Minotaur, \$29.00, May
Dez Limerick #4

Dez Limerick is in Paris with his ally Rafik when he's aware of something he thinks is strange. He sees two individuals dressed as painters, but, as he tells his friend, "Both had clean shoes." This sets off alarms for the men and puts Dez on high alert. Two days later the two "painters" set their plan to kill Dez and Rafik, but Dez has a plan of his own. After one of the assassins fires a shot at him, Dez runs into the scaffolding holding him, causing the temporary structure to fall and kill the shooter. He lets the other shooter live, saying to Rafik that she's no threat to them.

Two weeks later FBI Special Agent Tom Fairweather brings Dez to meet Trisha Jean Jackson, assistant secretary of

state. Authorities have discovered that there is a secret site in Eastern Canada that has gone into lockdown, and there is no way to reach the scientists there. It's believed that in this underground bunker there is a huge deposit of cerite, a mineral that is needed in computers, smart phones, televisions, and similar electronic devices. Apparently there are several interested parties in obtaining this materials—the United States, Russia, China, and a huge private company. Who is behind the lockdown?

Dez is hired due to his experience and knowledge as a "gatekeeper," someone who can open any door, keep it open as long as necessary to do the job, and then close it. Dez is interested in the problem, especially when Fairweather tells him that Petra Alexandris, his former lover, is one of the people who is now behind the locked doors of the underground site.

Two major blizzards are headed to Newfoundland, and Dez and the others in the group have to land in the brief period between storms. When they arrive at the hotel where they're staying, they are met by three others who have been sent to investigate the lockdown—Dyson Patterson, a physician; Frank Watts, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; and Elisabet LeCroix, a member of a Canadian research council.

Except that Elisabet is actually Ash, the assassin who was posing as a painter in Paris when Dez rammed into the scaffolding holding her and her partner. Dez doesn't recognize Ash, as she is known professionally, but she recognizes him. When he doesn't identify her because she has dyed her hair and was covered in white dust from the building she and her partner were allegedly painting, she is relieved. **She thinks that "there was no reason to kill this man. Yet."**

As Dez has proven in each of the three previous novels in this series, he is a man of many talents. He has an almost uncanny ability to get out of dangerous situations, not necessarily using force but instead using his quick intelligence and problem-solving skills. As I wrote in my review of *Deadlock*, the reader will eagerly await each dan-



gerous situation that Dez finds himself in simply to see how he manages to get out of it, not necessarily by brute force but rather by using his many talents and brain power.

James Byrne is the pseudonym of a man who has worked as a journalist and in politics for more than two decades. You can read about him at various sites on the web.

I, SPY

by L. M. Kemp

Minotaur, \$30.00, May

First novel

Kendal Carter used to be a spy, but then she became a mother and left the espionage life behind. Or so she thought until two armed and masked men invade her life in Switzerland, and she and her young daughter Rosie have to flee for their lives.

Kendal had grown up with a mother who was a spy. They moved often, changing their names and personal histories, and Kendal had vowed, when her daughter was born, that she would give Rosie the stable upbringing that she herself had missed. But now, four years later, she wonders if that was the right decision or if she's able to protect her child.

She's rescued by her friend Rico Ortez, another former spy who has now turned to guarding important clients in the corporate world with his company Bon Temps. He has arranged for Kendal and Rosie to live in a beautiful London house, as impregnable as a house can be made, that comes complete with Joel, an aspiring espionage agent. Joel, like Kendal, is working for Ortez's firm. He tells her that he's working on an app called Cadu; it's for school-age children. Another employee at Cadu is Alex Shapiro, the father of a "mean girl" in Rosie's kindergarten class, and Kendal tells Joel to keep an eye on him.

Over the Christmas vacation, Kendal, Rosie, and Joel rent a cottage in Suffolk. Despite the inclement weather, the three visit a nearby park and are surprised to hear a tune coming from an ice cream truck. When they walk over to the truck, Kendal is stunned to see the driver—Khalil Masoumi, her

former lover and Rosie's father.

On the book's cover are the tantalizing words *When Mother is the Best Cover*. The love of Kendal's life is her almost-five-year-old daughter. In their move from Switzerland to London, Kendal realizes the difficulties involved in being both a mother and an espionage agent; it's a very difficult balance. And she's not the only mother in the book who is dealing with family issues that are hampering her work.

L. M. Kemp's novel is an excellent read, and her descriptions of the many and varied characters are outstanding. The twists and turns that occur in the book make this a terrifically suspenseful novel.

FIRST SIGN OF DANGER

by Kelley Armstrong

Minotaur, \$29.00, February

Haven's Rock #4

At Haven's Rock, deep in the Yukon Territory, things are going well for Detective Casey Duncan and her husband Sheriff Eric Dalton. The remote sanctuary community is functioning well, and the people who live there, who are fleeing from abusive relationships or corrupt police, are able to keep things running smoothly although they are all-too-aware of the dangers they face from outside.

As Casey and Eric and their infant daughter Rory are hiking in the forest just outside the compound, they hear a woman's panicked voice. As they approach her, she tells them that her name is Gretchen and that she and her husband were hiking when he twisted his ankle.

Eric and baby Rory return to Haven's Rock while Casey follows Gretchen to where her husband is sitting on the ground. His story is the same as his wife's, and although he's reluctant to let Casey examine him, he eventually relents and shows her his swollen ankle. She bandages it up, and they go off in the opposite direction from the Rock.

Upon returning to the compound, Casey and Eric tell several of their closest friends the story of the two hikers. **All agree to institute a lockdown for**



at least that night without telling any other residents the real reason.

There is another issue that Haven's Rock is dealing with, one that involves their neighbors. When they founded the Rock, Casey and Eric believed there were no people anywhere near their community, but in fact they discovered that there is a gold mining camp not far away. Or is it really a mining camp? **The people there seem to be as eager as those living in the Rock to keep to themselves, but it's worrying that they have armed guards patrolling their camp and the forest that is in between the camp and Haven's Rock.**

When Casey and Eric return to the forest the following day, along with their deputy Anders, they continue going west, the direction Gretchen and Blake had said they were going. They continue their hike until they hear the sound of a grizzly bear, a clear warning that they are getting too close to its cave. As they prepare to turn around, they see the back of the bear pulling something along on the ground. It gets closer, still seemingly unaware of or unbothered by the threesome, and they realize what the animal is dragging—it's a human body.

As the bear comes nearer to them, Casey and Eric see that the body is that of Blake. But where is Gretchen?

FIRST SIGN OF DANGER is the fourth in the projected five novels in

the Haven's Rock series. Many of the secondary characters will be familiar to readers of the earlier mysteries, with a deeper look into what brought them to the community. They are realistic, well-described, and their reasons for living off the grid are totally believable.

THE DELIVERY

by Gregg Hurwitz

Thomas & Mercer, \$19.99, July
Standalone

NORM LLC—what does that even mean?

Rebecca and Mark Higgins are feeling overwhelmed by life. Mark has a demanding job, a boss he doesn't respect, and work keeps piling on. Rebecca is taking care of Maddy, their beloved daughter who is on the Autism Spectrum Disorder scale. She's a wonderful child, but her special needs and problems at school leave Rebecca exhausted at the end of each day.

When Rebecca and Mark finally manage to have a night out, Mark's boss Derek and his wife are sitting at the next table. They invite themselves to join Rebecca and Mark, start off by listing the impressive things in their lives (private boarding schools for their children, vintage Targa car, etc.), and then move onto their latest acquisition, their plus one as Derek puts it. It sounds so wonderful, an AI companion to do whatever the owners wish. With a little prodding the Higginses purchase one.

They call their NORM LLC Mr. Man, an attempt to personalize the strange thing that was delivered to their home. He will do the laundry, make breakfast, even drive to pick up groceries and do errands. It sounds perfect, doesn't it? Except that even their most innocuous statements are picked up by Mr. Man, and then strange things start happening around them. When Rebecca says that she'd like to sue Jackson, their annoying neighbor into the ground, and the next day he's found beaten to a pulp in his home, Rebecca and Mark start to wonder what is going on.

THE DELIVERY is a novella that gives readers a glimpse into what life

would be like if all our wishes, said and unsaid, were answered. That sounds like a dream, but it can easily turn into a nightmare.

Gregg Hurwitz's latest is a huge departure from his much-loved Orphan X series. Here he presents the reader with an ordinary family, faced with ordinary problems, who think they have found the answer to their busy, over-scheduled lives. But, as the saying goes, be careful what you wish for. As someone who is already a bit nervous about all that AI can do, *The Delivery* strikes close to home.

THEN HE WAS GONE

by Isabel Booth

(pen name of Karen Jewell)
Crooked Lane, \$29.99, February

The English family is out for a hike in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, celebrating Elizabeth's victory in a successful court case in Alaska. All four members of the family are experienced hikers, even ten-year-old Nick and four-year-old Henry.

Then there's a sudden downpour, and the two boys run ahead of their parents. They reach the parking lot, and Henry says he needs to use the toilet. Nick gives him his flashlight, and the younger boy rushes ahead.

When Elizabeth and her husband Paul come back to their Jeep, Nick is there but Henry isn't. Nick tells his parents where his brother went, but when their father looks for him, Henry isn't there. Did he get lost? Was he kidnapped? **The family's nightmare begins.**

Although on the surface their life seems perfect, there is a good deal of stress between the parents. Elizabeth has always been the breadwinner, making a very impressive salary, but numerous trials necessitate long absences from her husband and their sons.

Paul is embarking on a new career, beginning his master's in poetry at the University of Houston; even when he completes the program, however, there is no way he can compete with his wife's earnings. Feelings that were long buried between the parents come out into the open under the incredible stress of searching for their missing child.

In addition, Elizabeth's demanding job has exacerbated her dependence on alcohol, which began in college. For years it has been under control, but the celebration after winning the trial in Alaska led her to indulge again, with painful and unforeseen consequences.

The novel is told in several voices – Elizabeth's, the distraught mother; Paul's, who learns what happened in Alaska; Nick's, who blames himself for letting his younger brother out of his sight; Hollis Monroe's, a former sheriff and current park ranger; and Aunt Alex, Elizabeth's closest friend and Henry's godmother.

Elizabeth and Paul are now facing not only the terrifying possibility that their young son has been kidnapped and may be dead but also the different ways in which they are handling this crisis. Nick provides the only clue to Henry's disappearance when he remembers seeing a truck in the area, but he cannot offer any identifying features, so it's not really much help. Paul believes that the best thing for Nick is to return to their Houston home with him so that he can go to school, while Elizabeth is adamant about staying at the Park and waiting (and hoping) for Henry's return while plastering Henry's photo on every available tree and storefront.

The author does an outstanding job differentiating among these characters, giving the reader an insight into their feelings and thoughts about the missing youngster. Their emotions are painful and believable.



Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



THINGS GET UGLY: THE BEST CRIME STORIES OF JOE R. LANSDALE

by Joe R. Lansdale
Tachyon Publications, 2023, \$18.95
Rating: A

THE ESSENTIAL HORROR

by Joe R. Lansdale
Tachyon Publications, 2025, \$18.95
Rating: A

Desperate for a Joe R. Lansdale fix while waiting for the publication of the last (sigh) Hap and Leonard novel (**PETRIFIED DREAMS**, due out in early October 2026), I picked up these two collections from our new library, the Toms River NJ Branch of the Ocean County Library. Compiled by the author himself in collaboration with editors Jacob Weisman and Rick Klaw, they truly live up to the adjectives of “Best” and “Essential”. They make for

terrific beach reading, featuring dozens of single-sitting, compulsive reads. I enjoyed re-reading these ironic, iconic, often brutal tales, especially “The Steel Valentine” in **THINGS GET UGLY**, and “Bubba Ho Tep” in **THE ESSENTIAL HORROR**. Each tale is a gem, enhanced by the insights provided by Lansdale “hisownself” in the brief introductions accompanying each saga.

Besides short story collections, I found other treasures among the stacks. Two in particular resonated with me:

FAMOUS

by Blake Crouch
Random, September 2025, \$19.00,
Rating: B

&

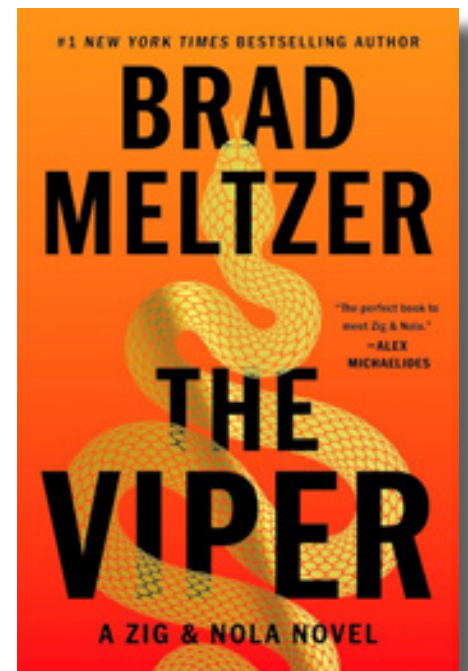
THE VIPER

By Brad Meltzer
Morrow, March 2026, \$36.00
Rating: B+

These two stood out for me because they’re both Large Print Editions (LPEs), so they were easy on my aging eyes. Plus, they made me feel like a speed reader, barreling through dozens of pages at each sitting, something that definitely added to my enjoyment.

I’ve been a fan of Blake Crouch’s writing for more than two decades now, ever since reading his first novel, **DESERT PLACES**, in 2004, and his second, **LOCKED DOORS**, in 2005. **FAMOUS**, which reminded me ever so much of authors Robert Bloch and Jack Ketchum, was something he originally self-published in 2010; it came back into print with the announcement that Zac Efron was attached to an upcoming A24 film. It’s the story of paralegal Lancelot Blue Dunkquist, who bears a striking resemblance to Oscar winning actor

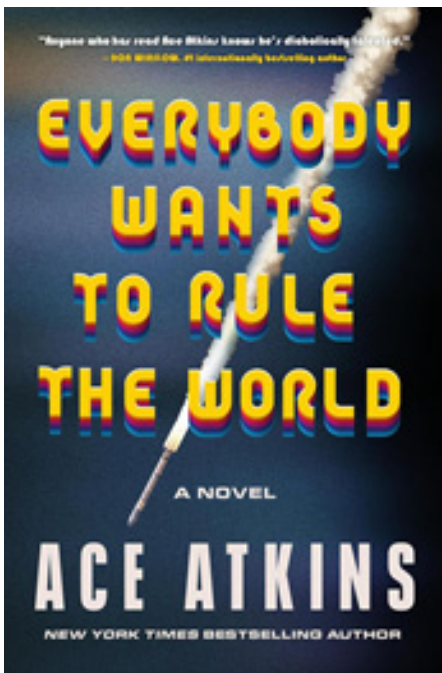
James Jansen. Often dreaming of what it would be like to BE Jansen, Lance decides to do just that when he abruptly loses his job. His plan is a perfect example of a break from reality, until his actions actually land him IN that reality. It’s a relatively short (50K words) dark, twisted, thoroughly engrossing tale that will linger in memory long after you’re done with it.



The second LPE was Brad Meltzer’s **THE VIPER**, the third in his series of “Zig and Nola” novels, featuring mortician “Zig” Zigarowski and U.S. Army Artist in Residence Nola Brown. Meltzer starts the action with the terminally ill Andrew “Fetch” Fechmeier dropping off a burial suit for his pre-planned funeral; it’s quite important to him, as he’s secreted a priceless MacGuffin within its lining. When Fetch dies protecting his secret, it triggers investigations on a



number of fronts, most importantly one instigated by Nola's twin brother, Roddy LaPointe. Loyalties are tested, details about Nola's and Roddy's past come to light, and myriad secrets and betrayals are revealed as a result. Meltzer justifies his reputation as a master of suspense throughout, providing compelling, sympathetic characters, and a propulsive plot.



Continuing the library theme:

**EVERYBODY WANTS TO
RULE THE WORLD**

by Ace Atkins

Morrow, December 2025, \$30.00

Rating: A+

Anybody in the mood for a novel of the Cold War, specifically one dealing with the early days of the proposed Star Wars defense system? If so, **EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD** is just your cup of tea. Set mostly in 1985 Atlanta, on the eve of the historic nuclear summit between Reagan and Gorbachev, it features unruly suburban teens, treason, intrigue, FBI agents, KGB agents, and Russian sleeper agents. It also features two especially terrific supporting characters, men's adventure author Dennis X. Hotchner and the fabulous drag queen Jackie Demure, a.k.a. Jackie Johnson, former defensive

end for the Atlanta Falcons, whom Peter Bennet (one of the unruly teens), desperately turns to in his hour of need. Fans of hard-boiled detective fiction may find some similarities between the pair and Ralph Dennis' dynamic duo of unlicensed PI Jim Hardman and his partner, Hump, formerly of the Cleveland Browns (if you know, you know). There's also an uncanny resemblance between fictional author Hotchner and real author Dennis (again, if you know, you know).

Similar to author Mike Lawson (see my contribution to Reviewed to Death, focusing on his latest novel, **McKENNA'S GUY**, elsewhere in this issue), Atkins is another author who can do no wrong in my book. In fact, this, and Atkins's **DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE** (2024), are two of my favorite reads over the last couple of years. Highly talented, and oh so versatile, Atkins seems to be at the peak of powers right now, a state which I hope he either maintains, or improves upon, in the future.

Finally, there's

THE RED SCARE MURDERS

by Con Lehane

Soho Crime, December 2025, \$29.95

Rating: B+

Set in 1950, Lehane's latest follows the adventures of the blacklisted Irish-



man Mike Mulligan; once a cartoonist/ animator working at Disney Studios, he now functions as a private investigator in New York City's Hells Kitchen. Here, he races against time to prevent the execution of avowed communist Harold Williams, a black taxi driver convicted of murdering cab company owner Irwin Johnson, seeking evidence which might exonerate him, or at least create reasonable doubt. His investigations lead him into the worlds of gangsters, union leaders and union members, and the as yet unorganized legions of New York cab drivers. As the jacket copy states, the book is a "big hearted noir" that strikes all the right cords, adeptly evoking an era of New York City and American history that should never be forgotten.

That concludes my "library themed" comments. I've really enjoyed the past few months, trying to borrow more books than I buy, a practice I need to continue if I'm going to survive my (and my wife's) retirement. Remember to support your local library in any way you can, while they're still a thing (I say that only half-jokingly). That entails everything from being a regular patron to making contributions (books and cash) to volunteering to being a member of your library's Board of Trustees.

Now, on to some highly recommended reading with significantly shorter comments. I may go into more detail on any or all of these in a later column, but, right now, I'm facing what Marvel Comics referred to as "The Dreaded Deadline Doom."

So now, let's turn to some of my "go to" authors, folks who deliver quality work novel after novel, all masters of their craft:

MURDER BY DESIGN

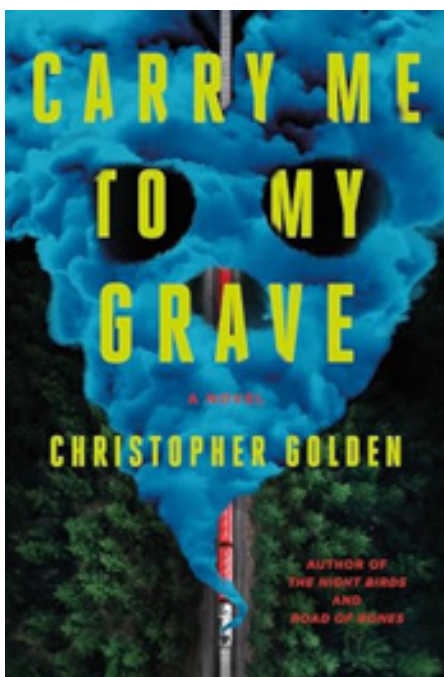
by Lee Goldberg

Thomas & Mercer, June 2026, \$28.99

Rating: B+

The first in this accomplished author's Edison Bixby series, this pleasant whodunit should prove irresistible to fans of other series Goldberg has created or co-created, such as those featuring Eve Ronin, Sharpe & Walker, Ian

Ludlow, and Fox and O'Hare (with Janet Evanovich). It should also have great appeal for fans of TV mystery series, such as *MURDER SHE WROTE* and *MONK*.



CARRY ME TO MY GRAVE
by Christopher Golden
St. Martins, July 2026, \$29.00
Rating: A

Vintage Golden, cover to cover action and thrills, and frights aplenty. Truly one of the finest purveyors of modern horror thrillers, Golden just gets better with each successive novel.

SECRET AGENT X VS. DR. DEATH
by Will Murray
Altus Press, February 2026
Rating: A

It's truly a battle for the ages as The Man of a Thousand Faces squares off against the madman known as Dr. Death, an evil scientist/chemist and occultist determined to throw civilization back into the Dark Ages. It's pure pulp magic from the pen of pulp fiction master Will Murray (who has written novels and short stories featuring The Shadow, Doc Savage, Tarzan, John Carter, and Sherlock Homes), as an initially cocky Secret Agent X comes to see the wisdom of recruiting three other pulp

legends, The Cobra, The Griffon, and The Moon Man, in his battle royale with Dr. Death and his army of supernatural monstrosities.

HAWAII RAGE
by Tori Eldridge
Thomas & Mercer, May 2026, \$16.99
Rating: A

I loved 2025's *KAUA'I STORM*, the first Ranger Makalani Pahukula mystery, and I love this follow-up, both for their terrific lead, and for their fascinating setting; Eldridge's affection for both shines through on every page. It was also fascinating to learn about Hawaiian ranching, and Hawaiian cowboys, known as paniolo.



KEIGO HIGASHINO

An Appreciation

By Marilyn Brooks



Keigo Higashino, the Japanese author whose books were read around the globe, died on July 23 at age 68.

Mr. Higashino, one of my favorite authors, wrote over 100 novels in the genres of mystery, science fiction, and parody. His works appeared in over 40 countries and were translated into English, French, Chinese, and Korean, among other languages.

His most famous creation is Detective Galileo, featured in *THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X*, a physicist whose name is actually Manabu Yukawa and who helps police solve murder cases. *THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X* was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 best mysteries of all time. However, my favorite character is Detective Kaga of the Tokyo police force, a man my husband refers to as the Japanese Columbo.

Portraying the human condition was at the heart of his writing, he noted. On a television program in 1999, Mr. Higashino said, "Whenever I write a novel, what I really want to portray is human nature."

Mr. Higashino admitted that he was not an avid reader as a child. When he won the Naoki Prize in 2006, he commented, "What I always think about is wanting to write novels that even my book-hating self from back then would enjoy reading."

I have reviewed seven of his books on this blog, the most recent being *GUILT* on March 20th. His final novel, *ETERNAL MEMORY*, will be published this month. I think that's a fitting title to Mr. Higashino's legacy.

The Cozy-Traditional Mystery Cafe'

Robin Agnew Reviews



THE BODY IN THE KITCHEN GARDEN

by Paula Sutton

John Scognamiglio/Kensington,
\$28.00, May

Hill House Vintage #2

Rating: B+

Ninety-six years after Miss Marple made her first appearance in the village of St. Mary Meade, **THE BODY IN THE KITCHEN GARDEN** demonstrates that the gentle English village mystery genre is still going strong. Like Agatha Christie, the legendary creator of Miss Marple, modern practitioners of the British village mystery- writers like Connie Berry, G.M. Malliet, and most recently Katarina Bivald – find the depths of human emotion and depravity lurking not far below the surface of this seemingly idyllic setting. Sutton has further updated the formula with the provocative move of having her detective be the only black woman in town.

Like her creator, main character Daphne Brewster is a vintage furniture and architecture enthusiast. (Sutton is a popular lifestyle influencer under the moniker @hillhousevintage). Indulging

in her books or Instagram posts transports the lucky reader or viewer into a world of British Village porn, where all the rickety chairs are beautiful, the beds are covered with lovely, faded spreads and the wallpaper is, of course, William Morris. This is more of a sidebar in the books, though Daphne owns a shop where she repurposes and sells old things, a pursuit she finds surprisingly lucrative.

Daphne has escaped London with her husband, adorable kids and cute dog to the village of Pudding Corner, whose peaceful and quiet facade, as any mystery reader knows, will soon be shattered by murder. One unspoken rule is violated when early on Sutton reveals the identity of the killer in the previous series installment – as I'd read it myself I was able to move on, but if you haven't yet checked out **THE POTTING SHED MURDER**, you might want to pick it up first to avoid the spoiler.

It all starts innocently enough when Daphne is approached by the soon to be lady of the local manor and asked to help her repurpose and reclaim enough rooms in the old place to turn it into an Airbnb she hopes can pay for its own upkeep. It's Daphne's dream job, and she can't wait to dive in with the meek Helena, the unlikely fiancée of Sir Hugh Darlington, lord of the manor.

Daphne and Helena work through the rooms, finding plenty to both repurpose and sell and even make a start on stripping the walls. Meanwhile, things in Pudding Corner take a dark turn when one of the town stalwarts, general store owner (and inveterate keeper of facts about everyone in town), is found dead one morning after a fall from her ladder. Her sister, sure it's not an accident, withdraws from the world,

and Daphne proves to be a good neighbor, keeping an eye on her and trying to coax her back out into the world.

Meanwhile not only are there village youths hanging around on the village green and perhaps stealing things around town, but also a homeless man lurking about, a rare sight in a remote rural village. Mysteriously, he's ultimately found dead in the garden of the manor house, where he had apparently been sleeping rough.

Daphne can't help but be drawn into sleuthing, feeling she can't leave the meek Helena on her own after the corpse is discovered on her premises. As usual the local constable warns the nascent detective off to no avail, but what follows is less traditional, and it's here that Sutton takes a deep dive into the psychological underpinnings of her characters, both fleshing them out and providing complex motivations. While I found this enjoyable, I also found the change in tone a bit unsettling, even starting to think that maybe she should stick to either a traditional or a psychological village cozy (with practitioners like PD James, Ruth Rendell, and Deborah Crombie, to name a few, pioneering the latter).

However, this remains a charming series, with a great setting and populated with terrific characters and telling details of village life. To be clear, I want to make it clear that I'm very much looking forward to reading the next book. I'm also wondering how Daphne can stay in shape after eating so much cake! Sutton makes it sound so delicious that you might be inspired to savor a slice yourself when you close the last page.

THE FORTY-YEAR GRUDGE

By Liza Tully

Berkley, \$30, June

Merritt & Blunt #2

Rating: A

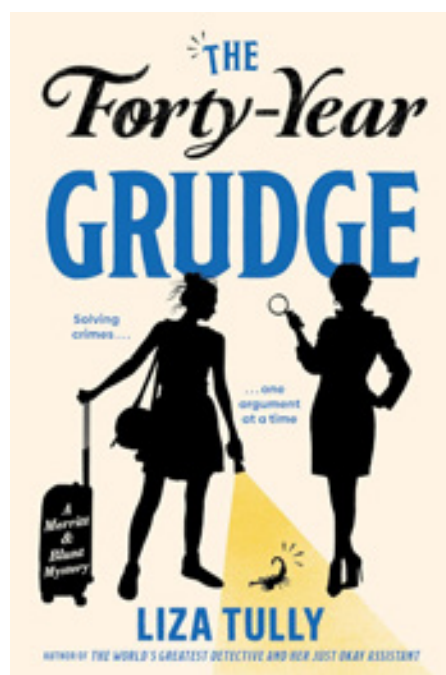
Two books in, this has already become a favorite series. Everything about this series sparkles – the characters, the storytelling, and the setting. The two central characters are 60 something Aubrey Merritt, a world-renowned pri-

vate investigator, and her young, green, recently married assistant, Olivia Blunt (who, it must be said, does the lion's share of the work). Blunt is in training to become a detective but so far Merritt is a bit scornful of her talents. She is eager, thorough, and good at research, however, and she arrives at the solution at *almost* the same time Aubrey does.

In this adventure, the two women are headed to Santa Fe to meet up for Merritt's 40 year reunion with her Sigma Delta Tau sisters. Merritt had no intention of going (despite Blunt's efforts in this direction) but there's a plea for help from her hostess's husband, as well as the fact that the hostess – retired Brigadier General Joan Battersea – is the one person Merritt wouldn't mind seeing again. Merritt despises emotion and sentiment as they impede logic, but when Joan's husband says there's a threat to Joan's life Merritt relents, and she and Blunt are on a plane almost before they have time to pack.

When they arrive, Joan insists the threat is nonsense, but her husband, showing the two investigators a death threat scrawled on the back of a reunion invitation, insists his wife take it seriously. Then the rest of the women arrive, indeed bearing grudges (in one case, an absolute doozy). All of them are staying at Joan's spacious desert estate and Blunt is reunited with her childhood fear of snakes and a new one is added: scorpions. Its not long before the worst occurs and Merritt and Blunt switch into full on detective mode.

