

Buzz Bin:

Debuting this January is British author, Belinda Bauer whose first book is **BLACKLANDS** (Simon and Schuster). It's a new twist on a serial killer story with the case already solved and done. A boy becomes obsessed with the case when he learns that his uncle who disappeared at eleven may have been a victim. As he starts to correspond with the killer he makes a mistake that places him in jeopardy. Terrific.

THE BEST OF JOE R. LANSDALE (Tachyon Press) is just what it sounds like, a collection of his best short stories. No small undertaking considering his body of work. The stories range from Sci-fi and horror to straight up crime fiction and it includes the story *Bubba Ho-Tep*. This is a must own.

BLACK RAIN (Dell Paperback) is a debut from author Graham Brown. It has thriller crowd written all over it. From the wonderful bookstore placement his last name will give him to the bold print cover. It's a globe spanning tale that involves a Mayan legend, government ops and a secret new energy source. Big book, fast read.

BLOOD TIES (Bantam) by Kay Hooper is the wrap up of the trilogy featuring a special FBI unit with agent in charge Noah Bishop. Bodies in a small Tennessee town are signs of an inhuman and violent evil on the loose, which brings in Noah and his unit. **BLOOD TIES** combines supernatural with procedural and mystery to leave the reader with a perfect blend of genres.

Bookseller turned author Vincent McCaffrey has written **HOUND** (Small Beer Press) an mystery novel set in the world of books. And while we strongly disagree with his personal contention that books are dead, he writes a hell of a tale. A murder and the trail to catching him leads through the world of book collectors (Bookhounds) and the things they love. Fans of Dunning will enjoy this.

THE CORPSE WORE PASTIES (Hard Case Crime) by Jonny Porkpie is an extremely fun book with wise cracks and wonderful observations. While an obvious love for the genre come through, Porkpie does not take himself overly serious inserting his own experiences into the book with himself as the lead. Fans of gritty crime fiction will enjoy this as will be people who just love a great narrative.

Elly Griffiths has a debut for fans of more traditional fare that is a bit dark. **THE CROSSING PLACES** (HMH) looks to be book one in a series with Ruth Galloway. Ruth is an anthropologist and in this tale she comes across the bones of a child on a dig. The police are concerned because a girl went missing a number of years back. The bones aren't hers but this peaks Ruth's interest and when another girl goes missing she gets involved in the case.

THE DISAPPEARED (Simon and Schuster) by M.R. Hall is being compared to Patricia Cornwell which is unfair. Hall can actually write a book worth reading. Jenny Cooper is a coroner in the district of Severn Vale (in the UK) and after two young Muslim men have been missing for 7 years she is asked to declare them dead. This leads to a perfectly logical reason for her to investigate and where it leads is the stuff of great thrillers. A wonderful book.

Andy McNab is another author who has a background that adds all the realism they need for what they write. A highly decorated SAS soldier gives him the knowledge he needs to make his thrillers roll, and **EXIT WOUND** (Bantam UK) is no exception. A couple soldiers come up with a plan to steal gold that belonged to Hussein. But a partner leaves them dead and the gold long gone. Enter Nick Stone who gets to the truth no matter where it will lead him. Awesome thriller.

Jonathan Gash has had a long run with *Lovejoy* and brings him back once again in **FACE IN THE POOL** (Minotaur) which opens with our favorite bad boy antiques expert in jail. The way out could kill him as he agrees to a marriage of convenience and also takes on a case which will most likely end badly. Fans of the series will be thrilled with this latest outing and new readers will most likely want to go back and read the rest.

FAMILY LIFE (Brandon, distributed by Dufour Editions) by Paul Charles is one of those books where the title nails it. A family birthday has the Sweeney family all gathering and as festivities start to roar they are interrupted by Inspector Starrett bearing news of one of the clan's murder in a neighboring town. The family all have secrets and many have reasons to be considered suspects. A great tale with a Ross McDonald vibe **FAMILY LIFE** is a rich tapestry of words put together perfectly.

