

Buzz Bin:

Following last year's **BLOOD OF THE WICKED** Leighton Gage is back with his second novel, **BURIED STRANGERS** (Soho). Mario Silva is back in another tale set in Brazil, this time in a case that is hampered by corruption and fear. A secret cemetery is home of dozens of corpses all missing body parts. The government is afraid it will hurt tourism, a corrupt cop want to use it as a chance to make money and it seems no one want Silva to solve the case. Atmospheric and suspenseful as all get out Gage has written another wonderful book.

Among the throng of new authors emerging this year a few are already standing out. Steven M. Forman has debuted with **BOCA KNIGHTS**, a wonderful PI novel that is hopefully the beginnings of a new series. Edie Perlmutter has retired from the Boston Police department and moved to Florida, hopefully to relax and help his arthritis. But being a champion of the underdogs, Eddie soon realizes that retirement may not be what he truly wants. He becomes a Private Detective and soon finds himself confronting skinheads and neck deep in trouble. Authentic Florida flavor and a realistic older hero help make this debut one to look out for.

BONES OF BETRAYAL (William Morrow) by the writing team of Dr. Bill Bass and Jon Jefferson as Jefferson Bass is their fourth work of fiction together. It's also the best one so far. Two murders separated by 50 years are linked together by a number of strange factors, not the least of which is radiation which looks to be from Oak Ridge Tennessee, the home of part of the Manhattan Project. This books joins history together with a top notch mystery and delivers a real punch and is a book that will want you to read it non stop.

Nevada Barr is back with another Anna Pigeon adventure in **BORDERLINE**(GP Putnam). This time out she is in Big Bend National Park in Texas. Anna is supposed to be relaxing and on vacation but she is once again in the midst of a mystery and on the run from snipers and bad guys hunting someone in her rafting party. Things are made more difficult by the newborn infant she has wither. Fast paced and everything you would expect from this incredible author **BORDERLINE** is another great book from Barr.

Author of **CITY OF FIRE** Robert Ellis is back with **THE LOST WITNESS** (Minotaur Books). Lena Gamble returns though disgraced after her last case. She has been punished by the higher ups by not being given any real cases. When she finally does get a real homicide to investigate it's a real loser and may give the brass the reason they need to dump her. An unidentified body cut to pieces in a dumpster with no witnesses. Ellis write3s a great mystery and while dropping in twists and surprises he never once stops playing fairly with the reader. Getting caught up and rooting for Gamble is easy the way Ellis writes this and it's a real joy to read.

DOORS OPEN (Orion) by Ian Rankin is now in paperback in the UK. The story was serialized in the US in the New York Times. This stand alone heist thriller has Rankin flexing some different muscles and from the looks of it he's been working out. Heist novels are always fun and Ranking definitely seems to have fun writing this book. Mike Mackenzie plans to rob the National Gallery in Edinburgh, the catch is he doesn't want anyone to know it was robbed. Rankin is on the top of his game here, and that's saying something because he always plays all out.

Barry Eisler has proved his skills as a master in the thriller genre repeatedly with his John Rain series. **FAULT LINE** (Ballantine) is his first book outside the series and it's an ass kicker. Lawyer Alex Trevan and his brother Ben, a shadowy operative, have been at odds for years and are a bit more than estranged. Alex ends the standoff when he is in danger and turns to the only person he know he can trust, his own brother. If Ross MacDonald wrote thrillers they may have felt like this. Outstanding. (look for an interview with Barry elsewhere in this issue)

In the tradition of such action adventure as **THE DEEP** and the books of Matt Reilly **KRONOS** (Variance) is a paperback original from Jeremy Robinson. Atticus Young is a former navy seal getting over the death of his wife when off the gulf of Maine a tragedy occurs with his daughter. It leads him on a hunt for a creature never seen before. Funded by a crazed billionaire Atticus goes all out to find Kronos. Full of twists and action packed **KRONOS** is relentless.

Lisa Scottoline has another winner on her hands with **LOOK AGAIN** (St, Martin's). The story feels very original and it's execution certainly is. A reporter named Ellen Gleeson discovers that her legally adopted son may actually be a missing child. Both heart breaking and intriguing this is a real tour de force. Scottoline pulls out all the stops in **LOOK AGAIN**.

NEMESIS by Jo Nesbo is a book that is getting a lot of buzz. It's been picked as an Indie pick of January and is being covered everywhere. This is the Norwegian author's second book released by **Harper** and is another featuring police detective Harry Hole last seen in **REDBREAST**. **NEMESIS** has a double threat with Harry trying to solve a series of savage bank robberies and at the same time trying to figure out if someone is trying to frame him for a murder. Fast paced and loaded with atmosphere this is a great read.

William Bernhardt also has a new novel named **NEMESIS** (Ballantine). Bernhardt's is set in Cleveland in 1935 and it tackles Elliot Ness's famous Torso Murders. I've read a number of different books about this case, some fictional and some not. This take on it is fascinating and engrossing. For fans of true crime and fiction this book will totally satisfy.

PLEA OF INSANITY (Vanguard) by Jilliane Hoffman is a legal thriller that makes this, her third book, her best yet. Julia Vacanti is a prosecutor trying to convict a man accused of killing his family. The defendant, a surgeon named David Marquette is using the insanity defense. The case is more than it seems as it appears there are a lot more bodies and in trying to win the case Julia has to face her own horrific past. Lightning fast pacing and true suspense make this book a must read.

If historical mysteries are more your thing then you really need to check out **PORTRAIT OF A LADY** (Berkley Prime Crime) by Diane A.S. Stuckart should be right up your alley. A Leonardo da Vinci tale set in 1483 sees conspiracy and murder challenging the famous multi talented artist. Two young female servants have died, suicides that are more than they seem and da Vinci needs to find the killer to help the Duke of Milan save face. A well researched and fun read.

John Conner is a great writer and his latest, **UNSAFE** (Orion) is yet another reason everybody should be reading him. Detective Karen Sharpe is a bit of a loose cannon, and after coming back after a suspension she is given a new case and a trainee to work with. Her new partner, Trainee Marcus Bradley quickly learns that Karen doesn't mind crossing into grey areas when the case demands it, and with a child in danger he may agree. Fast moving and intelligent this is a superb example of why British writers get so much praise.

THE SECRET SPEECH (Grand Central) is the follow up to one of last year's hot titles, CHILD 44 by Tom Rob Smith. Lead character Leo Demidov is no longer working for State Security, but this doesn't stop him from seeking justice where he can. Some papers have come to light which anger the nation and Leo is faced with threats to his family because of them. Fast paced and soulful this is a nice follow up book. Look for it in early May.

Michael Robotham's latest, **SHATTER** (Doubleday) starts with an intense scene and continues to pick up speed as it continues. Joe O'Loughlin was the main character in SUSPECT and the psychologist is back in spades in this latest masterpiece from Robotham. Someone who is a master at manipulating people is driving random citizens to commit suicide. O'Loughlin is working with the cops to put a stop to it, but soon the killer is changing his focus to the people hunting him, in particular, Joe. Fast paced and exciting like a riding in a car spinning out of control this is a great book.

SPADE AND ARCHER (Knopf) is a prequel to The Maltese Falcon written by Joe Gores. This book is right on the money and is exactly what it claims to be, the style is dead on and this book is getting loads of buzz everywhere.

A new author, another from Chicago (What is in the water there?!) Bryan Gruley makes his debut with **STARVATION LAKE** (Touchstone). A regional mystery set in a small town in Michigan the mystery surrounds the death of a hockey coach. The protagonist is a local newspaper editor with a past that he needs to get over and in doing so find redemption. This is a wonderfully suspenseful book and Gruley's background as a reporter really helps to make this a detailed and gripping read. We look forward to more from this new talent.