They have a hard time protecting Joan who is stubborn and sure of being able to take care of herself (she was a Brigadier General, after all) but the two detectives prevail in their insistence on her safety. They continue to investigate despite a sheriff who jumps to an obvious conclusion and arrests someone the two women feel is probably innocent. After a few other incidents – one involving, oh the horror, scorpions – the two edge toward a solution, despite Blunt's lack of sleep, nourishment, and annoyingly ignoring her new husband's pleas to look at the apartment links he keeps sending her as he tries to find them a new place in ultra competitive New York



City.

What makes this book sparkle is the prickly relationship between Merritt and Blunt, which absolutely has a Holmes and Watson feel to it, and the characters who surround them and make up the stories. In this outing the ageing sorority members who remember quite well the grudges and slights forty years past are a great cast of characters. The desert setting, so foreign to Blunt (who narrates the story) comes to life and assumes the part of a character in the proceedings.

The mystery part and the solution to it was clever and I enjoyed the traditional summing up by the two detectives at the end, which of course also reveals the killer. I like that author Tully utilizes traditional tropes but makes this form her own, by obviously updating it and having the assistant be so young she's the guide for what's occurring in the modern world, something Merritt doesn't fully understand and often has contempt for. And they are two women operating without the police. They have their cooperation but they, like many, many other fictional detectives, are professionals solving crime. Merritt's standing alone gives them agency to investigate. She's as famous as Poirot or Holmes were in their day. And the formula just works. I enjoy the company

of these two women, I like the way Tully tells a story, and I enjoyed plunging into the swirl of drama that was a class reunion.

THE BUSH TEA MURDER

by Ashley-Ruth M. Bernier

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, April

Debut

Rating: A-

Short story writer Ashley-Ruth Bernier's debut proclaims those roots - this sweetly moving novel is told via short episodes. The episodes connect, and are longer than the typical short story, packing more of a punch. By the end of the novel, the ends are neatly tied up. Our heroine is culinary TV star Naomi Sinclair, who tells stories through her reporting on, and love, of food.

Naomi is from the island of St. Thomas, and it's her Crucian heritage that shines through on every page of this novel. As the book opens, she and a fellow host on EAT TV are pitching their true crime-food episodes, and Naomi is leaving her audience in suspense. She has a great story to tell and her audience of TV producers are hanging on her every word to find out the solution to the long ago murder of Ursula Merchant, a well known island chef and entrepreneur.

To tell the story, Naomi goes back in time, taking her readers to a vivid rendering of St. Thomas and the Caribbean lifestyle. Her first trip back, for a wedding, finds her reconnecting with old flame Matteo, an adorable and sweet EMT. It's unclear how this long distance relationship will function as Naomi's work is back in the states. The two of them have a long connection going back to high school, and the story is populated with their high school buddies ranging from the well loved to the annoying.

The family and food culture of St. Thomas is well drawn, as is the lovely setting, though Bernier makes clear that even in paradise, life can be messy. Her portrayal of the various relationships and connections in the novel illustrate this point nicely, and the main focus is Naomi and Matteo's relationship, which

I would call the centerpiece of the novel, even more so than the murder.

Little by little, Bernier brings the reader through the past, catching up slowly to the present and the resolution of the crime, which includes some nice deductive reasoning on Naomi's part. At first I was slightly put off by the story telling style, but by the middle of the novel I was able to relax into the rhythm of Bernier's narrative and portrayal of what is obviously a beloved place for her.

The main crime Naomi investigates has deeply entwined family layers, and as Naomi unpeels them, they become painful for those still alive who were affected by their great aunt's death. Through the book, Naomi solves many smaller mysteries, all of them leading to the ultimate resolution. The emotional layers in this book are as beautiful as the food she describes. You may leave this book hungry, but you'll also leave it with a tear in your eye, as the characters Bernier writes about are truly brought to life on the page. This is a lovely debut.

MURDER MOST DELICIOUS

By Danielle Postel-Vinay

Harper Perennial, Hardcover \$30/Paperback \$18.99, May

Rating: B+

There are several ways to judge a book. If three are present – plot, character, and setting – the book (to me) is good, if not great. The x factor is prose style. This novel has three excellent elements – character, setting and lovely prose. The plot is OK and I figured out whodunnit long before the last page, but the prose just sings as does the setting of the novel, and I was carried away.

That setting is a tiny Paris neighborhood, Gros-Caillou, abutting the Eiffel Tower. The arrival of American sommelier Olivia Beech to a local anchor restaurant, Chez Jacques, is something of a sensation, becoming even more so when, during a wine tasting, the eponymous Jacques falls dead at Olivia's feet. While Olivia has been gifted with an extraordinary "nose" for wine, covid has taken away her sense of taste, which for a sommelier is a disaster. Surfacing from a career crisis in an attempt to

reclaim her life, she's pinned her hopes on a resurrection at Chez Jacques.

The stunned Olivia is immediately considered a suspect by the police, but the neighborhood cops on call think she's not guilty, and allow members of the neighborhood watch to whisk her away before she can be arrested. She's taken to the home of Auguste Dupin (a shoutout to Poe's character) who used to be the best detective on the police force, but hasn't left her home in years. Much like Olivia and her sense of smell, Auguste's ability to see subtle discrepancies marks her as different but also invaluable, making the combined powers of the two women formidable.

Postel-Vinay also introduces the reader to the neighborhood watch, a motley group which includes a florist, a baker, a perfumier, a rebel who works as the American Library in Paris and the now former partner of the dead man. They almost immediately accept Olivia as one of their own, and she's able to continue to stay at Auguste's and enjoy the wonderful cooking, including a soufflé, the description of which will leave your mouth watering.

The police are willing to step back to a degree to let the watch investigate and in their gentle way, the group solves the crime, bringing everyone together at the flower shop for a dénouement in the classic fashion. Nothing goes quite as smoothly as expected, but justice arrives in its own way, and the murderer is eventually caught. What makes this book a standout are the descriptions of food and wine, with the wine tasting especially revealing the kind of technical details that make a narrative memorable. Also standing out is the portrayal of a small slice of Paris that was so evocative it made me head to my computer to see it for myself.

The final thing that makes this book memorable was simply the lovely prose. I was arrested, captivated, bedazzled – the writing lifts the book up in every way. You'll stop to savor as you read, just as you might with a wine or a pastry. The determination on the parts of the characters to embrace joy and beauty in a difficult world are the parts of the book that will stay with me.



THE MASALA CHAI MYSTERY CLUB

By MJ Soni

Crooked Lane, HC \$29.99/PB

\$19.99, July

Debut

Rating: A

This charming first mystery may follow several trendy and now familiar tropes, but that didn't bother me in the least because the telling of the story and the characters in it are simply delightful. It's set in an upscale condo development where the main character, the recently retired and widowed librarian Neeti Shah, lives with her niece Myra and her adorable great nephew, Ved. The story begins when Neeti hears a scream across the road and hurries over to find her neighbor dead at the foot of his stairs, seemingly killed by a fall, but, surprise, Neeti is not convinced.

The body was discovered by the man's wife, who is soon joined by a local doctor, the pair of them rushing to order that not only must the victim be cremated as soon as possible, but his beloved dog Yolo has to be put down. Horrified at that prospect, Neeti quickly takes the animal in, mourning the death of her neighbor, while still being well aware that the brash and unpleasant fellow wasn't much liked in the community.

To the delight of Neeti, she heads back home with her new pet, where she quickly assembles a group of neighbors who dub themselves “The Masala Chai Mystery Club,” dedicated to gathering information about their local crime, with the aim of ultimately solving it.

It’s all a bit reminiscent of the Marlowe murder club as well as other recent books by Michelle Cullen, Freya Sampson, and Fergus Craig, but it’s no less appealing here, a big reason being the characters. Neeti herself is a charmer, making her chai tea and wearing lovely sarees which she lovingly describes for the reader. Usually she and her niece get along fine though some tension eventually develops between them, with the contrast between Neeti trying to find a place for herself after retirement and widowhood, and Myra trying to find a similar niche as a young single mom becoming a powerful and resonant theme. It’s almost like a romance with a breakup coming halfway through the narrative, because you know these two will work it out eventually, the question being not if they will but how.

The other stand out characters are neighbor Peggy and her Shakespeare quoting husband, who, though diagnosed with Parkinson’s, always seems to come up with an apt quotation for every occasion, as well as Thandi, a woman from South Africa who fears the police. Much like Osman’s Thursday Murder Club books, a female cop is drawn into the proceedings despite her better instincts when, unlike her blowhard lead boss, she concludes that a murder has indeed been committed.

Neeti and the dead man also have a previous backstory, one that makes her appreciate him despite all his unpleasant quirks, its eventual revelation proving both moving and unexpected. The mystery part of the story is similarly well handled, with the quite suspenseful parts of the story leading to a satisfyingly brisk pace. Soni brilliantly introduces her story with a reference to Christie’s **DUMB WITNESS**, and the trail of clues pursued by the team are classically clever and well laid out, with even the dog playing a vital part in the proceedings. All this and more have allowed

Soni to produce this truly enjoyable and well written debut.

OUR MARRIAGE IS MURDER

By Carol Goodman

William Morrow, Hardcover \$30,

Paperback \$18.99, July

Rating: A

Carol Goodman’s books have always been more on the darker, more suspenseful side of mystery, but with her latest and most delightful book, she heads in a fresh direction and may have even discovered a new genre - the gothic cozy. *Our Marriage is Murder* gently skewers mystery conventions, writerly backstabbing and competition, and pretty much everything about publishing. But gently, as this is a fairly loving look at the many working parts that make up the mystery writing universe, from librarians to bookstagrammers to reviewers to convention planners to jaded editors and publicists. Although that is my chosen universe and one I feel quite comfortable in, a reader unfamiliar with the whole substructure of writing and publicity will soon find themselves at home as well.

Our two main characters are an estranged husband and wife writing team, Fred and Thea, who write a wildly successful series featuring sleuths Nick

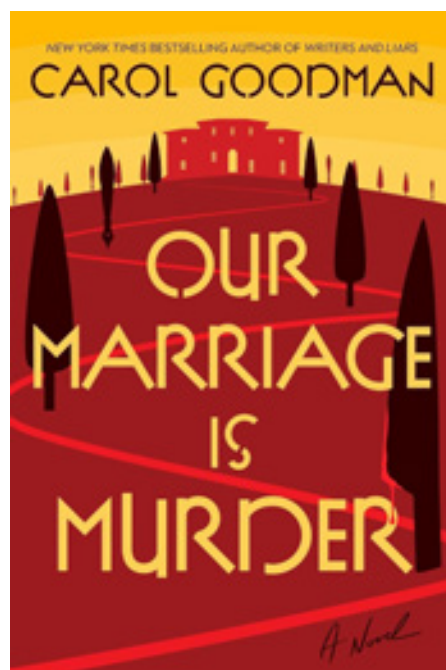
and Dora. The action begins as they attend a yummy sounding mystery convention in Italy where they are being honored with a lifetime award, and the convention organizer has planned a treasure hunt tying to clues in their first novel, **DEATH TAKES THE CASTLE**. Unfortunately, there’s a death before the opening ceremony gets off the ground, with many more to follow, all eerily resembling murders in the book.

Meanwhile, Thea and Fred are working out both the finale of their marriage and their series, and misunderstandings abound, though, as I mentioned, this is a cozy, so have faith, dear reader, that things will remain amusing. The clues in the former nunnery turned fancy hotel are draped in gothic miasma, complete with carvings of gargoyles and scorpions, underground chambers, a turret and a giant bell, and even a poison garden, all of them full of clues and grist for Goodman’s delightful mill.

The main mystery and resolution in their book, while tied to the nunnery where Thea abandoned her PhD dissertation and instead took on a writing partnership with Fred, was ultimately a fictional solution to an ancient mystery surrounding the convent, which proves to be a bit of a handicap for those trying to solve the crime (or for convention goers, the treasure hunt).

What makes **OUR MARRIAGE IS MURDER** a true stand out are the three dimensional characters of Thea and Fred, who come off as real humans with understandable flaws and foibles, not only relatable, but they actually resemble people you might know. My second favorite character was Joan, the plain-spoken cozy writer, a flat out hoot.

While never denying that writing is a business and not an easy one at that, Goodman also captures the inspiration and fellowship that come with storytelling, that magic that binds readers and writers together. As a great example, this book has a wonderful story, complete with both buried treasure and a damsel in distress who takes matters into her own hands proactively. You go, girl!



Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



THE PINNACLE

by Abir Mukherjee
Little, Brown, \$30.00, June
Standalone
Rating: B

This standalone mystery focuses on events that take place over a four-day period centered on a highly prestigious and secure high-rise in Mumbai known as The Pinnacle. The narrative follows a washed-up American actor named George Abercrombie who wakes up one morning in his Pinnacle suite to find his much younger and beautiful Bollywood superstar/wife Sweetie Sahota brutally murdered.

But the narrative is also propelled forward by the perspectives of two other protagonists: Sweetie's personal assistant Gemma, who is being blackmailed by an anonymous source; and, Amit, the couple's clever house servant and gofer who owes a massive debt to a local gangster.

The key to this mystery appears to be Sweetie's missing laptop and its contents. Everyone seems to be in search of it, yet it remains quite elusive.

I'm a fan of Abir Mukherjee's work, especially his Sam Wyndham series. This effort was entertaining at times, but seemed bloated (422 pages). It was also difficult to find a sympathetic character – George Abercrombie was more pitiful than likeable. The author is a Guest of Honor at this year's Bouchercon and is a host of the Red Hot Chilli Writers podcast.

A JURY OF HIS PEERS

by Jake Needham
Half Penny, \$18.00, July
Charlie Trust #4
Rating: A-

Jake Needham is churning out this legal thriller series almost as fast as I can read them – three so far this year and one more due in December. His Charlie Trust novels aren't as complexly plotted as his Inspector Samuel Tay novels, but they are equally enjoyable. They give us an entertaining look back at what life was like in Southern California in the 1990s and for me that has proved to be a wonderful nostalgic trip. As a retired attorney, I admit to being intrigued by the thorny legal issues Needham raises in this series. Law students would do well to read Charlie Trust. And then there is his mixing of fictional characters with real life celebrities.

To catch you up, Charlie Trust was a burned-out lawyer from the East Coast who came to California to house sit for a wealthy friend of his. The beach house just happened to be a beach front Malibu property right next door to Farrah



Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal, who make cameo appearances from time to time. The friend dies and leaves Charlie the beachhouse. And along the way Charlie encounters the legendary attorney Sandy Bouchier and they eventually set up a law partnership.

So that's where we find Charlie when the narrative of **A JURY OF HIS PEERS** opens up – as a homeowner, a practicing attorney and the proud owner of a 1969 cherry red Mustang convertible. Over the next few hundred pages, Charlie will experience the devastating 1994 earthquake, encounters with the Menendez brothers and O. J. Simpson.

This is not your typical mystery – certainly not a whodunnit. The mystery is in what happens next and Jake Needham is such a talented writer that the reader feels compelled to find out.

CODEBREAKERS

by Stella Sands
Harper Perennial, \$18.99, August
Maggie Moore #2
Rating: B+

The first book in this series, **WORD-HUNTERS**, was one of my favorite books of last year (nominated for a Barry Award as well). The protagonist Maggie Moore is as unconventional a character as you can find in mystery fiction, Pierced, tattooed and living a highly unusual lifestyle (unhealthy to put it mildly), Maggie's most highly redeeming quality for us mystery readers is that she is a genius when it comes to words, word puzzles and anything to do with language – in other words, an expert in the field of forensic semiotics.

In this book, Maggie teams up with former detective Silas Gabriel Jackson to form their own detective agency. Almost immediately their agency is hired to track down a sadistic predator who is systematically targeting unsuspecting men. Unlike a typical serial killer, this perpetrator leaves behind a trail of complex linguistic puzzles and symbolic clues that are specifically designed to taunt and challenge anyone trying to follow. Of course this is right in Maggie's wheelhouse.

Maggie also is able to turn up new

leads regarding the disappearance of her childhood best friend, which has greatly bothered her for many years.

If you love words (and what reader doesn't?), you will likely like this series. I tried not to be too judgmental about Maggie's poor life decisions and look more towards her positive traits, talents and ambitions. It is recommended that you start with the first book, **WORD-HUNTERS**, as there is a definite, underlying, continuing storyline.

DARK HARBOR

by Bruce Robert Coffin
Seyvern River, \$21.99, August
Detective Justice #3

Rating: A-

When the wealthy Granville Warren is found murdered in his Bar Harbor, Maine mansion, it looks like a burglary gone wrong. The burglar is also found, shot dead by Warren's trophy wife Lily, who claims self-defense. But a close examination of the crime scene raises questions of what really happened. It's up to Detective Brock Justice and his young partner Chloe to find answers. Brock's instincts tell him that the deaths are not a simple botched robbery, but rather a cover-up for something far deeper buried within Bar Harbor's wealthy, polished social circle.

To complicate matters a bit, Brock is also assigned another young detective, Samantha Osborn, whom he suspects as being a spy for some police higher ups who wish him ill. So he has to make sure everything in the investigation is done strictly by the book.

The author, Bruce Robert Coffin, was a police detective in Maine for many years and has put his experiences on the job to good use in his writing career in producing accurate and realistic police detective novels. In addition to this series, I also highly recommend his 4-book John Byron series.

AN ARTFUL DODGE

by Karen Odden
Soho Crime, \$29.95, June

Rating: A

Set in 1879 London, the story follows



Kit Jameson, a talented thief who operates in South London's Elephant and Castle district. Alongside her "dodge partner" Mary, Kit is the highest earner for a highly organized, all-women thieving ring managed under the steady leadership of Amelia Lyle. Working in pairs, one woman creates a distraction (acting as a "jenny") while the other uses nimble pickpocketing skills to steal jewelry and watches from wealthy marks. Kit inherited this dangerous trade from her late mother, but she constantly fears being caught by Scotland Yard, which could lead to prison, penal transportation, or the gallows.

The ring's leadership is upended by the return of Maggie O'Connell (also known as Maggie Wirth), the beautiful and charismatic daughter of the ring's original founder. Maggie has just spent twenty brutal years in an Australian penal colony after being betrayed and sent away. She arrives back in London to reclaim her position at the head of the gang and to seek revenge against the people who originally crossed her.

Recognizing Kit's intelligence and clever hands, Maggie selects her to execute a nearly impossible jewelry heist designed to ruin her enemies. Maggie structures the scheme in a way that makes it impossible for Kit to refuse, effectively trapping her. But Kit has her

own plans.

This is my kind of history mystery. It's full of wonderful characters with whom I quickly bonded, a captivating plot line and a more than satisfying and unexpected ending.

I am glad that Karen has finally landed with a major crime fiction publisher (Soho Crime) that values her talent and will give her wider exposure. I suggest that if you read just one history mystery novel this year that it be **AN ARTFUL DODGE**.

THE SHADOW STEP

by Mark Billingham
Atlantic Crime, \$28.00, July
Detective Miller #3

Rating: A-

The story begins in Blackpool when the body of Ezra Simmons, a minor local drug dealer, is discovered face-down in a park lake. Soon after, a timid ex-soldier named Barry Cheshire goes to the police to confess to the crime. Cheshire explains that while out walking his invalid, wobbly dachshund, Ruby, he got into a knife-wielding confrontation with Simmons. During the struggle, Simmons tripped over his own dogs and fell into the pond. Cheshire walked away, unaware that Simmons would drown. Although Miller's superiors are eager to prosecute Cheshire, Miller is convinced that Cheshire is innocent of intentional murder.

The situation quickly spirals out of control because the "murder that isn't really a murder" disrupts Blackpool's criminal underworld. Simmons owed heavy debts to a powerful local drug queenpin named Jacqui Cutler. When Cutler's enforcers attempt to track down the missing money, they target Cheshire. Then a genuine homicide occurs at Cheshire's residence during a botched confrontation involving Cutler's gangland enforcers.

Flanked by his pragmatic partner DS Sara Xiu, Miller must untangle the mess while navigating a parade of eccentric local characters, including a lovesick enforcer and a deranged ex-squaddie. The investigation forces Miller deep into the unvarnished gritty backstreets of

Blackpool—the same criminal territory his late wife, Alex, was investigating before her murder.

Here is another young series that I'm avidly following. I like to have a good chuckle while reading certain mysteries. Mark Billingham provides that for me in these works. They are top-notch mysteries as well.

THE BUTCHER'S LEGACY

by Alaina Urquhart
Zando, \$29.00, August
Dr. Wren Muller #3

Rating: B+

Set two months after the traumatic events of **THE BUTCHER GAME**, forensic pathologist Dr. Wren Muller returns to her routine at the New Orleans morgue. She works alongside Detective John Leroux and a new colleague, Maya Rodriguez, hoping to rebuild her life.

As Halloween approaches, young girls suddenly begin to vanish. The disappearances happen across two cities where the now incarcerated "Bayou Butcher," Jeremy Rose, used to operate.

Hundreds of miles away, a revered pastor named Philip Trudeau returns to his pulpit in Massachusetts. Behind his holy facade, Trudeau harbors gruesome secrets and an active, sinister urge that was not stifled when Jeremy Rose was caught. Trudeau shares a dark history with Rose.

When bodies begin appearing with the hallmark signatures of the Bayou Butcher, Wren is forced out of the morgue and back into active field investigation. Since Jeremy Rose is locked behind bars, the sudden disappearance of Pastor Philip Trudeau forces Wren and Detective Leroux to mobilize quickly. They are caught in a dangerous game where the captive killer, the missing pastor, and the investigators clash.

I've read all three novels in this trilogy and they are quite well written. But they deal with a great deal of loss, suffering and gruesome killings – probably too dark for my tastes, but I persevered because of my curiosity about the main character Dr. Wren Muller, who deserves better than what life has been

dealing her.

PAYBACK

by Lawrence Light
Severn House, \$29.99, July
Rating: B+

Frank Verity is at a professional low point after losing a high-profile libel lawsuit against a powerful billionaire, which cost him his job at a NYC newspaper. Meanwhile, chaos strikes Manhattan's elite when a Wall Street billionaire takes a fatal "swan dive" from his high-rise Fifth Avenue apartment. Near the broken window, investigators find a chilling note left by the killers: "I AM COMING FOR ALL OF YOU."

The murdered tycoon was part of an infamous, tight-knit group of four corrupt billionaires known as the "Medici Boys." With three remaining members marked for immediate death and no solid leads, the lead detective on the case recruits Frank to serve as a temporary police consultant.

The narrative builds through a series of sharp twists as the killers systematically strip away the illusion of safety surrounding New York's ruling class.

This is an enjoyable read if you don't look too closely at the plot which has some holes in it. I was especially impressed at how the killer was able to infiltrate the seemingly impenetrable

living spaces of the Medici Boys. The character of Frank Verity is strong enough to build a series around. I hope to read about his exploits in future books.

I have to admit to being a bit biased when it comes to this book. I consider Larry Light a friend (husband of **DP** reviewer Meredith Anthony) and was shocked to find my name in the Acknowledgements at the rear of the book. But I can honestly say that I enjoyed my reading experience and can recommend the book to **DP** readers.

NOT A WORD

by Linwood Barclay
Morrow, \$30.00, August
Standalone
Rating: B-

Unemployed journalist Reece Chartwell visits his parents's home just outside of Toronto and finds a lot more than he expected – none of it good. His parents, Brent and Catherine, are in their bed shot dead in an apparent murder suicide. When the police arrive, they soon find evidence that suggests a staged murder.

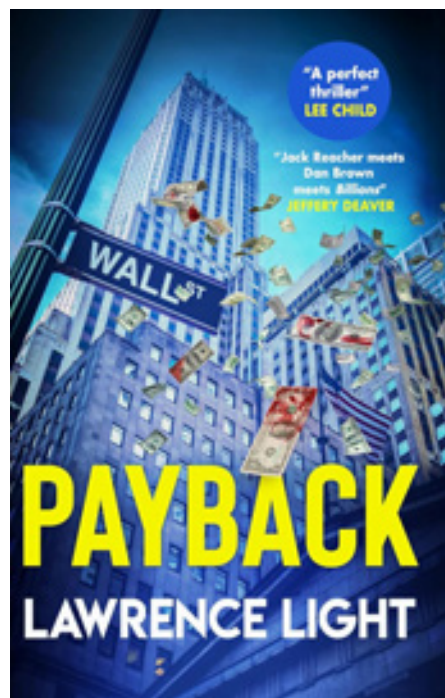
Then Reece gets a shocking phone call from his mother who is very much alive. Then who is the dead woman lying next to his father's body?

Every family has secrets and those of his parents seem to be buried quite deep. But his journalistic instincts kick in and he is soon chasing down what is behind this bizarre occurrence. His private investigation eventually leads him to the unscrupulous pharmaceutical company his father worked for years ago.

Good, but not great. The characters seemed wooden and largely unlikeable. The Harlen Cobenesque plot was admittedly creative, but by the end I had ceased caring what happened. Linwood Barclay has written far better books than this. For example, give **NO TIME FOR GOODBYE** (2007) a read.

THE BLUE FLAME

by George Pelecanos
Cardinal, \$29.00, August
Derek Strange #6
Rating: A-



Aging Washington, D.C. private eye Derek Strange is hired by sleazy defense attorney Billy Lake to find evidence so his client Antone Anthony can beat a murder rap. Antone claims that the murder victim Nigel Walker was a childhood friend and that he had no reason to kill him or anyone else. But the rub is that the murder weapon was found in Antone's home and he has no explanation for that.

A key witness in the case is another one of Antone's childhood friends, Cynthia Barnes. In a private conversation Cynthia admits to Strange that she doesn't think Antone is guilty.

Strange's investigation runs its course without finding much to help Antone.

Then three weeks after Strange completes his investigation, Cynthia Barnes is murdered. Her body turns up in a chest freezer in an urban junkyard. Strange liked Cynthia and wants to find out who killed her. But he has to be very careful not to step on the shoes of the D. C. cops.

The idiosyncratic character of Derek Strange is the engine that drives this beautifully rendered crime novel. George Pelecanos has an ear for urban dialogue and it is on full display in **THE BLUE FLAME**, which, by the way, is a phrase referring to Strange's short stint as a cop. "He was curious. It was the cop in him. That flame was still alive."

THE SECRETS WE HIDE

by Karin Slaughter

Morrow, \$32.00, August

North Falls #2

Rating: A-

Emmy Lou Clifton, the interim Sheriff of North Falls, Georgia is attending the funeral of her mother with her long estranged older sister Jude Archer (a former FBI profiler). As they are driving away, they hear gunshots echoing from a nearby residential street. Emmy rushes to the home of the Vickery family. Inside, she discovers a brutal crime scene: her friend Allison Vickery, a disgraced former cop turned private investigator, has been shot dead in the kitchen with



her own gun. Upstairs, hiding in the attic, Allison's 16-year-old daughter, Mandy, is found bleeding heavily and clinging to life.

The townspeople immediately assume the killer is Bill, Allison's notoriously abusive husband and Mandy's stepfather, who has conveniently vanished. However, as Emmy digs deeper, the evidence refuses to line up cleanly with a simple domestic dispute.

Various avenues of investigation open up:

1. At the crime scene, Emmy discovers \$300,000 in cash and fake IDs, indicating that Allison was planning a sudden escape.
2. Allison's private investigation work relied on tracking cheating spouses, which left her with plenty of enemies.
3. Then there's Reggie, a police chief from a neighboring town where Allison used to work, with whom she was romantically involved.

To solve the case, a heavily overwhelmed Emmy is forced to begrudgingly accept the professional help of her sister, Jude. Emmy deeply resents Jude for abandoning the family for over 40 years, leaving Emmy to carry the crushing emotional and physical burden of their mother's declining health alone. Jude's clinical, authoritarian federal training contrasts sharply with Emmy's

community-oriented policing, creating heavy friction as they bounce investigative theories off one another.

We are fortunate to live in an age when so many talented crime writers are plying their trade. Karin Slaughter is one of the best and never fails to shock and surprise with her twisty plots and flawed characters.

THE SHADOW FRIENDS

by Tess Gerritsen

Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99, August

The Martini Club #3

Rating: B

The quiet town of Purity, Maine is upended during a global affairs conference when a renowned infectious disease expert and Russian defector dies under highly mysterious circumstances. Soon after, a waitress at the conference hotel is found murdered.