Last year Daniel Suarez hit the ground running with **DAEMON**, a techno thriller that was originally self published. This year opens with Suarez releasing a sequel called **FREEDOM™** (why this is trademarked we have no idea...) It's more of the hyper thriller with the New World order brought about by computers and governments and corporations trying to assert control.

DYING GASP (SOHO) is another fine book from Leighton Gage in his series with Inspector Mario Silva set in Brazil. A girl from a prominent family goes missing and Silva is getting pressure to find her fast. The girl was taken by men trafficking in white slavery. Wonderfully paced DYING GASP is a book that uses location like another character and assures that Gage is no one hit wonder.

Every year just after New Year's just as winter starts to take it's toll we get a visit from Serge, the self crown master of all Florida trivia. Oh yah, and a bad ass psycho killer who is really just misunderstood. GATOR A GO-GO (William Morrow) is number 11 in the series and it's another winner. The running subplot in the adventure involves Serge's decision to make a film about Spring Break. It's crazy, it's fast and it's more fun than a keg party on the beach. Spend some time with Florida's first psycho.

Richard Belzer (with Michael Black) has another book in his series featuring himself as the main character. I AM NOT A PSYCHIC (Simon and Schister) has Belzer being asked to co-host a charity event in Vegas and he is getting ready to head out west he get a phone call which sets off another investigation for the TV cop. With a Marilyn Monroe type actress's suicide years ago, ties to politics and other conspiracies, Belzer jumps right in. Entertaining and clever this is a fun read.

T.Jefferson Parker has not written a single book that hasn't been terrific. His awards prove it. His latest is called IRON ROVER (Dutton) and it's another book people will be talking about all year. Charlie Hood is a member of the ATF and is on hand when a fed accidentally kills a boy. The boy turns out to be the son of a big time drug cartel member. Fast paced, down and dirty this is a great read.

JACLYN THE RIPPER (Forge) by Karl Alexander is a sequel to his book TIME AFTER TIME (made into a movie with Malcom McDowell). The premise is simple. HG Wells not only wrote a book called *The Time Machine*, he built one, and Jack the Ripper used it to travel to 1979 San Francisco. In this tale Jack has found a way back, only something has happened and transformed him into Jaclyn. It's up to Wells and his wife to stop him again in a modern USA and all the fun of modern society. Great fun.

Crimesprees loves Simon Kernick and while we think it's a crime that he's not published in the US he is doing quite well in the UK, thank you! His latest UK release is THE LAST TEN SECONDS (Bantam UK). A serial killer is caught only to be abducted from police custody soon after. Two different coppers have their own reasons to get him back, and his abductors have a reason for him not to go back. Surprising, fresh and unrelenting this is a book that will not be read slowly.

Heading to the big screens soon, LONDON BOULEVARD (Minotaur) by Ken Bruen is now out in the US in hardcover. Wonderful crime fiction involving a ex-con who wants to be left alone. Mitchell just wants to work his new job and have a normal life, but local hard man Tommy Logan won't let him. When threats hit home Mitchell needs to act. Fast and furious this is one of Bruen's true gems.

Tony Black's latest LOSS (Preface Publishing UK) is another home run featuring PI Gus Dury. Gus is trying to get his life back on track when his brother is murdered which threatens to throw everything out of balance for him all over again. Black's writing is flawless and his character of Gus is one you can't take your eyes off of, kind of like a train wreck and a ballet at the same time.

LUCK OF THE DRAW (Minotaur) is a debut novel by Anthony J. Cardieri and is a perfect New York piece of crime fiction. Deke Durgess is a detective working a serial murder case and the pressure to catch him adds to the adrenaline rush of the plot. Great first book and hopefully more coming.

Hitchcock made great use of the plot idea of a man on the run who had done nothing wrong. ORDINARY THUNDERSTORMS (Harper) by William Boyd uses a spin on that device and has created a great thriller that is impossible to put down.