WHISPERS OF THE DEAD (Bantam UK) by Simon Beckett is another great book from this rising star. Dr. David Hunter returns in this book and also returns to the body farm in Tennessee to reinvigorate his skills and himself. His mentor asks him along to observe on a particularly gruesome case. The case is complicated as it looks like the killer has a knowledge of forensics and maybe playing games. Beckett writes a hell of a novel that never lets up. It's dark and amazing and it lingers long after the reading is done. Beckett is a new favorite here at Crimespree.

Kim Harrison in addition to being a wonderful author also has some of the coolest titles ever. The latest from Harrison is **WHITE WITCH, BLACK CURSE** (EOS) and is another in her Rachel Morgan series. Morgan is a bounty hunter and a witch and in this adventure she has a case that intersects with her hunt for her lover's killer. She brings in all her contacts to help and the action is nonstop. In this perfect blend of thriller/supernatural/mystery Harrison excels and this is another great book from a master.

Full Reviews:

Jen's Round-up

Travelling over the globe in less than a week can only be done sans jet lag with books. My first stop (does this sound like a Price is Right showcase?) was Paris. My guide, Aimee Leduc, shares a predilection with many male detectives of her

ilk. She must know the truth; she must solve the puzzle. The puzzle is triple fold in Cara Black's **MURDER IN THE LATIN QUARTER** as a Haitian woman, Mirelle, presents herself as Aimee's long lost sister and then vanishes. When Aimee tries to find her, she walks into the scene of a murder. The victims association with Haiti seems to tie her to the missing Mirelle. As others die, Aimee knows she must find her would-be sister to find out if she's the murderer or about to be murdered. Black snaps a moment in time and place perfectly with one of the best female leads in crime fiction.

From Paris, I head to Florence, Italy with what is unfortunately the last in Magdalen Nabb's Marshal Guarnaccia series (Nabb died in 2007.) In **VITA NUOVA**, which is as far from the texts of Dante as we can get, a single mother leading a studious life is found dead in her bedroom at her family's country-side villa. The family does not welcome the Marshal's investigations and it is no wonder. They are a study in family dysfunction. But Guarnaccia has been handpicked for this case. With patience, tenacity and pure instinct, he sorts through layers of lies to find the killer in midst of the chaos.

Careening sharply north, I land in Dundee, Scotland, a city built on the basalt plug of an extinct volcano called The Law. Here, our dedicated detective is J. McNee - former DI, current misanthropic truth-seeker. A man, farmer James Robertson, is not buying the police story of his brother's apparent hanging suicide, though Robertson himself discovered the body. The brother had been the prodigal son, possibly trying to make right too many wrongs. But, as in life, no one is all good and no one is all bad. With British thugs on the loose, looking for something the dead man had, McNee must struggle with his own demons as he tries to find the seemingly impossible - the truth. **THE GOOD SON**, Russel McLean's debut, is dark, well honed and taut. I crave more McNee.

My last stop takes me to post-Castro Cuba with Robert Arellano's **HAVANA LUNAR**, a beautifully written book about how quick the decent into the shadow land can be for even the best of men. Mano Rodriguez is eking out an existence as a doctor in the post revolution medical service when a woman, a girl really, comes to his clinic and begs for his help. She cannot bear her life as a prostitute under the violent and capricious pimp that rules with an iron fist. By saving her, Mano saves a part of himself that he'd lost - hope for the future. But his act of heroism has brought the pimp and his violent entourage to Mano's door. Soon after, the police come knocking. The teenaged Julia is either the best thing that has ever happened to Mano, or the very worst. The dark elegance of this HAVANA LUNAR is another shining gem in the Akashic line-up.

And all of this globetrotting can be yours, if you go to your local independent bookstore.
Jen Jordan

A DEADLY SILVER SEA

Bob Morris
2008
Minotaur

This fourth installment in Bob Morris's excellent Zack Chasteen series finds Zack and his pregnant wife, Barbara, setting sail on the inaugural cruise of the luxury liner *Royal Star*. As the publisher of a travel magazine, Barbara has been invited to write about the ship and its high-class amenities, and Zack is more than happy to play sidekick.

But the fun doesn't last long. Within hours of leaving port, the ship has been overtaken by a band of thugs, the passengers bullied and beaten, and most of the officers killed. Separated from Barbara and desperate to find her, Zack leads his compatriots to save the ship, its cargo, and his wife and their unborn child.

In **A DEADLY SILVER SEA** we find the same Zack Chasteen that we've enjoyed in his previous adventures. He's smart, smart-alecky, and as stubborn as two mules in his search for answers.

Rae Helmsworth

A DARKER DOMAIN

Val McDermid
February, 09
Harper

After a long tenure with St. Martin's Val McDermid has switched her American Publisher. This master of the crime fiction genre is looking for a wider readership. If, in the end, a book is the relationship between the writer and every individual reader followed by word of mouth then **A DARKER DOMAIN** should do the trick.

To call myself an unbiased reviewer when it comes to McDermid's work would be a lie. I am of the opinion that each of her books has a value so high that all of them must be read. The woman challenges herself with each new work, always producing something new both within her plot and within the structure of the current novel. She plays with formula like no one else writing today. Plain and simple. *The previous paragraph is this reviewer's disclaimer & should you care to continue, the following is a critique.*

A DARKER DOMAIN is a stand-alone from Val McDermid. The book begins with two current storylines. A young woman

approaches the police. Her father is a missing person. A journalist on holiday explores an Italian Villa and thinks she may have a piece of a twenty-five year old story.

The Miner's strike of the 1980's drove entire communities to choices they never wanted to make. Amongst the footnotes from those times. A young family man abandoned his dying community and for years all left behind assumed he went on to be a scab. Until now the past has been unacknowledged, but Mick Prentice never arrived at his assumed destination. Now his daughter must find him if she can. Her young son's life lies in the balance. There was tragedy amongst the wealthy that year too. A young heiress and her son were kidnapped and ransomed. At the drop, Catriona Grant is killed and her son, Adam disappears without a trace.

D.I. Karen Pirie revisits her own youth and the cold case surrounding the miner Mick while Bel Richmond tackles a story on the Grant family kidnap with full access to Cat's surviving family. As these two strong young women race towards their "solutions", McDermid paints a picture of both today and yesterday. She tells of a history too raw to forget and a present steeped within the past. Some horrors never quite go away and can create new abominations. You'll find it all within the pages of *A DARKER DOMAIN*.

Ruth Jordan

ALL THE COLORS OF DARKNESS

Peter Robinson

March 2009

William Morrow

Banter between officers, run ins with superiors, support teams of crime scene or medical personnel, red herrings, these things and more are the framework of and go into making up a good police procedural. Peter Robinson has, in following the formula, never been formulaic. He's always exceeded the familiar expectations of the police procedural reader. He does it again in *ALL THE COLORS OF DARKNESS*. The aura of menace he creates in his newest novel is more than enough to keep the reader quickly turning pages.

DI Annie Cabbot is first on the scene of what appears to be a suicide. When things get a bit more complicated, Detective Superintendent Gervaise, has Annie call in her immediate superior, Alan Banks. Banks has been on vacation with his new girl friend Sophia. He returns from London and pokes around a bit, basically guiding Annie's moves. When word comes down from even higher up than Gervaise that case is 'solved' Banks's interest is picqued. Warned off he, officially, goes back on vacation but begins to delve much deeper into a case that taken at face value should be open and shut.

It's what Mr. Robinson does stylistically to the police procedural that provides a great read, that's good in itself but with *ALL THE COLORS OF DARKNESS* and his other novels he raises the bar for police procedurals and has all authors trying to write up to his standards and that's great.

