

Buzz Box

Anne Fraiser's latest, *GARDEN OF DARKNESS* from Onyx is a paperback original. Return to the haunted and brilliantly crafted tension of Tuolena, Wisconsin, with this USA Today's bestselling author's sequel to *The Pale Immortal*. The good folks of Tuolena have decided to disinter "The Pale Immortal" mummified remains in an effort to start a major tourist attraction. Trouble is, the body has a habit of stepping out for the night. Anne Fraiser has such a way with words about her, I'm in awe. I for one will never watch dried leaves blowing across the street again in quite the same way again. And try not to listen to all those voices. You just might catch what they're saying.

IN THE KEY OF DEATH from Robert S. Levinson is set in Nashville is a asskicker that unravels the music industry. Ex LA PD Josh Wainwright lost his wife to murder and he blames Clyde Davenport, a hold over from the glory days of rock and roll who discovered a lot big name stars. In a strange twist Josh goes to work for Davenport to help him get clear of another murder so that he'll be able to prove his wife was murdered by his new client. Fast paced, funny and dark this is a whirlwind in a bottle and turning that first page is going to let it loose.

DEATH WILL GET YOU SOBER is the first novel by Elizabeth Zelvin. As you might imagine part of the plot and the lead character's background involve drinking. As a psychotherapist who treats alcohol related problems Zelvin is more than up to the job of making it work in this book. She also does a hell of a job with the story. Great characters and a wonderful voice Zelvin is an author to keep your eye on.

Book three in the New Destroyer series by Warren Murphy and James Mullaney is *DEAD RECKONING* and its even better than the first two in this revitalized series. Remo Williams and his mentor Chiun are after an escaped prisoner who is a terrorist with an unfulfilled mission. Amped up action and pacing that should make all other thriller writers jealous this book moves like hot ice skates on a deep frozen pond. From Tor paperback in April.

Maxim Jakubowski has a real knack for getting wonderful stories and outing them together. His previous anthology, *LONDON NOIR* was top notch. He follows that up with *Paris Noir (Serpent's Tail)*. Among the authors included are Cara Black, Stella Duffy, John Harvey, Jason Starr and Scott Phillips among others. The introduction by Maxim while brief is very nice. This is a great collection.

Soho books has another winner on its hands with Australia's Adrian Hyland and his first novel *MOONLIGHT DOWNS*. Emily Tempest has come home after a very long absence. Perfect timing puts her in the middle of a murder and between the two communities that make up her home town. Beautifully written with both a flair for the mystery story telling and a truly unique feel and wonderful location make this a winner.

People who fondly remember reading Cornwell when she was still worth reading still jones for a good forensics book. Kathy Reichs only puts out one book a year so there is a gap that needs to be filled. Jefferson Bass, the writing team of Dr. Bill Bass and Jon Jefferson have bridged that gap with a wonderful series. Book three is *THE DEVIL'S BONES* (William Morrow). The case that sparks the story here is one of arson and murder, always good for wonderful forensics! With some added twists that feel like they are from the headlines this book is a real treat.

Oscar Season (Simon and Schuster) by Mary McNamara may help get you through the writer's strike. Before setting pen to this first novel McNamara worked the Hollywood beat for the LA Times. No surprise then, it's a Hollywood book. Juliette Greyson is a PR director and when things get weird she starts to worry about more than keeping her job. In a town where illusion is king just what is real and what's a stunt? Murder, conspiracies, lies and secrets, this book has all the ingredients of a wonderful way to spend time away from the screen.

London during WWII is fertile ground for tales of mystery and suspense. Add the fact that Laura Wilson is writing this new series and you can't go wrong. *STRATTON'S WAR* is the first book featuring DI Ted Stratton. Opening with a dead silent movie star this tale swirls through gangsters, espionage and politics. Phenomenal plotting and characters that jump out of the book and stay with you for days after Wilson has put the start to something truly magic. It's available from Orion.

Michael Allen Dymoch's latest novel, *M.I.A.* is intriguing and fascinating. Jimmy Fahey is going through a rough time, rougher than most young men. His real father was dead before he was born, his adoptive father, a local cop

was just killed. Family secrets begin to come forward and lead Jimmy to seek out his grandparents in a nearby town, which only unlocks more secrets. Meanwhile a new neighbor is becoming part of his life as his mother takes an interest in the mysterious John Devlin. Intricate and tightly woven this tale of suburban noir is a book that can't be put down.

Robert Fate has been showing up on a lot of people's favorite book lists. With his latest, HIGH PLAINS REDEMPTION from Capitol Crime Press he has yet another great book proving that all the praise is well deserved. Feuding outlaws, kidnapping and no stop action keep Kristin and Otis on their toes. The cover describes it as action-crime-adventure and that sums it up quite nicely. Calling this fast paced doesn't really do this book justice, it's faster than that. It's kind of like trying to keep track of a bullet after it leaves the barrel. Wonderfully memorable characters make this a ride you'll want to take again. This is a May release so keep your eyes open and ask your book store to pre order for you.

Jason Pinter's second book is out this March, THE GUILTY from Mira. Henry Parker and Amanda Davies are back and Henry is chasing a story that takes him to some very unexpected places. Steeped with a feel for modern day mythology this is a captivating and thought provoking read and thoroughly enjoyable. Pinter has another book coming in August, making two for this year and it still feels too long between them. One of the great new voices of the genre.

Jordan Dane has three books coming out back to back in March May and June. Her debut in March is NO ONE HEARD HER SCREAM from Avon paperback. Opening with an abduction we soon discover that the victim is the sister of protagonist Detective Rebecca Montgomery of the San Antonio police. Not allowed to work her sister's case Rebecca works on what looks like a cold case involving a skeleton in an old theatre. But before long the cases intermingle and Rebecca is on a dark path, ending in justice or vengeance? Terrific debut. Jordan Dane has got the goods and she delivers them with a knock out ending. Another great new author to watch.

SLEEPING DOGS(Thomas Dunne) by Ed Gorman is a perfect politically fueled mystery for this election year. Dev Conrads is a consultant to politicians vying for re-election. His latest client has a bit of a problem keeping his pants on and this leads to blackmail. When the blackmailer is found dead getting elected is the least of his problems. Gorman writes great mysteries and his background with politics adds the realism to this book that makes it so damn good. Smart, witty and with a fast paced plot this should not be missed.

Patricia Sprinkle writes a wonderfully charming series set in the south with a lead character in her sixties. True amateur sleuth styles her and wonderfully done. The latest is WHAT ARE YOU WEARING TO DIE? (Obsidian paperback) Sprinkle creates a terrific puzzle and deftly leads the reader through to a very satisfying climax. While maybe a bit tame for some Crimespree readers Sprinkle can really write and this is a damn fine book.

GOODBYE SISTER DISCO (St. Martin's Minatour) is a follow up to James Patrick Hunt's last novel THE BETRAYERS featuring Lt George Hastings of the St. Louis PD. A terrific procedural which revolves around a kidnapping and murder. Hunt has a faithful depiction of police work and this gives the book that much more urgency to the already wonderful suspense. Hastings is a wonderful character and this will be a series to watch.

Jenny White came to the attention of the mystery world last year with THE SULTAN'S SEAL. Does lightning strike twice? You bet it does. THE ABYSSIAN PROOF again features Kamil Pasha, this time given the task of finding out who is stealing treasures from Istanbul's Holy places. Set in 1887 this combines a wonderful mystery and historical detail for a truly fascinating book. A real treasure for you to uncover at your local bookstore.

PRIMAL THREAT (Ballantine) is a pure thriller from Earl Emerson that has almost a LORD OF THE FLIES feel to it. Back story involves a brief affair gone wrong and jealous ex-boyfriend. The action shoots us into the woods as one group of people is set on terrorizing another group, isolated and contending with nature itself people are doing things they wouldn't normally do. Edgy and tense this book is action packed and will leave you breathless.

SINS OF THE ASSASSIN (Scribner) is Robert Ferrigno's second visit to the future he created in PRAYERS FOR THE ASSASSIN last year. Rakkim Epps is a man who thought his years of fighting were over but he comes out of the shadows to try and save America. With a strange yet somehow familiar political feel this thriller is a

wonderful read. Using an alternative reality it manages to say things about today's world while also satisfying the need to read fast paced action. Top Notch.

ACTS OF NATURE

Jonathan King
2007
Dutton

Max Freeman has been working hard since we first met him in *THE BLUE EDGE OF MIDNIGHT*. An ex cop, Max had escaped into the Florida Everglades to find himself again. Slowly, through a series of great whodunits and with the help of a small circle of friends Max has found himself mainly healed and much more in the world than he ever intended to be. His romance with Sherry Richards wasn't really planned but King and his readers have come to love the high octane chemistry the pair provide.

This is where we begin *ACTS OF NATURE*.

Max and Sherry need a break from urban Florida, a week with no cell phones, T.V. or Radio. They escape to Max's shack in the Glades with nothing but fishing and uhm... on their mind. Soon the pair are restless and decide to canoe deeper into the Florida wilderness. When a hurricane strikes, leaving them with no medicine, food, very little water and a broken canoe their search for civilization and help may prove to be fatal.

King's Everglades are once again masterfully drawn, as real to me as Burke's bayou, Connelly's L.A. *ACTS OF NATURE* is a harrowing read, palpitating with danger. The irony is the very place that harbored Freeman from the world may now be his undoing and the drudge brought from the water's bottom by the storm isn't the only scum you'll meet in this read. *LORD OF THE FLIES* for grown-ups.

Ruth

BLEEDING KANSAS

Sara Paretsky
2008
G. P. Putnam's Sons

Setting aside V. I. Warshawski to allow her to recuperate from her travails in the last episode, Sara Paretsky has written a novel of monumental proportions. It is set in the Kaw (Kansas) River Valley, where the author grew up, and traces the lives of several founding families who settled there in the pre-Civil War days when the pro- and anti-slavery forces vied against each other.