The dual murders trigger the investigative instincts of *The Martini Club*, a tight-knit circle of retired spies. For club member Ingrid Slocum, the killings bear chilling signatures of a doomed CIA mission from three decades prior—a disastrous Cold War operation that resulted in three deaths and nearly cost Ingrid her life.

Ingrid's disappearance leaves her frantic husband Lloyd—who lacks covert field experience—determined to find her. Aided by Martini Club anchor Maggie Bird, Lloyd pursues his wife into Europe. Meanwhile, back in Maine, local police chief Jo Thibodeau uncovers startling evidence that shifts all assumptions about the case. As a clandestine network of assassins tries to eliminate them, the retired operatives must question their oldest allegiances and resurrect their rusty skills.

I would categorize this series as mild entertainment, geared to the cozy/traditional mystery reader. It wouldn't compare well with today's heavy hitters in espionage fiction (Herron, McCloskey, Cumming), and it would probably be unfair to make that comparison. I don't think that is what Tess Gerritsen is aiming for here. Like I said – mild entertainment.

ONE GOOD EYE

by Kevin Wade

Celadon Books, \$28.99, August

Jeep Mullane #2

Rating: B+

As a powerful hurricane makes landfall on the affluent Gold Coast of Long Island, Police Chief Jeep Mullane responds to an urgent plea for help. He arrives at the estate of Jenny Racine, his magnetic but infuriating childhood friend who grew up to become a wealthy and famous entrepreneur. Jeep finds that Jenny has been violently assaulted during a brutal home invasion.

Despite the severity of the attack, Jenny adamantly refuses to allow an official investigation into the incident. Bound by their complicated 25-year history, Jeep decides to cast his official police protocols aside. He embarks on an independent path to find her attackers and uncover the truth.

Jeep's rogue investigation quickly reveals that the assault is tied to a complex blackmail scheme. Over the course of five action-packed days, he must navigate and pry information from a dangerous web of local characters and factions, including:

Jenny's secretive, ex-military ex-husband

A fugitive police captain on the run
Steely, elite, blue-blooded, local doyennes

Two rival local biker gangs

As the narrative zigzags between the high-stakes present-day hunt and interleaved chapters detailing their shared 25-year past, Jeep is forced to grapple with his deeply buried feelings for Jenny.

I'm a Long Island boy, having grown up in Nassau County, right next door to Suffolk County, where the events of this novel take place. It's always fun for me to read a novel set there, as I recall the different locales that I used to be familiar with. But the problem with **ONE GOOD EYE** is that the plot meanders quite a bit and my attention would waver. I liked Jeep a lot, but would like a tighter story in the next book.

HIDE AND SEEK

by Soren Sveistrup

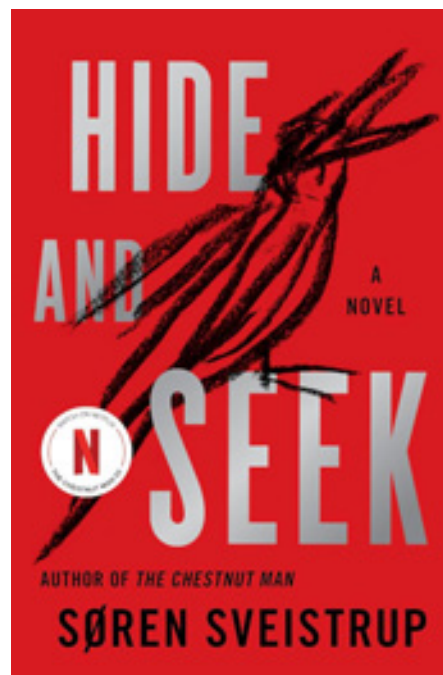
Harper, \$32.00, July
Naia Hess & Mark Hess #2

Rating: A

Sequel to the Barry-Award winning **THE CHESTNUT MAN**.

Denmark, 1992. A school bus driver takes a group of schoolchildren on a birdwatching field trip to a local Danish marsh and lake. While playing an innocent game of hide-and-seek, a young boy chants a traditional nursery rhyme to count down. As the game begins, he discovers the dismembered remains of a human body floating in the reed beds. The investigation stalls, hardening into a decades-old cold case.

More than 30 years later, on Valentine's Day, a 41-year-old single mother named Silje Thomsen becomes paralyzed with fear. She has been receiving targeted, anonymous text messages containing covert photos of herself. Each message repeats the ominous lines of the same childhood hide-and-seek counting rhyme ("Count to one, count to two..."). Shortly after swapping her SIM card in a desperate attempt to escape her stalker, Silje vanishes from her home. Her family reports her missing, prompting detectives Naia Thulin—now working with Denmark's National Cyber Crimes Unit (NC3)—and Mark Hess to lead the search.



As Thulin and Hess dig deeper into Silje's life, her dismembered body is discovered, establishing a grim pattern. The narrative then splinters into multiple investigative threads

Both of the books in this series have been made into streaming series and can be found on Netflix. I have watched both and found them quite true to the books and high quality productions. Books and TV series are both highly recommended.

THE CHASE

by Felix Francis

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, September

Rating: A-

Fabian Tulley is a 49-year-old art dealer who is accused of selling a fake painting, attributed to legendary equestrian artist Alfred Munnings. He knows the claim is false, but he is having difficulty proving otherwise because the painting is being held by the police as evidence and they won't allow it out of their possession.

Then things go from bad to worse. While running a retail sale booth at Cheltenham Racecourse, some of his other paintings are vandalized. This is followed up by a couple of men who try to run him down in the racecourse parking lot. To top off Fabian's troubles, it turns out that his clients are being threatened to stay away from his gallery and his landlords are trying to cancel his gallery lease. Someone is obviously targeting him but Fabian has no idea why or, for that matter, who.

But rather than lying down and taking it, Fabian decides to fight back and through some good detection, he eventually gets to the bottom of things with the help of one of his clients, a retired attorney.

The resolution of **THE CHASE** is particularly satisfying.

If you enjoyed Felix's father's works (Dick Francis), you should also enjoy **THE CHASE**.

In some of the publicity material it is mentioned that this is a Sid Halley novel. Sid is one of Dick Francis' and Felix Francis' most popular characters (and mine). But he DOES NOT appear

as a character in **THE CHASE**.

A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES

Jonathan Ames

Mysterious Press, \$23.95, September

Rating: A-

Maria Cole is a fiercely independent LAPD homicide detective with a history of childhood abuse, who grew up in the foster care system. While on mandatory leave following an on-duty shooting, Maria receives word that her estranged, ex-con father has been murdered.

Traumatized by recent violence and her own heavy grief, she travels to her father's rural, coastal home in Alabama to settle his estate and attend the funeral.

Upon arriving in the lush Southern beach town, Maria begins asking sharp questions about her father's death. The tight-lipped locals reject this inquisitive outsider, and the local police actively evade her official questions. Realizing that something does not add up, Maria decides to dig out the truth entirely on her own. To secure answers, Maria is forced to tangle directly with bigoted local police officers, corrupt small-town officials, and home-grown criminal conspiracies.

The investigation leads her on a dark trajectory into long-buried personal trauma, forcing her to confront a painful past she tried to forget.

This slight tome (192 pages) really packs a punch. What satisfied me the most was how many misconceptions Maria had about her parents and her past life and how she was eventually able to find out the truth about her father and put some demons to rest.

The Georgia town setting is populated with stereotypical characters whom the reader loves to hate. I didn't mind that, but it was reminiscent of John Ball's **IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT**, which was made into the award-winning movie with Sidney Poitier – although the Rod Steiger character was more nuanced than the sheriff in this novel.

FIGHTING EDGE

by Margaret Mizushima

Crooked Lane, \$29.99, September

Mattie Walker #11

Rating: A-



FIGHTING EDGE opens with a bang when Deputy Mattie Walker and her K-9 sidekick Robo conduct a routine welfare check and discovers a young mother named Jaclyn dead. Jaclyn's hysterical toddler, Emma, is found alive in her crib and remains the sole witness to the violent crime.

Before the murder investigation fully gets underway, Mattie pulls over a speeding vehicle. She notices a highly nervous driver and a terrified teenage passenger. A vehicle sweep by Robo, uncovers illicit drugs and evidence of human trafficking, prompting Mattie to arrest the driver and place the teenager in protective custody.

While local law enforcement collaborates with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Mattie's husband, veterinarian Cole Walker, notices highly unusual and suspicious activities at local dog kennels during his ambulatory farm calls.

As Mattie, Robo, and the CBI piece the evidence together, they realize the murder, the drug trafficking, and the suspicious kennel activities may be interconnected parts of a massive orga-

nized crime syndicate operating in their mountain town.

Reading a Margaret Mizushima novel is like visiting an old friend to check out what is going on with their life. Her characters have become so life-like to me that I find it difficult to imagine they are not real. This series has a strong underlying and continuing story arc, which has been a pleasure to observe. There is a lot of detection and a lot of action in the novel so is this a novel of detection (perhaps a police procedural) or is it an action thriller? It's a bit of both and that makes it the kind of book I want to read.

Did I mention that it has a dog?

NO SONG FOR THE DEAD

by Jussi Adler-Olsen, Stine Bolther & Line Holm

Dutton, \$30.00, September

Department Q #11

Rating: A-

The Danish National Police's cold case unit, Department Q, is struggling to stay afloat following the retirement of their long-time mentor and leader, Detective Carl Mørck. Carl has stepped away to write novels based on his career, leaving his assistants, Assad and Rose, to handle operations on their own.

But Carl's retirement is short-lived when he discovers a highly disturbing audio recording. He hands it over to Department Q, prompting them to look into what was previously deemed an open-and-shut murder-suicide case from years prior.

Then the depleted Department Q receives a surprise transfer—a prickly French detective named Helena Henry. While she dives into the case with immense focus, she carries dark personal secrets that threaten to complicate the unit's survival.

The team finds themselves pulled into two major, overlapping mysteries:

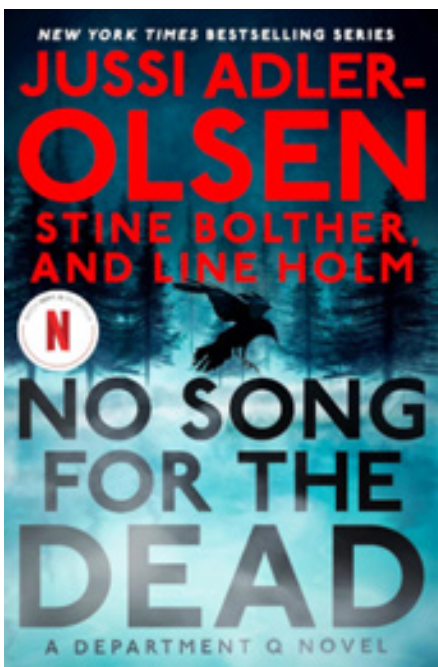
Historic Abuse: The core of the plot dates back to a grim flashback where a 10-year-old boy was left tied naked to a tree in freezing weather. Decades later, the boy's childhood tormentors are being violently murdered one by one.

Current Escalations: A sudden wave of seemingly random violence erupts, including an explosion off the coast of Jutland and the shooting of a young woman in Copenhagen.

As Assad, Rose, and Helena dig deeper into the present-day evidence, they realize all these horrific threads trace back to a singular, unexpiated dark event from the past that someone has never forgotten.

This series was supposed to end with the last book and thing were tightly wound up at the end of **LOCKED IN** (2024). So I was surprised to find out that the series was going to continue with Jussi Adler-Olsen as a co-writer (not the sole writer, as with the other 10 in the series) along with a couple of seasoned reporters doing some or all of the writing. I could tell no difference in writing style and overall quality of the narrative between **NO SONG FOR THE DEAD** and the prior 10 books of this superior series. I'm delighted that there will be more Department Q novels to read in the future.

There have been a couple of attempts to film this series that have not been very good. But the most recent, *Dept. Q*, is quite well done (a lot of profanity though) and the first season can be viewed on Netflix. A second season is in the works.



Crime Jazz

Ted Fitzgerald



THE BLUE FLAME

By George Pelecanos
Cardinal, August, \$29.00

THE BLUE FLAME is George Pelecanos' welcome return to crime fiction, bringing back one of his signature characters, Washington, DC private investigator Derek Strange, the protagonist of five earlier novels, a man "on the old side, but not too worn", according to one observer.

Business is slow these days, so Strange grudgingly hires out to flashy drug lawyer Billy Lake to interview and evaluate witnesses for or against Lake's client, marijuana dealer Antone Anthony, who's also accused of shooting and killing his close friend Nigel Anthony, possibly over a young woman named Cynthia Barnes. Strange finds a tight-knit group of longtime friends from high school days who vouch for Anthony as non-violent. Cynthia, whose late brother was one of the group, concerns Strange, especially when he observes suspect behavior on her part. But that's not Strange's job. He files his report, deposits his payment and put the case behind him, until Cynthia is found dead three weeks later, her body wedged into an abandoned refrigerator.

Strange gingerly reignites his investigation, walking softly and circuitously to avoid drawing the fire of DC Homicide while he investigates Cynthia's double life and her friends, plays some roles, works a bluff, discovers motive and opportunity for Cynthia's and Nigel's killers and sets into motion a plan to ensure justice for both victims. It's a classic private eye scenario, done splendidly and with gravity. Like all of Pelecanos' stories, **THE BLUE FLAME** is immersed in the sounds, sights and

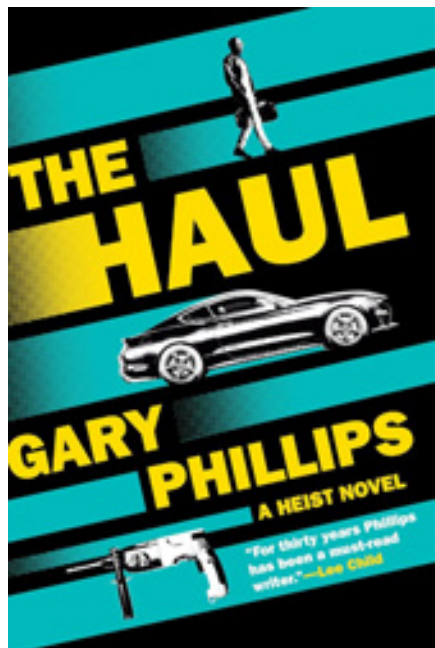
presence of the District's people, neighborhoods, streets, music, food, fashion and culture. (How detailed? Meeting a gun dealer in an attempt to trace the murder gun, Strange wears "old school classic DC" gray New Balance 990s sneakers. The dealer looks at the shoes



and says "I see you're from here.").

Key to the book is a topic and attitude baked into all of Pelecanos' work: masculinity. To be precise, the importance and value of being a man, in the sense of knowing oneself, taking responsibility and gaining maturity. **THE BLUE FLAME** of the title refers to the battered neon sign adorning Strange's storefront office, which he's had for fifty-plus years, "so that young men and women, many moving in and out of Roosevelt High School across Georgia Avenue, could see a Black man turning the key of his front door, in his own shop, every day." It also refers to this ex-

cop's curiosity and passion for justice. As a homicide detective tells Strange, late in the story "Once you wear the uniform, the blue flame never goes out." It's clear the flame is still lit for Strange and Pelecanos. Long may it burn.



THE HAUL

By Gary Phillips
Soho Crime, July, \$28.95

Gary Phillips has never published a dull sentence in his life. Reading through his varied body of work, including the Ivan Monk and Harry Ingram series and the frenetic standalones **THE JOOK** and **THE PERPETRATORS**, you're strapped into propulsive combinations of characterization, detail, environment and straight-ahead passion often racing downfield to a pounding climax.

THE HAUL is no exception. O'Conner, his protagonist, is a semi-retired career thief of a certain age who spends more time these days managing his legitimate businesses than in planning new scores. But a tempting and extremely rewarding offer to clean out a robber baron billionaire's secret bunker underneath a Los Angeles basketball arena entices O'Conner with a Trifecta opportunity for professional challenge, personal satisfaction and considerable profit. As in all good caper stories, we

follow O'Conner and his small team through recruitment, refinement and execution (using an array of technical tools never imagined by Richard Stark's Parker, W.R. Burnett's Doc Riedenschneider or any of Lionel White's benighted bandits). Then comes the moment when the past intrudes on the present, forcing O'Conner to scheme and improvise, using smarts and brawn and ruthless professionalism to punch back to ensure his having a future.

Periodic flashbacks to O'Conner's youth and portraits of the people who provided him an environment in which to evolve and eventually become the best at what he does is critical. It provides O'Connor with a context and personality (something not always present in capers) for his career choice and his worldview. I have not read the previous O'Conner novel, **WARLORD OF WILLOW RIDGE**, but **THE HAUL** makes me eager to do so. Three decades after the publication of **VIOLENT SPRING**, Phillips is still hitting hard and ringing solid.

DREADFUL SUMMIT

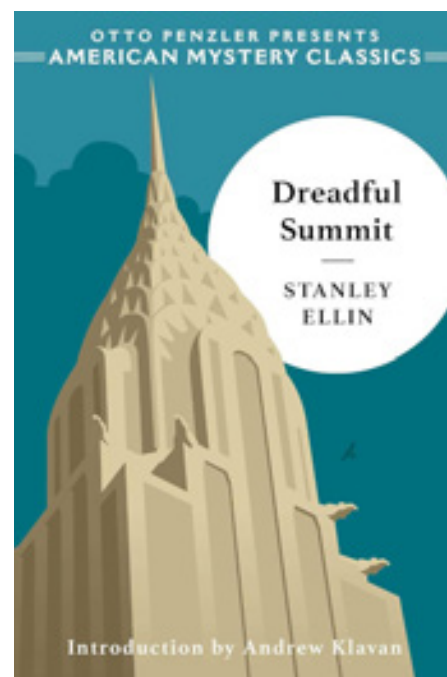
By Stanley Ellin
Introduction by Andrew Klavan
Mysterious Press, May, \$15.95 (PB)

With **DREADFUL SUMMIT**, his 1948 debut novel, MWA Grand Master Stanley Ellin joins Otto Penzler's *American Mystery Classics* series, and a fine addition it is.

George LaMain, the bookish 16-year-old son of a New York City tavern owner is looking forward to celebrating his birthday by attending a prize fight with his father Andy but the plans are upended when noted sportswriter Al Judge enters the bar and administers a brutal caning to the father, who submits to the thrashing without a complaint. An angry George doesn't understand the reason for the beating but vows to avenge his father: "*Then I knew I had to kill Al Judge.*" George grabs the fight tickets, an overcoat, his father's hat and a loaded gun and heads to Madison Square Garden, where Al Judge is covering the fight. His first thoughts are to gun down Judge but the urges of anger,

vengeance, wounded pride and seeking of ultimate retribution swirling and churning through his adolescent self, collide: George wants Judge to explain himself, to suffer with the knowledge of why he's being executed. George wants . . . Well, he's not quite sure.

Through the evening that unravels, George runs a gauntlet of challenges prompted by his youth and passion – how to obtain enough cash to get to the arena, how to find Judge, when and how to approach Judge and mete out his righteous punishment. During his night journey, George encounters a variety of people, some as emotionally damaged and as lost as he is, from chiselers to poseurs to a young woman who introduces him to lust and sorrow, and, comes the dawn, Al Judge himself. Judge explains the reason for Andy's beating, a revelation that shatters George's faith in the life he's always known and leads the boy not to resolution but to home and tragedy and a fate that cannot be reversed. (If the image of a confused, angry youth in ill-fitting clothes wandering the night streets of Manhattan, be aware that **CATCHER IN THE RYE** wasn't published until 1951). Of course, the title, taken from *Hamlet*, suggests the novel's plot and theme go back to Shakespeare and to the dawn of storytelling. Still, **DREADFUL SUMMIT** is Ellin's own



tale and packs an emotional punch that tears and reverberates as much in 2026 as it did 78 years ago in 1948.

THE GREAT GAME

By Arvin Ethan David

Thomas & Mercer, July, \$16.99 (PB)

THE GREAT GAME sounds like great fun – legendary gentlemen thief A.J. Raffles and his associate “Bunny” joining with an aging Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in 1905 London at the behest of a young Winston Churchill to combat a terrorist threat to the British Empire and solve the brutal killings of several noble families – a teaming suggesting Philip Jose Farmer’s *Wold Newton Universe*, a common cosmos shared by numerous heroes and villains of British and American popular fiction. But author Arvin Ethan David has something more substantial and adventurous in mind than a pastiche linking Doyle’s and E. W. Hornung’s creations.

For one thing, this Bunny is not Raffles’ dogsbody of old (That poor fellow was killed in the Boer War.). In his place is another veteran of that slaughter, Balvinder dey Sing, known familiarly as Bal, who has moved from India to London to pursue twin goals of a legal career and becoming his idea of a proper English gentleman, ambitions he’s financing as Raffles’ accomplice in audacious burglaries. If that sounds contradictory, it’s just the start. Being the book’s narrator and protagonist Bal brings a different perspective to the British empire’s old boys’ club of high adventure and derring-do, that of the outsider: the colonized as opposed to the imperialist.

Throughout **THE GREAT GAME**, Bal encounters people and circumstances that cause him to question his long-held beliefs about empire, women, music and loyalty. These include a romantic interest in the form of an Irish feminist named Maude Adler (Hmm.), and a sinister mastermind who compels Bal to confront his long-held beliefs and make a fateful choice. The decision will be unnerving to some readers, even if they sense it coming, but it promises intriguing cultural and moral collisions



in future volumes.

Disclosing more will be revealing too much. Let’s just say that author Arvin Ethan David, a polymath creative (playwright, producer and author of 2025’s graphic novel adaptation of Chandler’s **TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS**), can marshal his characters and tell an adventurous tale well. His characterizations are unique and laced with humor. It’s clear that David is a trickster happy to use mischief, humor, anger and a distinct perspective on classic popular adventure fiction to upend assumptions and create a new storytelling universe. **THE GREAT GAME** won’t be everyone’s cup of tea but in today’s fractured and autocratic era, it’s a brew worth sampling.

DREAM NO MORE:

15 MEMORABLE TALES OF MURDER, MALICE AND MAYHEM

By Philip MacDonald

Edited & Introduction by Curtis Evans
Stark House Press, June, \$19.95 (PB)

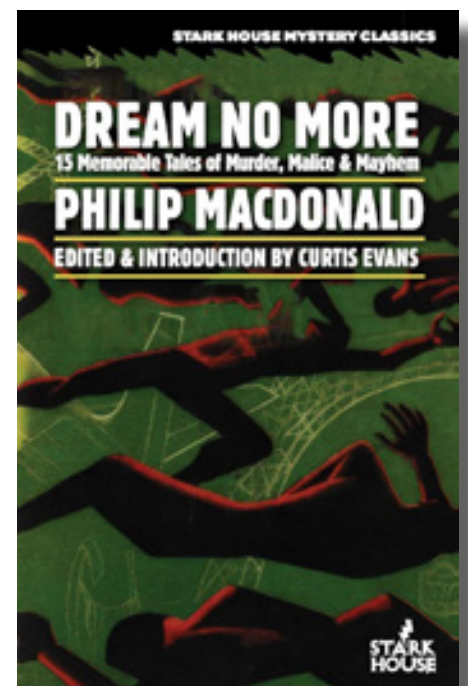
Best known as one of classic writer of Golden Age mysteries (**THE RASP**, **THE ROPE**, **WARRANT FOR X**) and as a screenwriter, Philip MacDonald was also an accomplished short story writer, particularly during the 1950s, during which he won two Edgars for his

work in the form. **DREAM NO MORE** collects 15 tales, a mix of mystery and horror, which include some daring and disturbing visions of human avarice and madness that deserve to be rediscovered.

The book opens with early works, notably the eerily titled “His Mother’s Eyes”, from 1927, an edgy tale of an almost supernatural serial killer decimating British troops in World War I Mesopotamia and “Our Feathered Friends” a 1931 precursor to *The Birds* that ends with a subtle and most jarring image that leaves the worst to readers’ imaginations.

The meat of the collection is in the 1950s stories, most published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* at the behest of Fred Dannay. It’s in most of these stories that MacDonald, in the words of collection editor Curtis Evans, “dared unflinchingly to explore the darker impulses of the dastardly and depraved human soul”, which is an understatement for several of these tales. A number of them take place in El Morro Beach, a California beach retreat that appears quite the dangerous place to live in the Eisenhower era.

The Edgar-winning “Dream No More” chronicles the battle of wills between a widow and a university professor over possession of her son



and her property. Gavin Rhodes covets the beachfront property owned by Mrs. Garroway and has a devilish using John, her son and his student and probable lover, to achieve that end. Mrs. Garroway is equally opposed to Rhodes' desire. The tension builds quietly but intensely to a surprising ending. "Love Lies Bleeding" from the Edgar-winning collection **SOMETHING TO HIDE**, finds playwright Cyprian Morse needing an alibi for a woman's murder and the return of his intimate friend Charles from overseas. Subsequent events provide reasonable doubt about the murder charge but at a price Morse finds devastating. In "The Ticker-Tape", Martin Llgard is besieged with the growing suspicion that his wife may be connected to the murder of a young Mexican man and MacDonald keenly dissects the husband's evolving fears and doubts. In this and other stories, especially "Malice Domestic", MacDonald makes clear that no place is safe, especially home, and that his is a world in which one can never be certain what the person they love and live with is capable of doing.

While other stories, including "The Green-and-Gold String", "The Man Out of the Rain" and "Deed of Mercy" – dealing with, respectively, a con artist, a hostage situation and a false accusation – are less emotionally fraught and a bit more conventionally entertaining (all were adapted for television in the 1950s) but are enjoyable.

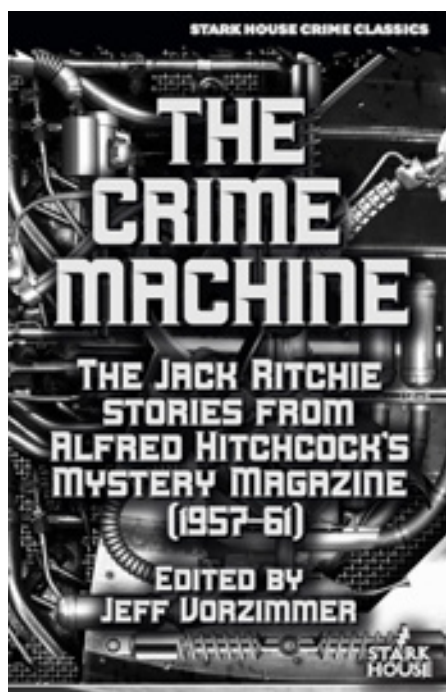
THE CRIME MACHINE: THE JACK RITCHIE STORIES FROM ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (1957-61)

By Jack Ritchie

Edited by Jeff Vorzimmer

Stark House Press, September, \$19.95 (PB)

Like Edward D. Hoch, Jack Ritchie was one of a handful of crime and mystery writers who made their living writing short stories. For Ritchie, this included such magazines as *Manhunt*, *Ellery Queen*, *Elks Magazine* and the unlikely trio of *Adam*, *Boy's Life* and *Young Catholic Messenger*. Of the about



345 stories he published, 117 were for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. This collection gathers the first 39 of those stories, most of which range from three to 10 pages, with arresting and evocative opening sentences that draw you in immediately.

Example: The first story, "Bullet-Proof", opens: "When he came through the front door of Charlie's house, he let us know his name was Brice. I guess he did that because it wasn't a secret to the cops outside. They got there thirty seconds later now were waiting for him to make a break."

Bam! That's the set-up. Ah, but wait. What appears to be just a hostage situation quickly turns more complicated as the narrator doles out information suggesting a dubious dynamic among the people in the invaded house – the narrator, his beleaguered host and the host's provocative wife – leading to one character's apparent solution to the predicament and then a nasty surprise.

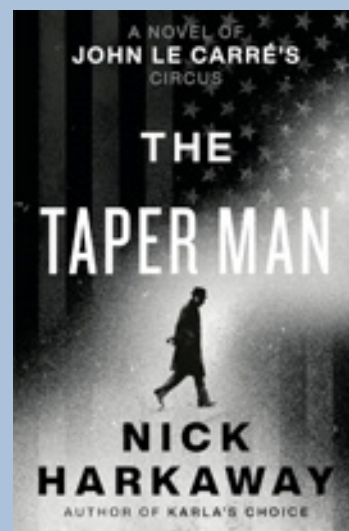
That's just the start. Ritchie follows up successfully throughout the collection, varying settings, plots and twists with rapid abandon and uncanny skill: "Bomb #14" and "The Third Call" are stories of police detectives with different motives for behaving strangely; "22 Stories Up – 22 Down" is a dark varia-

tion on the would-be suicide on a ledge trope; the title story is an apparent fantasy with a down to earth denouement; "All the Rude People" is a wry twist on the serial killer theme; "The Traveling Arm" is pure horror; and "You Can Trust Me", one of the longest stories, is a satisfying gangster tale, more moody than twisty.