David Biemann

BAMBOO AND BLOOD

James Church

2008

St. Martin's

BAMBOO AND BLOOD, the third novel of North Korean Inspector O, opens in the bitter winter of 1997. Inspector O and his boss Pak are told to keep a close watch on Jeno. Jeno, like all 'visitors' to North Korea is presumed, correctly in this case, to be a spy. Jeno leaves and O is told to look into the death of a young woman. Create a file, throw in some basic information and we're done, Pak says and stay away from missiles. O ends up in New York and then Switzerland. His orders are as vague as ever. His integrity and the advice of his grandfather seem to be his only guide. Church has a roundabout way of having O solve his cases. Reading the Inspector O novels should be done when you're ready for pithy dialog, puzzles you have to work to solve along with the inspector and the time to savor Church's low-keyed, spare style. But, by all means *Bamboo and Blood* should be read. It's a book that actually rewards the reader for the effort. Church is a rising star in the mystery field. *Bamboo and Blood* is further proof of the rise.

Dave Biemann

THE BELLINI CARD

Jason Goodwin

2009

Sarah Crichton Books

The Edgar Award winning author of *THE JANISSARY TREE* has produced another excellent adventure in the third entry in his Inspector Yashim series.

The year is 1840, the setting is Istanbul, and there's a new sultan in power who needs Inspector Yashim to go on an errand. He orders Yashim to Venice to find and bring back a painting that is purported to be a lost Bellini. However, given the political murk surrounding the sultan and his advisors, Yashim decides that the wisest course of action is to remain in

the palace and send a trusted friend in his place.

The trusted friend is, of course, the Polish ambassador Palewski, who sets off undercover to Venice to join the hunt for the painting. It doesn't take long for Palewski to realize that he, and everyone else involved in the search, are in mortal danger. There's a killer on the loose, who is both fearless and cunning.

It requires all of Yashim's skill and courage to support his friend and unravel the multiple mysteries surrounding the painting. As always in a Goodwin novel, the historical detail is rich, the plot is satisfyingly twisty, and the characters are engaging. It's to be hoped that this series continues for a long, long time.

Rae Helmsworth

BLOOD AND BONE

William Lashner

2009

William Morrow

Known for his series featuring Victor Carl, Lashner takes a break from Carl and has put out a wonderful first standalone. BLOOD AND BONE's lead is Kyle Byrne, illegitimate son of a prominent lawyer in Philly. When his dad dies when Kyle is 14 he has to sneak into the funeral and is kicked out by his father's law partner Laszlo Toth. Jump ahead 12 years and Toth is murdered. Byrne goes to the funeral which raises suspicions with the police. Doubts are raised in his father's death and soon a former client approaches Byrne. As Byrne starts to dig into his fathers past and what he finds could change not only his life but many others as well.

Lashner's character of Byrne is perfect, disenfranchised and disillusioned he is a man who seems lost, almost by choice. This is a compelling story and while I love the series I hope to see more stand-alones from Lashner as this one is terrific.

Jon Jordan

BLOOD ISLAND

H. Terrell Griffin

2008

Oceanview Publishing

Matt Royal used to be a lawyer. Now he hangs out at the Florida beach, doing his best to avoid, well, pretty much everything. He's not very good at it.

On a pretty normal April morning, Matt stumbles across a dead guy who's been left, literally, for the vultures. He does the right thing and calls the cops. The next morning his ex-wife calls – her daughter is missing and is probably in Florida. The two seemingly unrelated events are, in fact, just part of the labyrinthine mystery that Matt must solve in order to save the people who are most important to him. Racing against a ticking clock, Matt and his pals must battle everyone from low-life thugs to religious zealots to get the answers they need.

Matt Royal is a likeable character, and the plot of this story is satisfyingly fast-paced and twisty. If you like Bob Morris and Randy Wayne White, you can't go wrong with this sun-baked thriller.

Rae Helmsworth

THE BODIES LEFT BEHIND

Jeffery Deaver

2008

Simon & Schuster

In this suspenseful novel featuring a new protagonist for this author, Sheriff's deputy Brynn Mackenzie, if something can go wrong or be misinterpreted, it is a deliberate effort by the author to move the story forward while treating the reader to another false lead. Something he is very good at doing.

An abbreviated 911 call, in which the caller utters just the word "this" before it ends, gives rise to the sheriff asking Brynn to investigate. What she finds are a man and his wife murdered in a home near a state forest miles from anywhere. The a nightmare develops as she has to escape from two armed men, eluding them during a chase through miles of wilderness, during which she comes across a young woman who says she too is escaping from the professional killers. The plot twists are on nearly every page leading the reader by the nose with surprise after surprise. Along the way we learn more about Brynn's unfortunate relationships with her present and ex-husband, as well as her 12-year-old son. It has been suggested that Brynn might form the basis of a new series; time will tell. Meanwhile Mr. Deaver is finishing the next installment of a novel featuring Kathryn Dance as well as a new Lincoln Rhyme novel.

Theodore Feit

BURN OUT

Marcia Muller

2008

Grand Central Publishing

Sharon McCone's life-threatening experiences on her last case have culminated in a burn-out. Trying to rejuvenate at the small family ranch in the high desert of Northern California, McCone considers whether she should get out of the P. I. business.

While she's mulling over what to do next, the ranch manager Ramon Perez's niece is murdered. McCone realizes her nature will not allow her to do nothing. When she finds two bodies, the sheriff's department asks her for help and she's "sucked in." When she finds yet another body, a possible suicide, (more bodies than Muller usually has!) that gives her a major clue. She connects the relationships of the murders that involve past crimes, a dysfunctional family and hidden identities. Even though she's away trying to heal, McCone keeps her finger on the pulse of her investigative agency and in the end makes a decision that helps her heal.

As with other Muller books, I couldn't put this one down until I finished reading it.

Gay Toltl Kinman

CARAVAGGIO'S ANGEL

Ruth Brandon

2008

Soho Press

Regina (Reggie) Lee, a curator at the National Gallery in London, is the amateur sleuth in this art mystery. She wants only one thing and uses her knowledge to get it. But it isn't bringing the murderer to justice.

Reggie wants to have an exhibit of Caravaggio's three paintings of 'St. Cecilia and the Angel.' The Louvre promised a loan, but then reneged, so she goes to Paris to plead her case.

She tries to meet with the curator there, but that seems impossible. Finding out where his brother lives, he puts her in touch with their mother, Juliette Rigaut. At Juliette's house, in a village outside of Paris, Reggie sees a fourth St. Cecilia. Only three are known, so is one a forgery? Juliette tells her about the painting and what happened during WWII. Two possible suicides in the family, one old and one recent, lead Reggie to dig a little more.

Author Brandon knows the art world well, and she writes beautiful descriptions of scenes in France, as Reggie keeps going back there for more information and to firm up the loan with Juliette.

Another death, possibly natural, and a car accident take two more lives. Reggie doesn't think either are what they seem. Taking another look at the paintings and the deaths, and she has her answer.

But the murderer is still at large.

Gay Toltl Kinman

THE CONTRACTOR

Colin Mackinnon

March 2009

St. Martin's

As the chief editor of Middle East Executive Reports and Iran Country Coordinator for Amnesty International, Colin Mackinnon had plenty of opportunity to observe the way the international diplomatic community functions – or doesn't function. The author has put that experience to great use in this excellent spy thriller.

The protagonist, Rick Behringer, provides outsourced intelligence service to the CIA. Espionage runs in the family – Rick's father was a CIA operative until his untimely suicide when Rick was 13 years old.

The story opens with the fatal interrogation of a Russian thug and dives right into a nightmare for the American intelligence community: Pakistan's continuing efforts to go nuclear.

When Rick starts hearing, from credible sources, rumors of a Pakistani nuclear physicist - also an Islamic extremist - who is trying to acquire uranium to aid in his country's development of the bomb, he rolls into action. On a globe-trotting mission to thwart Pakistan's plans, Rick has to fight for his own life as well as fighting for his country safety, while at the same time dealing with the truth surrounding his father's death.