The novel takes place in current times, with references to the past, and looks at the social politics and farm life of the area, including religion, pro- and anti-Iraq War, persecution, the hard lives of farmers and other themes. It is a far cry from Dorothy's Kansas which, at least, had a rainbow.

The characters are well-drawn, the story engrossing. The novel raises a variety of questions on a broad array of themes, including fundamentalism and scientific evolution, but more importantly, hope.

Theodore Feit

A BONE TO PICK

Charlaine Harris
2008 (re-release)
Berkley Prime Crime

How many people dream of inheriting a fortune from a stranger? Roe Teagarden finds out quickly that a dream like that coming true is, at best, a mixed blessing.

It's been a rough patch for her. Her mother remarries and goes off on a honeymoon. An old lover marries, and she isn't sure which is worse - ignoring the wedding and putting up with the talk that will cause or sucking it up and attending the wedding, with a different sort of talk as a result. And then there's the funeral of Jane Engle, one of the members of Roe's disbanded crime discussion group. Jane was a friend, but not a very close friend. So Roe is understandably startled to find out that Jane has left her a rather substantial estate, including a house.

The house is quite nice, but turns out to be across the street from the newly-weds - the ex-lover and his very pregnant wife. The money is enough that Roe doesn't have to work any more. There is, of course, a catch. In one of the window seats in her new house, Roe finds a skull. Not a brand new one, but certainly new enough that Jane must have known who the killer was. Roe considers it part of her legacy to find out who the skull belonged to, and who the killer is.

Roe tries to track down the victim, and discovers that there is more than one possibility. This increases the suspect pool as well, and muddies all kinds of waters. The closer she gets to finding answers to all her questions, the more danger she finds herself in.

A BONE TO PICK is one of Harris's early works, the second in her first series. Those who haven't read Harris before will find an enjoyable cozy mystery in their hands. Those who have read Harris in other series will not be disappointed, although it will be obvious that she has grown as a writer since this was first published in 1992.

P.J. Coldren

BLOOD HARVEST

Brant Randall

2008

Capitol Crime Press

1928 New England is the setting for this dark puzzle of a mystery. BLOOD HARVEST is a moody and atmospheric tale that revolves around the lynching of a man who was moon shining. A second body clouds the reasons for why he may have been killed.

The 1920's in New England in some ways may as well have been the 1600s for how different a time it was.

Randall takes this story which evidently grew and evolved from a story his Grandmother told and gives us a truly American classic. His pacing and dialogue are wonderful and fit perfectly. While definitely firmly in our genre of mystery this goes beyond it as well as did Steinbeck with some of his work, it has layers and depths that go a long way to giving an insight into a very different time.

This is a top notch book, and that's fitting for the first hardcover from this new publisher.

Jon

BLOOD OF THE WICKED

Leighton Gage

2008

Soho

Mario Silva is Chief Inspector for Criminal Matters. His boss is Nelson Sampaio, the Director of the Brazilian Federal Police. What Nelson says to do, Silva does but in his own inimitable way. So when a Bishop is very publicly shot in a remote town, and Sampaio is getting calls from all over the place, he tells Silva to handle it. Silva sends his nephew Hector Costa to deal with it. Of course, the police in Cascatas do Pontal have no desire whatsoever to help Costa solve the murder.

There seems to be no lack of suspects. The landowners have been at very violent odds with the members of the Landless Workers' League. One of the local priests is a known partisan for the LWL; the Bishop hews to the party line, which backs the landowners. One of the local landowners is suspected of the slaughter of an LWL leader and his family. IS it someone looking to make the landowner look guilty? Is it someone opposed to the Bishop's stance and/or the possibility he may be on his way to Rome?

Costa and Silva have to deal with the antipathy of the local police, the reluctance of the people in the village to trust any police personnel, and all the layers of political maneuvering going on all around them. Then more people are killed. The list of suspects doesn't really increase, but the motives develop layers as the police learn more about the suspects.

Gage has written an engrossing mystery novel with characters and situations reflecting very real circumstances. While the solution to the crime is probably believable, it leaves no feeling that the overall situation has really changed. This is probably as true to life as the rest of the book, although not always satisfying to the reader.

BLOOD OF THE WICKED is certainly not for the weak of stomach, as some of the descriptions of violence are fairly graphic. Other than that, readers who enjoy reading about people working within a flawed system to find some sense of right will walk away from BLOOD OF THE WICKED satisfied.

P.J. Coldren

CASH AND CARRY

Tim Broderick

2008

Echelon

Tim Broderick has a unique ability to tell a story in a very whispered way. His latest is CASH AND CARRY, the third in his graphic series featuring David Diangelo. David does odd jobs and in this book he is acting as a courier dropping off a case in Vegas. What he doesn't know is that he has a decoy. He also doesn't know how badly people opposing his employer want the disc.

Broderick's story has a nice steady pace and is nicely layered with subtle intricacies. His art also blends in perfectly with the story and really enhances the tale. This is a perfect crime fiction graphic novel.

Jon

CHASIN' THE WIND

Michael Haskins

March 2008

Five Star

Set in steamy and exotic Key West, Florida, CHASIN' THE WIND is a chilling, well-plotted mystery about injustice, revenge and bucking the system. When journalist "Mad Mick" Murphy discovers a buddy brutally beaten and barely hanging on to life, he's able to get only one word from the man's swollen lips before he dies "Gusanos" slang for the hard-core Cuban exiles in Miami.

The local cops think it's about the Key West to Havana boat race Mick and his friends were planning, and blow him off. But when Customs and Treasury gets involved, and an unnamed heavy weight Federal agency tells him to bug off or else, Mick decides to investigate on his own.

Despite the danger and Mick's repeated protestations, a motley band of locals pledge to help him find the murderers and even the score. Through the back alleys and bars of Key West the friends gather information and lay their plans. Meanwhile, Mick is attacked and nearly drowns, his boat is targeted for explosives, and an acquaintance from his dark-ops past mysteriously appears.

A life-and-death chase through a graveyard at midnight, a daring rescue of a half-dead beauty from the deep blue sea, and a fearsome face-down with a Cuban Army General on a Havana beach will quicken the heart rate of readers and send them flying through the final pages. Not all is won at the end, but Mick has a good tale to tell, and though he'll never stop looking over his shoulder, he'll also not stop chasin' the wind aboard the Fenian Bastard.

Haskins knows Key West well, especially the night spots and boat docks. His characters are imaginative and colorful, including a mooching ex-priest who talks with angels and is uncanny correct in his predictions. Hastings weaves a political conspiracy plot to equal Grisham or Ludlum, and then pumps it with patriotism, camaraderie and a touch of romance.

Jackie Houchin

CHILD 44

Tom Rob Smith

2008

UK Simon and Schuster

USA Grand Central Publishing

I heard rumours about this debut novel last year after I attended the London Book Fair as it was subject to a bidding war resulting in the work being sold to 22 countries, as well as film rights being secured by Ridley Scott. Filming has commenced with Scott behind the camera and Clive Owen in front. So with all this hype ahead of publication, I was skeptical holding the review copy in my hands; especially as it was a debut of such a young and unknown writer who is a couple of years shy of his 30th birthday.

My opinion after reading Child 44?; a remarkably brilliant debut that had me clutching the book with both hands as if my life depended upon me completing the book in a single sitting. Why is this debut so bewitching? Firstly the backdrop Stalin's cruel regime that enslaved the Russian people in poverty and paranoia. This setting is a most interesting canvas to pitch the hunt of a child-murdering serial killer as the Russian-state refuses to believe that crime exists in the communist nirvana they project to the West. Then there's the characters themselves. Leo

Demidov a respected secret policeman and his wife Raisa who find themselves on the wrong-end of state politics when the case of a murdered child turns to obsession. They discover that the death on a railway-track was not an accident that the authorities concluded. Nor is the death an isolated case for a trail of child murder snakes along Russia's railway system showing the work of a deranged mind or minds. Then we have the cruelty of the instruments of the state oppressing the people with the threat of the Gulag, contrasted against the compassion and strength of the human spirit.

Loosely based on the case of prolific Russian serial killer Andrei Chikatilo, we find Leo and Raisa exiled from their privileged home in Moscow to the freezing hinterlands. Leo finds himself under scrutiny from his superiors due to professional jealousy from a subordinate [the banally evil Vasili Ilyich Nikitin] when an operation to capture a soviet veterinary surgeon [and suspected spy] goes terribly wrong. The brutality of this book is shocking but is placed into context of the terrible extremes of the Stalinist era. There is in the darkness, a warmth and insight into the good within people struggling against the tyranny.

The novel feels very well researched, but the level of detail is not thrown in your face, but rather subtly painted into the plot, enriching the narrative and making the hunt for a serial killer take on a fresh dimension. Child 44 at times is harrowing; at times terrifying; and at times brings you to tears such is the power of the remarkable talent of young Mr Smith. I was however concerned whether the ambition of the first half of this tale would be sustained in the later half, and the answer is a resounding yes. The tension and terror of this novel is striated evenly throughout the narrative until the chilling and satisfying denouement. Consider this debut to be part Martin Cruz Smith, part Thomas Harris, part Robert Harris with a smattering of George Orwell. I really do not want to reveal any more for fear of spoiling one of this years greatest literary treats. Believe the hype and feel the terror as Child 44 delivers a stunningly original twist in a genre that I considered having very few surprises. Tom Rob Smith is a name that is blinking blood-red on my future reading radar, Bravo!

Ali Karim

CLIVE BARKER'S THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW

Adapted by Chris Ryall and drawn by Gabriel Rodriguez

2007

IDW Publishing

I am an enormous fan of the work of Clive Barker. I read everything he writes, I buy foreign editions and I once drove three hours to see him at a signing event. Of all his work The Great and Secret Show, the beginning of the "Art" trilogy is probably my favorite. Reading it I at once had the feeling that I was starting a journey, something epic. The story is told in layers and in depth, crisscrossing itself. I feel that Stephen King is brilliant, and while his work shines a flashlight on those things that you forgot from the past and make you scared, Clive Barker reaches into a part of your soul and strokes his fingers lightly across things that don't normally get touched.