Mo Hayder is one of those authors that just can't write fast enough for us. Her latest, SKIN (Grove Press/US Bantam/UK) features two of the characters for RITUAL, Flea Marley and Jack Caffery as they track a killer whose killings have ties to a series of flooded quarries. While an awesome crime fiction tale SKIN goes beyond that and into the relationships of characters and is a look at society that is timely.

SPADE AND ARCHER was a huge hit here in the states and it is now available from Orion in the UK. Joe Gore's prequel to the Maltese Falcon shows how Spade hooked up with Archer and what lead him to where he is in Falcon. Unbelievably tight this feels like was written by Hammett and it is a wonderful addition to the Sam Spade legacy.

Also by Simon Kernick, TARGET (Corgi) shows why. A writer (Rob Fallon) has a few too many drinks and sets himself up to do something he shouldn't with a friend's girl. Before he can follow through she is abducted. When he looks into it it is as if it never happened. While Fallon is pretty sure he isn't nuts, he is starting to wonder. And if he doesn't figure this all out, he could be dead. Fast paced and gritty this is just another in a line of great books from Kernick.

Set in the late 60's TOO MANY MURDERS (Simon and Schuster) by Colleen McCullough is the second novel featuring Carmine Delmonico. On April 3rd 1967 twelve people were all murdered, all in different ways with seemingly nothing in common. Chief of Detective Delmonico has his work cut out for him and he has to traverse the university in the small town and the corporations as well as the small town subtleties that only get more complicated with the addition of the FBI. This is a great read from a truly great author.

THE TRAITOR IN US ALL (Five Star) is the latest from Robert S. Levinson and is another terrific thriller. In California two girls are murdered and a third kidnapped, and what looks like a brutal crime, but not that extraordinary, takes on a different tone when freelance writer Jack Sothern pieces things from the crimes together with facts from a diary of East Germany's former State Security Minister. A white knuckle read with twists and turns that make Ludlum look like a beginner.

The Wyatt Hunt series by John Lescroart is to San Francisco what Harry Bosch is to LA. In TREASURE HUNT (Dutton) one of Hunt's operatives hits on a case that will bring The Hunt Club into the world of philanthropy as one of the major players is murdered. The story which follows the case through secrets and strange goings on and is paced perfectly. The real star here is the city the book is set in.

WASHINGTON SHADOW (John Murray, a division of Hachette UK) by Aly Monroe is the second book in the series featuring Peter Cotton. In this outing Cotton is undercover, sent as part of a delegation to Washington DC from the UK. Truman has called due the loan to the British and there is a belief in some circles it is a plot to keep the Brits from becoming powerful again as an industrial leader. As Cotton looks for the truth all he seems to find is more and more deception while he deals with people who live their lives in the shadows. Fast paced and great espionage action this is a terrific read.

A new Irish voice is heard in WINTERLAND (Minotaur) by Alan Glynn. Two men named Noel Rafferty are killed on the same night, one in a gangland style killing the other in an auto accident. Police write it off as coincidence, but Gina Rafferty doesn't buy it. As she looks into the deaths she finds herself in a shadowy place of business and politics in this terrifically contemporary hard boiled tale.

Jack Higgins is a true master of the thriller and THE WOLF AT THE DOOR (Putnam) is further proof of this. Someone is targeting a group of men who shouldn't be able to be killed. Sean Dillon needs to find out who is targeting these men with ties to the Prime Minister and stop the threat. Lightning fast plot drives this adventure.

From Robin Burcell comes THE BONE CHAMBER. Sydney Fitzpatrick is teaching at Quantico. Reevaluating life away from being an F.B.I. field agent. An agent comes asking for Sydney's help with a forensics sketch and she agrees to help. What Sydney doesn't know is that agent already suspects the body's identity and will do anything to protect the case he's working on.

