Fall 2026 ◀▶ Issue 113 Free

Deadly Pleasures
Mystery Magazine



Reviews ◀▶ Columns ◀▶ New Books ◀▶ What's New in U.K. ◀▶ Articles

MAD MABEL

& Other Works

by Sally Hepworth



I liked the book, **MAD MABEL**, so much that I chose it for a Reviewed to Death title for this issue. And I wanted to feature Sally Hepworth on the cover so this column is a combined cover article and Reviewed to Death (where many of us review the same book) column. I hope that you enjoy it and are inspired to seek the book out. As one might expect, not everyone liked the book as much as some of us did. You can be the judge as to whether or not to read **MAD MABEL**, if you haven't already.

Reviewed to Death

MAD MABEL
by Sally Hepworth
St. Martin's Press, $29.00, April
Standalone

MAD MABEL is a psychological study of Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick, an 81-year-old woman living on a quiet Melbourne street called Kenny Lane. Her life story is told in a series of flashbacks that give the reader insights into how Mabel became the seemingly cantankerous, abrasive neighborhood curmudgeon.

Her isolated life is disrupted when a nosy, talkative seven-year-old girl named Persephone moves in across the street and insists on befriending her. Shortly after, another neighbor named Ishaan is found dead, most likely from natural causes. As police investigate the death, Elsie's hidden identity is exposed to the neighborhood, sparking a media frenzy and leading locals to suspect that "Mad Mabel" has struck again.

George Easter

Mabel has my vote for the most unforgettable character of 2026. It has been a word-of-mouth sensation going into multiple printings in hardcover. I read it, gave it to my wife who liked it and then gave it a neighbor who also loved it.

Now that Sally Hepworth has gotten my attention, I'm sure that I'll be reading more of her works in the future.
Rating: A

Hank Wagner

I thoroughly enjoyed Sally Hepworth's latest; I was kept on edge by its dual time line, but mostly by one of the book's covert questions, namely, "Was the narrator, "Mad" Mabel, reliable or unreliable?" It's remarkable that, even though I came down on the side of reliable, I'm still not totally sure. But, to Hepworth's credit, I did come to admire and even like the curmudgeonly old broad, much as her chosen family (her neighbors, and the podcasters who let her air her side of the story) did.

The novel bears an obvious debt to author Anne Perry's real-life story; it also feels like something Patricia Highsmith might have written, but it's substantially less dark than any of her novels. It stands out from both instances in that it deals more modern issues, such as being judged by the public at large merely on the basis of the musings of various influencers. In that,it bears more than a passing resemblance to another dark but sneakily charming novel I read earlier in 2026, that being Sophie Hannah's highly entertaining **NO ONE WOULD DO WHAT THE LAMBERTS HAVE DONE** (Sourcebooks, January 2026, 408 pages, $32.99), wherein a quirky family deals with the fallout of their beloved pet being accused of a crime it didn't commit.

Rating: MAD MABEL: B+
Rating: NO ONE WOULD DO WHAT THE LAMBERTS HAVE DONE: B+

Meredith Anthony

You could call **MAD MABEL** a coming-of-age story—if the age is in the mid-eighties. And that's my only caveat: I like the cranky, prickly Mad Mabel at the beginning of the book better than the grown-up at the end of the story. Nonetheless, **MAD MABEL** is well worth reading. I mostly loved it.
Rating: A-

Ted Hertel

MAD MABEL is a story about a granny who murders people….or so you could easily believe. What it really is is a warm-hearted (and heart-breaking) tale of the power of female friendship (with those murders thrown in to propel the

plot). But it's okay, guys, it's a tale you'll enjoy, as well.

Sally Hepworth has created a fine cast of characters centered around the complicated Mad Mabel Waller. From little Persephone to arch-enemy (or is she?) Joan and others, each is perfectly drawn with their own agendas and quirks. The story spins out rapidly as Mabel, now age 81, "peels back the onion" of her tragic childhood in interviews with podcasters. Told with gentle humor that offsets the mild descriptions of murder, the novel will capture the reader's attention from the beginning and hold it to the surprising finish. One day I plan to go back and re-read the book to see just how the author managed to pull this off. **Rating: A-**

J. Kingston Pierce

I can't help thinking that this tale of an octogenarian Aussie who has long concealed her past as a teenage murderer, was inspired at least partly by the unlikely history of Hepworth's fellow crime-fictionist, the late Anne Perry. As we learned only well into Perry's career, she'd conspired at age 15 to kill a friend's mother in New Zealand. Unlike the cultured and reserved Perry, though, **MAD MABEL**'s Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick is outwardly caustic and curmudgeonly, her softer aspects teased forth only slowly by the persistent attentions of a 7-year-old neighbor girl, and portrayed quite affectingly in this dual-timeline yarn.

There's intimidation, abuse, vicious gossip, and violence here, but that's confined principally to Elsie's adroitly rendered backstory. This is equally a novel about platonic love, the power of friendship to defeat corrosive ostracization, and those singular moments when one might demonstrate courage against all odds. While it boasts surprising twists at the end, the categorizing of **MAD MABEL** as a "mystery" doesn't do it justice. Hepworth's narrative is really a character study about an elderly woman compelled by unfortunate circumstances to confront her past, in the process discovering that she's always been a better person than was led to believe. **MAD MABEL** is the first book by this author I have read; it won't be the last. **Rating: B+**

Marilyn Brooks

MAD MABEL is a wonderful read. Her past and present are interwoven seamlessly, and it's easy to understand how she became the embittered, solitary woman she is when the book opens and how she allows herself to befriend her neighbors as the novel progresses.

The characters in the book are perfect: Mabel, the victim of a lifetime of cruelties both large and small; her beloved aunt Cess, her mother's sister, who brought caring and love into her life; her father, a man who not only dislikes his daughter but actively works to make her life miserable; Persephone, who wants to be best friends with Mabel; Roxanne, Persephone's mother, who is in hiding from her child's brutal father. Each one is beautifully delineated and essential to the story. Plus the two twists at the end of the novel took me totally by surprise. **No Rating.**

Mike Dillman

I remember looking at **MAD MABEL** and putting it back on the shelf at Barnes and Noble with no interest in buying the book. Then George called and said it was going to be the next Reviewed to Death title. So, I got the book and was truly surprised. I read it and found it to be one of my favorites of the year. What I enjoyed the most were the interactions between Mabel and her seven-year-old neighbor Persephone.

I had never heard of Sally Hepworth before this. I have since ordered all her books and so far have read **THE SOULMATE**, which I also enjoyed.

There are several authors that I have read -- because of the ***Deadly Pleasures*** reviews by George and other ***DP*** reviewers and from participating in the Reviewed to Death column -- that I would not have read otherwise. As a result, my reading horizons have been expanded. The hardest decision I now have it what to read next. My to-be-read pile continues to grow thanks to George and the other ***DP*** reviewers. Thanks – I think. **Rating: A**

Robin Agnew

I wish I had liked this more. The writing is good and I loved Mabel herself. As a former shy and geeky kid, I could relate. When things started piling on, however, with more terrible things happening than should happen to anyone, my dislike of the book grew. I even liked all the characters. They were all well drawn and memorable and on some level, except for the obvious villains, interesting and redeemable in some way or another. I seldom read, longing to be banged on the head. However, that was what reading this book felt like. **Rating: C+**

Lou Jacobs

Sally Hepworth's **MAD MABEL** is absolutely amazing. This cannot be characterized as a murder mystery with psychological suspense, but rather an exploration of the consequences of childhood cruelty and the ramifications of media labelling and gossip. The main protagonist is the irascible 81-year-old Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick, whose sharp and sarcastic tongue has protected her from society's injustices, like a suit of armor. She had been labelled "Mad Mabel" at age fifteen, after the killing of her cold and cruel father, who had just killed her beloved aunt, Cess.

The media and the judicial system didl not probe or investigate the events leading up to this tragedy. The public story, however incorrect that may be, will be the source of ongoing public fear and fascination for the rest of her life.

Hepworth brilliantly unspools the narrative in two alternating timelines. She reconstructs Elsie's childhood that shaped her, while providing present day events that once again casts suspicion and dredges up past gossip after she discovers her neighbor dead in his house. Naturally she is suspected of foul play. Her relationships with her neighbors

allow expansion of her real personality.

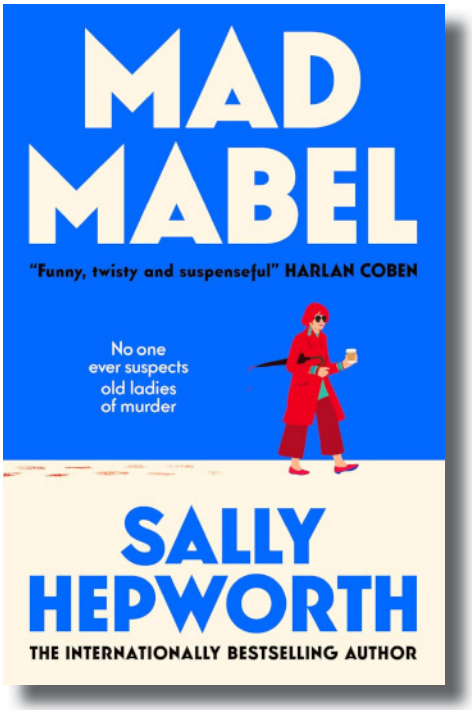
Especially warming is the relationship with the precocious seven year-old Persephone, who latches onto Elsie as a substitute grandmother.

Above all, this is a story of family, friendships and love that binds them together. At the same time, how cruelties and traumas of childhood shape ongoing events. It is interesting how gossip and accusations form the lens on which we judge people. It is no surprise that media accusations spread much faster than their correction. Wonderful characterization of multiple players in this emotionally deep portrayal of consequences of childhood trauma and neglect, laced with dark humor. This certainly will make me explore Hepworth's body of work. This has to be the best novel I've read this year. **Rating: A**

Ali Karim

(Ali listened to an audio version read by Hannah Fredrickson and Jenny Seedsman.

I must admit the content warning that preceded the audiobook was annoying, as it advised me that it touches upon mature themes including "_____". I have redacted what



can be a distraction and perhaps a small spoiler. That being said, the reader[s] were brilliantly engaging with a subtle antipodean accent which breathed life into this novel's backdrop.

What commences as a warm hearted [and at times very droll] narrative about age and quirkiness slowly turns into an examination of something darker. When elderly Melbourne resident Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick's [even older] next-door neighbour dies unexpectedly, foul play is suspected. Rumours and suspicious messages start appearing around the Kenny Street neighbourhood. As a bitter old woman, Elsie 'Mad Mabel' Fitzpatrick [at face value] is an unpleasantly opinionated eighty-year-old, but when viewed under the context of her childhood, then the novel's title may eponymously explain why Mabel is the way she has become, and therefore 'is' -- an unusual child of the 1950s. Sally Hepworth's novel is less of a mystery and more a domestic melodrama-cum-psychodrama. **MAD MABEL** is compelling as an audiobook, but a warning – when it comes to sentimentality -- not all nostalgia is sepia stained, some of the past is much darker. **Rating: A-**

Larry Gandle

This silly book is a first-person narration. As a result, characters are superficial and the father is a stereotypic mad monster. We are also at the mercy of an unreliable narrator. There is one so-called twist near the end concerning her best friend from childhood. Other than that there are few surprises. The plot is suspenseful enough to keep a reader's interest throughout. I am not sure this book is worth your time, however, in any case, you will be entertained throughout. What more could we expect or ask for? **Rating: B**

Well, there you have another session of Reviewed to Death with our contributors' varied opinions. It seems that more of us liked it a lot than were lukewarm or didn't like it at all. Now go and read **MAD MABEL** and see whose opinions come closest to your own.



Sally Hepworth

Sally Hepworth Hepworth lives in Melbourne, Australia, with her husband, three children, and their dog. She writes full-time from her home and remains highly active in the book community, hosting the "Dear Sally" advice series and engaging regularly with readers online. She is known for her darkly charming domestic thrillers and contemporary fiction. Her novels have sold millions of copies worldwide and been translated into over 30 languages.

Hepworth published her debut novel, **LOVE LIKE THE FRENCH**, in 2014, followed by her breakout U.S. release, **THE SECRETS OF MIDWIVES**, in 2015. Since then, she has maintained a prolific pace, publishing a book nearly every year. Her stories typically blend suspenseful family dynamics with quirky humor and sass, focusing heavily on human behavior, secrets, and identity.

Her works have won a Davitt Award and two Ned Kelly Awards.

Other Sally Hepworth Titles

It should be noted that most of these titles could be considered psychological suspense novels, with no crimes involved.

THE SECRETS OF MIDWIVES

(2015). Neva Bradley, a third-generation midwife, is determined to keep the details surrounding her own pregnancy -- including the identity of the baby's father -- hidden from her family and co-workers for as long as possible. Her mother, Grace, finds it impossible to let this secret rest. The more Grace prods, the tighter Neva holds to her story, and the more the lifelong differences between private, quiet Neva and open, gregarious Grace strain their relationship.

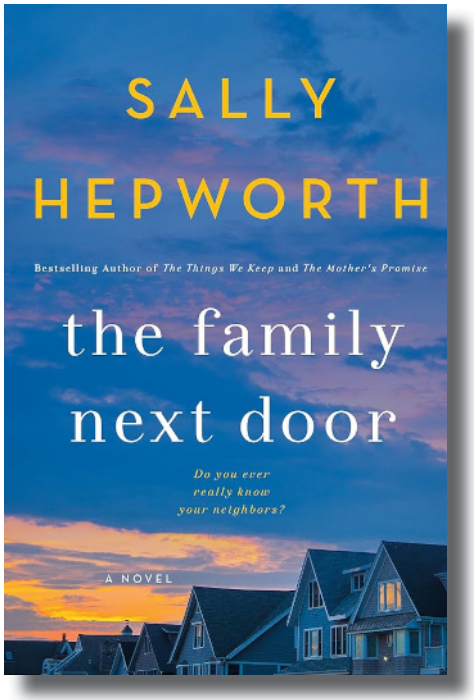
For Floss, Neva's grandmother and a retired midwife, Neva's situation thrusts her back sixty years in time to a secret that eerily mirrors her granddaughter's -- one which, if revealed, will have life-changing consequences for them all. As Neva's pregnancy progresses and speculation makes it harder and harder to conceal the truth, Floss wonders if hiding her own truth is ultimately more harmful than telling it. Will these women reveal their secrets and deal with the inevitable consequences? Or are some secrets best kept hidden?

THE THINGS WE KEEP (2016). Anna Forster is only thirty-eight years old, but her mind is slowly slipping away from her. Armed only with her keen wit and sharp-eyed determination, she knows that her family is doing what they believe to be best when they take her to Rosalind House, an assisted living facility. But Anna has a secret: she does not plan on staying. She also knows there's just one other resident who is her age, Luke. What she does not expect is the love that blossoms between her and Luke even as she resists her new life. As her disease steals more and more of her memory, Anna fights to hold on to what she knows, including her relationship with Luke.

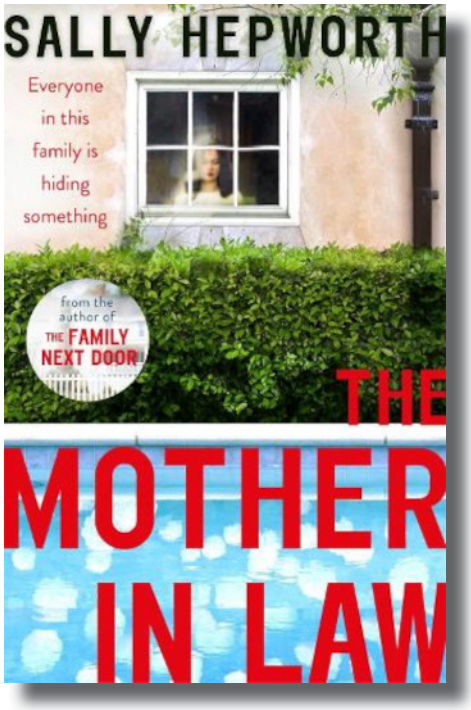
Eve Bennett, suddenly thrust into the role of single mother to her bright and vivacious seven-year-old daughter, finds herself putting her culinary training to use at Rosalind house. When she meets Anna and Luke, she is moved by the bond the pair has forged. But when a tragic incident leads Anna's and Luke's families to separate them, Eve finds herself questioning what she is willing to risk to help them. Eve has her own secrets, and her own desperate circumstances that raise the stakes even higher.

THE MOTHER'S PROMISE (2017). All their lives, Alice Stanhope and her daughter, Zoe, have been a family of two, living quietly in Northern California. Zoe has always struggled with crippling social anxiety and her mother has been her constant and fierce protector. With no family to speak of, and the identity of Zoe's father shrouded in mystery, their team of two works, until it doesn't. Until Alice gets sick and needs to fight for her life.

Desperate to find stability for Zoe, Alice reaches out to two women who are practically strangers but who are her only hope: Kate, a nurse, and Sonja, a social worker. As the four of them come together, a chain of events is set into motion and all four of them must confront their sharpest fears and secrets, secrets about abandonment, abuse, estrangement, and the deepest longing for family



THE FAMILY NEXT DOOR (2018). From the outside, Essie's life looks idyllic: a loving husband, a beautiful house in a good neighborhood, and a nearby mother who dotes on her grandchildren. But few of Essie's friends know her secret shame: that in a moment of maternal despair, she once walked away from her newborn, asleep in her carriage in a park. Disaster was avoided and Essie got better, but she still fears what lurks inside her, even as her daughter gets older and she has a second baby.



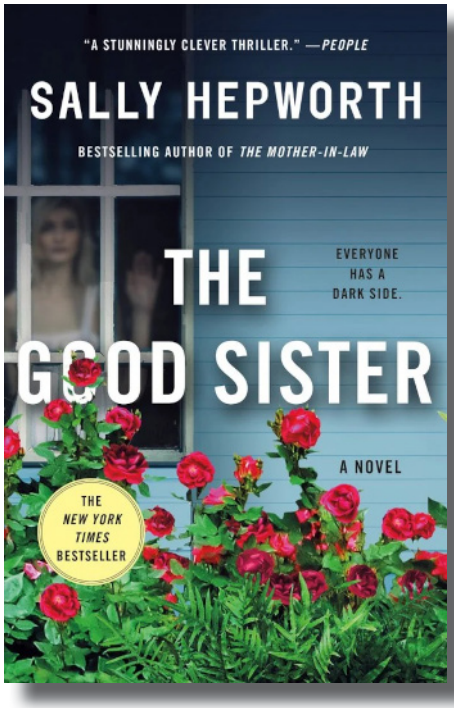
When a new woman named Isabelle moves in next door to Essie, she is an immediate object of curiosity in the neighborhood. Why single, when everyone else is married with children? Why renting, when everyone else owns? What mysterious job does she have? And why is she so fascinated with Essie? As the two women grow closer and Essie's friends voice their disapproval, it starts to become clear that Isabelle's choice of neighborhood was no accident. And that her presence threatens to bring shocking secrets to light.

THE MOTHER-IN-LAW (2019). From the moment Lucy met her husband's mother, she knew she wasn't the wife Diana had envisioned for her perfect son. Exquisitely polite, friendly, and always generous, Diana nonetheless kept Lucy at arm's length despite her desperate attempts to win her over. And as a pillar in the community, an advocate for female refugees, and a woman happily married for decades, no one had a bad word to say about Diana…except Lucy.

That was five years ago.

Now, Diana is dead, a suicide note found near her body claiming that she no longer wanted to live because of the cancer wreaking havoc inside her body. But the autopsy finds no cancer. It does find traces of poison, and evidence of suffocation.

Who could possibly want Diana dead? Why was her will changed at the eleventh hour to disinherit both of her children, and their spouses? And what does it mean that Lucy isn't exactly sad she's gone?



THE GOOD SISTER (2021). Fern Castle works in her local library. She has dinner with her twin sister Rose three nights a week. And she avoids crowds, bright lights, and loud noises as much as possible. Fern has a carefully structured life and disrupting her routine can be... dangerous.

When Rose discovers that she cannot get pregnant, Fern sees her chance to pay her sister back for everything Rose has done for her. Fern can have a baby for Rose. She just needs to find a father. Simple.

Fern's mission will shake the foundations of the life she has carefully built for herself and stir up dark secrets from the past, in this quirky, rich, and shocking story of what families keep hidden.

THE YOUNGER WIFE (2022).

The Husband

A heart surgeon at the top of his field, Stephen Aston is getting married again. But first he must divorce his current wife, even though she can no longer speak for herself.

The Daughters

Tully and Rachel Aston look upon their father's fiancée, Heather, as nothing but an interloper. Heather is younger than both of them. Clearly, she's after their father's money.

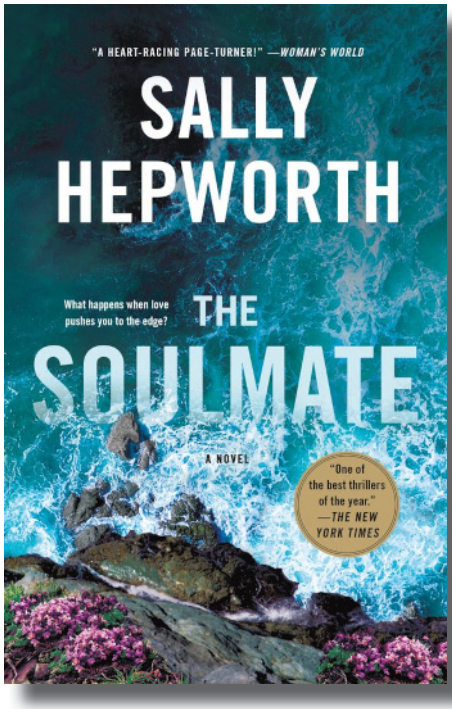
The Former Wife

With their mother in a precarious position, Tully and Rachel are determined to get to the truth about their family's secrets, the new wife closing in, and who their father really is.

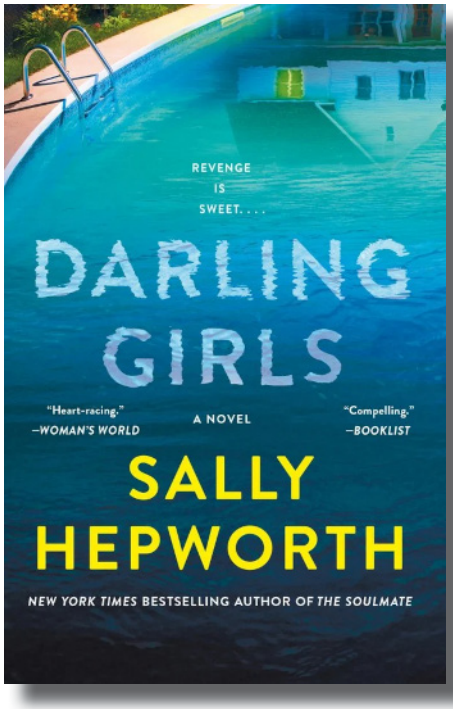
The Younger Wife

Heather has secrets of her own. Will getting to the truth unleash the most dangerous impulses in all of them?

THE SOULMATE (2023). Picture a lovely cottage on a cliff, with sloping lawns, walking paths, and beautiful flowers. It's Gabe and Pippa Gerard's dream home in a sleepy coastal town. But their perfect house hides something sinister. The tall cliffs have become a popular spot for people to end their lives. Over the past several months, Gabe comes to their rescue, literally talking them off the ledge.



Until one day, he doesn't. When Pippa discovers Gabe knew the victim, the questions spiral. . . .Did the victim jump? Was she pushed? And would Gabe, the love of Pippa's life, her soulmate . . . lie? As the perfect façade of their marriage begins to crack, the deepest and darkest secrets begin to unravel. Because sometimes, the most convincing lies are the ones we tell ourselves.



DARLING GIRLS (2024). For as long as they can remember, Jessica, Norah, and Alicia have been told how lucky they are. As young girls they were rescued from family tragedies and raised by a loving foster mother, Miss Fairchild, on an idyllic farming estate and given an elusive second chance at a happy family life.

But their childhood wasn't the fairy tale everyone thinks it was. Miss Fairchild had rules. Miss Fairchild could be unpredictable. And Miss Fairchild was never, ever to be crossed.

In a moment of desperation, the three broke away from Miss Fairchild and thought they were free. Even though they never saw her again, she was always somewhere in the shadows of their minds. When a body is discovered under the home they grew up in, the foster sisters find themselves thrust into the spotlight as key witnesses. Or are they prime suspects?

The 2026 Barry Award Winners

Best Mystery Novel

KING OF ASHES, S. A. Cosby – Winner

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING, Belinda Bauer
CROOKS, Lou Berney
THE BLACK WOLF, Louise Penny
THE WHITE CROW, Michael Robotham
PRESUMED GUILTY, Scott Turow



Best First Mystery Novel

THE VANISHING PLACE, Zoe Rankin – Winner

LEVERAGE, Amran Gowani
ALL THE OTHER MOTHERS HATE ME, Sarah Harman
DEAD MONEY, Jakob Kerr
STILLWATER, Tanya Scott
JULIE CHAN IS DEAD, Liann Zhang



Best Paperback Original Mystery Novel

THE DENTIST, Tim Sullivan – Winner

CRIMSON THAW, Bruce Robert Coffin
SPLINTERED JUSTICE, Kim Hays
MAKING A KILLING, Cara Hunter
IF TWO ARE DEAD, Rick Mofina
WOLF SIX, Alex Shaw



Best Action Thriller

MIDNIGHT BLACK, Mark Greaney – Winner

WITNESS 8, Steve Cavanagh
THE OLIGARCH'S DAUGHTER, Joseph Finder
CLOWN TOWN, Mick Herron
HEAD CASES, John McMahon
THE MAILMAN, Andrew Welsh-Huggins



Thanks to Members of the Barry Award Nominating Committee

Tips For New Readers of *Deadly Pleasures Mystery Magazine*



Since changing from a paid subscription system to offering all issues free of charge, we are adding more readers of the magazine daily, so I thought it might be helpful for them to get some tips on how to best avail themselves of the information that each issue holds.

1. **How Best to Read the Digital Magazine.** Printing the magazine out in color can be quite expensive, but I used to print out one black & white copy for a subscriber in a rest home and it cost about $8.00 and that included a spiral binding.

If you have access to a black and white laser printer, you can print out each issue quite easily. If you don't want to print it out, then reading it on an tablet like an Ipad is the best option. It looks great on an Ipad and one can adjust the pages to be read in comfort.

If you are just skimming the magazine and reading certain portions of it, a laptop or desktop computer serves the purpose just fine.

2. **Some Aspects of the Magazine to Understand.** This is a fan magazine. None of the reviewers are asked to read certain books by assignment. They are free to choose what they want to read and what to skip (even when it comes to the Reviewed to Death column, in which we read and review the same book). Most of us don't want to waste our time on books that don't "work" for us. So most of the reviews are positive because the reviewers are seasoned mystery fans who have a pretty good idea if they will like or dislike a book before cracking the cover. We don't have to finish reading a book if we don't like it and thus that book isn't likely to be reviewed. Don't mistake the overall positivity of reviews for any of us seeing the books through rose-colored glasses. I have great trust in the critical sense of our stable of reviewers. Though our tastes may differ one from another, we use our years of experience to recommend good books to you. Suggestion. Read a sampling of the books recommended by reviewers and determine which mirror most closely your own tastes. Then follow that reviewer or reviewers' recommendations.

3. **Our Main Goal.** The main goal of the magazine is to find the best mysteries, crime fiction and thrillers and then recommend them to you. The February issue of the magazine concentrates on determining which books are the best of the prior year and giving you a peek at some of the books of the upcoming year (in this case, 2027) that show the most promise.

4. **Some Reviewers Give a Rating and Some Don't.** I would prefer that reviewers rate the books they review, but since this is all volunteer and labor-of-love work, I don't insist on ratings. In most cases, the reviews without ratings are pretty clear on whether the reviewer is recommending the book or not.

5. **Book Titles**. I was told by a proofreading expert when I started ***Deadly Pleasures*** over 30 years ago that I could adopt my own style just so long as I was consistent with it. I like to emphasize book titles so they always appear in capital letters and in bold print. That may not be in concordance with the University of Chicago Manual of Style, but I don't care. You shouldn't either. Each reviewer has their own style as well and I try not to fiddle too much with how they structure their columns.

6. **A Little History**. ***Deadly Pleasures Mystery Magazine*** began publishing in 1992 as a 16-page newletter (too small to be considered a magazine). It quickly grew to magazine length and was printed on a quarterly basis until the summer of 2019, when it converted to a digital-only magazine. It wasn't cost effective to print the magazine in full color so I'm more than pleased to present the digital editions in full color. When I started in 1992 there were several, excellent mystery magazines being published, such as ***Armchair Detective***, ***Mystery Scene*** and ***Mystery News***. Now there are no magazines with similar content to ***DP***. So if you like the type of contact you'll find herein, i'm afraid you're stuck with **Deadly Pleasures Mystery Magazine**.

7. **A Cumulative List of Best Mysteries of the Year**. To compile such a list, we try to find consensus about certain books by considering those which have received Starred Reviews in the four library journals, ***Kirkus, Publisher's Weekly, BookList*** and ***Library Journal.*** Also considered are the Amazon Editor's Monthly Picks and positive reviews in ***Deadly Pleasures***. The list grows through the year as more titles are published.

8. We have reviewers who specialize in British, Australian & New Zealand crime fiction and you will see their columns herein. There are some great crime novels and thrillers being written in those areas of the world.

Keller

The Unsung Pleasures of Lawrence Block's Most Underrated Character

by Cody Pomeranz

Crime fiction is rife with hitmen. Spend a year reading mystery novels and you might assume it's one of the world's leading professions, the way we all thought marine biologists were as common as lawyers when we were growing up (if only…).

The "likeable" hitman or hitwoman, specifically, is having a bit of a renaissance in Hollywood right now. Hannah Waddingham's Judith Burton in Amazon's hilarious ***Ride or Die*** is the most recent example. Before that, we had Glen Powell donning ridiculous disguises in Richard Linklater's 2024 ***Hit Man***, and Bill Hader pursuing his thespian dreams in HBO's ***Barry***.

In publishing, we've long been blessed with a veritable buffet of engaging murder-for-hire stories, from Robert Ludlum's Bourne novels and Frederick Forsyth's seminal **THE DAY OF THE JACKAL** to Thomas Perry's **THE BUTCHER'S BOY**, Chris Holm's **THE KILLING KIND,** Elle Cosimano's *Finlay Donovan* series, and many, many more.

But in 1989, in a short story published by ***Playboy*** (yes, that ***Playboy***), mystery novelist Lawrence Block introduced us to one of the more unusual and refreshing creatures of this subgenre: John Keller.

Keller is a contract killer. He sits at home until his phone rings and his handler, Dot, tells him where to go and whose off switch to flip. Sometimes, the instructions are specific. No guns. Make it look like an accident. Kill the secret lover too and you get a bonus. Frame the secret lover and you get a bigger bonus.

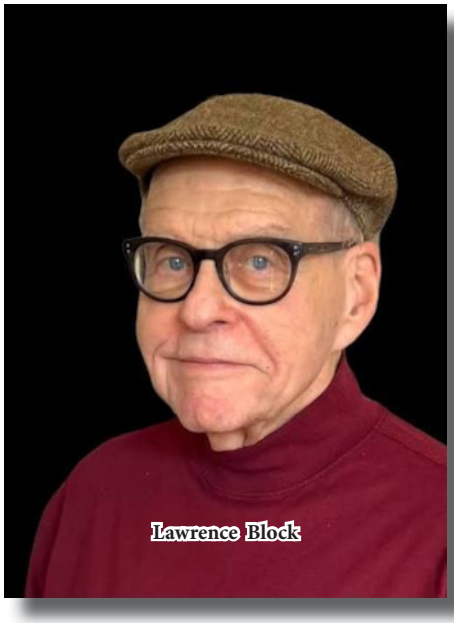
This all sounds like run-of-the-mill hitman stuff. And it would be, if it weren't for the man at the center of it all.

Keller is no ordinary hitman. He's a stamp collector who seems to descend into an existential crisis on nearly every job, questioning its ethics and wrestling with his conscience.

If that sounds strange, it is. It's also quite funny. Block equips Keller with a deadpan sense of humor and a penchant for wry digressions on some of life's universal questions. Why are we here? What's the point of it all? Should I let the man finish his steak before I kill him? You know, stuff we've all asked ourselves.

Here's a philosophizing philatelist (fun to say) who frets over whether or not he should delay murdering a john until the sex worker gets paid. In one story, he's hired to kill an aggressive dog and murders four people instead.

Dot, who's just begging to be played by Margo Martindale, indulges these ethical dilemmas and crises of faith with a mixture of amusement and annoyance, and their banter makes each story a joy.


Lawrence Block

Take this excerpt, from the story "Keller's Choice," after Keller calls an audible on the job:

"So explain it to me, will you?"

He took his time thinking about it. At length he said, "I didn't like the process."

"The process?"

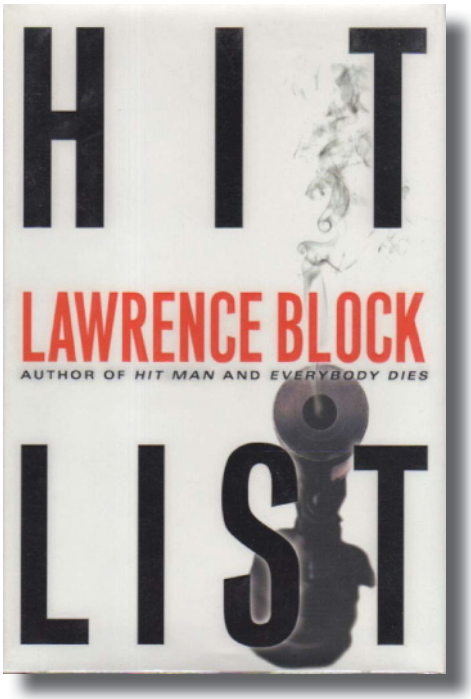
"Making a choice. There was no way to choose, and tossing a coin didn't really help. I was still choosing, because I was choosing to accept the coin's choice, if you can follow me?"

"The trail is faint," she said, "but I'm on it like a bloodhound."

Of course, Dot and Keller are just as likely to discuss her homemade iced tea and stock trading as they are their mutual business of killing.

In a broad sense, it's easy to make a character likeable. There's a whole school of storytelling built around this idea. But Keller is more than likeable; he's relatable. An everyman who's never quite sure of his place and purpose in the world. And it's his palpable loneliness, and his commitment to the smallest morsels of morality in an otherwise deeply immoral profession, that make him such fascinating company.

If you're squeamish, rest assured, these aren't very violent stories. The actual murders only take up a line or two in each scenario; sometimes they happen completely off stage (or page, I should say). Nor does Block care much for gun lore or martial arts. While many examples of this genre expend a lot of ink on the mechanics of a specific kind of rifle or jujitsu strike, Keller's more of



a point-and-shoot kind of guy. It's his hemming and hawing, his scheming and second-guessing, that keep us reading. And chuckling. And pondering the same puzzling situations alongside him.

Block's other major series characters, the hard-drinking P.I. Matthew Scudder and the gentleman thief Bernie Rhodenbarr, get all the glory (and sales), but it's Keller, with his stamp collection and conflicted conscience, who I keep coming back to, and who deserves his own spot in the pantheon of crime fiction.

For all Block's productivity (he's published over 100 books), Keller only features in six of them: four collections of loosely connected short stories (**HIT MAN, HIT LIST, HIT PARADE**, and **HIT ME**), one full-length novel (**HIT AND RUN**), and one novella (**KELLER'S FEDORA**)And with Block nearing 90, we may never see Keller again. But he's already brought readers plenty of joy.

In case you're not convinced, here are three specific reasons you should try the Keller series. I'll style them the same way Block titles most of the Keller stories.

Keller's Conscience

Block comes up with all sorts of ingenious and outlandishly fun predicaments to drive Keller nuts. In one story, he is hired to kill a man, but before he can complete the mission, he gets a phone call from Dot with another job… in the same city…to kill the client. (For context, Keller and Dot's boss, referred to only as "the old man," is suffering from dementia and forgets that the man hiring for this new job is the target he and Dot already sent Keller to kill.)

What's Keller to do? Should he honor the first contract or go with the highest bidder? Should he follow through on both of them or call the jobs off entirely? The quagmire provides plenty of fodder for Dot, as Keller begins searching desperately for evidence to help him make the "right" decision.

Maybe one of the men is easier to kill, he reasons. Maybe one of them has a family and the other is a loner, unlikely to be missed. Or maybe one deserves it more. If, for example, one of the men hated dogs, that would make the decision easier, wouldn't it? So, naturally, he seduces the ex-wives of both men and asks them if their former husbands had a particular affection for or antagonism towards canines.

When he comes up empty on all counts – no children, neither is currently married, both will be equally difficult to kill, no opinion one way or another on dogs – he consults Dot.

"Neither one's Albert Schweitzer," he told Dot, "and neither one's Hitler. They both fall somewhere in between, so making a decision on moral grounds is impossible. I'll tell you, this is murder."

"It's not," she said. "That's the whole trouble, Keller. You're in Cincinnati and the clock's running."

"I know."

"Moral decisions. This is the wrong business for moral decisions."

"You're right," he said. "And who am I to be making that kind of decision, anyway?"

"Spare me the humility," she said. "Listen, I'm as crazy as you are. I had this idea, call both brokers, have them get in touch with their clients. Explain that due to the exigencies of this particular situation, di dah di dah di dah, we need full payment in advance."

"You think they'd go for it?"

"If one of them went for it," she said, "that'd make the decision, wouldn't it? Knock him off and the other guy's left alive to pay in full, a satisfied customer."

"That's brilliant," he said, and thought a moment. "Except …"

"Ah, you spotted it, didn't you? The guy who cooperates, the guy who goes the extra mile to be a really good client, he's the one who gets rewarded by getting killed. I like ironic as much as the next person, Keller, but I decided that's a little too much for me."

"Besides," he said, "with our luck they'd both pay."

"And we'd be back where we started. Keller?"

"What?"

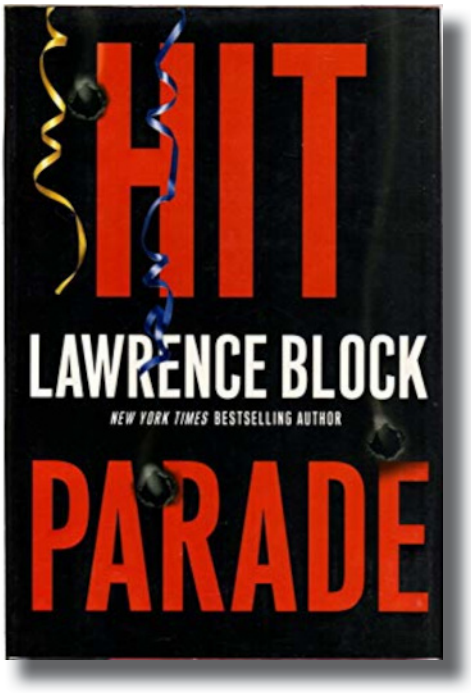
"All said and done, there's only one answer. You got a quarter?"

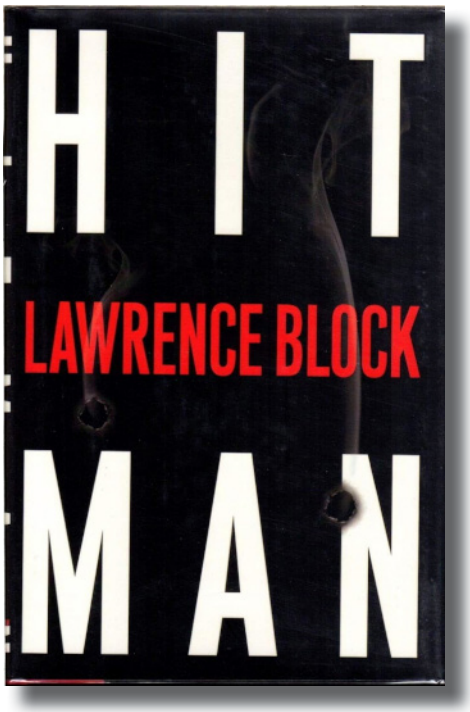
"Probably. Why?"

"Toss it," she said. "Heads or tails."

I won't spoil how he ultimately decides to resolve the situation, though I gave you a hint in the first excerpt I shared. How Keller teases out each dilemma is one of the pleasures of these stories, and one of the reasons he enjoys his job.

Keller isn't amoral like Richard Stark's Parker. But he isn't cloying or sanctimonious, either. Sometimes, he's ruthless. He finds the target, kills them,





and gets out of Dodge. He likes this work, even if he's conflicted by it. In a therapy session, Keller's psychiatrist even gets him to ponder whether his name, one letter from "killer," subconsciously led him to his chosen profession.

Keller's Inefficiency

One of the reasons we're so drawn to hitmen is because, in most of these books and films, they're usually good at their jobs. Stephen King famously described American readers' obsession with work in his legendary memoir On Writing. That applies here too. We crave competence. We admire highly skilled practitioners, even if the practice is, in fiction at least, killing other people for money.

One of my favorite examples is the aforementioned Michael Schaeffer (a.k.a the butcher's boy), Thomas Perry's brilliant, meticulous hitman who's always ten moves ahead of everyone else. Another is Don Winslow's Frank Machianno (a.k.a Frankie Machine), a retired gun for the Mob who wakes every morning before dawn, grinds his own coffee beans, keeps his home spotless, and seems incapable of making a mistake. This militaristic discipline is supposed to tell you everything you need to know about the kind of man you, and Frank's enemies, will be dealing with for the next couple hundred pages. Someone who believes if you're gonna be a ditchdigger, you might as well be the best damn – yada yada yada. Or as Dot might put it, di dah di dah di dah. You get the picture.

But John Keller is not Michael Schaeffer or Frank Machianno. He's not John Wick or Jason Bourne. He's a self-admitted bad shot and untrained in any sort of lethal or sophisticated martial arts. He's also a luddite who wonders whether turning off his phone will mean cell towers can't ping his location. Keller tells himself he should know these sorts of things. But he doesn't.

And yet, Keller is hardly bumbling. Nor is he a consistent victim of bad luck like Donald Westlake's hapless criminal John Dortmunder. The people Keller intends to kill usually wind up dead. And if they don't, it's almost always because he's decided to kill someone more deserving instead, which causes headaches for Dot when the more deserving party ends up being the client who hired them.

That unpredictability is part of the fun. Keller is mostly effective at his job, just highly inefficient. He procrastinates and daydreams. He stares out windows and reads pulp novels and flirts with waitresses.

Ultimately, Keller's inefficiency stems from a deeper problem: He's a man without an identity, which explains why he spends so much time trying on other people's.

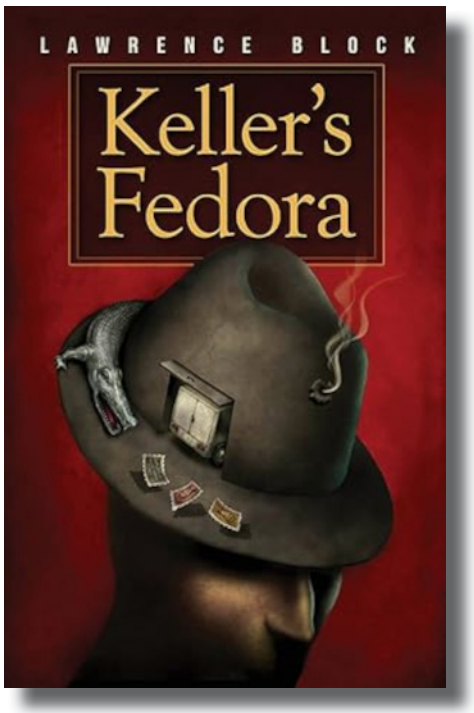
In his very first appearance (that 1989 Playboy story), he travels to Roseburg, Oregon, to kill a man in the witness protection program. He meets the man he's supposed to dispose of on his first day in town, but instead of killing him, he calls a real estate agent and decides to go house-hunting. "Every place you go, you want to live there," Dot tells him. "A person could have a decent life there," Keller replies wistfully.

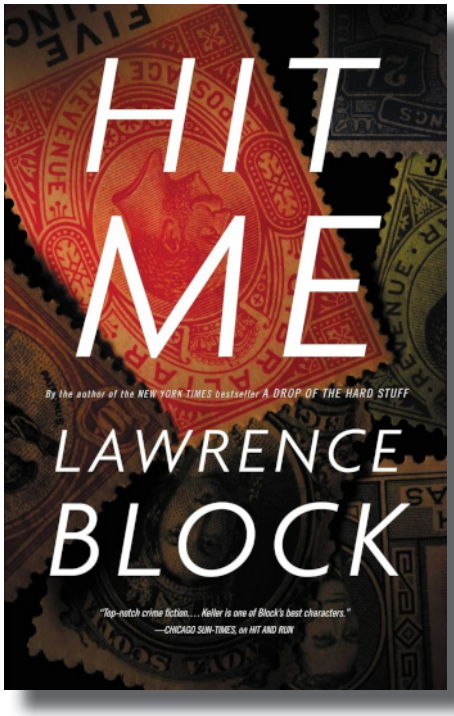
In "Keller on Horseback," the third story in Hit Man, Keller is sent to Wyoming to kill a ranch hand, but spends more time cosplaying life as a cowboy than scouting his target.

In KELLER'S FEDORA, a novella published in 2016, he does his best Marlowe after Dot gives him a perplexing job: the client wants his wife's secret lover dead, but doesn't know who it is, requiring Keller to play both gunman and gumshoe. He gets so into character that he's even afraid to leave his new fedora on the front seat of his car, lest some thief make off with it.

He tries a girlfriend who eventually leaves him. He adopts a dog who eventually leaves with the girlfriend.

In HIT MAN, Block delivers one of his best Keller stories, and one that perfectly encapsulates the character's rather circuitous methods of murder: "Keller's Designated Hitter." Dot and her employer hire Keller to kill a professional baseball player on the verge of hitting his four hundredth home run. Nobody knows who the client is (it's all done through intermediaries), but somebody wants the slugger dead. Instead of executing (pun very much intended) the plan with haste, Keller spends a month following the player's team across the country.





He tells himself, and Dot, that it's because he's taking his time to pick the right moment. Only later does he admit the truth. "It was the numbers," he confesses to Dot. "Four hundred home runs. Three thousand hits…I wanted him to get into the record books…and I wanted to be able to say I'd been there to see him do it."

Block sweetens the deal with some sparkling Dot-Keller banter. Like this:

"He's a designated hitter," Dot had said, on the porch of the big old house on Taunton Place. "Whatever that means."

"It means he's in the lineup on offense only," Keller told her. "He bats for the pitcher."

"Why can't the pitcher bat for himself? Is it some kind of union regulation?"

"That's close enough," said Keller.

And this, when Dot asks why a team from Tennessee, a landlocked state, is called the Tarpons:

"The franchise moved," Keller said. "They started out as an expansion team, the Sarasota Tarpons, but they couldn't sell enough tickets, so a new owner took over and moved them to Memphis. Look at basketball, the Utah Jazz and the L.A. Lakers. What's Salt Lake City got to do with jazz, and when did Southern California get to be the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes?"