Ok, I'm a fan.

Chris Ryall is obviously a fan as well. Taking on a project like this is a bold move. A book with a following like this one has obviously will have people reading an adaptation closely and critically. The first thing I noticed in the comic was that the Ryall and Rodriguez are fans. They put this novel to the music of the graphic form, and like a really good cover version, it is true to the original, and yet also has a sound of it's own. Visually this book is right on the money. Rodriguez nailed the images that the book put into my head. And Ryall was able to get the whole book into 269 pages of comics. I got the same buzz reading this as I did the original novel, a sense of growing urgency while it builds to the climax, and a real feel for good and evil. This was a great read and I will be rereading it again many times. I really hope they do the next book as well.

Jon Jordan

THE CRITIC

Peter May

2007

Poisoned Pen Press

The critic of the title was a renowned wine critic whose opinions in his newsletter could make or break a vintner. He disappeared four years previously and his body has just turned up dressed in the garb of the Brotherhood of the Order of the Divine Bottle, his body obviously having been immersed in wine. The case was one of five unsolved mysteries in a book, the first of which was solved by Enzo Macleod, a Scotsman now a professor of forensics in France.

Enzo now travels to Gaillac, a wine-producing section of France, to look into the critic's murder, and discovers a series of other seemingly unrelated disappearances. There are plenty of suspects and too few clues. Complicating the task are several problems, including the critic's secret code for evaluating the wines he tasted, as well as inter-personal relationships. The novel is so well written, the background of the production of wine and descriptions of the elements so well done, that the reader is carried along in a heady manner. The solution to the various puzzles is so unexpected, that the reader is rewarded beyond expectations. THE CRITIC is highly recommended.
Theodore Feit

DEAD OF THE DAY

Karen E. Olson
2007
Obsidian Mystery

The title of Karen E. Olson's newest book, the third in the Annie Seymour Mystery series, refers to the newspaper term for the obits on area residents who have died that day. As the book opens, Annie Seymour, crime reporter for the New Haven Herald, there are two such events: First the body of a man is found floating in the waters of the harbor, parts of his body covered in bee stings [a wildly unimaginable thing in mid-April], while later that day the city's newly-installed police chief is gunned down in front of the Yale Repertory Theatre in a drive-by shooting as he is about to enter the theatre with his wife and his best friend, the assistant chief. Annie seems particularly well-suited to cover the story, as she had just wrapped up a series of interviews in preparation for a profile of the police chief, an Hispanic with little experience and no known enemies. The police, and Annie, have their work cut out for them. Annie and her off-again-on-again romance with a private detective, and another with a police detective with whom she broke up when she met the p.i., keep her off balance. Also figuring into the story are her mother, an attorney whose boyfriend happens also to be Annie's publisher; the police chief's wife, a Chinese woman who is a scientist at Yale; a ubiquitous cleaning woman; undocumented workers; Homeland Security; and those darn bees, whose presence recurs at the oddest times, as does that of several characters in the book. Annie thinks "My head was swirling with too much information, too many questions, and not enough answers," and I knew just what she meant. I had difficulty at times keeping the many characters and plot lines straight. But it is an interesting tale with many different things going on at once, in which the reporter's trade is apparently realistically drawn.
Gloria Feit

DEATH SONG

Michael McGarrity
2008
Dutton

Michael McGarrity's Kevin Kerney series is amongst the best in fiction. With characters we've all come to like and respect he continues to defy the odds. Time after time McGarrity presents a solid police procedural with no fear. DEATH SONG begins as Kerney's son Clayton trains a new deputy. Within hours not only is the deputy dead but so is his wife. The wife has a connection to Kerney and so father and son come together to solve these crimes. As McGarrity brings us closer to the why the book begins to resonate with a tone both of the series and entirely unique. That is the secret behind this often neglected series. Each book is a part of the whole but with a sum of its own. At the end of DEATH SONG, Kerney is retiring from the police to leave with his family for England. I'm looking forward to the next phase of McGarrity's career and the next stage in Kerney's life.
Ruth

DEATH WAS THE OTHER WOMAN

Linda L Richards
2008
Thomas Dunne Books

Every so often a book comes along and just sweeps you away; which is exactly what Richards' homage to private eye fiction of the 1930s did for me. This is a huge departure from her Madeline Carter contemporary thrillers;

not only with the setting, but also in terms of style and pace. It features Katherine "Kitty" Pangborn who works as a secretary for boozy and troubled Private Eye Dexter "Dex" Theroux in depression hit Los Angeles; just after Wall Street crashed around them. The collapse of the stock-market claimed her wealthy industrialist father, a man who gave her financial security but not the emotional support she needed. Kitty suddenly finds herself losing the sheltered and privileged lifestyle she once enjoyed. She is haunted by her father's suicide, never knowing her mother, she tries to pick up the pieces in her world now tumbled upside-down. Despite being nearly destitute, she is resourceful and strong in spirit and those traits are exactly what Dex needs in his life. The troubled P.I. is a former veteran of WW I, who looks at the world through the ridges of a whisky tumbler. Hints are made about why he drinks so much, but I am sure more will be revealed in further adventures; because this novel screams series, such is the gentle intensity of the narrative. Taking the familiar conventions that shaped the work of Chandler, Hammett and the like; Richards reshapes them from their genre-mould, creating a fresh outlook on the era we term the "golden age".

So when a shapely woman named Rita Hepplewaite comes knocking at their office, you know right-away that Kitty and Dex are in for some very serious trouble. There are moving insights into how the rich and the ever-growing poor in 1930's L.A. co-exist and of course where there is disparity, there will be crime. As Dex struggles due to his love of the bottle, Kitty acts as his guide through this adventure. Through their mutual friend [the kindly fixer] Mustard, they find themselves seeking a dead-man, who may not be dead. The trail leads Kitty and Dex to San Francisco where Kitty meets up with her wealthy former friends, and soon, even stranger women appear who are also seeking the missing dead-man. To make matters worse, it seems many of L.A.'s bootleggers and crime-lords are also after the mysterious dead-man who could be the missing Harrison Dempsey; because not only did he have lovers [including the vampish Rita Hepplewaite], but he was also married, as well as heavily in debt to the mob. The trail will snake through the East Coast drinking parlors, diners, shipping liners as well as traversing the roads and tram-system of the city of angels. The writing is well researched, captivating, hard-boiled but with a compassionate eye that makes it impossible to escape the flow of the narrative.

In a day when some books come to my table bloated, over-written and vanilla, it is with sheer delight to read such a sharp and captivating mystery. I felt moved by the descriptions of poverty but also by the sheer pride and resourcefulness in Kitty Pangborn. I have a prediction; Pangborn will become a major character in the genre, because her life [and what we yet do not know about her], makes me thirst for more. At times the book is heartbreaking, at times it's fast and furious and at times perceptive about how people lie and deceive - but at all times it showcases brilliant storytelling. I loved it completely as it is an excellent tale of a bygone age told by an unusual talent featuring an amazing character.

Ali Karim

EASY INNOCENCE

Libby Fischer Hellmann

April 2008

Bleak House Books

Hellmann debuts her new series protagonist, Georgia Davis, in this dark suspense novel set on Chicago's affluent North Shore. When a high school girl is found bludgeoned to death, everyone is quick to blame the registered sex offender spotted at the scene. But the suspect's sister is sure of her brother's innocence and hires Davis to prove everyone wrong. Still haunted by the events surrounding her suspension from the police force, Davis not only wants to prove her client's innocence, she's determined to find the real predator.

Hellmann's prose is bleak and unapologetic as Davis uncovers a teenage prostitution ring amongst the children of Chicago's high society, shattering suburbia's innocent façade. Her detailed description of this well-heeled community and the type of people that reside within make it difficult to tell which events are fiction and which are fact. Though most would find it surprising to find the kids born with silver spoons turning tricks in downtown hotel rooms, Hellmann's vast knowledge of the area and ability to dive deep into her characters, give her the authority needed to create a suspenseful and gripping story without stretching the scope of believability. Though Georgia Davis is a promising series character, when it comes to plot, EASY INNOCENCE is a tough act to follow.

Dana Kaye

EMPTY EVER AFTER

Reed Farrel Coleman

April 2007

Bleak House Books

Moe Prager cannot escape his past. At the beginning of *EMPTY EVER AFTER* it becomes quickly obvious that someone from that past doesn't want him to. There is a clear and present danger to the entire Prager family in this book. One that will keep you reading until there are no more pages.

Almost every review I read of a Coleman book includes the word poet (or some variation there of). It's quick, it's easy and it explains the prose better than any other word. A fan from the beginning of this man's career, I have seen definite growth in his crime fiction. I recall claiming *THE JAMES DEANS* "takes nothing away from this author's signature style but should find a much wider audience".

EMPTY EVER AFTER marks another ascension. Wrapped within the broad confines of a PI novel is a story of man; his fallibilities, his triumphs, the hope that makes us go on and the despair that makes us want to give up. Coleman is that rarest of writer, the closer you get to the individual in his plotting, the more universal the themes he uses become. In a novel where the basic story is of a man trying to save his family, Coleman manages to subtly use history, metaphysics and the occasional glass of Scotch to relay to his reader what his protagonist is feeling. A sparse sentence explains why and then we're two steps farther in plot.

Those familiar with the works of Reed Farrel Coleman will not be shocked when I say *EMPTY EVER AFTER* is not an easy read. Pain, when conveyed by a great writer becomes very personal. Those familiar with the works of Reed Farrel Coleman will not be surprised when I say *EMPTY EVER AFTER* is a stunning read. This is a writer not afraid to write in blood. With *EMPTY EVER AFTER* we must leave all comparison to other writers in our genre behind and realize we have a great and unique talent. His signature style is now a singular style.