From here Burcell takes her reader on a new kind of adventure. International conspiracies, shady alphabet men, Freemason history and the possibility of a biochemical disaster drive THE BONE CHAMBER and the history of Rome's architecture provides the climactic setting. Sydney Fitzpatrick S.F.P.D. has transitioned nicely into F.B.I. agent Sydney Fitzpatrick. With THE BONE CHAMBER, Burcell fans will see her future and it may well be spy related.

Book Reviews Issue 34

ALL MY ENEMIES

Barry Maitland

2009

Minotaur Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 1996, this intriguing British procedural, part of a series featuring DCI David Brock and DS Kathy Kolla, has finally crossed the Atlantic. The wait was well worth it.

Kathy is to begin her new assignment in the Scotland Yard Serious Crimes Branch, and the day before Brock calls her and asks if she would join him at the scene of the brutal murder of a young woman. This leads to a series of murders,

and Kathy, along with her colleagues on the team, investigates various possibilities, although forensics has little to guide them. While the plodding work goes on, she follows what leads develop, however implausible some of them appear. Eventually, she discovers an amateur theatrical group whose the script might as well be written in blood. The clues are deceptive and the plot ingenious, even good theater. The dialogue and prose is as good as it gets, and the character development superb. The novel is suspenseful and engrossing, and is recommended. Next up for this reviewer: Mr. Maitland's latest, *Dark Mirror*, published in the US in October.

Theodore Feit

AN OLD CHAOS

Sheila Simonson

2009

Perseverance Press

The protagonists of Sheila Simonson's Latouche County series, following the excellent *Buffalo Bill's Defunct*, taking place about three months after the conclusion of that book, are back: the county's chief investigator, Rob Neill, and his girlfriend, head librarian Meg McLean. As the book opens, Rob's mentor, Sheriff Mack McCormick is contemplating retirement. He and his wife, Beth, have moved out of their long-time home in Klalo, in western Washington State, and into a new McMansion several miles out of town, in Prune Hill, a gorgeous development of six new homes, only partially inhabited as yet, within sight of Mount St. Helens.

When Rob's cousin, Charlie, a geologist, turns up in town, two things happen in quick succession: Rob finds out that the Prune Hill development is on a site Charlie had classified as Class II, meaning a Landslide Hazard Area, and apparently reclassified as a Class III, meaning approved for residential development, but before Rob can act on the information and investigate further, there is a major landslide, and that entire portion of the mountain falls, destroying anything and anyone in its path.

There are intimations of graft, corruption, and bribery, and there's no telling where the investigation may lead. The county commissioners, the developer and his investors, and even the county clerk may have been involved; there is even the possibility that Mack himself, a father figure to Rob, may have had something to do with it; how else to explain the fantastic deal he got from the developer on the purchase price of the house?

Although there are a few deaths [whether or not they are murders must be determined], this is primarily a character-driven book. From Rob and Meg, Beth and Mack, Maddie Thomas, principal chief of the Klalos, and her husband, Jack, to the various other inhabitants of the small town, civilian and politicians alike, they are deftly brought to life by Ms. Simonson, who lives in Vancouver, WA. Her love for and appreciation of the beauty of the Pacific NW is made clear to the reader, and some arguments for and against its development are cogently set forth. The book was a fast and a good read.

Gloria Feit

AUNT DIMITY DOWN UNDER

Nancy Atherton

February 22, 2010

Viking

Billed as "The Paranormal Detective," Aunt Dimity exists--but only to Lori Shepherd. Stuffed rabbit Reginald and a journal are Lori's means of communication with her. When Lori opens the journal, Aunt Dimity writes her answers to Lori's statements and questions, then the writing disappears after Lori reads it. Of course, Auntie helps Lori solve the mystery and gives her encouragement to go on.

In this story, 101-year-old twins, Ruth and Louise Pym, want Lori to find their long-lost brother who went to New Zealand as a young man. Lori leaves behind husband Bill and their twin boys. Her husband's friend, Cameron, takes her the length of the two islands to find the only remaining family member. It's a tour of New Zealand and a lovely one at that.