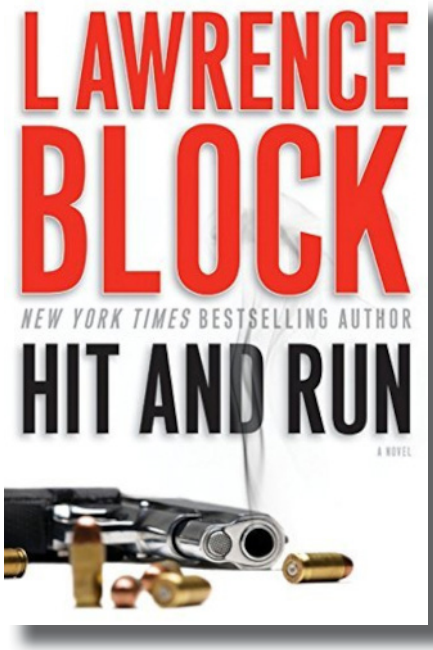
"The reason I don't follow sports," she said, "is it's too damn confusing. Isn't there a team called the Miami Heat? I hope they stay put. Imagine if they moved to Buffalo."

For all this inefficiency, however, Keller is quite clever and resourceful when he needs to be. In one instance, when his target is being protected 24/7 by a bodyguard, he stakes out the restaurant where the two men eat lunch at the same table every day. When he notices the target oversalts his food, he laces the salt shaker with cyanide and waits for the man to have a heart attack.

(Don't worry, he later replaces the poisoned shaker with a normal one so no one else dies, ostensibly to not draw suspicion, but more likely because of that nagging conscience of his.)

Keller's Hobby

John Keller may be the only hitman, fictional or real, who has even been armed with both a handgun and a pair of tongs at the same time. It's a nifty dichotomy. He uses the tongs to handle delicate old stamps, while employing the handgun (or whatever weapon is nearby) to inflict maximum damage.



His day job is dangerous and suspenseful, while his true passion would put most people to sleep.

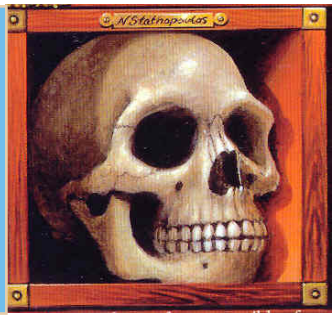
Block, himself, is an avid philatelist. And it shows. He clearly understands the often irrational mind of a collector. For example, Keller collects stamps up to 1940 from every country except the United States. "That way there's always something for you to buy," another philatelist, who only collects American, tells Keller. "Which is a blessing or a curse, depending how you look at it." Sometimes, Keller takes a job only to replenish his stamp fund. Other times, he accepts only because the target lives in the same city as a famous auction house he wants to check out or a stamp convention he was already planning to attend.

"Spending a fortune on little pieces of colored paper?" Block writes in "Keller in Dallas," the first story from his 2013 collection, **HIT ME**. "Picking them up with tongs, putting them in plastic mounts, and securing them in albums? Why, for heaven's sake? Keller had long since come to terms with the essential absurdity of the pastime, and didn't let it bother him. He was a stamp collector, he derived enormous satisfaction from the pursuit, and that was all he needed to know. If you thought about it, just about everything human beings did was pointless and ridiculous. Golf? Skiing?"

As a keen and irrational collector myself (first-edition mystery novels), I can't help but smile at the lengths Keller goes to just to get a flimsy rectangle no one else in the world, save a select few enthusiasts, cares about.

But we all have our vices and obsessions. Even reading about Keller can feel like its own kind of sin. In fact, in an interview with Craig Ferguson to promote the release of 2008's **HIT AND RUN**, Lawrence Block called Keller a "guilty pleasure" for a lot of readers. "They like him and they feel they shouldn't," Block said. "It's something for them to talk about in therapy."

Deadly Pleasures Best of 2026



Titles listed garnered starred reviews in one or more of the four library journals (***Publisher's Weekly***, ***Kirkus***, ***Booklist*** and ***Library Journal***), an Amazon Editors' Choice, and/or a glowing review in ***Deadly Pleasures*** as indicated. Many of the books listed herein will be found on year-end Best of 2026 lists. All sub-genre's of the mystery/crime fiction and thriller world are represented.

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**

***OUR NOBLE SELVES**, Kate Atkinson (Doubleday, $32.00 , September). When crime correspondent turned war reporter Harry Flynn returns to Britain from Singapore in 1945, he takes a quiet job with the Festival of Britain, a government-funded endeavor aimed at celebrating the nation's creativity, grit, and ingenuity. There, he joins a team of misfits and eccentrics as they help to ready the Festival for launch. When a Frenchwoman goes missing, Flynn becomes the central suspect in her disappearance—and possible murder. He was the last person to see her alive, yet he has no memory of the evening they spent together. As evidence against him mounts, Flynn begins to wonder if he might actually be to blame. To make matters worse, he is surrounded by people who have their own secret agenda. **Kirkus** & **BL**

***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**

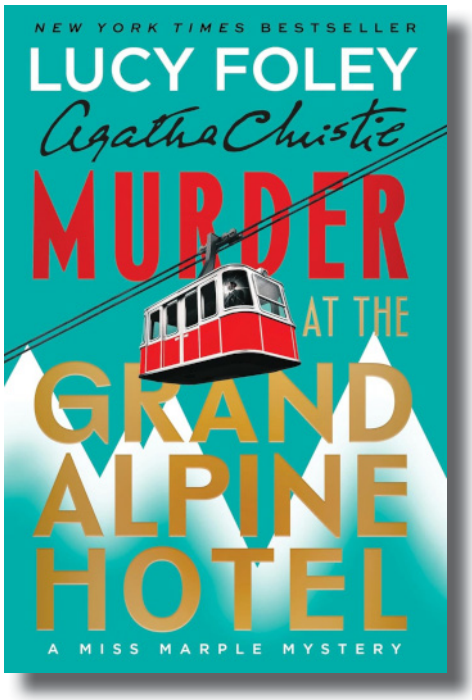
***IRONWOOD,** Michael Connelly (Little, Brown, $32.00, May). Stilwell #2. Detective Sergeant Stilwell knows that his posting on Catalina Island is no paradise, but to most residents, it seems blissfully separated—by twenty-two miles of ocean—from the troubles of Los Angeles County. But now a threat 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 newfound 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**



***MURDER AT THE GRAND ALPINE HOTEL**, Lucy Foley (Morrow, $30.00, September). High in the Swiss Alps, accessible only by a single, winding railway, stands the luxurious Grand Alpine Hotel. With glorious mountain views and exclusive access to powdery slopes, it draws guests from far and wide. But not everyone is here for a winter holiday. Beneath the champagne and furs, dark histories simmer; old grudges emerge like cracks in the ice. And someone is watching from the shadows. A polite, unassuming woman with an extraordinary mind: Miss Marple. When a body is found and a blizzard cuts off all escape, only Miss Marple can connect the clues before the killer strikes again. **BL, PW, LJ & AZ**

***WOLVES OF SUMMER**, Donna Freitas (Soho Crime, $29.95, November). Set mostly in the late 1970s in Bonnet Shores, Wolves of Summer picks up after twelve year-old Christina Grove doesn't come home one night. Christina's older sister, Maddie, takes the disappearance especially hard and blames herself for sending her little sister alone through the woods on her bike. As the community comes together to search for Christina, Maddie has suspicions of her own that lead her to take ever more dangerous risks. **PW** & **Kirkus**

***THE KEEPER,** Tana French (Viking, $32.00, March). Cal Cooper #3. Sweet, loving Rachel Holohan was about to be engaged to the son of the local big shot. Instead, she's dead in the river. In a close-knit small Irish town, a death like this isn't simple. It comes wrapped in generations-old grudges and power struggles, and it splits the townland in two. Retired Chicago detective Cal Hooper has friends here now, and he owes them loyalty, but his fiancée Lena wants nothing to do with Ardnakelty's tangles. As the feud becomes more vicious, their settled peace starts to crack apart. And when they uncover a scheme that casts a new light on Rachel's death and threatens the whole village, they find themselves in the firing line. **AZ** & **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(2) & 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, DP** & **AZ**

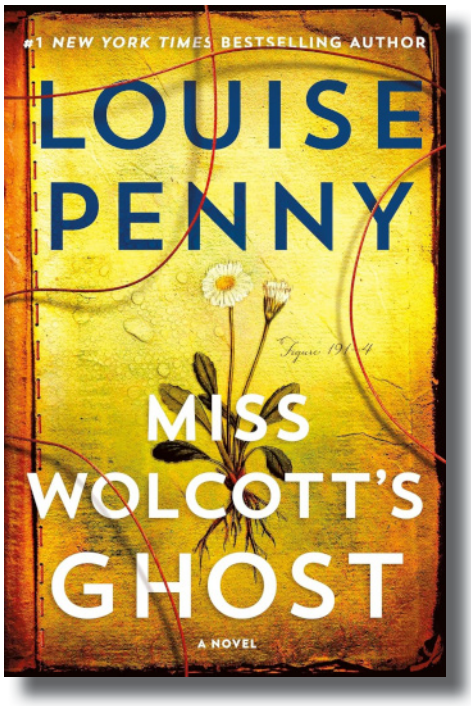
*****HEART OF GLASS**, Jennifer Hillier (Minotaur, $29.00, August). Twenty-five years ago in Seaside, Washington, a charming drifter named Sam met three inseparable teenage girls at the local amusement park. Days later, one of them was found dead. Barb and Nicolette were shocked to learn that the man they all met at Wonderland was the Carnival Killer. After he's arrested for the murders of five young women – one of whom was their best friend, Lorelei – Nicolette moved to the city to pursue her dreams of being famous. Barb stayed behind in Seaside, eventually becoming a reporter for the local paper. Their past safely behind them, they've both moved on with their lives. But when the Carnival Killer recants his confession and a new body washes ashore on the eve of Wonderland's grand reopening, the secrets that Barb and Nicolette have worked so hard to bury begin to resurface, threatening to destroy everything in their carefully constructed lives. **BL**

*****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**



*****MISS WOLCOTT'S GHOST**, Louise Penny (Minotaur, $30.00, October). "There's a body in Lost Nation." "Where?" demands Armand as he scribbles on the pad by his bed. But the line goes dead before Chief Inspector Gamache can question the caller. The head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec has no idea where Lost Nation is, or who woke him in the small hours of the morning at his home in Three Pines. What he does know is that the man was terrified.

And so Armand is thrust out of a deep sleep and into the surrounding

forests in search of the mythical Lost Nation. And a body. When he and his team of Jean-Guy Beauvoir and Isabelle Lacoste find both, the situation only grows more bizarre. The unidentified dead man appears to be from an era more than a century old. **Kirkus** & **BL**

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

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

***NIGHT OBJECTS**, Lev 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. As privilege collides with grief and loyalty warps into obsession, Lenny's choices will lead to an unforgettable reckoning—and a murder investigation that will test every story she tells herself about guilt, power, hope, and who she is becoming. **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**

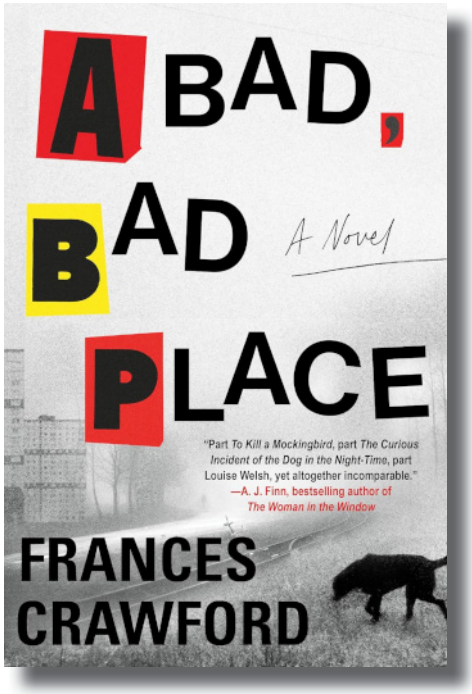
***COOL MACHINE,** Colson Whitehead (Doubleday, $30.00, July). In 1981, New York City is emerging from financial ruin while reluctant fence and furniture salesman Ray Carney gambles on one last heist. In 1983, seasoned criminal Pepper takes on a gig as a bodyguard, plunging into the alien territory of 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, $27.00, 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**

****REVENGE PLOT**, Stephanie Wrobel (Berkley, $30.00, November). All Arnie Tenderton wants this Christmas—all he's ever wanted—is to be a published author. For decades he has toiled over one novel after another. Each was missing something. Until now. He's finally written his perfect book. What he needs next is a literary agent, someone who can get his book into publishers' hands. Not just any agent will do, of course. Arnie wants the best. Arnie wants Claudia Conley. She already rejected him once, and Arnie has never forgiven her. He could move on. Instead, he finds out where Claudia is spending the holidays: alone in a remote house in the Catskill Mountains. He decides to show up there to make his pitch. Claudia may try to turn him down again, but this time Arnie won't take no for an answer. Because his book is about her. And he's not leaving until the story ends the way he wants. **PW, AZ** & **LJ**

Best First Mystery Novels

****THE BARMAN OF THE RITZ**, Phillippe Collin (Scribner, $29.00, September). Paris, 1940. The Nazis have descended on Paris and the Occupation has begun. Businesses across the city have shuttered, but the legendary Ritz Hotel remains open, its dazzling lights still burning bright on the Place Vendôme. When it becomes the favorite watering hole of the occupying forces, its barman, Frank Meier, is forced to adapt to a new clientele. But Frank has a secret: he is Jewish. Tensions rise as the war progresses, but Frank refuses to leave his post behind the bar. Unbeknownst to the Nazi officers he serves night after night, Frank forms precarious alliances with unlikely accomplices in order to save other Jewish families in the city and keep his loved ones alive. **Kirkus, BL & DP** (2)



****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** & **DP**

****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**

****MOTHER MAY I**, Harry Hunsicker (Oceanview, $19.99, October). When former CIA operative Meg Dalton finds a shocking clue that suggests her long-missing daughter might still be alive, she's forced into a desperate, high-stakes search for the truth. Fifteen years after little Ivy vanished without a trace at a Texas

fair, Meg has built a career as a covert "operator", a soldier-for-hire who takes on dangerous black ops missions for the government.

But during a botched assignment in Los Angeles, Meg encounters a woman wearing her daughter's distinctive butterfly necklace, and everything she believes unravels. As Meg defies her handlers and goes rogue to chase the lead, she's thrust into a deadly conspiracy linking global espionage, human trafficking, and her own past sins. **PW & DP**

*****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 schoolteacher 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**

*****THE 10:12**, Anna Maloney (Harper Perennial, $18.99, October). Claire Fitzroy was on the way home to London when her train from Manchester was hijacked by a group of armed men. In one terrifying moment she faced the starkest of choices: to passively stand back or act and fight back—knowing that with either choice, she could die. With nothing to lose, the middle-aged art lecturer gathered and led a squad of passengers who, against all odds, overcame the hijackers and saved hundreds of lives. But what at first looks like heroism may play out very differently in the courts of law and public opinion. Especially when you have the blood of two men on your hands. **PW** & **BL**

*****HOW TO COMMIT A POSTCOLONIAL 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**

****HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER** (Minotaur, $29.00, February). Detective Inspector Samantha Hansen has been on leave for six months, recovering from a breakdown she suffered at work, but when a fourteen-year-old girl is murdered in a local park, Sam jumps at the chance to return to the job and prove that she's still got what it takes to be the Yard's most successful homicide detective. One of the case's only leads is a copy of a self-help book found in the victim's backpack called How To Get Away With Murder by a man named Denver Brady. **Kirkus**

*****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. **LJ & AZ**

Best Paperback Original

Mysteries

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

***THE MIDNIGHT TAXI,** Yosha Gunasekera (Berkley, $18.99, February), Siriwathi 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, LJ**

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

***CODEBREAKERS**, Stella Sands (HarperPerennial, $18.99, August). Wordhunter#2. Steamy, seedy, swampy south-central Florida once again serves as the backdrop for the unlikely duo of loquacious, tattooed, trash-talking Maggie Moore and laconic Detective Silas Gabriel Jackson—linguistic genius and genius detective, respectively. Now operating their own agency and using their extraordinary skills in forensic semiotics (her), and good old-fashioned observation (him), the pair decode clues embedded in words and symbols to uncover a sadistic criminal who preys upon unsuspecting men. **DP**

***THE PATIENT,** Tim Sullivan (Atlantic Crime, $17.00, February). George Cross #3. DS George Cross can be rude, difficult, and awkward with people. But his unfailing logic and dogged pursuit of the truth means his conviction rate is the best on the force.

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

***HOW TO KILL A GUY IN TEN DATES**, Shailee Thompson (Gallery, $18.00, February).

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

Best Thrillers

***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**

***MOTHER MAY I**, Harry Hunsicker (Thomas & Mercer, $19.99, October). When former CIA operative Meg Dalton finds a shocking clue that suggests her long-missing daughter might still be alive, she's forced into a desperate, high-stakes search for the truth. Fifteen years after little Ivy vanished without a trace at a Texas fair, Meg has built a career as a covert "operator," a soldier-for-hire who takes on dangerous black ops missions for the government. **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 Lillinthal is summoned to the crime scene and marvels at the outcome. Why would anyone want to kill gray-haired Roger Smith? He's the picture of respectability--a widower devoted to his family, an amateur painter, and a civil servant who works at the Government Printing Office. When asked why he'd be a target, a clearly shaken Roger claims to be baffled. But instinct tells Grace there's more to Roger's story. **DP**

***LONDON STATION**, David McCloskey (Norton, $29.00, September). A new US administration has taken office, installing a brash and unconventional CIA director skeptical of old alliances and determined to disrupt the Agency. When the axe falls on the chief of London Station, the agency veteran decides to spy for the Brits—a betrayal uncovered by his replacement, Artemis Aphrodite Procter. Caught between a turncoat spymaster and a ruthless new boss back at Langley, Procter must now navigate a tense environment as old friends become adversaries and no one knows whom to trust. **DP**

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

what is his connection to their C.I.? **DP**

***GUNNER**, Alan Parks (Pegasus, $27.95, April). March 1941. Joseph Gunner is back on the streets of Glasgow after being wounded on the front lines in France. Keeping the pain in his leg at bay with the help of morphine, Gunner, a former detective, is hoping to lie low as the Luftwaffe begins bombing Glasgow. But when he runs into his old boss Drummond, he is persuaded to help examine a body found in the wreckage. When it turns out to be that of a German, mutilated to disguise his identity, Gunner reluctantly agrees to investigate. **PW**, **BL** & **DP**

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

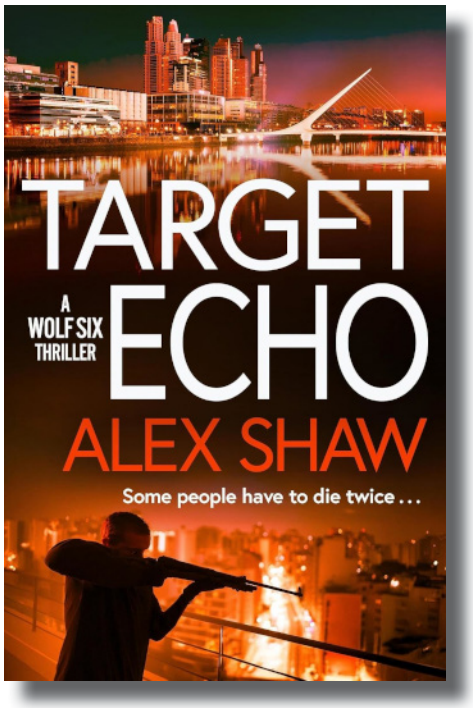
***THE DARK TIME,** Nick Petrie (Putnam, $30.00, March). Peter Ash #9. Katelyn Thorsen, known as KT to her friends and enemies, is an independent journalist who receives a very specific death threat. Fortunately, Peter Ash has arrived in town to protect KT at the request of his girlfriend, June Cassidy. From the moment of his arrival, he's thrown into a maelstrom of violence trying to protect KT and her daughter and discover the source of the death threat. **DP**(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 shakedown. Majed isn't just in trouble—he's a target. And the hunters are closing in. **BL, PW** & **DP**

***PENDERGAST: The Beginning**, Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child (Grand Central, $30.00, January). Prequel. It only took six months for the life of Special Agent Dwight Chambers to crumble around him. First, he lost his partner, and then, tragically, his wife. Returning to work at the New Orleans Field Office, Chambers is dismayed to find himself saddled with mentoring a brand new FBI agent—a certain A. X. L. Pendergast. As Chambers tries to pull himself together, his enigmatic and exasperating junior partner pulls an outrageous stunt that gets both of them suspended. Pendergast welcomes the banishment, because it gives him the opportunity to investigate a peculiar murder in Mississippi that has captured his fancy. Chambers grudgingly goes along. **DP**

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

Elite Ukrainian assassin Ruslan Akulov, aka Wolf Six, is a ghost. A weapon for hire forged in the fires of conflict and tempered by experience. Known by both the underworld and international intelligence agencies, he



works alone, guided only by the next mission and his unwavering commitment to his personal kill code. So when a routine contract in Argentina turns from simple to chaotic in the squeeze of a trigger, Akulov is thrown into a complex web of deceit and dangerous tests of loyalty. Akulov had heard of the French intelligence operative Sophie Racine – her reputation and skills are world-class, but when her business becomes his problem, Wolf Six must quickly learn to work with others. **DP**

***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



Barry Awards. I just finished presenting this year's Barry Awards at Bouchercon. It was the 30th year of the Barry Awards and I have decided to cap the Barry Awards at that nice round number of 30. We've had a good run and have recognized the worth of many mystery and thriller writers and their books along the way. A big THANK YOU goes out to all of the devoted mystery fans who have served on the Barry Award nominating committees over the years – and to the readers of ***DP*** who faithfully voted for the winners of the Barry Awards.

Why stop now? It has nothing to do with my health which is still good. I'm trying to simplify my life. It's just that I didn't want to be committed to going to Bouchercon each year to present the awards and find out that some emergency (medical or otherwise) had cropped up. I'm in my 80's now and something is probably going to occur during the next ten years, so I'm preparing for that eventuality.

The **Good News** is that we (the former Barry Award Nominating Committee) are still going to choose six nominated books each year in our four categories: Best Novel, Best First Novel, Best Thriller and Best Paperback Original. We may even add Best British (published in U.K. but not U.S.) and Best Australian/New Zealand Crime Novel categories. Then the members of the Nominating Committee (not the readers of ***DP***) will choose the winners of each category. These will be dubbed the **Deadly Pleasures Best Mystery, Crime and Thriller Books of (year)**. There will be an announcement, but no award plaques. You will still get to see which are the books in a given year that we value most highly, and create your own reading lists therefrom, if you so wish.. I may add a few well-read fans to the Nominating Committee. If you feel qualified and would like to join us, please send me an email at george@deadlypleasures.com.



Bouchercon Report. Before attending, I had mixed feelings about this year's Bouchercon in Calgary, Canada. That was because many of my close mystery friends (Maggie Mason, Larry Gandle, Mike Bursaw, Nancy Mitchell, Mike Dillman, Hank Wagner, Ali Karim, Mike Stotter, Ted Fitzgerald, Kevin Burton Smith, Robin Agnew, Janet Rudolph, Jeff Kingston Pierce, Oline Cogdill and Ted Hertel) decided to give it a pass for a number of different reasons. The only member of the current ***DP*** staff who was there was Meredith Anthony, who did a great job on the panel I moderated. But there were other old-time fans like Donus Roberts (and his family), Judy Bobalik, David Magayna, John Purcell, Don & Jen Longmuir, Peter Rozovsky, Kim Krabill and Barbara Peters who helped fill the void.

The convention seemed well attended and very well organized. The city of Calgary was a lot bigger than I imagined. I thought it was about the size of Salt Lake City (500,000 + population). But it proved to be much larger – population 1.7 million. Very impressive. I'm glad I went. When my father immigrated from England in the 1920s he first went to Calgary for a year and I've always been curious to see the place.

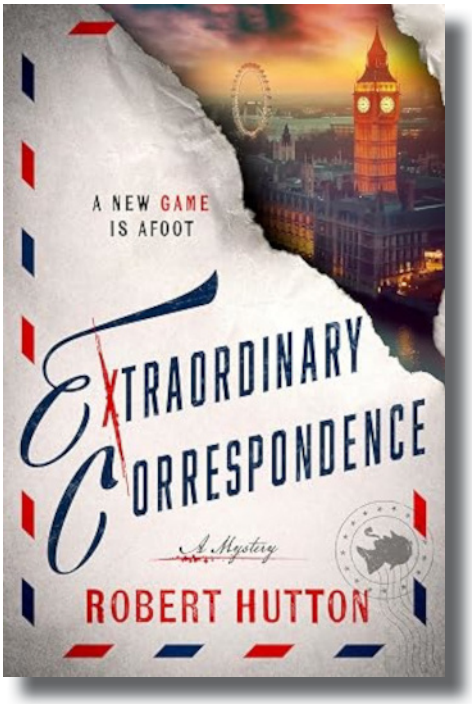
One of the main reasons for going was to meet Steele Curry's wife and family and to attend any events regarding his donation of over 8,000 spy, thriller and crime fiction novels to the University of Calgary Library. I did meet up with Steele's wife Judy and her two beautiful daughters at the Opening Ceremonies and got to spend a special few minutes with them. A couple of days later there was a small exhibit of some of Steele's books in the convention lobby. These showed the diversity of his collection – authors from all over the world. The convention did a marvelous job of honoring his memory as a super fan and supporter of Bouchercon.

Breakfast Tradition. Back in 2016 we established an on again/off again tradition of gathering a bunch of fans and authors and meeting each morning for breakfast. The site we found in New Orleans was The Ruby Slipper, just a couple of blocks from the hotel. Ali Karim would sweep in with his entourage of writers. It was there that I met two of my favorite U.K. writers – Steve Cavanagh and William Shaw. When Bouchercon returned to New Orleans last year, Ali did his thing again and I met Alex Shaw, who has quickly become one of my favorite action thriller writers.



I knew that it would be hard to duplicate those breakfasts in Calgary because the only "breakfast" author attending was going to be Alex Shaw. Nevertheless, I emailed Alex and agreed to meet up with him. I told him to invite whomever he wished – and he did so. In Ali Karim-like fashion, he brought along two other thriller writers whom I had never met – Stephen England (Montana) and Stuart Field (U.K and Germany) and his lovely wife Anika. Peter Rozovsky joined us and we had a very congenial time of it for four consecu-

tive breakfasts. I've now got a copy of **SIDESHOW** by Stephen England and **NOBODY'S AGENT** by Stuart Field on my nightstand and IPad to read.



Whenever I run into veteran St. Martin's/Minotaur editor Keith Kahla I ask him for a recommendation of an upcoming book. A book he is high on is a first novel called **EXTRAORDINARY CORRESPONDENCE** by Robert Hutton, coming out next June. Here is the plot:

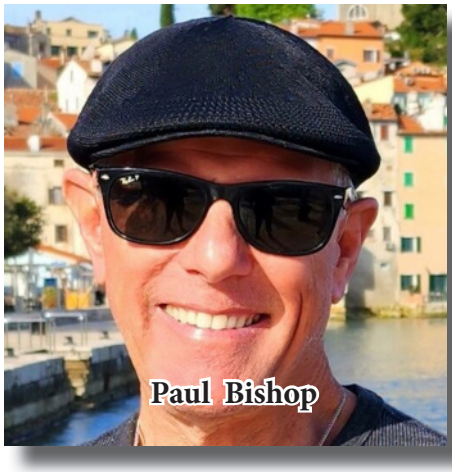
On Baker Street in London is an old, very private bank. For over a century letters have arrived there from around the world addressed to the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. To respond to this mail, the bank created the office of Extraordinary Correspondence, its sole employee being one Sycamore Bell.

Sycamore Bell is a young, short, stout man of few passionate interests, primary among them is Sherlock Holmes. His bookshelves are jammed with books about Holmes, he only watches film and TV about him, and his greatest, unfulfilled desire is to be able to match Holmes' uncanny abilities at deduction.

James Watson is a temp worker at the same bank who needs a cheap room to rent. Being teased as "Dr. Watson" his entire life, he has one abiding hatred – he despises Sherlock Holmes and refuses to read, watch, or even know anything about him. But desperation has made him the unlikely roommate of Sycamore Bell.

When Sycamore receives a letter asking for Holmes's help investigating a murder in Texas, he wonders if there might be something he can do to help. He knows all of his hero's cases and techniques inside out and this is his chance to put his own powers of deduction to the test. Unfortunately, Sycamore's detective skills are terrible. When the case goes disastrously wrong, James faces a dilemma: is it really his job to rescue Sycamore, solve the murder case and save the day?

Keith has promised me an advance reading copy so I'll let you know my thoughts after I read it. The plot sounds intriguing.



A Favorite Encounter. Paul Bishop was a writer/LA Detective whom I was familiar with in the early 1990s. At one Bouchercon he told us an unforgettable story. He and his partner went to an apartment complex to arrest a suspect, which they did. While searching the suspect's apartment, Bishop noticed that his latest book was lying on the suspect's night stand. A thought flashed through his mind, "Should I ask him if he wants me to sign it?"

Flash forward thirty years or so and whom should I encounter at this year's Bouchercon but Paul Bishop – and he recognized me. At the time I was in conversation with Bruce Robert Coffin (one of many enjoyable conversations with him), a thirty-year veteran cop (Maine). I introduced them to each other and while they were standing there, I said to Paul, "I've been telling this story about you for years. Can I tell it to you now – to see if I still have the facts straight?" So I did and he said that I was correct, but that there was more to the story. So he told Bruce and me the story with a lot more details.

Paul and his partner went to the suspect's apartment and rang the doorbell. The suspect came to the door in a bathrobe, wide open at the front showing that he was completely naked underneath the robe. So they placed the suspect under arrest and took him upstairs to his bedroom to find some clothes. On the nightstand was Paul Bishop's latest hardback laying open and face down with an obvious crack on the spine. His first thought was, ""Should I ask him if he wants me to sign it?" And his second thought was, "I should add a charge for cracking the spine of my book." His third thought was, "The poor bastard isn't going to find out how the book ends for fifteen years."

Fast forward to the trial. The judge asks the jury, "Do any of you know Detective Paul Bishop?" A little old lady in the back of the jury box raises her hand and said, "I don't know him personally, but I'm reading his book." She reaches into her purse and pulls out the book.

After the lunch break, four of the jurors and the defense attorney come back with copies of Paul's book. Love that story. Now I can tell it with more details.

Encounters with Authors. Not long after arriving at the hotel, I bumped into Harry Hunsicker. I had just read and greatly enjoyed his latest book, **MOTHER MAY I** (see review herein). He told me that my comments had made his day.

Karen Dionne won a Barry Award for **THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER** some years ago and we've gotten to know each other a bit over the years. I almost didn't recognize her this year. She is so fashionably thin and looks great. She says that she hopes to have another book out in 2027.

I was very glad to present a Barry Award for Best Thriller to Mark Greaney, my favorite action thriller writer. We had nominated him eleven previous times and he finally won this

year.


George & James Byrne

When I spied James Byrne, author of the Dez Limerick series, I mentioned that I thought he was the only author attending Bouchercon this year that attended Bouchercon in 1991, my first Bouchercon. Back then he went by the name of Conrad Haynes. Now I'm wondering if the aforementioned Paul Bishop was there in Pasadena.

Canadian Rick Mofina spent a lot of time at the convention and I saw him numerous times. He conducted a wonderful interview with Louise Penny. We had a few chances to chat and one long gab session in which he regaled me with fascinating stories from his newspaper reporting days. He is a very talented writer whom I consider grossly underrated because he publishes in trade paperback.

Barry-Award nominee Karen Odden and I had several good chats over the course of the convention. I also talked about her book **AN ARTFUL DODGE** on my panel. I saw her at Otto Penzler's party where I ate some popcorn offered as an hors-d'oeuvre. Besides it tasting nasty, I got a corn husk caught it my throat that caused a coughing fit. So I left early.

I had a copy of Louise Penny's first book in first edition to get signed for Mystery Mike Bursaw. Louise had a signing on Friday and the line had maybe 30-40 people in it. So I just chatted with people in the bookroom until the line got down to about 5 people. Then John Purcell and I went over and joined the queue. Just before our turn, we were told that Louise had to leave and that we should come back the next morning at 9:00 am when Louise was having another signing. I did so and found that the new line had about 200 people in it, so I went to a panel instead. I came back an hour later and there were still about 100 people in line, so I joined the line and had a wonderful talk with Cody Pomeranz who said that he had written an article about Lawrence Block's character Keller. He offered it to me for the magazine and I willingly accepted (see the article herein). I'm going to see if he is willing to contribute more in the future.

When it was finally my turn, I got a nice hug from Louise and someone offered to take our picture together. Louise signed for two hours. What a trooper!


Louise & George

The delightful Tanya Scott came all the way from Australia and hers was the only book I brought to get signed for myself. We did a Reviewed to Death column earlier in the year on her excellent debut novel **STILLWATER**. She has a second novel coming out in 2027 set in the same area as the first, but featuring new characters.

I organized and moderated a panel called Rave Reviews. The panelists (Barbara Peters of the Poisoned Pen Bookstore, ***DP*** reviewer Meredith Anthony and author/podcaster Abir Mukherjee and I) talked about recent and past favorite books. We had about 150 attendees in a cavernous panel room. I had a handout of our choices because, of course, we didn't get to talk about all of them because we all ran a bit long with each book we talked about. I thought it went quite well and hope to do it again next year. Among others, I talked about David Heska Wanbli Weiden's new book **WISDOM CORNER**. He was there at the panel and I admonished him to not make us wait six years for the next book.

Michael Sears and his co-author Stanley Trollip write under the name Michael Stanley (Barry-Award winner) and are up to ten books in the Detective Kubu series. I had a pleasant chat with Michael about how to stay safe while visiting South Africa. He has promised a piece for ***Deadly Pleasures*** on the series.

There were brief encounters with thriller and mystery writers Nick Petrie, Adam Plantinga, Mark Greaney, I.S. Berry (new book on the horizon), Andrew Bridgeman, James LEtoile, Charles Todd, Lawrence Light, Marc Cameron, Sam Reaves Alex Dekker and William Kent Krueger. Other writers I spoke to briefly were Margaret Mizushima (with veterinarian husband), Mia P. Manansala (a past Barry Award winner), Tracy Clark, Sara Paretsky, Danielle Girard, S. J. Rozan, Matt Goldman, David Housewritht, and Laurie R. King. At the airport going home I saw Brett Battles (Barry Award winner) and we had an interesting discussion about his writing and continuing the Stuart Woods' Stone Barrington series.

All in all a great event for me. I'm already planning to attend next year in Washington, D. C., where many who didn't attend this year are planning to attend.

They Died With Their Boots On. I'm thinking of three writers who have recently passed away. They all have new books coming out or recently released. I've often pondered on the fact that writers seldom retire. And why is that? I assume it is because they love what they do best and that is to create new worlds for readers.

The first of these recently departed writers is Peter May, whom I considered a friend. Even as I write this short obituary I find myself getting a bit emotional. My thoughts and prayers go out to his lovely wife Janice.

I also greatly admired his work and spent many enjoyable hours reading it.

It was my honor to present him with a Barry Award for his exceptional book **THE BLACKHOUSE**.



Peter's new book, **ISLAND OF THE DEAD** comes out in the U.K. in January, 2027.

The second writer is Jeffery Archer, who enjoyed a very successful career as a writer and a checkered past as an individual (he spent time in prison for perjury.).

Archer was as accomplished as a writer of short fiction as he was as a novelist. He had an inborn talent for storytelling and his sales of 33 million books wroldwide is a testament to that.

His latest novel, **ADAM & EVE** came out in October, 2026.

The third writer whom we will miss is Mark Pryor, who passed away at the relatively young age of 59. Most of Mark's novels were set in Paris, with one of his series being set in the Paris of the 1940s.

His latest book, **A VINTAGE MURDER IN PARIS** will be published in March, 2027.

Next Issue. I will be collecting and analyzing about 80 to 100 best mystery, crime fiction and thriller lists as they come out over the next couple of months. These will be posted on the www.deadlypleasures.com website and will form the basis for the cover article in the February, 2027 issue on The Best of 2026.

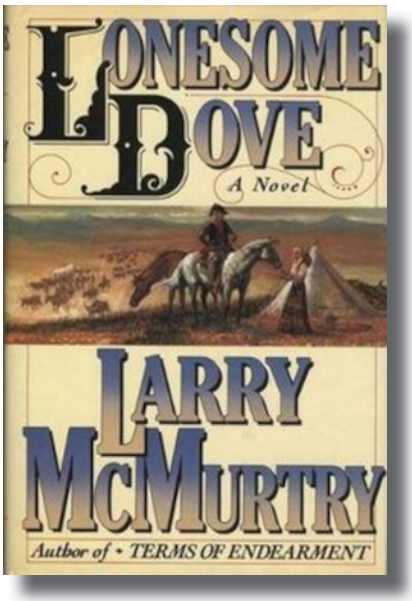
Associate Editor's Message



I have been reading and reviewing crime fiction and thrillers almost exclusively since 1995 -- over thirty years.

Recently I joined an online bookclub that reads literary fiction. At this time of my life, I find literary fiction speaks more to me than crime fiction.

The world of crime fiction has changed dramatically since those days of regional PI novels that dominated the 1990s. I won't go into a history of crime fiction, but, suffice to say, so much of crime fiction today consists of psychological and domestic suspense novels, all trying for the shocking 'GONE GIRL' twist. These books are so much of the same thing that there is an inherent lack of originality. These books do sell. Therefore, they remain and continue to thrive. I am not saying that international thriller novels and legal thrillers are not being written at a high level of quality. However, I have been reading these books for over thirty years and at this stage of my life, I will be very selective as to what books in the crime fiction genre I will read. I now find myself tied into the literary fiction social media websites. This has very much changed what books



I will pick up and read. For example, on social media, it is almost universal that when bloggers and voracious readers list their favorite books of all time two books are mentioned. These are **LONESOME DOVE** by Larry McMurtry and **EAST OF EDEN** by John Steinbeck. I am determined to finish these two lengthy books before the end of the year. I am halfway through **LONESOME DOVE** and I see their point. It is a great read.

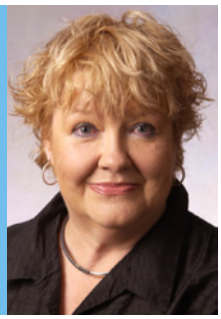
So, the point of this is to explain why I have no review column in this issue. I will get back to crime fiction as George accumulates the best of the year lists. I will selectively read books of this genre as we get into the end of the year. I only want to read what are considered the best of the best.

Bouchercon has always been an adrenaline shot to get me back into crime fiction. I did not attend the event this year in Calgary. I was on the Bouchercon board when we selected Calgary a few years ago. The Calgary presentation proposal was the best I have ever seen. I did check to see if there were direct flights from Tampa and, at the time, there were on Air Canada. Therefore, I thought it would be a convenient destination from many other locations. Since then, they did away with direct flights to Calgary from Tampa and the travel time would be over eight hours each way. I decided to go to Europe instead. Therefore, I didn't get my annual adrenaline shot of excitement for reading crime fiction. I will go to next year's Bouchercon in Washington DC. It may be my last one depending on whether I still enjoy the event. Many of my friends no longer attend and after over thirty years, it might just be enough. We shall see.

[*Editor's Guess: You'll come back energized and anxious to clean your palate with crime fiction to remove the stuffy taste of literary fiction.*]

A Visit From the Book Broad

Meredith Anthony



CHAIN REACTION
By Lee Child and Andrew Child
Bantam, October 2026, $34.00
Rating: A

First line: She knew that finding Reacher would not be easy.

CHAIN REACTION finds Lee Child and Andrew Child at the top of their form. It is a nearly flawless thriller, a great entry into the long and excellent series of Jack Reacher novels. Beautifully written, brilliantly realized, it finds Reacher wandering as usual, with only the slightest of ties to civilization: an ATM bank card. When an enterprising former colleague uses this slender thread to find Reacher, she brings him her problem. He is the only person she trusts to help her solve it. He remembers her fondly from an encounter years ago. He agrees to help.

Susan Turner is now a general and very highly placed in the Pentagon. But when a colleague of hers is killed while looking into a problem at data center in Colorado, Susan is sure he wasn't the victim of a random mugging. She realizes that her communications are no longer secret and that she can trust no one in her chain of command. She needs someone completely off the grid. Reacher.

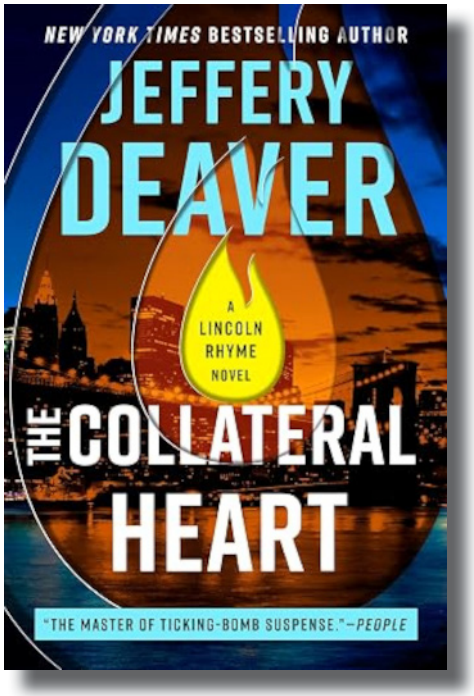
Hilariously, the most state-of-the-art cyber-crime can only be solved by the most analog of investigators. Reacher brings his formidable physical abilities and his serious smarts to a complex plot way beyond his usual skill set. Undaunted, he wades in looking at the details, finding meaning in the most mundane circumstances. With Susan and one trusted aide, Reacher ranges from a remote Colorado data center to the power corridors of Washington and Silicon Valley which houses best and brightest minds.

One of the mundane details leads to the unravelling of a nearly successful plot to rule the world! Naturally, it's a MUST READ!

THE COLLATERAL HEART
By Jeffery Deaver
Putnam, November 2026, $30.00
Rating: A

First line: Wouldn't you know it?

He had me from hippopotamus! Seriously, sometimes you're reading a favorite author's newest book and you get a delicious surprise! That's what happened to me when I settled in happily to read the latest Lincoln Rhyme book by Jeffery Deaver. I was enjoying reentering the world he created and curious about the new crime Rhyme had to solve when I sat up straight and let out a yelp of joy. Hippopotamus! This is what we live for. When the oddest detail in a book reaches out and grabs us, it's a revelation. A cause for rejoicing.



The story begins with an arson incident that injures and nearly kills a homeless man. A box of clues has been left nearby, indicating that the fire was the first of a probable series, and Detective Amelia Sachs and Rhyme begin to investigate. They, too, love a challenge. Meanwhile a Long Island detective is looking into the killing of a young woman. Are the crimes related?

Characters that resonate, details that educate, plots that challenge, and twists that amaze. These are Deaver's hallmarks. I love books that make me feel smart. I adore books that actually make me smarter! Part of Deaver's genius is that he packs a twisty mystery with scholarly material without you noticing. It's a great bonus and elevates his thrillers high above the ordinary crime and detection pursuits.

Deaver is a master storyteller at the top of his game. **THE COLLATERAL HEART** is a flawless thriller from a brilliant craftsman. Like Michael Connelly and Lee Child and Andrew Child, Deaver has achieved a near perfect track record with his amazing series.

SUNDAY OR THE HIGHWAY
By Cindy Fazzi
Thomas & Mercer, 2025, $16.99
Rating: B+

First line: Tell me what comes to your mind when you hear the word *alien*?

Cindy Fazzi delivers an enjoyable

and thought-provoking thriller with **SUNDAY OR THE HIGHWAY,** the second in her Domingo the Bounty Hunter series.

Domingo specializes in finding illegal aliens and turning them over to the authorities, but this time he is hired by a wealthy heiress to track down the parents of her fiancée, a wealthy Mexican immigrant who has a successful business in the US. Sounds straightforward. But it's not.

Domingo Sunday is a Filipino but is often mistaken for Mexican, particularly in the Southwest United States where he does most of his work. Mistaken or deliberately disguised racial identity is at the core of this book. This arcane addition to the plight of the immigrant in America is interesting but also a bit confusing.

Tessa, the rich girl at the book's center is charming but perhaps a bit dim-witted. When she was eight, a fourteen-year-old boy saved her life. She has held on to this for many years and has finally found her childhood love and gotten engaged to be married. Belatedly, she begins to wonder just exactly who his really is.

Clearly, Tessa may not like what Sunday finds out about her sweetheart, a successful businessman. Or is he?

Sunday's pursuit of the fiancée's origins is, as expected, complicated. Is the guy a dangerous criminal or an American success story? Or both?

Sunday is also writing a book, What It Means to Be an Alien in America, which is a manual for would-be illegal immigrants. His main advice is, "Don't do it."

THE SHADOW FRIENDS
By Tess Gerritsen
Thomas & Mercer, 2026, $16.99
Rating: A

First line: Her life was not supposed to end this way.

Tess Gerritsen's excellent Martini Club novels just keep getting better. Like Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club, these books posit a group of former spies who can't seem to stay out of trouble. In The Martini Club, they are former CIA agents who have retired to a peaceful village in Maine for a well-earned stretch of golden years.

In this installment, former CIA operative, Ingrid Slocum, has been coaxed into filling in for a sick host at a conference in Purity, Maine's conference center. Now retired and a resident of the town, Ingrid thinks it sounds easy. But the conference is about bioweapons and threats to international peace and, of course, things begin to go wrong. A prominent scientist at the conference is found dead. Was it a toxin or something worst? Then there is the appearance of an international spy named Rodrigo who had been Ingrid's lover many years ago.

When Ingrid and Rodrigo both disappear, Ingrid's husband, the CIA desk man she married and retired to Maine with, leaps into action. He saw the way the former spy looked at his wife and he decides to pursue them. The other members of the Martini Club are also ready to roll up their sleeves. They just have to save the world and their friend's marriage at the same time. Easy, right?

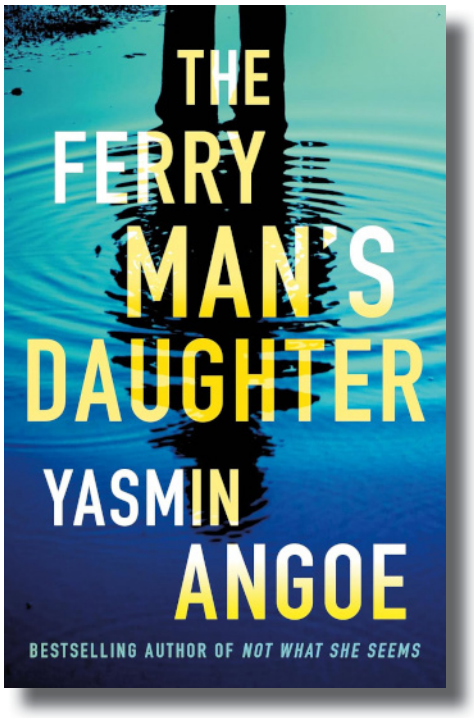
Lloyd leaves for Amsterdam and Maggie insists on going with him. After all, Lloyd was a desk man and other three were operatives. But will their arrival help or hurt Ingrid's mission?

Gerritsen's smooth writing and steady pacing make this series a pleasure. You can read **THE SHADOW FRIENDS** as a stand-alone, but if you are not yet a fan, I'd start at the series beginning with the marvelous read, **THE SPY COAST**, grab the excellent follow-up, **THE SUMMER GUESTS**. Then give yourself over to **THE SHADOW FRIENDS**. Great series from a fine writer.

THE FERRYMAN'S DAUGHTER
By Yasmin Angoe
Thomas & Mercer, October, $28.99
Rating: A-

First line: Sanaa sat in the tiny, cold room under the lights, one of which was nearing its end.