Ruth Jordan

EXPLETIVE DELETED

Edited by Jen Jordan

2007

Bleak House

Short story anthologies have enjoyed a recent surge of popularity, with location-centric noir collections dominating the market. Moving in a refreshing new direction, *EXPLETIVE DELETED* editor Jen Jordan offers readers a collection that aims to pay tribute to the f-word, and the result is a treasure trove of noir stories you won't want to miss out on.

Otis Twelve's *FLUFF* is a twisted tale about a desperate mother, delivered with a knock-out punch. Staying with the family theme, Russel D. McLean's *PEDRO PAUL* is a tragic tale about how the most noble intentions can turn into horrific mistakes. Ruth Jordan looks at monsters within and without in an absolutely chilling story called *LITTLE BLUE PILL*, and you won't soon forget Charlie Huston's *LIKE A LADY* after reading it.

One might think that an anthology dedicated to the f-word would be filled with four-letter words but it's the spirit of F*** that's being celebrated. Even when the stories contain no profanity themselves, the events that unfold are such that in your mind you're thinking, "Oh F***" and as with all classic noir it's often like watching a train wreck in motion. You want to warn the characters to stop before it's too late but are powerless to save them, although all too often the twist in the end is more shocking than what you anticipated would happen.

The proof of the range of the stories is best exemplified with John Rickards' *TWENTY DOLLAR FUTURE*, which is as much a social commentary as it is a gripping tale that rounds out this collection beautifully. Add in contributions by Ken Bruen, Olen Steinhauer, Anthony Neil Smith, Ray Banks, Kevin Wignall and many more, and you have a collection of short stories well worth indulging in. To say more would give too much away.

Sandra Ruttan

HAND OF EVIL

J. A. Jance

2007

Touchstone/Simon & Schuster

The latest saga in the life of Ali Reynolds, the ex-TV journalist, who has moved back to Sedona, AZ, from LA following her dismissal by her media employer, divorce and the death of her husband (before the divorce became final), finds her at loose ends—but not for long. She is busy writing her blog and answering emails.

Ali got her start when she was awarded a college scholarship by the Ashcrofts, mother and daughter, after an invitation to tea at their palatial home. Many years later, Ali is again invited to tea by the daughter, who asks that

a diary she wrote be reviewed by Ali as the basis for a possible tell-all book. This diary plays a role in solving a series of murders.

Meanwhile, Ali becomes involved with the wayward daughter of her friend, Detective Dave Holman, who is the victim of sexual predators. And just to make things interesting, someone working for Ali's father is beaten to death, an event that intertwines with the background of the girl's circumstances.

Throughout, Ali plays a pivotal role in helping at least three police departments solve a whole bunch of murders, arresting the culprits and wrapping up the loose ends. The novel is the third in the series, and continues at the same high level. The author, of course, has written a dozen Joanna Brady mysteries and 21 J.P. Beaumont mysteries. She doesn't really need our recommendation, but she has it anyway.

Theodore Feit

HAWAIIAN DICK: BYRD OF PARADISE

B. Clay Moore

2007

Image Comics

B. Clay Moore has written a wonderful noir tale in this first volume of his series. Our protagonist is Byrd, a man living on the islands in an exile of sorts. He's pals with a local cop and that comes in handy as a detective. In this first story we are introduced to the players as we see Byrd on his first case. He is asked to find a woman who has been kidnapped. Sounds easy enough, but the woman is dead and the people who want her aren't going to be very happy. Byrd is also helped out by a waitress at a local tiki bar he frequents and the beginnings of a wonderful relationship is born as the two play off each other like Tracy and Hepburn. The characters really drive the story here, and as in all good noir pieces you want to follow their every move and also warn them to stop and look around.

This is pure noir, Hawaiian noir if you will. The artwork from Steven Griffin is absolutely perfect and invokes the fifties wonderfully. It's full of jazz and doodads from the islands and is very evocative of the period.

The first collection also has some extras including character sketches and the very first web appearances of Byrd.

You need this book.

Jon

HEAD WOUNDS

Chris Knopf

2008

Permanent Press

The third entry of the Sam Acquillo series has Knopf writing at his best. His protagonist, Acquillo is an everyman who is trying to lead a simple life living in a small cottage in the Hamptons while earning money as a part time carpenter.

The object of Sam's affection is a woman named Amanda, who as it turns out is also being pursued by a local contractor who is basically a thug. This brings plenty of conflict as you might imagine. Sam just wants to live peacefully, forget the past and ignore the present but between the local Police chief with a grudge, and the contractor named Milhouser Sam can't get a break.

The real strength of Knopf's writing is his ability to set the mood effortlessly and his use of dialogue. Knopf also builds the tension and relieves it perfectly building the suspense and making the book one which needs to be read urgently. Knopf is one of my new favorites and this is one book not to be missed.

Jon

JACK WAKES UP

Seth Harwood

2008

Breakneck Books

Everyone has daydreams about a big score, a big hit, a mother lode that will put them on easy street. Most of us know that it's just that, a dream. But for Jack Palms, a former movie star and recovering drug addict with nothing left to lose a chance comes along that may actually be the real thing. A one time score with some euro-dealers could put Jack back on the right track, or at least a track that isn't dead ending.

Of course this being a work of fiction, a work of dark and noirish fiction at that we know it's too good to be true. Well, Jack ends up in the middle of a royal clusterf#*k and the wrong decision could see him behind bars for good or just plain dead.

This is a ride we've been on before, but with Harwood at the wheel this is a ride you won't forget. Twists and turns to rival a le mans track this book really is an edge of your seat read. If this is Jack waking up I can't wait to see him after his coffee!

Jon

THE KINGDOM WHERE NOBODY DIES

Kathleen Hills

2008

Poisoned Pen Press

On a hot August day, a farmer rides his tractor back and forth across the hayfield, leaving neat rows of cut hay behind him to dry in the sun. Nearby his two oldest sons work the family's potato crop with hand held tools. The farmer's young daughter watches from a perch in a nearby tree, delaying the moment when she must carry the midday meal to her father and brothers in the fields.

Kathleen Hills sets her series in the 1950's in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. John McIntire is the township constable in the area, and soon he and the young girl will meet in that field, McIntire called to investigate the body of the farmer, dead of a shotgun blast to his head; and Claire confronting the upset of all she has held familiar. Claire will be a formidable adversary to McIntire as he investigates, without ever declaring her hostility openly. As McIntire searches for the killer, he finds a distressing dearth of both suspects and motives for murder. Although the dead man was a cruelly strict father, his family clings to their assertion that their beliefs prevented them from owning any guns. A few local residents seem to have unresolved issues with the dead man, but all provide valid alibis.

As events unfold, McIntire's own safety is in jeopardy and he is stunned by his eventual understanding of the farmer's killer. Like the best in suspense fiction, Hills' book portrays a fatal web of greed, festering hostility, jealousy and desperation.

Woodstock

LADY KILLER

Lisa Scottoline

February 2008

Harper Collins

After four years and four standalones, Scottoline has finally brought back protagonist Mary DiNunzio, the Italian American, hard hitting attorney in South Philadelphia. Scottoline, brings the unique neighborhood to life, using her protagonist as the tour guide. DiNunzio personifies the cultural and socioeconomic divides as she's torn between her roots in the dilapidated row houses and her new life in the chic, up-and-coming area for young urban professionals. The internal struggle continues when old high school nemesis, Trish Gambone, comes to Mary's office for help. Still wearing too much makeup and hairspray, Trish explains that her mobster boyfriend has been abusing her, but knows he'll kill her if she tries to leave. Mary offers to help by going to the police and obtaining a restraining order, but Trish refuses, insisting it will create more trouble than good. When Trish goes missing, the entire neighborhood is counting on Mary to find her, before it's too late.

Scottoline's combination of hard boiled and quirky characters makes Lady Killer both suspenseful and fun. While DiNunzio's love affair doesn't do much for the overall story, it does illustrate the vulnerable, more sympathetic side of the protagonist. And although she is now a strong, successful attorney, Trish reminds her of the days when she was the straight-A nerd voted "Most Likely to Achieve Sainthood". In the beginning, readers only see the side DiNunzio allows them to see. It is the secondary characters who reveal the other facets of this dynamic protagonist.

Dana Kaye

LAST CALL

James Grippando

2008

HarperCollins

After a one-book hiatus, Jack Swyteck and his long-time friend (and client) Theo return in this gripping story relating to Theo's boyhood. It is the seventh in the series, with a backdrop of Miami's roughest neighborhoods and past glory in the jazz world. As a youth, Theo ran with a gang. Jack and Theo met while Theo was on Death Row, and the former governor's son, now a defense attorney, got him an acquittal based on DNA evidence. Early one morning, Theo gets a phone call from an escaped convict (who was the gang leader of his youth), seeking help. He offers to tell Theo the name of his mother's murderer in exchange for assistance. Thus, the beginning of the tale which involves Theo's sax-playing uncle Cy, Jack, and FBI agent Andie Henning. Throughout the novel, Jack has ups and downs with regard to his love life, wondering about Andie who he dated a few times previously but had broken off the relationship when he thought she "disse" his friend Theo. Grippando slowly builds the tension toward a gripping finale. His descriptions of Miami's Little Harlem and jazz clubs are detailed and authentic. The characters are well drawn and interesting.
Theodore Feit

THE LIAR'S DIARY

Patry Francis

2008

Plume

Jeanne Cross is a troubled woman. But she lives blissfully unaware of the depths of her own self-deception until she pursues an unlikely friendship with Ali Mather, the seductive, free-spirited woman who teaches music at the school where Jeanne works. When Ali is found murdered, and Jeanne's son Jamie is accused of the crime, Jeanne is forced to examine the charade her own life has become and the true nature of her relationship with Ali. But as the story unfolds, it is the reader who is seduced by Jeanne's single-minded pursuit of justice for her son and Ali. Francis does a masterful job of hiding the truth in exactly the last place one thinks to look for it: right in plain sight.