The only mystery is if they will catch up with the relative, so there are no bodies, other than natural deaths, and no untoward acts. A lovely, heart-warming story. Cozy.

Gay Toltl Kinman

BAD MOON RISING

L.F. Crawford

2010

Five Star

Detective Art Murry is on a cruise with his opera singing brother, Lance, and his partner, Detective Billy Kidman. The purpose of the cruise is to dull Murry's pain after his girlfriend dumps him. It's not working, and Murry spends most of his time drunk.

When a passenger is mauled to death in the ship's hot tub, Billy is New Orleans Detective Jean Grallan's prime suspect, and Murry must sober up if he's going to clear his partner's name and find the real killer. The murders are the work of a wealthy socialite, Sylvania Benoit, and her sexually manipulated boyfriend, Thomas Samson. Sylvania has mastered the

art of shape-shifting into a wolf and has exploited that gift to satisfy her desire to kill. Trouble is, Samson should never have shared his family secret, and if his relatives find out, he and Sylvania are dead as their victims. Murry's investigation is assisted by his visions, an ability he got after an encounter with a voodoo sorcerer. The case also draws his girlfriend, a medical examiner, back to his side, but for how long? The book has elements of a cozy—the operative brother, Billy the Kid, an impending wedding—but if you're looking for a sweet story, this isn't it. References to serial killers, crucifixions, and rape require a taste for the dark side, but fans of supernatural suspense will have plenty of odd encounters to keep them satisfied.
Jacqueline M. Vick

BAJA FLORIDA

Bob Morris
2010
Minotaur

Morris' fifth book in his Zack Chasteen's series has the now signature Florida setting and humor that flows more smoothly than a ice cold Corona on a hot beach. Zack is asked by an old friend to do him a favor, find his estranged daughter so he can spend time with her before he passes away in a few weeks. The daughter in question was last seen on a boat headed for the Bahamas with some friends, and since then has gone missing. Seas filled with pirates make the disappearance of the first PI on the case a bit more dangerous than a regular missing person case. While it seems most people mention the humor of the books by Morris it sometimes seems that makes people forget to mention how good he is at plotting. The story moves in interesting surprising directions that in hindsight make perfect sense. Add great characters to the mix and you've got a few hours of great reading to look forward to.
Jon Jordan

BROKEN PLACES

Sandra Parshall
February 2010
Poisoned Pen Press

In this series, set in the present, veterinarian Dr. Rachel Goddard and Deputy Sheriff Tom Bridger team up to solve crimes in Mason County, Virginia. Two murders later in this story tests their relationship sorely. The first victim is Cam Taylor. He's been a activist for many years, but had turned his talents into doing anything to keep his failing newspaper from going under. He targets a local celebrity, Ben Hern, a good friend of Rachel's, and tries to get money from him. Rachel witnesses their argument, and later finds Cam's body. That puts her in jeopardy, as the rumors multiply about her involvement, namely, that she saw the murder, which isn't true. The roots of the murder go back to the 1960s when a group of VISTA volunteers came to the area and changed the chemistry of relationships in this small community. Someone is fueling the rumors. Is it Cam's daughter, Lindsay, a former lover of Bridger and who wants him back and Rachel out of the picture? Or Ben's mother who was a friend of Cam's? Or someone else, for some unknown reason? Tempers flare from everyone. Rachel and Tom both ask questions and get information, but they don't share which puts both of them in danger. Tom finds a diary written by another murder victim and from that figures out who the murderer is. The title comes from Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills."
Gay Toltl Kinman

THE BRICKLAYER

Noah Boyd
February 2010
William Morrow

Steve Vail was fired by the FBI. Now they want him back. They send a new Deputy Assistant Director to get him. Kate Bannon has never worked with him, but she knows of him. She knows that he doesn't recognize incompetent authority, that he lives by his own rules, that he does what he believes to be right even at great cost to him. So she knows the buttons to push in this instance. The case the FBI needs Vail for is complicated. Someone is extorting money from the FBI using threats that have the power to convince the FBI to pay up. The agents sent to deliver the money are very good at what they do, and they are still killed. The demands escalate. There is good evidence leading the FBI to believe that one of their own is behind the extortions.