In Yasmin Angoe's excellent thriller,



THE FERRYMAN'S DAUGHTER, there is a lot to like. Saana has put her past behind her and built a new life with a great job, teaching forensics to high school kids, and a great fiancé who happens to be a homicide detective. But when a murder echoes a decades old cold case, it upends Saana's life.

Saana Karrem, who now uses her mother's maiden name, teaches forensics in a high school. She is the daughter of a famous and revered forensics professor, Dr. Voss. Voss disappeared when Saana was still a girl. Her father, she had found, was also a serial killer known as the Ferryman. The cases were never solved and although her father was a suspect, he was never identified as the killer. Now, years later, murders start happening with all the same hallmarks as her father's kills. Has the Ferryman come back? Only Saana knows the answer. What she doesn't know is who is replicating the crimes of the past.

THE FERRYMAN'S DAUGHTER is an excellent thriller, well-written, and full of twists and turns. Told from multiple points of view, particularly Saana and her cop boyfriend, Marcus, the story depicts the investigation into the new series of murders and Saana's growing dread that Marcus and the rest of the world will discover who her father was.

I feel the writing, while on the whole very good, grew repetitive and sounded the same themes many, many times. The suspense is more from the slow parceling out of the information rather than inherent in the story. The culprit is fairly easy to spot. I liked it, but a more streamlined approach would have made this a perfect thriller. I would still recommend it.

THE UNKNOWN
By Riley Sager
Dutton, 2026, $32.00
Rating: C

First line: Night has fallen, and I'm scared.

Riley Sager's latest is **THE UNKNOWN**, a popcorn book made for girls fresh out of summer camps and slumber parties, and the women they become. These books are popcorn because once you start, you are compelled to finish the entire bucket! Sager is a master at compelling prose and impeccable pacing, so deft that you might race through the entire novel in a sitting. But, like popcorn, it is empty calories and not by any means a meal.

On the other hand, if you like psychological suspense and gaslighting, you will love **THE UNKNOWN**.

Told in two timelines, a young wanna-be actress improbably lands a part in a movie filled with multi-award-winning, veteran actresses. She is taken to a remote island in a large lake in Vermont for a week to workshop the script with her fellow cast members, the director, the producer, and one assistant. The boat drops them off and the captain promises to return in seven days. What could go wrong?

The past timeline, in 1926, comes in the form of diary entries of a young woman, down on her luck, who was recruited to come to the remote Vermont island a join a community of women who have made it their home. Each of them seems to have a "gift." Visions, predictions, spirit summoning, clairvoyance. At first, she is thrilled to have a safe haven, but then her fellow island dwellers start to disappear one by one.

The present-day timeline details the strange occurrences that mount as the young actress joins her cast mates on the island, excited about the opportunity and the boost it will afford her career. But it also focuses on the increasing sense of dread that the actress feels. Then her fellow cast members begin to disappear one by one.

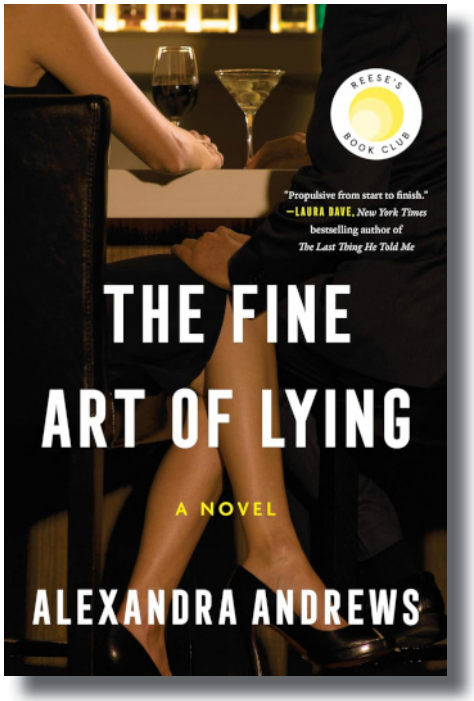
Let me admit right away, that I'm not a big fan of ghost stories. I prefer mysteries and thrillers that are grounded in reality, no matter how unlikely or complex the reality is. So having to sort out what incidents in which timeline are "real" and what are supernatural is an exercise I find distracting and annoying. I don't mind an unreliable narrator or two, but an unreliable narrator from beyond the grave?

If you don't mind the occult elements, the writing is good, the action propulsive, the pacing expert. I found it simply annoying. You might love it.

THE FINE ART OF LYING
By Alexandra Andrews
HarperCollins, 2026, $30.00
Rating: A

First line: Venetian red.

Alexandra Andrews' **THE FINE ART OF LYING** is everything I love in a thriller. It's smart, sexy, urbane and full of the twists and turns we must have in our favorite thrillers. It even has 'Fine Art' cleverly hidden in the title!



Set in New York's high-end art world, Clare, a beautiful but impoverished art history student has married into the one percent. Her husband, Jed, is the scion of the monied Bast family. He is handsome, charming, and completely in love with Clare. They have a good marriage, a sweet daughter and a lovely home, but Clare is not fulfilled. She never finished her art history dissertation and does not have an art world job that would complete her life. When an uber-wealthy friend, Tasha, introduces Clare to a prominent gallery owner, sparks fly. He represents the remaining paintings of the artist that Clare was writing her dissertation about. Blake Webley is an Abstract Expressionist whose life and work are so well-described that I had to look him up to assure myself that he was fictional. Gabriel has Webley's most important painting in his New York home.

Gabriel Prevost is everything that Jed is not. He's an important figure in the art world and has a sexy continental vibe. Rashly, Clare gives in to her urge to sleep with him just once, but quickly finds herself immersed in a clandestine love affair. Determined to break it off to save her marriage, Clare goes to Gabriel's home one last time, to have great break-up sex and to see the Webley painting again. While she's there, an act of violence jump-starts the plot and put Clare in the center of a dangerous situation that threatens her marriage and maybe her life. She manages to leave without anyone seeing her, but she is in real danger.

Clare has to use her wits and determination to stay one step ahead of both the investigation and the turmoil in the art world. The plot is complex and fun to unravel. But it is the art world details that really make it work.

Highly recommended!

CROOKS
By Lou Berney
William Morrow, 2025, $30.00
Rating: A-

First line: it's in his blood.

Imagine if Elmore Leonard or Carl Hiasson had written **THE GODFATHER** together. **CROOKS** is that book!

Lou Berney's **CROOKS** is a terrific novel, but I'm not sure I'd call it a thriller. It's a family saga. A criminal family, sure, but a family saga just the same.

It begins with the origin story as Budy Mercurio, a small-time criminal is rising in his organization in Las Vegas, the epicenter of criminal activity. He meets his future wife, Lillian, and when he sees her committing a crime herself, he is smitten. They marry and have five children.

When a set-back forces them to flee Vegas, they hide out in Oklahoma City and start their own criminal enterprise. It's a family affair. Alice, their oldest, and the smartest one, devises the plans. Jeremy is the con artist. Tallulah is the stunt person. Ray is the muscle. And Piggy is... Well, Piggy. The family owns a casino. Eventually the children disperse into the world to lead their own lives that often reflect the family legacy. Jeremy goes to Hollywood. Tallulah ends up in Moscow. Ray goes to Vegas. Alice alone decides to go straight. She becomes a lawyer. It's not that different.

Piggy brings the family back together. Then Piggy becomes a novelist.

CROOKS is funny, wise, moving, surprising and touching. Highly recommended.

MAD MABEL
By Sally Hepworth
St. Martin's, 2026, $29.00
Rating: A-

First Line: It's interesting to note that there are two groups of people who are rarely, if ever, suspected of murder.

Sally Hepworth's **MAD MABEL** is almost a great thriller. I loved the first half of this novel as much as any book I've read recently. The whole story works well and the writing is engaging. But the real standout feature is the central character, Mad Mabel, one of the most appealing protagonists in crime fiction. It's Mabel's story and it's told (mostly) in first person.

Mabel is in her eighties when the book begins and she tells her story in the present, as well as in flashbacks about her early life helpfully labelled 'Then.' Mabel was notorious and gained her nickname when she became the youngest convicted murderer in Australia. She is now trying to live out her days in a quiet Melbourne suburb where she has only one friend and generally ignores her nearby neighbors. As it turns out, it's not that easy to live a solitary life with minimal outside contact.

You could call **MAD MABEL** a coming-of-age story—if the age is in the mid-eighties. And that's my only caveat: I like the cranky, prickly Mad Mabel at the beginning of the book better than the grown-up at the end of the story. Nonetheless, **MAD MABEL** is well worth reading. I mostly loved it.

JAR OF HEARTS
By Jennifer Hillier
Minotaur Books, $19.00, 2018
Rating: A-

First line: The trial has barely made a dent in the national news.

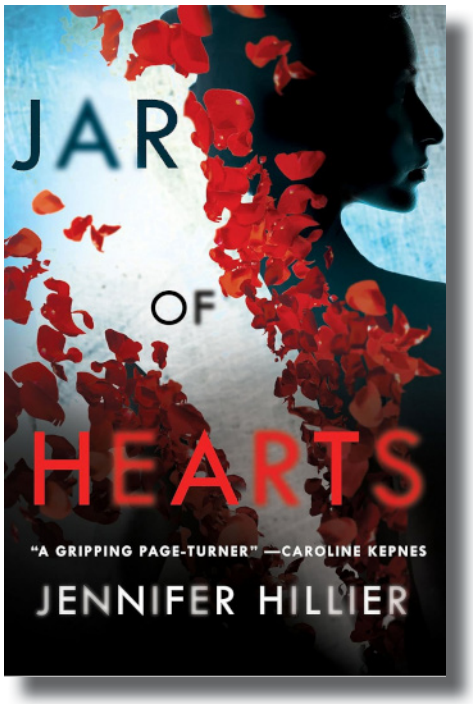
Jennifer Hillier's **JAR OF HEARTS** is a very dark domestic thriller. Very dark.

I'm late catching up with Hillier. She is often mentioned along with the slew of female authors (and a couple men) who churn out domestic popcorn books, full of teenage angst, poor choices, and ruined lives.

There is plenty of teenage angst in **JAR OF HEARTS**. Plenty of spectacularly poor choices. Lots of ruined lives. But this is not chick fiction. This is a dark, almost Gothic, fugue of love, lust, violence, obsession and death.

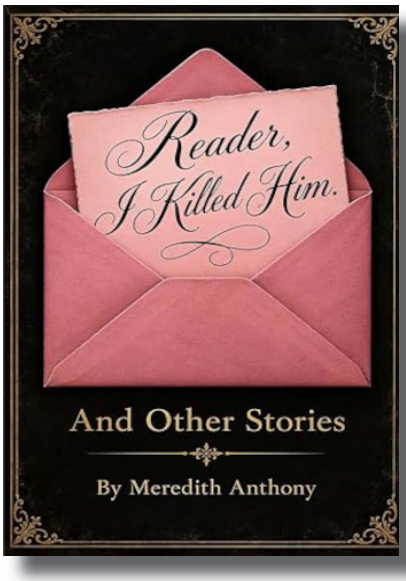
This is **CRIME AND PUNISHMENT** for the high school set.

Alpha mean girl, Angela Wong, disappeared after an alcohol-fueled teenage party. Fourteen years later, her body is found and her best friend, Georgina Shaw is arrested, tried and convicted of complicity in Angela's murder. Her own teenage boyfriend, the charismatic Calvin James was the killer.



The girls' teenage constant companion, Kaiser Brody, is now a Seattle detective. He still carries a torch for Georgina. Georgina did time in prison for her involvement in the crime, but she never revealed the details. Now, out of prison, she goes home to her father's house to try to rebuild her life. Then, more murders are revealed...

Hillier spares no details. The violence is graphic and the shocks are many. The final twist strains credibility, but provides the only fitting conclusion to this symphony of crime, consequences, and—yes—punishment. .



The Jacobs Report

Lou Jacobs



THE HOLLOW
by Michael Connelly
Little, Brown, $32.00, October
Harry Bosch #21
Rating: A

Michael Connelly never ceases to amaze in his 43rd novel. Another marvelous gem as Connelly delves into the childhood trauma that shaped Harry's ultimate destiny and uncompromising code to seek justice and prevent others from suffering the feeling of powerlessness. Harry became a ward of the state at age 11, after his mother was murdered. He found himself confined to the abusive MacLaren Children's Center, where he learned to survive the abuse and trauma of the guards and the resident "bullies." He avoided "The Hollow" …. A cramped dark and tight space beneath the staircase, that was used to throw residents in for not only disciplinary reasons, but absurd infractions. It was a source of cruelty and degradation. Thank God this place is now scheduled for demolition. Bosch has just been made aware that he and others were awarded $400,000 each in a class action suit as compensation for the cruelty and abuse they received. Now that the Center and its inhuman treatment are brought to the light, he learns that his close childhood friend, Charlie "Chops" Lamb was discovered murdered while in the Hollow. More infuriating to Bosch is that nobody cared enough to investigate the circumstances. He could care less about the money. He needed to conduct his own cold-case investigation and hopefully make those perpetrators accountable. This will also allow him to address the personal helplessness feeling as a boy. He was aided in obtaining the decades old files of the Center by his friend and protege LAPD detective Renee Ballard. Intrigue and suspense build as evidence is gradually recovered. Bosch's integrity and obsession will not let him falter in the search for justice.

Connelly once again proves to be a masterful storyteller as he weaves together multiple plot lines together with unexpected revelations. His narrative adds layers of new dimensions to the character and morality of his long running Harry Bosch novels. Connelly creates a riveting narrative that compels the reader to keep turning pages eagerly , seeking the final resolution.

This is a sharp criticism of institutional corruption and neglect of their defenseless and vulnerable charges. Connelly's background in crime reporting shines as he effortlessly utilizes his knowledge of police procedures and details of criminal investigations. I don't think that I'll ever tire of Connelly's writings … especially the Harry Bosch series.

MURDER AT THE GRAND ALPINE HOTEL
by Lucy Foley
William Morrow, $30.00, September
Miss Marple Mystery
Rating: B+

Lucy Foley successfully melds a Golden Age mystery with a modern cinematic thriller, while carrying on the sustainable tradition of Agatha Christie's famous Miss Marple. Miss Marple remains the same inimitable, understated character who plies her skills through observation and intuition. The setting is post-war 1950, where an ensemble cast of colorful characters are gathered to experience a luxurious vacation in the snow capped peaks of the Swiss Alps. The hotel is a natural setting for the rich and successful to gather and enjoy the excessive amenities of the wealthy. Highlighted are a cast of suspicious characters: Anthony Narracott, the pretentious and ambitious politician with a duplicitous past, and tagging along is his wife, Catherine, excessively "polished'" and always ready to do "what's expected" of her. A grand appearance is made by Sylvia Sinclair, the aging Hollywood actress, and "mistress" on the side. Aware that the clock is ticking, along with her allure. "Oh my god, now they're offering me parts… to play the mother."

And of course Bruno Crane, who appears out of place, and apparently is a wartime compadre of Anthony's. Why are they meeting here, near the site of their "wartime heroics?" Miss Marple is also traveling to this idyllic setting, with her friend and traveling companion, Dolly Bantry, along with Diana Glass, her "personal assistant." The mystery unfolds with alternating narration by: Diana, Catherine, Sylvia and Bruno. The mystery will unravel with alternating viewpoints, embellished with prejudices, secrets, and incomplete knowledge resulting in escalating tension and intrigue, and an abundance of "red herrings."



All is well , until a guest is found dead, and possibly murdered, as the exquisitely ornate gondola reaches the top of the mountain and ski run. As the discovery is made, an encroaching snow storm literally traps everyone in this luxurious setting. The guests' fear and anxiety cannot be dampened by the free flowing champagne, elegant rooms and gorgeous views. More guests will die before the weekend is over. Miss Marple, although rather subdued in the first half of the book, takes center stage in the last half. She will apply her astounding observational skills , along with her intuition to help unravel the complex, multilayered mystery, She is constantly overlooked and underestimated because of her polite, quiet manner. She will notice small inconsistencies that escape others. Old secrets and motives will become apparent.

Lucy Foley admirably continues the character of Miss Marple in the vein of Agatha Christie.

Amazingly she forges a complex narrative utilizing an atmospheric setting and a deeply developed cast of characters. Foley succeeds in making Miss Marple the story more than the complicated web of murder and deceit. This is not just a homage to Christy. Along the way she explores the multiple themes of jealousy, ambition, wartime trauma, sexism, and finally society's disrespect for the elderly. Her prose and pacing and cinematic descriptions bring this tale into the contemporary. Hopefully we will be treated to the further mystery solutions of Miss Marple.

MYSTERY PLAY
by Elizabeth Kostova
Ballantine Books, $33.00 October
Rating: B+

Please note this is not a vampire novel with graphic horror, but a much more rewarding literary Gothic historical novel. Kostova returns to similar themes in this follow-up to her astounding 2005 debut novel, The Historian. The central protagonist, Jay Turner, is the son of one of the main characters in the debut novel. This slow burn tale can easily be read as a standalone, as past characters and events are seamlessly incorporated. Jay's mother has died, and he has returned home to go through her things. He discovers a partially burned newspaper fragment that mentions Gael Brogan. He soon learns that Gael was a famous nineteenth century actor, enigmatic and loved for his famous portrayal of Dracula, in Bram Stoker's play. While still at her house, even stranger is the delivery of a medieval book that he remembers his mother donating to a museum. He remembers his mother dreading the presence of the book in the house. It was reportedly commissioned by the real historical figure, Vlad Tepes, associated with the fictional Dracula. These coincidences propel Jay, a history teacher, into investigating the related history and mythology. He will become immersed into discovering the Gilded Age of American theater, and how it relates not only to Gael Brogan, but also his leading lady,Fern Quinn. The mystery slowly unravels in multiple timelines and multiple narrators. Further facts and motives are elucidated by the presence of relevant letters, journals, and historical documents. Gael brogan's portrayal of Dracula appears somewhat unsettling, as it appears to have shaped his actions and motives in reality.

Kostova's prose is elegant, and her use of documents render a feel of slowly developing connections to later bring the mystery, and presence of secret societies into a researched reality, rather than fiction. Dread and tension will ever so slowly build. This is not an action thriller. There is no graphic horror, but merely the Gothic suggestion of its presence. The ongoing atmospheric dark deeds pervades throughout the tale. The continued portrayal of Dracula in books, and theatrical presentation will forever perpetuate the Dracula legend. My only criticism is the length of this epic novel, at nearly 600 pages, it feels bogged down at times with a feeling of repetition. As Elizabeth Kostova, herself, has said in interviews: Dracula is a metaphor for the evil that is so hard to undo in history.

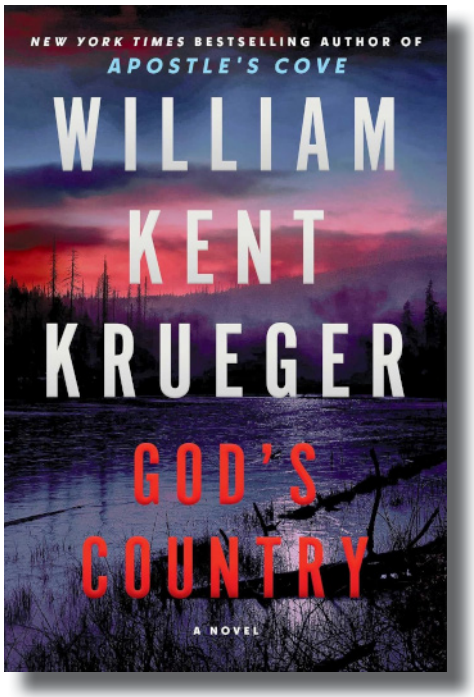
CHAIN REACTION
by Andrew and Lee Child
Bantam, $34.00, October
Jack Reacher #31
Rating: B

Not to worry Reacher fans. The torch is being successfully passed from Lee Child to his younger brother, Andrew. The voice of our beloved iconic hero Reacher lives on. Reacher's inimitable style of conflict resolution with action and violence in support of unknowing victims shines on with mystery and intrigue. Although this is the 31st in the series it can still be devoured as a stand-alone, as the necessary backstory is seamlessly laid in. Reacher in his typical nomadic style is traveling by bus and hitchhiking to remain off the grid. No charge cards or cell phones for him. With great difficulty his previous cohort , when he was in command of a unit of MPs, tracks him down in a small town because of an ATM withdrawal from a bank. Susan Turner, now a General and commanding his old unit petitions him for his help. A member of her covert analysis team was murdered in Summertown, Colorado, chasing down an unknown lead. She doesn't even trust the people working around her. Summertown is a tiny isolated "town" containing only a diner and a single motel … but more importantly is the site of an enormous data center and solar farms. Being the 31st in a series it is easy to see it experience reader fatigue ….however, the writers bring fresh insight by introducing current topical variables. What could possibly be going on, if murder is necessary to cover their tracks. General Turner appreciates that Reacher is the necessary X factor. He is outside of the political and business world, doesn't need money, status or approval, and can virtually never be intimidated. Reacher is an imposing figure, and is morally driven and doesn't necessarily worry about doing things legally. The murder becomes the first link to a far reaching conspiracy. Reacher has an uncompromising sense of justice, and will not be deterred.

Most of this tale apparently is penned by Andrew, who does a masterful job in weaving a convoluted narrative featuring both intrigue and sus-

pense with the expected Reacher action and violence. His prose and pacing relentlessly pushes the momentum forward into a barn-burning denouement. Along with multiple three dimensional character development, the reader is treated to a twisty tale with multiple surprises. This is not meant to be literary fiction, but rather a fantastic fun read begging to be gobbled up. I continue to look forward to Jack Reacher's continuing predicaments.

GOD'S COUNTRY
by William Kent Krueger
Atria Books, $28.00, August
Cork O'Connor #22
Rating: A



It is always such a joy to read another Cork O'Connor tale. They are all infused with

raw emotion, warmth, and an overwhelming sense of family and love. This 22th installment can easily be enjoyed as a standalone and an excellent jumping-off point for new readers. His almost poetic prose provides a perfect blend of suspense and mystery, infused with his ever present insight into human nature.

Cork is a retired sheriff from Aurora, Minnesota. Although he spends a lot of time working at his long-term fast-food eatery, he is often drawn into private investigations for friends and close locals. This tale starts out as a peaceful family canoe trip into the hauntingly beautiful wilderness of Minnesota's Boundary Waters region. Prior to departing Cork has an unsettling prophetic vision of a wolf eating someone's heart. At the same time, his son Stephen and grandson Waaboo experience different ominous visions.

Their vacation quickly goes awry when they come upon a campsite suggesting Cork's friend and guide, Cordell Bishop, has violently been abducted and taken hostage. Cork sends his family back to safety while he tracks onward in hopes of saving his friend. The Kennedy Brothers are using Cordell to navigate the treacherous waters in hope of finding their deceased father's hidden cache, and then fleeing to Canada. The ruthless brothers have already killed several innocents who've stumbled into their path. Cork is captured and attempts to outmaneuver and outwit the dangerous brothers. Can he accomplish this without having any further campers brutalized, and yet without stooping to their degree of depravity.

Krueger deftly weaves together multiple plot lines together with evocative prose and insight.

The unbridled beauty of the surrounding lakes, forests and wildlife take on a life of their own.

This is not your conventional thriller, as Krueger's reflective philosophy and exploration of Cork's moral dilemma raises this novel to literary crime fiction. This is not merely solving a mystery, but rather an exploration of violence, greed, and desperation. Can justice be obtained without moral compromise? Krueger's mesmerizing prose and character development rivals that of James Lee Burke's best. I look forward to Cork O'Connor's next soul searching adventure.

THE DELIVERY
by Gregg Hurwitz
Thomas & Mercer, $12.98, July
Novella
Rated: B+

Gregg Hurwitz delivers a masterful thriller novella (or rather short novel) that is very divergent from his ever popular "Orphan X" series. Rather than featuring Evan Smoak in another rousing adventure where his competence and capability defeats the dastardly forces oppressing the helpless victim, we're confronted with a family in turmoil. The Higgins family are spiritually defeated and mired in grief after Rebecca has miscarried. Mark is under increasing pressure at work, and both of their lives seem consumed with raising Maddy, their neurodivergent child. Mark's boss suggests a solution. A new AI personal assistant can be purchased from an emerging tech company. They have to submit DNA swabs to obtain a unit that is tailored to their lifestyle and needs. A box the size of a coffin arrives, but they must "ask it in" to accept "delivery." (… like a Vampire?). Their daughter, Maddy, is very accepting and refers to him as "Mr Man." and her relationship with the machine is very different. At first Mr Man is amazing as he cooks, cleans, runs errands and takes on the burden of taking care of Maddy. However, the humanoid AI is also a learning machine, and soon picks up on the family's desires , emotions and behaviors. It actually starts to act on their unsaid desires and wishes, without concern for morality or decency.

Hurwitz masterfully provides a cautionary tale of what can happen when we outsource our every day lives to media and technology. He explores the effects of losing control and responsibility … into the darker side of convenience and dependence. He explores the danger of social media as it creates villains of those with alternative thoughts and ideas. The AI constructs will always be deficient in interpretation. This would have been an excellent novel with greater character development and only suffers from its brevity. I look forward to reading how Hurwitz further expands his oeuvre

Neither Tarnished Nor Afraid

Kevin Burton Smith

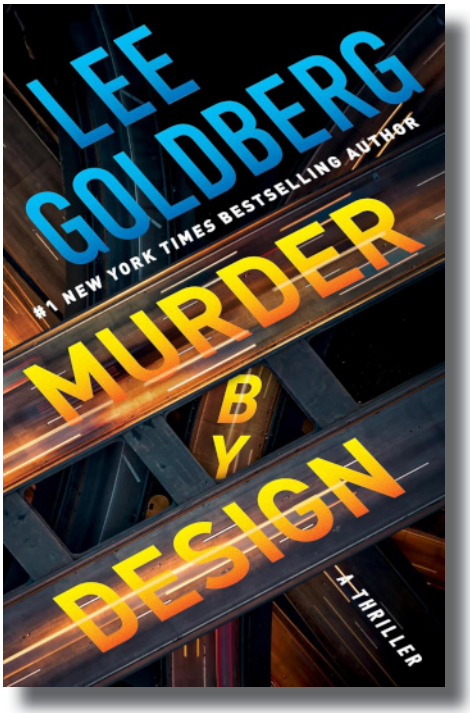


MURDER BY DESIGN
by Lee Goldberg
Thomas & Mercer, $10.95

Ex-cop turned insurance investigator Edison Bixby is brilliant. Just ask him. He's rich and handsome and pretty much insufferable; a certified genius when it comes to cracking seemingly impossible crimes.

He's also possibly just plain certifiable, obsessed with a crackpot theory (or is it?) about environmental design and how it affects and possibly even inspires crime. Oh, and just in case his ego wasn't enough, he's also unbearably rude, blurting out abrupt observations with absolutely zero filters, thanks to a traumatic brain injury — the result of being shot in the face when he was a cop. Or at least that's his excuse.

So his new employer, Triax Global Insurance, realizing he may need watching, hires struggling actor Wally Nash, whose biggest roles have mostly involved TV commercials for various drugs and is only a few small steps from living out of his car, to play babysitter., hoping he'lll act as a buffer between their genius investigator and the rest of the world.

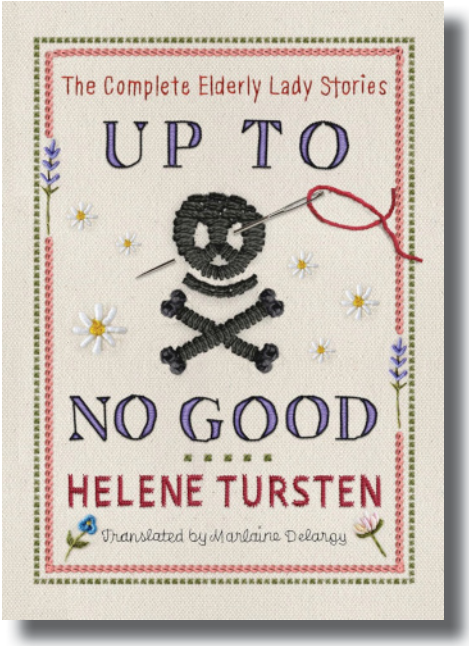


Wally also serves as the confused but loyal first-person narrator, a trick TV writer and novelist Goldberg previously used to great effect in his Monk tie-in novels. But the author adds an additional twist: Wally himself is a tad unreliable — prone to flights of fancy and often overcome by empathy; a sort of easily deluded Archie Goodwin to Edison's mash-up of Nero Wolfe and TV's Banacek, another insurance dick more than a little full of himself.

All in all, though, it's great fun, as Edison and Nash work their way through four separate but interconnected cases in what may be the first of a series — or a pilot-in-print for a potential TV show? As boorish as Edison may be, and as peculiar as his philosophical crackpot theories may (or may not) be, it's a hoot following the Great Detective (just ask him) rubbing all sorts of people the wrong way (more than a few may even deserve it), while solving what seem like impossible crimes, with Wally struggling to catch up. I'd read the next one; I'd tune in to the show.

UP TO NO GOOD
by Helene Tursten
Soho Press, $24.95

Putting the "home" back in "homicide"? Nothing quite says "Happy Holidays" domesticity like the cross-stitched front cover illustration with tiny floral splatterings that adorns this adorable little hardcover. And yes, it would probably fit in a Christmas stocking. It's a collection that rounds up all of the previously published, cozy short stories featuring Tursten's Maud, everyone's favourite homicidal elderly lady. With a kill rate hovering somewhere between Mike Hammer and The Punisher, this determined but always proper Swedish octogenarian has always viewed homicide as a viable solution to a vast array of what she calls "Problems," from shoddy household repairs and irksome neighbours to disrupted travel plans and unexpected visitors. A little push, a little poison, a smidge of this, a little of that, and the Problem is solved. As a treat for Maud's faithful followers, the author also offers a few lagniappes as bait for this black-hearted collection: a brand new story, never before published: "An Elderly Lady Encounters an Unpleasant Problem," wherein an unexpected and unwanted heir shows up, throwing



Maud's long-delayed plan to relocate to the far-warmer climes of South Africa up in the air, plus a few recipes for Semlor (Swedish Lent Buns) and Gingerbread Cookies (both naughty and nice versions), plus a cross-stitch pattern.

PALMDALE
by Kirk Fox
Meridia Books, $32.99

The author, a comedian and actor (and if his bio is to be believed, a former tennis instructor and private eye) has concocted a private eye yarn that warms the cockles of my heart, or at least some place cockles-adjacent. He's not only set it in my adopted hometown, but he's gone and used it as the title. He even gives a shout-out to his former father-in-law, Clint Eastwood.

Billed as a "dirtbag noir," this one features a couple of mismatched local private eyes from the high desert suburban shit hole of the title, about sixty miles north of (and a world away from) the City of Angels, as they get tangled up in the kidnapping of the heir of a wealthy but not particularly clean Iranian family from Belair, amidst enough criminal stupidity to fill an Elmore Leonard yarn.



Billy Weber is a twenty-four-year old Goody Two Shoes, struggling to get her fledgling detective agency off the ground, still fretting over having just blown $136.23 on new business cards. "It was worth it," she keeps telling herself, but then she stumbles across a case that could really pay off. Only problem?

It's also attracted the attention of Joe Soperton, an older, rival private investigator. Joe is a bottom feeder, no question — a scam artist who drinks too much and isn't overly concerned with scruples. Show him a corner, and he'll cut it. Suffice it to say that Joe and Billy don't see eye to eye on anything.

But what makes it even worse for Billy?

Joe is her father. The guy who walked out on her and her mother years ago.

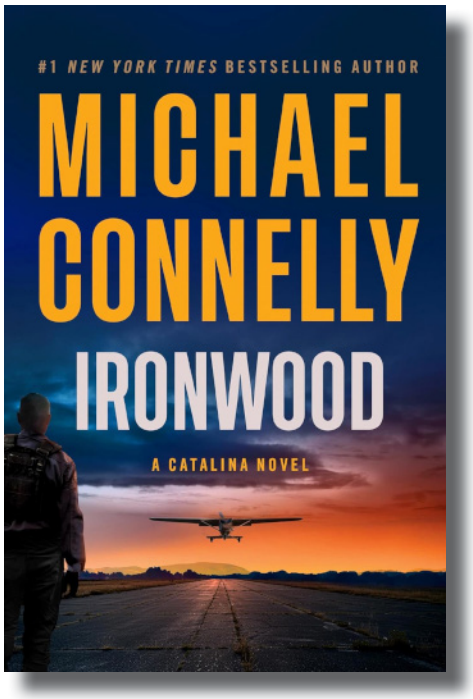
The two bicker and work at cross purposes, but with big bucks in the offing, they finally, reluctantly join forces. Along they way, however, they have to contend with a couple of Guatemalan gardeners with a shaky grasp of SoCal geography, a would-be criminal mastermind (maybe), bodies that disappear, family treachery, and a killer or two.

It's a quick, fast read, and a promising debut. The characters are a hoot, and they drive the story, as the misunderstandings pile up and the clown parade stumbles along. Oh, sure, Palmdale's Chamber of Commerce may not approve, but I hope there's a return visit.

IRONWOOD
by Michael Connelly
Little, Brown and Company, $32.00

In Mick Herron's Slow Horses series, disgraced MI5's agents are banished to the rundown Slough House, looked over by the unkempt and flatulent Jackson Lamb.

In Michael Connelly's books, disgraced deputies of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department are banished to Avalon on Santa Catalina Island — the off-shore resort/tourist trap "paradise" twenty-odd miles off the coast of Los Angeles — where



they're under the command of Detective Sergeant Stillwell, a tenacious and dedicated cop who has also run afoul of the powers that be.

It's a small force with only a handful of deputies that Stilwell's been charged with, stationed on what one officer sardonically refers to as the "Island of Misfit Toys." Cut off from the mainland, forced to rely on ferries and helicopters for the often necessary trip back to the mainland (which the locals refer to as "Overtown"), their precinct is tucked into a building that also incorporates the island's only courtroom, and the tiny municipal library. It's soon apparent that most of the deputies posted there, while generally competent, are not exactly Harry Bosch.

That's made even more obvious when a last-minute, late-night stakeout at the island's only airport (known as the "Airport in the Sky," because it lies near Catalina's highest point) goes spectacularly awry, leaving one officer dead and one seriously wounded, with Stilwell himself tumbling recklessly down a hillside on his ATC, as the bad guys escape.

With his actions in the botched operation under review, he's ordered off the case and assigned to desk duty, even as a new, unrelated case pops up. Tasked with a long-overdue clean up

of the precinct's lost-and-found room, Stilwell discovers an unclaimed backpack that may belong to a young female hiker who went missing years earlier. Which soon brings him into contact with Renée Ballard, the LAPD's Cold Cases lead, and another of Connolly's series characters. What started as a make-work project soon becomes a major case for Stilwell. One he's eventually allowed to conduct.

There's something appealing about the almost-claustrophobic feel of the book as the ever-resourceful and tenacious Stilwell, with minimal staff, handles overlapping cases large and small — including the airport shootout he's been specifically ordered by the brass NOT to investigate.

What? You really thought Stilwell would let that slide?

Steeped in local lore, with a sharp and occasionally unflattering view of island life that the tourists rarely encounter (graffiti, vandalism, decades-long political squabbles and corruption, the unflattering local nickname for hotel, etc.), and a lead who comes off as Gary Cooper of the Island, or maybe Wyatt Earp. Brave, courageous and bold. Connelly may have another hit series on his hands.

And here's a confession: I read this book while on vacation on the island. I went to the airport, I drank in the bars, I ate in the restaurants, I visited the library, I saw a bison. Connelly nailed it.

PETRIFIED DREAMS
by Joe R. Lansdale
Little, Brown& Company, $30.00

Back in 1966, John D. MacDonald' **DARKER THAN AMBER** began with one of the more memorable opening scenes in crime fiction, with Travis McGee and his friend Meyer rescuing a young woman dumped off a bridge into the water where the two were doing a little peaceful nighttime fishing.

It's a kick ass beginning, and sixty years later, young women falling from the sky open two equally strong books, by two of the more recent masters of the Shamus Game.



In the grisly, disturbing **PETRIFIED DREAMS**, Lansdale's mismatched long-time shit-kicker heroes, Hap Collins (a white former hippie) and Leonard Pine (a Black gay Republican) of Laborde, Texas, are doing a little fishing of their own. Having recently put their careers as private detectives (and an even longer spate as professional shit magnets) in the rearview, they're both looking forward to working at the martial arts club that newlywed Leonard now owns. With an occasional sunny day off to go fishing.

And on one of those days, as they sit in their borrowed aluminum boat in a small private lake belonging to friend, Leonard ruefully admits "This is the life, brother."

Yep. Until a small prop plane crash lands into the water, narrowly missing their boat, breaking apart upon impact and spilling some of its cargo: heavily drugged teenage girls in crates. The two friends manage to rescue one of them, but she soon succumbs in the hospital, barely able to communicate more than her name. Nobody else survives.

And that's that. Until a woman, Norwood May, shows up, claiming to be Dakota's sister, and says she'd like to meet Hap and Leonard. To find out, you know, what happened. But her discovery of the boy's recent occupations as detectives —and their own curiosity — prompts her to ask if she could hire them. And like that, Hap and Leonard are back in the game. Oh, Hap assures his wife Brett that it's "just a temporary slip out of retirement."

Don't you believe it.

Sure, there's plenty of talk about the implications and realities of aging ("Does your dick still work?" is a common refrain), and Lansdale doesn't powder any of it with sugar, but if this is indeed the end of the series (after fifteen novels and countless short stories), as Lansdale claims, it's clear that he wanted them to go out with a bang.

This is Grand Guignol territory here, real white-knuckle stuff — a cross-country odyssey of increasingly unsettling discoveries and increasingly violent encounters, that eventually leads Hap and Leonard, aided by Brett, Leonard's new husband Pookie, and their old pal Jim Bob, a fellow PI (and pig farmer), to a human trafficking ring, an army of enablers, and a genuinely sick monster known only as "The Artist"— a pretentious, straight-outta-the-weird-menace-pulps sculptor who works in human flesh.

Like I said: BANG. If this is indeed the end, it's a fitting and even touching farewell. As Leonard says,"We had seen a lot in our time, but this took the rag off the bush."

I'm gonna miss these two knuckleheads.

GUNS ACROSS THE RIVER
by Sam Weibe
Harbour Publishing, $18.95

There are no fishing rods in the opening of Sam Weibe's latest blast of northern noir, but there is a bridge. Roughneck "once upon a time" private eye turned international security consultant Dave Wakeland and his smart and savvy long-time business partner Jeff Chen are definitely alone and afloat.

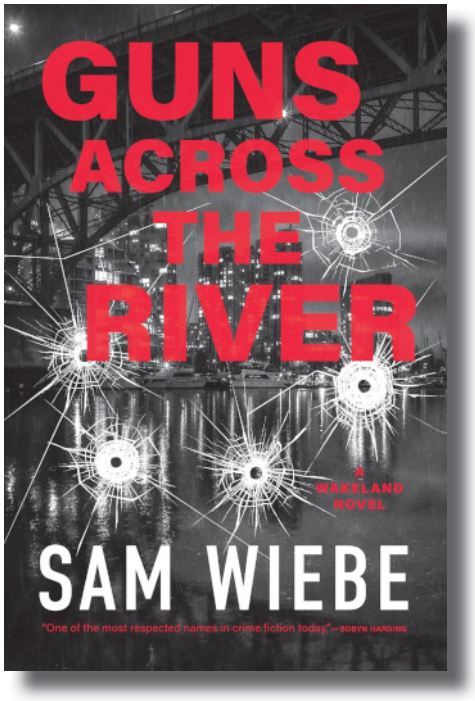
It's a chilly March night, and the two friends are the last ones left, chilling after a boozy, druggy poker session with a few buddies, on the top deck of

Dave's new "float home" (please don't call it a "houseboat"). It's moored in False Creek, a short, narrow saltwater inlet that jabs almost into the heart of downtown Vancouver.

Jeff's enjoying a little weed and Dave's sipping some mezcal, when a young girl crashes into the water, apparently dropped (or did she jump?) from the Granville Street Bridge that rises above them. A befuddled rescue attempt (that includes a stolen kayak and a lot of splashing around) succeeds, and the unconscious young girl is hospitalized with severe injuries. The prognosis is grim.

Only when Dave finally drags himself home the next day, a woman claiming to be from the police is already there, seeking more info. Not sure how to take the woman's vaguely threatening manner, Dave keeps mostly mum.

But he soon returns to visit the slowly recovering girl, whose name, it turns out, is Nicola. Feeling protective toward the feisty fourteen-year-old he starts to poke around, and eventually discovers she's the daughter of single parent Mark Havoc — a man who's not going to win any Father of the Year awards anytime soon. He's a ne'er-do-well trucker and long-time con artist who's flitted in and out of Nicola's life for years, and left behind a long string of victims. His latest scam involves the buying and selling of a large cache of ghost guns smuggled in from the States — except he ripped off the original sellers, and may be planning to rip off the new buyers as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, both parties, plus a few other rival factions, want to have a serious talk with him. They all figure Nicola might be just the bait they need to draw him out.



Realizing she may be in danger, Dave and Jeff take Nicola under their wing, squirreling her away, acting like clandestine foster parents, and Dave — despite renouncing his former occupation — agrees to protect her. Which means finding her father.

Right.

Except… people who buy or sell illegal firearms, those interested in who buys or sells illegal firearms, and those who intend to cheat those who buy or sell illegal firearms, aren't exactly the nicest people in the world, and as the bruised and increasingly battered Dave bounces around Vancouver and environs (out to the Fraser Valley and back), rushing from one violent confrontation to the next, trying to track down the elusive would-be gun dealer, he soon finds that out.

And wonders about how "nice" he is.

Even while one adversary cautions him that he's "not ruthless enough for this business."

It's that fleshing out of his characters (especially his always brooding, conflicted hero), and Wiebe's refusal to spit out cookie cutter types that helps raise his books out of the mire. That, and his total embrace of setting (particularly the ever-evolving, shape-shifting Vancouver) and even current events (Dave bitches about the U.S. tariffs and how he's had to switch to a Canadian brand of his favourite tipple), bodes well for this series, which continues to twist and turn, refusing to play it safe.

Elbows up.



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.

Reading Now

DIE FAMOUS
Michael Koryta
JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE
Jake Needham
MURDER AT THE GRAND ALPINE HOTEL
Lucy Foley
BAD COMPANY
Sara Paretsky
SIDESHOW
Stephen England
THE LOYAL DAUGHTER
Allen Eskins
THE SHEPHERD
Paul Vidich
REPEAT AFTER ME
Fiona Barton

Already Read for Next Issue

TELL ME SOMETHING TRUE
Michael Robotham
ANIMALS OF THE FRENCH SPECIES
Michelle Richmond
THIS NEVER HAPPENS HERE
Wanda M. Morris
THE MISSING
C. J. Box
THE OPERATOR
Mike Lawson
SHADOW GAME
Nick Petrie
SCORPIO RISING
Deon Meyer
THE WORST WIFE
Amy Tintera
THE INVISIBLE ENEMY
Alma Katsu

Marilyn's Mystery Reads

Marilyn Brooks



BITTER FALL
by Bruce Robert Coffin
Severn River Publishing, $19.99, January

Summer Randall is the golden girl in the small town of Greenville, Maine. Smart, beautiful, athletic, she appears to have it all. **So why is she running through the woods for her life in the middle of the night?**

The following morning, that area is set off by yellow police crime tape. Maine State homicide detectives Brock Justice and his partner Chloe Wright are called to the scene because what at first glance looked like a horrific car accident is clearly, on closer analysis, a brutal murder. There's a small cut on Summer's side that was there before the accident, the on-scene medical examiner tells the detectives.

No sooner do Brock and Chloe arrive at the scene than Evan Mathers appears. **Several months earlier Brock had testified against Evan, then a Maine State Detective, in a wrongful shooting case. Evan was cleared of the charge, and Brock was demoted and transferred to the northern part of the state.**

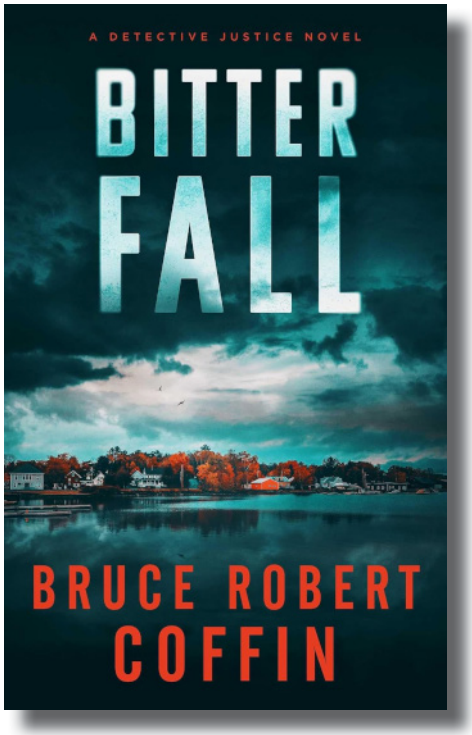
However, Brock is not able to leave the court case behind him. He's certain that Evan killed the victim deliberately, but he now discovers that Evan resigned from the State Police and is a member of the local force where Summer lived.

The case turns into a media circus when the victim is identified as the daughter of a U. S. Congresswoman, a woman who is always searching for problems with the police. One of the suspects in the case is Ronnie Libby, Summer's ex-boyfriend. He was arrested the previous year for assaulting the young woman while on drugs. Summer's father Taylor threatened Ronnie and thus lost his job as a reserve officer on the town police force, and Ronnie went into a voluntary drug rehabilitation program.

Brittney LaRoux was Summer's best friend, and she tells Brock that she is blaming herself for her friend's death. The two were supposed to go on a training run the previous afternoon, but Brittney had canceled at the last minute. **"And I think she might be dead because of me."**

Chloe attends Summer's autopsy, and it's discovered that the young woman was several weeks pregnant. Did Summer and Ronnie get together again, and is Ronnie the baby's father? Or was she involved with someone else?

Brock tells Chloe that the pregnancy must remain a secret, including from Summer's parents. When Chloe objects, saying "That's cold, even for you," Brock reminds her that the fact that the victim died of a stab wound, not as originally thought by being hit by a car, became public knowledge even though it was supposed to be kept under wraps. He doesn't want the same thing to happen with the latest information, and his partner reluctantly agrees.



Bruce Robert Coffin has written another riveting police procedural. His characters, with their strengths and foibles, make them true-to-life and relatable. Plus, the twist at the end is totally satisfying.

CAPITAL PARTNERS
by Libby Fischer Hellmann
Red Herring Press, $28.99, October

The husbands are business partners, the wives reluctant friends. **The hedge fund that Jay and Sy run is very successful, as shown by the luxurious lifestyle the couples have, until a "Mr. Cole" knocks on Jay and Grace's door.**

Grace is standing on the upper landing, getting ready to open the front door, when she realizes that her husband is already talking to someone on the steps. The tone of the man's voice is threatening, and after he leaves Jay appears annoyed. He tells his wife that the man wants to withdraw the sixteen million dollars he invested for his clients with Jay and Sy, but Jay is having none of it.

Grace realizes, however, from the smile on her husband's face that he's not telling her the truth. Cole had left a phone number before he called at their house in person, and Grace, now upset, calls him the following morning. They arrange to meet at a coffee shop near Second Chances, a rehabilitation home that houses twenty young people out of

rehab, a charity Grace is involved with. Cole gives her his business card, writing something on the back. "Call me tomorrow," he tells her.