Laura Benedict

MAP OF MURDER

Susan Budavari and Suzanne Flaig, editors

2007

Red Coyote Press

Location, location, location. The editors of this slender volume of short stories have chosen tales in which geography or local tradition plays an important part in the denouement. From the laid back atmosphere of Key West to the upscale gentrified city center of Portland, Oregon with stops in between and along the way, the authors collected here serve up a very enjoyable mix and variety of suspense, revenge, and tension. Most of the authors represented are relative unknowns. But don't let that prevent you from investigating their work. You'll find slapstick humor from Kris Neri; cold, calculating exploitation from Simon Wood; chilling horror from R L Coffield; a satisfying payback from S J Smith; a life changing moment of understanding from Larry D Sweazy; and fifteen other enjoyable stories.

The advantage of a collection of short stories is that it's a perfect carry-along for times when a wait will be in order. While you sit at an airport boarding gate, or wait out a slow schedule in the doctor's waiting room, you'll have just enough time to read because most of the tales in MAP OF MURDER can be read in a half hour or less. And very often, an anthology like this presents authors in the early days of finding a market for their work. Tomorrow's "must read" list has to start somewhere; collections like this one are often just the place.

Woodstock

MURDER IN THE RUE DE PARADIS

Cara Black

2008

Soho Books

Readers who follow Cara Black's Aimée Leduc series will have their breath taken away more than once in the opening pages of MURDER IN THE RUE DE PARADIS. The lives of two women cross and nearly cancel each other out in this tense, passionate P.I. novel.

Aimée Leduc hastily leaves at the curb a blind date gone tiresome, little knowing that by dawn the next day a past love will have swept into her life and left it as abruptly. Leduc goes into detective mode when faced with the body of the man who had so recently left her arms. A tall woman in a black chador was seen running from the alley in which his body was found. Leduc finds that her investigation mirrors that of her reporter fiancé. Into the mire of the Kurdish dilemma between Shi'a and Sunni and the question of independence.

The woman in the chador has her own agenda. Assassinating Kurdish feminist Jalenka Malat. Her course and Leduc's parallel and then intersect as authorities try to stop both women from what they are duty bound to do. This is the manner in which a political tale should be told. Taught, fast and deeply personal, Black's narrative will compel a cover to cover read.

Jennifer Jordan

MURDER OF A CHOCALTE COVERED CHERRY

Denise Swanson

April 2008

Obsidian Mass Market

Ahhh. spring is in the air and that means one thing to me, time for another trip to Scumble Creek with Denise Swanson and her wonderful series. This year's offering has our heroine Skye Denison guilt-tripped into entering a cooking contest by her Mother. This is not good for Skye, who as a cook is a pretty good pilot. Luckily she is offered a distraction in the form of a murder. A chocolate covered murder to put a point on it.

Swanson writes such a wonderful series, each book is like a nice weekend with old friends. And each book manages to look at trends in our society and things that are supposed to be "hot", and she takes these things and spins them around till they are dizzy. Top notch story telling with truly unique and wonderful characters makes this one of the best traditional mystery series being done today. This latest is my favorite so far.

Jon

NO TIME FOR GOODBYE

Linwood Barclay

2007

Orion Books

Believe the hype. Blurbs on a back cover can be misleading, but in the case of Barclay's new standalone thriller, every word is true. NO TIME FOR GOODBYE is the gripping tale of Cynthia Archer who wakes up one morning to find her mom, dad, and brother vanished without a trace. Twenty-five years later, married with a child of her own, she is still asking questions. Barclay tells the story from the point of view of Cynthia's husband Terry, who tries to support his wife as she struggles to learn the truth, but suspects her of being paranoid and is concerned for her mental health. When each step closer to the truth leads to someone else in their lives being killed, it becomes evident that some questions are better left unanswered.

Barclay's expert ability to create meaningful characters is clearly demonstrated in the dynamic between Cynthia and Terry. Despite his love for his wife and his desire to stand by her, Terry begins to doubt Cynthia's honesty, wondering if it is actually her planting the clues leading to her family. This doubt passes on to the readers, creating a plot that will have everyone guessing up until the very end.

--Dana Kaye

PRAYER OF THE DRAGON

Eliot Pattison

2007

Soho Press

The Inspector Shan series – five in all - provides deep insights into Tibet and the consequences of the Chinese takeover. In this installment, however, there is an additional twist. Shan is summoned to a remote village to save

a comatose man from execution for two murders. It turns out that the man is a Navajo descendant visiting Tibet with his niece, an American anthropology professor researching a link between Tibetans and Navajos. The two murders, Shan discovers, are but part of a series of others and he has to solve not only those, but the riddle of Dragon Mountain, "where the world begins." The village is located on the mountain and the suspects are numerous. With the help of his friends, the unlicensed monks, Gendun and Lokesh, Shan undertakes an arduous task.

The common religious and cultural aspects of Tibetans and Navajos described throughout the novel are fascinating. The descriptions of the people and bleak geography are penetrating. The novel, like its predecessor, gets off to a slow start, and the author lays the groundwork for the plot. But once it gets going, the mystery moves apace solidly.

Theodore Feit

PREACHING TO THE CORPSE

Roberta Isleib

2007

Berkley Prime Crime

Rebecca Butterman is back, after her debut in *Deadly Advice*, in the second entry in the charming new series by Roberta Isleib. Rebecca is a clinical psychologist, as well as writing a weekly advice column, what she describes as "Bloom magazine's answer to Ann Landers...I moonlight as Dr. Aster, *Bloom!* Online magazine's expert on heartbreak and love...comforting the sick at heart and counseling the confused." [There are even a few column entries included, always enlightening.] But suddenly she is called upon late one night when Reverend Wesley, the minister at her local church, is being held in custody after a woman he visited died shortly after he got there, apparently having been poisoned. He refuses to talk to the police until Rebecca arrives. The dead woman was heading up the committee formed to choose a new minister for the Shoreline Congregational Church in their small Connecticut town, a position intended to smooth the transition, from a man who had suddenly left the congregation, to his successor.

Rebecca is persuaded by the detective in charge of the case to accede to the pleas of Wesley to head up the committee in the place of the dead woman. Her ambivalence is partially caused by the fact that she and the detective had briefly had a relationship of sorts in the case at the heart of the prior novel, which quickly ended due to the fact that he was married. But she agrees to help, saying "If I can help ease Wesley off the hook, it helps the whole church."

The victim was known to be secretive and controlling, but the cops are hard pressed to try to find a motive. The ensuing investigation, by the detective with the decided assistance of Rebecca, turns up some surprising things and, of course, endangers her life. In the process, she gives the reader yet another wonderful read. Rebecca is an interesting protagonist, still getting over the dissolution of her marriage, saying of herself "The man in my life purrs and uses a litter box. Slightly pathetic." I have been a fan of this author's terrific *Golf Lover's Mysteries*, but this new one is every bit as much fun.

Gloria Fiet

THE PRODIGY

Charles Atkins

2008

Midnight Ink

If books lived up to their premises, I would have loved *The Prodigy*. Fabulous wealth and no small bit of clout have allowed for the release of an inmate from a mental institution best kept away from sharp things and blunt instruments.

James "Jimmy" Martin IV is a genius, a prodigy of the cello and a complete sociopath. Mommy and Daddy made him do "it" and he is determined to do "it" some more. "It" being kidnapping, murder, etc. You know, the usual sociopathic pursuits.

The focus of his manic man logic? Dr. Barret Conyors, a predictably beautiful forensic psychiatrist whom Martin and his evil twin sister enlist to treat the rather resistant ex-patient. Despite her intelligence and savvy, the brave doctor is soon ensnared by Martin.

What is Jimmy's nefarious plan? How can the good doctor escape his clutches? Read *The Prodigy* by Charles Atkins and find out!

Jennifer Jordan

THE PRICE

Alexandra Sokoloff

2008

St. Martin's Press

Every now and again I read a book that leaves me with a weight on my back, a cloud in my brain, a feeling of something in my world being a little askew. Don't get me wrong, this is a feeling I relish, and one that reading Clive Barker often guarantees. Well this time Alexandra Sokoloff is to blame.

Will Sullivan is an up and comer, a bright future awaiting him in politics and aspirations for the Massachusetts Governorship. But life doesn't always follow our plans and Will 's life is put on hold when he and his wife discover that their daughter has a tumor in her stomach. They entrust her care to the Briarwood Medical Center, and in doing so change their lives for ever. Strange happenings abound in this place of healing and nothing is the way it should be. Before long Sullivan is no longer thinking of the future, he is concerned more about survival for his family.

Sokoloff has put together a tale of suspense that is astounding. Creepy is a word that comes to mind quickly when trying to describe the story. The writing is done so well that I felt off balance while reading it, and I had to keep reading because the story was at the same time compelling beyond words.

If you can forgo a bit of sleep then you need to pick up this book.

Jon

PUSHING UP DAISIES

Rosemary Harris

Feb 2007

Thomas Dunne

Paula Harris has given up the big city and not unlike characters in Green Acres she heads to the country to get away from the fast paced life style. Opening her own gardening business seems like a stress free way to live. Stress free at least until a body is discovered mummified in a local Garden she is working in. Natural curiosity leads Paula to look into this, but the investigating becomes more serious when a new body is discovered freshly murdered and one o Paula's friends is implicated.

Quirky and fun and thoroughly entertaining I found this to be a great read and a wonderful break from all the dark fiction I read.

I look forward from more books by this great new talent.