Many of these stories would have made fine episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. As it is, only one story in this collection made it to the show – "What Frightened You, Fred?" a puzzler, filmed with Ed Asner and R.G. Armstrong, about why an ex-con ends up back in prison 48 hours after being released. It's a goodie, on the page and on the screen.

As usual with Stark House releases, this collection is complemented by editor Jeff Vorzimmer's crisp introduction and a comprehensive checklist of Ritchie's many stories. The best way to enjoy a cornucopia like **THE CRIME MACHINE** is to dip in and out, reading a couple of stories at a time, savoring them at your leisure. By the time you finish, the next collection may be published and waiting for you.

George Smiley Is Back in a new novel by John le Carre's son



HISTORICAL EMPORIUM

Robin Agnew



ECHOES OF INFAMY

by Shaina Steinberg
Kensington, \$27, May
Bishop & Gallagher #3
Rating: B+

I usually have no problem catching up with a series when I begin with a later instalment, but due to the complex backstories of the characters in this one, I found myself having to peruse a synopsis of the first two books to figure things out. It's set in 1948 Los Angeles, and the main characters, Evelyn Bishop and Nick Gallagher, met during the war working as OSS agents. In this novel, they've finally married and Evelyn has taken over the family aeronautics company, while Nick is working as a private eye.

Steinberg addresses many issues such as chauvinism in the workplace, Japanese internment camps and the contemporary treatment of homosexuals. As the book opens, Bishop Aeronautics is breaking ground on an expansion when Evelyn is approached by Billy Takemura, a Japanese American soldier, who insists they are breaking ground on land where his family's illegally seized (and now destroyed) restaurant formerly sat. Evelyn, who has a highly developed conscience, asks Nick to investigate and uncover how the Takemuras lost their land.

Soon after he gets to work, a body is discovered on the development site, which turns out to be that of the owner of a company who had acquired a lot of land for new housing developments. It's not long before Billy's brother, the ne'er do well Hanzo, known to the police as a "troublemaker" with a long record, is arrested for the crime and Nick gets to work attempting to prove his innocence. Unfortunately, he has to deal with a rac-

ist, sexist sheriff who figures he's already cracked the case.

At the same time, a young boy appears near Nick's office who turns out to be Nick's nephew. Abandoned by his parents and older siblings at twelve, about the same age as nephew Rory, Nick is delighted to again find some semblance of family. Suspecting Rory's life has been no easier than his own, Nick and Evelyn take him in, feed him and work to gain his trust. This portion is very well done, well written and moving, with wonderful character development, and it becomes the emotional heartbeat of the novel.

Nick's investigation takes in the horror of the Japanese internment camps during the war, history that seems quite pertinent at the present moment. Japanese were turned out of their homes with only what they could carry and put into camps, returning after the war, as the Takemuras did, to find their homes



and businesses gone, making the rage felt by people like Billy and Hanzo perfectly understandable.

Steinberg also takes a critical look at the scepticism Evelyn meets as she runs her father's aeronautics company. Several of the men she works with have known her since she was a young and still treat her like a child, assuming that since she's a newlywed, she'll no doubt be leaving soon to have babies. To their surprise however, Evelyn proves herself to be a bit of a bad ass with no intention of quitting. Maybe it's not wishful thinking and there *were* companies treating their workers so well back in 1948, but I'm not convinced.

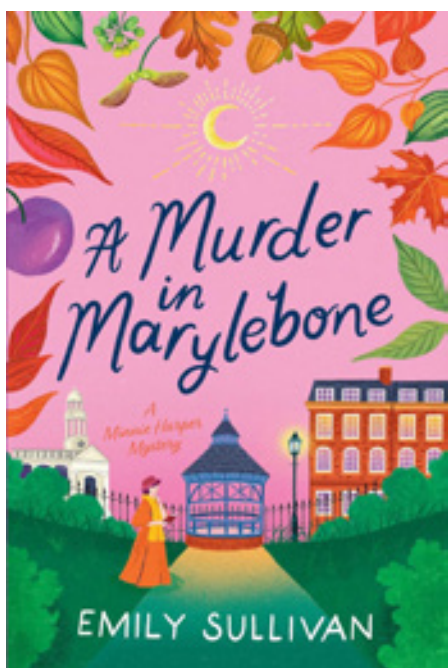
Another character struggles with homosexuality, something that was, if not criminalized, was certainly deemed unacceptable. I'm assuming there were people in 1948 like Evelyn and Nick who had no problems with gay people, but it was far from the prevailing attitude.

This book has a rich and textured canvas, full of interesting (if maybe a few too many) characters, putting heartbreaking life into the issues the author confronts. Strongest of all is the relationship between Evelyn, Nick and Rory, as the couple helps the young man to find his footing. The investigation is well done with a good clue toward the end that cracks the case, and the entire mystery is set in an unusual time period for a mystery (at least one set in the States), the whole providing a satisfying mystery as well as a fascinating look at postwar life.

A MURDER IN MARYLEBONE

by Emily Sullivan
Kensington, \$27, April
Minnie Harper #2
Rating: B+

The first instalment of this perfectly charming series set at the turn of the century took place in Corfu, which made it stand out. Even though central character, Minnie Harper, an English woman and recent widow with two young children, promised her late husband to never return to London, her elder child, daughter Cleo, begs her so ceaselessly to attend school there that



they ultimately wind up back home anyway. Arriving with young Tommy in tow, she takes up residence in her Aunt Agatha's townhouse, reacquainting herself with the family she hasn't seen in years.

Things aren't so great there, with her father suffering from what we would now quickly identify as dementia, her mother only slightly less remote and her brother Jack still as big an ass as ever, the only bright side being her baby sister Delia, now a grown woman and up and coming artist. Delia begs Minnie to accompany her to her art opening, and as Tommy is happily settled in with Jack's children, the cousins he never knew he had, Minnie agrees.

Delia's the one who kicks off the action, however. At the opening Minnie is both impressed by her sister's work and alarmed to discover that her old boss from Corfu is also in attendance and as alarming as ever. She knows Mr. Dorian, the popular mystery writer, from having typed his last manuscript, and the two circle each other like prickly hedgehogs, clueless to their attraction for each other.

When she returns home, Minnie is awakened in the middle of the night by Delia – after sneaking out of the house to hook up with her lover she discovered his corpse instead. Minnie cleans things up by returning with Delia to the scene

and calling the police, only to find that the detective in charge is Mr. Dorian's brother. He immediately suspects Delia, who takes to her bed, and it's up to Minnie and Mr. Dorian, the writer, to get to work unravelling clues.

What follows is a fairly standard investigation, made new by the freshness of Sullivan's characters, a touch of humor and her light hand with prose. Also intriguing are the dynamics of Minnie's family, especially the burgeoning relationship between two sisters who hardly know each other.

Minnie is haunted by the idea that her beloved husband was up to no good, perhaps smuggling Greek antiquities back to England during their time in Corfu, and is as determined to get to the bottom of that mystery as she is to clear Delia's name. While there are an assortment of strong women in this novel none of them seem anachronistic, and often Minnie herself is surprised by their capabilities, as well as her own, as she begins to realize she has something to offer the world in addition to being a mother.

Sullivan, who came to mysteries via romance, is obviously an old hand at both romantic elements and series fiction, and she leaves a dandy thread dangling at the end which will leave the reader panting for her next instalment. I'm already a full on Minnie fan, so I'm certainly looking forward to meeting her again.

A BITTER CUT

by Anna Lee Huber
Berkley, \$18.99, June
Lady Darby #14

Rating: B+

Set in 1830s Warwickshire, this installment finds series heroine Keira, Lady Darby, settling into a new home on the grounds of her father in law's estate, while getting ready to host a long run of large house parties which will culminate in a ball. While she's repaired her breach with stern father-in-law, Lord Gage (much thanks to her small daughter Emma), there's new family trouble brewing in the form of her brother Trevor's planned engagement to a wealthy

young woman, Matilda, who has, it turns out, extremely abrasive parents.

Mr. Birnam, the father, owns large factories and would like regulations relaxed, and is apparently attending the house party chiefly to lobby Lord Gage's upper-class friends in an attempt to get factory bills passed. Despite his constant efforts, he's not getting anywhere, and Trevor's engagement seems to be stalling out as well. After an extremely uncomfortable dinner where the presence of Mr. Birnam's secretary was requested at the last minute, Kiera discovers that very secretary's body later that night, dead from an acid assault.

Acid attacks were apparently common in the 1830s as the substance was readily available, and often used to disfigure, if not necessarily to kill. As Kiera's husband, Gage, as well as his father, are licensed agents of the crown, they begin to officially investigate. Kiera works with the two, along with her maid and Gage's valet, making an impressive team, which works to peel back the complex layers of tension, suspicion and ill feeling that lurk within the Birnam family.

Huber's matrix is a rich one, delineating the family relationships in a way that helps the reader easily keep track of the different players. Kiera's siblings



have always been a part of the books, but it's her brother Trevor's heartbreak as he pursues, perhaps in vain, his lady love, that's front and center in this one. It's obvious both Matilda and Trevor are hiding something from the others, which just complicates the investigation.

As she's a painter, Kiera is excellent at observing details, and pretty fearless, though by the end of the book the pressures of managing a large house party and a ball alongside a murder investigation begin to take a toll even on her. She has a strong relationship with her husband, and loves being a mother, all things which are woven throughout the narrative. Huber's storytelling is relaxed, and once you as a reader settle into her writing style, you're transported comfortably back to the 1830s.

She's an old fashioned author in the best sense, one who obviously loves writing series fiction, and makes a habit of leaving a hanging thread to follow up in the next book. Fourteen books in, Kiera and Gage remain a captivating couple, with plenty of fresh adventures to look forward to. The mystery in this one was pretty tricky, but Huber plays fair and lays the clues for us readers, if we are deft and clever enough to follow them!

THE PARIS CHASE

by David Lewis

John Scognamiglio Books, \$27, July
The Secret Churchill Files #3

Rating: A

This enthralling mystery is set in 1942 and begins with our heroine, Welsh woman and secret agent Catrine Colline, pondering her future after her woman only spy division, 512, is absorbed into the larger SOE (Special Operations Executive). Determined to qualify to be sent to France, she's passed all the physical tests, but can't manage to speak the language like a native, so is seconded to the dreaded office work. Churchill, however, senses Catrine has something special, and when an SS agent disappears in Paris, he decides she's the one to find him and bring him to London. The man, Dieter Silber, had discovered the plans for Hitler's grue-



some "Final Solution," and can't stomach it.

At the moment he's basically the most wanted man in Paris, and the cruel and determined Germans are willing to sacrifice as many French lives as necessary to get to him. The viciousness of the Nazis prevent this story from being a straight up entertainment, as the simple factual details Lewis includes are enough to break any reader's heart.

Battling this evil is the French resistance in Paris. When Catrine arrives she's sheltered by an old friend, Evelyn, and her glamorous mother, who happens to have a beautiful apartment on Rue Foch across the street from the Gestapo headquarters, proving handy to keep an eye on the enemy.

The man, Dieter, who has disappeared, only wants to get to London in order to get the plans he's stolen from his superiors into Churchill's hands. These plans, which he keeps strapped to his chest, becomes, if you will, the MacGuffin of the story, the thing everyone is after. After he warns a bar owner that the Nazis are planning a raid, the pair escapes together, heading for Marseille, the jumping off point for Spain or even London.

The rest of the novel, after this set up, becomes a near perfect escape and chase story. Dieter and his team meet up

with numerous roadblocks, which they counter with ingenious work arounds. Catrine, realizing where Dieter must be headed, heads for Marseille on the slow train, leading her own team. There are some heartbreaking losses along the way, giving the suspense real urgency and keeping the tone of the book taut as a wire. As an experienced reader you know Catrine and Dieter must succeed, yet Lewis still makes you doubt that outcome through masterful, compelling storytelling and pacing that's absolutely top of the line.

Two people can't stop a war or end up changing the outcome, but can still do their part, and with the assistance of the French resistance, Dieter and Catrine meet up and head to the pick up point together. In early 1942 the Allies were losing ground on many fronts, and prospects didn't seem great for our side, with the victories of the future seemingly distant at the end of the book. It was very hard to put down this well told tale, populated with wonderfully drawn characters and propulsive action scenes. You'll be cheering along with Catrine when she's finally able to introduce Dieter to her mentor Churchill.



I'm looking for a fan/reviewer who loves to read psychological/domestic suspense -- which continues to be very popular these days. This subgenre' is under-reviewed in *DP* since the departure of Kristopher Zgorski. The review column doesn't have to be in every forthcoming issue, but it should concentrate on the best of the subgenre' (separating the wheat from the chaff). If you are interested in reviewing for *Deadly Pleasures* in this regard, please send a couple of sample reviews and I will consider adding you to our team. george@deadlypleasures.com

Lookin' For a Few Good Books

Larry Gandle



ON EARTH AS IT IS BENEATH

by Ana Paola Maia

Churco Press, \$21.00, 2025

Rating: A

Somewhere in the wilderness in Brazil, a penal colony was built to house prisoners for rehabilitation. Decades later, no prisoner was rehabilitated and the operation is winding down. A mad warden runs the prison. The prisoners live in a nightmare as every full moon, the warden releases a few prisoners giving them a false opportunity to escape while he hunts them down like animals. It is hoped one prisoner can escape to inform the authorities about what is happening.

This is a short but brutal read. It is a searing exposition of violence and the cruelty men can exert on each other. The pacing is relentless and reaching the climax it becomes lightening quick. This book was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. In my opinion, it should have won. Superb.

THE SHAPE OF WATER

by Andrea Camilleri

Penguin, \$19.95

Rating: B-

A prominent man is found shot dead in his car with his pants around his knees in a seedy part of Vigata, a small town in Sicily. Inspector Salvo Montalbano is called upon to investigate. In order to solve the case, he must deal with the politics and the criminals in Sicily. The case gets increasingly complex. Even the Pope demands that Montalbano close the case.

This is the first volume in a very popular series. There is some humor and much about life in the small Sicilian

town. It is filled with rich characterizations. As a detective novel, it is competently written. However, I think readers come back to this series again and again for the slice of Sicilian life.

WHITE RIVER CROSSING

by Ian McGuire

Crown, \$29.00

Rating: A-

In 1766, a peddler arrives at a remote outpost of the Hudson Bay Company in Northern Canada with a lump of gold. He claims there is plenty more at a place called Ox Lake. The head of the outpost, Magnus Norton, dreams of vast riches prior to returning to England. He sends out a small and secret expedition headed by Magnus's brutal deputy, John Shaw and Thomas Hearn, the first mate of a whaling vessel. They are led by a family of native guides. The expedition

is top secret. Braving the harsh landscape, they set out. After John Shaw commits a highly offensive sexual act, the expedition is placed in great danger. Accomplishing the mission suddenly has become increasingly difficult. Death will ensue.

Ian McGuire has written one of my favorite novels, **THE NORTH WATER**. This book is equally as exceptional. The two books concern historical explorations tinged with violence. McGuire is a master at conjuring hostile settings both climate and human. The plot is relentless and never lets up. Characters are so realistic. This is a very memorable thriller and is highly recommended.

THE ELEMENTS

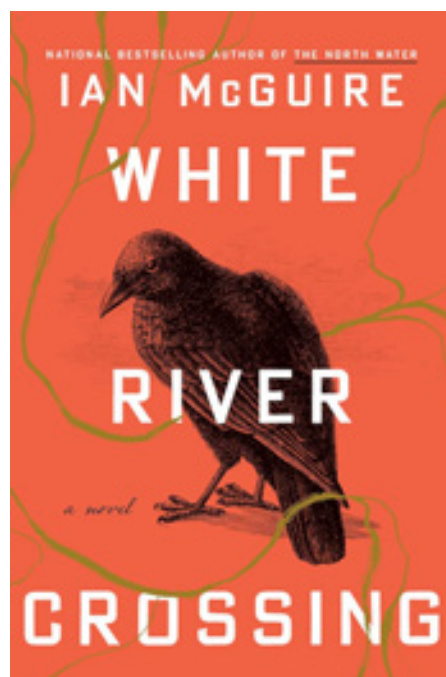
by John Boyne

Henry Holt, \$29.99

Rating: A-

This book is essentially four novellas. Each of them are interrelated to a crime. In the first, Vanessa moves to a remote island for a peaceful existence. Why? What happened? She meets a young man who is a supremely gifted athlete who makes it onto a professional team but hates the sport. In the second story he is on trial for potential rape. Did he do it? A jury will decide. In the third, a female surgeon commits unspeakable crimes. In the fourth, a father goes on a trip with his son which transforms their lives.

All of these stories are compelling enough in their own right. However, they come together in the end. It is highly unique in that there is no apparent coherent and continuous narrative. The writing is superb in the sense of characterizations and the pacing of the plot. This is an excellent literary crime



fiction novel and is highly recommended.

THE DAY OF THE OWL

by Leonardo Sciascia
NYRB, \$15.95

Rating: B

A man is shot dead as he boards a bus in a small Sicilian town. Captain Bellodi is assigned to solving the crime. He is met with silence from everyone. One man claims to have seen someone he knows fleeing the scene of the crime. However, he is soon found dead. It appears the Mafia is involved. His investigation puts him into the track of other crimes. Since nobody is talking, even solving the crime may not land him with any witnesses.

The author is a well-known Sicilian writer. This book was originally published in 1961 in Italian. It is of historic interest in that he exposes the layers of silence the Mafia has imposed on the island. This is a competent crime fiction novel but not a great one.

YESTERYEAR

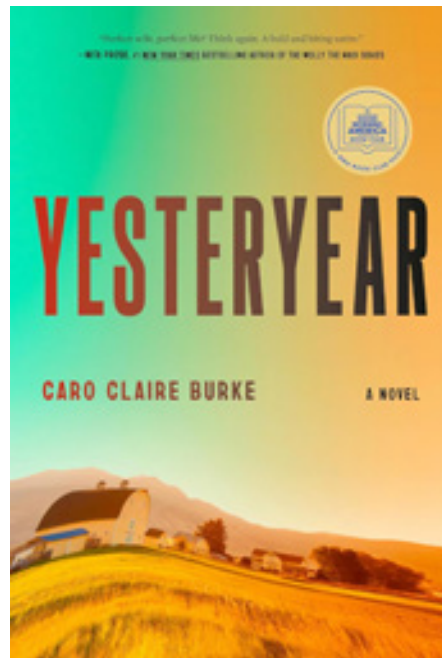
by Caro Claire Burke
Knopf, \$30.00

Rating: A

Natalie is an influencer with over eight million followers. Apparently she lives a traditional lifestyle in a rustic farmhouse with a handsome cowboy husband and six children. Her many followers want to know about her life and how she uses old fashioned techniques in cooking, cleaning and décor. Off screen she has a producer and two nannies. Her husband is the heir of a political dynasty. Her father-in-law is a favorite to win the White House.

One day, Natalie wakes up in a home that isn't hers. Her husband looks different, as do her children. She appears to be in the 1800s and desperately wants to escape. But how? What is going on?

This is, surprisingly a very polarizing book. Some readers hate this book but so many other, like myself, really enjoyed it. The time travel is totally confounding and it appears there must be a reasonable explanation. This keeps the pages turning. The solution is very



clever. **YESTERYEAR** is a entertaining novel and one well worth spending your time with.

THE SURVIVOR

by Andrew Reid
Minotaur Books, \$29.00

Rating: C

Ben Cross is fired from his Manhattan job. He gets on the 1 train heading uptown when he starts to receive text messages from a killer telling him to remain on the train, do not get off and they know who he really is. They kill a passenger getting off the train to prove their point. It is up to an NYPD detective, Kelly Hendricks, to discover what exactly is going on and why. The train is hijacked to 181st Street. Why? What is Ben hiding?

The book is a debut effort. It shows. The plot is preposterous. The descriptions of the action scenes are confusing especially towards the end. Characters are shallow and the reason for the hijacking makes no sense. If you want Ben dead, walk up behind him and shoot him. There are so many complications and for seemingly no reason. Avoid this book.

COOL MACHINE

by Colson Whitehead
Doubleday, \$30.00

Rating: A

It is 1981 and New York City is starting to recover financially. Ray Carney, the successful furniture dealer in Harlem has just been awarded The Sterling Furniture's Dealer of the Month Award. Even though he is successful, he wants to do one last heist before he goes straight. It will not prove to be easy and could very well cost him his life.

In a separate story, it is 1983 and Carney's friend and partner, Pepper, takes on a bodyguard job which again becomes quite violent and deadly. In a last story, Carney tries to get a cousin's son out of a dangerous situation. This places him, once again into a deadly harm's way and people will die.

This is the concluding volume of the Harlem Trilogy. It is not necessary to read the earlier two books but they are both highly recommended (**HARLEM SHUFFLE** and **CROOK MANIFESTO**) and are my previous favorite books of the year. As with these two books, Colson Whitehead has brought back to life Manhattan of the time the books take place. I did live in New York in the 1980s and the city is perfectly captured. He travels throughout New York and every setting rings true. It actually is a book of three novellas of different times in the decade. The plot is always compelling and the action is swift and can be quite brutal. Characters, as expected, are incredibly realistic. This is a perfect example of a literary crime fiction novel that hits on all cylinders. It can be enjoyed by readers who want a compelling plot, as well as, those that want to read great writing. Highly recommended.



But I Digress...

Ali Karim



THE HOTEL MANAGER'S GUIDE TO MURDER

by Erlendur Arason
Blekverk, £10.99, July
In U.S., Kindle \$6.35
Raykjavik Shadows #1

Rating: A

This debut novel by the enigmatic Erlendur Arason is the first Icelandic crime thriller of the "Reykjavík Shadows" series. It features the likeably naïve Torfi Pall Saeversson, a supervisor at the Bristol Hotel [in downtown Reykjavík] who finds himself accidentally at the centre of a murder that may prove to conceal other horrors.

Following the takeover of the hotel that had been in the Guomann family for generations, the ever reliable and trustworthy supervisor Torfi finds himself in front of newly appointed HR Manager Sigridur [aka 'Sigga' behind her back] and Operations Manager Asbjorn. It seems the new owners [Nordique Group] have plans to trim headcount which includes making Torfi's supervisory position redundant. The news is totally unexpected as Torfi has been in the employ of the Guomann family for over a decade becoming a valued and essential part of the Bristol Hotel's staff team. He's become part of the furniture.

He and his second wife Stjana [together with his teenage stepsons Arnar and Anton] live paycheck-to-paycheck on his meagre wages; that's even with Stjana working as an administrator for Nordique Group head office. Torfi knows every aspect of the business from Reception, Restaurant, Bar and House-keeping -- so he is shocked to hear of his upcoming unemployment. Pleading to Asbjorn and Sigridur citing his reliabil-

ity and long service record, he panics at the HR meeting. A surreal misunderstanding causes the two executives to rethink Torfi's planned redundancy. Instead of losing his supervisory position, he is offered an immediate promotion to front-of-house manager, which comes with a generous pay-rise and regular bonuses [paid in brown-enveloped cash]. Torfi tells his wife Stjana that things are looking up. With his first cash bonus, he pays off his credit cards and takes his wife and two teenage stepsons for a summer beach holiday.

On his return, Torfi finds there is a price to pay for the sudden [and unexpected] good fortune.

Down in the Bristol Hotel's kitchen, kindly breakfast chief, the Albanian Manuela serves thick sweet porridge and steaming mugs of coffee each morning covertly to a small group of unfortunate homeless vagrants. Torfi has

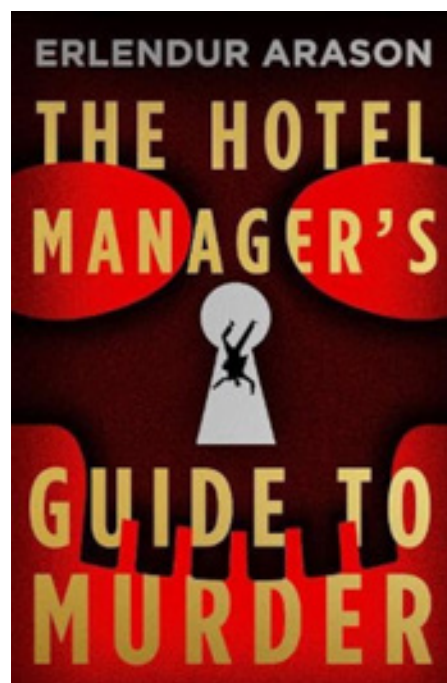
always known that Manuela feeds Raggi [aka Ragnor], Laki [aka Thorlakur], Gyda, Ingi and Patrekar et. al. turning a blind eye as long as this homeless group are fed and on their way by 6am, when the official breakfast for the Hotel's guests commences. This is one example of social commentary that the author peppers in this novel, contrasting the kindness of the foreign-born breakfast chief toward the less fortunate people living in the deep cold of an Icelandic winter.

Torfi is instructed to give a verbal warning by Asbjorn and Sigridur to the Bar Supervisor Gudjon Andri Jonsson with an added threat that any further shortfall in performance could result in dismissal. Confronting the Bar Supervisor, Torfi is surprised when Gudron Andri is nonplussed by the warning. Later, the Bar Supervisor is hospitalised by an unprovoked attack on his way home, and his deputy the Albanian-born Ljena has to take the role of Bar Supervisor when Gudron Andri decides not to return to work -- then the proceedings take a dark turn for Torfi.

By accepting the promotion and cash bonuses, Torfi may have entered into a Faustian pact, and perhaps the Hotel's Operations Manager Asbjorn and Head of Human Resources Siridur have something to hide.

The incongruous Icelandic detective team of Dagny Thorlaksdottir and Hauker Grimsson arrive at the Bristol Hotel much to the alarm of Torfi. It appears that a young man [Leo Freyr] has gone missing. He was last seen by CCTV in the Bristol Hotel bar with a man named Alberto, or was he?

To complicate Torfi's life further, his wife Stjana informs him that his



estranged daughter from his former marriage Bjort is coming to stay with them. Questions from Nordique group H.Q. gnaw at Torfi. Have the informal breakfast club for the homeless witnessed something that they shouldn't have observed? And all the while, police detectives Dagny and Hauker circle the Bristol Hotel as the irregularities start to mount up, and Torfi realises that he may be 'the fall guy' for a series of unspeakable crimes.

Arason's slim thriller is written with humour and empathy that helps mask the dark underbelly that lurks under the narrative. At times the phraseology is sharp and jarring as if the author [and/or translator] wishes to unsettle or remind the reader that they are observing foreigners in a foreign land.

The surreal situation that unfolds around Torfi [Pall Saeversson] grips the reader tighter than the icy embrace of an Icelandic winter. This promises to be the start of an extraordinarily addictive series of Nordic/ Scandinavian crime thrillers.

Arason's novel is like a narcotic – after this first dose, you'll be in need of another fix from the "Reykjavík Shadows".

Translated into the English Language by Quentin Bates.

THE WINTER WARRIORS

by Oliver Norek

Translated by Nick Caistor

Open Borders Press, £11.99, June

Rating: A

With the incredibly hot weather enveloping Europe, I was kept cool by this immersive historical narrative based around the icy grip of a Finnish winter in 1939. Meticulously researched, it tells the true story of how the small country of Finland, newly independent from Soviet Russia, fought valiantly against Stalin's vast hordes when they invaded to reclaim their former territory.

World War II commenced when Hitler and his forces of Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September, 1939. The reality was that little was happening in the rest of Europe in terms of 'boots-on-the-ground' military activity.



"There has to be a first death; you have to see with your own eyes to truly believe in war," is the adage with which the author bookends his narrative.

There is a worrying prescience in the actions of Stalin's Russia invading Finland [starting the Winter War in 1939], with the current 'special operation' that Putin's Russia has mounted by invading its former territory Ukraine.

As a prelude to a wider European [and then Worldwide] conflict, Stalin invaded Finland to incorporate this former territory to act as a 'buffer' in case Hitler and Germany decided to attack Russia. Despite Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop signing the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR, Stalin did not trust Adolf Hitler. Finland would serve as a buffer to protect mainland Russia, and Stalin considered his invasion of Finland would take at most a matter of weeks before the Finns surrendered. In order to find pretext to mount an invasion of Finland, Stalin orders a 'False Flag' operation using political prisoners from a Soviet Gulag.