When she returns home, Grace searches the web for information about Charlie McCall, the name Cole had written on his card. Although the date on the internet photo that she finds is ten years old, there's no doubt in her mind that it's her husband Jay. He and his former partner, George Siegel, had created an investment pool that became a Ponzi scheme. **When the fund collapsed and authorities stepped in, George was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, but Jay turned state's evidence and entered WITSEC, the witness protection program.** Is it possible that Jay decided to run another Ponzi scheme, this time with Sy as his partner, Grace wonders?

She thinks back to the evening she and Jay spent with Sy and his wife Dana. The two women have almost nothing in common, but that night Dana was desperate to talk privately with Grace. In the ladies' room, Dana confides that her husband was afraid of something, and after he made a phone call he told her that he had to fly to Washington the following day.

Seriously concerned, after Sy left his office Dana pressed the redial button on his phone. She discovers he was talking to the SEC, the Security and Exchange Commission, but Dana has no idea what their conversation was about. Why, she asks Grace, this urgent need to talk to them in person?

Cole's visit to Jay, the demand for sixteen million dollars, and Sy's hurried trip to the nation's capital all mean major problems and upheavals in Grace and Dana's lives. **Can they figure out what their husbands did and how to fix the problem before everyone's life is in danger?**

CAPITAL PARTNERS is a captivating novel about greed, marital relations, friendship, and integrity. The characters are convincing, and the plot moves rapidly from one crisis to another. Libby Fischer Hellman has written a novel that will keep readers engaged until the end.



FOR SERVICES RENDERED
by Will Thomas
Minotaur, $29.00, August

Private enquiry agent Cyrus Barker is certain that he killed his arch-enemy Sebastian Nightwine years ago. He "pierced him through with a sword," according to Thomas Llewelyn, Barker's assistant. So how is it that Nightwine has been seen in London this very day?

The enmity between Barker and Nightwine goes back years. At one point the two men had been friends in Canton, China, even serving together on the Osprey, a Chinese ship Barker had won in a game of chance. But then Nightwine's true nature began to surface, culminating in the duel that supposedly ended in his death. But now, Barker and Llewelyn wonder, what really happened?

To secure their safety, the enquiry agents send Rebecca and Rachel, Thomas' wife and young daughter respectively, and Lady Philippa Ashleigh, a close friend of Cyrus' and the object of Nightwine's perverted attentions, to Paris to keep them out of danger.

At the same time, Barker and Llewelyn become involved in another case that ultimately becomes entwined with the Nightwine one. A young Chinese-born man who has spent nearly all his life in Hawaii is visiting London. As he exits an omnibus, he is accosted by several Asian men and forcibly taken to the Chinese embassy and put in a cell.

Several days later, Barker and Llewelyn receive a new client, Dr. James Cantlie**. He tells the two men that a friend of his, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, had been visiting him but hasn't been seen for two days.** He approached Scotland Yard and the Pinkerton Agency for help but was turned down, so he has come to Barker's Private Enquiry Agency for their help.

The doctor explains that Sun took part in the insurrection the previous year against the Manchu government in Canton. After the government crushed the rebellion, Sun escaped and made his way to London to confer with Cantlie, who had been his mentor in China; Sun, like Cantlie, is a physician.

FOR SERVICES RENDERED switches between the agency's search for Nightwine and the cell inside the Chinese embassy where Sun Yat-sen is being held. For readers interested in history, Will Thomas' novel is fascinating not only for its excellent look into Victorian England but for a sense of China's history at the end of the 19th century. In addition, there are glimpses into Scottish and Jewish traditions of the time.

As has been true for all the previous novels in this series, the author's ability to create realistic and engaging characters is outstanding. It's always a pleasure to see Cyrus Barker and Thomas Llewelyn, and as always they are at the top of their form.

AN ORDINARY SORT OF EVIL
by Kelley Armstrong
Minotaur, $29.00, May

When Mallory Mitchell, a police detective on the present day Edinburgh force, stepped through time a year earlier and landed in 1869 Edinburgh, she could hardly have been been prepared for what her destiny held.

She arrived in the home of Dr. Duncan Gray, where she began her Victorian life as a housemaid and then progressed to his assistant. Now she has decided

that this is her home and her future life.

Mallory and Duncan are called to the home of Lord and Lady Adler late one night to find a séance in progress. Although neither Mallory nor Duncan is a believer in ghosts or spirits, the Adlers are friends of Duncan and his sister Isla and deserve to be heard. When they arrive at the mansion, they are told that the spirit of a young housemaid, Nellie, spoke to a medium at the table a few minutes earlier. **"I have been murdered. Tell Dr. Duncan Gray that he must find my killer."**

Mallory asks Lady Adler to relay what happened. It appears that Nellie disappeared in the middle of the night three evenings previously, leaving nothing behind in the attic room she shared with the other housemaids. There would be nothing suspicious about her disappearance except for the "fact" that her spirit appeared to Madame Paix, the medium, at the séance and said she had been murdered.

Despite Duncan's obvious reluctance to pursue the case, Lady Adler is most insistent that he do so. Mallory steps into the conversation and suggests that she begin gathering all relevant information, and Lady Adler agrees. With that settled, Mallory and Duncan return to his home.

The Rip in Time series gives the reader a fascinating look into what life was like 150 years ago. We are certainly familiar with the fashions of the time, its crinolines and bonnets for women and silk and wool top hats for men, but here we see the mores, the educational practices, and the society that allows children in the lower classes to be sent out to work as young as eight in such jobs as chimney sweeps, textile workers, or housemaids.

Mallory Mitchell is a delightful heroine–smart, personable, and adaptable to her life in Victorian Scotland. She is surrounded by other equally interesting people–Duncan, his sister Isla, and Isla's soon-to-be husband, Detective Hugh McCreadie. Each contributes an important part to every novel.

AWAY TO ME
by Patricia B. McConnell
Kensington, $28.00, February

I am always amazed and delighted by the things that I learn by reading books. I don't mean only scholarly books or textbooks but also novels/mysteries that tell me things I had never thought about but am now pleased that I know. Away To Me is an excellent example of learning about a subject that gave me a glimpse into a very different world; it's a truly fascinating book.

Maddie McGowan is an animal behaviorist, a scientist who works with animals who exhibit dangerous behaviors, including those caused by trauma. She owns a farm in Wisconsin where she raises sheep and trains dogs, in particular her border collie Jack, to participate in sheepdog trials. As the novel opens, the two are participating in a Championship Sheepdog Trial and waiting for their turn when the sound of a shotgun fills the air and George, Maddie's close friend, lies dead in the field.

George was widely liked and admired, both for his expertise as a trainer of sheepdogs and as a mentor for those new to competitions. The police can find no motive for the shooting, and the case remains open.

Maddie's life continues as usual, at least on the surface. She works with dogs who bite other dogs, who are traumatized by thunder, or who don't obey their owner's commands. Her love and understanding of canines wins their trust, and each animal that is brought to her clinic learns appropriate behaviors and their place in a family. George, however, is never far from her mind.

Then Maggie receives a call from the director of a local humane society. A half-dead German shepherd had been found on the side of a road, and after he was released from intensive care at a local veterinary clinic no one could get near him. Aware of the excellent work that the organization does, Maggie agrees to see the dog. She names him Cisco and becomes impressed with him despite the issues he presents, and she agrees during her second visit at the society to foster him at her farm and work with him there.

A few days after Cisco's arrival, Maggie returns home after her office hours to find one of her guard dogs in a drug-induced stupor and Cisco missing from his cage. The local veterinarian tells Maggie that the guard dog looks like the victim of a fentanyl overdose, and just like a person she had to receive a dose of nalozone immediately to save her life. A prolonged search of the area doesn't find Cisco despite Maggie asking all her friends and neighbors for help. **It isn't hard to believe that someone is trying to destroy Maggie's life.**

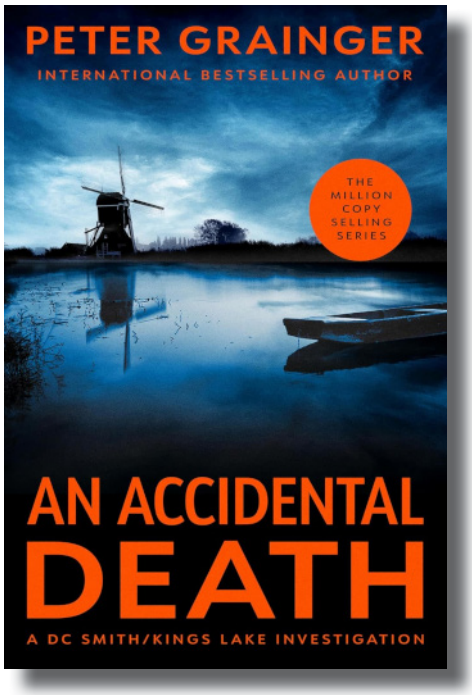
Patricia McConnell has written a wonderful novel. She has a doctorate in Zoology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, researching dog behavior and communication between professional trainers and working domestic animals. She has appeared on CNN, written articles for numerous publications, has presented nationally and internationally, and now is the author of this outstanding mystery with its believable characters and exciting plot.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH
by Peter Grainger
Union Square, $17.99, May

When I read the August 26th article by Sara Lyall in ***The New York Times*** about Peter Grainger, the pen name of British author Robert Partridge, I was immediately intrigued. Also a bit embarrassed. Here is a best-selling author of 17 mysteries who is totally unknown to me.

I ordered his first D. C. Smith novel, AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH, on Kindle and became hooked at once. There is something about the writer's style that made me feel that I knew this police inspector from the first page, even though I knew I hadn't read his work before.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH introduces D. C. Smith, a detective sergeant in the small town of King's Lake. He should be called D. S. Smith because of his rank (Detective Sergeant), but he prefers to go by D. C. (Detective Constable) because those are his initials of his first and middle names. Since Smith isn't a man who is interested in status, he's happy with the initials referring to a



lower rank than he actually holds. After all, he earlier gave up a higher rank because he realized it didn't allow him to do the actual police work that he loved.

The novel opens with a group of teenagers are fooling around on the bank of a river. A canoe passes by, its passengers jeering at them, and when a second one is seen, Wayne Fletcher, one of the teenagers, decides get revenge. He jumps into the water to catch it, and then Wayne and the canoe disappear around a bend.

At first the group on the grass isn't concerned, but after a few minutes and Wayne hasn't returned, they begin looking for him but without success. They go to the police to file a report, and a search is carried out. **Wayne's body is found in the river, but it's not certain if his death was an accident or if the missing canoeist is responsible**.

Smith and his new partner, Christopher Waters, don't know the answer either, but Smith's experience is telling him that the case needs more investigation. And when the inquiry leads them to the estate of a reclusive former member of the British Army, Smith and Waters realize they are in a dangerous situation.

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH is followed by sixteen novels in the D. C. Smith series. Smith is a dedicated police officer, a man whose abilities guide him through the labyrinth of clues and false statements to discover the truth. **What a wealth of reading is ahead of the readers who discover this outstanding series featuring a down-to-earth man who is able to bring his outstanding abilities and knowledge to his job.**

A DEADLY ENTANGLEMENT
by Cathy Pegau
Minotaur, $30.00, September

As President of B & H Foods, Margot Harriman is used to being successful at everything she does. That includes fundraising, even if most of the credit goes to the all male New York City Charity Hospital board. This is, after all, the early 1900s, and men are in charge of nearly everything.

Margot is discussing the plans for the upcoming gala in support of the hospital with Dr. Stephen Jameson when something catches her eye as it moves past the physician's window. Then there is a thud, followed by a scream. **The deceased was Stella Nowak, a nurse at the hospital, and her death, sad as it is, is officially ruled a suicide.**

Margot, however, doesn't agree, especially when her friend CeeCee, a nurse at the facility, tells her that Stella's death was only the most recent one. Is there something going on at the hospital that Stella was aware of that led to her passing?

Much of the plot contrasts the care given to patients at the Charity Hospital and that given to the residents at the Caspian, a luxurious setting catering to well-to-do clientele suffering from the stresses of high society. But here too, there are mysterious happenings, including the death of Margot's friend Dotty shortly after they share lunch at the facility's beautiful dining room.

When Dr. Beales, a physician at both hospitals, visits Margot to tell her of Dotty's passing, she decides the only way she will find out what caused the death is to become a patient at the Caspian herself. It's certainly easy enough to plead fatigue and overstimulation as the reasons to do so, and the following week Margot is at the facility.

At the same time, CeeCee and her lover, private investigator Rett Mancini, are looking into the recent deaths at the Charity Hospital, including Stella's. Is it simply coincidence that both hospitals are experiencing an unusual number of deaths, or is it something more sinister?

One of the most interesting things about reading novels that take place in another time is how similar or different things were then compared to our own time. In A Deadly Entanglement, it's easy to spot the differences between that time and ours, but it's also easy to see which things haven't changed at all, or at least not much.

One of the changes is certainly the recognition of gay relationships. CeeCee and Rett are in a committed lesbian relationship, but they can tell no one about their feelings for each other. And Margot has strong feelings for Shiloh, a magician's assistant and lock-picking expert, but in addition to the same-sex aspect of their affair is the issue of their very different places in society, with Shiloh being especially aware of the economic and educational differences between them.

A DEADLY ENTANGLEMENT is more than an entertaining read, although it is that. It's also a penetrating look into society's mores and values in the early 20th century and how they compare to ours**. Cathy Pegau has written an outstanding mystery with characters and a plot that will resonate with readers.**

A DEADLY EPISODE
by Anthony Horowitz
Harper, $32.00, April

I can't think of another author who is so willing to make fun of himself as Anthony Horowitz. Perhaps when you are the author of over 50 books in the genres of mystery, fantasy/suspense, and young adult novels you are confident enough in your abilities to engage in a little gentle self-mockery. Horowitz does it so well.

For those unfamiliar with the author, his Hawthorne/Horowitz books

are written in the first person by Tony Horowitz, who in the novels as in real life is the author of the books. As **A DEADLY EPISODE** opens, an earlier novel by Horowitz, **THE WORD IS MURDER**, is being made into a movie, and both Horowitz and retired police detective Daniel Hawthorne are invited to see the filming in the historic English town of Hastings for a day or two. As usual in their relationship, when Horowitz arrives he realizes that Hawthorne is the priority; a car had been sent to bring him to the film site while Horowitz arrived by train.

The movie's two stars have worked together before. David Caine is playing the police detective, and Ralph Seymour is playing the author. Horowitz thinks Seymour is the better actor, but there's something strange in his background. Several years ago he and Caine were both up for the Best Actor award given annually by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTRA), and the two actors went out to dinner beforehand, each saying that just being nominated was recognition enough.

After dinner, Seymour began to feel ill, and by the time the men took their seats in the auditorium he was seriously nauseated. When his name was called, he somehow made it up to the theater stage and picked up his trophy, but then he vomited on the stage and onto the people in the front row of the audience.

Seymour returned to his home country of New Zealand in disgrace, but things didn't improve for him there; his wife left him, and he began to sink into obscurity. Then came the call for him to star in ***The Word is Murder***, bringing him back to England.

Tony is feeling a bit left out of things, as it's obvious that Daniel is receiving a lion's share of attention. He decides to return to London a day earlier than planned, but on the morning of the day after he returns home he receives a call from Hawthorne**. "We've got to get back to Hastings," the retired detective tells him. "There's been a murder**."

The author's writing style and wit make reading **a deadly episode** a delight. The supporting characters in the novel are perfectly drawn–Hilda Starke, Tony's literary agent who is tough as nails except when it comes to Daniel; Teresa de León, the film's producer, who is having a hard time getting the necessary funding for the project; Shanika Harris, an eco-warrior who is directing the movie; and of course, Ralph Seymour and David Caine, the two stars of the movie.

Anthony Horowitz has written another clever novel in the Horowitz/Hawthorne series. Although the book's tone is light, there is a real mystery for the reader to solve, and the look into the worlds of book publishing and film production is fascinating. Anthony Horowitz's characters are sharply drawn and realistic, and the plot will keep readers captivated until the very end.

THE SHADOW FRIENDS
by Tess Gerritsen
Thomas & Mercer, $28.99, August

Maggie, Ben, Declan, Ingrid, and Lloyd are the members of what they have chosen to call The Martini Club. They are former CIA agents who have retired, somewhat reluctantly, to the small town of Purity, Maine.

Although they profess to be happy in their new lives, it's only Lloyd Slocum, Ingrid's husband and a former analyst rather than an operative, who is truly content. The others, although they are loath to admit it, miss the excitement and satisfaction they had when they were working.

Their lives are about to change, however, with the surprise arrival of Rodrigo Estrada, another retired agent and Ingrid's former lover. Although the two haven't seen each other in nearly thirty years, it's obvious that they had a relationship, something Lloyd wasn't aware of.

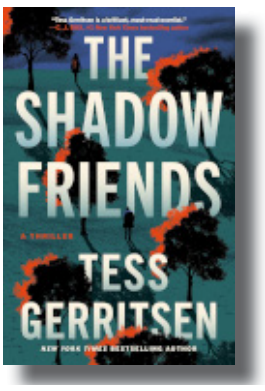
After leaving the CIA, Rodrigo founded Argus, a multinational corporation that does covert operational work. He tells Ingrid that many of the people in the nation's government aren't pleased with the way the Agency is currently operating, and thus a number of them have joined Argus, which is free from governmental scrutiny and has been extremely effective.

The ostensible reason for Rodrigo's visit to Purity is to attend the Stone Coast Conference, which this year is focusing on biohazards, and to meet one of the speakers, Dr. Mikhail Maslov. Maslov is a scientist who worked in a Russian lab before he defected to the West, and Rodrigo needs to find out more about the biohazards he will be talking about in his presentation.

The second reason for Rodrigo's attendance is that he wants Ingrid to join Argus. Although it has been twenty-eight years since the two worked together, Rodrigo is certain that Ingrid's skills are just as sharp now as they were then. He tells her that Argus' client wants to know which bioweapons are being developed, and for that reason he has set up an appointment with the Russian doctor for the next day. Of course, he cannot know that Dr. Maslov will be dead by then.

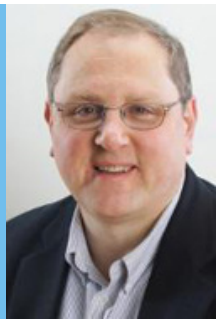
Then Ingrid disappears. She leaves a note for her husband which says "I need to leave. I'll explain later," which does not clarify the reason for her leaving nor tell him when she'll return. Lloyd contacts Jo Thibodeau, the town's acting police chief, and she and the remaining members of the Martini Club join with Lloyd to find Ingrid. Ingrid, however, is an expert at covering her footsteps, so this will not be an easy task.

THE SHADOW FRIENDS is a multi-faceted novel. It explores the deep friendships between the members of the Club, the marriage of Ingrid and Lloyd, and the emotions stirred up by Rodrigo with his re-entrance into Ingrid's life. Tess Gerritsen has written another impressive mystery featuring well-drawn people and a truly suspenseful plot.

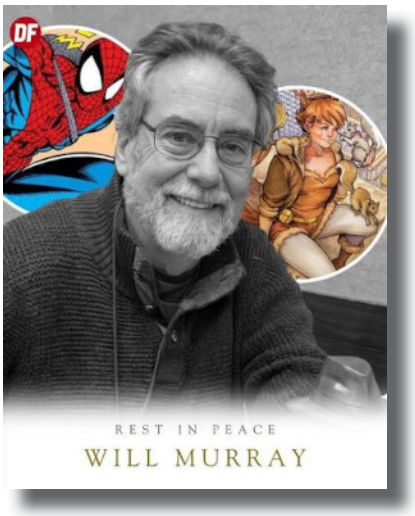


Novels of Sensation and Other Stuff

Hank Wagner



R.I.P. Will Murray



I'm deeply saddened to report the passing of a true gentleman and learned scholar, Will Murray, on August 24, 2026. He was prolific in every sense of the word, whether it be fiction or non-fiction: it seemed like he published an article, or book, or novel, or short story collection every few weeks. Whether it was for ***DP, Mystery Scene***, or ***The Strand***, my review columns rarely lacked a glowing mention of one of his publications. In fact, I gave a mini-review of his last novel, **SECRET AGENT X VS. DR. DEATH**, last issue; it was quintessential Murray, well-crafted, accessible, and highly entertaining.

It was his love of the bloody pulps that always piqued my interest, especially when he was writing about ***The Spider, Doc Savage,*** or ***The Shadow***, or a plethora of other pulp heroes and villains. Besides that, he also wrote stories featuring no less than Tarzan, King Kong, and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu. As icing on the literary cake, he also co-created (with the legendary Steve Ditko), the world-renowned comic book character, Squirrel Girl. He will be sorely missed.

IRONWOOD
By Michael Connelly
Little, Brown, May 2026, $32.00
Rating: A

This is the second novel in Connelly's new series, featuring Catalina Sheriff's Detective Stillwell.

The novel kicks off as a stake out goes horribly wrong, with one officer being grievously wounded and another killed. Was it human error, or a set up? Stillwell needs to find out quickly, despite the numerous distractions and obstacles he faces in his professional life.

IRONWOOD is quintessential Connelly, well-written, tight, and compelling. I love the focus on the day to day, and the grind involved in solving cases. In an odd way, Catalina feels like Mayberry, in that Stillwell is the steady hand on the tiller that keeps the town on course, its citizens safe. The book also evoked Ed McBain's 87 th precinct novels and Robert B. Parker's Jesse Stone series.

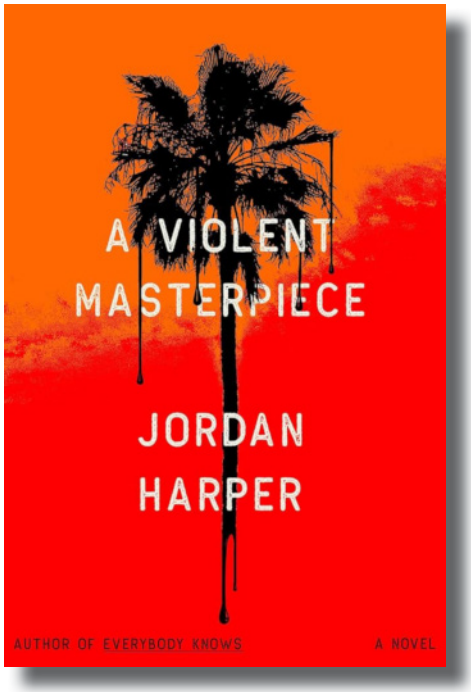
Oh, and any book in which Renee Ballard has a starring role is worth your time. There are also mentions of Harry and Maddie Bosch, which provide a couple of special moments of frisson for Connelly aficionados.

A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE
By Jonanthan Harper
Mullholland, April 2026, $29.00
Rating: A+

I wanted to talk about this book first because…wow. It's terrific for so many reasons; it's Elmore Leonard and Michael Connelly and James Ellroy on steroids, full of heat and steeped in violence, a celebration and condemnation of modern Los Angeles whose impact you will feel deep in your bones.

So yes, I liked it. You get a sense of what's to come early on, from the book's gorgeous cover designed by Gregg Kulick (based on a request for "neon gravitas" from the author, neon capturing the feel of the city, and gravitas suggesting its connection to classic noir), through its first three chapters, where you meet the three main characters with whom you'll be traveling down L.A.'s mean streets. There are also unmistakable connections to the (under) world we first visited in Harper's modern classic, 2023'S **EVERYBODY KNOWS**. The book ultimately delivers a strange mix of cynicism and optimism, rage and tenderness, despair and hope.

So yes, it's good. Maybe even great.



I predict it will top almost everybody's Year's Best next January, deservedly.

DARKNESS AT SHADOWSIDE
By Amanda DeWeese
March 2026, $12.99
Rating: B+

Justine Blakeley dreams not of Manderley, but of a mysterious, murky edifice that she later comes to know as Shadowside Manor. The house is notorious as the scene of a heinous murder decades before; the noting of the 100 th anniversary of the death in a local newspaper is how the edifice gains her attention in "real life". Having nothing to lose after she is ousted from her position as a maidservant at Highcliff Manor, and motivated to understand her strange dreams, she takes it upon herself to visit the mansion.

Arriving there, she is stunned when its owners, the Fevershams, tell her that she bears an uncanny resemblance to a spirit that haunts its halls; she finds this to be true when, shortly after being taken in, she actually encounters said spirit. Trying to understand the message the specter seems to be trying to communicate to her becomes her mission in life. Her quest is fraught with peril, as she has no idea of either the spirit's or her benefactors' true agenda.

DeWees adeptly weaves mystery, suspense, and the supernatural in this winning gothic thriller; she dusts off old tropes and breathes new life into each and every one, from the numerous dark and stormy nights to the brooding, irascible male lead. Readers will enjoy the adventures of this daring young heroine as she continually places herself in jeopardy in her relentless pursuit of the truth. You can tell just by glancing at the cover art that she's not your traditional gothic heroine, running headlong from the danger present in the haunted mansion, candelabra ablaze. That art shows a defiant, determined heroine, ready to tackle any problem she faces, head on.

GHOST INN
By Bev Vincent
Lividian, March 2026, $125
Rating: B+

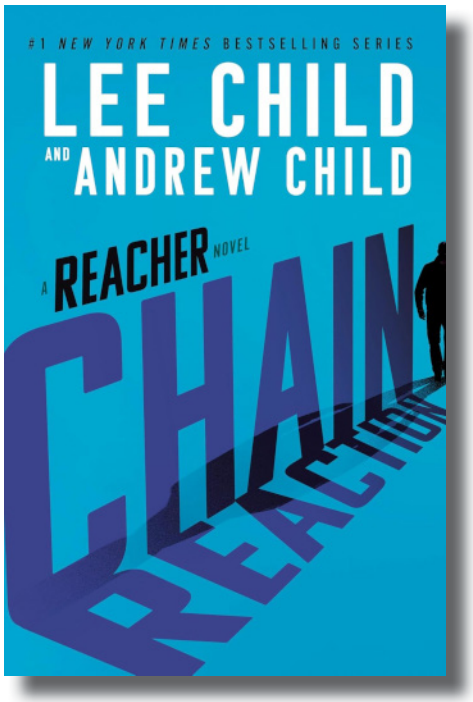
Is the historic Gresham Inn of Galveston, Texas, haunted? The current owners say yes, exploiting the hotel's spooky reputation to boost reservations, even leaning into it so much as to host a convention in honor of one of its most famous guests, best-selling horror writer Bob Wilson, whose career was kick started by his honeymoon stay at the venue, during which a murder occurred. Wilson doesn't remember much about that fateful night; in fact, he has studiously avoided the hotel ever since. Seeking to move on with his life after a rocky divorce, he's decided to attend the convention in hopes of uncovering the truth behind the trauma he experienced. Were dark forces involved, or is the explanation more mundane?

I enjoyed Vincent's debut novel, a clever and compelling Texas Gothic, replete with shocks, scares, and any number of terrifying twists and turns. His character work is excellent, especially as it pertains to the book's main character, Bob Wilson, whose career trajectory may remind devotees of another famous horror author who became famous by writing a novel about a haunted hotel. Bob is multi-dimensional and fully formed, as are supporting characters, Inn Manager Tom Fanning, and intrepid newshound Erica Clark.

Vincent has stated that the book was over twenty years in the making, moving forward in fits and starts, but none of that shows in the final product. Hopefully, the publication of this 600-copy limited edition will create demand for a more mainstream release of this book, as it deserves a much wider audience.

CHAIN REACTION
By Lee Child and Andrew Child
Bantam, October 2026, $34.00
Rating: A

So, there's a new Reacher novel, the 7 th collaboration between the brothers, the second this year (**EXIT STRATEGY** came out in March 2026), and, drumroll please, the 31st overall since the first book, **KILLING FLOOR**, created a stir almost three decades ago. It also follows the debut of the 4 th season of Reacher,



GONE TOMORROW, based on the 13 th book in the series.

I'm glad to report that, as both fan and reviewer, **CHAIN REACTION** follows in the footsteps of its immediate predecessor, **EXIT STRATEGY**, as a well-written, well-plotted, well-paced throwback to earlier novels in the series. It brings back Susan Turner (from **61 HOURS** and **NEVER GO BACK**, now a General), who asks Reacher to do some covert work for the fledging federal agency she heads. Reacher pokes and prods, as he does, eventually uncovering a larger conspiracy.

I understand that Andrew Child wrote most of this book, and that it's the last book Lee Child will co-author, with Andrew taking on all the writing chores with Reacher #32. If that's the case, Reacher Creatures have nothing to fear, as their hero seems to be left in highly capable hands.

A pairing of titles

PETRIFIED DREAMS
By Joe R. Lansdale
Little, Brown, October 2026, $30.00
Rating: B+

FIRST CHANCE
By Casey Lansdale
Blackstone, September 2026, $29.99

Rating: B+

This pairing is highly appropriate, as Casey Lansdale is Joe Lansdale's daughter. They have collaborated in the past, most notably on the short story collection, **TERROR IS OUR BUSINESS**, and on the novella "The Case of the Bleeding Wall". And, look at those covers side by side, was there something in the air when they were being designed?

Besides that, **FIRST CHANCE** is Casey's debut novel, chronicling the first case of neophyte PI Chance Kirby; **PETRIFIED DREAMS** is being marketed as her father's last novel to feature the unlikely duo of Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. Bookends of sorts.

Papa Lansdale's book is quintessential Hap and Leonard, as the boys find themselves on the trail of the macabre sculptor known as The Artist (no relation to Prince Nelson). Long time regulars Brett Sawyer and Jim Bob Luke also appear, adding zest to the narrative.

Daughter Lansdale's book delves into serial killers and long buried family secrets, as Chance tries to emerge from her parent's shadows to make her own mark in the PI field, even as she struggles with parenting an unruly teen (not her own).

Both novels are well worth your time and attention. I can only say that I'm as gladdened by Casey Lansdale's impressive solo debut as I am deeply saddened by the prospect of no new Hap and Leonard adventures in the future. Kudos to Champion Joe though for going out at the top of his game.

Some science fiction/horror/fantasy thrillers:

OTHER WORLDS THAN THESE
By Stephen King and Peter Straub
Scribner, October 2026, $35.00
Rating: B+

This is the final installment in the duo's Talisman trilogy, written by King, inspired by Straub. It's pure nostalgia for Constant Readers of these horror/thriller/suspense Titans, as we find out what became of Jack Sawyer, the hero of The Talisman and Black House, after he was gunned down at the end of the latter. Jack, who now resides in the alternate universe called Mid-World, is multi-talented, his chief skill being able to shift between "our" reality, and the realityof Mid-World, a locale that acts as sort of a mirror universe to our own. In OWTT, he is tasked with investigating a strange phenomenon known as the Gullett, which seems to be a tear in the wall between the two universes. What begins as a quest for knowledge ends as a quest to save all realities.

Fans of King and Straub, and of the previous Talisman tales will have a great time with this book; there's a lot of fan service, and a lot of call backs. There are also explicit ties to the Stephen King Universe, especially to King's Dark Tower series, as Roland the Gunslinger and his ka-tet are creatures of myth and legend in Mid-World. Folks coming to this cold should also enjoy the book, even though they might struggle to understand the import of everything that'sbeing thrown at them.

THE INSTITUTE
By Katherine Bradley
Simon & Shuster, February, $28.99
Rating: B+

THE INSTITUTE is a real "edge of your seat" experience, a literal page turner. It tells the story of a young woman named Billie Walker, the sole survivor of a seemingly spontaneous mass suicide event on a train platform, who is invited to reside at The Arbor Institute, a secretive, corporate backed research facility that is looking into a disturbing rise in similar events around the globe.

Billie doesn't realize it at first, but the folks at Arbor see her more as a lab rat than a human patient.

I was turned on to Katherine Bradley's latest novel by CriminOlly, a most excellent Book Tuber who, according to his You Tube Intro, reviews "Crime, pulp, horror…that sort of thing." **THE INSTITUTE** (published only in the UK, as far as I know) is precisely "that sort of thing," a creepy mashup of science fiction, horror, suspense and murder mystery that brings to mind novellas in the vein of "Flowers for Algernon," and books as diverse as Robin Cook's **COMA**, James Herbert's **THE FOG**, Dennis LeHane's **SHUTTER ISLAND**, and Stephen King's 2019 thriller of the same name.

The 2026 Anthony Award Winners

Best Hardcover Novel

THE BLACK WOLF, by Louise Penny – Winner

ALL THIS COULD BE YOURS, by Hank Phillippi Ryan
CROOKS, by Lou Berney
DEATH OF AN EX, by Delia Pitts
KING OF ASHES, by S.A. Cosby

Best First Novel

MASK OF THE DEER WOMAN, by Laurie L. Dove – Winner

HISTORY LESSONS, by Zoe B. Wallbrook
JULIE CHAN IS DEAD, by Liann Zhang
THE RETIREMENT PLAN, by Sue Hincenbergs
VOICES OF THE ELYSIAN FIELDS, by Michael Rigg
WHISKEY BUSINESS, by Adrian Andover

Best Paperback Original

EDGE, by Tracy Clark – Winner

CRIMSON THAW, by Bruce Robert Coffin
RIVER OF LIES, by James L'Etoile
THIS VIOLENT HEART, by Heather Levy
TRICKS OF FORTUNE, by Lina Chern



The Cozy - Traditional Mystery Cafe'

Robin Agnew Reviews



MISS WOLCOTT'S GHOST
By Louise Penny
Minotaur, $30, October
Chief Inspector Gamache #21
Rating: A

It's been a while. I wasn't a huge fan of the last two Gamache books, or of the more recent thriller co-written with Melissa Fung, but with *Miss Wolcott's Ghost* Louise Penny has returned to the form that has made me a giant supporter of her work. I'll never forget the spell put on me by her first novel, *Still Life,* and that reading rapture was gifted to me again with this book. When I hit the three-quarter mark, I was glued to the pages and didn't leave my chair.

Readers have come to expect many things from Penny's novels – a complicated, thoughtful plot; wonderful characters; and a resolution that often leaves a lump in your throat (for this reader, in any case). This book does not disappoint on any of these fronts. Set again in Three Pines, the story focuses in on Gamache, Beauvoir, and another character who appears to be despised by both men. His story is teased out through the book, and I won't provide a spoiler.

The basics: Gamache gets a panicked phone call in the middle of the night, with a caller saying merely "There's a body in Lost Nation." That of course is a sentence to launch a good story and it does. First Gamache has to *find* "Lost Nation" and when he does find it there is indeed a dead body on top of a grave, and the body has plants growing through it.

The plant is as big a mystery as the body itself. It appears to be a plant thought to be extinct, and with great care (and the help of a botanist) Armand transplants it to his own garden. The plant and the body are linked, but it takes the majority of the novel for Gamache and his team to discover exactly how they are connected. Along the way the team also discovers a marine disaster – worse than that of the Titanic – occurring just two years later. The investigation also involves this tragedy. It's a real occurrence, and you'll want to look it up as you read. It's remarkable that it's been so forgotten.

To tell much more would be to give away the delights of this plot. Always, the revelations are made via Gamache's conversations with suspects and other people he encounters during his investigation. In this way, Penny very much reminds me of the great P.D. James, though Penny's spirit is ultimately a more optimistic one than James'. These conversations and discoveries are the heart of this deeply complex and moving novel.

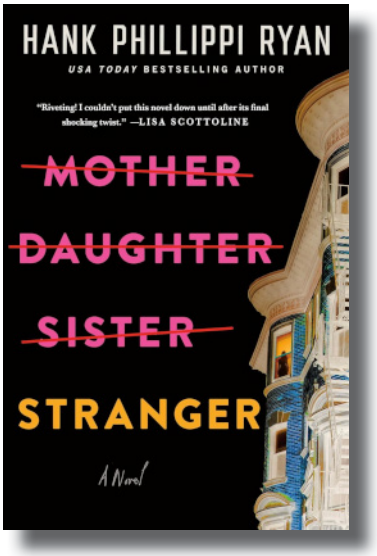
Penny also gifts the reader with some short visits with her series "regulars" – Reine-Marie, Ruth, Clara, Myrna, Gabri and Olivier, and even Rosa the duck. But for all it's breadth of storytelling this is a focused book. It's focused on Gamache's and Beauvoir's investigation, as well as their memories of the character despised by them both. This tighter focus makes the novel a very strong entry in this series, perhaps one of my favorites to date.

MOTHER DAUGHTER SISTER STRANGER
By Hank Phillippi Ryan
Minotaur, $29, September
Rating: A

Nearly twenty books in, accomplished pro Hank Phillippi Ryan can keep you entertained, squeeze your heart, make you cry, give you a bit of a scare and make the whole darn thing look easy. But this one achieves just a little bit more, with the characters so beautifully delineated, and the family tensions and problems that gives the plot its legs so poignant, that the book had me aching to actually reach into the pages and help the compelling characters in some way.

Hank always has a great set up - here Eliza is caring for niece Piper for a week while her sister Bea takes some time away from it all after a divorce. The problems start when the day comes for Bea to collect Piper and she doesn't show up. At first the family rationalizes that Bea must have gotten the wrong day. The following day is the annual family "remembrance day," when Eliza, Bea and Piper go to the cemetery to visit the grave of Eliza and Bea's parents, who died in a plane crash many years back. Since they know Bea packed an appropriate remembrance day dress, they conclude Bea must mean to meet them there, so they head over the next morning, but, again she's a no show.

While exploring Bea's and Piper's house, the burglar alarm goes off, summoning the police. They discover someone has changed the alarm code, kicking off an escalating string of worrisome events, and in this fraught moment we enter Eliza's head as her concern cascades for Bea, and, most of all, Piper, who is already struggling to cope without her mom. Eliza begins to fear the worst, trying to keep the situation from becoming too much for a stressed



eleven-year-old, even as her boss keeps pinging her, wondering what is going on. They ultimately end up with said boss eating a much-delayed dinner and figuring out their next steps.

To give any more away about this beautifully constructed plot, one in which one element organically unfolds into the next, would do the reader a disservice. Long ago a dear writer friend, Barbara D'Amato, told me she loved Agatha Christie, because "she's so organic." It took me many years of reading to understand her exact meaning, but in a nutshell, it's this – the plot must unfold like life, with events that surprise us but nevertheless emerge logically from the past. I'll just suggest readers pay close attention, because canny pro Ryan doesn't let details drop without a reason, which often only becomes apparent in admiring hindsight.

The reveals can astonish, but, as I said, they grow organically from plot and character, as Ryan has prepared a trail and it's only after the surprise that the reader realizes they've been set up by a master. A combination of barrelling thriller, expert mystery and moving story, *Mother Daughter Sister Stranger* had me grabbing for Kleenex at the end. It's a high bar, but I found it to definitely be one of Ryan's strongest books.

THOSE WHO ARE GONE
By Laurie R. King
Bantam, $30, September
Raquel Laing #2
Rating: A-

THOSE WHO ARE GONE is the follow-up to Laurie King's 2022 excellent **BACK TO THE GARDEN**, one of my favorite books of that year. Her new effort is definitely a different animal, as she goes back to her roots with a complex police tale reminiscent of **A GRAVE TALENT**, for which she won the 1993 Edgar for best first novel.

Equal to the modern master of the genre, Michael Connelly, this is a procedural with bells on. Main character Raquel Laing is a homicide cop still cleaning up a timeline which stretches back to King's previous book, while at the same time trying to get a grip her own troubled and murky past. She's what we might recognize as neurodivergent, as many social cues elude her, but she's compensated by developing the skill of reading micro expressions, allowing her to translate her interpretations into an out of the box solution to various mysteries, solutions which are quite often correct. Her glitches relating to other humans make her a challenge as a partner, and in this novel, she has a new one named Pam, who seems more interested in her Manolo Blahniks and boyfriend than her job.

Raquel maintains ties with Al of the cold case squad, and she has worked cold cases in the past (see *Back to the Garden*) but now after an injury, she's returned as a homicide consultant. The book moves back and forth in time a bit, taking in the case that left Raquel injured as well as a new one that seems connected. The other mystery that needs to be resolved is the question of her parentage. She still lives with her adopted sister, Dee, whose parents, the Laings, took Raquel in at age 9 after her mother's and father's death and subsequent dreadful foster home experiences.

Raquel's father was a drug dealer, and her memories of him, while not awful, are also tied to a variety of "uncles" and "aunts" in the same business, one she hadn't understood as a child, but one that, as a cop, she now knows only too well. She was investigating the vicious murder of a lower-level drug dealer when she was shot, and the aftershocks of that case continue to reverberate throughout the story.

King's nimble time hopping is not confusing, but rather serves to elucidate the narrative, both in terms of Raquel grappling with her family's past, as well as managing to tie together the various threads of the story. Another less expert writer could very well have produced a boring book, but in King's hands it's unputdownable, as the reader races ahead, curious about what Raquel is discovering about herself and the murder of the young drug dealer.

King's mind is far reaching and over arching, examining every single aspect of the story she tells, taking in tiny details and big ones, creating books compellingly rich and layered. It's a high wire act, and I almost expected the skillful balancing act of this complicated narrative to go awry, but thankfully, it never did and the result is an extremely well done and memorable book. There's a certain special something in King's writing that pulls directly on the heartstrings, explaining her legions of devoted fans.

THE DYING LIGHT
By Ann Cleeves
Minotaur, $29, September
Matthew Venn #4
Rating: A

Over a forty year writing career, Ann Cleeves has emerged as one of the very best traditional mystery writers around. With three very well regarded series to her credit, Shetland, Vera, and Matthew Venn, she's achieved something few writers are capable of in creating several discrete casts of characters who differ from each other yet remain individual and memorable. Her latest features Matthew Venn, a gay Detective Inspector in Devon, who, despite being shunned by his religious parents when he lost his faith, now lives very happily with his husband, the chill and patient Jonathan, the two of them comprising one of the nicest couples in mystery fiction.

Despite this stable relationship Matthew still has his issues. Often anxious and unsure of himself, he compensates with blazing intelligence and a thor-

ough and careful investigating style. He needs these qualities when he and his team catch a heartbreaking case involving the death of two young girls who had come down to a family vacation home for a getaway before beginning their first year at university. Hannah, whose family owns the house, is the daughter of an MP, so there's big time scrutiny, including massive amounts of press.

Cleeves, however, keeps the story and the circle of players tight. There is a richly drawn background of family and locals, friends and neighbors, but not a big roster of suspects, creating a golden age balancing act for Cleeves, which she pulls off, keeping the reader guessing until almost the very last chapter. The set up is completely heartbreaking, with the grieving parents of the two girls reacting in different ways, highlighting their lack of connection and sympathy. While the victims were friends, their parents are not, despite their shared grief.

Matthew and his team patiently interview and cover the investigative ground thoroughly in order to discover just what happened to the two girls and who might be responsible. The depiction of the grieving family and other families in this small, resort area of Devon is beautifully and completely delineated. Out of this mix of pub owners, farm families, different surly teens and the mother of one of the dead girls, Cleeves creates the rich canvas of her story.

Her books always have the ineffable quality of something unexpected waiting around the corner, with Cleeves having more than enough aces up her authorial sleeve to keep the reader guessing. One of the reasons these books are so resonant is not simply the ingenious resolution of the mystery, but the development of the characters of Matthew and Jonathan. In this instalment, Jonathan deals with a larger personal issue, while Matthew, always unsure about how to properly handle personal interactions, can only remain awkward but loving.

The story's dénouement is not only heartbreaking, but a true tragedy with many tendrils and victims. The wrap up to Jonathan's situation is more ambiguous, leaving me even more eager for the next book.

THE KILLING TIME
By Elly Griffiths
Pamela Dorman Bks, $30, November
Ali Dawson #2
Rating: A

Since finishing up her beloved Ruth Galloway series, Elly Griffiths has been letting her freak flag fly with wonderful results. In this latest series, her main character, Ali Dawson, is a detective in the cold crimes division: so cold, they're frozen. The unit operates out of a decrepit building in London on Eel Street, with a mysterious upper chamber called "Pevensie," which, as every Narnia lov-



ing kid knows, was the last name of the family in the books. It's into this air of slight unreality that the reader finds that the detectives in this cold case squad can time travel.

When I first heard about this aspect of the books, I almost didn't read them, but I should have had faith in the greatness that is Griffiths' storytelling. To me, she's one of the greatest pure storytellers alive, and these books prove my point. The time travel element is folded naturally into the stories, enriching the plots. There are crimes in the past as well as in the present that must be solved, and in another tribute to Ms. Griffiths' skill, these crimes are all related to one another.

In the first book in the series, *The Frozen People,* Ali chooses to go back to 1850s London. It's all the more jarring as she's living in the neighborhood where she lives in the present. She must learn to deal with being a servant, using a chamber pot (and emptying it), and wearing a corset. (As it's made clear in this novel, when there's a heat wave in 1851, corset itch was real.) In this book, while she does again end up in 1851, she'd meant to only go back a week for the quotidian reason of wanting to close the cat flap in her kitchen, preventing her cat's escape. She misses him dreadfully.

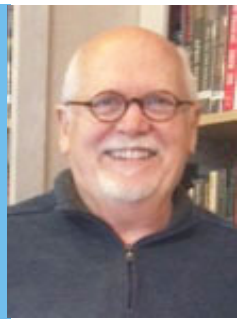
When she returns to the past, she finds another person from the cold case squad still there who is now happily living in 1851. This woman scoops Ali up and gives her a very different experience than the one she had the first time. Rather than a serving as a maid, Ali is now a guest in an upper class home. While she finds it more pleasant she's wracked with guilt as she knows the amount of labor the servants are performing to keep her in comfort.

The thread that ties past and present turns out to be a man who claims to be able to fly and who can read minds. Ali has seen one of his present day shows where he references an influence, and similar figure, in Victorian London. Are they scam artists? Do they have actual powers? Ali is sceptical and when there are deaths – all of them, in this instalment, in the present – they are still tied to the past as Griffiths performs her own writerly sleight of hand and brings Madeline L'Engle's "wrinkle in time" to an even fuller expression. The past seems folded into the present, and vice versa.

What really makes these novels extraordinary is the vivid depiction of 1851 London. I read many, many historical novels, and I love them, but Griffiths books really make you feel, as a reader, that you can perhaps begin to grasp and almost experience the way an ordinary person might have lived in the past. If that's not time travel, I don't know what is. The whole is wrapped in a mesmerizing story that was the icing on this very particular cake. You'll have to read the book and discover its delights for yourself.

Deadly Pleasures

George Easter



A BAD, BAD PLACE
by Frances Crawford
Soho Crime, $28.95, March
Debut Novel
Rating: A

The story centers on Janey Devine, a precocious, punk-rock-loving 12-year-old girl. Janey is an orphan, having miraculously survived a tragic flat gas explosion years prior that killed her parents and older sister. She lives with her protective, widowed grandmother, Maggie (Nana), who works as a part-time pub cleaner to make ends meet.

The plot kicks off when Janey is out walking her oddly-named dog, Sid Vicious, along an abandoned stretch of railway tracks known locally as the Dummy Railway. Sid leads her to a horrifying discovery: the mutilated remains of Samantha Watson, a 22-year-old university student.

Samantha is not just anyone—she is the daughter of Billy "The Ghost" Watson, a notorious local crime boss and gangster. Janey reports what she found to the police ("the polis"), but the trauma causes her to experience memory gaps—and to intentionally hide a crucial detail.