Jon

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

Diane A. S. Stuckart

2008

Berkley Prime Crime Hardcover

Dino is a young apprentice in service with Leonardo da Vinci, learning the many and varied jobs required of a painter. At the moment, da Vinci and his entourage are working in the household of Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan.

In a moment of capriciousness, the Duke requires a living chess game to be played. Members of his court will serve as the various chess pieces and the game will be played against Monsieur Villasse, the French ambassador. The winner will have as his prize a painting which both men claim. The Duke asks da Vinci to take care of all the arrangements, which he does.

After a break in the game, Dino is sent to track down an errant playing piece. When Dino finds him, he finds a corpse. There are political ramifications to the killing, and to the Duke's decision to keep everyone in the castle until the killer is found. He designates da Vinci to find the killer.

De Vinci uses Dino and some of the other apprentices to find out some of the information he requires, as they blend into the woodwork and can pass unnoticed in many places. Other parts of the investigation he handles on his own. But he uses Dino quite a bit more than the other apprentices; that causes some dissension and makes problems for Dino.

Stuckart has an interesting plot, well-developed characters, and seems to have done her homework in terms of historical research. *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT* is an engaging mystery for those readers who enjoy historical mysteries of a cozy nature.

P.J. Coldren

QUEENS NOIR

Edited by Robert Knightly

2008

Akashic Books

The newest in the Akashic Noir series, following prior compilations of short stories dedicated to tales in, among other places, other New York boroughs: Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx, this follows the pattern of the previous books in that it is comprised of all-new stories, predominantly by little-known authors. [Other books include other major American cities as well as ones outside of the U.S., e.g., Dublin, London and Havana.] I must admit the only authors in the present book with whose prior work I was familiar were Stephen Solomita and K.J.A. Wisnia.

The stories range in length from very short, e.g., four and six pages, to twenty-eight pages. They are somewhat uneven, but the whole is enjoyable. Other authors whose tales are included are Denis Hamill, Megan Abbott, and the editor, Robert Knightly. The book is divided into three sections, and covers time frames as recent as 2006, covering a blackout which engulfed the area that summer, in a story by Liz Martinez; a somber post-9/11 tale by Patricia King; one by Megan Abbott in a story about the 1970's; and one by Joe Guglielmelli sure to please any Mets fan [of which I am admittedly and unashamedly one] which includes references to one great season and one notoriously disastrous trade that will make fans grin and grimace by turn before it veers into considerably darker territory. [Mr. Guglielmelli was a co-owner of the very recently closed--and sorely missed--Black Orchid Mystery bookstore in Manhattan.] An interesting assortment of stories, and the book makes for a good read.

Gloria Feit

RANDOM VICTIM

Michael A. Black

April 2008

Leisure (PBO)

Black has already made his mark in the mystery community with his wonderful PI series and a couple of great stand alone books. With *RANDOM VICTIMS* we see the start of a new series, a procedural with a lead named Frank Leal, a Sergeant for the Cook County Sheriff's office.

A local election has brought a cold case out of the freezer and a task force is assembled to get to the bottom of a murder. Leal is not really in a position to be part of a team as he is still dealing with some things from his recent past. The cold case quickly heats up as does the action in this wonderful book. Leal is not sure who to trust, and when politics are involved it's a safe guess to not trust anyone.

A bit darker than his previous work Black has really put everything he has into this book. It's emotional, it's topical and it is brilliant. I think this is a book people will be talking about next year at award time.

Jon

RUNOFF

Mark Coggins

2007

Bleak House Books

August Riordan has now appeared in four novels in this series, and if *Runoff* is any indication, it is a wonder how he's made it this far. In the space of 260 pages, he is knifed, shot, hit with a meat cleaver down to the bone, jumps off roofs, among other hazards, and just goes on as if nothing had happened. But, I guess, all that goes with the territory of a PI. August also plays bass in a jazz quartet (also not so unusual; after all, Sherlock Holmes played the violin).

With nothing to do, August stakes out bank ATMs which are being hijacked, in an attempt to capture the thief and collect a posted reward. Then he is retained by the Dragon Lady, a rich Chinese woman with a finger in a lot of

pots, including an art gallery and a newspaper, among other things. She has a beautiful daughter who provides an interesting diversion. August is asked to investigate the possibility that a Mayoral election was “fixed,” causing the Chinese candidate to come in third. The two leading candidates, supported by opposing forces, then are in a runoff to take place in just a few days.

The assignment leads August and his sidekick in myriad directions and dangers. Various possibilities surround a new touch voting-screen system used for the first time in the City by the Bay. The novel is written in the customary attributes of the genre—the hard-boiled PI, the wisecracks, some sex and a twisting plot. Descriptions of San Francisco are excellent, and the writing is in keeping with the subject, including technical descriptions of the voting system. [The book has had a simultaneous release in trade paperback.]

Theodore Feit

SALT RIVER

James Sallis

2007

Harcourt

Many books are written as man against the world, fighting to shape his own destiny and overcome whatever obstacles threaten him. Within crime fiction, most books involve a quest for answers, a protagonist determined to find the missing pieces to put the puzzle together and figure out whodunit, or why the guilty party did it.

In other words, many books – even character-driven books – rely on action to propel the storyline. The plot follows a series of events and reactions to those events.

Reading Sallis is refreshingly different. In *SALT RIVER* John Turner does not doggedly hunt down leads, question every person who might even remotely be connected to the events unfolding. Nor does he lose himself in a bottle as he struggles to deal with his own grief. As tragedy strikes again and again how the events unfolding affect Turner on a personal level, how he processes them, how he feels, is never sacrificed to the plot. In fact, the story is more about his journey than anything else. The way Sallis writes embodies the spirit of the idea that the universe will unfold as it should, the truths eventually reaching Turner through incidents often out of his control without seeming contrived or unrealistic because Sallis sets up those scenes so subtly you don't predict them but have been prepared for them.

SALT RIVER is a beautifully written portrait of the journey of the dying: the dying man, the dying town. The prose is hypnotically spellbinding. As a bass player I know the silence between the notes is as important as the notes themselves, an understanding Sallis translates to his writing effortlessly, making the revelations of the book all the more powerful. A tremendous talent. Which authors will still be read fifty years from now? Without a doubt Sallis.

Sandra Ruttan

SATURDAY'S CHILD

Ray Banks

2008

Harcourt

Cal Innes hasn't had time to adjust to life outside prison when he's confronted by a job for a notorious gang lord who won't take no for an answer. What the gang lord says he's after and what he's really looking for are two different things and the gang lord's son – the person responsible for Cal being sent to prison - has a personal stake in the situation, and Cal has no idea just how ugly things are about to get.

Any review of *SATURDAY'S CHILD* would be incomplete without mentioning the original voice of Ray Banks. His style is so assured that when he changes narrators you know whose perspective you're following without introduction or cues. He allows the dialogue, the diction and the actions to define the characters in a way that few authors are capable of.

Banks also utilizes internal variables to drive the story. Although *SATURDAY'S CHILD* has plenty of action the events are propelled by the way the characters think. Cal's biggest enemy may be himself, too naïve to realize there's far more to gangster Tiernan's “job” than meets the eye. With a cop hot on his tail, ready to send him back to prison at the drop of a hat, Cal is hemmed in, with no one to turn to, and when his life is threatened he'll find out just how far he's willing to go to get revenge and bring this case to closure.

Gritty language that evokes a sense of place all on its own, SATURDAY'S CHILD will slam you through the back alleys and seedy bars at a furious pace as Cal Innes confronts the darkness within himself, as well as the dangers he doesn't know wait around the next bend. Hardboiled crime fiction of the highest caliber.

Sandra Ruttan

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

Mary Reed and Eric Mayer

April 2008

Poisoned Pen Press

What if you could meet the model for the famed MONA LISA? Or what about the woman who posed for sculpture of the Winged Victory? Or the Venus deMilo? Moving forward to the present day, what would it be like to meet and talk with Dora Maar, who gave Picasso such vivid inspiration for both sides of a tempestuous relationship portrayed on canvas? Would you find yourself in the company of a friend whom you formerly knew only from her image? Or would you be confronted by a stranger seeking to draw you into a web of danger?

John the Eunuch, the chamberlain in the court of the Emperor Justinian, often muses out loud to a mosaic portrait of a young girl, which adorns the wall of his study. He finds these one sided conversations helpful in organizing his thoughts and identifying possible courses of action. One evening as John strolls the streets of Constantinople, he is approached by a woman who identifies herself as the girl in the portrait and urges him to return for another meeting when she will tell him facts of great importance.

Instead, John finds her dead a few days later – her body dyed a nauseating red, her face badly beaten, and only a vivid tattoo providing an identifying mark. Out of a sense of responsibility to the image on his wall where he finds help in performing the duties of his job, John claims her body, arranges for a respectful burial and devotes the next few days to finding her killer.

In the confusing, twisted alleyways of the Copper Market, John finds more questions. An eccentric troupe of actors and actresses seems to hold the key, yet it seems that there is more going on than just one mysterious death. Simmering unrest may portend a threat to the Emperor himself.

Reed and Mayer present another entertaining chapter in their adventures of John the Eunuch. Fans of historical mysteries are urged to seek this one out.

Woodstock

SEVERANCE PACKAGE

Duane Swierczynski

May, 2008

St. Martin's Press

Imagine the worst job, on the worst day. The world is far scarier than any imagination can come up with. Scratch that, there's Duane Swierczynski and SEVERANCE PACKAGE. After 2006's THE BLOND , I found myself thinking it couldn't get any better but it does.

SEVERANCE PACKAGE opens with a look at domestic life that still has my husband shuddering, and then it explodes into a read that can only be described as, are you ready, A laugh out loud funny, snidely satirical look at the corporate world and what the intelligence service has become post 9/11.

This book has it all, characters you love to hate (Molly Lewis) and characters you hate to love (Jamie Debroux). There's the infamous Swierczynski finely honed chaos. What if your boss had been ordered to kill all of his employees? How would your office dynamic work in that situation? At the offices of Murphy, Knox & Associates we're about to find out.