What Stalin and his sycophantically fearful generals hadn't understood was Finland's Field Marshall Carl Gustav Mannerheim's use of 'SISU', the internal and physical resolve of the Finns.

He also drew his defensive army from ordinary people, from villages, of brothers, sisters, friends, and relatives to share a common purpose – to defend their homeland, with 'SISU'. The legend of Lotta Svärd inspired many young Finnish women to join their men in the conflict as field nurses defending their homeland.

The tale features several friends [including brothers] from the small village of Rautjarvi -- Toivo, Onni, Pretara [and Brother Victor] and especially Simo though a farmer, but thanks to his Father's training is now Finland's Champion Marksman.

The friends join the 6th Company lead by the manic alcoholic Captain Aarne Juutilainen [aka 'The Terror of Morocco' due to his service with the French Foreign Legion]. There are four commanders that form 6th Company. The boys from Rautjarvi join platoon number 1, led by Karlsson. Their objective is to prevent the Russian advance by protecting both fronts at Kollaa and the Mannerheim line.

Despite heavy artillery bombing of Finnish villages and cities including Helsinki, the Russian army can only advance via the Loiloma Road, due to heavy impenetrable forests and lakes. The Finns of 6th Company mount a guerrilla campaign even attacking Russian tanks and vehicles. Simo's prowess as a sniper becomes feared among the invaders, and he is termed 'The White Death'.

The novel details harrowing episodes as the massively outnumbered Finns fight valiantly against a ruthless Russian army. It becomes a David and Goliath battle with guile and resolve [SISU] on the side of Finland as it battles for its homeland against the overwhelming military capability of Russia.

Battles on the Loiloma Road, Ullisma Forest and Gulf of Finland are detailed dispassionately but in graphic detail. Russian propaganda is redoubled as its population at home are kept in the dark as to the mounting casualties, as are the soldiers [Ivans] thanks to the implanted Politruk officers [who report any lack of loyalty back to the increasingly paranoid Stalin].

Norek's narrative is filled with action, detail, pathos, compassion making this book astonishing. It provokes deep thought about humanity [as worthy as that sounds] and the power and resolve of the human spirit when one's back is to the wall. The editing is so judicious that when I put the book down, I shook it vigorously listening for a rattle. There was silence as not a single sentence, word, or superfluous comma could be heard.

In closing, the author provides two epilogues which add context to the proceedings, photographs of the people in the narrative, a detailed bibliography [of references], concise notes and acknowledgments that make one pause, and think.

I learned a great deal, for which I am so very grateful to Oliver Norek in explaining a very crucial part of European history and an exploration of human nature.

I would urge you to seek this book out because when I put the book down I clapped at the skill of the author until my palms became stained red.

MURDER AT THE END OF THE WORLD

by Akane Araki,
translated by Jesse Kirkwood
Pushkin Vertigo, £14.99, July
Rating: A-

This impressive debut by an impossibly young author is constructed as part-Japanese Murder Mystery, and part-Existential Science Fiction Thriller but once combined, it is an addictive and hugely thought-provoking narrative.

The novel opens with Haru, a young woman who is attending the Dazarfu Driving School in regional Japan. Her Driving Instructor is the mysterious Isagawa a former tenacious Police Inspector. The streets of Dazarfu are deserted because World Governments announced ["Black Wednesday"] the discovery of a giant 'Asteroid 2021-NQT' aka 'Telos' heading toward Earth. Scientists calculated the trajectory to impact the city of Fukuoka in the Kyushu region of Japan. Much of South East Asia

will be instantly destroyed, while the rest of the global human population will be subject to mass extinction as billions of tonnes of rock will be displaced into the atmosphere, blocking out the Sun for decades. All Plant and Animal life on [what remains of] Earth will die.

So what [and why] are these two women Haru [the student], and Isagawa [the tutor] engaged in driving lessons in regional small-town Japan, when giant asteroid 'Telos' is headed toward them? Initially there was global unrest, riots, rape, murders, violent disorder and despair leading to epidemics of suicide.

Most of the inhabitants of Japan have fled the asteroid impact epicentre, trying to make it to South America. This mass migration is only postponing their deaths from predicted wars, famine and disease. Haru and her driving instructor Isagawa ignore the rumours of deep underground shelters for elites, and spaceships for the ultra-rich. They focus on avoiding the bodies of those who committed suicide ['dying wild'] on their drives.

There are a few people left; the elderly, the infirm and the altruistic who stay behind to care of those unable to flee, such as remaining Police Officers Ginjima and Inchimora, and the oyster-eat-

ing brothers Akihito and Hikaru. The driving lessons are halted when Haru and Isagawa discover the mutilated body of a woman in the trunk of their training car. Isagawa's former Police instincts come to the surface. It appears the dead woman was Lawyer Mieko Hizumi and the wounds on her body indicate that she was brutally tortured before she was stabbed to death and bundled into the trunk of their training car. .

The bodies of Yuchi Takanash, a high-school dropout, and Jumya Tacinom [a model student] are also discovered with multiple stab-wounds in abandoned cars. Linking the body of the Lawyer [Mieko Hizumi] with the two adolescents, Isagawa concludes that there is a spree-killer operating in the area. But the former Detective asks "*but why commit random murder when the world is ending and everyone will be killed?*"

Haru recalls the names [of the murdered boys] Yuici and Junya from her memory -- they were friends with her estranged [and missing] younger brother Seigo.

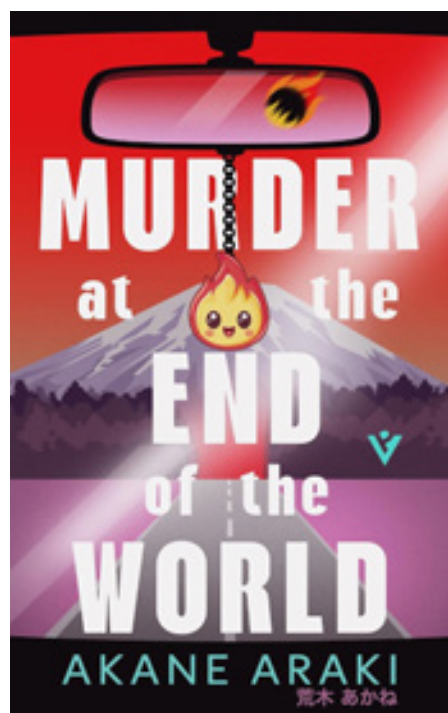
What remains of the Police is complete disinterest in these murders [and the whereabouts of a missing youth] when contrasted against the imminent extinction of humanity.

Araki's novel recalls Ben Winter's **THE LAST POLICEMAN**, fused with the classic Japanese whodunits/whydunnits of Seicho Matsumoto and dystopian fiction of Sam Youd aka John Christopher [**THE DEATH OF GRASS** aka **NO BLADE OF GRASS**.

With no help from the authorities, our duo of Haru and Isagawa find assistance from the Oyster-eating brothers Akihito and Hikaru and from the "*Holdout Villages*" where the last remaining Japanese people shelter in repurposed shopping malls. They discover whispers of a series of hit-and-run murders by an unknown madman termed '*The Taxi Killer*'. Could this automotive *serial-killer* be linked to the *spree-killer* that our duo are hunting?

And what is the significance of Haru's missing brother Seigo?

How random is life and death?



Though the novel doesn't always succeed, the sheer ambition [and originality] from such a young and accomplished writer must be applauded. Though dark, there is subtle humour striated in the narrative which probes the good and bad sides of human nature and the randomness of life and death.

So as the asteroid fast approaches, Haru and Isagawa's investigation gathers pace toward a frantically violent climax. Bravo.

SURFACE

by Olivier Norek

Translated by Nick Castor

Open Borders Press, September

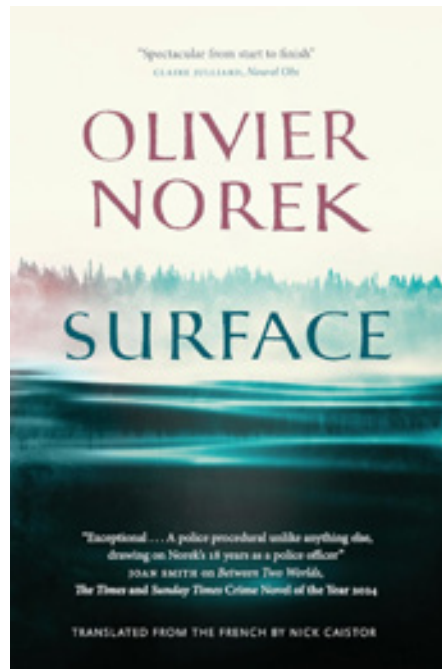
Originally Published / French 2019

Rating: A

Last year we enjoyed publication of the author's historical thriller **THE WINTER WARRIORS** in an English Translation. Thanks again to the legendary British publisher Christopher MacLehose we return to Norek's violently thought-provoking police procedurals with publication of the English Translation of 2019's **SURFACE**.

The novel focuses on the rehabilitation of Police Capitaine Noemie Chastain, an officer with Paris Drug Squad. The opening features a violent raid on a notorious Drug Dealer [Sohan Bizien], who shoots Chastain in the face with a shotgun. Following emergency treatment which saves her life, she has to undergo months of therapy which consists of both facial reconstruction surgery as well as mental therapy with Dr Melchior, a Psychiatrist experienced with the battlefield injured [earned during the Iraq conflict]. During her rehabilitation, she is sent words of encouragement from her junior colleagues Chloe and Jonathon, but her boyfriend [and fellow Drug Squad Detective] Adriel is unable to cope with the 'new' Noemie. Her facial disfigurement is as pronounced as her mental scarring.

Eager to re-join her former Police colleagues in the Paris Drugs Squad, the Director-General however has other ideas. Noemie Chastain has to pass tough re-qualification tests at the Police



gun-range [following her injuries and rehab] before being allowed back into the Paris Drug Squad. Sadly she fails the field-assessment [at the gun range] as she remains haunted by traumatic memories of the shotgun blast that tore into her face and mind. In consequence, the Director-General assigns her to a rural police station Decazeville in the Aveyron region – a backwater. This is ostensibly to aid her recovery but it is also a political manoeuvre by the Director General of the Paris Jurisdiction.

With her failure at the police shooting range, Noemie is forced to accept the 'soft' assignment to Decazeville.

She is met at the train station in the village of Avalone by Lieutenant Romain Valent, and taken to her allocated [rental] house. The small property [and Landrover car] have been offered to the Decazeville Police via the Lieutenant's father – the wealthy landowner and town Mayor Pierre Valant. Noemie is assigned Lieutenant Romain Valent, Gardia de la Paix Soullignac [aka 'Bambi'] and Brigadier Bousquet as direct reports. She is tasked to evaluate police operations in the region which is centred at Decazeville but also has responsibility for Aubin, Cransac, Firmi, Viviez and Avalone which fall under the remit of the National Gendarmerie headed regionally by Commandant

Roze. It seems that the regional police structure is being scrutinised by the National Police [Sûreté Nationale]. Noemie realises her task is to examine the policing covertly, and report back to H.Q. who wish to make 'cut backs' [aka 'cost savings'] due to the sorry state of the regional economy.

Though a sleepy rural backwater, she is immediately confronted by the tragic death of retired [and disabled] local architect who died on his chairlift. It appears that the old man's house suffered a power-cut, and as he lived alone [with few friends], he died, trapped in his chairlift unable to summon help.

Soon, Noemie has to move onto real crimes when the body of a badly decomposed child is discovered in a discarded [and concealed barrel]. The legend [or myth] of the child abducting monster 'The Ogre of Malbouche' from 1899 resurfaces as does memories of a seasonal worker [and alleged paedophile] who abducted three local children and escaped the police over two decades earlier. It seems that this seasonal worker was employed by the Mayor, Pierre Valant.

So much for Decazeville being a rural backwater as Capitaine Noemie Chastain, and her colleagues -- Lieutenant Romain Valent, Patrolman 'Bambi' and Brigadier Bousquet soon have their work cut-out investigating fresh evidence on a cold case. Having the Mayor's son on her team adds an additional problem to Noemie, as it does to the Mayor himself. When DNA testing is undertaken on the decomposed body of the child in the barrel, old feuds resurface from the families of Alex Dorin, Cyril Casteran and Elsa Saulnier – the three children that vanished over two decades ago. Mayor Pierre Valant is concerned with the adverse media attention the region is now experiencing, especially as it jeopardises badly needed inward investment from China. It becomes evident that the Mayor's xenophobia simmers barely beneath his surface charm. He is also reticent in discussing the matter of the alleged paedophile who hid away among his foreign [seasonal] workers twenty years ago -- while the locals whispered tales of

‘The Ogre of Malbouche’.

Like the mental wounds hidden under Noemie’s reconstructed face, and the secrets concealed from view in this small town – Olivier Norek’s eponymous title **SURFACE** -- gives the novel its theme. It is as thought-provoking as it is disturbing because beneath the placid surface of this rural French region lurks horror. Even in the most peaceful of places, historical secrets are hidden beneath the strata of the land.

It often takes an outsider to reveal the fault-lines.

Not to be missed.

THE LOST DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS

by Jack Jewers

Moonflower Publishing, May 2025

Rating: A

In preparation for the release of the highly anticipated **SEETHING LANE** we’d recommend catching up with the author’s precursor which is now available in paperback. The importance of Samuel Pepys’ [1633 – 1703] diary as a historical document [which details a decade in the life of London from the vantage point of a civil servant in the court of King Charles II] cannot be underestimated. Jewers’ provides imaginative context [by penning an exciting fictional adventure] with Samuel Pepys as the main protagonist conjecturing if the infamous diarist had continued scribbling in his notebook, rather than halting after a decade.

The novel opens with ‘Sam’ Pepys becoming separated from his wife Elisabeth when she discovers [and decodes] his concealed diaries. Their marriage was fraught as it oscillated between strong bonds of love, and angry annoyances due to the diarist’s amorous [and lurid] encounters with prostitutes. Elisabeth leaves their East London home to stay with relatives in Devon. Pepys is devastated. Thankfully his work at the Navy Board keeps his mind from the emptiness he feels following his wife’s departure. England has emerged from the English Civil War, financially crippled. War with Holland appears imminent. The King has sent his represen-

tative Sir George Downing to Amsterdam on a diplomatic mission to avert a conflict that England cannot afford, nor win with the royal coffers depleted.

The Duke of Albemarle despatches Samuel Pepys and his loyal assistant Will Hower to Portsmouth to investigate financial irregularities with the Prince Rupert. The English Naval Board had previously sent Elias Thorne to meet with the Governor of Portsmouth [John Maynard] in order to bottom out why so much money has gone missing in refitting the battleship Prince Rupert.

The Naval Agent, Elias Thorne is found murdered in a dangerous Portsmouth backstreet, and his body sexually desecrated. The dead man had left notes and numbers indicating serious fraud of the Naval coffers; at a time that England could ill afford with a War with the Dutch on the horizon.

Staying in the Four Feathers hostelry, Sam Pepys and Will Hower begin their investigation into the naval embezzlement which may be related to the horrific murder of Elias Thorne.

The stage is set for a violent and enthralling murder mystery [and detective adventure], in which neither Pepys nor Hower dare trust any of the other characters that surround them. Goody Brown and Tamsin Lacey who work at the Four Feathers offer whispered

rumours as does the handicapped sailor Tom Wilkin [who sailed on the Prince Rupert]. Another murder with a sexual motive is that of barmaid Piety Brown, which may [or may not] be connected to the investigation.

There are some sections that are tough to read, such as a medical operation on Pepys’ groin, carried out without anaesthetic by Dr Grey. Will Hower and the physician’s surgery assistants tether Pepys to a table, and place a wooden stick in the diarist’s mouth – while Dr Grey makes deep incisions into his groin. It’s a section that requires an accompanying drink to calm the reader’s nerves.

There is pathos as well as several amusing asides, as ‘Sam’ Pepys and Will Hower battle henchmen trying to obstruct their investigation. Though they gain a powerful ally in the shape of the mysterious Charlotte de Vere [with her bodyguard, the ex-pirate ‘Belle’] and ‘Captain’ Jack Gale as their investigation involves sailing covertly to Holland and confronting powerful and dark figures who could benefit from a war with the Dutch.

Rarely has historical fiction become as thrilling as this opening volume of the adventures of Samuel Pepys. The author provokes deep-thought with judiciously researched period detail striated into a truly ‘edge-of-the-seat’ narrative.

With *Seething Lane*’s imminent release, this **THE LOST DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS** is essential packing for the summer escape [or downloading the Gareth Armstrong narrated audiobook].

Wonderful.

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE

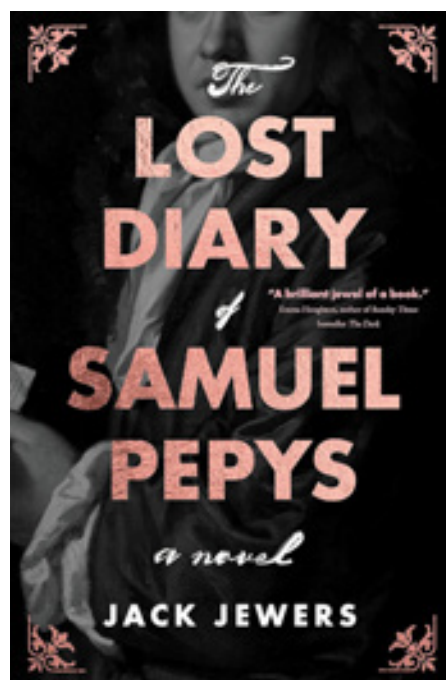
by Peter Swanson

Faber and Faber, £10.00, September

Novella

Rating: A

Swanson returns to the novella format with his latest work, a narrative so judiciously edited that the 150 pages almost turn themselves. Like the author’s previous work, it is an extremely dark narrative cloaked under the writing



style of a cheerfully jolly golden age mystery. Once the climax is reached, the reader feels obligated to return to the beginning, not just to re-examine and reflect upon the path of the story – but to re-live this rare treat a second time and see what was missed on the first reading.

The set-up is deceptively simple. Novelist Nicholas Child is invited to lunch in a swanky New York restaurant by his literary agent Linda Barkin of Barkin Associates. Child has travelled from his Boston home by bus, as he no longer runs a car. He recalls his first lunch with Linda in the lead-up to the sale of his debut novel **DARK AT ITS RISING**, when optimism in his future career fuelled his drinking. Sales had been average, though his sophomore effort [a direct sequel featuring his ‘ghostlike detective’ Adam Noone] **THOUGH NO ONE PURSUES YOU** had received a less than lukewarm reception. His agent had indicated that he should pursue a third work, but was far less enthusiastic than she had been when Nicholas had sold his debut work [as he no longer held a publishing contract]. Child is therefore curious why Linda has called him out of the blue for lunch at the swanky Casa Sacha in New York.

The pretext for the lunch is a curious writing proposal. Linda Barkin explains that she also represents Marco Tavares, a writer whose first two novels examined the lives of New England working-class fisherman from the Portuguese community. They sold average numbers, but Marco’s third novel was a ‘black swan event’ – the international thriller **THE GIRL AT THE DOOR**. It was published as M.A. Tavares as opposed to Marco Tavares [in an attempt by the publisher to distance it from Marco’s earlier work]. **THE GIRL AT THE DOOR** spent over 18 months in the New York Times Top Ten Hardcover Bestseller Chart. However the success appears to have paralysed Marco’s own writing efficacy, as he struggled to complete a follow-up. Linda explains that he had travelled to Italy for inspiration. The plan is that on his return in December he will complete it over the Christmas holiday at his bench-front house Grey



Gables. And Linda’s motive for asking Nicholas to lunch is to suggest that he meet Marco at Grey Gables, and spend the Christmas Holiday assisting him to complete the M.A. Tavares’ third novel which has a working title ‘The Imposter’. Linda offers Child a fee of \$50,000 dollars [half up front, and half after completion of the assignment]. It is made clear that Child is not being hired as ‘ghost-writer’, but an editorial helper who can assist Marco lick ‘The Imposter’ into shape. Linda remarks that Child was chosen personally by Marco, as his literary ‘helper’ because he has warm memories of a writer’s retreat [the ‘Naskeag Colony’] he shared with Nicholas a decade earlier in Maine. Marco’s wife Maeve [nee-Finch] also considered Nicholas Child an ideal choice as her husband’s literary helper. She also indicates that magnificent Grey Gables [the house that **THE GIRL AT THE DOOR** built] will also have several guests joining Nicholas and Marco over the Christmas holiday, as they work on ‘The Imposter’ manuscript.

With Nicholas Child’s acceptance, the stage is set and the guests arrive for this Christmas Murder Mystery.

With festivities in full swing and drink flowing like water - a brutal murder occurs inside Grey Gables, while outside on the beach-front lies another

corpse. The police appear, and an investigation opens, thus closing off the first act in this three-act murder mystery.

Swanson provides a concise character list of the people who stay at Grey Gables which proves most useful because like most ‘locked room’ mysteries dark motives come in [and out] of focus.

Apart from Marco’s family which include his wife Maeve, sister ‘Cat’ [aka Catherine] and Grandmother Louisa – other guests include Marco’s former girlfriend Eve Margolis and her husband Ben, friends Billy Sousa and James Beers as well as Nicholas Child – fellow mystery writer. There’s even a house-cat amusingly named Brigid O’Shaughnessy.

The second and third acts move back and forward in time, and recollections become unreliable at best, or distortions at worst.

Crime and Mystery Books are referenced throughout the novella as classic titles lay on shelves in Marco’s library at Grey Gables as well as from Nicholas’ collection of first editions from his shelves in Boston.

Nicholas remarks after picking up Marcus’ copy of **THE LAST GOOD KISS** by James Crumley “I remember thinking how easy it is to find a hiding place in houses that have lots of books.”

A wonderful narrative, though short in terms of length, it has considerable heft in terms of insight into human conscience and how it affects the lives [and motivations] of people who have morals, and those who lack them.

Whether right or wrong, you’ll be recalling this novella long after you put it down.

Editor’s Note: Why is this column called ...But I Digress? At a recent Bouchercon Ali Karim was the Fan Guest of Honor and I had the distinct privilege of interviewing him. Before the interview started, Ali gave me a whistle and said, “I have a tendency to wander down rabbit holes. If I digress too far from the subject at hand, blow the whistle.” I did blow the whistle twice to great laughter from the audience. To know Ali is to love him.

Digging Into The Global Crime Spree

Craig Sisterson



Kia ora and giddy fellow mystery lovers, I hope that wherever you are you've been having a great season, summer or winter, and that there have been some good books in your life in among everything else. Here in the UK, we're in the midst of not only an unusually hot, dry summer, but a plethora of fantastic crime and thriller writing events. Kicking off with the prestigious CWA Dagger Awards in central London at the beginning of June, then the Capital Crime Festival in London later that month, it's seemed a bit of a non-stop string of cool bookish things going on, from bookshop author talks to festivals huge and small.

Just last weekend I had the pleasure of being a wee part of the brilliant Bute Noir festival that takes place annually in early August in the town of Rothesay on a Scottish island. It was lovely to catch up with authors I've read for a while and hung out with or interviewed many times in the past, along with being introduced to some newer-to-me authors and fresh voices in the crime and thriller genre. It's a fantastic festival in a special location, full of great natural landscapes and plenty of history alongside the crime and thriller fun. I'd highly recommend any crime (fiction) lovers who are ever in the UK in early August to give Bute Noir a try sometime. As a taster, there's a couple of interviews in this issue of *Deadly Pleasures* from authors on the 2026 programme: Staten Island native Ilona Bannister, a literary turned thriller writer, and award-winning Glaswegian crime writer Alan

Parks.

British crime writing festivals have a really cool energy and collegiality, and a slightly different vibe to the literary and arts festivals I experienced in New Zealand and Australia, or the convention-style crime events in North America, like Bouchercon or Left Coast Crime. I'm really looking forward to a couple more events next month, including one of my favourite festivals of any kind in the world, Bloody Scotland, and an exciting new event, the Preston Crime Fiction Festival, in northern England.

Along with seeing a lot of cool British-based authors, I'm excited to catch up with some international authors who are coming over to take part in some of the events, including my fellow Kiwis RWR McDonald, Zoe Rankin, and JP Pomare, and bestselling US author SA Cosby. If you haven't read their books already, then go give them a go. They vary across the crime writing landscape in terms of sub-genre, but are all tremendous, award-winning or listed, storytellers with fresh perspectives.

It's funny, in a lovely way, to think back to the wee kid growing up in small-town New Zealand, decades ago, who loved mysteries and thrillers (along with fantasy and other stories), and who now as a hobby or side gig gets to interact with some amazing crime and thriller storytellers from all over the world; interviewing them onstage or off, and sometimes even putting together some of their stories into anthologies like the *Dark Deeds Down Under* books – I'm currently putting the near-finishing

touches on the third and latest edition, though like many of the authors I've interviewed, I'm a touch behind schedule. How cool is reading? Not only is it entertaining, but it's good for us.

Life can be more than hectic nowadays, but like a good walk in nature, I always find that reading (novels not social media scrolling) calms my mind and soul. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

So wherever you are and whatever you're doing, I wish you happy reading, and a calmer mind, during these summer months. Enough from me for now, let's dive into some interviews and reviews.

An Interview with Ilona Bannister

Born and raised on Staten Island, New York, Ilona Bannister is the author of three novels, including her new thriller **FIVE**, which is an Amazon Best Books of 2026 So Far Pick. Ilona worked as an attorney in the USA and as a solicitor in the UK before writing her first novel, **WHEN I RAN AWAY** (2021), which was longlisted for the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. Her experiences as a mother, lawyer, and American transplant in Britain are reflected in her novels. Although she will always be a New Yorker at heart, Ilona now lives in London with her British husband and growing sons. Following her recent "Thrillers and Killers" panel alongside Gavin Bell, Ajay Chowdhury, and Colin

Sinclair at the Bute Noir festival in Scotland, we talked about her work and writing journey.

Given you'd previously published a couple of novels that would be considered literary fiction, what was the inspiration for what became *Five*, your somewhat 'accidental thriller'?

Yes, accidental thriller I think is the right way to put it. I was looking for a new idea. I brought a completely different idea to my agent about delivery people who deliver packages purposely to the wrong people on the same road, and insinuating conflict, but she hated that idea, so she told me I needed to figure something else out. I was on the bus on the way back from that meeting, pretty dejected. But the great thing about being on a London bus or that kind of transport in any big city, is that you are surrounded by people, and it occurred to me that if I lined up everyone on the bus and asked them their life story, it would be much better than any fiction I could write. The things that people carry and what they've survived and what they've done and seen and been through is so much more interesting than you imagine, or than you could think when you're just sitting next to them on a bus. And that same week there was a very tragic accident near my home. It was in the back of my mind because it was very sad. During the morning rush hour, a cyclist was killed on impact at an intersection that I crossed all the time. It was really moving to me because I knew the street the person was on, the pub that they had passed, the school that they had passed, a tree they had passed, and I could envision what they were looking at during their last five minutes, not knowing that was it for them. Suddenly on the bus those two things came together – it was a lightning bolt moment, and I've never had one of those before, where two things clicked together. I thought, oh, that's it, it's five people waiting for a train, and in five minutes one will die. I emailed that to my agent, I think the same day, and she was like 'go for it'.

When did you realise you were writing a thriller, a new genre or style for you, and did you have to do anything differently in terms of the way you wrote, whether from a process standpoint, or mindset or perspective? Were there things you had to change from writing your previous books, or was it similar, just perhaps playing in a darker area?

No, I had a handle on the darkness because I think that was something that was a throughline in my previous two books, but what I needed to learn about writing *Five* was the suspense and how to tell a story that has history to it. How to hold things back, how to lay breadcrumbs. How to do these things which so many of our big thriller writers do so well. So that was something I hadn't done before. I really had to listen and learn how to do that because it was an element to my stories I had never really had before, and I needed to do a lot of research to figure out my style and my way of storytelling and how do I do it, from a thriller perspective.

Now you're sitting here at Bute Noir, a fantastic crime writing festival on a Scottish island, having today been part of a cool 'Thrillers and Killers' panel onstage. What's it like for you being welcomed into the UK crime and thriller community, being embraced as

a thriller writer now?

This has been such a lovely surprise for me in entering this world because what I didn't know with my previous work, I didn't really understand about sort of genre communities because in literary fiction things are much more amorphous and it's much harder to sort of find your people. Here in this world readers have been very, very generous with me because even though *Five* is not a sort of traditional thriller, they have been very open to me telling this story a bit differently, and they have welcomed it. Crime and thriller readers are so enthusiastic and engaged. And these sorts of events, Bute Noir and the other festivals, the level of excitement, the attendance, the enthusiasm that readers have, I hadn't experienced that before. It's just been really delightful to see. It's funny to say, like, there's so much joy at a crime fiction festival. It's really, it's really lovely. Like the joy of reading and the joy of writing is really celebrated at those festivals [focused on books about dark material].