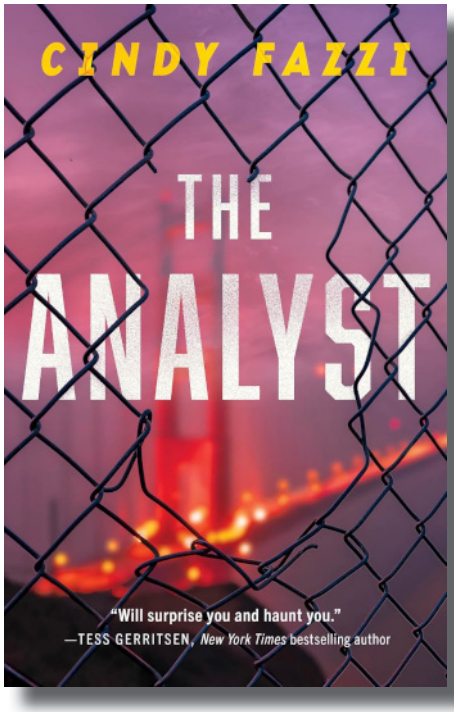
Because it is 1979, the police rely on loose conduct rules and heavy-handed tactics on Janey, suspecting she knows more than she is letting on. At the same time, Billy Watson takes an aggressive interest in Janey. Driven by grief and a desire for street justice, Billy tries to use the family; he gives Janey a cash reward for staying with his daughter's body and hires Nana Maggie to work as a dispatcher for his taxi business. Maggie is uneasy working for a criminal, but the family desperately needs the money, and she empathizes deeply with Billy's grief.

The narrative alternates between the distinct voices of Janey and Maggie, written heavily in authentic "Glesga patter" (Glasgow dialect – a glossary of which is found at the back of the book). As rumor and terror ripple through the tight-knit Possilpark**, the tension escalates.** The author throws us a couple of good red herrings along the way to a satisfactory ending.

This debut effort reeks of authenticity and well deserves the plaudits it is getting from the mystery fiction community. Expect to see it on many of the year's "best" lists, including mine.

THE ANALYST
by Cindy Fazzi
Thomas & Mercer, $16.99, April
Bethany Briggs #1
Rating: B+

THE ANALYST follows Bethany



Briggs, a brilliant 23-year-old biracial Filipino American, who is one of the youngest intelligence analysts working in the FBI's San Francisco field office. Relying entirely on her intellect and instincts rather than a weapon, she gets a career-defining break when the violent crimes squad recruits her to crack an increasingly complex web of political murders.

The investigation centers on a string of high-profile deaths: four Filipino men (three of whom are members of a communist militia) are found slaughtered in a rainforest. Shortly after, a diplomat is assassinated, and the body of the prime suspect in the initial quadruple murder washes ashore on a beach. As Bethany begins tracking the forensic data and analyzing surveillance footage, she uncovers a calculated pattern that forces her to confront her own heritage and family history.

The professional case rapidly turns deeply personal when the digital and forensic trails point directly toward someone she loves.

The strength of this novel is the central character Bethany Briggs, who is quite likeable. The reader quickly develops an affinity for her and her well-being. The plot meanders a bit, but eventually comes to a satisfying conclusion.

BACKTRACK
by Marc Cameron
Kensington, $30.00, July
Arliss Cutter #8
Rating: B+

The seeds of this mystery are buried in the past – specifically 1977. An armored truck robbery goes violently wrong, leaving two guards dead and $5 million in diamonds stolen and/or missing. D. Wayne Cutter—a Green Beret, Texas deputy sheriff, and grandfather to Arliss Cutter—pursues the robbers. When D. Wayne tracks them down, he kills one and captures the other – the teenage accomplice, Ricky Lee "Pinky" Pink, who is sentenced to life in prison.

Fast forward to the present. Pinky (not the sharpest tool in the set) has been released from prison and wants

to act on his long-harbored desire for revenge. He illogically believes that the Cutter family has the long-lost diamonds and also wants to revenge the death of his friend and mentor, who was killed back in 1977. The object of his vengeance: Deputy U.S. Marshall Arliss Cutter. His plan: to kidnap Joellen, Cutter's wife while she's on an Alaskan cruise and hold her for ransom to obtain the diamonds. What Pinky has failed to find out is that Arliss' "wife" is really is his ex-wife (they've been divorced for eight years).

Nevertheless, the plot thickens when Joellen tells Arliss that she has a feeling that she is being followed. So Arliss and his partner Lola meet up with Joellen when her ship docks in Ketchikan.

While the author does a lot of things right in this book (especially actions scenes), I had a problem with the plotting. The villains were just so dumb! It just didn't seem realistic to me that they would try such a high-risk operation without a lot more intelligence gathering and planning.

I specifically took this book on my Alaska vacation and was mildly disappointed when I discovered that a lot of it is set in Texas. There were scenes set in Anchorage and Ketchikan, which I visited on our cruise, so that was pleasing to read and experience at the same time.

THE BLACKBIRD CONSPIRACY
by Tariq Ashkanani
Thomas & Mercer, $16.99, August
Callie Munro #2
Rating: B+

The story line of **THE BLACKBIRD CONSPIRACY** follows abrasive but dogged Edinburgh private investigator Callie Munro after she discovers her tech specialist/friend murdered inside his heavily secured flat. Because there are no signs of forced entry, Callie realizes he must have known his killer. Before his death, the tech specialist left behind a highly dangerous piece of evidence: surveillance footage documenting a fatal hit-and-run accident. When Callie investigates the incident, she discovers that there is no record of the incident in official public records and that a possible coverup has taken place.

As Callie investigates the cover-up, the mystery deepens:Key witnesses connected to the event begin to systematically vanish. The local police force finds itself completely stonewalled by higher powers.

Targeted by an elusive hunter and unable to trust anyone around her, Callie is forced to operate entirely on her own, which ratchets of the danger quotient.

Callie is also carrying on a parallel investigation in search of her parents who abandoned her at a homeless shelter when she was a baby.

Ashkanani writes well and infuses the narrative with good pacing, interesting characters and a puzzling plot. Good, but not great.

SECRETS OF THE MISSING
by C. J. Carver
Bloodhound Books, $15.99, September
Standalone
Rating: B+

Twelve years after her own father vanished without a trace, Constable Kira Connal is tasked with investigating the sudden disappearance of another family man, Oliver Stroud. Oliver went into hiding after witnessing a fatal shooting tied to a smuggling operation involving millions of dollars in illegal tiger skins.

As Kira investigates, she uncovers chilling links to her father's past, discovering that both men were pilots who flew out of the exact same airfield and were entangled in the same dark enterprise.

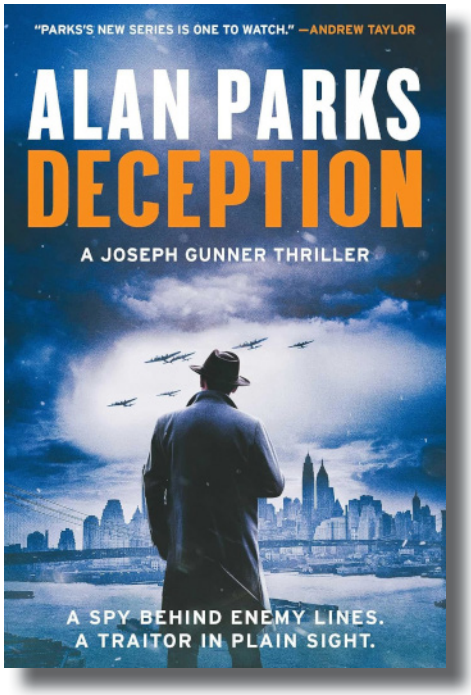
Kira's investigation quickly draws intense, conflicting pressure from both the British police and India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Hunted by a ruthless organized crime syndicate and facing corrupt forces determined to keep a twelve-year-old truth buried, Kira must navigate a deadly conspiracy that stretches from the UK to India.

I've been reading stories by C. J. Carver (also known as Caroline Carver since her 1991 debut novel **BLOOD JUNCTION**. In other words, I trust her to come up with a compelling story line and great characters to follow.

SECRETS OF THE MISSING depends a little too much on coincidental events for my taste, but I'll still keep reading her books.

DECEPTION
by Alan Parks
Pegasus Crime, $27.95, September
Joe Gunner #2
Rating: A-



DECEPTION is a gripping, atmospheric wartime thriller set in New York City in the early days of December 1941, just before the United States enters the Second World War. The novel follows former detective Joseph Gunner, who—along with his enigmatic boss Nickerson—works for the BSC (British Security Coordination), a branch of the British Secret Service stationed at the Hamilton Princess Hotel. Their primary mission is to covertly push an isolationist America into joining the war using propaganda, planted stories, and blackmail.

The action kicks off with two major, intersecting crises:

The Honeytrap Gone Wrong: Gunner orchestrates a blackmail operation targeting a prominent American politician. The plan falls apart violently when the young woman acting as the femme fatale is found murdered, leaving

Gunner with a target on his back and his cover blown.

The Intelligence Leak: Concurrently, the head of the Japanese intelligence section is murdered and his apartment ransacked. As Gunner investigates, he realizes that classified British communications aren't being intercepted by the enemy—there is a traitor hiding within their own censorship operation.

As the body count rises rapidly, Gunner is plunged into the city's murky underbelly, navigating the intersecting worlds of the NYPD, New York mobsters, and secretive Nazi operatives. With historical events rapidly accelerating toward the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, Gunner finds himself in a desperate race against time to uncover the conspiracy, expose the traitor, and clear his own name before becoming the next victim.

There's more action than detection but both are well done.

WE CHASE SHADOWS
by Richard Osman
Pamela Dorman Books,
$31.00, September
We Solve Murders #2
Rating: B+

At the end of the first book in the series, **WE SOLVE MURDERS**, the three main characters, Amy (highly capable private security specialist), Steve (Amy's father-in-law and retired police officer) and Rosie (world-famous crime novelist) open the We Solve Murders detective agency.

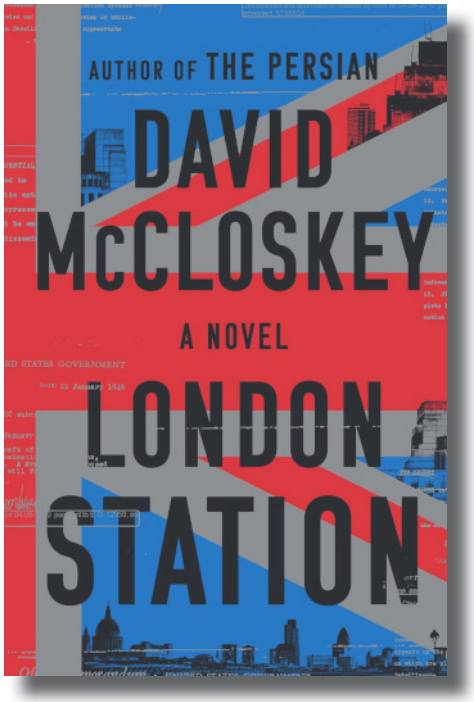
As **WE CHASE SHADOWS** opens up, the team has secured their first case. Vern Blackwood operates a shady counterfeit vitamin business and one of his bodyguards has been murdered. He suspects the culprit is one of four men that he made an agreement with five years ago to not infringe on each others' territory. Thing is, three of them are already dead and the fourth, Jakob Eriksson, is proving quite illusive.

The trio take Rosie's private jet to far-flung locales to track down clues to find the killer.

If you like a mystery that enables you to spend quite some time with eccentric and sometimes charming characters, then this is the series for you (as well as his Thursday Murder Club series). I have read all of the entries of these two series and quite enjoyed the experience.

But I did find the plot of **WE CHASE SHADOWS** somewhat disjointed and my interest waned a bit. In other words, it was easy for me to put down. Not a good sign. But to his credit, the author did pull all of the disparate threads of plot together for a satisfying ending.

LONDON STATION
by David McCloskey
Norton, $29.99, September
Artemis Procter #4 (not all
as a main character)
Rating: A-



This is a cautionary tale about what happens when a successful corporate head is placed in charge of the CIA and he thinks that he can run the espionage organization like he ran his company. Bad things happen.

Bobby Jerome, the newly appointed CIA Director, is deeply skeptical of historic foreign partnerships and seeks to dismantle traditional intelligence alliances—specifically the "Special Relationship" between America and Great Britain. Bobby's first salvo to reorganize the Special Relationship in the U.S.'s favor is to appoint the rebel CIA agent Artemis Proctor as head of London Station – just to tick off the Brits because she had recently been unmasked as operating on British soil without British permission. But Artemis is no lap dog and will only follow Bobby's lead up to a point.

Meanwhile, MI6 is more than miffed when the CIA failed to come to the aid of a British SIS officer trying to exfil an Iraqi source is detained at the Pakistani border – with disastrous consequences.

The operational chaos deepens due to two major factors:

·**A Deadly Leak**: Intelligence assets and field agents run by both services suddenly begin dying. Procter and her London team are forced into a race against time to identify who is leaking their sources' identities before both agencies lose their eyes and ears entirely.

·**Private Intelligence**: A secretive, massively well-funded private intelligence firm enters the fray. Run by a reclusive billionaire, this corporate entity operates with advanced technological tradecraft and its own hidden agenda, further destabilizing the fractured CIA-MI6 alliance.

David McCloskey has proven with just five novels that he is in the top tier of today's spy novelists – along with Mick Herron, Charles Cumming, Stella Rimington, Paul Vidich and Dan Fesperman. McCloskey's ability to handle complex plot lines and create memorable characters are testaments to his talent.

THE HOLLOW
by Michael Connelly
Little, Brown, $32.00, October
Harry Bosch #21
Rating: A

When Harry Bosch was eleven years old, his mother was murdered, forcing him to become a ward of the state. He was sent to live at the MacLaren Children's Center, a notorious California youth facility where systemic abuse and brutal discipline ran rampant. Decades after the facility closed its doors, a massive, multi-billion-dollar class-action

lawsuit resolves in favor of the former residents.

Bosch's half-brother, defense attorney Mickey Haller, tracks him down to inform him that he is personally entitled to a $400,000 settlement. Instead of accepting the money, Bosch rejects the payout (later he gives it to charity). He decides that he does not want financial compensation; he wants justice.

The news of the lawsuit reawakens a deeply buried trauma of his past – specifically, his memories of Charlie "Chops" Lamb, a young black boy Bosch befriended while living at MacLaren in the 1960s.

In 1965, when Bosch was fifteen (and had escaped from MacLaren), Chops was found dead from blunt force trauma. His body was hidden inside a dark, cramped space underneath a staircase, known as The Hollow. The facility's staff regularly used this hidden room to isolate and discipline misbehaving children.

Calling on his friend Renee Ballard for help, Bosch conducts a sub rosa investigation into what really happened to Charlie Lamb.

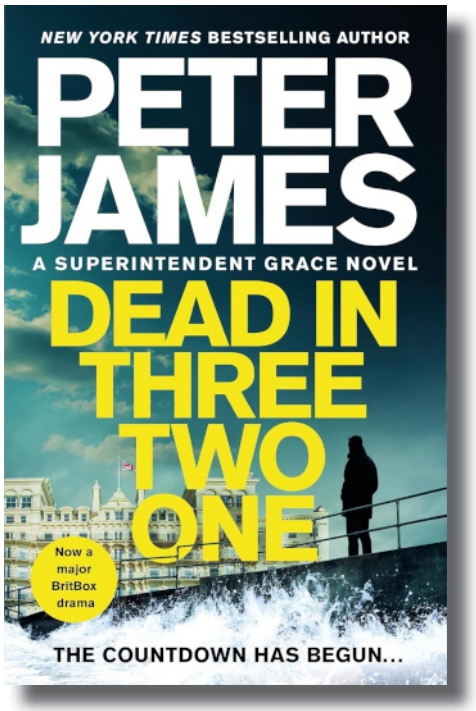
What can one say about Michael Connelly's superb mystery writing skills that hasn't already been trumpeted from the rooftops?! He's simply the best. This was another two-day read of pure pleasure for me. I hope and expect it will be the same for you.

DEAD IN THREE TWO ONE
by Peter James
Macmillan UK, $29.99, October
Roy Grace #23
Rating: A-

As half a million people descend upon the city for the vibrant Brighton Pride celebrations, Detective Superintendent Roy Grace is stretched to his absolute limit. He is tasked with managing a massive security operation.

Back in a prison cell, Roy's old nemesis, the Albanian mob boss Roel Albazi, is orchestrating a cold-blooded plan to execute Roy and completely erase his bloodline.

To execute the hit, Albazi deploys his ruthless consigliere, Dritan Dervishi. Arriving with a beautiful companion and a lethal secret concealed in his luggage, Dervishi checks into the Royal Courteney Hotel. He specifically requests Room 321—a room offering deadly proximity to his intended target, who is expected to take the adjoining room the following week.



But things go awry when Dervishi feels it necessary to murder his beautiful companion and exit the hotel with her body, cleverly avoiding all security cameras and hotel employees.

But Dervishi's presence in the hotel had already been clocked by the police as suspicious. And then there's the appearance of a human limb at a local disposal site.

Will Roy Grace uncover enough of the plot in time to save himself and his family? That's the question that the reader is most anxious to find an answer to.

There are a lot of thriller elements here, especially danger and deadline. But this is principally a novel of detection and stellar police procedure. Even our Larry Gandle (who doesn't like police procedurals per se) will admit that a work by Peter James is not "dull and dreary." Just the opposite.

For more Roy Grace, you can stream six seasons of the British crime drama on BritBox in the U.S.

FIND ME NOWHERE
by Andrew Klavan
Mysterious Press, $26.95, October
Cameron Winter #6
Rating: B-

The novel opens in the wilderness bordering Afghanistan, where Army sniper Corporal Geoffrey Tubman is seemingly blown to bits in a devastating cave explosion during a firefight.

A year later, former government assassin Cameron Winter has finally found a semblance of peace: he is teaching poetry at a small Midwestern university, finding success in therapy, and planning to marry his girlfriend, Gwendolyn Lord. However, his quiet life is disrupted when his former boss and mentor, "The Recruiter," resurfaces. The Recruiter is currently on the run after exposing a high-level government blackmail and human trafficking ring, and he suspects a deeper conspiracy is at play regarding a recent homicide. He want Winter to look into it and no one says, "No" to the Recruiter.

Kenneth Tubman—a drugstore manager and the father of the deceased sniper—has been found stabbed to death. His body was left in "Nowhere," a patch of colonial ruins deep in the woods surrounding Kinnecombe, Pennsylvania. Intrigued by the potential connection between the father's murder and the son's battlefield death, Winter reluctantly leaves his academic life behind to investigate.

Winter arrives in Kinnecombe, a decaying former factory town hit hard by globalization, poverty, and a rampant drug trade. When he interviews Kenneth's widow, Kathleen, she drops a bombshell: before his death, Kenneth was entirely convinced that his son Geoffrey was actually still alive. In fact, Kenneth claimed to have spotted and spoken to his son at the first Cincinnati Reds baseball game of the season.

As Winter digs into whether Geoffrey faked his death or is operating in the shadows, his presence in Kinnecombe quickly draws violent opposition. He is repeatedly targeted by a mob of local thugs and a deceptively mild-mannered gangster who controls the town.

The stakes escalate rapidly as Winter crosses paths with an unstable but highly capable female American spy, all while being hunted by an elite, professional contract killer who specializes in becoming practically invisible right up until the moment he strikes.

I've enjoyed reading the escapades of Cameron Winter and the fine writing of Andrew Klavan, going all the way back to my favorite of his, **TRUE CRIME** (1995). However, I had trouble with believing the motivation of the Recruiter and of Winter in this one. It stretched credulity too far.

WOLF SEASON
by Wesley King
Atria/Emily Bestler, $29.00, October
Rating: C

The narrative begins when Everett Johnson returns to his mountain hometown after a seven-year absence in Alaska. His father, Sheriff Dale Johnson, has mysteriously vanished into the woods while investigating the brutal murder of a 17-year-old local girl, Orsie Armel. Everett's brother, Connor, who is a local police officer, unofficially deputizes Everett to help hunt for their missing father. However, the search takes a dark turn when they eventually discover Dale's corpse in the wilderness, turning the rescue mission into an active murder investigation.

As Everett digs deeper, the investigation becomes tangled in a decades-long feud between two prominent local families: the Blackburns and the Armels. The Armel family consists of a reclusive, powerful clan of seven women spanning three generations, whose prime acreage is a frequent target of local greed and speculation. All of the Armel men died in a horrific, mysterious "accident," and rumors persist that anyone else who crosses onto their land vanishes.

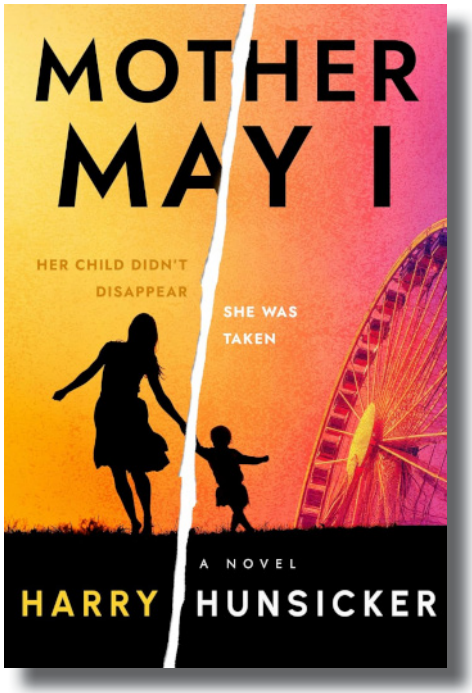
Amidst his investigation, Everett is reunited with Bernadine Armel, Orsie's older cousin and the love of his life. Interspersed flashback chapters reveal their passionate, secret romantic past, which was broken off due to Bernadine's abrupt rebuff of Everett for reasons still a mystery to him.

About 2/3 of the way through the narrative, there is a surprising turn when the author introduces a horror/supernatural element to the story, which disturbed me. I don't like it when mystery and detective fiction is mixed with horror/supernatural fiction. Yet, I see this as a trend in publishing. ***DP*** reviewers such as Ali Karim and Hank Wagner, who are fans of horror fiction, may see this as a positive trend. I don't (not a fan of horror fiction) and hence the rating. I'm sure they would give this novel a higher grade. If you are like me, you may want to avoid this one.

MOTHER MAY I
by Harry Hunsicker
Oceanview, $19.99, October
Standalone
Rating: A

At age 18, high school senior Meg Dalton attends a Texas county fair with her three-year-old daughter, Ivy. While navigating a rowdy crowd to meet Ivy's father, Rusty, Ivy suddenly vanishes without a trace.

Two frustrating years pass with no resolution and no Ivey, so a devastated Meg joins the Army and is subsequently recruited into a paramilitary branch of the CIA. Over the next 15 years, she hones her skills into a lean, mean fighting machine.



Meg now works for a private intellingence contractor and is on an undercover mission in Los Angeles, when she spots a woman wearing a distinctive silver butterfly necklace—the exact heirloom Ivy wore the day she disappeared. But before she can interrogate the woman, the whole operation goes belly up.

Realizing she is being set up to take the fall for the botched L.A. operation, Meg abandons her mission and goes on the run. Alongside is her colleague Daisy, another highly skilled but volatile female contractor. Together they go in search of the woman with Ivy's necklace to finally get answers to her daughter's disappearance.

A lot of danger, action and derring-do follow.

This is my kind of action thriller – with an admirable protagonist on a righteous quest. It was almost as if Harry Hunsicker wrote it with me in mind as his reading audience. When I first picked it up, I could not put it down – always a good sign. Harry has been around for a while, so if you have not tried him yet, this would be an excellent place to start.

SPLIT SCREEN
by Lee Goldberg
Thomas & Mercer, $28.99, October
Eve Ronin #7
Rating: A-

Eve Ronin has not always been onboard with the television series based on her eventful police career. But the income from the show has provided her with a nice home and some financial freedom. When Erin Casey, the actress who portrays Eve, asks to ride along with her on her sheriff's detective duties, Eve has a hard time telling her "no." But when a surprise shooting occurs and Erin is seriously injured, it quickly becomes evident that the real target was the real-life Eve.

To make matters worse for Eve there is a newly appointed sheriff in town who has higher ambitions and relishes the publicity that Eve garners for his department. The sheriff issues an ultimatum, forcing Eve to cooper-

ate with his publicity stunts or he will systematically destroy the career of her longtime partner, Duncan Pavone. And as we've encountered in previous novels in the series, there are factions within her sheriff's department who are jealous of her quick advancement and want to take her down.

To make the plot even more intriguing, Eve finds out that she has a reckless half-sister whom Eve never knew existed. This new sister drags Eve towards a dangerous criminal conspiracy tied directly to a murder victim recently found in a Topanga Canyon ravine.

Two of my favorite Lee Goldberg characters, Walter Sharpe and Andrew Walker join Eve to find the source of all of this mayhem.

This book (and all of the Eve Ronin books) was a lot of fun to read. I highly value good detection and there's a lot of that in **SPLIT SCREEN**. I also admire Lee Goldberg's ability to get right to the story and pursue it relentlessly, dragging the reader right along its path to a satisfying conclusion. It's hard to believe that the series is up to seven books already. Keep 'em coming, Lee!

CHAIN REACTION
by Lee Child & Andrew Child
Bantam, $34.00, October
Jack Reacher #31
Rating: A

At the recent Bouchercon Barbara Peters (The Poisoned Pen Bookstore) thrust an advance reading copy of **CHAIN REACTION** into my hands and said, "You've got to read this! It's extraordinary!" Well, one ignores Barbara's advice at their own peril, so I did just that. She and I are well aware of the general consensus that the Reacher books, since the advent of Andrew as a co-writer, have not had the same pacing and zest that earlier Reacher novels have possessed. But I can say **CHAIN REACTION** is a return to the "old" Reacher that we've all grown to love.

A former love interest of Reacher's (**NEVER GO BACK**, 2018), now an army general, tracks Reacher down using his expired bank ATM card and enlists him to help her on a secret investigation.

Special Agent John Bisley, a member of the covert G-99 Section, has been found brutally stabbed in a small Colorado town. General Susan Turner fears that he was killed because of a leak within her command structure and needs Reacher, a "clean skin," to look into the matter.

Reacher travels to Bisley's last known location: Summertown, Colorado—a remote desert outpost consisting of a single motel, a diner, two massive solar farms, and five giant data centers. Not too long after arrival, Reacher is the target of an attack.

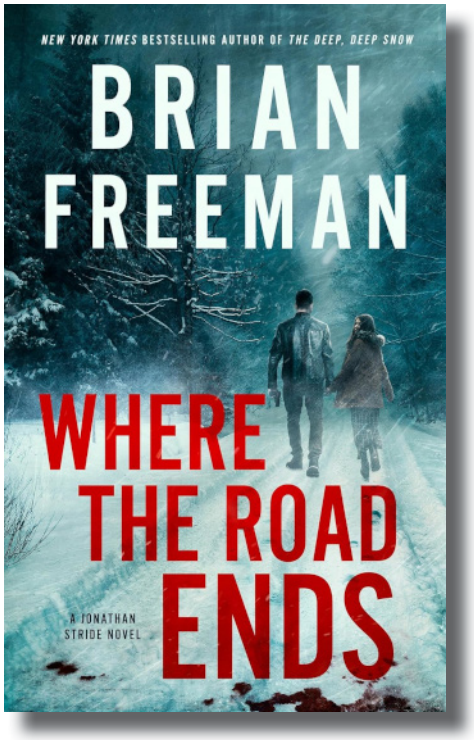
The rest of the story is typical Reacher: outsmarting the bad guys, using his physical strength to subdue them and ultimately being triumphant. The joy is in the ride. Welcome back, Jack Reacher!

WHERE THE ROAD ENDS
by Jonathan Freeman
Blackstone, $29.99, October
Jonathan Stride #12
Rating: A

The story begins after midnight in Duluth, Minnesota, when Detective Maggie Bei responds to a call regarding shots fired at a residence. Inside, she discovers renowned Duluth judge Gordon Hartwick and his wife, Tracy, brutally murdered in their bed. While securing the scene, Maggie discovers an intruder hiding in the house. Following a foot chase, she makes a split-second decision and shoots the suspect dead.

When Lieutenant Jonathan Stride arrives at the crime scene, he delivers devastating news to his longtime partner: the intruder Maggie shot was completely unarmed. Because he did not have a weapon, he could not have been the executioner who shot the judge and his wife. Maggie instantly becomes the center of a massive political backlash and national media firestorm for killing an innocent man.

To clear Maggie's name and protect the people he loves, Stride takes over the double-homicide investigation to track down the real killer. As he digs into the lives of Judge Hartwick and his wife, he



begins peeling back layers of dark, tightly guarded secrets. Stride must uncover what the prominent couple was hiding that ultimately made them targets for an assassin, leading him down a perilous path that culminates in a shattering finale.

I haven't liked every Jonathan Freeman/Jonathan Stride book I've read, but this one hit a sweet spot with me. A real page-turner and one of the best books I've read this year.

COLD SUNSET
by William Boyd
Atlantic Crime, $28.00, November
Gabriel Dax #3
Rating: B+

Gabriel Dax is a well-respected travel writer, who is also a somewhat reluctant spy for the British intelligence service. The Russians also think that he is a budding spy for them but that is all a ruse on his part.

Dax is roused out of his sublime abode that is Rose Cottage to embark on a journey across the Atlantic to establish a rendezvous with the poet F.T. Falkner. The ravage of a terminal illness finds Falkner at the doorstep of death. The dying man, however, brings to life an explosive revelation involving a former

colleague at Bletchley Park, and currently a professor at Carlsen University, Indianapolis, Angus Fairford. Ordered by his handler Faith Green to get to the bottom of things, Dax takes Fairford unawares by springing himself upon the Professor after an insipid lecture on Molière. What Dax learns, more than just stirs a hornet's nest. There has been an insidious infiltration of the MI6, the nature of which is grave enough to rival the treachery of defectors such as the Cambridge Five.

From there Dax is dragged into an extremely dangerous operation, that involves amongst other things, an intricate process of exfiltration from Russia. Partly egged on by his ambivalent feelings for Faith. Partly by the sheer exhilaration spontaneous patriotism can incite, the full-time author and part-time spy is thrown into a roiling cauldron of danger, desperation, and duplicity.

If a spy novel with a literary bent is your cup of tea, you may want to try out the Gabriel Dax trilogy. As I read these three books I often found myself chuckling over an elegantly worded phrase here and there. Dax as a character is laid-back, often lackadaisical, yet admirable in his determination to finish the job once started.

THE RIDDLE MAKER
by Bruce Borgos
Minotaur, $29.00, November
Porter Beck #4
Rating: A-

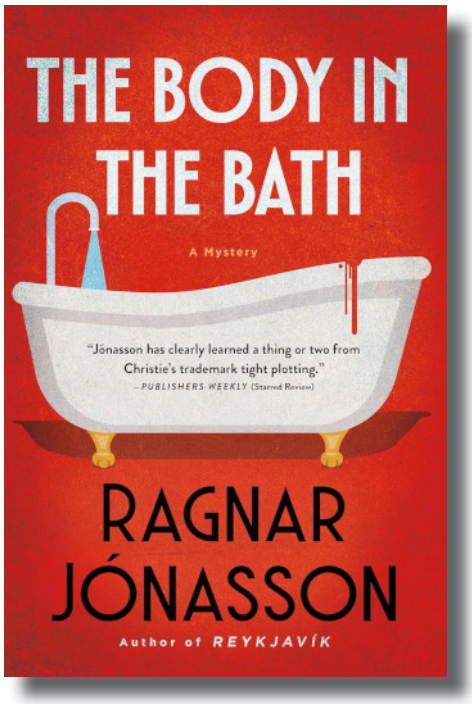
Lincoln County, Nevada, a vast desert landscape famed for housing the top-secret Area 51 military installation. Near the highway sits a weathered "Black Mailbox" where UFO enthusiasts traditionally leave notes for extraterrestrials. However, the latest message left in the mailbox is explicitly addressed to Sheriff Porter Beck. The communication is a cryptic riddle.

When Sheriff Beck and his law enforcement team decipher the riddle, the solution leads them south to the receding waters of Lake Mead. Submerged and chained to the bottom of the lake is an old oil drum containing human skeletal remains. A forensic examination reveals that the body belongs to someone who went missing in the 1970s—and a DNA match proves the victim is Beck's own maternal grandfather,

The investigation quickly draws the attention of the FBI, bringing in Jett Lowell, a fierce and determined criminal profiler. Agent Lowell recognizes the killer's signature style. Seventeen years prior, her own brother vanished shortly after she received an identical riddle—one she was never able to solve.

THE RIDDLE MAKER is part a novel of detection and part an action thriller and both work very well. With each successive novel in this series I become more and more a fan of Bruce Borgos' writing and the fascinating characters he has created. Ideal for C. J. Box and Craig Johnson fans.

THE BODY IN THE BATH
by Ragnar Jonasson
Minotaur, $29.00, November
Helgi Reykdal #3
Rating: A-



As a snowy Christmas approaches in Reykjavík, young detective Helgi Reykdal is consumed by grief and rage. One month prior, his girlfriend Aníta was killed in a devastating car accident. The driver was Helgi's ex-girlfriend, Bergþóra, a violent alcoholic whose past domestic abuse Helgi had kept strictly secret. Because Bergþóra claims the crash was purely accidental, she walks free without charges, leaving Helgi trapped in mounting despair.

Seeking a distraction to cope with his trauma, Helgi returns to work and buries himself in a cold case. He launches an investigation into the unresolved disappearance of his predecessor, Detective Hulda Hermannsdóttir (the central protagonist from Jónasson's popular Hidden Iceland series). Though Hulda was long presumed dead by suicide, Helgi remains unconvinced and starts tracking her last known steps.

The situation takes an even darker turn when Bergþóra is found dead in her own bathtub. Given Helgi's clear motive—the tragic death of Aníta and his history with Bergþóra—his own police colleagues turn on him and treat him as the prime murder suspect. With time running out, Helgi must race to find the true links connecting Hulda's disappearance, Aníta's accident, and Bergþóra's murder in order to clear his name and survive..

The writing is direct, engaging, and fast-paced. Multiple perspectives provide insight into the lives of various characters without slowing the plot's momentum.

Ragnar Jonasson is an expert on the classic traditional mystery (especially those written by Agatha Christie) and has used this expertise to craft this clever traditional mystery series.

QUARRY'S REUNION
by Max Allan Collins
Hard Case Crime, $19.99, November
Quarry # 18
Rating: B+

In a departure from his usual hunting grounds, Quarry travels back to the town where he grew up—a place he hasn't stepped foot in since before his life-altering tour of duty as a sniper in the Vietnam War and his subsequent decades working as a ruthless, Stateside hitman.

A high school girlfriend has asked

him to look into a series of mysterious drive-by shootings that have targeted her daughter. The police have failed to take them seriously, so Quarry's help has been requested.

What is supposed to be a trip down memory lane quickly spirals into chaos. Instead of a quiet weekend reminiscing about old times, the reunion transforms into a deadly trap when bullets begin to fly. Structurally, the book shifts away from the series' usual hardboiled thriller formula to adopt the style of a traditional, multi-layered murder mystery with numerous moving parts.

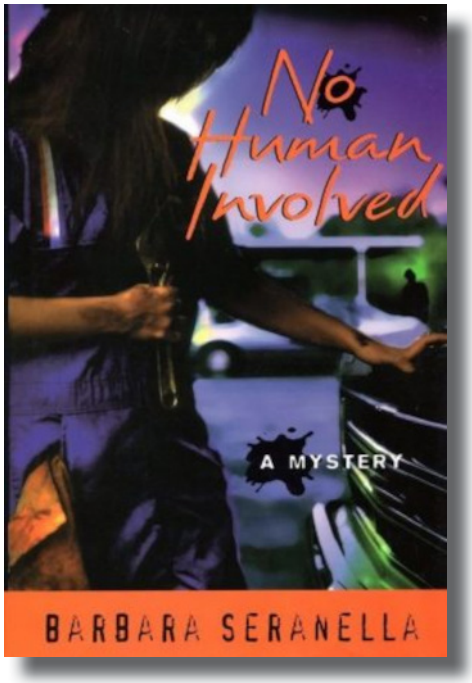
Quarry is forced to use his lethal, expert skillset to navigate a web of small-town secrets, old grudges, and modern-day violence. As he investigates who is pulling the strings, the plot uncovers hidden details about Quarry's past, shedding light on the person he was before he became a professional killer.

Quarry has keep himself in pretty good shape (morning swims) but he's still in his 70s so I found his hopping in and out of bed with old girlfriends and others a little bit unrealistic, but the rest of the book is pure Quarry. And Al Collins throws in a big surprise at the end for good measure. Happy 50th anniversary, Quarry!

Golden Oldie

NO HUMAN INVOLVED
by Barbara Seranella
St. Martin's Press, 1997
Munch Mancini #1
Rating: A

The story begins in the bleak fringes of Venice, California, known as "Ghost Town". Miranda "Munch" Mancini is a street-smart, drug-addicted prostitute and alcoholic struggling to survive. Her life has been defined by horrific abuse; her scummy, drug-dealing father figure, a pimp known as Flower George, got her hooked on heroin at a young age and repeatedly sold her for drugs. When Flower George is found murdered, Munch decides she has reached her breaking point. Desperate to escape "the life," kick her heroin addiction, and outrun the



law—as she is the prime suspect in her father's killing—she goes on the run.

Evading the police, Munch manages to smooth-talk her way into an honest job at Happy Jack's Auto Repair in the San Fernando Valley. Despite her unlikely appearance, the owner, Jack, hires her because she possesses sharp, self-taught mechanical skills from her years on the street. Armed with a new paper trail to bury her old identity, Munch begins the agonizing process of withdrawal. She finds stability, joins Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) with the help of a supportive Denny's waitress named Ruby, and begins proving herself as a highly talented car mechanic.

Meanwhile, tired and cynical LAPD homicide detective Mace St. John is assigned to investigate Flower George's murder. He is initially on Munch's trail because he believes she pulled the trigger. At the same time, St. John is juggling immense personal stress—caring for his addled father who has suffered multiple strokes—and a competing investigation into a horrific serial killer. A grisly series of dismemberments has struck the area, with bound body parts turning up near Ballona Creek.

As St. John presses forward, the two separate cases begin to converge. The gun used to shoot Flower George is ballistically linked to the serial killer's dismemberment victims, and a clue involving a penicillin-resistant strain of gonorrhea puts St. John right back on Munch's trail.

The book's title refers to a derogatory, real-life 1970s police slang acronym, NHI ("No Human Involved"), which officers informally used when crimes occurred among societal outcasts like transients, sex workers, and addicts—implying their lives weren't worth much and their deaths not worth investigating.

NO HUMAN INVOLVED was a big hit with mystery fans when it first came out. It had at least two things going for it: the unusual background of the author that mirrored that of the protagonist and the high quality of the writing and plotting. It was nominated for a Best First Mystery Barry Award, only to be beat out by **KILLING FLOOR** by Lee Child. Barbara went on the write seven more Munch Mancini mysteries before her untimely death at age 51.

Personal Note: Shortly before Barbara's death, she called me from the Salt Lake City Airport. She had a long layover between connecting flights and wondered if we could get together. I jumped at the chance, drove out to the airport and brought her back to my house (we're high on the mountain side and can clearly see the airport from our house). We spent a delightful couple of hours in animated conversation. Her death was a great loss to me personally.

Another Note: Long-time ***DP*** subscriber Susanne Kirk Tomlinson was Barbara's editor at Scribners when Barbara switched from St. Martin's to Scribners and had many positive things to say about their editor/author relationship.



Crime Jazz
Ted Fitzgerald



GOD'S COUNTRY
By William Kent Krueger
Atria Books, September, $28.00

What impresses me about William Kent Krueger's recent Cork O'Connor novels has been the emphasis on family and spirituality. The one-time police chief and current private investigator is a man with his feet in two world, the Catholic faith of his Irish ancestors and the spiritual influence of his Anishinaabe native heritage, with a growing role as an elder to his extended family and his Minnesota community.

GOD'S COUNTRY opens with Cork supervising a planned campout with his progeny in the remote and massive Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness but the adventure is shadowed by his son's and grandson's visions of a fierce wolf atop Cork, feeding on his heart. Do the dual visions focus on Cork's cardiac health or violence or something else? Well into the expedition the group encounters signs that two legged predators are on the loose. Cork sends the family back to civilization to bring help, a portage that will take days, then continues on. His prey is a pair of homicidal brothers, the Kennedys, who are seeking a stashed fortune and an escape route into Canada and are willing to cut down anyone they encounter. When Cork confronts them and understands their level of savagery, he take it upon himself to misdirect them and to keep them away from any unknowing campers they may encounter.

This becomes a physical and mental cat-and-mouse game, one with damaging and fatal consequences for the unwary innocents and frustration for Cork as the advantage shifts back and forth and the human toll increases. Cork's anger at the Kennedys becomes a growing rage in which his desire to punish them wars with his commitment to justice. Indeed, it appears that the wolf is already in Cork's heart, snarling to be loosed to devour the murderous siblings. As exciting and tense and frightening as the novel's physical action is, Cork's internal battle is at the center of **GOD'S COUNTRY**, a novel of moral and physical courage and challenge. Whether or not by design, it reflects the anger ignited in many people by the cruelty and disregard for people characterizing much of our current national tumult. **God's Country** reminds us of the challenge, importance and dignity of respect and of not allowing the wolf to devour us.

QUARRY'S REUNION
By Max Allan Collins
Hard Case Crime, November, $19.99

Max Allan Collins' Quarry is always a welcome visitor to readers, just not in real life. Where Quarry goes, bodies start falling. It's been that way since Quarry first appeared in 1976. Yes, it's been a half century, since the Vietnam veteran killed his wife's lover then fell in with a devil called The Broker, beginning a long-running career as a paid assassin and engaging anti-hero.

The title, **QUARRY'S REUNION**, is what it says it is: The one-time professional killer, clandestine author and trouble magnet returns to his home town for his 50th high school reunion. It's at the behest of his high school sweetheart, Mary Ann Kemper Means, who jilted him back in the day and married small town big money but is now asking him to find out who may be trying to kill her daughter, Jenny, and prevent that unhappy occurrence. It's a setup that allows the author to graft a fair-play whodunit, complete with a suspect list, red herrings unexpected surprises and a few corpses, along with reflections on romantic disappointments, family conflicts and small town politics, spice it up with sardonic asides and humorous observations on reunions and homecomings, and, of course, sex and violence (for a "retired" gent in his late sixties, Quarry's in no need of Viagra but, maybe, an occasional handy gun), all topped off with a pair of bittersweet kickers which suggest **QUARRY'S REUNION** won't be Quarry's last exploit.

Of course, that's up to Collins and his publisher, but the world of crime fiction would be less fun if the murderous and highly shameless old scoundrel hung up his guns. While fans of the series will enjoy **QUARRY'S REUNION**, newcomers may want to start at the beginning with one of the 16 previous novels (I believe they're all available), because it will be a long time, if ever, before we read a book called **QUARRY'S SUNSET**.



BIRDS OF PREY:
NEW CRIME STORIES
Edited by Harlan Coben & C.J. Box

Mysterious Press, June, $17.95 (PB)

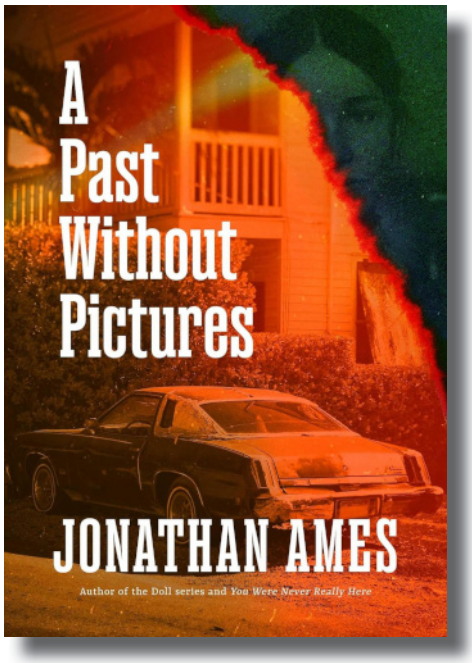
Themed anthologies can be fun for writers and readers alike, as this International Thriller Writers collection proves. Excitement for the writers in concocting tales under the collection's editorial constraints (in this case, stories inspired by particular avian predators) and pleasure for the readers in perusing the results. **BIRDS OF PREY** presents crisp, well-crafted and clever stories by eleven top pros utilizing buzzards, vultures, bald eagles and goshawks and other hunters .

A seagull provides the background sound for Tess Gerritsen's tale of secrets and revelations off the Maine coast; Kathy Reichs and S.A. Cosby pick two very different types of owls: the eponymous protagonist in Reich's adventure, a harbinger of fate in Cosby's fable; falcons are popular: a classic car of the same name is the trigger in Robert Dugoni's reflection on forced maturity while Hank Phillippi Ryan makes singular use of the black bird in a tale set in a rest home; but Gregg Hurwitz, in the disturbingly titled "Red of beak and claw", conjures the most omniscient and frightening predator of all, one able to zero in, access and conquer almost everyone.

Co-editor Harlan Coben tells readers to skip his *punishing* introduction if they wish, but come back to if you do; it's fun. Do make a point of reading each author's introduction to their individual stories. They are fine peeks into the creative process that enhance their tales.

A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES
By Jonathan Ames
Mysterious Press, September, $23.95

At a time when too many crime novels stretch to the 300- to 400-page range, there's something to be said for a concise novel that tells a story, well and complete, in under 200 pages. Which is what Jonathan Ames does with **A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES**. Protagonist Maria Cole, a foster child and abuse survivor who's now an LAPD detective is on leave after killing a suspect. That trauma is compounded by the news that her estranged birth father, an ex-convict, has been murdered in his home in



backwoods Alabama and Maria is his executor. Her trip to Alabama and into her father's past is fraught with conflicted emotions and memories and Maria can't shake the feeling there's something off center about Billy Cole's request.

Looking into his post-prison life as an artist, the emotional becomes concrete for Maria as she clashes with the bigoted, inbred local law and also becomes the target of murderous gangsters. But Maria is more a fighter than a brooder and author Jonathan Ames (he of the Harry Doll novels) compresses matters into an emotionally layered story as tight and swift and violent as a Gold Medal paperback original. In Maria Cole, he's created a protagonist as hard as tungsten, as vulnerable as flesh and as resilient as the heart. The book's final section, in which Maria sorts through her experiences and divines the truth of her father's death is striking and haunting.

MAN ONE
By Loren D. Estleman
Severn House, March, $29.99 (hb);
August, $16.99 (pb)

It's a brutal winter in Amos Walker's Detroit. The snow and sleet, ice and gales and the occasional faded sun are as cold and bitter and dangerous as the hearts, minds and souls of several of the characters in **MAN ONE**, the 33rd Walker novel since 1980, and the first under new publisher Severn House.

Trying to learn who in a black Escalade with snow tires and an Alaska license plate is staking out his house, Walker braces the driver, Sage Holland, an attractive looking thrice married thirty-two year old widow who was tried and acquitted in the poisoning death of her third husband. She's seeking his help to counter the threat posed by her embittered brother-in-law, Greg Holland, an Alaskan state trooper who's been stalking her from Alaska through Canada and eight US states to Detroit. When Walker asks why she came to him, Sage mentions the name of a woman who was a significant figure in his past (Longtime readers will recognize the name; I won't spoil its impact). That may be why he takes the case, even though Sage's story sounds as threadbare as a discarded Christmas tree in January.