Grittier than Peckinpah, More intricate than LeCarre and going down smoother than Booker's Bourbon, Severance Package and Swierczynski are the best argument for comedic mysteries since PEST CONTROL.

If you haven't found this author yet, find him now.

Ruth

SILVER

Edward Chupack

2008

Thomas Dunne

The Silver of the title is not precious metals but Long John Silver the pirate, and this is a novel of his life and times. And I'll tell you now, Pirates of the Caribbean this isn't. What it is though is an engrossing read that I enjoyed immensely.

Silver has been captured and is being returned to England to hang, but he has at least one more caper in him and it is set in play when he tells his own tale. The belief that there is a huge fortune hidden away has given Silver a bit of leeway during his journey and there are plenty who would listen in hopes of getting rich. But will they? Chupack has taken a legendary figure and set him loose in a wonderful story in SILVER. Adventurous and sublime, exciting and devious this is a very unique book and I look forward to more from Chupack.

Jon

STALKED

Brian Freeman

2008

St. Martin's Minotaur

STALKED, the third book in the Jonathan Stride series, demonstrates that Freeman just keeps getting better. Back in Deluth, Minnesota, Stride's partner Maggie Bei is accused of killing her husband and he is determined to clear her name. But when another woman disappears and a few more report being raped, it is evident that the offender's scope is far broader than anyone expected. These women aren't just anyone to Stride: they're partners, ex-lovers, and worst of all, his wife. Freeman skillfully balances the large cast of characters, each harboring secrets and haunted pasts that the investigation threatens to expose.

The strong character motivations drive this thriller novel as each player in the story has much at stake, whether it is power, reputation or their lives. The rape victims not only have to deal with the trauma of the attack, but with their tarnished reputations and humiliation when their private lives are subjected to public scrutiny. These layers and facets add to the authenticity of the plot; no one is all good or all bad and everyone is relatable. Combined with the cliff hanger chapter endings, the gripping chase scenes and the thrilling final face off, STALKED is impossible to put down.

--Dana Kaye

STILL SHOT

Jerry Kennealy

April 2008

St. Martin's Minotaur

This is a real treasure of a book full of old Hollywood twist and characters. A wonderful noir tale set in the land that made it famous.

Film critic Carroll Quint who is also a writer of novels is asked by his mother to look into a death of an old friend. Her assumption is that since he writes the stuff he should be able to do it as well. If it works not only will Quint find a murderer he will also have a hell of a story.

Old Hollywood is almost a genre unto itself and this book is a wonderful addition to that group. With all the classic elements of noir and a compelling lead character this was a real joy to read.

Jon

ST BART BREAKDOWN

Don Brun

March 2008

Oceanview Publishing

This is Don Brun's fifth novel, the fourth featuring rock 'n' roll journalist Mick Sever. Brun's novels explore the seamy underside of the music industry, uncovering how unchecked power and corruption often lead to mayhem and even murder. The novels are all set in famous beach locales, so the sights and sounds of the novels are pleasant to read, but there is a moral in each story.

In this adventure, Mick Sever's new assignment is to interview Danny Murtz. Murtz's walls are lined with platinum records, but his closet is full of skeletons. Known for producing an unbelievable string of hits, Murtz is also tied to

a string of disappearances. It seems a number of Murtz's romantic conquests have vanished into thin air. After his latest incident, Murtz conveniently retreats to his secluded St. Bart villa.

Murtz has been doing heavy drugs for so long, he has lost track of reality. His handlers have been making his problems go away through intimidation, payoffs and maybe even murder. Now in a moment of clarity, Murtz is sure someone wants to bring him down and he doesn't know who to trust. He begins a ruthless campaign to eliminate possible suspects and Mick sever becomes one of the suspects.

This is a great murder mystery series with beautiful beach settings. It is a good read.

Joe Czech

THE SULTAN'S SEAL

Jenny White

2007

W W Norton

In late 19th century Istanbul, the nude body of an Englishwoman is found floating in the sea near the edge of the city. She is wearing a necklace with a symbol on its face – the seal of the Sultan. Inside the pendant is an enigmatic group of symbols, not immediately recognizable as from any known written language.

A magistrate in one of the Turkish courts is called to investigate, and with the help of a local surgeon trained in post mortem techniques, he learns that the woman has drowned. A visit to the British embassy only brings more questions – no one knows how she might have come by the strange piece of jewelry, and no one knows why she might have been lured to her death.

Running parallel to the investigation of the death of the English woman, White tells the story of a Turkish girl from a wealthy family, who enjoys all the privileges her family can provide, but finds her life and plans for the future seriously limited by the customs and history of an Islamic society. The plans made by her father and uncles only serve to ignite her refusal to cooperate.

Only the reader will fully understand how these two stories intersect and complement each other. While the magistrate does begin to understand the full political significance of the symbols on the necklace, he never completely solves the mystery of the woman's death.

Many of the issues in late 19th century Istanbul remain timely today, and in a brief reading group guide included in the paperback edition, White adds intriguing background to her story.

Booklist included THE SULTAN'S SEAL as one of its "top ten first novels." I would concur with pleasure.

A short epilogue on the cover indicates that White may be planning a series featuring Kamil Pasha, the magistrate. Let's hope so!

Woodstock

SWEETHEART DEAL

Claire Matturro

2007

William Morrow

Not only is Lilly Belle Clearly a neurotic vegetarian lawyer, but apparently she doesn't mind bending the rules to solve a mystery—like breaking and entering. But under the circumstances, perhaps such transgressions might be understandable. She makes her fourth appearance in this series under unusual circumstances. It seems her pill-popping mother is caught red-handed with a pistol by the police chief of the small Georgia town in which Lilly Belle was reared. At her mother's feet is a man who has been shot dead.

Called by her frantic brother Lilly Belle drives up from Sarasota where she is a law partner to Bugfest, GA [no, that's not a typo], to which she vowed never to return when she fled. There she finds her mother under police guard in the hospital, unconscious, sedated, and apparently someone is trying to murder her.

While the plot is well-thought out, its presentation is overly cutesy for my taste. That doesn't mean someone else might not be amused by the writing and dialogue.

Theodore Feit

THIRD STRIKE

Philip R. Craig and Wm. G. Tapply

December 2007

Scribner

In this, the third entry in the Brady Coyne/J.W. Jackson adventures, after the earlier "First Light" and "Second Sight," Brady has been called to Martha's Vineyard, where J.W. presently makes his home. Larry Bucyck, a client who he hasn't heard from in years calls him when he fears his life is in danger, and implores Brady to help him. J.W.'s help is enlisted when the steamship strike on the island has idled the ferries which are virtually the only way to get to the island from what they term America [i.e., the mainland].

J.W. has his own problems: His wife, Zeolinda ["Zee"], has prevailed upon him to investigate the death of her friend's husband, who is believed to have died while trying to blow up the engine room of a boat, all part of the growing tensions arising from the strike. It soon appears that two men have died from seeing what they should not have seen, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is not apparent at first in what manner these two threads will come together, but the reader knows it will happen at some point and in some way as the book progresses. The tale moves at a measured pace, unhurriedly, much as life itself does on a summer's day in Martha's Vineyard, I imagine, and with equal pleasure.

The authors alternate chapters with their respective protagonists moving the plot along, Mr. Craig's JW Jackson, the former Boston cop and Vietnam vet, happily married after ten years and with two young children. The steamship company has till now been the only viable lifeline between the Vineyard and America; now men are using their own boats, making two, three trips a day, ferrying eight cars at a time, and it was just such a boat that was destroyed in the attempted torching which resulted in the man's death. There are others who are making good money during the strike, ferrying people and cars and freight night and day, for whom the strike is a boon. Meanwhile Brady, who describes himself as a wills and estates lawyer from Boston and a trout fisherman, must find out who killed his former friend and client, who he describes as a "shy, private guy, living like Thoreau down there in the Menemsha woods. He said he just wants to be left alone," an innocent enough man who had managed to find a simple life on his own. Had indeed "carved out a little Walden for himself in a patch of woods on Martha's Vineyard, how he raised chickens and pigs...how he built stone sculptures that I guessed would stand there for eons, the Stonehenge of future generations..." The island at the moment is inundated with "pilgrims who came seeking the Promised Land, found it, and now can't leave because of the strike. The gods are Jesters." "The island cops were already stretched thin by the strike and by Larry Bucyck's murder, to say nothing of maintaining law and order among 100,000 August people who were rowdier than usual because they didn't like being trapped, even though they were trapped in Eden."

It would appear that the first man's death wasn't a suicide and that moreover there is a plot afoot with very sinister implications which Brady's client may have stumbled upon. These two authors, who were also great friends with a common love of the natural world, fishing and the Boston Red Sox, have put together a seamless, well-written and suspenseful book, with the personalities of their protagonists blending into a well-oiled machine that gets done that which it must, never losing sight of the women they love or their love for the beauty of their surroundings and their fishing. The writing is wonderful. Mr. Craig's J.W., at the end of a tense day, waiting for Mr. Tapply to return: "I imagine Brady's fine, I lied. I felt I was on the lip of the Void, ready to fall. We sat close together in the fading evening light and looked out over the gray waters of Nantucket Sound where the sailboats were easing toward harbor under the low dark sky. In spite of the sultry summer heat, the earth seemed without form, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. What had become of Brady?" And Mr. Tapply's Brady, confronting one of the 'bad guys: "Harry Doyle ignored me. He hunched his shoulder, squinted his eye, peered through the sight on his weapon, and tracked it across the sky above us like a skeet shooter wringing on a high-flying clay pigeon."