You shared a story onstage about having five very different characters in the book, that you wanted readers to empathise in some ways but also judge them – as humans do – and consider who they think deserves or doesn't deserve certain things to happen. But you had to change one character in the writing process. Do you want to share that story with *Deadly Pleasures* readers?

Yes, so we've got five characters in my latest book: we've got the child, the mother, the businessperson, the old woman, and the gambler. Mrs Worth is the old woman, she's 78, she's a forensic pathologist who had an amazing pioneering career as one of the only women in her field in the 1970s, and she's a very accomplished woman. Also, she's very prickly, very difficult, cantankerous. She's hard to love in the beginning. But she started as an entirely different character, called Sister Bernadette, who was a nun of the same age. I had an older woman in mind, and Sister Bernadette was a rebel nun who



Ilona Bannister

was part of a convent that had the first underground domestic violence shelter for women in the UK. Her story was one of protecting women at a time when there were no laws to protect them from violence. And I loved Sister Bernadette. I spent a huge amount of time researching life in the convent and things that nuns wore in the 1940s and all of all of this detail I went into, but unfortunately, because a lot of her story happened postwar, it was a bit too far in the past to be relevant and to keep us in the present with our five people on the platform. So my agent made the right call in telling me to let her go, but then I had to find a replacement. And Mrs Worth and her very dark story and past is what came through. In the end, that was absolutely embraced, and readers have really warmed to her, which I appreciate.

Five is out now in the USA, \$28 in hardcover, published in May by Crown Publishing Group.

Reviews of recent reads

THE MAKOTO MURDERS

by Richard Jerram

Titan, \$18.99 USD, 21 July 2026

Rating: B+

Japanese crime fiction is going through something of a boom, globally, with foreign readers, publishers, and booksellers all now picking up on the rich heritage and fantastic mystery and thriller stories that have been produced by Japanese authors dating back for more than a century. From Seichi Yokomizo, a contemporary of Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh, to modern authors like Keigo Higashino and Youtuber turned global phenomenon Uketsu, translations are now flowing fast.

Into that realm steps Richard Jerram, who lived in Japan and Singapore for more than twenty years, is a fluent Japanese speaker but requires no translation, and won the CWA Debut Dagger for the unpublished manuscript that became this fascinating debut Tokyo

Noir, **THE MAKOTO MURDERS**.

Half-Japanese, half-British photo-journalist Ken Kato is working for a low-brow weekly magazine in Tokyo. Four years after he won fame (and a big award) for his image of a young boy who drowned in the 2011 tsunami, his career is circling the drain, and at risk of going the way of his marriage. Desperate to regain success and recognition, he realises that being first-on-the-scene to photograph a murder, before the police even arrive, could provide the kind of career jolt he needs. Attention-grabbing images that put his newspaper front and centre; a sensation in a society unused to murders. More importantly, triple the sales figures. A happy(ish) boss, Kato's career saved. So what if a person or two needs to be sacrificed along the way. He could even impress his colleague Hayashi's estranged wife Makoto, who he's obsessed with after a brief affair. Or perhaps she'd be fearful, and turn to Kato for support. Especially since the growing number of victims share her name.

A pitch-black crime satire that would be all-too-easy to compare to Dexter, **THE MAKOTO MURDERS** in fact probably veers more towards the likes of American Psycho. Like that tale, it skewers the society it portrays, causing readers to examine what we've become obsessed with ourselves as a society, even as Kato follows his own unhinged path. How heavy does ambition weigh? Why are so many people obsessed with true crime, with images of real violence against real victims?

THE MAKOTO MURDERS is a compelling read on many levels, from its traversing of Tokyo as Kato seeks out his victims and sets up his alibis, to the lingering, perhaps discomforting, questions it asks us. A page-turning thriller where readers may find themselves egging on the villainous protagonist, or at least strapping themselves in for a bumpy ride. Jerram deftly unveils some of the byways and backstreets of Tokyo, as Kato tries to do his job and stay a step or two ahead of the police.

THE BURNING GROUNDS



by Abir Mukherjee
Pegasus Books, \$28.95 USD
November 2025,

Rating: A-

After scooping many accolades for his contemporary standalone *Hunted* – notably both the 2025 Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year and 2025 British Book Crime & Thriller of the Year – Scottish-Bengali scribe Abir Mukherjee makes a welcome return in **THE BURNING GROUNDS** to his ancestral homeland and the historical mysteries where he first made his name, with this terrific sixth tale in 1920s India-set series starring Sam Wyndham and Surendranath 'Surrender-not' Banerjee.

Mukherjee does an exquisite job transporting readers through space and time, soaking us in the atmosphere – the place, people, and politics – at a time the British Raj was still in control but in decline, and India was moving towards independence. You can almost smell the smoke from the burning ghats and feel sweat trickling as we traverse Calcutta (now Kolkata) and beyond with Sam and Surrender-not, the duo that give this historical series plenty of heart among the mysteries.

In **THE BURNING GROUNDS**, both men are still recovering from the

events and fallout from the previous book, **THE SHADOWS OF MEN**, which saw Banerjee, a Sergeant who works with Captain Sam Wyndham in the Imperial CID, framed for murder, imprisoned, and accused of terrorism.

It's an uneasy reunion, a few years later, as cases and dangerous circumstances bring the former friends back into each other's orbits. But can they trust each other, after all that has happened?

At a time when the country seems on the brink of tearing itself to pieces, and they're each roiling through their own self-sabotaging or self-destructive tendencies, two puzzling cases offer some salve. In **THE BURNING GROUNDS**, Mukherjee crafts a very good mystery tale that is enriched by his great touch for character and setting. There's plenty of intriguing historic details and perspectives to please history buffs, but not too many where they overwhelm or stall the plot.

THE BURNING GROUNDS is a propulsive tale that will have pages whirring, but it doesn't feel 'thin'; there's a nice mix of depth and detail, of humanity and whodunnit.

Overall, this is a very good read that will likely please newer readers to the series, while also delivering plenty for long-time fans. Mukherjee has shown with **HUNTED** that he also has a good touch for contemporary tales, but hopefully there's still plenty of mileage left in the investigations and adventures of Sam and 'Surrender-not'. Recommended.

THE SECRETS WE HIDE

by Karin Slaughter

HarperCollins, \$32 USD, August

Rating: A

Bestselling thriller author Karin Slaughter has been intriguing, entertaining, and terrifying readers around the world for 25 years now, since her excellent 2001 debut **BLINDSIGHTED**, the first of her popular 'Grant County' series. Multiple terrific series, adaptations for screen, awards and acclaim, and superb standalones like **COP TOWN**; Slaughter is a modern-day

titan of thriller writing.

Last year, Slaughter embarked on a new series set in North Falls, a fictional, suffocatingly tight-knit small town in South Georgia, her home state. **WE ARE ALL GUILTY HERE** was short-listed for the prestigious CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger, for best thriller, earlier this year, and now we have the much-anticipated follow-up. **THE SECRETS WE HIDE** opens on the day acting Sheriff Emmy Clifton and her surviving siblings bury their mother Myrna. Surrounded by relatives; the Clifton family is local royalty. The county is named after Emmy's family. A nearby interchange has been recently renamed for their father Gerald Clifton, the longtime Sheriff recently killed in the line of duty. It's been a traumatic time for Emmy, stepping into Gerald's shoes and dealing with the tail end of Myrna's lengthy spiral through dementia, alongside the surprise arrival of Jude, a long-lost black sheep of the family who'd grown from teenage wildcat to legendary FBI Agent over her 40-year absence.

An emotional day escalates when Emmy, Jude, and Emmy's son Cole – a deputy in the Sheriff's department – stumble across a 'shots fired' situation following the funeral. A wealthy neighbourhood, a dead woman shot in the chest and her daughter shot in the head, barely alive. A home invasion gone wrong? Or something even more sinister? Emmy knows the dead mother, an ex-cop in an abusive relationship, who'd been cheating with another cop. Two aggressive men top the suspect list. Too much testosterone, and far too much local politics.

Slaughter keeps the revs high while also delivering plenty of oomph when it comes to character and place. **THE SECRETS WE HIDE** is another masterful thriller, laced with nuanced, messily human characters among the galloping pace, nice touch for place, and plenty of mystery and intrigue. No stark white hats and black hats here; just many shades of smudged grey. Excellent.

COOL MACHINE

by Colson Whitehead

Knopf Doubleday, \$30 USD, 21 July

Rating: A

Crime fiction is the modern social novel, they say – and by 'they' I mean legendary writers such as Dennis Lehane, Val McDermid, Sir Ian Rankin, and many others – thanks to its ability scrutinise all levels of society, and delve into important issues through the prism of a page-turning story.

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Colson Whitehead certainly does that with his 'Harlem Trilogy', which comes to a vivid, stirring conclusion with **COOL MACHINE**. Like its predecessors **HARLEM SHUFFLE** (2021) and **CROOK MANIFESTO** (2023), Whitehead's latest crime thriller centres on successful furniture store owner (and part-time fence) Ray Carney, and evokes a particular period in New York City through a triptych structure; three episodic shorter tales making up each novel.

This time around the events and misadventures occur during the Reagan era 1980s, leading up to 'Greed is good' and the 1987 Wall Street crash. 1981: Ray has been named Sterling Furniture's dealer of the month, but gambles on a final heist when banks won't give his wife Elizabeth a loan for her new business. 1983: Ray's pal Pepper takes a bodyguard gig as a favour to Elizabeth. 1986: twenty years after his cousin Freddie died, Ray risks everything to try to save Freddie's son from being framed for the murder of a lawyer. Ray and his pals capers are ramped up from past lo-fi affairs, matching the 'bigger is better' fallacies of the era.

Skittering along on Whitehead's kinetic prose, and full of memorable characters and incisive social observation, **COOL MACHINE** is a triumph. Like a modern take on Chester Himes, Whitehead's trilogy soaks readers in Harlem, and this fine finale sticks the landing on a remarkable trilogy that's immersed readers in the changing face of New York City, from the late 1950s through the mid-1980s. Highly recommended.

Down Under Crime



Jeff Popple Reviews

FOR ALL THE DEAD GIRLS

by Sherryl Clark

Harper Collins, \$A32.99

Rating: A-

Australian/New Zealand author Sherryl Clark has been steadily improving over her first four books and her latest, **FOR ALL THE DEAD GIRLS**, is her strongest and most gripping novel to date.

FOR ALL THE DEAD GIRLS is the second entry in her series about ex-cop turned PI, Lou Alcott. Still recovering from the trauma of her last case, Lou is asked to help with the extraction of a woman and her son from a dangerous domestic situation. She gets the pair out, with some difficulty, but then finds herself the target of a mysterious dark-web, misogynist, hate group. As the violence escalates around her, and others involved in the rescuing of women from domestic abuse, Lou and her firm desperately try to find the person behind the killings.

This is a well-paced crime novel with enough twists to keep it interesting. Lou is a well-developed, and likeable, character, who has believable grit to her. The other characters are also credible and Lou's unusual family situation, her father is a senior cop and her grandfather a well-known criminal figure, adds to the interest and tension.

Timely themes around gendered violence and internet misogyny are prominent, but do not overwhelm the story. Sherryl also effectively gives voice to growing concerns in Australia about the rise of far right groups and the hate they bring. All the themes are nicely woven into a good story that maintains interest throughout.

After some good build-up, the book quickly powers to a gripping ending, and an unexpected revelation. A first class crime novel, but not one for the faint-hearted.

RED LAKE

by Jason Summers
Macmillan, \$A34.99

Rating: B

RED LAKE certainly hits all the tropes of recent Australian outback crime fiction: a female police detective returning to her small rural hometown, a cold case affecting her and her family, local secrets, murder and a stunning evocative cover.

Former Sydney Homicide Detective Sergeant Harper Quinn has returned to her sleepy hometown of Koorinda in the state's Riverina area in search of a quieter life. It is going relatively smoothly, until Harper learns that the town's

now dilapidated waterpark is being reopened, on the shores of its famous Red Lake. The park holds a special place for Harper and her family, as it was where her little brother vanished into thin air 30 years ago. She is further shocked when a body is found at the park and suddenly Quinn finds her family back in the spotlight again.

RED LAKE is a smoothly written crime novel that steadily moves through its paces. Summers keeps the reader on edge throughout, initially through the identity of the murder victim, and then with some well-orchestrated twists. The small town background is also nicely evoked, and the ending produces the requisite surprises and tension.

In all, **RED LAKE** is a solid, enjoyable crime tale. It does not break any new ground, but is competently told and quite entertaining.

DEVIL MOUNTAIN

by Inessa Jackson
Affirm, \$A34.99

Rating: B

A grisly murder and a hint of the supernatural effectively combine in Inessa Jackson's debut novel, **DEVIL MOUNTAIN**, to produce an engaging crime tale.

Detective Sergeant Anastasia Brown is given the opportunity to escape from a poisonous work situation in the Sydney Homicide Unit, when grisly remains are discovered in a small rural town on the New South Wales Central Coast. The body of a popular doctor has been found at the foot of a local mountain, chained and burned, with arcane symbols carved into the soles of his feet. Adding to the drama, the schoolboy who stumbled on the remains swears that he saw a ghost lingering in the trees. Locals believe



that the mountain is haunted, and the activities of an elusive Wiccan coven who regularly worship there also adds to the location's spooky reputation.

Juggling rumours of ghosts and witches with a town full of suspects, and dangers from her past, Ana has to tread a fine line to find the killer, and a missing girl, before the mountain claims another victim.

DEVIL MOUNTAIN proceeds at a good pace, and there are some decent twists and turns to keep the reader engaged. The mild supernatural elements add a bit of interest and there is the regulatory low-key romance lurking in the background. The policing and pathology details strain credibility, but the geography of the small town locale is effectively conveyed. The characters and suspects are the usual small town mix, and Inessa sensitively touches on recent popular topics around sexual harassment, misogyny, and the pressures of small town life, especially for doctors.

DEVIL MOUNTAIN is a fun read that builds to a surprising revelation, and a tense conclusion.

THE WRECK

by Riley James

Allen & Unwin, \$A34.99

Rating: B+

Riley James' first novel, **THE CHILLING**, was a gripping Antarctic thriller that made the most of its inhospitable terrain. Now with **THE WRECK** she continues her panache for cold, unwelcoming locations and mounting tension.

In September 1977, a young pilot named Donovan 'Van' Spector vanishes over Australia's dangerous Bass Strait after a chilling radio transmission: 'A large aircraft seems to be flying above me ... it's colossal ... it's soaring down.' Twenty years later, a rumour surfaces that Spector's plane wreck has been sighted on a remote island in the notorious 'Bermuda Triangle of the South'. A group of researchers sets sail to uncover the truth. On board are Teo Young, an ambitious PhD student chasing a lead, and Hannah Buttery, a UFO enthusiast with an agenda of her



own. After a storm leaves them stranded on the island, with the rest of their party missing, Teo and Hannah are left facing a terrifying reality. Their lives are in danger. No one is coming to their rescue. And a sinister presence is lurking in the shadows.

THE WRECK is a gripping survivalist thriller, with a lingering sense of mystery at its core. The events of 1977 and 1997 are told through a series of shifting viewpoints, with transcripts from a 2017 podcast on "*The Bermuda Triangle Of The South*" providing the broader context in which the two disappearances occurred. It is an unusual approach, but Riley handles it quite well and the story powers along at a decent pace.

The descriptions of the harsh island are very evocative, and Riley certainly makes you feel the cold and the desolation. The shipwreck leading to the stranding of Teo, Hannah and the others is particularly vividly told, and will have you keenly turning the pages to see what happens.

Once on the island, Riley skilfully shifts the telling between the three main characters and different timelines to good effect, and for a long time she keeps you guessing as to what is going on. The suspense builds steadily throughout the book, and some grue-

some scenes keep the tension at a high point. The excitement falters a little at the end, but the final revelation is a good payoff.

Adding to the enjoyment are a good cast of nuanced, interesting characters that avoid the usual stereotypes. The mysterious Malin is particularly well drawn, and Riley manages to make her both scary and sadly pathetic.

THE WRECK is a good, original crime thriller that makes a nice change from the usual Australian small town mystery. Warmly recommended.

DYING DAYS

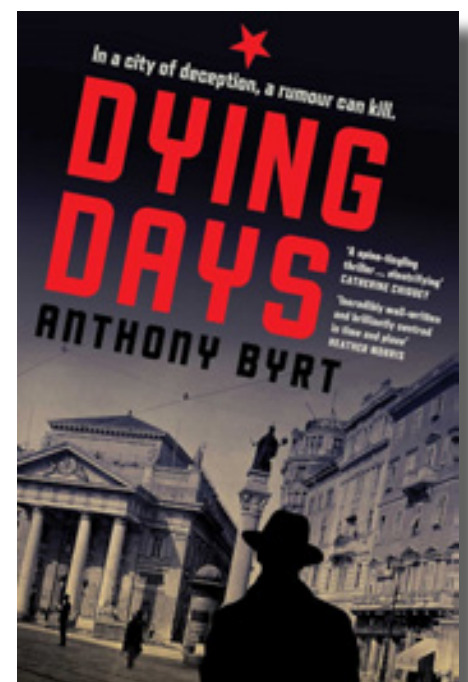
by Anthony Byrt

Affirm Press, \$A34.99.

Rating: A-

Anthony Byrt's debut spy novel **DYING DAYS** is a very impressive historical thriller that centres around a little explored episode towards the end of the Second World War.

After months of hard fighting, Allied forces make it to the Italian city of Trieste in May 1945, a day after Marshal Tito's Yugoslav Army arrive. A tense stand-off ensues in the city, as the Allied forces, mainly New Zealanders, have to watch Tito's forces deal with suspected Fascist sympathisers and install their own political leaders. The Allies are



reluctant to get involved in another European conflict, but tensions reach breaking point when some New Zealand soldiers also disappear, potentially the victims of Tito's clean-up. A British MI6 agent and a New Zealand intelligence officer are charged with sorting the problem, and have to deal with a dangerous web of lies and corruption involving the local community and the various political interests.

DYING DAYS is a very well written spy novel that impresses with its vivid descriptions and unintrusive historical detail. The characters are well limned and interesting, especially the British agent known as Alex Madigan, and all behave in a believable manner. Byrt also nicely conveys the varying perspectives of the locals and the tiredness of the New Zealand troops who just want to get home.

The story moves along at a decent pace, although there are some slow patches, and the plot is very credible. Some well-crafted episodes push the story along in an intriguing manner and the flashes of violence generate the necessary excitement. The story is book-ended by a short prologue which sets the scene, without having much to do with the subsequent plot, and a very good epilogue which surprises and wraps up the story nicely. There is also an interesting Afterword by Byrt in which explains his connection to the story.

DYING DAYS is one of the best debuts I have read this year. Original and very atmospheric, it is a strongly recommended read for aficionados of serious spy fiction.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

FOR ALL THE DEAD GIRLS

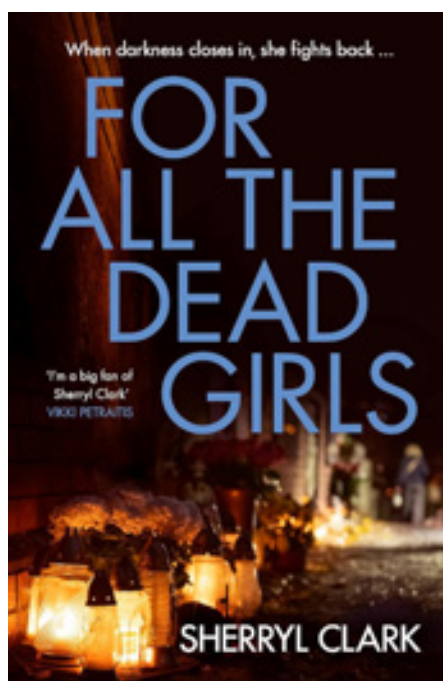
by Sherryl Clark

HarperCollins AU, \$32.99 AUD,

30 June 2026

Rating: A-

After scooping NZ Booklovers and Ngaio Marsh Awards shortlistings for **WOMAN MISSING**, her first novel starring ex-Melbourne police constable turned private eye Lou Alcott, highly



experienced Northland author Sherryl Clark has brought back her tough and gutsy heroine for another go round in fast-paced crime thriller *For All the Dead Girls*. Clark has previously written a CWA Dagger shortlisted series starring Judi Westerholme, along with poetry and dozens of children's books.

Picking up after events of **WOMAN MISSING**, this new tale sees Lou getting an unexpected offer to return to the Victoria Police from her begrudging father, the Assistant Commissioner. Meanwhile, Lou's worried about her grandfather Hamish, a notorious local crime boss. Her workload at Paul Marshall Investigations includes a search for a missing man who's meant to receive a sizeable bequest from a Scottish uncle. That hits unexpectedly close to home, but it's another case her boss Paul gives her that turns the danger levels to extreme.

Several hours drive to rural NSW to extract a woman, Jasmine, and her child from a violent relationship. Only to arrive back at a safe house to find a worryingly open door, a piece of paper with the letters SYB in red, and the bodies of two dead women. That's (horrifyingly) bad; it gets worse. The murders of more women are connected to SYB, a dark web hate group, who start to target Lou.

Clark is unafraid to delve into the

darkness. Violence against women has been a controversial topic in crime writing at times, but here Clark -- akin to international giants like Val McDermid, Denise Mina, or Karin Slaughter -- gives readers a stark understanding of its pervasive horrors, without ever seeming gratuitous. **FOR ALL THE DEAD GIRLS** is a very good read in a very promising series.

THE BODY AND THE BLOOD

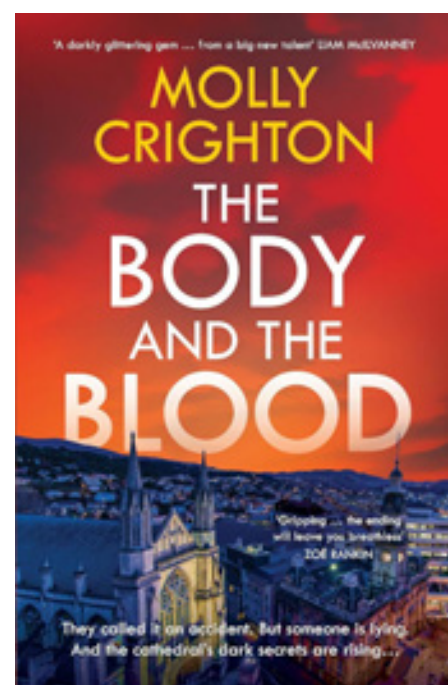
by Molly Crichton

Moa Press, \$36.99 NZD, 25 August

Rating: A

Emerging from award-winning author and professor Liam McIlvanney's (**THE QUAKER**, **THE GOOD FATHER**, etc.) Otago University classes on crime writing, Molly Crichton hits the ground running with her own debut mystery, an atmospheric, propulsive tale where an unlikely investigative duo dig into the 'accidental' death of an elderly organist at St Paul's Cathedral in the heart of Dunedin, one of the world's southernmost cities, and one of the most Scottish places outside of Scotland.

On first glance, **THE BODY AND THE BLOOD** could seem a very on-the-nose or generic title for a crime novel, but like a hint of what's to come, there's layers. Crichton's first effort scurries





along while offering plenty to chew on in terms of character, place, and themes.

Ivo Hart works for the Dunedin police force, but his responsibilities are slim. Administrative support, taking notes in meetings, filing. Even less than before, given a colossal mistake last year that still haunts Ivo, a socially awkward young man who sees the world in a different way to most. When small details don't quite sit right with Ivo when he's asked to minute a meeting where organist Sybil Marsden's death is classified as accidental, it niggles at him to the point he reaches out to Halia Knox, a reclusive ex-journo whose bull-in-a-china-shop style is completely the opposite of Ivo's personality, and led to her career imploding years ago. Together the mismatched duo set about digging into the circumstances of Sybil's death while trying not to get Ivo fired. Or worse.

Crichton shows she's a quick study, delivering a terrific first crime novel that feels fresh and invigorating while delivering plenty that long-time fans of the genre will enjoy. *The Body and the Blood* is a fascinating tale about who gets justice and who gets blame (or is absolved). About who is 'seen'. Richly descriptive, quirky, with some lovely turns of phrase, **THE BODY AND THE BLOOD** takes us into various corners and crannies of Dunedin, from the central Cathedral to a homeless man's patch in an abandoned building to the less-explored Quarantine Island. Highly

recommended.

EVERY TIME SHE WAKES

by Petronella McGovern

Allen & Unwin, \$34.99 AUD, 30 June

Rating: A-

A strong newer voice in Australian crime writing that's emerged in the past few years, Petronella McGovern first grabbed attention with her parental nightmares 2019 thriller, **SIX MINUTES**, where a young, where a young child vanishes from a play group. Across her growing oeuvre since, McGovern has continued to focus on everyday characters caught in horrifying situations, but with this fifth and latest novel she brings an unusual, genre-blending twist.

Suze Vitale is under a lot of stress: bushfires are approaching her family home, her parents are pushing her to resign from her job as a careers counsellor, a journalist is digging for dirt on a wealthy media personality, and Suze fears her own past links to the 'shock jock' radio presenter could erupt at any point, upturning her life. Then while being evacuated during a bushfire emergency, Suze realises her family are being kidnapped, only for the van to crash and her to wake up two weeks back in time. Was the past fortnight, the kidnapping, and crash all just a horrifying dream? But then events start to repeat, only for Suze to wake, again and again, in slight-

ly different versions of her life. Could it be stress-related psychosis? A brain tumour? Running out of time to save her family and regain her 'true life', Suze must discover why it's happening and who's behind the damaging events.

In lesser hands, the time-slip element in **EVERY TIME SHE WAKES** could easily face-plant, but McGovern has a nice touch, and does a terrific job weaving it into her character-centric storyline. With themes of what matters most in life, and the power of our own (in)decisions, this is a cracking good thriller that will have readers whirring pages and leave you with plenty to think about.

Sliding Doors meets Liane Moriarty, perhaps? An absorbing read.

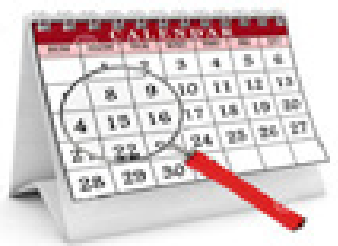
Cooper & Fry

Cooper & Fry is a new British TV series based on the police detective novels of two-time Barry Award winner Stephen Booth. You can now find the 8-episode series on Britbox in the U.S.

Set in and around England's picturesque Peak District, the series follows Cooper, who is struggling to emerge from the shadow of his late father, while Fry is an outsider fleeing tragedies in her past. Together, they tackle grisly crimes in the remote countryside.



DP Calendar



ly Bestler (Publisher), Oline Cogdill
(Review Columnist)
Website: Thrillerfest.com



April 1-4, 2027
Left Coast Crime
The Big Chile Rides Again!
Santa Fe, New Mexico
Guests of Honor: Craig Johnson,
Lee Goldberg, Gigi Pandian and
Wendall Thomas
Website: leftcoastcrime.org

May 28-May 30, 2027
Capital Crime
London, England
Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: www.capitalcrime.org

September 18-20, 2026
Bloody Scotland
Stirling, Scotland
Guest of Honor: Denise Mina
Website: bloodyscotland.com



April 9 - 11, 2027
Malice Domestic 39
Bethesda, Maryland
Guests of Honor: Leslie Budewitz,
Mary Kay Andrews, Mia P. Manan-
sala, Jeffrey Marks, Janet Powell &
Remembering Anne Perry
Website: www.malicedomestic.net

Date Unknown -- TBA
Theakston Old Peculier
Crime Festival
Harrowgate, England
Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: harrowgateinternational-festivals.com

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



April 27 - May 1, 2027
ThrillerFest XXII
New York Midtown Hilton
Guests of Honor: Michael Connelly,
Karin Slaughter, Lisa Jewell, Mark
Greaney, Isabella Maldonado, Emi-

September 1-5, 2027
Bouchercon 2027
Washington, D. C.
Guests of Honor: S. A. Cosby, Mar-
tin Edwards, Laura Joh Rowland,
Laura Lippman, George Pelecanos,
Barbara Neely, Art Taylor
Website: bouchercon2027.com



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CROSS BORDER GUEST: KATHY REICHS

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



BOUCHERCON
WORLD MYSTERY CONVENTION

What's New In the U.K.