The writing is lean, the characters believable, and the tension is palpable. Anyone who enjoyed Alex Berenson's "The Faithful Spy" is sure to have a blast with this terrific novel.

Rae Helmsworth

DARK SIDE OF THE MORGUE

Raymond Benson

2009

Leisure Books

Book two in the Spike Berenger series is a riot. This time out Spike is involved in a series of murders in which the victims are all progressive rock musicians (or as the new term goes "Math Rock"). Spike's security firm are called in and the people who could be next on the list are scared to death, of a dead woman.

Benson's writing here is full of insider music knowledge, which judging from the Rick Wakeman (keyboard player for Yes) blurb is authentic. Benson is a musician himself and he knows what he's talking about. He also is a hell of a writer and this book moves faster than a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert. He keeps the suspense going right to the end and while keeping the action tight he still manages to toss in some humor and loads of fun. Raymond Benson is someone who should be on everyone's must read list.

Jon Jordan

DOOLEY TAKES THE FALL

Norah McClintock

March 2008

Red Deer Press

DOOLEY TAKES THE FALL is a Canadian YA novel but as with the best that YA fiction has to offer. Don't let those two letters fool or scare you. This is as tough a crime novel and as good a mystery as you're likely to find anywhere anchored by one of the best characters to come along in years.

The story is anchored by two mysteries, one for the reader and one for the plot. You see Dooley, age 17, has a criminal past. Currently living with his retired cop uncle, he is trying hard to straighten up his life. But if it weren't bad luck, Dooley would have no luck at all. As he walks home from work, he sees a kid jump off of a bridge. Of course its Dooley that is first on the scene; of course Dooley knows the kid and of course they have a history together. So, of course Dooley is the prime suspect. His carefully cultivated existence begins to unravel. Dooley sets out to clear his name by investigating the death on his own. The second mystery, the one for the reader, has to do with the nature of the crime that Dooley committed to initially get into so much trouble. Even though it is hinted at (and can be guessed,) the final reveal is saved for near the end.

Dooley is a great character that invokes a wide array of feeling from the reader but becomes one that you ultimately root for. If John Hughes wrote a crime novel it might look something like this.

Brian Lindenmuth

FATAL FEBRUARY

Barbara Levenson

2009

Oceanview Publishing

Like Connelly's LINCOLN LAWYER, Barbara Levenson's Miami defense attorney protagonist, Mary Magruder Katz, seems to acquire clients via her car, or a carwash, to be more exact. When an arrogant and handsome real estate developer named Carlos rear ends her newly washed Explorer, Mary is ready to ream him. Instead, he charms her into becoming his lawyer in what may be fraud, and later his lover, which causes her to lose both her fiancé and her job at a prestigious law firm.

Her other client, Lillian Yarmouth, is accused of murdering her husband. Mary believes she's innocent, despite the abundance of circumstantial evidence against her and sets out to prove it. As she investigates the murdered husband's business practices and numerous infidelities, Mary discovers someone she believes to be the real killer. Persuading the cops and the jury proves more difficult.

Between working on her cases, and trying to set up her own law practice, Mary must also contend with a vicious stalker. Here's where Carlos and his "security men," who dress in army fatigues and boots, come in handy.

Ricocheting from wild farce to sizzling romance to intense courtroom drama, Levenson keeps the action moving, the story interesting and readers guessing. And although she touches on the serious issue of inadequate funding for city police departments, and how that affects the justice system, readers will chuckle at the closing scene which takes place in a (what else?) carwash.

Jackie Houchin

FEELERS

Brian Wiprud

2009

Minotaur Books

Brian Wiprud has entertained me with every one of his previous books, and I was thrilled to see the latest in hardcover. FEELERS has a rather distinctive Wiprud feel. The main character is a guy with a very non-typical job and is sometimes

more comfortable in that gray area.

Morty Martinez has a job that has a number of descriptions, but what he is, is a feeler. He cleans out homes after the family removes a loved ones wanted possessions. Morty and his guys come in and get rid of the old couches, the kitchen utensils and other unwanted items, making the house ready to sell. But the real reason Morty does this is hidden treasure. And the name feeler comes from his ability to "feel" when there is treasure to be found.

Marty's latest job netted him a bundle - \$800,000 hidden away from the world. Too bad for Morty word spreads fast and other Feelers are out to get his score. Danny Kessel is also looking for the cash and has a rather dubious claim to the money. He stole it in the first place and hid it at his uncle's house.

Wiprud takes the reader on a merry ride as this tale unfolds and it is entertaining, sometimes funny and totally enjoyable. Wiprud has written another winner and this is a "don't miss it" book.

Jon Jordan

THE FOREIGNER

Francie Lin

Picador

May 2008

THE FOREIGNER is about a man without a country and without much of a past in search of his only family after his mother dies. He discovers himself in the process.

Emerson Chang is a messy, contradictory and complexly drawn character. He has no sense of identity, self or worth and lacks any vocabulary of self-expression. He's been emasculated by an over bearing mother and scorned by a brother who left many years earlier. The only family member who gets off lightly is his father but only because he died when Emerson was young. This is a deep exploration of identity, the loss of it, and the role that we play in creating our own; the conflict of the identity that others put on us and the one that we consider for ourselves and the vast gulf that can lie in between the two. All of this told in an atmospheric way that makes Taiwan come off the page and on to the minds screen in a vivid way. The only thing that holds the book back is the very ending, which is a little weak and fails to hit as hard as it could have.

Brian Lindenmuth

GO WITH ME

Castle Freeman Jr.

February 2009

Harper Perennial

In GO WITH ME there is a group of old men who act as a Greek Chorus for the novel. Skeptical of this device, I couldn't really see how it could be successful. But quickly this simple idea transformed the idea of expository passages and found a new way to convey necessary information. Even a simple description just doesn't do it justice; the casual conversations of a group of men sharing some beers, shedding necessary light on the actions of a concurrently running storyline, really shouldn't be that radical of a concept. Yet it is. I've haven't read another book that puts so much under a simple facade. In GO WITH ME the primary narrative thrust surrounds some very unlikely protagonists. If a girl was in trouble and was being harassed by the local hard man, most authors would send tough guys with her of a more, shall we say, clichéd and stereotypical variety. Freeman takes a different route and sends her out with, as Lillian puts it, "They had sent her out here with sixth-grade dropout and a senior citizen who could hardly walk." But like the book, these two will prove to have more behind them than first thought would suggest.

The bottom line? GO WITH ME is a great book that more people need to read.

Brian Lindenmuth

THE KILLER BOOK OF SERIAL KILLERS

Philbin and Philban

2009

Sourcebooks Inc

This is a book about serial killers, obviously. There are a 39 of these creatures listed in here, each with his/her own chapter augmented by photos, some interesting facts, quotes and other items. For the most part, this material has all been done before, and usually better. This book feels as though it is pandering and treating these killers as celebrities. If you don't know much about serial killers and want to learn more, I would avoid this book and instead look for The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers by Michael Newton. It's written better and doesn't treat the subject as entertainment.

Jon Jordan

KNOCKEMSTIFF

Donald Ray Pollock

March 2009
Anchor

Though it's not really presented as such, under a broad definition KNOCKEMSTIFF can be considered crime fiction and would appeal to many of its fans. KNOCKEMSTIFF is filled with stories of low-bottom fringe dwellers with nothing. Not nothing to lose, literally nothing. Bill Hicks once assaulted a heckler with the following line "Your gene pool is so shallow that its like your daddy jerked off and your mama sat in it." The characters of Knockemstiff are the result of that union. As in crime fiction there is a notion of the city as main character. As these stories unfold and the lives of these characters interconnect, the desolate nature of the town really comes through as the main character. The characters are presented, if not sympathetically, then at least objectively. You can't really relate to them but they are interesting. There is a raw, almost primitive power that comes out of them. Pollack doesn't demean or belittle his characters by categorizing their actions as black or white. They are just who they are, and sometimes even oddly comfortable in their own skin. Like the guy who slips off his wedding ring to hit on the convenience store clerk only to have her start making fun of the "retarded" girl who comes in sometimes realizing that it's his wife she is talking about. If there is a relationship between crime fiction and the horrific (especially the horror of small acts,) then surely the town of Knockemstiff resides on the border. Like the moment of quiet horror when a father exhorts his young son to beat the shit out of another boy while in the restroom of a drive-in.