Walker prevails upon reporter Barry Stackpole, one of his few friends, to shelter Sage and help with research. Armed with information about Greg Holland's vehicle, Walker also utilizes snitches and street people, a "shirttail army of Baker Street Irregulars" to keep an eye out for the vehicle. One informant, Rafael Mesquino, apparently spots the car but doesn't show up for a meeting and Walker goes looking for him. Greg Holland turns up in town; another connection to Sage enters the picture; and homicide lieutenant Deborah Stonestreet (Walker's police contact since the retirement of John Alderdyce) finds several reasons to keep busy. The novel's final third is tense and relentless, with Walker driving through a snowstorm to a showdown with a killer on Belle Isle, a state park at the U.S. Canadian border.

Series private eye novels can vary in scope and complexity. **MAN ONE** is a chamber piece with a limited number of players and possibilities, expanded in its effect by Estleman's breathtaking skill at combining description, setting and dialogue to add context, history and attitude to propel and enrich a story. While the Walker novels often display a painter's eye, Man One feels as if it was sculpted in ice. Estleman published his first novel in 1976. A half-century later, he's still going strong. Don't stop now!

HISTORICAL EMPORIUM

Robin Agnew



MURDER ON 34TH STREET
By Mariah Fredericks
Minotaur, $29, October
Rating: A

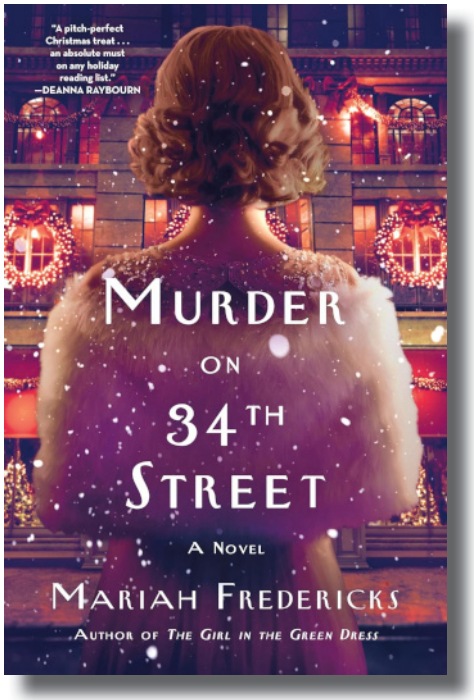
What Fredricks has put under the tree for her readers this year is an instant Christmas classic, the kind of book you might reach for every December – but only if your taste runs to a few murder victims in Santa's bag! It's set in 1932 and main character Grace Verlander is in charge of much of the big Macy's Thanksgiving day parade, an event as big in 1932 as it is today. Her biggest headache is that someone has threatened Santa Claus, and she must do everything she can to keep the big fellow safe despite the chaos of the parade.

I loved the details of running a big department store, the kind of establishment that hardly exists today. For a few years after college, I worked at Dayton's in downtown Minneapolis (Mary Tyler Moore threw her hat in the air in front of Dayton's), which was a city unto itself. There were seven floors of magic, including a bookstore, coffee shop, restaurant, furniture department, and much, much more. The store culture of the 30s described in the book doesn't sound all that different from the store culture in the 80s I knew then, complete with a Santa in residence on the top floor during the entire month of December.

Grace has her hands full with employees wanting to be in the parade as well initiating and directing it, while still keeping a watchful eye on her star's safety. Despite the presence of the head of store security undercover as an elf on Santa's float, by the end of it all there's the inevitable tragedy. Grace is skeptical about the guilt of the person the police have decided to arrest in their rush to judgement, and decides she might just do a little investigating herself.

Meanwhile, as readers, we learn more about the store and its employees, including the genius behind its beautiful display windows. He's a bit prickly but despite that he and Grace are definitely attracted to one another. We also learn her backstory, about coming up the hard way, one where she's risen from her hardscrabble past through her own hard work. She's so relatable that you're with her every step of the way as she juggles working and sleuthing. The stresses of her beloved job still resonate today, as does the very real and very female anxiety of worrying about, well, everybody.

I loved the details of life in the 30s, one where Macy's is helping to provide some Christmas sparkle, if only through a look from the other side of seasonal window displays. This book reminded me a bit of Rhys Bowen's **THE TWELVE CLUES OF CHRISTMAS**, which also included a high body count, but still managed to end up a charming Christmas read that wrapped things up with a hopeful bow. Like a delicious Christmas cake, this book contains a bit of just about everything good in the kitchen -- I laughed, I cried, I was surprised, and fell in love with the main character. **MURDER ON 34TH STREET**, Fredericks has created her own unique piece of holiday sparkle.



LET THE MURDERER SAY AMEN
By Carolyn Marie Wilkins
Kensington, $27, July
Psychics & Soul Food #2
Rating: B+

This lively and compelling mystery is set in a small town in Illinois in the 20's. While author Wilkins names her fictional town Agate, to orient yourself, it's fairly close to Joliet, outside of Chicago. The central character is the charming Nola Ann Jackson, who is working for a caterer and lives with her aunt Sarah. Both women are psychics though Aunt Sarah has far more experience, and is known as a conjure woman. Both can see auras. I loved this aspect of their characters – it made them both more specific and more interesting.

The two black women are living in the 20's, not long enough after the Civil War that relatives don't remember "slave times." However, the black culture in the town of Agate seems strong and vital. As the book opens, Nola is working an event at a new church in town run by a Bishop Ra. Nola's antennae are up – she thinks there's something phoney about him though she does think he some psychic ability. The only white woman in the place is an opera singer. The other white person is the man who provided funding for the church building.

As the women are packing up to leave, they meet the Bishop's wife, who comes to thank them and to winkle a recipe out of Nola's boss, Minty, who only gives it reluctantly. They go home exhausted, to awaken to the news that the opera singer has been murdered, and that a friend of theirs, Sam, has

been arrested for the murder. The police are planning to move him to Joliet as the last time a black man was accused of killing a white person, the KKK broke into the jail and lynched him.

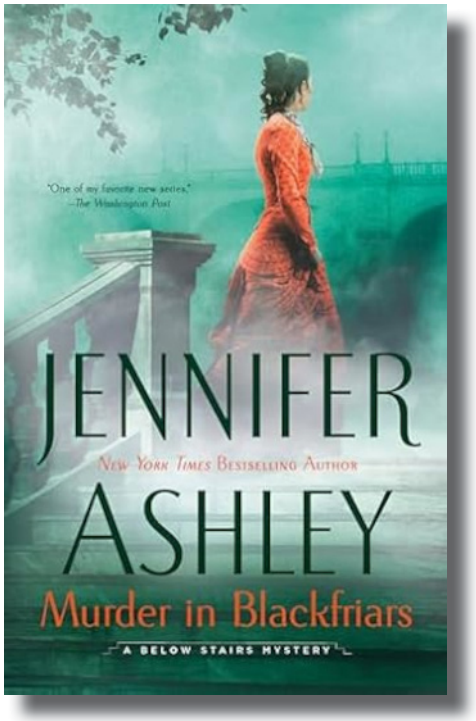
His lawyer is an old drunk named Freddie, and Nola and her friends are not only sure that Sam is innocent, they are sure Freddie can't handle the case. Before Sam leaves for Joliet Aunt Sarah makes him a "mojo bag" to wear and keep him safe while he's in jail. Sam is still waiting for the Bishop to get him out, but it turns out the Bishop's testimony put him there.

While Sam is up in Joliet, there's another murder, and another friend is arrested, really putting Nola to work as she tries to clear her friends. What I loved about the book was the relationship between Nola and her Aunt, and the details of her awareness of people's auras as well as the work that Aunt Sarah does. There's a scene where the two expel a ghost from someone's home that is one of the best of the whole novel.

The rest of the characters, especially the ones delineated at Bishop Ra's church, are well done and the story really moves. It's hard to put the book down. The combination of the unusual setting – the Midwest in the 20's is not frequently covered in mystery novels, nor is the black culture in the Midwest. It's another strength of the novel. I was cheering for Nola to figure out her love life (reader, she does) as much as I wanted her to nail the killer. Which she also does. This was really a fun read despite some of the harsh details of life depicted – it's Nola who makes the book shine.

MURDER IN BLACKFRIARS
By Jennifer Ashley
Berkley, $18.99, August
Below Stairs #9
Rating: A-

There are quite a few historical mysteries set in Victorian London, but what makes this series so memorable is that the main character, Kat Holloway, is not of the nobility, connected to nobility or even someone who aspires to nobility, but simply a humble cook.



For a mystery reader, encountering the working-class side of the city makes the series more relatable and the stakes the characters deal with a bit more resonant. The other reason I loved this one is simply that Jennifer Ashley, with over 60 novels to her credit, is a truly polished storyteller with an unerring instinct for what makes a narrative move and connect with the reader.

While secondary to the plot, the details of the way Kat commands her kitchen are pretty compelling and energize parts of the action. In this, her ninth outing, Kat is engaged to Daniel, a longtime beau, and hoping that when she marries she can at last share a household with her daughter, Grace, who now lives with a friend. Kat's employer isn't even aware she has a child, and in truth, Victorian employers expected their servants to have very little personal life, so she can only spend time with Grace on her days off.

Her beau, Daniel, grew up on the streets and knows nothing about his own origins, so when a man shows up claiming to have pertinent information, the couple rush to meet him. Unfortunately, he's killed shortly after their encounter, and the book becomes a hunt for the man's killer, in the middle of the fraud and underworld gang rivalries that flesh out the plot.

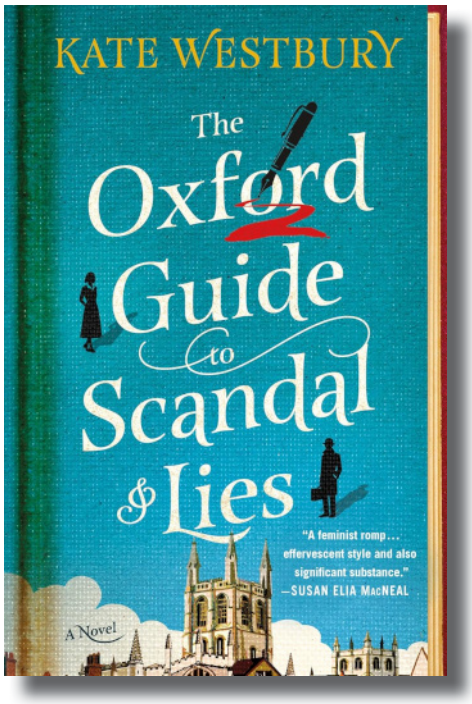
At the moment Kat mind is concerned with two things - the idea of taking up a stall in the market where she can sell her pies and tarts on her days off, and the imminent departure of Grace for the countryside with her friend's family. Kat and Grace aren't happy about it, but eminently practical Kat finds a way to come to terms with her daughter.

Meanwhile, the hunt for Daniel's past continues, involving the close examination of both parish and public records, eventually drawing in both Daniel's vicar brother and another friend of theirs who is sweet on the daughter of the house where Kat works. Ashley keeps all her recurring characters alive and active, but for me the delicious personality of the vicar is the real standout.

Of course, as all the mysterious stuff is happening, Kat still has to manage her position as a cook in a prosperous household. Although her boss is a bit prim and nosy, she's mostly able to run her kitchen, her sleuthing activities and even keep track of her daughter. They say the sting is in the tail, and the end of the book, for me at least, had a real emotional heft and a satisfying conclusion, with Ashley enough of a pro to leave enough hanging threads to tantalize the reader eager for the next book. **MURDER IN BLACKFRIARS** is series fiction at its best.

THE OXFORD GUIDE TO SCANDAL AND LIES
By Kate Westbury
Minotaur, $29, September
Debut
Rating: A

Set in Oxford in 1951, this delightful first novel features an opposites attract type couple, Ginevra Bishop and Simon Braithwaite. Bishop, Gin to her friends, is a well connected redhead familiar with the upper crust boys who have joined her at Oxford. Simon Braithwaite, on the other hand, is a clever working-class veteran damaged by the war who has come to the campus in order to escape his ghosts (what we



would now recognize as PTSD).

At that time, the after effects of the war remained inescapable, with both the student body and the faculty staffed with war veterans, all of them struggling with their own nightmare memories. As the book opens, Gin, searching for a study spot in the crowded Bodleian library, asks her favorite librarian, Tolliver, for a tip, and ends up next to a hostile and inhospitable Simon. Meeting cute, the two glare at one another over the top of their research tomes, and so far, so cozy. It's only when Simon and Gin discover the body of sweet old Tolliver at the moment he's drawing his final breath that things take a slightly darker turn. It's murder, and the pair are soon recruited by British intelligence.

Tolliver had apparently been hunting Russian spies, leaving behind a list of suspects that includes both Dons and students. The mysterious "Rook" asks Simon and Gin to do their bit by working undercover and surveilling the people appearing on that list. The nexus of the suspicious activity appears to be a used bookstore, setting the scene for their first stakeout. There, their different personalities are on full display, with impulsive Gin all eager and committed, while Simon, who had done some intelligence work in France, remains far more measured and cautious. Of course, between the two, they're able to create a happy medium.

This debut book is a deft untangling of many different threads, with its author confidently presenting each an array of credible suspects, as well as a dandy red herring or two. The whole story is presented in a very golden age style, truly transporting the reader back to the Oxford of the fifties. As some of the earliest women to work their way through Oxford, Gin and her friends have different concerns than most of their male counterparts, who are obsessed with class and money.

The most upper crust men have a social club that also seems suspicious, and one of their members keeps claiming to be engaged to Gin. The two have family members familiar with each other and there seems to be an understanding between the two sets of parents that Gin is not privy to. This phoney engagement puts Simon off for much of the book, and both he and Gin are often distracted by their own individual concerns, Simon by his war memories and a growing attraction to Gin, and Gin by family concerns and ructions, as well as an engagement she in no way wants any part of.

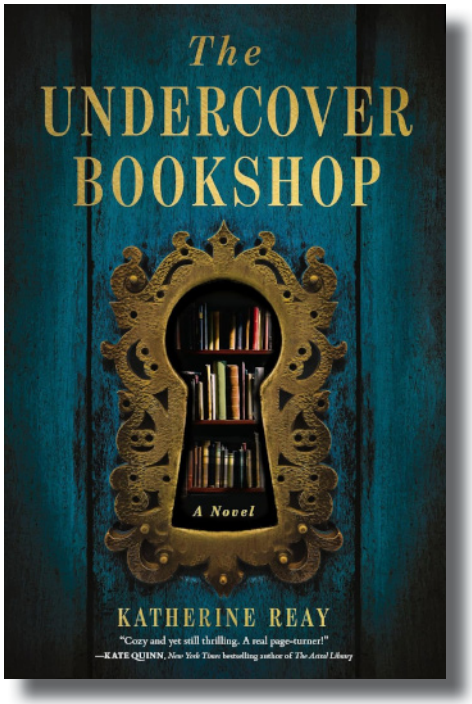
The delineation of class, of the ranks of ambitious scholars, and the place of women on campus and in the world are all handled with the touch of a much more experienced writer. Beyond the dandy espionage plot, it's the very strong personalities and well delineated characters of Gin and Simon that really power the narrative. This looks to be the first book in a series, and I'm already eager for the second one.

THE UNDERCOVER BOOKSHOP
By Katherine Reay
Harper Muse, $18.99, October
Rating: B+

This thoroughly enjoyable read is set in postwar Britain, and follows young Gemma Brown as she attempts to make a life for herself in the small Cotswolds village of Great Rollright. In London, Gemma had been lonely in her boarding-house, and wanting to find a sense of community she couldn't find in the big city, so she answers an advertisement for a shop clerk in Great Rollright simply because the job offers the perk of a bedsit. She settles into her new life pretty quickly, getting to know the villagers when they shop in the store, and developing friendships at the pub each night.

The plot thickens when Gemma, who has a love for baking, discovers baking doesn't love her so much after one of her cakes is such a disaster that it shuts down a church committee meeting. Her friend Peggy, the vicar's secretary, points to the baking prizes on the wall and suggests Gemma ask someone more gifted for lessons. Gemma selects the town enigma, Ursula, an intriguing woman who has been in the store only once, as, to the great interest of the entire village she chooses not to buy her groceries in Great Rollright but rather bikes to the closest larger town.

Gemma turns up at her door one morning to make the request, and is quickly enchanted by Ursula's home, busy household, and cozy kitchen. Ursula does agree to take her under her wing and teach her to bake, and the two begin a few early mornings a week before she heads to the store for work.

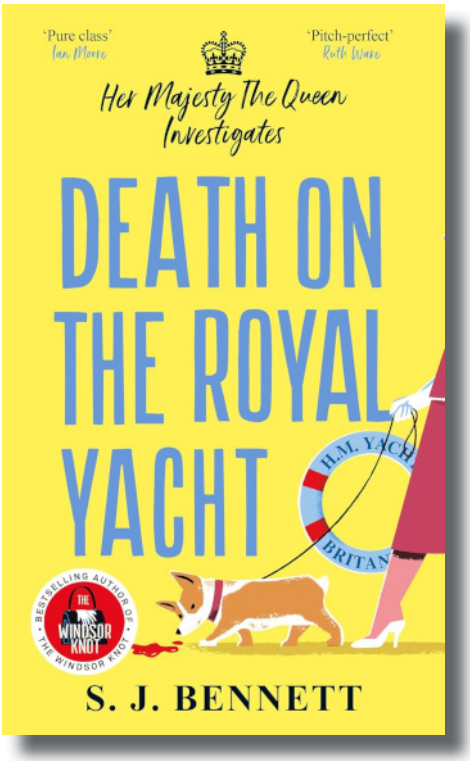


Before she knows it, they've become close friends, and her boss is actually looking forward to the shortbread she now brings him. Her other contribution to the common good in Great Rollright is adding a book "corner" to the store, stocking mainly mystery novels as well as others. When she starts a book club – its kickoff powered by her own delicious lemon cake – sales in the store take off and remain steady because people in the postwar period were looking for the kind of diverting and now classic puzzles that writers like Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham and Dorothy Sayers were providing to their eager readers.

Gemma is the kind of person that picks up on details, even helping her policeman boyfriend crack a few cases, and when she notices that Ursula has a huge and unexplained radio antenna at the back of her house, doubts about her begin to creep in. After the purchase of a bicycle, Gemma is able to follow Ursula, and begins to suspect she might be a spy. The 1950s was the time of the "red scare," with communists purported to be around every corner, and what Gemma notices is enough for her to become convinced.

While her evidence is at first not definitive enough to take to the police, she eventually gives in, and as a reader, you are convinced she is correct in her suspicions. The carefully constructed front Ursula has been putting up slowly begins to unravel, with results that change many lives in Great Rollright, including Gemma's.

While this is not technically a murder mystery, it does contain a mystery to be solved, and actually winds up as a gentle espionage novel. Set in the same (or close) time period as books by Allison Montclair and S.J. Bennett, it doesn't quite achieve the vivid sharpness of storytelling that sets those writers above the pack, but the plot remains captivating, and the character of Gemma endearing. An enchanting fairy tale version of an espionage thriller, **THE UNDERCOVER BOOKSHOP** provides the reader an enjoyable resolution to wrap up this satisfying read.



DEATH ON THE ROYAL YACHT
By S.J. Bennett
Crooked Lane, $29.99, October
Her Majesty the Queen Investigates #6
Rating: A

To read this book, I had to violate one of my "rules" – no circuses, no ships, no fairs (state or world). This is one of my favorite series however, so I was forced to make an exception. Along with Allison Montclair, Bennett writes one of the smartest, most tightly plotted series around. If you love the golden age schematic but welcome an update, these are the books for you. Set on the Royal Yacht in 1966, we follow the Queen's tour of the Caribbean. As always the central character is the Queen's personal assistant, Joan McGraw, but also as always, when a dead body crops up, it's the united efforts of the Queen and Joan that solve the crime.

These are slyly feminist books. The Queen is surrounded by mansplainers – including Prince Philip – and Joan, a highly placed and successful woman, is viewed by staff as a bit unapproachable and cold. The Queen has a personal assistant as well as security detail who like to think they solve the crimes that pop up, but they are wrong, as the Queen gently and subtly guides them to a solution after she has figured everything out.

The body in question is that of a glamorous young woman, Pamela, who was sensational to look at and extremely bold. She had been driving Joan a bit crazy but Joan is all in when it comes to searching for the reason behind her death, an apparent overdose. Joan and the Queen aren't so sure it's that simple and of course they are correct.

What's so strong about these books are not just the settings – and this one, aboard the Royal Yacht, is a delight – but the way the Queen's household functions, with the Queen's day and schedule broken up into 5 minute increments. Elizabeth as portrayed by Bennett is dutiful and intelligent with a wicked sense of humor. She and Joan have a wonderful partnership which involves mutual trust and appreciation of the other's intelligence. It's a lovely portrayal of friendship.

The other part that's really strong are the mysteries themselves. The one in this novel is quite complex and though Bennett never leaves the reader behind, you still might not quite be catching up with the intelligence of her plot. There are red herrings, an array of suspects, and an incorrect solution before the Queen gently supplies the correct one, one which has been fairly laid out, clues and all. These are "cozy" in the way Agatha Christie is cozy – there's a high body count, and there are some dark undertones though the ultimate tone of the story is lighter and more hopeful, which slides it into cozy territory. Bennett is still writing about the loss of a child, drug use, and racism, but it's organically integrated into the plot.

I've been telling people since the first book to try this series, especially if traditional detection is your favorite type of story. The Queen is technically an amateur detective, but she has some world class support. She can go wherever she wants to, and where she can't be seen, there's Joan. These books really could not be better.

But I Digress...

Ali Karim



THE TAILOR
by Tim Sullivan
Head of Zeus, £18.99, July;
in U.S., $27.00)
George Cross #8
Rating: A

The elements that intertwine to make **THE TAILOR** a wonderful reading experience in this reviewer's opinion are:
[a] Vividly realised central character.
[b] An ensemble cast that act as foils to the eccentricities of the central character and investigation.
[c] Smatterings of subtle humour that help lighten the truly beastly aspects of human nature that this novel reveals.
[d] Hauntingly rendered location[s] in the British South West as if combined visually into a picture-frame by artists John Constable by way of Alfred Kubin.
[e] Deft [and non-intrusive] social commentary that provokes deep thought in the reader. And most crucially
[f] Fine story-telling that engages the reader until little else matters, except the pages turning as the narrative unravels.

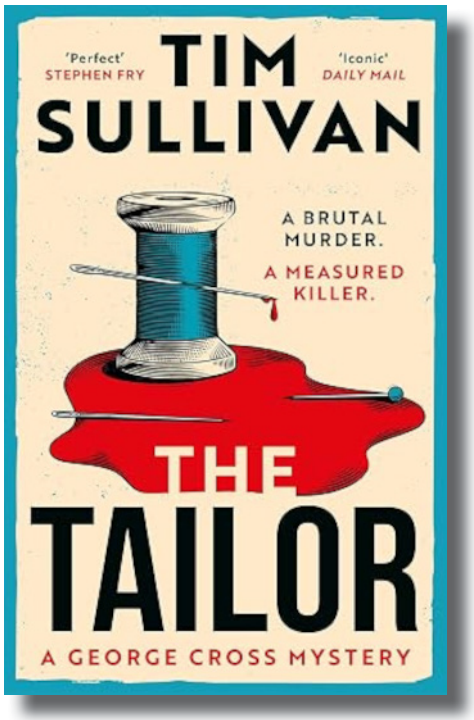
When William 'Billy' Titcomb [the eponymous Tailor] is brutally murdered inside a toilet on a morning train from Bristol Temple Meads to London Paddington, the Avon and Somerset Police Major Crimes Unit [MCU] are tasked to investigate.
DS George Cross, together with former partner Josie Ottey [now promoted to Detective Inspector] is tasked to lead the investigation under the eye of their boss DCI Ben Carson. Though the lead investigator is neuro-divergent, the author rather than use Cross's Autism as the key to the investigative process; references it purely as an ordinary facet of Cross's character.

There are issues of Cross's elderly [and formerly estranged] parents Raymond and Christine impinging upon the Detective's life, as well as local uber-villains Franklin 'Rocky' Rockwell and Declan O'Leary.

It appears that the murdered tailor was traveling to China by way of London Heathrow then Dubai to meet lawyers. At [The Tailor] 'Billy' Titcomb's funeral, Cross is surprised to see Toby Fletcher [an old contact from a previous case], as well 'Rocky' Rockwell attend to pay their respects.

As the case has possible political ramifications, George Cross is assigned the recently promoted [former staff officer] Alice MacKenzie as his partner, with DC Prianka and Catherine handling the CCTV and technical IT issues.

Adding the murdered man's twin sister Gwen [who was also his business partner at Bristol's Titcomb and Titcomb], and his wife 'Min' a former PhD Chinese research chemist who he met at University College London [UCL], muddies the waters of what appears as purely an opportunistic murder.



What George Cross and his team uncover is something entirely different, and a much darker view of human nature and the term 'bad actors' emerge.

Another facet of Sullivan's mystery is the insight into the craft of the tailor which is presented from the perspective of our autistic investigator who becomes fascinated by the artistry [and technical detail] behind handcrafting a bespoke suit.

Though this latest DS George Cross detective novel is a part of a now essential British Police Procedural series, **THE TAILOR** was my first introduction to former film maker Tim Sullivan. Though there are subtle hints abouthappenings from previous instalments, at no time did I feel adrift. I read thebook as a standalone – and at the end, I urgently ordered all the preceding novels because when I turned the final page -- I was bereft.

A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES
by Jonathan Ames
Pushkin Vertigo, £9.99, September
in U.S, Mysterious Press, $23.95,
Maria Cole #1
Rating: A+

Ames' latest crime novel is a brutal, thought-provoking meditation on how fate can steer lives and the cost to those rolling the dice. Maria Cole is a LAPD cop, who [after a decade in uniform] is on her first assignment as a plainclothes detective. In a stakeout, she kills Felix Soto, a 17 year-old Mexican youth fleeing from a domestic burglary. She's

mentally unprepared for the toll the accidental shooting causes. The Internal Affairs investigation finds no procedural fault in her self-defence plea. But can Maria live with the consequences of her actions that resulted in the death of a youth?

On a month's administrative leave, she wonders if she is really suited to being a police detective. But she has little time for soul-searching as she gets a call from a police chief in Fair Port, Alabama. Soon she's headed by plane from Los Angeles CA to Birmingham AL, as she's been advised that her ex-convict father, William 'Billy' Cole was found murdered outside his house. It seems the murderer, a fellow member of the local Alcoholics Anonymous group has been apprehended – a black youth named Dray Forrest.

The past life Maria Cole has buried, returns as she is forced to revisit her relationship with her estranged father, a troubled man who spent over twenty years locked in Raiford Penitentiary. On his release, he had tried to reach out to Maria, his only daughter – but she rebuffed his advances, and now it is too late for a reconciliation.

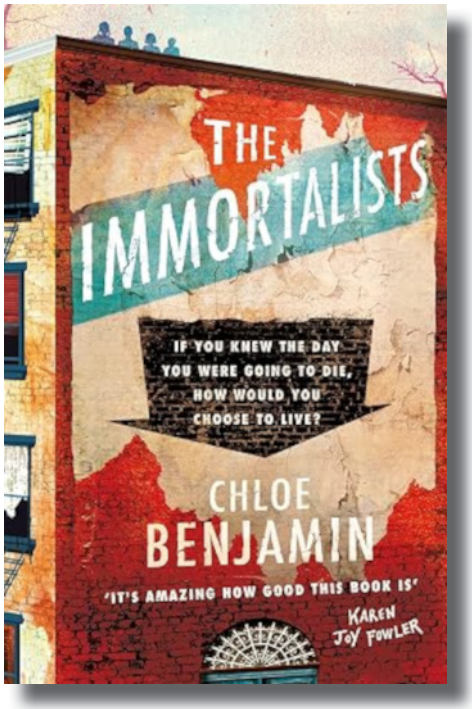
Though Maria's police intuition indicates that Billy Cole's murder was not a home burglary gone wrong. There are similarities to the death of the youth Felix Soto, a bullet wound that Maria inflicted back in Los Angeles – but there are also disparities that ring alarm bells.

It's not long before Maria's presence in small town Alabama becomes a thorn in the sides of some unpleasant people, and perhaps her father's death could have been as a result of a wider danger that's hidden in plain sight.

There is mirrored tragedy in the childhood of Maria Cole, and that of the incineration of her father Billy Cole.

Not unlike Ames' **YOU WERE NEVER REALLY THERE**, this latest work is more a novella that can be easily read in a single sitting. It also shares the theme of haunted investigators having to become more brutal than their adversaries. Concise and judiciously edited, it hits with the power of shotgun blast to the face, raising questions of morality and its linkage to death and if retribution can ever be achieved or justified.

The memory of living through this narrative will remain in the mind of the reader like scar tissue. Brilliant, but highly disturbing.



THE IMMORTALISTS
by Chloe Benjamin
Tinder Press, £12.99, 2018
Rating: A+

This is not a new novel, but a book I picked up recently* and felt an urgent compulsion to tell others about. **THE IMMORTALISTS** is a novel that is completely immersive, a book to become lost within its adhesive narrative. While trapped between its covers, I lost all sense of time and place as I navigated myself through the lives [and deaths] of the Gold family.

The novel's hook is the intriguing premise contained within the concise prologue 'The House on Hester Street, 1969". Four siblings in Manhattan's East-Side covertly visit a Rishika [a Seer], from the Romani-Gypsy community. They do not tell their parents Saul and Gertie Gold who are devout followers of the Jewish faith. The mysterious Rishika is believed to be able to tell them the exact dates of their deaths. The eldest Varya [aged 13] is relieved to hear that she will live to a ripe old age, but her younger siblings Daniel [aged 11], Klara [aged 9] and Simon [aged 7] are told less encouraging news. The eldest Daniel and Varya, do not believe the Rishka's prophecies, but their scepticism is not shared by Klara nor [especially] seven-year old Simon, who tearfully advises his siblings that he was told by the Seer, he would die young.

And that's the set-up.

As the children grow, it becomes apparent that Simon who was supposed to take over their Father Saul's Tailory business has other ideas. The book is separated into four sections, each detailing the lives that each of the siblings follow. The sections are adhered to an era, having the shadow of the Rishka's prediction hanging over them.

Simon with his sister Klara venture to San Francisco, much to their older siblings disappointment. Simon becomes a dancer, dazzled by the carefree hedonistic life he becomes embraces – a far cry from the strict regimes of a middle-class Jewish upbringing. Klara follows the steps of her grandmother, dazzled by the allure of the stage, of magic tricks, grease-paint and the love of an applauding crowd. She is soon dragged from San Francisco's Castro district to the bright lights of Las Vegas.

Studded into the lives of Simon and Klara are glittering supporting characters, like Robert the former football player turned ballet dancer, and Raj Chamar, a poor Indian-American trying to find a path away from poverty, as well as the mysterious policeman turned FBI Agent, Eddie Donoghue.

Soon it is time to learn of the fate of Daniel and Varya, the two eldest Gold siblings, and how their life paths unfurled -- as unlike Simon and Klara, they held no credence in the Rishika's prophecies.

The narrative is so well constructed, with characters that pulse with life [and death], and events at times expel the air from the reader's lungs, and stop them dead in their tracks [pun intended].

It's a novel that is thought-provoking, shocking and emotionally buffeting -- that I found myself anchored into the narrative, as if clinging to a Frigate battling an Atlantic storm.

It is part mystery novel, and part an existential examination of what it means to live and to die, the role of fate but much, much more.

I'll be thinking of this narrative for many years, pondering the significance of what the story reveals about our lives, and also the anticipation of our deaths, especially the question "how would we live our lives if we knew the hour of our death?"

Extraordinary.

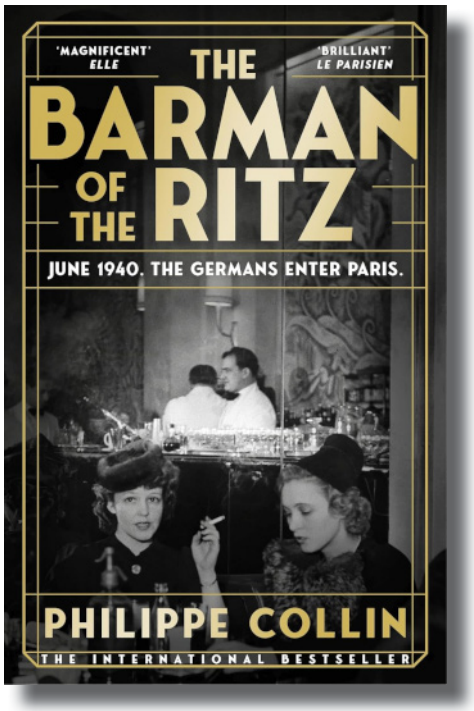
***Editorial note**: A huge thank you to Maxim Jakubowski and his September book review column "To The Max" at Crimetime. I became aware of this extraordinary novel when Maxim revealed his book of the month to be Chloe Benjamin's **UNDER STORY**.

Opening his review -- "US author Chloe Benjamin's previous novel **THE IMMORTALISTS** was a moving family saga with a fascinating speculative overtone about a trio [actually a quartet] of kids who are given the opportunity to know the time when they will die, and can elect to know or not, and how over a lengthy period it affects the way they live and love in subtle ways."

It intrigued me sufficiently that I ordered **THE IMMORTALISTS** [2018] on the back of Maxim's paragraph. After finishing the novel, I quickly ordered Chloe Benjamin's two other **NOVELS --THE ANATOMY OF DREAMS** [2014 in America, 2018 UK] as well as her new work **UNDER STORY** [2026].

THE BARMAN OF THE RITZ
by Philippe Collin
Translator: Frank Wynne
Doubleday, £18.99, August;
in U.S., Scribner, $29.00, September
Rating: A+

The occupation of Paris by the Nazis during WW2 is retold through the eyes and ears of Frank Meier, the legendary barman of the Petit Bar, in the Paris Ritz Hotel. Philippe Collin's debut novel is akin to oneof Meier's cocktails, for it infuses deeply researched historical facts, with fictionally imagined flourishes that render the narrative addictive -- but one with a colourfully dark, dark sting in its



long tail.

Ernest Hemingway opens this book "When I dream of afterlife in heaven,the action always takes place in the Paris Ritz".

Written with the urgency of present-tense and interspersed with imagined diary entries, the short chapters imaginatively detail the life of the enigma that is "Frank Meier." The author provides a usefully concise Dramatis Personae, which gives a thumbnail sketch of the faces in the crowd.

There is opening context to Frank Meier, with his humble childhood, hisworking-class, Austrian-Jewish parents and then his fleeing Europe for New York by ship [via Antwerp]. Meier's father never accepted his Jewish faith, and despite his wife's protestations, refused to have baby Frank Meier circumcised.

While in New York, Meier becomes trained into the life of tending bar and the art of mixing cocktails.

On his return to Europe, he finds employment as a barman at the Brunswick in Paris, enjoying the American clientele. With the advent of World War I, Frank enlists and fights for France under the command of the legendary Marechal Petain. Returning to Paris after the hostilities were over, Frank's recent [and short-lived marriage] to Maria Hutting in 1921, results in a son, Jean-Jacques, as well as a divorce. This is all preamble to the main story of Frank Meier; now in his fifties and head barman at the Ritz's exclusive Petit Bar. He is joined by his former wartime comrade Georges Scheuer and his apprentice Luciano looking after the exclusive clientele of artists, actors, writers and intellectuals such as F Scott [and Zelda] Fitzgerald, Sacha Guitry, Arletty as well as socialites such as Coco Channel and Barbara Hutton [heiress to the American Woolworth empire].

Things change as the German Army advance into France.

Frank Meier's complex nature runs in parallel to the complexities of life within an exclusive Hotel caught in the centre of an occupied city. Frank and the fellow staff of the Ritz find themselves surrounded by hostile German invaders, as well as infiltrated by opportunistic indigenous French, trying to adapt to life in the Vichy regime.

The management of the hotel remains with Marie-Louise Ritz, referred to as 'The Widow' [of Cesar Ritz] at the helm. She controls the hotel with an iron hand. The management from Claude Auzello and his American wife, the silent-screen actress Blanche [who was née Rubenstein] are soon superseded by interim manager Hans Elmiger and his deputy, Monsieur Suss in order to appease the German overlords.

Soon the Petit Bar has an uncomfortable mix of German Officers from the Wehrmacht, opportunistic French Business people, Political figures [from France as well as Germany], Prostitutes, Art-Dealers as well as intellectuals, artisans and aristocracy – making for an awkward group to be managed by Frank Meier, Georges and Luciano – under the watchful eye of The Widow.

Collin's novel details the intricacies of life at that time, working in a luxury hotel during World War Two, where the high ranking officers of the Wehrmacht used it as their living quarters, and their social centre. There is illegal gambling, 'dead-letter drops' at the bar, and drug taking with the opium addicted Hermann Goring requiring frequent hot baths to alleviate the pains of morphine withdrawal. Parisian Jews try to flee the

horrors of Nazism [and evade French collaborators] with forged documents. There are plots against Hitler, and trust becomes a rare commodity, where gossip can land you in a gestapo torture chamber.

"Eavesdropping without appearing to be listening is another vital trait among the world's greatest bartenders" explains the author as Frank Meier finds himself swimming in dangerous waters. All the while, war rages in Europe, while Blanche Auzzello [the Jewish wife of the Manager Claude] says -- "Do you know something, Frank? I've always felt safe inside your bar, no matter the chaos of the world outside. I think the other guests do too. It is part of what makes it feel so magical."

When the dangers of being Jewish becoming tangible, Frank Meier's anxiety heightens as his estranged son Jean-Jacques and his niece Pauline arrive in Paris. The Barman befriends Fersen, a Scandinavian diplomat who can source exit documents for fleeing Jews, for a price.

"Frank's knowledge of life doesn't come from [reading] books, but he has learned one thing from crime novels – going on the run is expensive."

At the conclusion, as the Germans fled Paris while the Allies advanced into the Ritz -- I sat in silence, turning the pages of the Appendix with its photos and notes about what happened to the people who populated the story.

Especially haunting were the photos of Claude Auzello and his wife Blanche Auzello [née Rubenstein] -- may they both rest in peace.

Bravo Phillipe Collin – "tu es le meilleur"

Reviewer's Notes**: As this book was on**e of the most interesting [and thought provoking] narratives I've read this year, I must pass my thanks to Jeff Pierce of ***The Rap Sheet*** for pointing it out to me, and to Alison Barrow, Eleni Lawrence / Sandra Taylor and especially publisher Selina Walker of PenguinRandomHouse's literary imprint Doubleday / Transworld London.

George's Take: I read this on the basis of Ali Karim's powerful recommendation and I'm certainly glad that I did. **THE BARMAN OF THE RITZ** is a slow-burner of a book. Each seemingly insignificant vignette builds upon the past ones until they all reach a crescendo. The language is beautiful (kudos to the translator) and the story line compelling even when the reader knows the general historical events that are about to happen. It was a surprise to me (revealed in the Appendix) that most of the characters in the novel existed as real people. One of the best novels of the year. Thanks, Ali. **Rating: A**

TELL ME SOMETHING TRUE
by Michael Robotham
Sphere, £22.00, September; in U.S.,
Atlantic Crime, January, 2027
Standalone
Rating: A+



Robotham's small town crime novel is striated with menacing claustrophobia, where the truth is purposefully camouflaged from view and eroded by the passage of time. Despite the emotional heft of the book, the pages slip by so rapidly that the reader is forced to grip the cover until the knuckles turn white.

It's 2001 and Arlo Hackett is released [on parole] after serving twelve years of a fifteen year sentence. He returns to his hometown Yulara, to visit his Mother Mary Hackett [nee Tierney] who has been placed in a nursing home. Yulara is in a South Australian backwater; founded during the antipodean 'gold-rush'.

The residents of Yulara are hostile toward Arlo's return. His younger brother Luke was involved in the rape and murder of a local girl Saxon Winacott [Nee Tully]. It was this horrific incident that landed Arlo in the penitentiary [for obstructing the course of justice]. Arlo never believed his brother was capable of rape, though he may have caused Saxon Winacott's death by accident. The only member of Yulara's insular community that has any sympathy [and time] for Arlo is Helen Churcher, who is the manager of Eltham Court, the nursing home that cares for Mary Hackett.

Robotham's novel has a split timeline, with life in Yulara in the 1980s, when Helen Churcher had a crush on Arlo during their school days. The crush would develop into a relationship, following Arlo's military service. Though the relationship would come to an end following the incident that placed Arlo Hackett behind bars with the fifteen year sentence for aiding his brother Luke attempt to evade justice. Helen Churcher would conscientiously write letters to Arlo while he was incarcerated despite his instance she forget him. Arlo never opened the letters.

Ostensibly a murder mystery set in small-town Australia, it is also a coming-of-age tale, laced with a melancholic view of childhood's end that blends regret to hidden evil[s] camouflaged by time and secrets.

There many secondary characters, that traverse the narrative like glittering gems viewed through a kaleidoscope, coming into and out of focus – at times sharp and then diffuse, like smoke in a Brownian Motion tube. It is the supporting characters that help make Robotham's narrative so utterly compelling.

The murdered girl Saxon Winacott had fled her boarding school but refused to return to her family home. It appears her stepfather, Frank a second generation politician is a violent bully. Saxon escapes to the Hackett household, where

she is allowed to stay in the spare-room, under the condition that she attend the local state school with Arlo and Luke and play the organ each Sunday at Catholic Mass - as ordered by Mary Hackett.

The church priests Father Martell and Father Corday see their congregation blossom as Saxon's savant-like keyboard skills attract more and more attendees. Saxon also becomes popular at the local school, despite being a wealthy former privately-schooled pupil. She befriends Elizabeth ['Betsy'] Nagel, who once bullied her, but soon they become inseparable. There is tension in the Hackett household as Saxon has a [unreciprocated] crush on Arlo, though it is the younger brother Luke that appears smitten by their guest. Saxon's Mother Cathy and Stepfather Frank Winacott are less than happy with their daughter attending state-school and residing in the poor side of town with Mary Hackett and her two older sons.

Other characters slide in-and-out of the narrative as tragedy erupts, such as Lawyer Otto Gutterson and his niece Camille, as well as local businessman and soon to be Mayor of Yulara Devlin Fraser and his timid wife Jenny. The recollections of Arlo's childhood are painted evocatively, especially his memories of his late stepfather Angus Hackett which are detailed with compassion and an understanding that forces the reader into deep contemplation about their own lives.

This paragraph written from the perspective of Arlo Hackett is the novel in a microcosm –

"Years ago, before I went to prison, I remember a TV commercial showing a tough-looking skinhead sprinting along a city street, charging at a middle-aged man who turns and holds up his briefcase to fend off the attack. Then the camera showed a different angle. A sling breaks and rocks and debris come crashing to the ground a split second after the skinhead pushes the man to safety. The message was clear – until you see the whole picture, you only see part of the story."

Like tilting the angle of a prism so that the truth can be diffracted from the rest of the image. The acknowledgements help explain why this novel has the combined enthusiasm of a debut work - suffused with the polish of writer at the peak of their literary ability.

WATCH THE QUIET SNOW
by Mick Herron
Baskerville, £22.00, October
Collection of Novellas



Rating: A+

Though it may be an outlier opinion, Mick Herron's Slough House novellas are even more engaging and thought provoking than the author's Slough House novels, or the Apple TV+ adaptations. Contained in one volume are five novellas. All that is needed is the gift-wrapping for the perfect Christmas present.

These five stories are wonderful because despite their length, they will linger in the mind, provoking deep thought and at times make the reader smile.

The first two stories have an air of pathos as they both feature John Batchelor, a minor character who could be considered a loser. This low-level MI5 'handler' for 'The Park' [as opposed to 'Slough House'] in the opening novella - **The List,** takes on the Aegis of one of his charges [Dieter Hess] an East German Cold Warrior of little importance, even in death – except for Batchelor and a suspicious secret service. Diana Taverner appears as do members of the Slough House ensemble. Jackson Lamb and Catherine Standish are mentioned in dispatches, scribbled notes with Bachelor's opportunity turning to desperation.

The Drop is the second novella also featuring John Batchelor [as well as Diana Taverner] and revolves around an eponymous [and mysterious] exchange ['aka 'drop'] in a London café, and its significance.

Batchelor returns in the third novella **The Catch** in a minor role, tracking and tracing the theft of secrets from 'The Park'.

The fourth novella is the standout, worth the price of the collection alone. **The Last Dead Letter** is set in a Church, hidden away at the bottom of a cul-de-sac in Hampstead. Molly Doran [MI5's archivist] has summoned Jackson Lamb to talk through an event that occurred during the cold war in a divided Berlin. It gives readers a glimpse into Jackson Lamb's past in Germany and a brush with East German secret police [aka the 'Stasi']. Filled with Lamb's acerbic wit deployed to camouflage the horror of the situation. Lamb's assertion that there was little he could have done differently at the time is his way to manage the darkness of his memory. Like many situations during the Cold War, Lamb justifies the tragic end result as a fait accompli. On reaching the end, I quickly returned to the beginning, savouring Herron's clever plotting and the real human cost behind The Last Dead Letter. The story is dark and haunting. It reminded me of a line Dennis Lehane once stated "In Greek tragedy, they fall from great heights. In noir, they fall from the curb."

To close the collection we have something lighter, a Christmas tale **Standing by the Wall** featuring an insight into morality and consequence with Roddy Ho and the Slough House inhabitants considering their profession.

Beautifully packaged, this collection is presented within an artistically amusing jacket design which will appeal not only to readers of Mick Herron's

novels, but also to those who have only watched the Apple TV+ adaptations. It might get the latter group to venture into the bookstore to finally read the novels, because as well written as the TV adaptions are, the novels that they are based upon - are finer.

A GAME OF CAT AND KILLER
by Jiro Akagawa
Translated by Hayden Trowell
MacLehose Press, £16.99, September; in U.S., Grand Central, $17.99, September
Mikeneko Holmes #1
Rating: A-

This curious Japanese mystery novel is of the 'locked room' or 'impossible crime' subgenre, and could also fall under the 'cat mystery' classification. Written in a beguiling 'cozy' golden-age crime fiction style, it has a darker undercurrent which at times borders on the grotesque. Originally published in Japan in the 1970s - it is the first of the casebooks of Mikeneko Holmes now finally available in an English translation

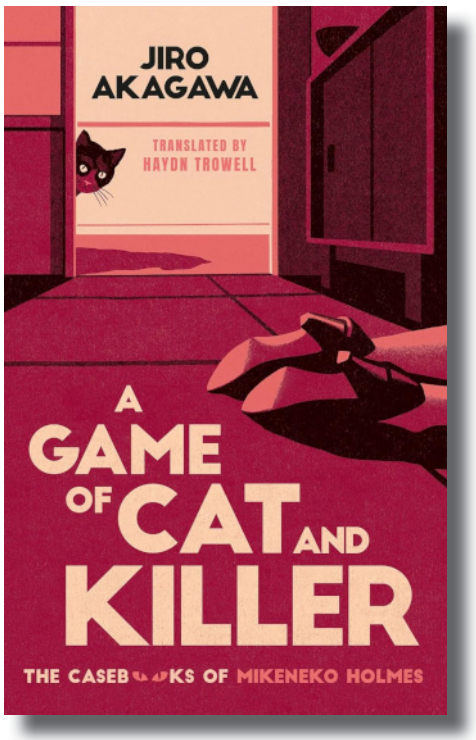
The novel is based around nefarious machinations occurring on the campus of Hagoromo Woman's University (a small residential college). There are less than 500 female students housed onsite in either the dormitory or flats, together with an all-male academic [and support] staff who also reside on University grounds.