Vail agrees to work with Kate, although his feelings about dealing with the regular guys at the Bureau make this an uneasy pairing. His disdain for authority continues to rub the brass the wrong way; his ability to get results rubs salt in the wound.

THE BRICKLAYER is densely plotted, and the suspense makes 400 pages go by very quickly. The tension between Vail and Bannon is handled well - not mawkish, not too blatant, believable. For readers who want that hero who does what's right, Vail can easily join the ranks of Rain and Prey. Readers who want a good puzzle can thank Boyd for a job well done. Let's hope there is another Bricklayer book in the works.

P.J. Coldren

BUYING TIME

Pamela Samuels Young

2009

Goldman House Publishing

Pamela Samuels-Young has written another grip-your-seat-and-hang-on-for-the-ride book. Her chapters, filled with tension and twists, are short and brisk and leave the reader anxious to know what happens next.

In her first standalone novel, *Buying Time*, Samuels-Young introduces a new set of characters. Angela Evans is the bright but socially insecure Assistant U.S. Attorney heading a task force to investigate fraud of the most nefarious kind. The insurance policies of terminally people are being bought up by a company dealing in viatical settlements; they offer desperate people much needed money for their final days. Angela believes the company is pressuring sick people to sign away their policies for peanuts.

Enter Waverly Sloan, a recently disbarred attorney. He needs money to hang onto his materialistic wife, and viatical brokering for Live Now is a lucrative business. At least until his clients start dying ahead of schedule. Suspected of murder, Waverly's troubles have only begun.

As usual, Samuels-Young's characters have depth. While there are definite bad guys, many of the characters who are involved in shady activities are layered people, even likeable when they're not selling crack or embezzling funds. And even when her characters make choices that cause you to scream "Don't do it!", their actions are the result of reasoning rather than fortuitous acts to make the plot work.

Samuels-Young is a master at raising the stakes, and just when you think the worst has happened, new complications set in.

Jackie Vick - writersinresidence.blogspot.com

CORPSE ON THE COB

Sue Ann Jaffarian

February 2010

Midnight Ink

Jaffarian bills her heroine, Odelia Grey, as plus size, which means there's lots of good food mentioned in this book. Odelia discovered the whereabouts of her birth mother whom she hasn't seen for thirty plus years. Her wheel-chair bound husband, Greg Stevens, buys her a ticket from cozy California to the small Massachusetts town where mom lives.. Her mother is supposedly working a booth at the Fair. O. goes there and learns that her mother will be back shortly. To kill (yes!) time she goes into the corn maze (not maize). Then--O. finds her mother in the most dramatic fashion--bending over a corpse. Next to turn up is one of her mother's sons, a police officer, so she also meets her half-brother.

Of course, hubby is incredulous that O. has found another body, so he sends friend Willie to get her on the next plane home. That doesn't happen because O. still hasn't had a chance to confront her mother with the question that has been burning in her brain all these years. She eventually gets her answer and has to deal with that. In the meantime, she discovers she has another half-brother who is also a police officer. Since the murder involves her mother and her two half-brothers, O. can't leave yet. She doesn't believe mom did it, and she works with her half-brothers to find out the real story. The murderer thinks O. knows who he or she is and wants to get rid of her. O. comes out of the encounter bruised and battered, but alive. All this does is confirm her suspicions of who and what was involved.