Brian Lindenmuth

LAST DAYS
Brian Evenson
February 2009
Underland Press

One of the themes that plays out in LAST DAYS, and in Evenson's work when taken as a whole, is the effect of closed systems on the individual; The closed system is often religion and the individual is often unbalanced. When the pressures and permissions of religion are pushed to the front and the exposed cracks in the individual widen, the results are always interesting and never what you expect.

There is a sense of otherness or wrongness that strongly pervades LAST DAYS. We are to understand that Kline was an undercover police officer of some sorts but even that mooring point is shifted away from us by calling him an infiltrator instead. Everything is off.

Kline is an interesting character especially in the way that he is portrayed and the distance at what he is kept from us. When we first meet Kline it is soon after his previous case where he lopped off his own hand and in an act of self-determination cauterized the wound. Though it's never explicitly stated he is clearly suffering from some form of posttraumatic stress syndrome. Kline is in a state of shock and practically numb to everything around him and, for the duration of the book, the situations that he finds himself in. I say practically because there does seem to be some indication that he is aware of how far down he is but doesn't recognize the way back up. It may even be this disorientation that kicks off the story; Kline is so spun around, yet aware of his state, that he accepts the first hand offered to him. It's been suggested that LAST DAYS is a Grand Guignol crime novel but I think that Kline's dour personality works against this assertion and that Allan Guthrie's HARD MAN is much more akin to this comparison.

Often time's crime fiction is billed and blurred as being "dark" and too often it fails to live up; flinching first and crying uncle when the story gets tough. In this unique detective novel, Brian Evenson is willing to hold the gaze of the abyss and the result is a novel that isn't likely to be forgotten anytime soon.

Brian Lindenmuth

LAST RITES
John Harvey
2008
Bloody Brits Press

Charlie Resnick, the intuitive, low-key Detective Inspector, is embroiled in two separate cases which become intertwined. The shooting of a key drug distributor by a rival with the chase to find the missing weapon and proof of the perpetrator's guilt. And a murderer who receives permission to attend his mother's funeral subsequently escaping from his keepers. Both these situations occupy Resnick amid fears of an escalating drug war between various factions: find and recapture the escapee, and keep a lid on the volatile situation in the streets. Resnick smoothly pursues both goals while enjoying his love of music and trying to make sense of his own love life. Tenth in the series, the novel is simply told and written with polish. The story moves fluidly and the suspense builds to an explosive climax. The characters are portrayed in a realistic manner, and while the two elements of the story are unrelated, the author meshes them believably.

Theodore Feit

THE LAST STRAIGHT FACE
Bruce Kennedy Jones and Eric Allison

February 2009
Old Street Publishing

Talk about authenticity in crime fiction: co-author Eric Allison was characterized by the Manchester police as “among the top echelons of British criminals”. These two long-time friends have conjured up a doozy of a debut novel. The story opens as the Nameless Protagonist is let out of Strangeways Prison, having served time for something he actually didn’t do – which is unusual for a career criminal. Waiting for him is the guy who caused him to get caught – a guy who wants to cash in on the fact that Our Hero owes his father a favor. But all Our Guy wants to do is visit his wife and children. So, off he goes – but not only is his family not at home, their house has been cleaned out. There’s nothing left. And bad just goes to worse when Our Guy’s nephew is murdered. He finally begins to understand that someone is after him with murderous intent, and he has very little time to figure out who, and why, and stop them. This is nouvelle British crime fiction at its best: blazing fast, irreverent, and darkly funny. I can’t wait for the sequel.

LEATHER MAIDEN

Joe Lansdale
2008
Knopf

In many ways LEATHER MAIDEN is a conventional mystery, especially in the sense that a lot of familiar elements are here (small to mid sized town, scandal, murder, blackmail, psycho side kick, etc.) but at this point Lansdale has been at the game so long that he really knows his shit and you are in safe hands. He has taken the things that you know and used them in a story that’s truly good. It’s reminiscent of the notes may be familiar but the song is still great. He’s written something like 30+ novels at this point so he knows how to tell a hell of a story and does. The Lansdale style is on full display here. He’s almost like a really great storyteller you meet at the bar who tells you the greatest story ever told.....as long as you keep plying him with drink. As befitting our times, and something I expect to see more of, the protag is an Iraq war veteran. It’s a simple device that firmly grounds the story in the present. His portrayal of Cason Statler is subtle and full. It’s nice to have a character with traits instead of being defined by them. For example, in the beginning of the book he is drunk. But then he decides to try and not drink anymore and it’s not turned into a big deal. He’s also carrying some baggage from the war that is never explicitly referenced, thus attaining a greater power. All of his characters are handled well and in the same manner. One of the highlights (if that is the right word) is a torture scene that comes later in the book. His sidekick is an advocate of torture and Statler is not so sure. The scene unfolds in a non-judgmental, warts-and-all way that shows how horrible it can be but that it CAN also be effective. Sides aren’t taken and both characters can be seen as right and wrong. The reader has a complex reaction to a complex scene about a complex subject. I also love the exploration of the relationship between the two brothers and their interactions with one another. This is yet another great book from the master storyteller Joe Lansdale.
Brian Lindenmuth

LETHAL LEGACY

Linda Fairstein
2009
Doubleday

Number eleven in the series featuring Alex Cooper, LETHAL LEGACY feels like her best yet. Cooper works for the DA’s office sex crimes unit (as did Fairstein) and as this tale opens Alex is called out to a crime scene in which someone disguised as a fireman assaulted the victim. The victim, Tina Barr, works for the New York City library as a conservator, meaning that she is responsible for the conservation of books, a topic dear to my heart. As a result we have a wonderful story set in the NY Library. As Cooper and her colleagues look into Barr’s past, they start to discover some strange things. Before long another body shows up and the pressure to get the case solved multiplies. This was such an enjoyable read. The plot is quick and engaging, all the facts about the library were a genuine treat. LETHAL LEGACY is must read for anyone who loves a great mystery and loves books.
Jon Jordan

LOST RIVER

David Fulmer
January 2009
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Reading a David Fulmer “Storyville” novel, you can almost taste the beignets and chicory coffee, and you’d swear you

could just walk outside to be in the heart of early 20th century New Orleans. Fulmer's writing is just that evocative. The latest Valentin St. Cyr mystery opens in the autumn of 1913. St. Cyr has left Storyville to try and live a 'straight' life. But Storyville won't leave him. A murder in a brothel has its madam looking to Valentin for help, and he can't turn her down, even though helping her causes the worst kind of trouble between St. Cyr and his lady, Justine. Hoping to get the case solved and try to pick up the threads of his new life, Valentin is stunned to learn that he's been played and betrayed and now is, himself, a murder suspect. As the murders continue, St. Cyr must find the truth about the killings, and look inward to decide the truth about himself. This is a compelling read, and a worthy entry in a terrific series.

THE MESSENGER

Jan Burke

2009

Simon & Schuster

Jan Burke has never stood still as a writer and everything she's ever published has been a delight to mystery fans. Throughout the years she's exposed layers of our genre until you cannot be in a cabin without a touch of claustrophobia, pass a house without wondering what secrets it holds, or read an noxious headline without wanting Irene to tell you the rest of the story.