I particularly enjoyed J.W.'s query to Mr. Brady: "Maybe we can bring Stoney Calhoun down from Maine. He's as good as [Sam] Spade." Brady gave me a blank look. "Who's Stoney Calhoun?" "I'm not absolutely sure, and neither is he." Calhoun is, of course, another uniquely Wm. Tapply creation. These words by Mr. Craig particularly spoke to me: "Above us, the innocent blue sky held clouds whiter than newborn lambs, and the sun shone down onto a world that should have been devoid of murder." Sadly, it is a voice we will hear no more. That is the last collaboration between these two esteemed writers, and the end of their friendship as well, as Mr. Craig recently passed away. But this is a book that can be enjoyed on many levels: It is suspenseful, yet evocative of beautiful scenes of island life, beauty and leisure. [Actually, the authors had me before page one, with quotes from both Milton's Paradise Lost and Yogi Berra.]

Gloria Feit

THREE SISTERS

James D. Doss

2007

St. Martin's Minotaur

There is a mesa near the Ute Reservation in Colorado with three rock formations resembling faces called Three Sisters. Then there are the three Spencer sisters in Granite Creek, all beautiful and rich. One of them, the eldest, Cassandra, is a TV psychic, whose live on-air visions predict almost simultaneously sordid events like arson and murder. The novel gets off to a slow start, with the author expounding on any number of topics, and little happens until the entry of Charlie Moon's aunt Daisy, a Ute Shaman whose investigative talents and inquisitiveness get an assist from the spirit world, enters the scene.

Moon, a rancher and part-time tribal investigator, makes his 12th appearance in this series. With the help of his best friend, Scott Parris, and his aunt, the road to solving the various mysteries is enabled. The first of these begins with the chilling death of the youngest sister. Then there is the question of how the psychic sister achieves her visions. And there are others.

To my way of thinking, the author's writing style is overblown and too cute. On the other hand, there are many amusing pieces of dialogue or asides throughout the book. Despite my reservation, I did enjoy reading the novel, and would recommend others do so also.

Theodore Feit

TOUCHSTONE

Laurie King

2008

Bantam

Laurie King is always a treat for me. I fell in love with Kate Martinelli first. The San Francisco series is one of my "go to" reads. So when King decided to write something a little different and created the character of Mary Russell I followed. And damned if this historical series featuring a bride for Sherlock Holmes doesn't work. King had me on the hook for two series at this point. And then came the standalones. So now, if I had my druthers the poor woman would be writing three books a year.

Since I prefer my authors healthy, I'm okay with only one but still, maybe a case of Red Bull is in order.

January's TOUCHSTONE is written outside of Ms. King's existing series.

A story of a turbulent time, our narrative begins in the 1920's. One man has lost a brother, another has lost his way. Together they may save countless lives. So simple. Did I mention the author's name.

Laurie King's skills with stepping across through time and putting her reader firmly in the time of a story are renowned. Her ability to create unique and sympathetic characters amaze me. But it is the relevance of the whole within TOUCHSTONE that makes this book a must read.

Harris Stuyvesant is an American F.B.I. agent with a theory. He believes a powerful British subject may be behind a series of bombings in America. On "a leave of absence" he's given a letter of introduction to British Intelligence. All doors are firmly slammed in his face until one man suggests he use Bennett Grey as an introduction to British Society and the subject of his inquiries. Bennett has a certain "gift", an ability to tell when people are being truthful. Stuyvesant makes his case and Grey agrees to help. It is a painful and brave decision.

How many great crime novels have started with a simple weekend in the English Countryside? King's is sure to join that list. TOUCHSTONE takes a traditional mystery style and claims it for the author. This is a novel of anarchy and anarchism, of the roots of contemporary terrorism. With a slight of hand King takes a beautiful historical novel and adds a dose of contemporary thriller that would leave Baldacchi, Silva, and DeMille proud to have written it. I swear she owns a Tartus.

Ruth Jordan

TRIAL BY BLOOD

John Macken

2008

Bantam Press (UK)

This may sound superficial and maybe a bit silly, but as soon as I saw this book I felt it would be one I enjoy. The cover is beautiful, a dark setting with bars and chains with a shadowing figure in the background. Without even opening the book I'm already interested! His previous book, DIRTY LITTLE LIES was one of the highlights of my reading in 2007.

Having recently become an Ex cop Rueben Maitland is not having the best of times, in fact he may be having the worst of times. Marriage done, reputation in ruins Maitland is offered one chance to redeem himself. He needs to go undercover in prison to investigate a man he helped place there with false evidence.

This book may not be the one to pick up if you are looking for happiness and light, but if you want something that feels gritty and real and moves like a hurricane force wind through a trailer park with the same regard for who is left standing this is the book for you.

Jon

TWISTED JUSTICE

Patricia Gussin

2007

Oceanview Publishing

Dr. Laura Nelson, a respected and talented surgeon, faces more calamities than is possible in this twisting tale. To begin with, she walks into her home after a long and difficult day and night of surgery to find her husband and a strange woman nude in the family room. Then she is found later on in that woman's home kneeling by her dead body and Laura's fingerprint on the murder weapon. She is arrested and accused of the murder. Among other travails to follow, one of her children is found to be seriously ill.

This novel is a complex story about mistakes, failed relationships, lies, manipulation and betrayals. The author is a physician and uses her professional knowledge to provide the story with a high degree of realism. Moreover, she does a credible job on the ins and outs of Laura's legal defense and child custody problems. The only criticism is her characterization of the husband, which is superficial (as is he).

All in all, the novel is a well-paced saga, suspenseful with a plot that keeps the reader wondering what will happen next. Dr. Nelson first appeared in *SHADOW OF DEATH*, and it would seem she is poised to play a role in a future novel.

Theodore Feit

VIENNA BLOOD

Frank Tallis

2008

Random House/Mortalis

Following the monumental debut novel, *A Death in Vienna*, the author has followed up with a second book of equal proportions. He brings back psychiatrist Dr. Max Liebermann and Inspector Oscar Rheinhardt as they face a formidable serial killer who leaves strange symbolic signs in what appears to be random murders.

The novel takes place at the turn of the century in Vienna and is filled with hints of the onset of Nazism and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its culinary tastes. Sigmund Freud plays a minor—but crucial—role in providing Max with psychiatric insights into the meaning of the killer's psyche. The combined talents of the police inspector and the psychiatrist again fortify each other's efforts to discover the identity of the savage murderer.

The depth of the descriptions of Viennese society and the city are magnificent. The plot is overwhelming and supplies a penetrating look into Max's personality and ethics.

Theodore Feit

VIRGINS AND MARTYRS

E.L. Merkel

2008

Five Star Mysteries

Bombs, snipers and stigmata litter the pages of Merkel's third novel, *VIRGINS AND MARTYRS*. The thrust of Merkel's novel, pro-life/pro-choice, is volatile and must be handled deftly. The closest analogy this reviewer can make in reference to Merkel's actual handling? Well, just think of Vice President Cheney's mishap with his shot gun.

Spanish Bay, Florida police detective Aria Quynn is a first hand witness and victim to a fierce attack against a clinic in which abortions are performed. Among those that lose their lives that day is her partner of more than a year. The case instantly becomes personal to Quynn. And she is just as instantly taken off of it. A back door is made available by presence at the home of a young teen in the middle of the turmoil by dint of visions she claims to have. When a Department of Justice and a member of the press deem her a needed cog in the machine that will catapult their respective careers, Quynn is smack dab in the middle of a case she was told to stay away from. When a sniper's bullet takes down another doctor and the Feds seems to be more eager to wrap the case up quickly then catch those responsible, the only one with the ability and the determination to get to the bottom of this chaos of a case is the woman who has the most to loose.

What, by all intents and purposes should be a well paced, plot driven political thriller is a clumsy, heavy tome with an antagonist that has bad guy written on his forehead from his first appearance. Quynn's first person narrative often jars the reader from the story and provides much unneeded back story. Merkel is not without skill and his passion for and knowledge of the subject is obvious. But his ham-fisted prose and unsympathetic lead don't impart the strength needed to succeed with a premise this socially and politically charged.

Jennifer Jordan

WHO IS CONRAD HIRST

Kevin Wignall

2007

Simon & Schuster

In his fourth novel, WHO IS CONRAD HIRST? , once again Kevin Wignall magically melds a cold blooded assassin with a passionate philosopher. In a character evolution that most writers would spin in a story arc that stretched over multiple novels, Wignall bookends in one beautiful work.

Conrad Hirst is a contract killer. He can virtually turn off his humanity, making him very good at what he does. But this switch goes haywire when, during a routine killing, Hirst makes a life and death altering decision. He will kill the men pulling his strings since his career in killing began.

At the heart of the story is the question asked in the title. And what could be a simple thriller is complex tale of best of each of us battling the very worst in us all told with skill and subtlety.

Jennifer Jordan

YELLOW MEDICINE

Anthony Neil Smith

2008

Bleak House Books

Many protagonists have straddled the fence between good and bad guy but none so much or so well in recent years as Anthony Neil Smith's Deputy Billy Lafitte. Not exactly amoral, Billy cares about what he wants and does what he has to do to get it. But, in the end, even he has a moral line that he will not cross.

One of thousands displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Billy sowed the seeds of his own destruction in a few dicey games of bad cop, worse cop. Displaced from the warmth of the Bayou to the cold Minnesota tundra, he is separated from all he once cared about (ex-wife and kids). All that draws him to action is affection for a Psychobilly singer named Drew. When he tries to "help" Drew's boyfriend, Ian, a slow and powerful chain of events is set off. This isn't just meth mixing madmen. This isn't just a psychotic man with a fast draw. This is bad guys gone international. And Yellow Medicine County, Minnesota is just as good a place to start a jihad as any. When it comes to fiction, Smith does it cleaner and darker and harder than anybody. A story that runs to extremes is utterly real. A character that seems despicable is, although not loveable, empathetic. And a book that has you racing to the end has you regretting having read it so damn fast when you're done.

Jennifer Jordan