A suspected serial killer is operating on the campus, targeting a group of students who have been working afterhours as prostitutes to augment their finances. The serial killer poses as a customer, in the attire of a middle-aged 'salaryman' seeking consensual [no-strings] sex in exchange for money.

After the first body turns up [student prostitute Yumiko Kurihura], slashed viciously in her friend Hiroko Misaki's blood-soaked flat; Chief Inspector Shigera Mitamura of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, assigns Detective Yoshitaro ['Yoshi'] Katayama to investigate. Detective 'Yoshi' is a timid policeman, finding it hard to cope with female company, and with a fear of blood. He is an odd choice to be assigned the case. The older policeman [Chief Mitamura] has an obligation to look after the young Yoshi Katayama. Mitamura was the former partner of Katayama's father, a legendary cop nicknamed 'The Demon Detective' who tragically died on the job during what seemed to be a routine burglary investigation. Yoshi was forced to help bring up his younger sister Harumi [as their mother had passed away earlier]. Mitamura, felt an obligation to his former partner, to take the young policeman Yoshi Katayama [and Harumi] under his wing.

Apart from the murder-mystery angle, there is insight into aspects of Japanese culture that may sit awkwardly in the minds of [some] Western readers. This novel was first published in Japan in 1978, so readers should place the publication date in contextual perspective to its content. There appears a tacit understanding [even acceptability] of sexual relations at the Hagoromo Woman's University between older male teaching academics and their younger students. I found this very uncomfortable reading, especially when a serial killer is stalking the campus with a razor, butchering female students.

Yoshi Katayama's first port of call is to visit the Dean of the University, Tomoo Morisaki because he was the official who contacted the Chief of Police, Shigera Mitamura about the suspected prostitution ring on campus. Morisaki, the Dean's calico cat, curiously named Holmes takes a shine toward the awkwardly shy detective Yoshi, following him around the campus grounds as he explores the University looking for clues. Though the author paints dark and unpleasant undercurrents to the investigation, but his narrative is aligned to a playful sense of absurdity, which acts as a contrast as well as much needed distraction from the deepening sense of foreboding.



There seems to be a link to the students involved in the sexual activity and the serial killings. However, Yoshi soon discovers that the Dean had received an anonymously printed warning letter, and that it appears common knowledge that the Dean is sexual involved with an attractively precocious student – Yuriko Yoshiuka.

Yoshi is assigned a night time stakeout in the repurposed campus cafeteria so he can keep watch on the student dormitory for the serial killer. While on surveillance detail, he discovers that the Dean is not the only academic with eyes for Yuriko Yoshiuka. A second student victim Kazumi Susuki is discovered murdered, her corpse covered in deep and frenzied razor slashes, with blood covering the dormitory floor. Yoshi is assigned a partner, the reliable Detective Hayashi – a family man to help with the case, due to Yoshi's phobia for blood.

The University enters lockdown when another body is discovered in the repurposed campus cafeteria. The cause of death, is not razor slashes, but blunt force trauma about the head and neck – and curiously, the body was locked inside the cafeteria [where Yoshi previously conducted his vigil of the student dormitory]. No murder weapon or suspect is discovered when the cafeteria door has to be kicked in to retrieve the body.

Yoshi and Hayashi, have to interview and speak with an array of strange characters, such as the PE Teacher Tomita and his sinister wife Asako; the Professor of Chemistry and Physics Akiyosh with his interest in pyrotechnics; the

sleazy English Professor Kenchi Ohnka; and worryingly, the pompous University President Shunzoh Abe who is also the chairman of the University Board.

All the while, Yoshi is followed around the University grounds by the Dean's cat Holmes, who seems to know more than an animal should, and she is joined in seeking Yoshi's affections by the Dean's lover Yuriko Yoshiuka.

Contrasting the overt sexual tensions at the University, and female advances on Detective Yoshi - we have the prim and proper matchmaking efforts of Yoshi's aunt, Mitsue Kojima who is trying to find a 'homely wife' for our detective.

Do not be fooled by what appears to be a gentle 'golden age' cat mystery, with an impossible crime at its centre. Beneath the veneer lurks a darker reality, one with sexual violence and deviancy, where murder, suicide, corruption and a sense of duty and sorrow vie for the reader's attention in 1970s Japan.

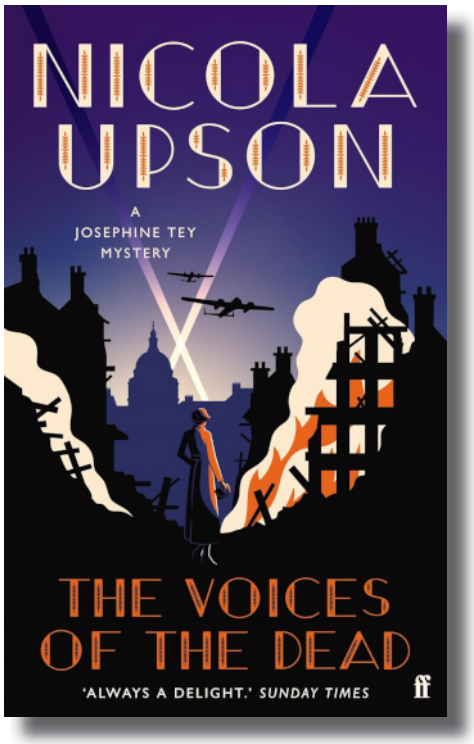
After the events of **A GAME OF CAT AND KILLER**, the shy and unassuming Yoshitaro ['Yoshi'] Katayama is a changed man, and he now has Holmes the Cat as his aide.

This is my first exploration of a cat mystery, and it won't be my last as MacLehose Press / Quercus Imprint is publishing further volumes of Jiro Akagawa's The Casebooks of Mikeneko Holmes with **A COPYCAT KILLING** [March 2027] and **THE CAT MANSION MURDERS** [November 2027].

Despite featuring supporting characters that are less than memorable, and bizarre plot contrivances - the dark machinations embedded in the narrative make up for these shortcomings as the novel reveals extremely unpleasant facets of humanity in an outwardly hospitable country, one that is a nation of Cat lovers.

THE VOICES OF THE DEAD
by Nicola Upson
Faber & Faber £16.99, November: in US, Crooked Lane, $19.99, November
Josephine Tey #12
Rating: A-

Nicola Upson again engages her



fictionalised "Josephine Tey" in another evocative period adventure. The narrative offers a thought provoking insight into how the protection of a nation's culture in wartime can lead to uncovering a hidden mystery protected by community secrets.

It is 1941, Great Britain is at war with Nazi Germany, so when the Luftwaffe start their aerial bombing of the nation's capital and major cities, the paintings of the National Gallery have to be evacuated to a place of safety.

The recently married Detective Inspector Archibald 'Archie' Penrose has to forgo his honeymoon, as he's tasked to oversee the relocation of the nation's most treasured art. Originally stored in Penrhyn Castle, officials at the National Gallery found themselves clashing with the demands of Lord Penrhyn, so the paintings were again on the move, this time to an abandoned slate mine in Wales. Accompanying the Detective are Josephine Tey and her partner Marta Fox who is recording the relocation for the Crown Film Unit. Problems arise when the body of woman is unearthed [in an unmarked grave] inside the mine following a rock-fall. Despite DCI Penrose's natural instinct to investigate, his work in saving the Nation's most precious paintings from the National Gallery [annoyingly] takes precedence.

The novel then takes a swerve to the Blanenau Ffestiniog Guest House, where Josephine Tey interrupts her holiday to assist her friend Archie Penrose, taking over the investigation of the mysterious body unearthed in the slate mine. Nearby, the playwright Noel Coward works on Blithe Spirit in the company of actress Margret Rutherford. It's amusing that Rutherford is perhaps best remembered as Agatha Christie's amateur detective Miss Marple. She is looking to play a medium, a clairvoyant in Coward's play, but is wavering. As Tey investigates the identity and circumstances of the woman's body, the local community close ranks. There are links to a local school, though the revelations are cloaked by the erosion of time and complicity of a four decades secret.

An intriguing historical mystery novel that is a dark cozy, one written for a winter evening spent tucked up in bed with a mug of cocoa.

Though **THE VOICES OF THE DEAD** is the author's twelfth mystery to feature the fictionalised Josephine Tey, there is no requirement for the reader to have read the preceding books, or even the novels of Josephine Tey. However, that being said, this latest novel by Nicola Upson may well entice readers unfamiliar with the work of Josephine Tey to explore this influential [and far from forgotten] crime writer, perhaps best remembered for her novel **THE DAUGHTER OF TIME.**

THE WRECKERS
by George Makana Clark
Europa Editions, £14.99, September
Rating: A-

Reading this novel is akin to voyaging on a hallucinatory dream, one that requires you take a life-jacket and notebook for it is a tempestuous journey that spans not only several continents but also traverses time.

Opening in Portugal's capital Lisbon in 1954 inside a historical archive, the mysterious Nuno Bárbaro de Castro is in the process of tracking down the last will and testament of the relative Garoto Bárbaro [de Castro]. The document

is dated 1874, and unconventional as it is actually a series of vignettes split into thirteen sections denoting items and their beneficiaries. The fragile manuscript is a deathbed confessional recounting the adventures of the dying former slave. Garoto began his servitude as an infant helper to a blacksmith and then as a young boy had his teeth extracted for his entry into bare-knuckle boxing. Following the collapse of his father's plantation due to gambling debts, he is taken to sea on the slave ship Ana-Margarida. The journey is harrowing, with misadventures in the Portuguese colony of Goa [in India], through to the adventures in the Caribbean Gulf Coast with the Vessel's master an expatriate former pirate from Wales, Captain Francis Davies and the Commodore. In Cuba, we are introduced to the brothel and gambling den - The Pink Corsair owned and operated by the colourful former prostitute Mamzelle Guzman.

From this set-up, **THE WRECKERS** crosses continents and time, to detail a surreal journey threaded by the slave trade from the 'lost' city of Mbala, on the African gold coast to Angola through to Cuba, and finally the islands in the Mississippi Delta arriving at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which was historically named as Angola Prison [the 'Alcatraz of the South'].

The novel becomes at times a confusing chase adventure, with relatives of de Castro, and Guzman searching for artefacts from long forgotten history, and the location of the Last Kingdom of Mbala. The path is littered with artefacts including brass dentures, illegally smuggled African blood-diamonds, bogus business cards, the questionable skull measurements of slaves [phrenology], as well as murder, deception and a map hidden in the contours of dried human skin.

The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade is a horrific one, though there is a bawdy sense of the surrealistic in the telling of the story, which converges in the 1990s in the archives at Baton Rouge in Louisiana, for the embargo placed on the importation of African slaves in 1807; however there were ways and means of bypassing the slavery embargo which became exploited by the instrument of the Louisiana State Prison, whose name descended from the African country that the slaves were imported from.

THE WRECKERS is a fascinating and wild narrative that should be read in chunks, for its imaginative texture and literary exoticism becomes overwhelming to the senses if read for long periods. There is confusion from an ill-defined progression of characters, which is exacerbated by equally bizarre interludes and misadventures - but at no time is the narrative boring. The writing is vibrant and electric with a unique pulse and timbre that sweeps up the reader in its wake.

It is of little surprise that the author, George Makana Clark is an academic, who has travelled and taught in Africa, North America and Europe.

THE WRECKERS is part historical crime thriller, and part literary adventure.

Though at times it is frustrating and not entirely successful in its narrative structure - however it is unlike anything I have read and will haunt your dreams and will fuel nightmares.

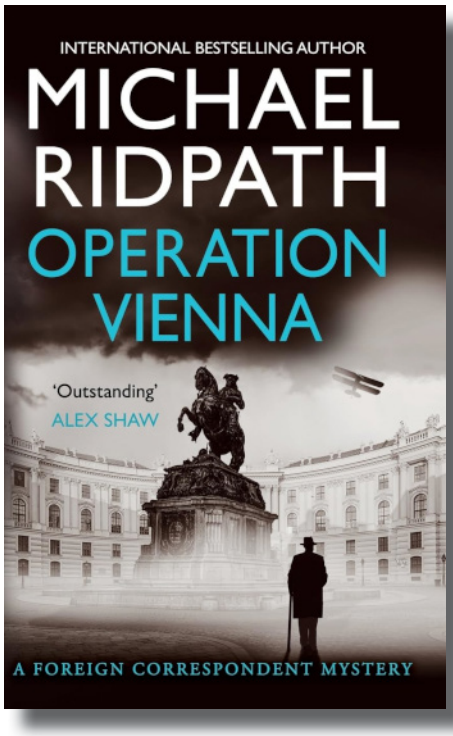
OPERATION VIENNA
by Michael Ridpath
Boldwood Books, £13.99, October
Rating: A

Though Michael Ridpath is often associated with his early financial thrillers and his Icelandic Detective novels -- this historical-murder-mystery series set between the war years in Europe is where he'll be deeply celebrated.

Ridpath's follow-up from last year's **OPERATION BERLIN**, is extraordinary. Now that the backdrop has been established and the various characters carefully positioned on the chess board - the author is free to deliver a hypnotic [and devious] murder mystery.

WW1 veteran Archie [Sir Archibald] Laverick [accompanied by his manservant / batman Arthur Lister] finds himself in 1931 Vienna. He is ostensibly researching the life and battles of an Austrian General, Prince Eugene [of Savoy] for a book he wishes to publish. Archie finds the activity of examining the battlefield strategies of renowned military officers helpful in managing the physical and mental damage inflicted by the horrors of his time in the trenches during [the *so-called*] Great War. He also relies on the companionship of his 'batman' Arthur Lister, who also served in that conflict. Archie Laverick, is accompanied by the young American woman, Esme Carmichael who hails from the Mid-West, but has her heart set on becoming a Journalist [a Foreign Correspondent] in Europe for a Chicago newspaper. In order to break into the profession, she works in an *ad-hoc* capacity for Archie as his research assistant. Esme is fluent in German and French, and tenacious in delving into the required libraries and typing up both her own as well as Archie's notes. Though, Esme Carmichael's work as Archie's research assistant provides her an income, it also proves a useful front in her journalistic investigations.

Carmichael has been contacted in Berlin by Journalist Joe Moretti regarding the death of a young American [Howland Weston Witherall] close to the Vienna Woods. What appeared at first as a tragic automobile accident is



soon confirmed as suicide by the Austrian Police.

Joe Moretti is aware that Esme Carmichael is actively seeking a news story to sell [and/or syndicate], so he advises her that Howland's suicide may be murder, and she should investigate. It appears that Howland, the young American came to Austria for psychotherapy with Dr Birenbaum [a former colleague of Sigmund Freud]. Dr Birenbaum is bound by his professional oath not to reveal what he uncovered during his sessions with Howland Witherall. Instead, the psychotherapist spoke with his friend Dr Gustav Reinitz - telling him that his patient was far from depressed, and is adamant that there was no way Howland Witherall committed suicide – despite what the police concluded.

It is not long before Esme contacts Archie and persuades him to join her in Austria where she can assist him researching the Austrian General Eugene, *in-concert* with her investigation into the suicide of Howland Witherall.

Soon the game is indeed *afoot*.

Much of the action centres on the machinations of the journalists at the Café Sisi, the news-hub for the Foreign Correspondents; as well as Archie's interest in rare book collecting especially when there's a possible Gutenberg Bible for sale from an Austrian monastery.

As the investigation into the suicide of the young American runs in parallel to the research into the Austrian General, more sinister matters become revealed, and perhaps there are linkages to darker rumours. There are whispers about Austrian banking irregularities, as well as sexual liaisons.

Though **OPERATION VIENNA** can easily be read as a standalone, the experience becomes totally immersive if you have read its precursor **OPERATION BERLIN**. Many of the previous minor characters reappear, such as the book dealer from Dresden Moses Garfinkel who adds light relief, or the unpleasant Grayson Trexler and his former lover, the communist Ruth Jakubowski – who without Esme Carmichael's help would have remained in a German prison cell before hanging for a political murder she did not commit. There are an array of new characters in the shape of the Foreign Correspondents who meddle in the intrigue of the time from their cups of coffee and liquor at the Café Sisi. Even Archie finds comfort from the horrors of his wartime scars. Though his batman / man-servant Lister is always on hand; he only makes small [but important] appearances when guile and brute force are required.

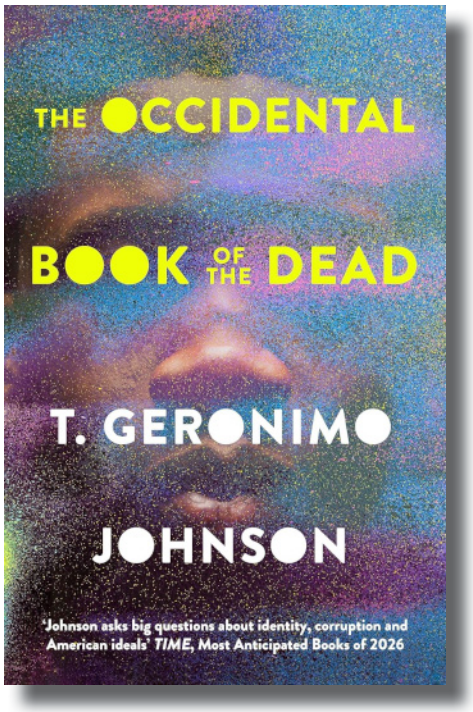
The novel carefully combines the deviancy and darkness of human factors within a golden-age murder mystery, to the wider political economics of the Austro-German situation in the lead up to the Second World War.

Michael Ridpath is an author of extraordinary skill – miss this novel at your peril.

THE OCCIDENTAL BOOK OF THE DEAD
by T. Geronimo Johnson
In UK; Abacus £25.00
In US; William Morrow $34.00
UK 29 Sept. 2026 / US 6th October 2026
Rating: B

This hyped literary crime novel has as much heft in its sheer physical size, as it has in the ideas it explores. It takes a dedicated and determined reader to make it to the end, and a reader who has a lot of time on their hands – because it is written to be read slowly, the words carefully digested so pictures emerge from the page, angrily taking shape and substance. However, a warning as it is not a book for everyone.

THE OCCIDENTAL BOOK OF THE DEAD requires slow reading, re-reading and making notes as one reads – because of shifting points of view, opposing retellings, thematic complexity and dense sentence structure. Adding to this, the narrative contains much urban American regional slang, cop terminology, ghetto euphemisms and acronyms that do not get explained when they appear. That all being said, this book is extraordinary in its ambition but perhaps less so in its execution. However the question that remains for the reader when you put the book down is "was it worth it?"



Set in Atlantis [coded for Atlanta], in the southern U.S. state of Glorious [coded for Georgia], Johnson's novel interweaves the short life of a white teenage school boy Anthony 'Tony' Montana with that of a black police officer [coded for peace officer] George Washington Jonson [aka 'Go Go'].

The first section is set in 2005. School boy Montana is a smart teenager, living in a rough housing project ['The Bricks'] which is home for predominantly poor black families. He works as a low-level white drug dealer for the unpleasant black criminal 'Pepper' and his two henchmen 'Cornelius' and 'Ivan'. Being a white school-kid, he can sell drugs in the affluent white neighbourhoods [where a black face would be a cop magnet].

When a consignment of drugs goes missing while in the possession of Montana, the criminal 'Pepper' takes control of Montana's beloved dog, a Pitbull named 'Knuckles', and will only return it once he has earned back the money lost to the missing drugs. 'Pepper' enters 'Knuckles' in illegal dogfights, which are harrowing not just for Montana, but also for the reader. Montana is suspicious of his ex-junkie mother as well as his ex-convict uncle Frank in having a hand in the mystery of the missing drugs.

Then the narrative zips back in

time to 1992 focusing on the black cop George Washington Jonson [aka 'Go Go'] and his life emerging from 'The Bricks', the same poor black neighbourhood housing project that would be home for the white school kid Montana [two decades later]. Brought up by a single mother 'Go Go' Jonson falls in love with the mysterious MK [Mary Kay] but in order to escape the ghetto to make a life for themselves, he joins the US Army and becomes stationed in Germany. The experience opens his eyes, for he asserts that he is treated as 'a human being, not just as a black man'. He makes civilian German friends becoming popular as he can source drugs for rave-parties. This side-line however leads to repercussions which result in his quiet discharge from the army and return to the US.

Back in Atlanta [aka Atlantis], 'Go Go' finds employment with the Police Department as a rookie cop. His former girlfriend Mary Kay [MK] is now shacked up in 'The Bricks' with a drug dealer named Zachariah Isiah Paul [aka 'Dice']. He finds himself at the end of a restraining order when he discovers that Mary Kay and 'Dice' have an infant child Aladdin, who 'Go Go' believes could be his son.

'Go Go' like all the rookie cops is assigned a FTO [a field training officer], named Tucker – a seasoned white policeman helping the intake of rookie cops adjust to modern policing. Tucker is a self-proclaimed 'Red Neck', but takes a shine to 'Go Go', even inviting him to home barbeques enjoying the company of Tucker's son Tommy and his liberal wife, a teacher who he refers to as 'The Brenda'. 'Go Go' is also introduced to Tucker's mistress 'Kaysha' such is the growing trust between these two black and white cop partners.

Matters take a swerve when a police raid [that 'Go Go' witnesses] descends upon the ghetto house 'MK' and 'Dice' share, landing both in prison or what Tucker's acronym OASIS spells – Off America's Streets Into the System.

Then Johnson's narrative fast forwards [back] to 2005, where the life [and death] of the young school kid Anthony 'Tony' Montana and the [now] older seasoned cop George Washington Jonson [aka 'Go Go'] collide.

Atlanta / Atlantis is well into the gentrification phase of the city's development. 'Go Go' is now married to a white woman Colleen, and has a stepson Alan who he adores with as much affection as the boy reciprocates back. Now, 'Go Go' is the FTO [field training officer] breaking in a rookie cop named Utner who appears to be a tad gung ho, and perhaps also a white redneck.

While on night patrol, 'Go Go' Jonson and his rookie partner Utner get involved in the shooting of a suspected drug dealer gunman. It is white cop Utner holding the smoking gun, and when the hoodie is removed from the body on the tarmac – it's revealed to be the corpse of a white youth – a fatal juxtaposition of what would become 'black lives matter' vs, 'American police' situation.

Enter Internal Affairs, Captain Ridenhaus from Philadelphia, written statements, interviews and the complex racial history of America.

Uncomfortable and at times unsettling reading.

Like some of the characters, not all readers will make it to the end of the book, and if they do, they may not be intact and it could be argued the readers that got to read 'The End' should be honoured with a certificate of achievement. With honesty, I must confess I sadly won't be a recipient of the completion award for 'The Occidental Book of the Dead'.

Despite enjoying the rich language, the intensity and challenge of reading the first half of this narrative; especially viewing urban Atlanta and America's South before and after the millennium through the [first-person] eyes of an African American – it just became too much for me, and I was drained and had to leave the task unfinished.

However, I would implore others to seek out this unusual [and uncomfortable] literary crime novel, for it is so, so very different in terms of reading experience, one that author T. Geronimo Johnson has crafted into an extraordinary book – one that challenges as well as confronting some harsh truths.

The 2026 Shamus Award Winners

Best PI Novel

THE BIG EMPTY, Robert Crais – Winner

PHOTOGRAPH, Brian Freeman
HATCHET GIRLS,
Joe R. Lansdale
GRAY DAWN, Walter Mosley
MIRAGE CITY, Lev AC Rosen

Best First PI Novel

WHERE THE BONES LIE, Nick Kolakowski - Winner

CHASE HARLEM,
Elise Burke Brown
MILES IN TIME,
Lee Matthew Goldberg
SHADOW OF THE ETERNAL WATCHER, Josh Mendoza
THE WITCH'S ORCHARD,
Archer Sullivan

Best PI Paperback Original

MIDNIGHT STREETS, Phil Lecomber – Winner

THE HOOK AND THE EYE,
Raymond Benson
SUNDAY OR THE HIGHWAY,
Cindy Fazzi
CITY LIGHTS,
Claire M. Johnson
CATCH ME ON A BLUE DAY,
M.E. Proctor



Digging Into The Global Crime Spree

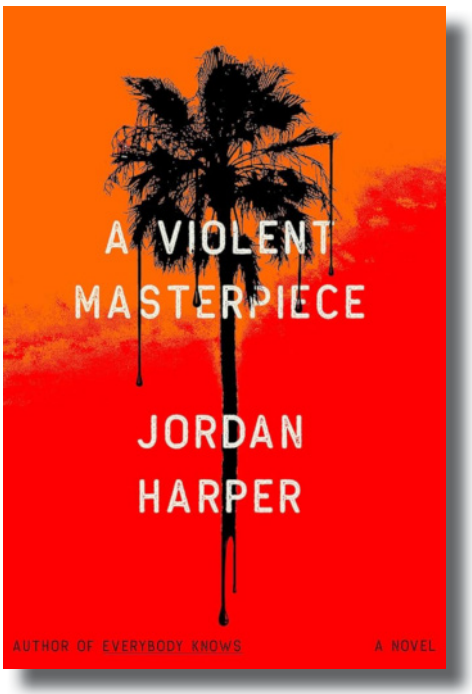
Craig Sisterson



A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE
by Jordan Harper
Mulholland Books, $29.00, April
Rating: A+

Raised in the Ozarks region, and having cut his mystery writing teeth on popular TV crime drama The Mentalist more than a decade ago, screenwriter and author Jordan Harper now falls into the powerful more than prolific category of crime novelists, with his stunning latest tale A Violent Masterpiece only his third book since his Edgar Award-winning 2017 debut She Rides Shotgun.

While Harper is far from matching the book-a-year pace of many in the crime genre, his tales are always well worth the wait, as **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** demonstrates once more.



A follow-up - thematically and in setting rather than in terms of ongoing lead or series characters - to his brilliant CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger winning Everybody Knows, released in January 2023, this latest novel once again pulls readers down into the muck and mire of modern-day Los Angeles, and the behind-closed doors corruption (and worse) of the rich and powerful who live and play there.

Jake Deal is a modern-day nightcrawler, livestreaming the City of Angels, warts and all, for hungry internet subscribers. Street lawyer Doug Gibson fights a broken system, case by case. Kara Delgado works for an underground, private concierge company, catering to the whims and fetishes of the ultra-rich, where 'there are no rules, only prices'. But when Kara's best friend goes missing, their three lives collide, as they face 'the Beast' (a vast, corrupt network of lawyers, private security, fixers, and black-bag publicists protecting the ultra-wealthy).

Inspired by real-life Hollywood scandals and powered by the brutal poetry of Harper's kinetic, staccato prose, alongside evocative visual storytelling, and unflinching look at the corrupt underbelly and contradictions of modern Los Angeles, **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** is absolutely true to its title.

COOL MACHINE
by Colson Whitehead
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 this year 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. It absolutely 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.

THEY SAY A GIRL DIED HERE
by Sarah Pinborough
Flatiron Books, $28.99, August
Rating: A

Expect the unexpected is a handy mantra for anyone reading a Sarah Pinborough tale. The bestselling storyteller often plays in the no-man's lands between genre boundaries, and rose to greater global notoriety thanks to a smash hit Netflix adaptation of her head-spinning thriller Behind Her Eyes, which back in 2017 had trended worldwide after spawning the #WTFThatEnding hashtag.

Now, in **THEY SAY A GIRL DIED HERE**, Pinborough turns her formidable talents to smalltown American rural noir. A place of flickering curtains, fading lives, and tightly held secrets, despite the 'everybody knows everybody' community mythology. It's an absorbing, fascinating tale that unfolds.

Anna Maybourne has moved to drought-stricken Harper's Creek with her mother, younger sister, and grandmother. Three generations of women living in an old farmhouse in grandmother Eveylyn's old hometown, all hoping the familiarity surrounds may help with her dementia. While sweeping what happened to Anna at university under the rug. Just like many in the town are trying to move on from the murders of two local teenagers, Lila and Bonnie, exactly three years apart.

That case was closed, the police say they shot the killer, but whispers that they got the wrong man linger, and fears grow as the three-year anniversary looms. Anna becomes obsessed with finding out what really happened, especially when she uncovers links to the killings that lie very close to home.

And what is her Grandma trying to tell her, in among her rambling thoughts and writings?

Pinborough crafts a tremendous, feminist rural noir that begins like a slow-burn exploration of people and place, with fierce, wounded characters at its heart, before ramping up to a suitably Pinborough-esque finale. A terrific read from a terrific storyteller.

MURDER ON THE GRAF ZEPPELIN
by Samir Machado de Machado,
Translated by Rahul Bery
Pushkin Vertigo, $16.95, December
Rating: A-



Thanks to this fun mystery, Brazilian writer, translator and graphic designer Samir Machado de Machado won the Jabuti Prize for Best Entertainment Novel, considered Brazil's most important book awards, for a second time. Now English-speaking readers can enjoy a novel with echoes of Agatha Christie while still being its own unique tale.

Rather than Poirot or Marple, our sleuth in **MURDER ON THE GRAF ZEPPELIN** interwar German police detective Bruno Brückner. He's travelling on a trans-Atlantic zeppelin flight to Rio de Janeiro. Far faster, and pricier, than a seagoing voyage in 1933. Alongside some Brazilian passengers and the forty-member crew, Brückner is joined by wealthy German Baroness Fridegunde van Hattem, who chases summer back and forth; Dr Karl Kass Voegler, who's set to speak at a eugenics conference on the dangers of racial mixing; and debonair Englishman William Hay. An eclectic, combustible group.

They're joined in Recife by another German, Otto Klein, for the final legs of the journey.

But Klein doesn't make it, dying overnight, after a dinner where the European quintet discuss classic art, how rising Nazism would fix what is ailing Germany, and ideas around racial purity. Brückner is asked to investigate Klein's death, and as he interviews the crew and passengers he uncovers a startling tale of fake identities, queer love, and revenge, where very little is what it seems.

With **MURDER ON THE GRAF ZEPPELIN**(published as **THE GOOD NAZI** in some other English-speaking countries), de Machado crafts an exquisite classic mystery with a unique setting that soaks readers in at-times disturbing pre-war viewpoints, while speckling his tale with several delightful surprises, right up until he absolutely sticks the landing of this aeronautical whodunnit.

Down Under Crime



Jeff Popple Reviews

NOTHING PERSONAL
by Alex Dook
Echo, $A34.99.
Rating: B+

Alex Dook burst onto the Australian crime fiction scene in 2025 with his dark, full throttle debut, **GUNPOWDER CREEK**. A wild ride of a story, it kept you feverishly turning the pages until the final blood-soaked climax.

Now Dook has followed it up with another exciting story, **NOTHING PERSONAL**, about a desperate young woman in the suburbs of Perth who steals the wrong bag of loot and finds herself on the run from dangerous criminals and crooked cops.

Once again, the pace is frenetic as Dook's flawed, but likeable, central character, Lola McKenzie, races from one disaster to another as she tries to stay alive, and potentially richer. The working class background against which the story unfolds is well conveyed and the characters are nicely described and credible. Lola is particularly engaging, although Dook tends to pile on her troubles a bit too much to make her actions understandable.

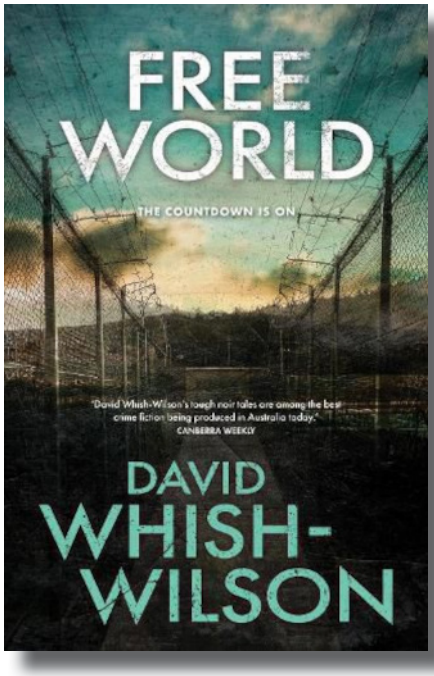
In all, **NOTHING PERSONAL** is an enjoyable read that will keep you happily entertained for a few hours. Recommended.

FREE WORLD
by David Whish-Wilson
Fremantle Press, $A34.99.
Rating: A-

David Whish-Wilson has quietly established himself over the past few years as one of Australia's best crime writers of noirish, hardboiled tales that grip your attention while exposing dark truths about Australian society.

Whish-Wilson's previous novel about young Perth PI Lee Southern, **I AM ALREADY DEAD**, was my favourite Australian crime novel of 2023 and his latest, **FREE WORLD**, is also a top read.

Set in the final days of 1999, it finds Southern going undercover in a Perth jail. When a murder in a prison cell winds up with the wrong man dead, Southern is hired to protect the intended victim by assuming the role of his cellmate and bodyguard. As tensions simmer in the prison on the eve of the new millennium, Southern finds himself trapped with no way out.



A taut, briskly paced thriller with a well described setting and a host of great characters, **FREE WORLD** will keep you reading well into the night. Highly recommended.

CHOPPY WATER
by Jack Heath
Allen & Unwin, $A34.99.
Rating: B+

I have really enjoyed Jack Heath's recent witty, and darkly amusing, "Kill Your" series set in regional Australia. Now with his latest book, **CHOPPY WATER**, he moves into darker thriller territory, with a no-holds-barred action novel set aboard a doomed cruise ship on the eve of COVID-19.

When Cesar Cain, a cleaner on the *Silver Lady* cruise ship, finds a woman's body in a laundry cart, management is quick to classify it as a freak accident and cover it up so as to not spoil the voyage for the passengers. Cain, not his real name, is not convinced, but he is not keen to get involved. He is on the ship to avoid the police and an American motorcycle gang that want him dead. But as the bodies begin to mount up, and the plight of the ship becomes more precarious, he finds that he has no choice. Ports are being closed to the ship, passengers are rioting, rumours of privacy are circulating, murders keep on coming and Cain's chances of surviving are getting slimmer and slimmer.

CHOPPY WATER is a terrifically entertaining read. The story races along at a fast pace, helped along by short chapters that often end with cliffhangers, and there are frequent twists to keep things interesting. The dangers faced by Cain get wilder and wilder as the book progresses and the story quickly builds to a gripping, bloody conclusion, and a neat epilogue.

Some suspension of disbelief is needed at times, but I suspect that most readers will be too busy turning the pages to notice or care.

LAST BASTION
by Alan Carter
Fremantle Press, $A34.99.
Rating: B+

Alan Carter excels in his ability to weave international intrigue and tensions into local crime stories set in Australia and New Zealand.

Carter's last novel about former Special Forces soldier Sam Willard and Hobart Detective Jill Wilkie, **PRIZE CATCH**, explored war crimes and corruption, and now in **LAST BASTION** he uses the rise of militant right-wing groups around the world as the backdrop to his story.

LAST BASTION opens with Willard locked in prison following the events in the last book. Frequently under threat from a long list of enemies, Willard is given a dodgy lifeline by a shadowy Intelligence operative. Freedom and a new identity in return for infiltrating a violent extremist group, that is planning a bloody event in Tasmania. It is a dangerous mission, but Willard has little choice if he wants to see his family again. Meanwhile, Detective Sergeant Jill Wilkie is tracking a surge of racially motivated attacks in her normally quiet city. As Hobart becomes a battleground for competing ideologies, one slip will expose Willard - and ignite the very attack that Jill is trying to stop.

This is a serious, well written thriller that also canvasses some important current issues. The characters are richly created and believable, and there is a strong degree of credibility around the plot. The story moves along at a steady pace, although there are slow patches, and Carter introduces some good surprises as the story progresses. The violence and the language is harsh and tough, and Carter does a good job of exposing the mindsets behind the current rise in nationalistic radicalism, especially the links to the United States.

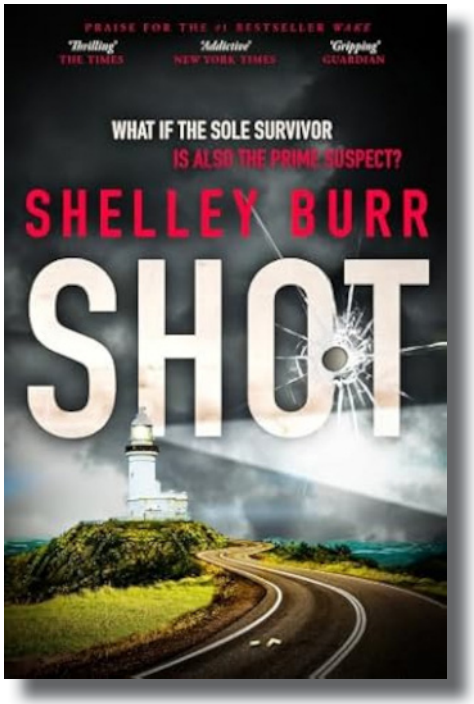
Some of the political manoeuvring by the Intelligence agencies stretches belief, although the cynicism of the politician and his advisers at the centre of story is very credible. In all, **LAST BASTION** is a dark, gripping tale that offers a good dose of suspense, while making you think about the current political trends in the world. I also very much liked the final twists in the Epilogue.

SHOT
by Shelley Burr,
Letterwing, $A34.99.
Rating: A-

Shelley Burr's latest novel, **SHOT**, revolves around an intriguing premise.

Dahlia and Duncan Crews were a rich, glamorous couple who enjoy enjoyed a lavish Byron Bay lifestyle courtesy of their popular livestreaming show. With their teenage daughter Karma, they portrayed themselves as the picture-perfect family to their hundreds of thousands of online subscribers. It all seemed to be going well for them until they were shot dead in the middle of a livestream. Karma was the sole survivor, and, in the eyes of many, the prime suspect.

Six years later, disgraced true-crime vlogger Jennifer Benedetta is hired to film a cold-case documentary on the unsolved Crews family murders. It's the chance she needs to salvage her reputation. There is a catch, however, she has to prove that Karma Crews was innocent. Desperate for the money Jennifer launches into the investigation, but it soon becomes clear that someone is watching in the shadows and is determined that she does not find out the truth.



SHOT is a smoothly written cold-crime mystery, that unfolds with clockwork precision as Jennifer gradually unwinds the various elements of the shooting. The characters are simply, but effectively, described and Jennifer is a compelling and believable central narrator whose commitment to the case keeps the story moving along nicely. The mystery of the Crews family murders is well handled and surprising, and there is an emotional subplot involving Jennifer's sister that adds to the texture of the story. The background information on blogging, influencers and gun clubs is interesting and seamlessly woven into the story, and Jennifer's insights into the world of social media are fascinating.

There is not a lot of action early on in the story, but the mystery around what is going on is enough to keep you turning the pages. As the novel progresses, there are some good twists, and the final resolution is surprising and well handled. There are a number of coincidences and chance meetings, but not enough to detract from the story. There is also a suggestion of a future case for Jennifer, which would be welcomed.

Craig Sisterson Reviews

LAST BASTION
by Alan Carter
Fremantle Press, $34.99 AUD
3 November 2026
Willard & Wilkie #2
Rating: A-

British-born TV documentarian and novelist Alan Carter has called Australasia home for more than three decades – living in Western Australia, then the Marlborough Sounds in New Zealand, and now Tasmania. It's the latter landscapes where he sets his latest crime thriller, Last Bastion, which sees the return of disgraced former Australian special forces soldier Sam Willard and aging local Tasmanian Detective Sergeant Jill Wilkie, from Carter's recent novel Prime Catch.

Now a whistleblower languishing in prison, while his fellow soldiers enjoy a government amnesty despite their alleged war crimes, Willard is offered a 'get out of jail free' card by a mysterious federal agent, with a nasty fishhook: he has to infiltrate a far-right extremist group, and successfully extract the son of a populist politician, if he wants to keep his freedom.

Meanwhile, DS Wilkie is investigating a rising tide of racist attacks in Hobart, including a 'lucky to survive' stomping and hospitalisation of a foreign student. Is this a disjointed response to hate-fuelled politicking at home and abroad, or something far more coordinated?

What is it all building towards? It's not long before DS Wilkie's case tangles up with Willard's unofficial undercover operation. But with powerful people in and out of the government who are used to keeping secrets and achieving their goals 'by any means necessary' circling events, can either Willard or Wilkie come out of this unscathed?

A consummate storyteller, Carter knows how to spin a good yarn. Scarily relevant to our modern times, Last Bastion delves into the dangers of extremism and the politicians and others who feed their careers and wallets by peddling hate.

SOMEBODY ALWAYS COMES LOOKING
by Paul Cleave
Upstart Press, $37.99 NZD
10 September 2026,
Rating: A

Two thirty-something singles, deflated by life's disappointments and thousands of miles from home, strike up a flirty chat near a string of sun loungers at a beachside Malaysian hotel. In other author or screenwriters' hands, this would be the 'meet cute' setup for a rom-com; in Paul Cleave's, it kickstarts a ripsnorting try-to-survive thriller that careens between steamy Malaysian jungles, filled with leeches, quicksand, and snakes, and frigid Canterbury farmlands, filled with kale and cattle.

In **SOMEBODY ALWAYS COMES LOOKING**, Cleave's fifteenth novel, Luca the wannabe writer and Katie the bank worker are each taking a weeklong break from family constantly hen-pecking their life choices, only to meet each other, and a surfer-looking Australian dude, on day one.

Antipodeans abroad, sharing nighttime drinks on the beach, maybe something stronger; getaway fun. It would all be a heck of a lot of fun, if their new friend wasn't a killer. Somehow surviving that encounter, Luca and Katie end up leaping from frying pan to roaring firepit, fighting for their lives at home and abroad, having stumbled into an unfamiliar world of drugs, big money, and brutality.

Malaysian detectives, brutal international gangs, travel frustrations, cancer-stricken children, heroin-filled syringes, raging bulls, bloodied shears, and a nod or two to his past novels are just a few of dozens of ingredients Cleave throws into the mix. But like a Michelin-starred chef, he creates an outstanding dish rather than a mess. Perhaps a tasty Nasi Lemak, given the setting.

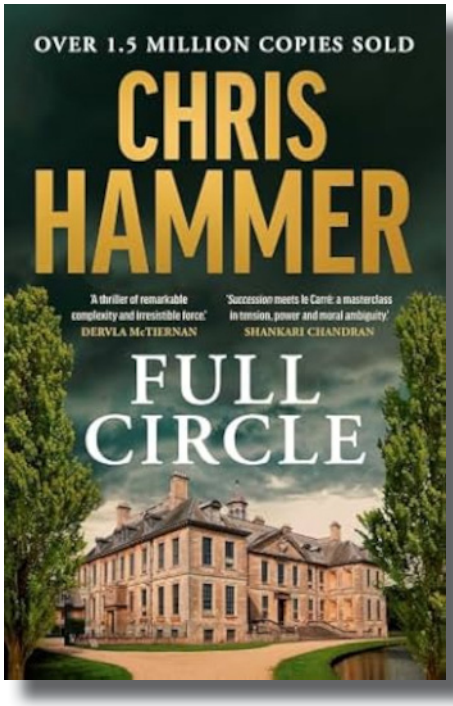
Cleave, a frequent traveller himself, soaks readers in hellish version of holidays-gone-wrong. His prose fizzes, and he crafts an engaging cast of characters who stir the emotions as well as taking us on a breakneck journey. Another superb tale from the Crown Prince of Australasian crime writing.

FULL CIRCLE
by Chris Hammer
Simon & Schuster, $34.99 AUD
29 September 2026
Martin Scarsdale #5
Rating: A

A master of compelling, multi-layered crime series set among Outback and other rural Australian landscapes, Canberra author Chris Hammer now turns his talents to a standalone thriller set in the murky world of high finance, hedge funds, and short selling shares.

A different kind of deadly landscape.

Travis Somerland is a former federal cop now on the outs after an undercover operation went horribly wrong, who



thanks to his old boss gets a job as a chauffeur with Felix Clapton, a charming but financially ruthless hedge fund manager who lives on a secluded estate on the Mornington Peninsula. For the Claptons, business is arithmetic, not morality. They specialise in targeting over-valued companies, and making millions by short selling shares, tanking the target's value with well-researched reports exposing all sorts of flaws.

For Travis, the next target is familiar, and personal: the Murtrie mining and media dynasty that he'd infiltrated, then ruined his career, and nearly cost him his life. But when celebrations of financial wizardry are upturned by multiple deaths, Travis is cast into new dangers. Can he uncover the truth about what's happened, now and in the past, if he can survive?

Oscillating narratives from the present day, Travis's past Australian Federal Police undercover operation with the Murtrie organisation (akin to the Murdochs but not, as they exist separately in this universe), and excerpts from a book about the history of the Murtrie dynasty, Hammer layers in plenty while keeping the storyline propulsive. Memorable characters season a thriller living at the nexus of white collar and violent crimes. Another terrific read from an exceptional storyteller.

DP Calendar





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



April 9 - 11, 2027
Malice Domestic 39
Bethesda, Maryland
Guests of Honor: Leslie Budewitz, Mary Kay Andrews, Mia P. Manansala, Jeffrey Marks, Janet Powell & Remembering Anne Perry
Website: www.malicedomestic.net



April 27 - May 1, 2027
ThrillerFest XXII
New York Midtown Hilton
Guests of Honor: Michael Connelly, Karin Slaughter, Lisa Jewell, Mark Greaney, Isabella Maldonado, Emily Bestler (Publisher), Oline Cogdill (Review Columnist)



Website: Thrillerfest.com
May 28-May 30, 2027
Capital Crime
London, England
Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: www.capitalcrime.org





September 17-19, 2027
Bloody Scotland
Details to be announced
Website: bloodyscotland.com



July 22 -- 25, 2027
Theakston Old Peculier Crime Festival
Harrowgate, England
Guests of Honor: TBA
Website: harrowgateinternationalfestivals.com



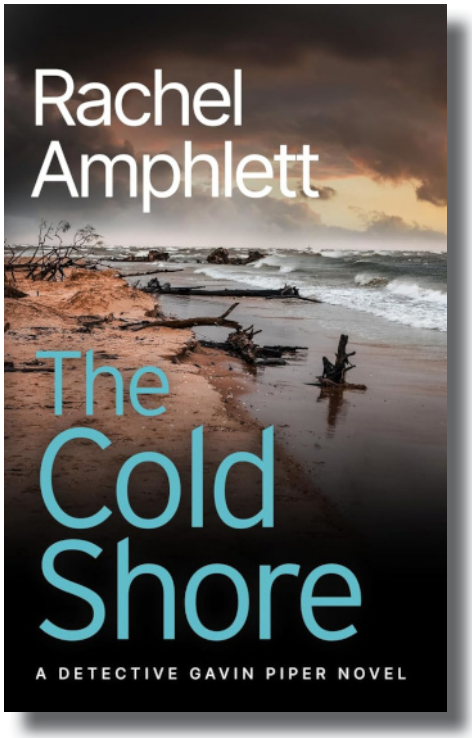
August 30--September 3, 2028
Bouchercon 2028
Secrets & Suspense in Speed City
Indianapolis, Indiana

September 1-5, 2027
Bouchercon 2027
Washington, D. C.
Guests of Honor: S. A. Cosby, Martin Edwards, Laura Joh Rowland, Laura Lippman, George Pelecanos, Barbara Neely, Art Taylor
Website: bouchercon2027.com

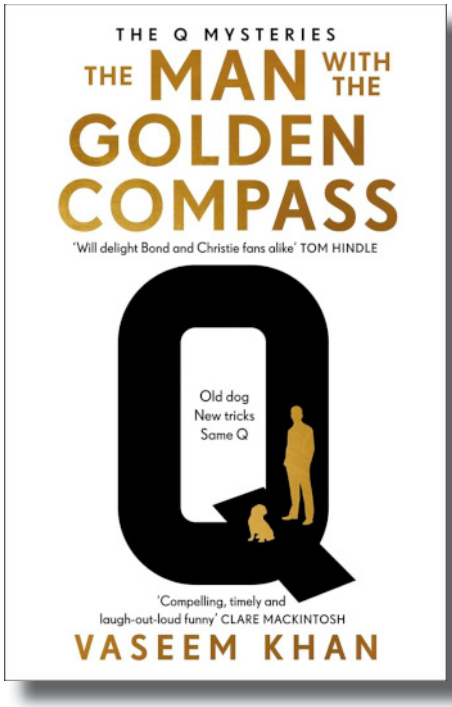
What's New In the U. K.