We've waited for THE MESSENGER. Readers have become expectant of the book a year deal. Imagine my surprise when I opened a book without the main ingredient of crimes and misdemeanors. But wait... THE MESSENGER sings with the talents of the best-selling Burke. Crisp and lyrical prose melded with a story full of the exotic, unimaginable, and decidedly creepy.

The book starts with a dive for treasure. Soon a young man realizes he's made a deal with something darker than normally found in our world. The hunt for an individual has been successful and he wants no more to do with the matter. Tyler Hawthorne has moved to L.A. He's a young man of 24 with a two century history. Tyler has a talent for connecting those who are about to die with their loved ones one last time. An old enemy has found him and wants something back. To tell more of the plot would be a cheat. Suffice to say that THE MESSENGER is unlike anything Burke has written with mysteries of a different kind abounding. For long time fans it is yet another direction in a fabulous career. For folks who've perhaps not read Burke, THE MESSENGER is an introduction to one of our best writers. Burke is a writer known for her sardonic wit, well-drawn characters and unforgettable stories. Done, Done and absolutely.

Ruth Jordan

MISS DON'T TOUCH ME

Hubert & Kerascoet

2009

NBM/Comics Lit

Originally published in France, MISS DON'T TOUCH ME is a wonderful mystery set in Paris in the 30's. It is a graphic novel that could quite easily become a pandering tool for violence and titillation, but it begins and remains a charming mystery starring an innocent girl.

Blanche is a maid and while her friend and sister Agatha is outgoing and fun loving, Blanche is reserved and almost scared to go out. A killer is loose in Paris, The Butcher of the Dances. After a close call with a stranger when returning home one night, Blanche is even more convinced it's a good idea to remain quiet and safe. However when Agatha is killed and it is dismissed as a suicide she decides to do what she has to in order to find the killer, including working in a brothel while remaining pure.

The mystery here is handled like a classic amateur sleuth books from the thirties or forties and it immediately engages. The pacing moves the story along nicely and the artwork really fits well. This is a graphic novel for anyone who enjoys a good mystery and something that I would recommend to everyone, regardless of their taste in novels.

NBM Publishing (www.nbmpub.com) has a large number of wonderful books and their Comics Lit imprint is just one of the great sources for wonderful things to read.

Jon Jordan

MURDER AT GRAVERLY MANOR

Daniel Edward Craig

2009

Midnight Ink

Trevor Lambert is back in this third book of Craig's Five Star Mystery series. Trevor is a hotel man. He knows how to run them and how to make them a success. In MURDER AT GRAVERLY MANOR, Trevor may finally be an owner.

Gravery Manor is a Bed and Breakfast in an old Victorian mansion and the eccentric owner insists on Trevor living there for three months before she'll sell. What follows is a wonderfully gothic feeling mystery that includes a missing chamber

maid and tales of the mansions past that give it a wonderfully spooky air. Lambert's past experience, though not intentional, puts him in a position to investigate.

Craig's writing comes from the heart and is peppered with his own experience in the business. His keen story telling skills and a wonderful sense of timing make his books a true joy to read and this latest is no different. Craig is definitely on my must buy list.

Jon Jordan

MURDER IN MYKONOS

Jeffrey M Siger

Jan 2009

Poisoned Pen Press

Paradise or chamber of horrors?

Hundreds of brochures and travel magazines promote the Greek island of Mykonos as a heavenly spot for a getaway. Sparkling in the Aegean Sea, the island presents an intriguing combination of traditional island life in patterns familiar to countless generations of residents as well as a lively hedonistic holiday ambience studded with bars, expensive shops, beaches and a 24 hour party atmosphere. But readers will learn that grisly realities are hidden beneath the surface, in grim contradiction of the tourist brochures. A construction worker stumbles upon a body concealed in the crypt of a semi-abandoned church. The cop called to the scene, Andreas Kaldis, is newly assigned to the area; and smarting with the humiliation of a demotion in his duties. His work in Athens came too close to some powerful people wished to keep undisturbed.

Andreas' investigation soon uncovers the remains of several other young women, all concealed in crypts of seldom used churches all prepared for burial in the same bizarre manner. Other cops from other jurisdictions arrive, increasing Andreas' sense of probations. Cops and other public officials must walk a fine line between conducting a thorough investigation and keeping a low profile to avoid alarming the many visitors to the island.

In a parallel story, readers follow a young woman who has arrived on her own to visit Mykonos. It's clear she fits the profile of the victim, and indeed she is abducted. Thus begin pages of nail biting suspense as the cops, her family, and her kidnapper race to the conclusion.

Siger's narrative has parallels to the first Scarpetta novel published by Patricia Cornwell – in that the killer is never a chief character in the narrative. Readers do gain some insight into his twisted motivations as he moves toward the planned murder of the newest abductee, but he remains a shadowy figure.

The closing pages present another twist – one of the investigating officers commits his own surprising act of violence. Did the end justify the means? Readers will be pondering that question as the book ends.

Author Siger is an American attorney who divides his time between Greece and the US. MURDER IN MYKONOS was first published in Greece, to widespread appreciation. This American edition has been re-edited for the English speaking market. The publisher notes that Siger is at work on a sequel, and has plans to take his cop Andreas to many sites within Greece in future entries in the series.

Woodstock

MURDER OF A ROYAL PAIN

Denise Swanson

2009

Obsidian paperback

Denise Swanson is one of my favorite authors. She manages to take me away from everything the world and lets me escape to Scumble Creek for a vacation. Of course, what is relaxing for me is often the opposite for series character Skye Denison, school psychologist.

In MURDER OF A ROYAL PAIN (I love her titles,) prom mother from hell, Annette Paine is found dead. The candidates for suspects are plenty. Annette wasn't the only crazy mother with the need to live vicariously through her daughter and see her crowned queen. Annette's husband looks perfect for a set of handcuffs as well. As usual, Skye's life is crazy and her own problems are only made more complicated by her involvement in trying to get to the bottom of the murder.

Swanson has given me many a smile and many hours of wonderful fun reading. This is just another in a long line of really great books.

Jon Jordan

MURDER ON THE DOWN LOW

Pamela Samuels Young

2008

Goldman House

Pamela Samuels Young knows the law and she knows the mystery-suspense genre. Now, in her third legal thriller, featuring attorney Vernetta Henderson, Young wrestles with a controversial social issue. But it's not at the expense of her intricate plotting, memorable characters and intense action that readers have come to expect.

A series of apparently unconnected murders of affluent African-American men in Los Angeles has citizens as well as the

police department on edge. From her preliminary investigation, LAPD Detective J. C. Sparks suspects a deeper motive than racial prejudice, but someone in the department has told her to back off.

At a funeral across town Vernetta Henderson, best friend Special Moore, sister attorney Nichelle Ayers, and J.C. mourn the death of a close friend, the victim of a different sort of crime. Maya died of AIDS, contracted from her secretly gay husband who got the HIV virus from one of his homosexual lovers... and failed to inform her.

The friends are outraged at how this "on the down low" creep killed Maya and got away with it. Determined to make him pay, they meet together with Maya's mother to plan their revenge. But Special, who was cousin to Maya, has more in mind than a wrongful death suit. After publicly exposing the man's lifestyle and accusing him of murder, she secretly – and viciously – begins to harass him. But later, when she is arrested and charged, it's for much more than harassment. As Vernetta and Nichelle research for the civil suit and Special's criminal defense, they find a shocking link to the citywide murders. Suddenly J.C.'s investigation is hot again, and time is running out for Special.

With shades of James Patterson's Women's Murder Club, the four women use their skills to find justice in a world of deceit, addiction, prejudice and fear, where there are many motives and opportunities for murder.

Whether in the courtroom, the police station, a church or a private bedroom, Young writes with a confidence that comes from first-hand experience and extensive research. And her passion for injustice and the issues that effect women is seen strongly in MURDER IN THE DOWN LOW.