THE KILLER'S MARK by M. W. Craven (Little, Brown, August). When Vice Admiral Boyer, RN (retd) died without leaving a will, his estranged daughter inherited his - not inconsiderable - estate. Called home to sort through his belongings, she found an AegisBox - a tamper proof safe within a safe designed to self-destruct if anyone without the code attempts to open it. Faced with the choice of walking away or opening it, she opted for knowledge over silence and uncovered something so horrifying it launched the biggest investigation in the National Crime Agency's history. Five years later, Washington Poe is unwittingly, and unwillingly, sucked into its gravity well... Finally able to escape the authority they once railed against, Washington Poe and Tilly Bradshaw are enjoying their new jobs as private detectives or - as the sign on their door says - 'Gumshoes for Hire'.

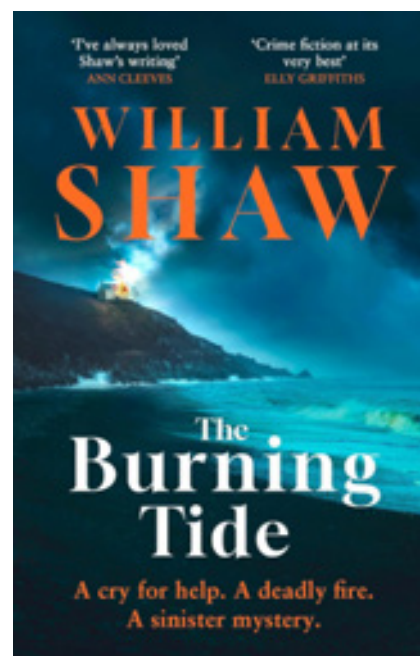
When a teenage girl walks into their office, looking for the mother she has long believed to be dead, they agree to take the case. As Poe and Tilly investigate the girl's claims, they find themselves drawn into a murky world of trafficking, pornography and prostitution.

ONE OF US IS GUILTY, Steve Cavanagh (Headline, July). A perfect couple. But one of them is a killer. Which one? Patrick Vanderpool, son of a billionaire media mogul, is destined for power. But the affair he's having could ruin everything. Vanessa Vanderpool, married to one of America's most influential men, has her own ambitions. But the affair he's having could ruin everything. When the other woman is found brutally murdered, there are only two suspects... One of them is guilty. But which one? Conman-turned-defence lawyer Eddie Flynn must risk his life to find out.

DEATH WRIT LARGE, Susie Dent (Zaffre, August). When mysterious symbols appear as graffiti around Oxford, lexicographer Martha Thornhill recognises them from an alphabet created by a deceased writer whose papers she once worked on. But this is no publicity stunt, and tensions intensify when further graffiti is found near the body of a university lecturer. Martha is not the only one to have doubts when the suspicious death is assumed by police to be a suicide. Called upon to lend their linguistic expertise to the case, she and her colleagues begin to unearth a tragedy that extends beyond the ancient walls of the university. As new messages portend more death, it's clear that a spirit of vengeance is stalking the city's streets, and may be reaching out towards them too.

HIDE AND SEEK, Chris Carter (Simon & Schuster U.K., July). Sam Stewart has escaped her abusive husband. She has taken him to court. She has watched him sent to prison. But Nelson Stewart leaves her with one chilling promise: He will come for her. No matter how long it takes.

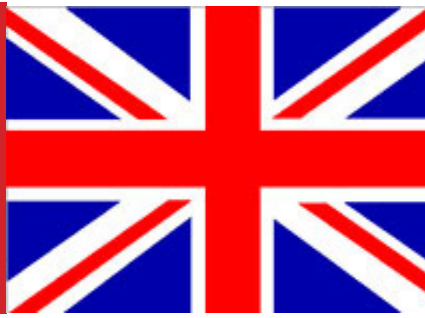
Given a new name and a new identity, Sam becomes Mary Smith and starts again. But Mary knows Nelson. She knows what he is capable of. And she knows that prison might not be enough to keep him away.



THE BURNING TIDE, William Shaw (HarperCollins, July). A scorching summer. Down in the seaside town of Teignmouth, ex-Met detective Eden Driscoll grows restless after a long summer caring for his nine-year-old nephew. A desperate plea. When a man knocks at Eden's door desperate for help, claiming someone is trying to kill him, Eden jumps at the chance to solve a mystery. But before he can ask more questions, the stranger disappears. A deadly fire. The cry for help came too late - that same night a house along the coast is burnt to the ground, and a man's remains are discovered among the rubble. In the days after, Eden's curiosity only grows. He soon finds himself investigating, and begins to uncover a web of deception, jealousy and corruption.



U.K. Reviews



Jeff Popple Reviews

EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY

by Jane Casey

Hemlock Press August, £16.99

Rating: B+

Jane Casey's latest novel, **EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY**, is a twisty feast of a mystery.

A woman is found in bloodstained clothes on the lonely Irish coast of County Mayo. At first, she won't speak, but eventually with prompting from a detective she offer a name: Ruth. She then starts to tell the detectives sent to interview her a story about her missing friend, Maura. Ruth says she and Maura were staying in a clifftop house together. However, the police can find no trace of Maura and no real proof that ever existed. There is only a pool of blood, that does not appear to belong to Ruth.

Switching back and forth between Ruth's changing story and the police investigation, the story weaves its way through mysteries and surprises to an unexpected outcome. It would be a crime to reveal any more about the plot, other than to say that Jane constantly keeps the reader on edge as different aspects to the story are revealed. There is also one jaw dropping shock about two thirds in.

EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY is a very tightly plotted mystery that dazzles with its twists. It does, however, feel very contrived and the pacing is a little slow at times. The manner in which the police handle the initial investigation seems unlikely, but it enables Jane to set up the emotional tension at the centre of the story.

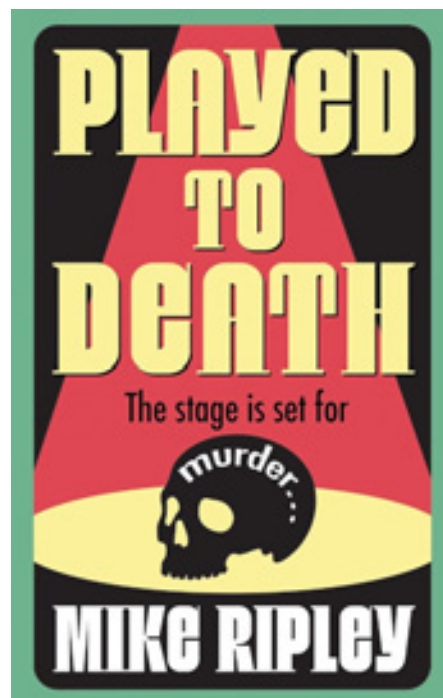
The story is well supported by an interesting batch of well crafted characters, particularly some of the supporting ones, and the outcome is surprising and satisfying. In all, a very enjoyable read.

PLAYED TO DEATH

by Mike Ripley

Severn House, £21.99

Rating: A



Last year Mike Ripley moved away from his Albert Campion continuation books, and provided a fresh, cheeky twist on the British murder mystery with **BURIED ABOVE GROUND**. Now he has provided an even better follow-up with **PLAYED TO DEATH**.

PLAYED TO DEATH features a similar structure to the first book, with the story being told through four viewpoints. Once again librarian and

crime fiction expert, Roly Wilkes is central to the story. This time Wilkes is approached by a local solicitor to read and analyse a play that is due to be performed by the solicitor's amateur dramatics group. The solicitor is of the view that the play plagiarises classic crime novels and wants Wilkes' perspective. Of course things are not that simple, and murder soon ensues.

The first part of the book is told progressively from the viewpoint of four potentially unreliable characters – Roly, the Librarian; Adam, the Lawyer; Jemma, the Producer, and Toni, the Police Inspector. After an intermission, the second part is told mainly from the perspective of the police detective, Inspector Toni Walker, and Roly.

It is a very clever structure that works well. Ripley keeps the story ticking over at a good pace and there is a solid mystery around who the killer is. There is also a good dollop of suspense at the end. The main pleasure from the book, however, comes from Ripley comprehensive knowledge of classic crime fiction and publishing. The book is full of fascinating references to novels and authors, there is even an appendix at the end explaining some of them, and plenty of wry humour. The cultural references are cleverly woven and often quite amusing, as well as being astute.

In all, **PLAYED TO DEATH** is a real treat!

SOLITARY AGENTS

by David Goodman

Headline, £20.00

Rating: A

David Goodman's **THE RELUCTANT SPY** was one of my favourite debut thrillers of 2024. Now Goodman is back with an even better spy novel that builds on the ideas and characters in the first book.

SOLITARY AGENTS continues the adventures of Jamie Tulloch from the earlier book, who now finds that he cannot settle back into his life as a technology company executive and wants to return to excitement of the secret world. Meanwhile Sam, a burnt-out corporate lawyer who was unexpectedly talent

spotted by MI5, also finds herself taking the first steps into a new Intelligence role.

Sam and Tulloch are both sent on an intensive training program, along with other potential new recruits. Once there they find themselves pitted against each other for their final evaluation in the infamous Red Poacher Exercise. Every year, MI6 trainees must evade capture, infiltrate sensitive sites and report back with the right intel, while their peers at MI5 try to stop them. This year, however, things take a nasty turn, and the trainees unknowingly find themselves caught up in something more sinister.

There is a Mick Herron feel to **SOLITARY AGENTS**, with an inter-service rivalry exercise becoming a matter of national security. The execution, however, is all Goodman, and once again he demonstrates the ability to bring fresh ideas to the genre. Without going into the details of the plot, the story certainly takes some good twists and turns as what starts out as a mundane tale about Intelligence training develops into an entertaining chase thriller.

After a slightly slow start, the book builds to an exciting finale, helped along by some well-developed characters and plot that keeps its secrets and final destination well hidden. As with the first book, the spy tradecraft is convincing, and it is enjoyable watching Tulloch employ simple, but effective, strategies to get in and out of difficult situations. There is also some interesting Intelligence manoeuvring in the background, mainly involving Jeremy, the head of the Legends program from the previous book.

I really enjoyed **SOLITARY AGENTS**. I was a little nonplussed at the beginning, but as the story progressed, I got caught up in it and was keenly turning the pages towards the end. Recommended.

George Easter Reviews

THE DEFENCE

by Rob Rinder

Century, £20.00, June

Adam Green #4

Rating: A-

Former MP, now a wellness guru, Adrian Wells is launching a new product in front of a hand-picked gaggle of influencers. To show the benefits of his new bath salt, Adrian is lowering himself into an architectural copper tub when something goes terribly awry. It seems like the bath salt has been poisoned and Adrian suffers a gruesome death.

Suspicion immediately falls upon Judith Quentin (call me "Jules"), Adrian's long-suffering assistant and the real talent behind his product development. Seems like an open and shut case. Jules had the means, opportunity and motive to commit the murder – and apparently no one else did. And she was arrested at the airport attempting to flee the country.

At Stag Court, we find barrister Adam Green delighted that his friend and colleague Georgina has been appointed Senior Treasury Counsel and will prosecute the Adrian Wells case. But his happiness is subdued when he finds out that he will appear for the defense in that case – as second chair to the silk, feminist titan Ursula Elder. Adam's primary job is to find evidence that can counter the prosecution's

strong claims.

So the battle lines are drawn and we are treated to a delicious legal mystery with many twists and turns.

Adam Green is an appealing character because of his moral fortitude and earnest desire to do his best for his client. This four-book series (so far) reminds me of one of my all time favorites – the Horace Rumpole series so wittingly penned by John Mortimer. Green and Rumpole (a master manipulator) are vastly different characters but they both work in the same intriguing milieu and both are highly dedicated defense counsel.

This series has become a must-read for me. I'm surprised it hasn't been picked up by a major U.S. publisher yet.

The author Rob Rinder is also a TV personality in the U.K. as host of the reality courtroom series Judge Rinder.

ONE OF US IS GUILTY

by Steve Cavanagh

Headline, £16.99, July;

Atria, \$29.00, March, 2027

Eddie Flynn #10

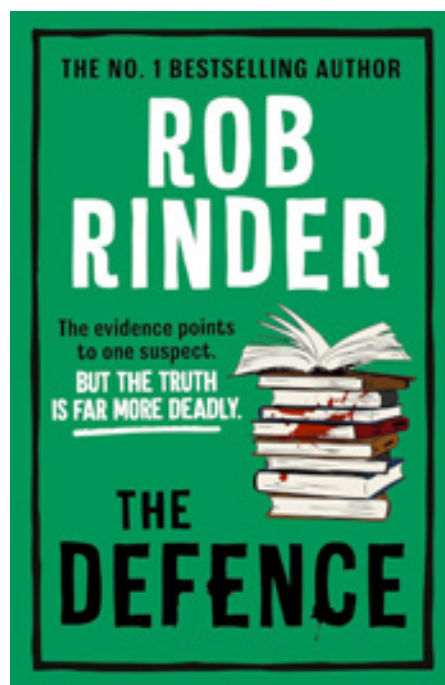
Rating: A

Patrick Vanderpool is the son of Julian Vanderpool, a mean-spirited billionaire media mogul who heavily controls Patrick's life and pushes him to run for political office. Trapped in a rigid lifestyle not of his choosing, Patrick finds escape through an intense affair with a political staffer named Molly Green.

However, the romance shatters when Patrick secretly reads Molly's private journal. He uncovers an alarming betrayal that threatens to destroy his future, leaving him consumed by rage.

Meanwhile, Patrick's ambitious wife, Vanessa Vanderpool, has tracked him to Molly's secret apartment. Desperate to protect her social and financial lifestyle, Vanessa enters the building.

Shortly after, Molly Green is found brutally murdered inside the apartment. Because of their overlapping timelines, intersecting motives, and



presence at the scene, Patrick and Vanessa emerge as the only two logical suspects. As the investigation unfolds, the official finger of suspicion heavily points toward Vanessa Vanderpool. The odds and forensic evidence are stacked against her, leading her to seek elite legal representation in the form of conman-turned defense attorney Eddie Flynn.

The narrative culminates in a fast-paced courtroom showdown. Eddie uses his signature con-artist tricks and sharp legal maneuvers to dismantle the prosecution's narrative. As he unpeels layers of family secrets and systemic corruption, Eddie risks his own life to expose the truth and ensure an innocent person doesn't take the fall for a calculated killer.

When you pick up a crime novel featuring Eddie Flynn you can be confident that you are in for a highly entertaining reading experience, full of twists and clever surprises. I generally can't wait the nine months it takes for a new Eddie Flynn to be published in the U.S. and pick up the Brit Edition. But, at least I'm grateful that all of the series is now available for sale in the U.S. That has not always been the case.

DISSECTION OF A MURDER

by Jo Murray

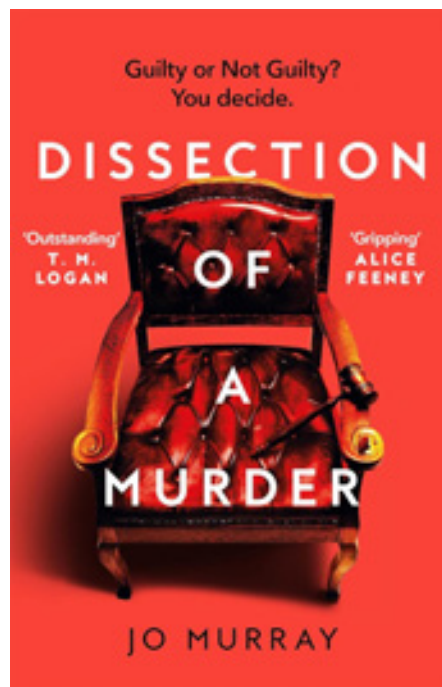
Macmillan, £16.99 (In U.S., Dutton trade pbk, \$19.00, May)

First Novel

Rating: A-

When the well-respected Judge Anton Smythe is found murdered, it sends shockwaves through the legal community. Up and coming barrister Leila Reynolds is tapped to defend (her first murder case) and to make matters more interesting, her husband and mentor Julian Reynolds, KC, is chosen as the lead prosecutor.

The defendant Jack Miller is a man whom Leila defended previously and whom she feels some guilt over because she mishandled his case and he served a two-year prison sentence because of that. Jack has refused to answer police



questioning and says that he will tell his story only at the trial. Of course, this seriously limits his defense team in its preparations.

Leila is the narrator of the story, but interspersed among her chapters are ones written by Witness X, who seems to know a lot about what really happened leading up to the murder of the judge. But who is she and what are her motives?

This first-time author really knows how to ratchet up the tension. Remember the name – Jo Murray. I predict many more excellent novels from her in the future. Despite a minor quibble with the ending, I was totally engulfed in **DISSECTION OF A MURDER**. It should be considered among the very best first novels of 2026.

BODY OF LIES

by Jo Callaghan

Simon & Schuster U.K., £18.99, May
DCS Kat Frank & AIDE Lock #4

Rating: A-

DCS Kat Frank is propelled into a high-profile investigation when a local Member of Parliament (MP) is brutally murdered on Halloween night. Because the politician was a vocal opponent of artificial intelligence, detectives initial-

ly suspect a political motive. However, the killer leaves a taunting message written entirely in binary code that is directed at Kat: "Catch me if you can."

Kat and her artificially intelligent partner AIDE Lock begin to unravel the digital breadcrumbs, the stakes escalate dramatically. A massive cyberattack hits the United Kingdom, completely shutting down the National Grid. With the country plunged into darkness and vital services failing, Kat and Lock are caught in a desperate race against time to find the hacker before thousands of citizens die.

To catch a killer who is always one step ahead, Kat has to decide whether she can fully trust Lock's logic over human instinct. Meanwhile, the investigation threatens to push Lock down an independent, post-human path that could change his partnership with Kat permanently.

BODY OF LIES has been billed as the last book in the series and I was curious to see how Jo Callaghan would wrap things up. She certainly did it in a surprising and unexpected way. I had to think about the ending for a while, but eventually came to the conclusion that I was o.k. it.

I have been thoroughly entertained by this series and am sad to see it end. But I will look forward to what Jo Callaghan comes up with next.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

THE SHADOW STEP

by Mark Billingham

Grove Atlantic, \$28 USD, 21 July

Rating: A-

Back in June at a glittering ceremony and dinner in central London, Mark Billingham became the latest, very well-deserved recipient of the prestigious Diamond Dagger, presented by the Crime Writers Association (CWA) for "sustained excellence and lifetime contribution to crime fiction".

Since his outstanding debut Sleepyhead in 2001, Billingham has had readers whirring through pages and staying

up late to finish his compelling tales. For a quarter century he has intrigued and entertained with masterful police procedurals starring curmudgeonly London detective Tom Thorne, alongside some terrific standalones, and more recently a fresh series with raucous, comic undertones starring ballroom-dancing, Blackpool detective Declan Miller.

After the emotional gut-punch of last year's 19th and latest Thorne novel, longtime Billingham fans may have been in need of a few good laughs, so another Declan Miller novel is just the ticket.

In **THE SHADOW STEP** the snarky sleuth is still talking to his dead wife and caring for his pet rats and doing his utmost to rile up colleagues and criminals alike, in among hanging out on the practice floor and local pub with an eclectic collection of ballroom dancing pals. The death of a local drug dealer creates all sorts of ripples, especially after traumatised ex-soldier Barry Cheshire confesses to what may not even have been a crime. A stabbing at Cheshire's house certainly is, though, so Miller and his work partner DS Sara "Posh" Xiu have at least one murder to solve. Then the son of the matriarch of the local drug empire gets kidnapped. With some very dangerous people circling and squaring off, Miller and Xiu need to dance their way through a potential minefield and solve the cases.

While trying not to get themselves or anyone else killed.

A master storyteller, Billingham can have you laughing out loud while also quick-stepping through the pages, fully engaged by the mystery and thriller storylines. Blending humour and pathos in a well-executed crime tale. A very good read in a growing, very good series.

ONE OF US IS GUILTY

by Steve Cavanagh

Orion Crime, £16.99, 30 July 2026

Rating: B+

It doesn't seem that long ago that Northern Irish lawyer turned author Steve Cavanagh was an exciting fresh voice in crime fiction delivering a startling debut, **THE DEFENSE**, about

conman turned New York City defense attorney Eddie Flynn trying to win a case involving a Russian mobster while dealing with a bomb strapped to his body. Somehow, *One of Us is Guilty* is the tenth novel in what's become one of the most quaffable legal thriller series around.

This time, Eddie Flynn finds himself dealing with the tricky case of Vanessa Vanderpool; wife of Patrick, scion to a billion-dollar media empire and tabbed for an important political future. A future that very rich and powerful people don't want waylaid by the brutal murder of Patrick's attractive young assistant. Due to conflicts of interest, the mega-firm for the Vanderpool empire asks Eddie to represent Vanessa, who's a prime suspect. Does Eddie have a killer or a scapegoat for a client?

As the investigation bleeds into a trial, Eddie and his colleagues like former judge Harry Ford, rugged investigator Melissa Bloch, and intense ex-FBI Agent Gabriel Lake come up against ruthless foes alongside a client who is telling far from the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

This is another page-whirring read from Cavanagh, who has set a high bar through his highly compelling Eddie Flynn series. While **ONE OF US IS GUILTY** for me didn't quite hit the heights of some of the earlier instalments – at his best, Cavanagh rivals the likes of Michael Connelly's Mickey Haller books and Scott Turow, etc – this is still another tense 'stay up all night' tale from a talented writer.

Interview with Alan Parks by Craig Sisterson

Alan Parks is the critically acclaimed author of the Harry McCoy series set in 1970s Glasgow, which has won an Edgar Award, the McIlvanney Prize for Scottish Crime Book of the Year, and the Prix Mystère de la Critique award in France. Before becoming a crime writer with his debut, **BLOODY JANUARY**, Alan worked as an executive in the



British music industry for over twenty years, helping to manage, market, and shaped the visual identities of several prominent British and international acts including New Order, All Saints, and The Streets. Recently he launched a new series set during the Second World War, starring Joseph Gunner, a deeply damaged protagonist. The second book in that series, *Deception*, was published in the UK in July, and will be released in the USA on 1 September 2026. At this summer's Bute Noir festival on a Scottish island, Alan and I sat down for a chat offstage.

What inspired you to write the new Gunner series after you have this award-winning series set in Glasgow in the 1970s, then you start writing about an ex-soldier during the wartime period? What drew you to explore that period and this wounded character of Joseph Gunner?

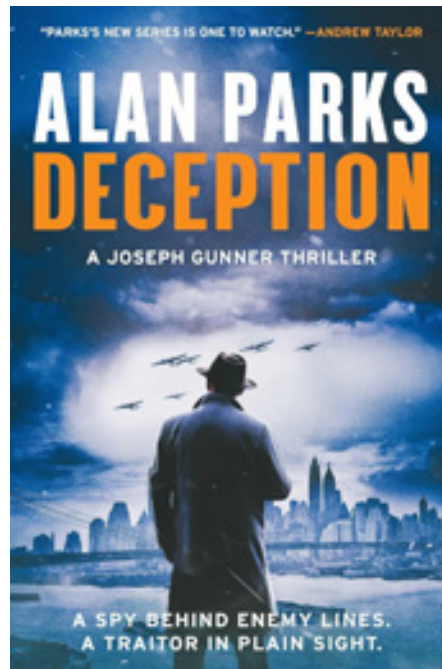
I think I just started picking up a lot of little things about Glasgow during the war. Not consciously, but they just kind of stuck in my head, and it seemed quite an odd time in Glasgow. Like, I found out that Kelvin Hall, which was this enormous spot, was set up to temporarily deal with so many bodies. I didn't really realise the scale. Also, Glasgow had a reputation as a place you could disappear. A lot of people went to basic training, came back, and disappeared. Because Glasgow is such a big transport hub, people got lost, there was looting and stuff, and it just seemed like an odd time in the city. Like the 1970s in Glasgow. So I thought it seemed it might

be quite interesting to have a look at it. It wasn't the sort of conventional wartime stories that you hear, if you know what I mean.

Can you tell us more about your new main character, Joseph Gunner?

Yeah, so he's called Joseph Gunner and he was a police detective in Glasgow, then he went off to the Second World War very early, a bomb went off near him, and he's got a very badly injured leg, one of his eyes, he's got scars on his face, and he also has a morphine problem, because that's what they used to do to abate the pain. So he comes back to Glasgow, not quite sure if he can rejoin the police, not quite sure if he can rejoin the army. Just trying to work out what he's doing, and he meets up again with his old boss, who's been brought back into the police, and his old boss asks him to investigate a case because a body's been found in a bombed-out building, but the body's fingerprints have been removed to stop identification. So obviously, it wasn't just there and hit by the bomb. So that's the beginning, in the first book, **GUNNER**.

People often use the term 'Tartan Noir' to describe Scottish crime writing, but obviously there is a huge variety of crime, mystery, and thriller



writing among Scottish authors; it's not all 'noir'. But what's it like being part of what seems to be a fast-growing community that's really gone from strength to strength over the past decade or more, since the pioneering days of the likes of Ian Rankin, Val McDermid, Denise Mina and others, or building on William McIlvanney's legacy?

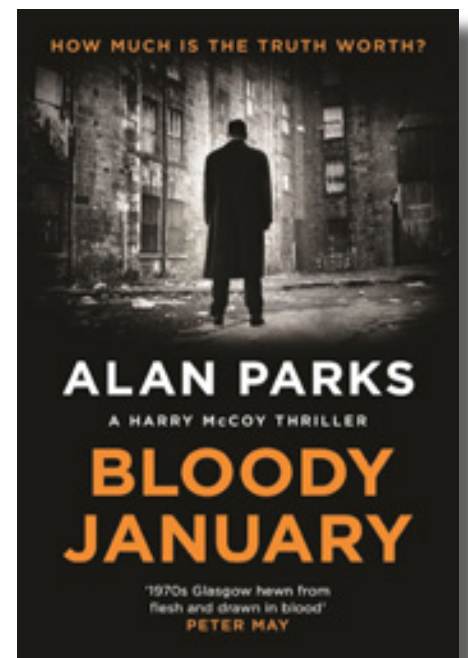
Yeah, Tartan Noir is this big thing now, and it's a bit weird as all the books are pretty different, but if you have a book with a murder in it set in Scotland, they call it Tartan Noir. I still think of noir as being like Humphrey Bogart films or things like that. But it's just a term people use, which is fine, like Scandi Noir and all this stuff. It just makes it easier for sort of marketing and things for some stories. The books are different but it's a really supportive community, and people are interested in each other's books and stuff, so it's a good time to be writing crime books in Scotland, I think.

You spoke on our "Soldier, Soldier" panel at Bute Noir today about the impact of having read LAIDLAW by William McIlvanney when you were younger. What's it like to go from reading a book about Glasgow and realising that your home city could

be an amazing setting for a novel, a crime story, to now writing Glasgow-set crime stories yourself (and winning the McIlvanney Prize)?

I don't know, I mean it casts a long shadow, LAIDLAW and William McIlvanney. If you write anything about Glasgow involving crime, it gets compared one way or another; goodly, badly, or differently. It's kind of the touchstone of Glasgow crime novels. He was miles before the 'Tartan Noir' term, but was kind of the originator, with more realistic, slightly literary crime fiction set in Glasgow. If my books turn up anything like his, I'm very happy. But I wouldn't go as far to say that.

Alan Parks Bibliography



Harry McCoy Series

1. BLOODY JANUARY (2017)
2. FEBRUARY'S SON (2019)
3. BOBBY MARCH WILL LIVE FOREVER (2020)
4. THE APRIL DEAD (2021)
5. MAY GOD FORGIVE (2022)
6. TO DIE IN JUNE (2023)

Joseph Gunner Series

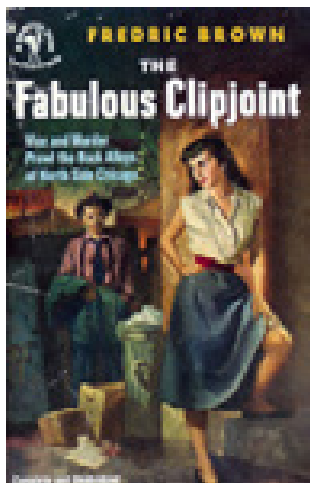
1. GUNNER (2025)
2. DECEPTION (2026)
3. TREACHERY (2027)

Ripster's Revivals

by Mike Ripley

Gold Standard

A new series from Penguin, their *American Mystery Classics Collection*, curated by 'the world's foremost authority on crime fiction' (it says here), Otto Penzler is launched in May with the anthology **GOLDEN AGE DETECTIVE STORIES**, edited by Penzler himself, which is to be followed over the summer by **GOLDEN AGE LOCKED ROOM MYSTERIES**, **GOLDEN AGE BIBLIO-MYSTERY** and, in September, **GOLDEN AGE WHODUNITS**. The Classics Collection will also, I believe, include individual novels deserving the epithet 'classic' and the first of these, from 1947, is a new edition of **THE FABULOUS CLIPJOINT** by Frederic Brown.