NO ONE IS SAFE, Simon Kernick (Headline, $20.00, November). Luke Jones, his wife Sofia and beloved son Max are hiking in a remote Scottish forest when they stumble across the body of a murdered woman. They're even more terrified when the killers reappear, guns in hand. Managing to flee, they each get separated in the dense woods -- with Luke stumbling and knocking himself unconscious. When he wakes, there's no sign of Sofia and Max. But when his phone starts ringing, the nightmare really begins



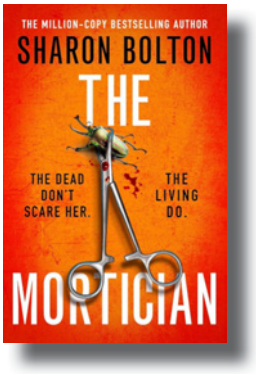
THE COLD SHORE, Rachel Amphlett (Saxon Publishing, £15.99, October). When a man is found savagely murdered on an abandoned vessel off the north Kent coast, what begins as a routine inquiry turns deadly. Detective Gavin Piper had intended only a brief visit to assist his superior officer – but when circumstance forces him to take command, he finds himself leading his first homicide case in a place that feels both unfamiliar and unforgiving. As the investigation deepens, a key witness is found dead and dark secrets begin to surface. With the body count rising and the pressure mounting, Gavin must race against the clock to find the only surviving link – before the killer strikes again.



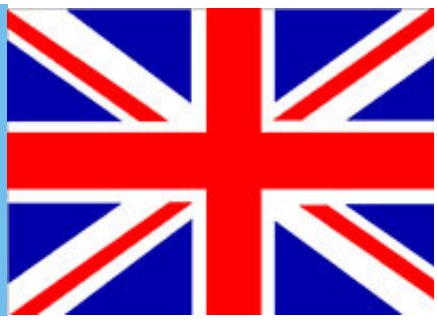
THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN COMPASS, Vaseem Khan (Zaffre, $20.00, October). Dismissed from MI6's Q Branch, where he developed weapons and field technology, Major Boothroyd (aka 'Q') has found a new lease of life as an amateur detective in his sleepy hometown of Wickstone-on-Water. Fresh from successfully solving the murder of his childhood friend, Q is now hired by the police to re-examine the unsolved killing of Lawrence Noble, a tech millionaire turned online antique dealer. Why was Noble tortured before his death? What is the significance of the circular golden object inscribed with mysterious runes found by his body? As Q investigates, danger stalks those around him, and he soon finds himself dragged into a chilling conspiracy

THE PATRIOT, Ajay Chowdhury (Harvill, £20.00, November). Detective Sergeant Kamil Rahman is riding high on newfound fame and a thrilling new case: the mysterious death of the Deputy Governor of the Tower of London. Meanwhile ex-partner Anjoli's luck is about to change too. Her struggling detective agency has been asked to investigate a series of death threats targeting a high-profile, and controversial, climate activist. Unbeknownst to them both, rogue historian Rohan Gill is planning the ultimate heist to reclaim the Kohinoor diamond from the Tower – and Kamil and Anjoli, are an integral part of his plan.

THE MORTICIAN, Sharon Bolton (Orion, £22.00, November). Mortician Ella Foxton has built her life around honouring the dead and guiding them to their final resting place. Her peace is shattered when Jonny Massey, a notorious gangster, arrives at her small funeral parlour demanding she provide a lavish funeral for his brother Jimmy. As Ella prepares Jimmy's remains, she soon realises it's not just a body Massey wants buried, but a lifetime of violent secrets. Secrets that may just tie the Masseys to a double murder investigation headed by the tenacious DS Brian Rushton. Caught between a live investigation and warring gangs, Ella must decide how far she'll go to bring the truth to light.



U.K. Reviews



Jeff Popple Revie-

THE FIFTEENTH MAN
by William Cook
Viper, £16.99
Rating: A-

Set in Berlin in 1990, **THE FIFTEENTH MAN** is a dark thriller about the hunt for an old Nazi who has been hiding in the West. Michael Braun is a down-at-heel Anglo-German journalist who makes a modest living tracking down old Nazis. However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Fleet Street's interest has waned, and he needs more than another concentration camp guard or petty bureaucrat to sell a story to the press. When he is offered the opportunity to pursue one last Nazi, he is sceptical, but is desperate for money. During the storming of the East German Stasi headquarters after the fall of the Wall, files were apparently found that show a Nazi may have been hiding in Berlin for decades. And not just another low-ranking soldier but Heinrich Müller, head of the Gestapo, whose fate has been unknown since he disappeared from Hitler's bunker in 1945. Braun reluctantly takes the job but soon finds that the man he is hunting knows how to stay hidden and that others are also interested in Müller's fate.

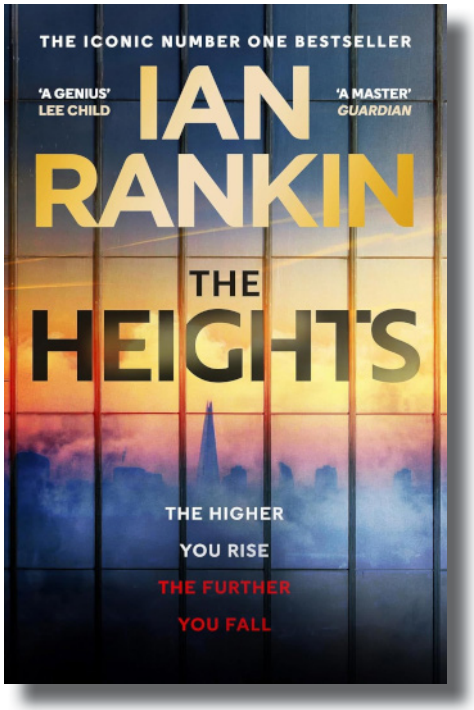
THE FIFTEENTH MAN is a very good debut that keeps you well engaged as Braun steadily goes about tracking down his prey. The story moves along at a decent pace, and the tension certainly mounts as the threats against Braun increase. Some unexpected developments push the plot in an interesting direction and the final pages crackle with action and revelations.

The strength of the book lies in Cook's ability to vividly convey a strong sense of time and place, and he convincingly brings to life Berlin, both East and West, in the early 1990s. The characters are also nuanced and credible, and Braun is a believable protagonist who becomes more engaging as the book progresses.

In all, **THE FIFTEENTH MAN** is a bit of a slow burn, but certainly keeps you interested with its gritty variation on the old Nazis-on-the-run trope.

THE HEIGHTS
by Ian Rankin
Orion, £25. 00
Rating: A-

Ian Rankin is in good form with his first standalone crime novel in over two decades. Drawing on a limited release short story (**THE RISE**) from 2023,



THE HEIGHTS, is a totally engaging police mystery that grips to the last line.

The story revolves around the murder of a night concierge, whose body is found in the lobby of an ultra-exclusive apartment building, called *The Heights*. London detective DS Gillian Gish is on call that night and she arrives shortly after the discovery, and finds no shortage of suspects. The Heights is a gleaming, high-end high-rise that looms over London's Hyde Park. Newly built from steel and smoked glass, and adorned with expensive artwork, it is a billionaire's playground offering sumptuous suites for the global elite. Included among the residents, are a very popular music star, a dodgy Russian oligarch, a reality tv actress, a foreign heiress, the wife of a notorious career criminal and the building's stressed developer.

As Gillian and her more senior partner, DI Jack Milton, work their way through the suspects, both in the building and outside, they come increasing under pressure from the media, their political masters and the influential residents of The Heights, who do not take kindly to finding their gilded lifestyles under police scrutiny.

Rankin thrusts the reader into the centre of the investigation from the opening pages, and he keeps the plot ticking over at a good rate from the first line to the final surprising revelation. The telling is as smooth as usual, and the book highlights Rankin's usual strengths of clever plotting, sharp social commentary, vivid pictures of the location where the crime occurs, gritty characters and a wry sense of humour. The detective pairing of Gillian and the nearing retirement Milton are a good match, and the other characters are also well sketched and credible.

As a mystery, **THE HEIGHTS** works very well with good twists and carefully placed clues that avoid detection until Gillian pulls them all together. Fans of Rankin may miss Rebus, but I think that Gillian Gish and **THE HEIGHTS** are a good substitute and will keep most crime readers well satisfied.

NO ONE IS SAFE
by Simon Kernick

Headline, £20.00
Rating: B+

Simon Kernick is one of those authors who never fails to entertain. You always know what you are going to get with a Kernick novel: fast frenetic action, twists, bloodshed and plenty of surprises. His latest one, NO ONE IS SAFE, sticks pretty much to usual formula and keeps you well entertained from beginning to end.

NO ONE IS SAFE opens with Luke Jones, his new wife Sofia, and beloved son Max hiking in a remote Scottish forest. Things quickly turn nasty, however, when they stumble across the body of a murdered woman. They are even more terrified when the killers reappear, guns in hand. Managing to flee, they each get separated in the dense woods, with Luke stumbling and knocking himself unconscious. When he wakes, there's no sign of Sofia and Max. But when his phone starts ringing, the nightmare really begins. Luke will do anything to save his wife and son. But, as a pawn in a deadly game which drags up his buried past, can he even save himself?

Skilfully shifting the viewpoint between Jones, Max, and a range of villains and crooked cops, Kernick keeps the story moving along at a hectic pace, and uses the differing perspectives to increase the tension and the surprises. As usual, the telling is very unsentimental and most of the characters have a dark, or crooked, side to them. The plot is impossible to predict, and there is never the assumption that the good guys, if there are any, will win.

There are slight references to earlier books and incidents, and one of Kernick's most popular characters, Tina Boyd, plays a major part in the story, but **NO ONE IS SAFE** can easily be read as a standalone novel. Good fun!

FEVER ISLAND
by Martin Edwards
Head of Zeus, January 2027, £22.99
Rating: B+

FEVER ISLAND is the sixth book in Martin Edwards' series about amateur sleuth Rachel Savernake and is another enjoyable homage by Martin to the Golden Age of crime writing.



The book opens in 1926 with the apparent murder of film star Godiva Lee at her isolated house in England's Lake District. It then shifts forward to 1931, and Rachel Savernake is blackmailed into attending a strange gathering at Godiva's old home on Fever Island.

The gathering has been arranged by the notorious occultist and womaniser Bob Unthank, who wants to bring together all those connected to Godiva's death. He is convinced that one of them is the murderer and he wants to unmask them. Rachel has been invited for her powers of deduction, but she is also there to determine the extent of Unthank's knowledge of a dark secret from her past. Tensions are already running high at the party, but when the island is cut off from the outside world by a wild storm and another body is found, they erupt into a maelstrom of suspicion and hostility.

Edwards does a superb job in capturing the mood and style of the classic British crime novel and **FEVER ISLAND** is a tricky, fair play mystery that will keep you guessing to the end. The pacing is a little slow, especially at the beginning, but once the framework is set in place, it moves along quite nicely.

George Easter Reviews

OUT OF THE ASHES
by M. J. Arlidge
Orion, £16.99, July
Helen Grace #14
Rating: A-

The story kicks off in the aftermath of a devastating attack that has left Helen Grace's best friend fighting for her life (see the previous novel in the series, **INTO THE FIRE**). The man responsible for this horrific act is Maarten Dekker, a dangerous fugitive who immediately flees the U.K. to avoid capture. Driven by a desperate thirst for revenge and an uncompromising demand for justice, Helen defies limitations to track him down. Her pursuit leads her across the channel to the major Dutch port city of Rotterdam, Dekker's home town.

Operating in foreign territory without the official backing of her usual team, Helen finds herself completely isolated. Rotterdam's criminal underworld is big business, and one of its major players (a childhood friend of Dekker) is highly protective and actively harboring Dekker on his home turf. Rather than finding allies, Helen faces a passive-aggressive police force, who are tepid at best in attempts to help Helen and her quest.

As Helen uses her instincts to navigate the hostile and unfamiliar streets, the stakes escalate significantly. She is forced to dodge two trained assassins who are shadowing her every move, sent to eliminate her before she can reach her target.

With her boss warning her that failure is not an option, Helen must risk everything—including her own life—to corner Dekker before he vanishes forever, leaving her world in ashes.

The author likes to put his protagonist in dangerous situations to see how she will escape harm or death. I found myself asking, "How is she going to get out of this?" several times while reading **OUT OF THE ASHES**. One might think that this is a novel of detection and there is some of that going on. But it is more an action thriller with chase

sequences, a deadline and danger, danger, danger. **OUT OF THE ASHES** succeeds on both counts. If you are looking for a book to increase your blood pressure, this is certainly one of those.

THE BURNING TIDE
by William Shaw
Hemlock Press, £18.99, July
Eden Driscoll #2
Rating: A-

Former Met detective Eden Driscoll is adjusting to a quieter life in the coastal town of Teignmouth, Devon. He is currently acting as the primary guardian for his orphaned nine-year-old nephew, Finn, after the tragic passing of his sister. Restless after a long, monotonous summer of domestic life, Eden misses the thrill of police work.

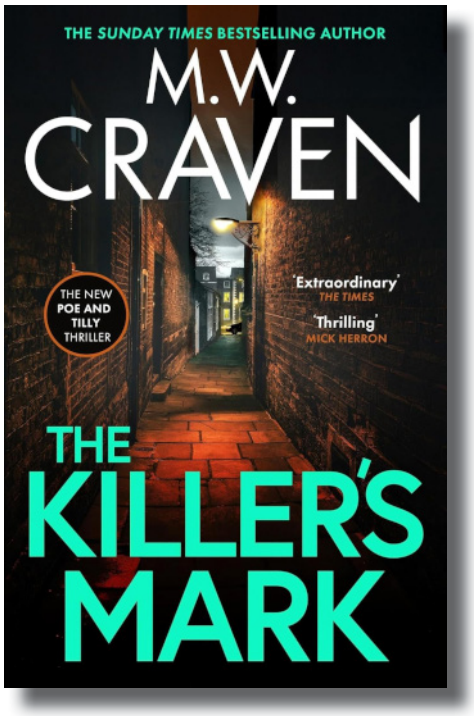
The quiet routine is shattered when a fit, mid-forties stranger named Richard Morrison knocks on Eden's door. Morrison frantically claims that someone is trying to kill him, but before Eden can press for more details or offer real assistance, the man abruptly vanishes into the night.

A few days later, a coastal house is intentionally burnt to the ground. Investigators searching through the charred rubble discover human remains. Believing the victim to be the missing Morrison, the lead local detective requests Eden's assistance. Eager to put his skills to use, Eden embeds himself in the official investigation, though his rogue investigative style is not always appreciated by the local police force.

Ultimately, the case forces Eden to fully confront his investigative instincts, proving that his time as a detective is far from over while setting up new opportunities for his future in Devon.

It is a pleasure to read a book written by William Shaw. He crafts his characters with such sensitivity that one can't help but gravitate towards them and wish them well. William Shaw is a must read for me. I've read all of his books to date and have never been disappointed.

THE KILLER'S MARK
by M. W. Craven



Constable, £22.00, July
Poe & Tilley #8
Rating: A

Detective Washington Poe and the brilliant, socially awkward tech analyst Tilly Bradshaw have quit the National Crime Agency and have gone off on their own as private investigators. On the side, Tilly is still doing some work for the British secret service.

The main plot ignites when a precocious teenage girl named Esmerée walks into their office ("Gumshoes for Hire"). She wants to hire them to find her missing mother, whom Esmerée had assumed was dead but recently appeared alive in a video snippet.

What begins as a simple missing persons case, soon turns complex and deadly. There are others searching for Esmerée's mother and they don't play nice. It becomes a race to see who can locate her first.

The puzzles that M. W. Craven creates in his crime novels are mind-boggling – so cleverly crafted and solved. Also not to be missed is Poe's sharp, witty and incisive repartee with the other characters in the book. I read **THE KILLER'S MARK** with a big smile on my face – I was enjoying it that much.

And Poe has somewhat met his match with Esmerée, who can hold her own with anyone. It appears that she may join the cast in future books in the series. I certainly hope so.

BLOOD, RUST, AND STEEL
by Stuart MacBride
Macmillan UK, August
(available in the U.S.)
Roberta Steel #3
Rating: A

Acting Detective Inspector Roberta Steel is called to a horrific crime scene. A couple has discovered a decomposing, mutilated corpse stuffed inside a wheelie bin at a highway rest stop off the A96. Accompanied by her loyal but long-suffering partner, DC Stewart "Tufty" Quirrel, Steel begins investigating. Identifying the corpse (no teeth, no fingers) proves near impossible.

A word about Roberta Steel for the uninitiated. She is a fiercely sharp-tongued married lesbian who is just a few weeks away from retirement – much to the relief of her long-suffering superiors who have had to put up with her obstinate shenanigans because she is such a good detective. Despite her abrasive personality, Steel has managed to collect a small cadre of loyal acolytes, whom she calls The Queen Street Irregulars. Chief among them is the aforementioned Tufty who speaks a strange, grammatically incorrect version of the English (Scottish) language, which took me a little while to get used to. One other note about something that had me a bit confused for the first few pages of the book. Apparently there is a swear jar in the office where the detectives work and each swear word uttered is fined £1.00. So Steel's solution to this dilemma, for she otherwise would be swearing multiple times per minute, is to invent her own swear words. At first I thought these words were Scottish slang (and some of them may be), but then the explanation of the swear jar gave new meaning to what was going on.

Now back to the story, which proves to be a complex one involving several parallel plotlines:

Political Unrest and Extremism: Aberdeen is caught in the middle of a tense local by-election. Far-right pop-

ulist politicians and shady government intelligence "spooks" are manipulating the public narrative, leading to massive, violent street protests.

A Second Violent Crime: While trying to contain one of these explosive political rallies, a near-fatal stabbing occurs just miles from where the initial corpse was found.

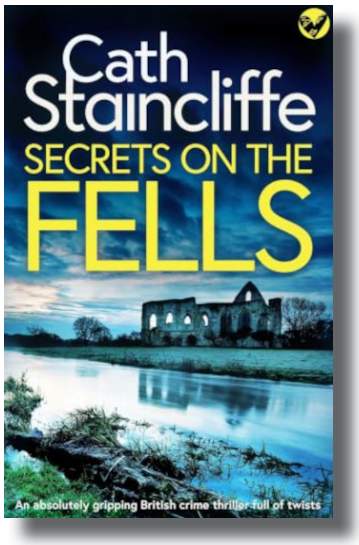
Off-the-Books Favors: An ex-colleague continuously pesters Steel to illegally run a set of vehicle license plates through the police database. This raises her suspicions.

Just as Steel begins connecting the dots between the illicit drug trade, the far-right political factions, and the murder, disaster strikes. Steel is caught in a devastating bomb explosion during a political rally. She narrowly survives, waking up in the hospital with severe injuries and a titanium plate permanently implanted in her head. Her recovery takes her up and through her date for retirement. But as Steel sits at home with nothing to do but housework and recuperation, she starts snooping around the investigations that she was involved with before the bomb went off. To do so, she elicits the help of her former colleagues, The Queen Street Irregulars.

BLOOD, RUST AND STEEL was an absolute delight to read. Roberta Steel could give Jackson Lamb a run for his money. There were several laugh-out-loud moments for me. If you are into humorous irreverence, this is the book for you. There is some good detective work found here as well. I would describe Stuart MacBride's writing style as "lively," and that may be an understatement.

SECRETS OF THE FELLS
by Cath Staincliffe
Joffe Books, $15.99, October
Donovan & Young #3
Rating: B

On a bitter winter night, Detectives Donovan and Young are called to the atmospheric ruins of Fountains Abbey out on the windswept Yorkshire Fells. There they discover the body of Patrick Armitage, a local college drama teacher and seemingly devoted family man who has been brutally slaughtered and stabbed repeatedly.



The two detectives interview a host of possible suspects but come up with nothing and progress on the case stagnates. Then Rosie, a teenage girl and vulnerable witness who was starring in the college's now-abandoned musical, suddenly vanishes. The detectives wonder if Rosie has fallen prey to the same killer who slaughtered her teacher.

I met the author some years ago at the Toronto Bouchercon and have read several of her books since then. Cath Staincliffe has impressed me with her keen perception of human frailty and her clever writing. But I'm sorry to say that **SECRETS OF THE FELLS** was a disappointment to me. It is a police detective story written by the numbers, with little or no pizzaz to it. Cath, I know you can do better than this.

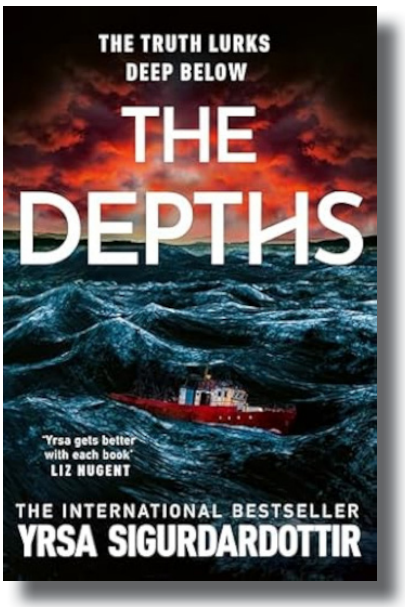
Craig Sisterson Review

THE DEPTHS
by Yrsa Sigurðardóttir
Translated by Victoria Cribb
Hodder & Stoughton, November
Rating: A-

A modern-day queen of Nordic Noir, Icelandic author Yrsa Sigurðardóttir has been thrilling and entertaining readers around the world for more than twenty years, courtesy of three different series (including a six-book series starring quick-witted lawyer Thóra Gudmundsdóttir, and another six-book 'Children's House' series starring child psychologist Freyja and police detective Huldar), along with a range of standalones. Her crime and thriller tales have been translated into 30 different languages, and read by millions. Her nineteenth novel to be translated into English, The Depths is the third instalment in her most recent 'Black Ice' series featuring police officers Týr and Karó, and forensic pathologist Iðunn, following on from Can't Run Can't Hide and last year's The Wake.

A skull is unearthed at a recycling centre on the outskirts of Reykjavik. A dangerous neighbourhood feud escalates into a murder investigation. A young woman working as a chef on a large fishing boat, looking to follow in the footsteps of her late seafaring father, is trapped at sea. How is a decades-old tragedy entwined with these disparate current-day events?

Sigurðardóttir, a civil engineer by trade, has a masterful touch for tension, and for constructing atmospheric, atypical thrillers laced with human psychology and disturbing aspects among the action and investigations. The fishing boat setting is a rare one in the genre, and Sigurðardóttir brings it to vivid life in all its pressures and proclivities. She weaves a fascinating tale that should please fans old and new; overall The Depths is another chilling, thrilling read from an excellent storyteller.



Ripster's Revivals

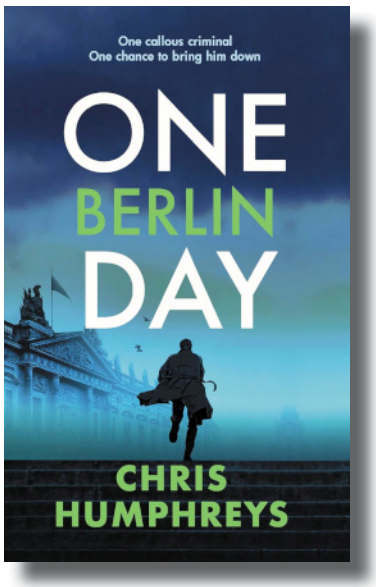
by Mike Ripley

New Stuff

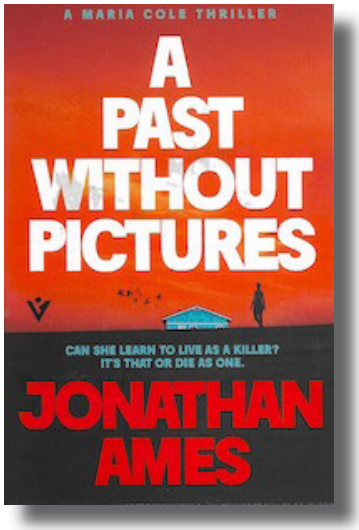
Although I have not even seen a copy yet, I am looking forward to the new Felix Francis thriller **THE CHASE** which is published by Zaffre at the end of this month. To celebrate the event, Felix will be continuing the Francis family tradition of a lavish launch party in the stylish parts of the West End of London. It was always seen as the start of the crime writing social season.

The tradition, started by Felix's father Dick, goes back to at least 1992, when I was first invited, and I think I have attended all bar one when I was unavoidably detained at my wine merchant's in Italy.

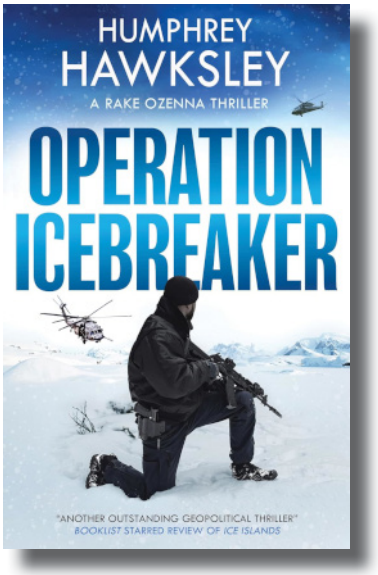
Out now from Allison & Busby is **ONE BERLIN DAY** by Chris Humphreys (perhaps better known as historical novelist C.C. Humphreys), which is a sort of follow up to his most enjoyable One London Day and although not essential, reading the London volume first is advised.



It's a frantic, almost breathless, tale of British spies going rogue in Berlin on the trail of a people-smuggling kingpin aided and abetted, or maybe hindered, by a touring mob of football hooligans (poor old West Ham getting the blame again) not there for the football but for a gladiatorial punch-up with their German counterparts.



Coming in October as a Pushkin Vertigo paperback original is **A PAST WITHOUT PICTURES** by Jonathan Ames, a crime novel I (honestly) read at a sitting, which at my age is no mean feat. It is the tale of troubled (in very many ways) LAPD cop Maria Cole who travels to Alabama to deal with the fallout from her estranged father's death, which of course she begins to investigate, not trusting the local constabulary. [Spoiler alert: there is a twist in the plot which has been used by Conan Doyle and Margery Allingham, but Ames puts a modern shine on it.] This is a taut, sparse thriller with no unnecessary padding, exploring extremely troubled as well as criminal minds. It ought to be worth a 'five stars and would recommend' rating but I can only manage four-and-a-half stars because of one particular phrase. In the middle of a vicious gunfight, one of the bad guys attacks Maria and the author cannot for some reason resist writing: She had killed both his sons! He was enraged. Well, yeah, I'd got that; there was no need to hammer it home with an exclamation mark. With that caveat, I would still recommend it!



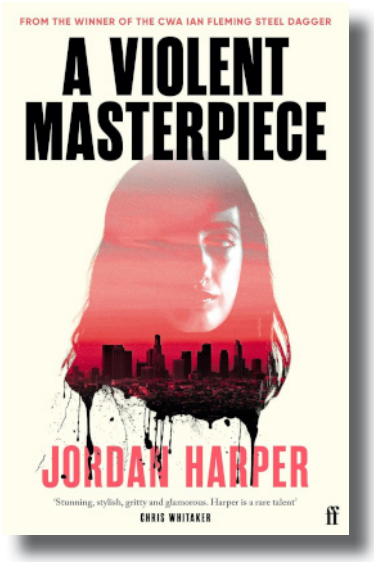
Now out from Severn House is **OPERATION ICEBREAKER**, the latest high-octane thriller from Humphrey Hawksley featuring Rake Ozenna, described by one character as an 'Alaskan dog soldier'. Ozenna's Alaskan origins, and the skills he learned in Special Ops, are both vital to his survival as he is plunged from the off into an attack on a US base in northern Greenland. Who would have thought that peaceable, icy Greenland, with its strategic positioning and hidden mineral resources, could be at the heart of an international conspiracy provoking a fairly uninterrupted stream of violence and a high body count, with Ozenna taking out five bad guys in one chapter alone – two of them with his hands tied behind his back! This is a good example of the action thriller that makes one glad one has shares in Glock GmbH.

I am looking forward to Nicola Upson's latest novel to feature Golden Age crime writer turned amateur sleuth Josephine Tey, **THE VOICES**

OF THE DEAD, which is published by Faber in November. This is, I think, the twelfth outing for Nicola's fictional creation (who herself was pretty good at fictional creations) and the setting is wartime England, and Wales, where the art treasures of the National Gallery are being hidden deep in the slate mines to avoid destruction in the London Blitz. Be prepared for a cameo appearance by Noel Coward in this delightful series of historical mysteries. I am sure he would have approved of them. I know the late P.D. James did, because she told me so.

I always understood the term 'Kensington Gore' to refer to the fake blood used in Hammer horror films but it is, of course, a real London address adjacent to the Albert Hall and in 1911 number 89 Kensington Gore Mansions was the fictional home of eccentric detective Decima Stockingham and her butler/servant/sidekick Stephen Pike. It is also the setting for the bloody murder of a policeman during a suffragette demonstration in **THE SHADOWS OF KENSINGTON GORE** by Ross Montgomery, published this month by Viking. Decima Stockingham is an unusual detective; confined to a bath-chair, arrogant, something of a bully and incredibly foul-mouthed for an Edwardian lady. Some of her ripe language might be anachronistic, but I would have to consult Susie Dent on that, and Decima shows remarkable restraint in not saying "Don't tell him, Pike!" when her sidekick (who finds the murdered copper) is questioned by the police. There is also an odious, venal character called Mrs Ripley, though goodness knows where the inspiration for her came from. Overall, a colourful, jolly romp for a detective duo Sherlock Holmes would probably have disapproved of.

Jordan Harper's **A VIOLENT MASTERPIECE** could be ultimate example of nominative determinism (if I've got that right) in that it is certainly violent and it might just be a masterpiece as no one has taken such a chain saw to the soft underbelly of Los Angeles since James Ellroy in the 1980s. Comparisons are inevitable with the legendary L.A. Quartet and Jordan Harper (who I think has a dog called Ellroy) is the first to acknowledge them. A Violent Masterpiece is a coruscating examination of Los Angeles where the grossest of crimes – and the ghouls who avidly follow their progress – all seem accepted as regular occurrences. This is a powerful crime novel and not one for the faint-hearted but one which is surely in the annual awards' stakes already.



Gogglebox

In a brief survey of the television schedules in September, I counted twenty-two different detective or police-based crime series on regular offer – not including any historic offerings available on streaming services such as BBCiplayer, More 4 or the excellent Walter Presents.



Whilst I am grateful for the chance to revisit the wonderful ***Homicide: Life on the Streets*** from thirty years ago and excited at the prospect of new series such as ***Ludwig*** and ***Marble Hall Murders***, I am delighted to see the Northern Ireland drama ***Blue Lights*** back on the telly. This is an absolutely fantastic ensemble drama about policing in Belfast, with no subject (criminal, political, sectarian or social) left unprodded, top-notch production values and first-rate acting, epecially among the strong female characters. Realistic to the point where it is probably hated by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Venice Homework

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.

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster



Sneak Previews

Upcoming Mysteries

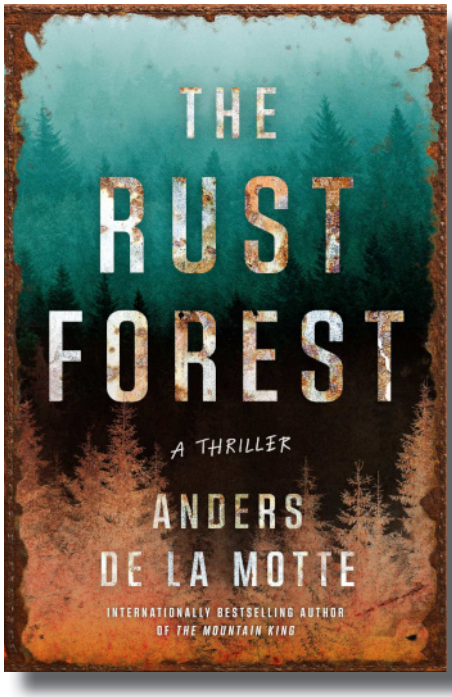


November, 2026

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)
5 Sharon Bolton, **THE MORTICIAN** – U.K.
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**
10 Clive Cussler & Dirk Cussler, **OBSIDIAN SKY** (Dirk Pitt)
10 Brendan Flaherty, **MIDDLEMAN**
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)
24 Amanda Flower, **THE FIRST LADIES' GUIDE TO MURDER**

December, 2026

1 Anders de la Motte, **THE RUST FOREST** (Leonore Asker)
1 Adele Parks, **EYES ON YOU**



1 Kevin Jagernauth, **THE LONGEST DEATH**
1 Robin Cook, **BLEED**
1 Camilla Trinchieri, **MURDER RETURNS TO GRAVIGNA**
1 Lisa Howells, **WOLF POINT**
1 Chris Chibnall, **THE PARKWOOD MURDERS** (Ali Dawson)
1 Avery Bishop, **THE GIRLS IN THE DARK**
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**

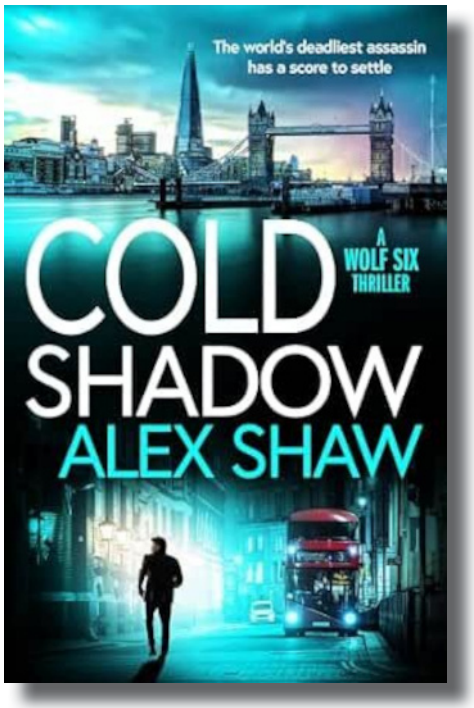
January, 2027

5 William Boyle, **HEAVY SUGAR**
5 James Grippando, **SHADOW JURY** (Jack Swyteck)
5 Sarah Fox, **WE ARE NEVER EVER SOLVING THIS MURDER** (Wyatt)
5 Flynn Berry, **A GOOD MAN ON A DARK NIGHT**
5 Nick Oldham, **DEATH IN GALLOWS WOOD** (Jessica Raker)
5 C. J. Green, **RECORD LOWS**
5 K. N. Wilder, **KNIFE TO MEET YOU**
5 Michael Robotham, **TELL ME SOMETHING TRUE**
7 Vaseem Khan, **THE LAST SHOT** (Malabar House)
12 Lucinda Berry, **THE GOLDEN CHILD**
12 Avery Bishop, **THE GIRLS IN THE DARK**
12 Ashley Audrain, **THE THINGS YOU'LL NEVER KNOW**
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**
19 Patricia Cornwell, **RAPID AND FATAL** (Scarpetta)

19 Peter May, **ISLAND OF THE DEAD** – U.K. only so far
19 Janice Okoh, **GIRL NUMBER 8** (Sola Adeyemi)
19 Robert Olmstead, **PIG AND SKUNK**
19 T. M. Logan, **THE DAUGHTER**
19 Anne Hellman White, **THE INDECIPHERABLES**
19 J. T. Ellison, **SO CLOSE THE HAND OF DEATH**
21 Paul Warner, **FUNERAL FOR A SPY** (Mark Wolfe) – U.K. only
26 Joseph O'Connor, **THE CITY OF ECHOES** (Rome Escape Line)
26 Paula Munier, **ONE KILLING FROST** (Mercy Carr)
26 James Markert, **RANSOM BURNING**
26 Kate Alice Marshall, **THE ONE WE BURIED**
26 Liz Nugent, **THE TRUTH ABOUT RUBY COOPER**
26 Charlie Donlea, **BEHIND EVERY FACE**
26 Preston & Child, **DEAD MAN'S JOURNEY**
26 Ardal O'Hanlon, **A PLOT TO DIE FOR**
28 Tim Weaver, **NO ONE BELIEVES ME** (Raker) – U.K. only

February, 2027

2 Jane Casey, **EVERYTHING SHE DIDN'T SAY**
2 Sarina Bowen, **BAD GIRLS MAKE GOOD LIARS**
2 Walter Mosley, **PARISHIONER** (Xavier Rule)
2 Patricia Cornwell, **RAPID AND FATAL** (Scarpetta)
2 Jonathan Kellerman, **MALICE** (Alex Delaware)
2 Julia Keller, **COLD DARK DEEP** (Sarah Fielding)
2 Harini Nagendra, **MURDER IN THE CROCODILE'S LAIR** (Kaveri Murthy)
2 Mary Stone, **THE DETECTIVE'S WIFE**
2 David Baldacci, **HELL'S CORNER** (Camel Club)
5 Erlendur Arason, **CHOP JOB** (Reykjavik Shadows) (U.K. only)
9 Gregg Hurwitz, **LAST MAN STANDING** (Orphan X)
9 Renda Knapp, **COMPLICIT**
9 S. R. Chamberlain, **MURDER MOST UN-CANADIAN**
9 Rick Bleiweiss, **THE CUPID KILLER AND OTHER MURDERERS** (Pignon Scorbion)
9 Evie Ross, **PLEASE KILL MY BOSS**
9 M. C. Beaton & R. W. Green, **DEATH OF A HIGH-FLYER** (Hamish Macbeth)
9 Alyssa Cole, **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**
9 Lauren Ling Brown, **THE INHERI -TANCE THIEF**
9 Devon Mihesuah, **FATAL DEPTHS**
16 Mark Greaney, **DARK UNION** (Gray Man)
16 Mike Lawson, **THE OPERATOR** (Joe DeMarco)
16 Allen Eskens, **THE LOYAL DAUGHTER**
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**
16 Susie Dent, **DEATH WRIT LARGE** (Martha Thornhill)
17 Alex Shaw, **COLD SHADOW** (Wolf Six)



23 C. J. Box, **THE MISSING** (Joe Pickett)
19 Michelle Richmond, **ANIMALS OF THE FRENCH SPECIES**
23 Fiona Barton, **REPEAT AFTER ME**
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)
23 Allan Gaw, **THE MOON'S MORE FEEBLE FIRE** (Dr. Jack Cuthbert)
23 Lev AC Rosen, **ALL HER POTENTIAL**
25 T. M. Logan, **THE FAMILY** – U.K.
27 Matthew Sullivan, **THE MIDNIGHT GAME**

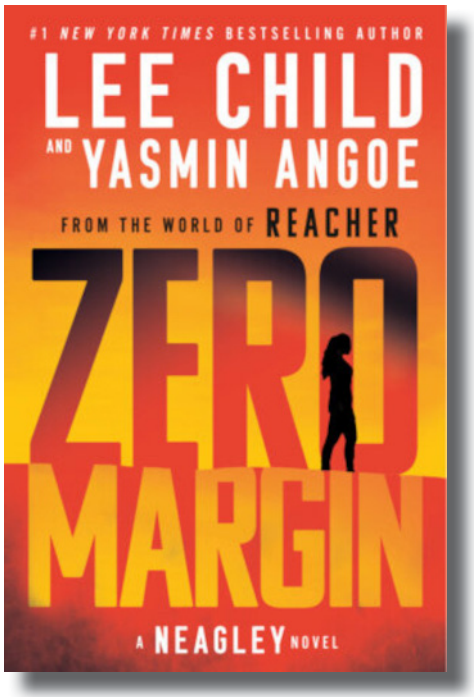
March, 2027

2 Deon Meyer, **SCORPIO RISING** (Benny Griessel)
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)
2 Danielle Arceneaux, **DREAMS OF GLORY** (Glory Broussard)
2 Samantha Jayne Allen, **TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE** (Cheyenne Mitchell)
2 Claire Douglas, **THE FAMILY FRIEND**
2 Samantha Quinn, **EXHIBITION -ISTS** (Debut)
2 Traci Hunter Abramson, **SHATTERED HARMONY** (Pen & Dagger)
2 Kristen Berry, **BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF**
2 Natalie Rose Richardson, **THIS IS AN ACTUAL TRAGEDY** (Debut)
9 Scott Moore, **THE MAD WIDOWS**
9 Anne Hillerman, **BLOODLINE** (Leaphorn, Chee & Manuelito)
9 Ken Jaworowski, **THE BEAUTIFUL BURN**

9 Julie Balint, **THE LOOKALIKE**
9 Andrea Mara, **SUCH A NICE GIRL**
16 J. A. Jance, **SMOKE AND MIRRORS** (Ali Reynolds)
16 Elle Cosimano, **FINLAY DONOVAN PLAYS WITH FIRE**
16 C. G. Drews, **THIS IS HOW YOU LIE**
21 Tess Gerritsen, **THE ITALIAN AFFAIR** (Martini Club)
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**
23 Lee Child & Yasmin Angoe, **ZERO MARGIN** (Frances Neagley)
23 Sue Hincenbergs, **VERY BAD NEIGHBORS**
23 Jiro Akagawa, **A COPYCAT KILLER** (Detective Katayama)
23 Joanna Wallace, **THE ART OF GETTING HAMMERED** (Claire)
23 Alma Katsu, **THE INVISIBLE ENEMY**
23 Freida McFadden, **THE SLEEP WALKER**
25 Cara Hunter, **THE BEST WAY TO DIE** (U.K. only so far)
30 Andrew Welsh-Huggins, **ADDRESS UNKNOWN** (Mercury Cater)
30 Mark Pryor, **A VINTAGE MURDER IN PARIS** (Paris Bookshop)
30 Lee Goldberg, **THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECT** (Edison Bixby)
30 Josh Kendall, **I'M NOT HERE TO HUNT RABBITS**
30 Sandra Brown, **COLD COMFORT**
30 Fern Michaels, **BEYOND SECOND CHANCES**
30 John Sandford, **RUTHLESS PREY**

April, 2027

6 John Sandford, **RUTHLESS PREY**
6 Julia Heaberlin, **JANE BONE**
6 Nita Prose, **EMERALD LAKE**
6 Christopher Bollen, **PARIS MATCH**
6 Katherine Faulkner, **TEN DAYS**
6 Adam Frost, **BAD NEWS DADS**
6 Rebecca Sharpe, **THE HAUNTING OF ROSA SINCLAIR**
6 Niamh Mulvey, **MOTHER MADE ME**



6 K. N. Wilder, **TO HAVE AND TO HOLD (CAPTIVE)**
6 Heather Graham, **BLOOD IN THE WATER**
8 Stephen Leather, **BROKEN PROMISES** (Spider Shepherd)
8 Fiona Cummins, **THE SERIAL KILLER SURVIVORS CLUB**
6 Niamh Mulvey, **MOTHER MADE ME**
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)
13 Jaime Lynn Hendricks, **THE WAY YOU LIE**
13 David Baldacci, **BOOM TOWN** (Aloysius Archer)
13 Deborah Crombie, **A LONG COLD SLEEP** (Kincaid/James)
20 Jean-Luc Bannalec, **THE WINE MAKER'S END** (Georges Dupin)
20 Jesse Q. Sutanto, **VERA WONG'S VACATION HACKS FOR CATCHING A KILLER**
20 Brad Taylor, **OMEGA AUTHORITY** (Pike Logan)
22 Claire Mackintosh, **YOU DON'T KNOW ME AT ALL**
27 Brianna Heath, **THE PENDLETON FAMILY'S GUIDE TO ACCIDENTAL MURDER**
27 Marc Cameron, **FAIL SAFE** (Team Jericho)

May, 2027

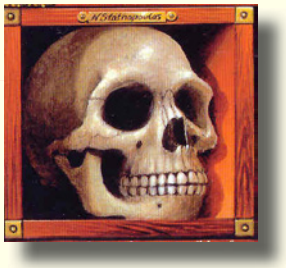
4 Paula Daly, **VERSIONS OF A MURDER**
4 Jeffery Deaver, **FREEZE FRAME** (Colter Shaw)
4 Yosha Gunasekera, **THE MOON LIGHT DETECTIVE** (Siriwathi Perera)
4 Laura van den Berg, **RING OF NIGHT**
4 Vera Kurian, **SUGAR BABY**
11 Jack Carr, **STATE OF EXILE** (James Reece)
11 Cara Hunter, **THE BEST WAY TO DIE**
11 L. M. Kemp, **MY LITTLE SPY** (Kendal Carter)
11 Dervla McTiernan, **THE BLACK DOVE**
11 Ragnar Jonasson, **THEVALLEY**
11 Caz Frear, **THE CHECKOUT GIRL**
11 John Connolly, **THE CASTLE**
11 Karen M. McManus, **DYING TO BE US**
18 Megan Abbott, **THE DEAR ONES**
18 Kelley Armstrong, **THE UNINVIT -ED GUEST** (Rip Through Time)
25 Michael Connelly, **DAYBREAK** (Stilwell)
25 Craig Johnson, **A SOFT WHITE DAMN** (Walt Longmire)
25 Jon Cowan, **INDEFENSIBLE**
25 Zach Baron, **LAST OF MY KIND**
25 Marisa Kashino, **THE TOP JOB**
29 Ruth Ware, **THE DEATH OF MRS. WESTAWAY**

June, 2027

1 S. A. Cosby, **HIGHWAY FULL OF NIGHT**
1 Jack Friday, **BIG CULT ENERGY** (Peter Key)
1 Freida McFadden, **DEAD MED**
1 Michael Nava, **SALVATION**
1 Isha Raya, **THIS IS ROBBERY**
1 Anthony Horowitz, **THE VANISH-ING JURY** (Hawthorne & Horowitz)

Table of Contents

MAD MABEL, Sally Hepworth	2
Barry Award Winners	8
Keller, Cody Pomeranz	9
Deadly Pleasures Best of 2026	13
Editor's Message	22
Associate Editor's Message	25
Reviews	
Meredith Anthony	26
Lou Jacobs	30
Kevin Burton Smith	33
Marilyn Brooks	37
Hank Wagner	42
Cozy/Traditonal Cafe'	45
George Easter	48
Ted Fitzgerald	56
Robin Agnew/History Mystery	58
Ali Karim	62
Craig Sisterson	72
Down Under Crime	74
On George's Nightstand	36
Anthony Award Winners	44
Shamus Award Winners	71
DP Calendar	77
News & Reviews from the U.K.	
New Books	78
Reviews	79
Mike Ripley	83
Sneak Previews	85



Editor/Publisher
George A. Easter
george@deadlypleasures.com

Associate Editor
Larry Gandle
LGandle@aol.com

Contributors
Jeff Popple
Ted Fitzgerald
Lou Jacobs
Ali Karim
Meredith Anthony
Robin Agnew
Hank Wagner
Craig Sisterson
Kevin Burton Smith
Marilyn Brooks
Cody Pomeranz

Subscriptions

All subscriptions are FREE. If you are new and want an email reminder when a new issue comes out, just send your name and address to me at george@deadlypleasures.com.

A link to each new issue will also be posted on the website (www.deadlypleasures.com). You can also find pdfs of all the digital back issues of DP (85-112) on the website, also available for free downloads.