Jackie Houchin

THE MYSTIC ARTS OF ERASING ALL SIGNS OF DEATH

Charlie Huston

January 2009

Ballentine Books

I remember reading EVERY LAST DROP not that long ago and being unable to escape the feeling that the real Charlie Huston had been kidnapped and was being held by a guy in an abandoned warehouse somewhere. Well, I'm happy to report that, after reading MYSTIC ARTS OF ERASING ALL SIGNS OF DEATH, it looks like Huston jumped that dumb son of a bitch and took his ass out. While the last Joe Pitt novel may have been a bit of a hiccup overall, Huston just keeps getting better and stronger and MYSTIC ARTS is a huge step in that direction.

Others of a pay grade higher than my own have declared this book a masterpiece. I'm not quite ready to go there yet, though. While I do think that MYSTIC ARTS is a great leap forward for Huston, I don't think it's quite a masterpiece.

If you've read his crime novels then you know what to expect. The slacker hero, the humor that rides shotgun with violence but never approaching bleakness, and, in the new book more so than the others...a modicum of hope. It's vulgar and violent but there is a certain likeability level to the characters that keeps you on their side no matter what.

I love the exploration of crime scene cleaning culture, and the characters that get attracted by accident or design to this type of work. My understanding is that this may be the start of a series. I hope so because I'd love to see further exploration of this interesting sub-culture.

Web's (Webster Gilmore Goodhue) back-story is a little like an Olympic power lifter going for the record, it's a little shaky in the knees but ultimately manages to support the weight of the story.

The bottom line here is that this could be the book to take him to a new level.

Brian Lindenmuth

PARTNERS IN CRIME

CJ Henderson and Joe Gentile

2008

Moonstone Books

This is a rollicking adventure story that is straight out of the pulps with a couple of characters that should have been in the pulps. Kolchak: the Nightstalker, Boston Blackie, Johnny Dollar, Lai Wan, Candy Matson, Pat Novak, Blackshirt, Mr. Keen, and Jack Hagee are teaming up to stop an unspeakable evil that was let loose at the end of World War Two.

This book is fun beyond words, having all these characters together is real treat and Henderson and Gentile obviously love them. The story has these heroes fighting for mankind on all fronts, including different times. The buildup is wonderfully paced and the climax is amazing. Interspersed with illustrations this feels like a book that was lost in the forties and just now found and published. This is noir pulp fun the way it should be done.

Jon Jordan

THE PROGRAMME VOLUME 1 & 2

Peter Milligan/C.P. Smith

2008/2009

Wildstorm/DC Comics

Volumes 1 and 2 of THE PROGRAMME collect the 12 issue comic miniseries of the same name. Peter Galligan, comics

scribe extraordinaire, has gone back in history and made a few little changes and tweaks, adding some very interesting elements to the cold war and the path followed by the US and USSR. In this scenario at the end of WWII, like in the real world, scientists from Germany were scooped up by the winners and put to work. The US had a super soldier project in the works with two attempts, both of which either failed or were dismissed. The Russians had better luck, but politics being what they were something bad happened and Stalin screwed with the one man who had control after a drunken insult. Fast forward to modern day and things are much different. The Russians are no longer what they were and the scientist in charge gets out of a gulag and reactivates his soldiers in order to once and for all show the western powers the error of their ways. The American versions are brought on line and the results are not what they were hoping for. What ensues is a wild trip of politics, espionage and conspiracy that is high entertainment.

Milligan does a wonderful job of using enough real world scenarios to make this all too believable. What his characters do is all too human and in his writing he gives a nice insight into society and the world we live in. And I am now a huge fan of the art of C.P. Smith. Combined with the color work of Jonny Rensch he delivers a snapshot by snapshot view of the action that shows all the detail you need without bogging it down without too much detail, if that makes sense. This is stylistically a masterpiece. These two books grabbed me by the throat and wouldn't let go.

Jon Jordan

PUNISHER: GIRLS IN WHITE DRESSES

Gregg Hurwitz

2009

Marvel Comics

The Punisher franchise at Marvel is a strong one and for a long time the Punisher Max line was dominated by the writing of the wonderful Garth Ennis. When Ennis left his run Marvel brought in some crime fiction writers to take over and first up was Gregg Hurwitz.

In a small Mexican town girls are going missing. Some turn up again, confused and a shadow of who they were. Others just never come back. The town's folk ask Frank Castle (The Punisher) to come down and help them. He's no gun for hire but Frank does eventually show up and decides he needs to intervene, which usually means a lot of violence and blood.

The Punisher eventually gets to the bottom of things, but the town and the people involved will never be the same.

Hurwitz tells a great Punisher story, but he also fills the saga with a look at society and the backlash of violence, taking it a few steps past just an action story. Laurence Campbell does a nice job on the art and it sets the mood perfectly. An added bonus is the introduction by Robert Crais.

Jon Jordan

SAFER

Sean Doolittle

February 09

Delacorte Press

Sean Doolittle and his readers have had the great good fortune to be able to go from book to book without a serial structure. The result is a body of work where every book cracked is something entirely new. I love the mystery series but it's quite refreshing to have a favorite writer who is able to travel from story to story with no real baggage, just a carry on full of talents that have had him acknowledged as one of the shining lights in our genre since his first book, DIRT.

SAFER opens with a Christmas party and an arrest. Paul Calloway is accused of inappropriate sexual contact with his neighbor's 13 year old daughter. Doolittle tells the recent history of the Calloways and their new neighbors interspersed with a forward narrative of marriage, hope, brutality and despair.

The Calloways have relocated from Boston to a small town in the Midwest. Wife Sara has taken a position as an Assistant Dean at a "third tier state school with a growing reputation in Economics". Husband Paul is working as an associate professor in English. On moving day it becomes apparent that their idyllic neighborhood really isn't but the neighbors rally round the young couple. A world of cookouts, group outings and neighborhood watch. Everyone together, living an American Dream, until it becomes a nightmare.

Doolittle crafts a tale of Americana compelling, frightening and carefully manic. What drives their neighbor Roger? Why would 13 year old Brittney play this game? What motivates the good citizens and police of Clark Falls? Doolittle reins in a dozen different stories and tells a tale of haunting humanity, Crime-Fiction style.

Ruth Jordan

SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING BOOK ONE

Alan Moore

2009

Vertigo

Well, right about now the whole world is going crazy for Watchmen, and well they should, it is a terrific book. But way back when a relative newcomer named Alan Moore was offered a chance to write an American book called Saga of Swamp

Thing. His first run has been reprinted in a amazing looking hardcover edition covering issues 20-27.

The story is monumental in the course of what was in store for the character. Sunderland Corp hires Jason Woodrue to explore the remains of the swamp creature and he makes some startling discoveries. Alec Holland is truly dead and the creature is not Holland, he only has phantom memories. Boasting cameos from the JLA and The Demon at the time was most likely done to boost sales, but looking back it is still clear who the star was. Dancing on the fringe of sanity this is gothic story telling at it's best.

Moore took Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson's character and completely redefined who and what he was. And it was done with editor Wein's approval. What Moore did was revolutionary in comics and it had not been done on this scale. he took what was originally a horror comic and changed it into a human drama that covered society, the environment and the nature of who we are. it was a milestone because this type of writing really had not been done on this scale at a major house before.

This first story arc by Moore is amazing and it is one that will be read repeatedly by many. The artwork by Stephen Bissette, John Totleben, Dan Day and Rick Veitch is haunting and hypnotizing.

This is a historic book and all comics fans should own it.

Jon Jordan

SIX SECONDS

Rick Mofina

2009

Mira

I read SIX SECONDS expecting the usual well-written novel by Rick Mofina. I was stunned by how far outside of the box he went with his latest book. If you blanked out the author's name on the book and passed it around, people would say: "Good for Tom Clancy" or "Man, can Vince Flynn write."