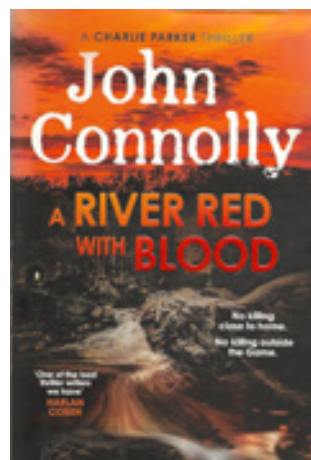


Frederic Brown (1906-1972) is a revered name in the worlds of American hardboiled fiction and science fiction and was a noted writer of short stories. He was, at one point, said to be Mickey Spillane's favourite author.

Recently 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.



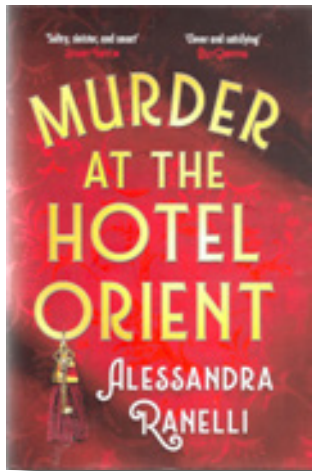
Another international bestseller, known as 'Ireland's Stephen King' (*Daily Express*, so it must be true) but not just because many of his books are set in Maine, is John Connolly and his latest sees a return of his regular hero Charlie Parker (no, not *that* one). A **RIVER RED WITH BLOOD** [Hodder] 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 inventive 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.

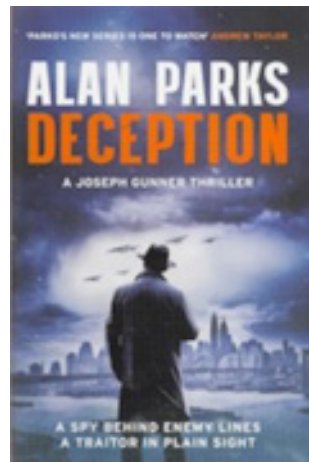


If the title of a crime novel includes the words 'Murder' and 'Orient,' how many readers scanning the shelves in a bookshop can resist imagining the word 'Express'? In fact **MURDER AT THE HOTEL ORIENT** by Alessandra Raneli [Baskerville] has more in common with the Grand Budapest Hotel than with Dame Agatha's murderous train service; although that's not completely fair because there are murders to be solved in the Vienna's Hotel Orient, an establishment dedicated to what might have been called, in the Golden Age, amorous trysts, with discretion guaranteed (almost).

The current popularity of classic Japanese detective stories must be largely in part to the eye-catching covers which Pushkin Vertigo have put on their new translations of the works of Seishi Yokomizo (1902-81). Their latest issue is **SHE WALKS AT NIGHT** which features legendary detective Kosuke Kindaichi having to help police solve a murder by decapitation with an antique



samurai sword, though nothing is likely to unsettle Kindaichi, who appeared in 77 books by the prolific Yokomizo, many of which were adapted for the stage and television in Japan.



Alan Parks made an initial impression with an outstanding series of 'Tartan Noir' thrillers set in Glasgow, but last year introduced a new series hero, Joseph Gunner, a former policeman, wounded at Dunkirk, but dragged back into service as a copper in wartime Glasgow. **DECEPTION** sees Gunner seconded to a secret British dirty tricks operation in New York (which includes a rather irritating naval officer called Fleming) aimed at bringing America into the war. The time frame of the book is the first week of December 1941, so we know what's coming if Gunner doesn't and he struggles with his own conscience as he sets up 'honey trap'

stings of prominent American political figures who might be pro-Nazi. He has few qualms, though, about continuing his personal crusade against the British class system.

DECEPTION is a fast-moving, well-researched hybrid of detective story (the detective being very much a stranger in a strange land) and historical spy thriller with well-drawn characters. It works on all levels and I will be amazed if it does not feature on multiple awards' shortlists this year.

Last Word on Len

I have written much in the last month on the passing of Len Deighton, but failed to mention one particular story which, sadly, I never got to verify with him.

In the late Seventies (or early Eighties) when Len lived in Ireland, he was able only rarely to attend meetings of the Crime Writers' Association, but when a visit to London coincided with a meeting at The Groucho Club, he decided to pop along. In those days the CWA always appointed an existing member of the ruling Committee to act as a meet-and-greeter to welcome new members or guests they did not recognise. On the night in question as Len arrived, the official greeter approached him and introduced herself. When Len volunteered his name, she said: "**Do you write?**"

Len's response is not recorded anywhere, but what I found interesting about this story is that it was told to me by two female CWA members who both – without a shred of embarrassment – claimed to have been the greeter on duty.

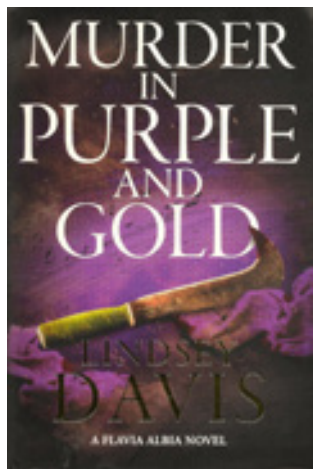
Following Len's death, I was also reminded of the generous things he said about my *Getting Away With Murder* column in this distinguished organ, of which he was a regular reader. In December 2010, on the 50th appearance of the column, he wrote to Shots editor Mike Stotter saying:

'I have always enjoyed widening my reading, and Mike Ripley's 'Getting Away With Murder' reviews and comments have done a great deal to introduce me to new writers and remind me of old favourites. I admire the way in which he is able to tempt the reader into the unknown, and I like his generous and forgiving tone when dealing with the sort of failings all writers show from time to time.'

Thank you, Len.

The Kindness of Authors

Despite the best efforts of her publisher to cancel me, I have received a copy of **MURDER IN PURPLE AND GOLD** thanks to the author herself, my old chumette Lindsey Davis.



This is the latest case for Flavia Albia, Ancient Rome's foremost (and forthright) female investigator who has inherited all the investigative nous of her father and stubbornness of her mother when it comes to solving crimes in the Rome of AD90 under the rule of the Emperor Domitian, who gets a bad press here and probably rightly so. Just as today, in *Ancient* Rome a considerable number of dead bodies were found by dog walkers and when it is Flavia Albia out exercising the family mutt Barley and the dog sniffs out a corpse, Flavia realises it is a murder victim and scents a new investigation. Naturally, it is anything but straightforward as the victim is

the rising star driver of the Purples chariot-racing team and jealous rivals in the other professional teams (Golds, Blues, Greens, Whites and Reds) could be suspects, not to mention the teams' wealthy sponsors, including the emperor, and the no-doubt totally honest on-course betting industry.

Life, death and detective work in first century Rome is described in all its glory through Lindsey's wry and twinkling eyes and the whole thing is an absolute delight. An added bonus comes in the climactic chariot race in the Circus Maximus which lacks only a Peter O'Sullivan commentary but otherwise gives *Ben Hur* a run for its money.

From the To-Be-Read Pile

I don't know why it has taken me so long to get round to Joseph Kanon's 2024 novel **SHANGHAI** as I have read most of his fiction with great pleasure and this one does not disappoint.

Set in 1939-41, with a tremendous scene-setting section as persecuted Jews flee Nazi Germany by boat from Trieste, most of the action takes place in a lawless Shanghai threatened by the invading Japanese, which may not sound like a safe haven, but at least it's not Berlin. One of the refugees, Daniel Lohr, is involved in some shady dealings from the off and on the voyage east is instantly attracted to a female passenger but also comes to the attention of a Major Yamada of the *Kempetai*, the Japa-

nese Gestapo. Once in Shanghai, Daniel finds himself the reluctant heir to a casino and in the middle of a turf war between Chinese gangsters. There are many familiar Kanon themes: the star-crossed lovers who have to escape a city or a country, the corruption of virtually every figure in a position of power, unexpected and shocking acts of violence, political motives and loyalties betrayed. And there is a splendid additional twist as Daniel's political convictions back in Berlin are slowly revealed.

We'll Always Have Berlin



For legal reasons I was unable to attend the lavish lunch which marked the launch of Michael Ridpath's new novel. I have, however, received a copy of **OPERATION BERLIN** [Boldwood Books] which shows Michael taking a new tack in his wide-ranging thriller writing career, kicking off a new series known as 'the Foreign Correspondent mysteries.'

Ridpath has adopted many diverse settings for his fiction, from the ruthless world of high finance and bond trading, to a series proving that Icelanders do not have a monopoly on Icelandic *noir*, from America to South Africa via the confines of a nuclear submarine and, yes, he has explored pre-war Germany before now in his 'Traitors' thrillers. **OPERATION BERLIN** is more of a detective story, set in 1930, though there are hints of espionage and there are lots of those pesky Nazis lurking in the shadows,



with an unlikely detective duo: Esme Carmichael, a feisty young American determined to become a foreign correspondent, and Sir Archie Laverick, a war-damaged English aristocrat soldier turned historian. They meet while Archie is in Germany researching the biography of Prussian general Blücher and Esme finds herself taking on the job of his secretary (which involves experiencing Archie's terrifying flashbacks to WWI) and when she witnesses, at very close quarters, the murder of her best friend, she sets out to find the killer with Archie (at first) a reluctant sidekick – or perhaps it's the other way round as this mis-matched couple bounce off each other with growing respect and affection.

Missions Only Just Possible

I don't know why but the warm weather has brought on an attack of the Quillers as I am gorging on the adventures of super-spy Quiller, as created by Adam Hall, one of the pen-names of Elleston Trevor (1920-1995), which itself was originally a pen-name of Trevor Dudley-Smith. [He liked the Elleston Trevor name so much he legally changed his name to it.]



To my surprise and great delight, I find there were Quillers I had not read before, including **THE SINKIANG**

EXECUTIVE from 1978 where Quiller gets to fly a Russian jet fighter into Asia on a one-way trip. Once on the ground and alone (as usual) in enemy territory, Quiller literally throws himself under bus to escape his pursuers. Tense, taught and fast-paced, this mission gives readers a brief glimpse of Quiller's cynical sense of humour and his sexual prowess – but don't worry, it doesn't slow down the action. Apart from changes in political geography over the last fifty years, the book holds up remarkable well.

Homework



Throughout the summer I have set myself a homework project to improve my knowledge and appreciation of that shimmering city Venice, in advance of attending the wonderful Venice Noir festival of crime writing in November. Not that I will be there in any capacity other than as a fan of both the genre and the city. I am more than happy to leave centre stage to international writers far above my pay grade and be able to relax in the audience in one of the staggeringly beautiful and historic locations or simply lurk in one of the multitude of cool bars and restaurants on offer. My only regret when there is that none of my thirty-six books have been translated into Italian, but I do not dwell on that too much as there are many distractions in Venice.

But I am preparing for any eventual-ity by reading anything I have not read

before, in which Venice is a key character, starting with **THE VENETIAN REDEMPTION** by Philip Gwynne Jones [Constable, out now]. Philip is a Welshman lucky enough not to live in Wales, but Venice, and is a charming author of delightfully cosy mysteries set in Italy. **THE VENETIAN REDEMPTION** is set around one of the city's spectacular religious/civic celebrations the attempted poisoning of the British honorary consul Nathan Sutherland, who always does what his cat tells him to, though he really should listen more to his wife. It is a wonderfully atmospheric story, ripe with the sights and smells of *La Serenissima* but I will have to have words with the author as the map provided in the book identifies the location of my second-favourite restaurant in Venice on the 'street of the assassins.' (Where for some reason, the staff always call me Michelangelo.)



For a taste of Venetian history, I will delve back into the early seventeenth century with **THE KNIFE MAKER of Venice** by David Gilman [Head of Zeus in August]. I have read and enjoyed David Gilman's contemporary action thrillers but have not until now tried one of his historical novels, which form the bulk of his output. I look forward to the learning experience.

One thing I did learn, many decades ago when at school, was that the 'Italian Wars' of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, were almost impossible to understand. In an early chapter in **THE FIRST GHETTO: VENICE**

AND THE JEWS [Picador], historian Andrew Lee takes a brave stab at explaining who was fighting who, where and, occasionally, why but I remain bemused and can only think of Harry Lime's iconic summation in *The Third Man* about the Renaissance, Michaelangelo, Switzerland and cuckoo clocks. Ironically, many Swiss were not carving cuckoo clocks but fighting as mercenaries in the Italian Wars. That aside, **THE FIRST GHETTO** is superlative history of Venice and the political and economic roles of its Jewish population, which was often resented but always needed.



And I cannot possibly prepare for Venice Noir without reading the new novel by David Hewson, one of the British leading lights behind the festival, **THE DEVIL IN DORSODURO** [Bloodhound Books]. Having survived the alarums and excursions of last year's *The Four Deadly Seasons*, retired archivist Arnold Clover is drawn into the investigation of an elderly Englishwoman in Dorsoduro, one of the six historic regions, or sestieri, of Venice and the one built on solid ground rather than over water. Clover is an engaging, if reluctant, hero and a charming guide to all things Venetian thanks to David Hewson's encyclopaedic knowledge of, and clear affection for, the city.

As a sidebar and not sparing his blushes (though he knows this will cost him in aperitivi), David's earlier novels set in Rome and featuring his detective Nic Costa have just been made available

in a 'box set' of e-Books by Joffe Books. They come highly recommended, especially **THE VILLA OF MYSTERIES**, by this long-time fan.



Venice Homework

'(A review from a later column)

I am continuing my revision into all things Venetian in advance of the Venice Noir convention in November and have recently enjoyed David Hewson's **THE DEVIL IN DORSODURO** [Bloodhound Books] in which retired British archivist Arnold Clover, aided by an annoyingly clever dachshund called Bruno, is drawn into the investigation of the deaths of four women in what seems to be a coven of white witches. Arson, bombs and drug-dealing elevate the investigation way above Arnold's pay-grade (not that he's being paid) but along the way David Hewson takes the reader on a guided tour of the byways (there are few highways), piazzas and cafes of this magical city. Sadly, the book was written before Venezia FC magnificently returns to Serie A football next season, nor could it note local fans' reactions to the sale of Austrian centre back Michael Svoboda to Brighton & Hove Albion... As you can tell, I'm taking this homework thing seriously.

Twenty Years On

It is, remarkably, twenty years since this column, or rather its predecessor *Getting Away With Murder*, first appeared in *Shots*, in the summer of 2006.

Looking back in the archive I hoped to find some heartwarming memories of days gone by, but in fact the experience was rather chastening. On the

brighter, plus side were mentions of Barry Forshaw's **ROUGH GUIDE TO CRIME FICTION** (the 'rough' being a publishing brand rather than a qualitative comment) and the formation of new publishing house Quercus. On the downside, there was an item reporting on the funeral of Elizabeth Walter, legendary editor of Collins Crime Club (and Agatha Christie's last editor). At the service, the eulogy was given by Robert Barnard and the hymn singing was led by fellow Crime Club authors Reginald Hill, Catherine Aird, Marian Babson – all of whom are no longer with us -- and myself.

It was, as they say, very much a different time back in 2006 when I joined *Shots* -- as can be seen in the official staff photograph of myself, Mike 'Tombstone' Stotter, Prince Ali Karim and Ayo Onatade, taken at the time.



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For the Barry Awards!

Sneak Previews

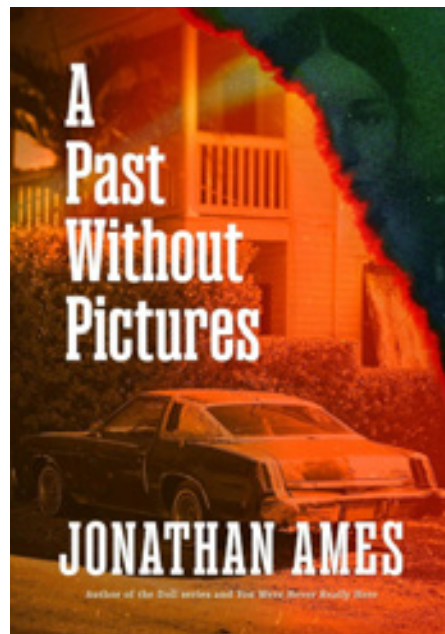
Upcoming Mysteries



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)
- 14 Tariq Ashkanani, **THE BLACK BIRD CONSPIRACY** (Callie Munro)
- 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)
- 25 Freida McFadden, **BRAIN DAMAGE**



September, 2026

- 1 Jonathan Ames, **A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES**
- 1 Hank Phillippi Ryan, **MOTHER DAUGHTER SISTER STRANGER**
- 1 James R. Benn, **THE NINTH CIRCLE** (Billy Boyle)
- 1 Henry Wise, **PROMISED LAND** (Will Seems)
- 1 K. B. Brodsky, **BEYOND HONOR**
- 1 Gregg Hurwitz, **THE DAMAGE MAN** (Orphan X)
- 1 Traci Hunter Abramson, **SILENT STRIKE**
- 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)
- 8 Felix Francis, **THE CHASE**
- 8 Jonathan Santlofer, **THE PERFECT GUESTS**
- 15 Richard Osman, **WE CHASE SHADOWS** (We Solve Murders)
- 15 Robert Dugoni, **ONE SPLIT SECOND** (Tracy Crosswhite)
- 15 Don Bentley, **DOUBLE TAP** (Mitch Rapp)
- 15 Garry Disher, **SANCTUARY**
- 15 Alex Hay, **THE MIDNIGHT GUESTS**
- 15 John Verdon, **GHOST BARN**
- 22 Michael Koryta, **DIE FAMOUS**
- 22 Clare Mackintosh, **IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK**
- 22 Michelle Chouinard, **A MAP TO MURDER** (Capri Sanzio)
- 22 Tasha Alexander, **MURDER ON THE SACRED RIVER** (Lady Emily)
- 29 Ann Cleeves, **THE DYING LIGHT** (Two Rivers)
- 29 L. M. Chilton, **I THINK WE SHOULD KILLER OTHER PEOPLE**
- 29 John Grisham, **THE FRENCH ILLUSION**
- 29 David McCloskey, **LONDON STATION** (Artemis Proctor)

October, 2026

- 1 Yasmin Angoe, **THE FERRY MAN'S DAUGHTER**

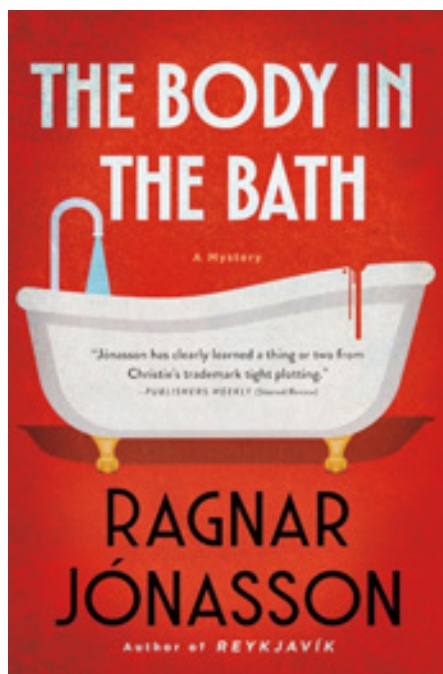
- 6 Joe R. Lansdale, **PETRIFIED DREAMS** (Hap & Leonard)
- 6 Tom Ryan, **RETURN TO BREAK NECK ISLAND** (Treasure Hunters Club)
- 6 Hisashi Kashiwai, **A SERVING OF HOPE** (Kamogawa Food Detectives)
- 6 Lyndsay Faye, **RAVEN**
- 6 A. E. Goldin, **DEATH ON THE PEARL RIVER** (Ben Canaan)
- 6 Joanne Harris, **SLEEPERS IN THE SNOW**
- 6 Rachel Louise Adams, **WHERE THERE'S SMOKE**
- 6 Imran Mahmood, **WHEN THE BIRDS DON'T SING**
- 6 Freida McFadden, **THE WITCH**
- 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**
- 13 Lucy Clarke, **YOU LET ME IN**
- 13 Ally Carter, **IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE MURDER**
- 13 S. A. Cosby, **TRUTH TO POWER** (Luke Cage)
- 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)
- 20 Jenna Helwig, **THE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT'S WIFE**
- 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 Argent)
- 27 Paige Shelton, **THE BONE WOMAN**
- 27 Carolyn Haines, **JOY TO THE BONES** (Sarah Booth Delaney)
- 27 Daryl Wood Gerber, **A CLASSIC CASE OF MURDER** (Literary Dining)
- 27 Ellery Adams, **THE LIARS' BOOK CLUB** (A Secret, Book and Scone Society)
- 27 Laura Joh Rowland, **RESURREC**

-TION KILL

- 27 Michael Connelly, **THE HOLLOW** (Harry Bosch)
- 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 Charles Finch, **MIDNIGHT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS** (Charles Lenox)
- 3 Donna Freitas, **WOLVES OF SUMMER** (Ocean State)
- 3 William Boyd, **COLD SUNSET** (Gabriel Dax)
- 3 Alan Bradley, **NUMB WERE THE BEADSMAN'S FINGERS** (Flavia de Luce)
- 10 Sara Paretsky, **BAD COMPANY**
- 10 David Baldacci, **ALL IN** (6:20 Man)
- 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)
- 10 Max Allan Collins, **QUARRY'S**

REUNION

- 10 Tara Laskowshi, **THE COLD READ**
- 10 Stephanie Wrobel, **REVENGE PLOT**
- 10 J. A. Jance, **THE TAKEN ONES** (J. P. Beaumont)
- 10 Carin Gerhardsen, **GIDEON'S RING**
- 10 Laura Griffin, **THUNDERBIRD RANCH**
- 10 Andrea Mara, **HIDE AND SEEK**
- 11 Dana Stabenow, **THE IRON TRAIL** (Clare Wright)
- 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)
- 17 Nick Harkaway, **THE TAPER MAN** (George Smiley)
- 17 Elly Griffiths, **THE KILLING TIME** (Ali Dawson)

December, 2026

- 1 Anders de la Motte, **THE RUST FOREST** (Leonore Asker)
- 1 Adele Parks, **EYES ON YOU**
- 1 Kevin Jagnauth, **THE LONGEST DEATH**
- 1 Robin Cook, **BLEED**
- 1 Camilla Trinchieri, **MURDER RE TURNS TO GRAVIGNA**
- 1 Lisa Howells, **WOLF POINT**
- 1 Chris Chibnall, **THE PARKWOOD MURDERS** (Nicola Bridge)
- 1 Brian Shea, **THE SINNER SAINT**
- 2 Jake Needham, **JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE**
- 3 James Naughtie, **BERLIN CHECKMATE** (Will Flemyng)
- 8 Claire Coughlan, **AMONG THE RUINS**
- 8 Laurie L. Dove, **CRY OF THE RAIN CROW** (Carrie Starr)
- 8 Christopher Goffard, **THE WINDOW MAN**

January, 2027

- 5 William Boyle, **HEAVY SUGAR**
- 5 James Grippando, **SHADOW JURY** (Jack Swyteck)
- 5 Sarah Fox, **WE ARE NEVER EVER SOLVING THIS MURDER** (Wyatt)
- 7 Vaseem Khan, **THE LAST SHOT** (Malabar House)
- 12 Lucinda Berry, **THE GOLDEN CHILD**
- 19 Brendan Duffy, **RULES OF FROST**
- 19 Sally Smith, **A CASE OF FEAR AND FAVOR**
- 19 Andy Callahan, **NOBODY DESERVES**
- 19 Susan Elia MacNeal, **LAST MISSION TO PARIS**



- 26 Joseph O'Connor, **THE CITY OF ECHOES** (Rome Escape Line)
- 26 Paula Munier, **ONE KILLING FROST** (Mercy Carr)
- 26 James Markert, **RANSOM BURNING**
- 28 Tim Weaver, **NO ONE BELIEVES ME** – U.K. only

February, 2027

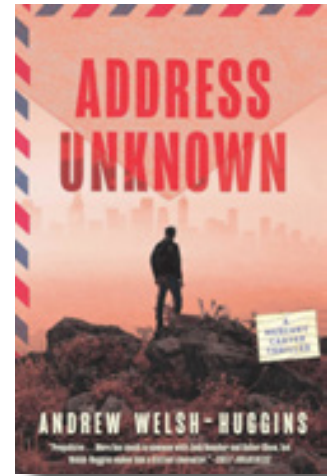
- 2 Jane Casey, **EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY**
- 2 Sarina Bowen, **BAD GIRLS MAKE GOOD LIARS**

- 2 Patricia Cornwell, **RAPID AND FATAL** (Scarpetta)
- 2 Jonathan Kellerman, **MALICE** (Alex Delaware)
- 9 Gregg Hurwitz, **LAST MAN STANDING** (Orphan X)
- 9 Renda Knapp, **COMPLICIT**
- 9 S. R. Chamberlain, **MURDER MOST UN-CANADIAN**
- 16 Mark Greaney, **DARK UNION** (Gray Man)
- 16 Mike Lawson, **THE OPERATOR** (Joe DeMarco)
- 16 Steve Berry & Grant Blackwood, **THE SORCERER'S VEIL** (Luke Daniels)
- 16 Jessa Maxwell, **THE LAST MATCH**
- 16 Fergus Craig, **I'M NOT THE ONLY MURDERER AT THIS WEDDING**
- 16 Wanda M. Morris, **THIS NEVER HAPPENS HERE**
- 16 Alys Cummings, **MURDER MOST CRYPTIC**
- 23 C. J. Box, **THE MISSING** (Joe Pickett)
- 23 Jenny Hollander, **FAMOUS LAST LIES**
- 23 Alice Feeney, **TWIST**
- 23 Laurie R. King, **MARY RUSSELL'S GHOST**
- 23 Jo Nesbo, **KILL SHOT** (Harry Hole)

March, 2027

- 2 Deon Meyer, **SCORPIO RISING** (Benny Giesel)
- 2 Paul Vidich, **THE SHEPHERD** (Alex Matthews)
- 2 Nicci French, **DON'T ANSWER THE DOOR** (Maud O'Connor)
- 2 Jacqueline Winspear, **CHARLIE BRIGHT**
- 2 Charles Todd, **A DEADLY COST** (Bess Crawford)
- 9 Scott Moore, **THE MAD WIDOWS**
- 9 Anne Hillerman, **BLOODLINE** (Leaphorn, Chee & Manuelito)
- 16 J. A. Jance, **SMOKE AND MIRRORS** (Ali Reynolds)
- 16 Elle Cosimano, **DONOVAN PLAYS WITH FIRE**
- 22 Nick Petrie, **SHADOW GAME** (Peter Ash)
- 23 Steve Cavanagh, **ONE OF US IS GUILTY** (Eddie Flynn)

- 23 T. Jefferson Parker, **GONE AT FIRST LIGHT**
- 25 Cara Hunter, **THE BEST WAY TO DIE** (U.K. only so far)
- 30 Andrew Welsh-Huggins, **ADDRESS UNKNOWN** (Mercury Carter)



- 30 Mark Pryor, **A VINTAGE MURDER IN PARIS** (Paris Bookshop)
- 30 Lee Goldberg, **THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECT** (Edison Bixby)

April, 2027

- 6 John Sandford, **RUTHLESS PREY**
- 8 Stephen Leather, **BROKEN PROMISES** (Spider Shepherd)
- 13 James A. McLaughlin, **GHOST BEAR**
- 13 Ritu Mukerji, **THE SCALPEL'S EDGE**
- 13 Spencer Quinn, **RAIDERS OF THE LOST BARK** (Chet & Bernie)
- 13 Mia Manasala, **MURDER UNDER THE FULL MOON**
- 13 Amy Pease, **THE SILENCE KEEPERS** (Northwoods)
- 20 Jean-Luc Bannalec, **THE WINE MAKER'S END** (Georges Dupin)
- 22 Claire Mackintosh, **YOU DON'T KNOW ME AT ALL**
- 27 Brianna Heath, **THE PENDLETON FAMILY'S GUIDE TO ACCIDENTAL MURDER**

May, 2027

- 11 Jack Carr, **STATE OF EXILE** (James Reece)

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