An Iraqi aid worker loses her family in a brutal attack. An off-duty cop tries to rescue a little girl from a raging Rocky Mountain river. A mother arrives to pick up her son from school only to find her husband has taken their child and disappeared without a trace.

These three victims don't know it yet but their lives have become entangled in a plot to change the world in only six seconds.

This novel went straight to my top 10 list for 2008 and I'm sure many readers will agree with me when this book finally hits the shelves in 2009.

Don Longmuir-Scene of the Crime Books

SMALL CRIMES

Dave Zeltserman

2008

Serpent's Tail

Joe's life had been in a tailspin. A miasma of gambling, booze and drugs, ultimately culminating with him stabbing the DA thirteen times in the face and leading to his imprisonment. Now, the local mafia kingpin, near death from cancer, is planning to make a deal with the D.A., seeking salvation in the afterlife, which would result among things in a deathbed confession implicating Joe and many of his former colleagues on the police force, among others. Joe is put in the untenable position of choosing between killing the Mafioso, or the DA. As he has frequently done most of his life, usually unsuccessfully, he comes up with a plan.

Mr. Zeltserman has written a suspenseful tale that is noir at its best and as it spins out to its conclusion picks up speed like a steamroller. Despite the fact that none of its inhabitants is sympathetic, which at times made me ambivalent about the book, it kept me turning pages and unable to look away.

Gloria Feit

THE SUREST POISON

Chester Campbell

2009

Nightshadows Press

Chester Campbell's latest, THE SUREST POISON, introduces PI Sid Chance and his side kick Jaz LeMieux. Sid, a retired police chief, lives just outside Nashville, and wanted to just get away from it all. His friend Jaz works her magic and talks him into taking a case and becoming a PI. With this books opening, she has pulled some strings and gotten him another case.

A local lawyer is representing a business owner in trouble with the authorities due to a chemical spill at his plant caused by the previous owners. Unfortunately, the previous owners are more than a bit elusive. The further along Sid gets, the stranger things become and it soon becomes clear these are people who want maintain their privacy. Something very hinky is going on.

Chance is a great character. 59 years old, Viet Nam vet, ex cop and relentless. Campbell's work here is his best yet and the book has a natural rhythm that moves the story along at a nice clip. The people who populate the book are realistic and nothing feels forced. Campbell is just telling their story without embellishing, which I found refreshing. A top rate mystery by a gem of a writer.

Jon Jordan

TOKYO DAYS, BANGKOK NIGHTS

Jonathan Vankin

2009

Vertigo Comics

This graphic novel is two separate stories. Both share the theme of Americans abroad and the cultural differences that can confuse and bewilder.

The first tale is set in Tokyo, and follows a young man who is addicted to gadgetry. He has a job to cover his expenses and spends his free time getting the latest electronics. Through a twist of fate he meets a young Japanese girl who helps bail him out of some trouble, only to lead him into bigger trouble. Rich pop stars, Yakuza and a girl who just wants to have fun are a just a few of the things making life , shall we say more challenging? For Steve, our unlikely hero.

In Bangkok Nights the adventure follows two people from LA, a couple trying to fix a relationship which seems to be pretty screwed up. Marz Kay and his girlfriend Tuesday are both people with their own agendas. Marz is a minor actor with some B movie credits, Tuesday likes spending his cash and messing with him. Soon after landing they realize that the way they behave back home won't work here. Their adventure gets more interesting when they steal an elephant, get caught up in a hassle with sex workers and their bosses, and go to a kick boxing match with a transvestite champion. The stories here move at a nice clip and are very interesting. I'm guessing Vankin spent time overseas because it just feels to authentic to think otherwise. I love the way he plays the Americans, rather oblivious to the way other people live and getting in trouble as a result. It seems like they eventually catch on, but maybe just enough to keep from getting in serious trouble. It's a big world out there and TOKYO DAYS, BANGKOK NIGHTS does a groovy job of showing some of it.

Jon Jordan

THE TOURIST

Olen Steinhauer

March 09

St. Martin's

THE TOURIST, the latest novel from Olen Steinhauer, is a stand-alone that hints at a series to come. Meet Milo Weaver. In his heyday, Milo was the CIA's best Tourist, i.e. an operative rather than an analyst, a loner. Tourists have no specific country they are assigned to or a specific agenda to work from. Trouble shooters might be a more descriptive name but this is the CIA and vagueness of definition counts where illegalities might be involved. Hence, by the nature of his job, Milo is a man of many layers. Now a desk man in his late 30's (Tourism is a young man's game,) he's in pursuit of an assassin named The Tiger. Milo actually catches the Tiger (all of the spies make fun of this 'code name' but none seem to think Tourist is an odd catch phrase) and what he reveals kicks off an investigation of one of Milo's closest associates. As Steinhauer peels away Milo's layers for the reader, he seasons the plot; adding complexity and intrigue as to who'd hired the Tiger and why. Fast paced stylistically, with plenty of violence and action, THE TOURIST has lots of vivid characters, especially females. It has the spy novel's strong sense of the grey areas of espionage. Steinhauer writes as if he's been a CIA insider. If you're looking for a claimant to the throne Steinhauer, with The Tourist, looks to be the likely heir to Le Carre and Deighton.

Dave Biemann

TRUE DETECTIVES

Jonathan Kellerman

2009

Ballantine

TRUE DETECTIVES is a spin off from the Alex Delaware series featuring two half brothers, one a cop and one a PI. I first read Kellerman way back with WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS. While always a solid writer it's been a while since he thrilled me. This time he has.

Aaron Fox, a half black/half white PI brother to LA Detective Moses Reed is asked to investigate a missing girl, the daughter of a wealthy and good client's accountant. The LAPD has made little or no progress and Aaron jumps right in. The cop on the case is his brother Moses.

When Aaron was young, his Dad was a cop, partnered with Moses' Dad. When the elder Fox was killed in the line of duty, officer Fox married his partner's widow. The widow Fox was married a few more times, the last time around to a wealthy man who left her a wealthy widow, which allows her to follow her artistic whims. She tries to get the boys together but resentment from childhood stands in the way. It looks like the case may end up doing what Mom can't as they realize they need to work together.

Kellerman has really done very well. The family dynamics are appealing and feel all too real. Having the mystery being worked by a PI and cop at the same time allows for some interesting elements. The book moves fast and the conclusion is wonderfully done.

I may no longer be the fan of the Delaware series that I once was, but I am definitely a fan of this new series.

Jon Jordan

WHITE RIOT

Martyn Waites

March 2009

Pegasus Books

WHITE RIOT is more than just a great Clash song. It captures in spirit what is at the heart of this, the third in Martyn Waites Joe Donovan series. Political conflict and social unrest billowed by basic human greed. Augmented by Waites ability to use empathy and violence as paint in a vivid human picture and it is easy to see why he has won critical acclaim. ... *The sun over the city was like a magnifying glass held over an anthill, the rising temperatures setting the inhabitants aflame.*

Violence burns under the surface in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A Muslim boy is harassed for his beliefs; beliefs he's not even sure he has. Two disaffected youths are pulled into the psychobabble of a hate group. The writer of a tell-all book about an extremist political group, The Hollow Men, is getting menacing phone calls. And the spark that lights the fuse is the murder of a Muslim student, a woman, during the pre-election tumult that acts as the wick. Joe Donovan is in the midst of it all, investigating the death threats and what stems from them before the city becomes unhinged.

Waites is unparalleled in his ability to make beautiful in words what is so ugly in reality; hatred and desperation. The back-story of Donovan trying to locate his son while ignoring the broken family he already has makes this lead one of the walking wounded detectives that are often emulated but rarely written with such skill.

Jen Jordan