Gay Tottl Kinman

CRUCIFYING ANGEL

P. I. Barrington

2009

Desert Breeze Publishing

This futuristic romantic suspense novella of 110 pages is set in 2032. Det. Sgt. Payce Halligan, Las Vegas Police Department, and her new partner Gavin McAllister from England, investigate serial murders in the now-defunct city. The three victims have been crucified. As the two detectives wait for the lab and coroner's reports, they talk about the fact that twenty-nine years earlier toxic pollution and the depleted ozone layer affected the surrounding fragile desert ecosystem.

There were 'endocrine disruptors' that turned fauna males into females and cross breeding of species occurred. Not a good time for a walk in the desert.

Plus, we learn the law allows implantation of 'addiction disrupting chips' into the brains of habitual users.

The adult Disneyland we knew as Las Vegas is dead, and every living creature is just trying to survive. So what is in the mind of this serial killer?

The first victim, LeighAnne Alanza, became a 'dweller' in the New Creation religious community. The detectives don't come away with a good feeling about their questioning of the residents there. (Think Stepford wives.)

Gavin describes Payce as wearing a jumpsuit of desert dun, with hair "cut blunt....a bit askew as if she'd just pulled off a motorcycle helmet." Nevertheless, he is attracted to her.

This is the first book in the Future Imperfect series, and the second will be out soon.

Gay Tolt Kinman

DEAD AIR

Mary Kennedy

2010

Obsidian

Set in the present, Dr. Maggie Walsh is a talk radio psychologist in Cypress Grove, Florida. She has just had the pleasure (?) of interviewing Guru Sanjay Gingii. Later he is found dead, and the suspects surface. Det. Rafe Martin lines up Miriam DaBosh, Sanjay's assistant, who efficiently ran his empire; Kathryn Sinclair, who considers he killed her daughter; Lenore Cooper, Sanjay's former wife who helped start his career; Olivia Riggs who was moving up in the organization, perhaps about to take over from Miriam; and--Lark, Maggie's roommate, who was the last one to see him alive.

Maggie finds Rafe quite delectable and wants to help him with the investigation. She is able to come up with background info that Rafe can't get. This is the first in the Talk Radio mystery series. Humorous. Cozy.

Kennedy is a clinical psychologist, multi-published, and a former radio copywriter.

Gay Tolt Kinman

DEAD AND KICKING

Wendy Roberts

December 2009

Obsidian

What a fun book! Set in Seattle in the present, Sadie Novak is in the Hazmat biz. She works closely with the Seattle Police Department to clean up messes dead people leave. She also talks to those who have been murdered or haven't committed suicide--and helps them pass over. Her sister, Dawn, knows about her 'gift,' and so does her psychic friend Maeva.

Complications arise--Sadie's Dad has died and is trying to move on, but she isn't helping much--she doesn't want to let go, as there are things left unsaid between them. Her mother doesn't believe in her gift and thinks she needs a good psychiatrist; her employee and lover, Zack, is up to no good and is back with his former lover. The latter complicates things even more because his former lover, Paula, hired Sadie to clean up her mother's house, an abode of an obsessive hoarder.

Paula's mother's house has a spirit that is quite abusive, so cleaning up the house is hazardous to one's health. Sadie tries to find out who the spirit is, but who can tell her except Paula's mother, now on the dementia trail. Sadie is stressing out, making mistakes, plus someone is harassing her. It's just one mess after another. But humorous for the reader.

There is enough information in the book about Hazmat cleanups to give the reader an idea of what it is like, but not enough to cause any internal disturbance. A very interesting fast-moving, cozy.

Gay Tolt Kinman

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Jackie Griffey

2010

Five Star

Set in Memphis, Tennessee, this upbeat, heartwarming story is about Maggie Murphy, 25, whose husband Horace was just killed in a motorcycle accident. Even this isn't downbeat because his spirit is around comforting her and trying to get his murder--yes!--investigated. A handsome young--and single--police officer, Joe Driver, comes to tell her the news of Horace's death. Instant attraction.

She learns from Horace's friend, Happy Harris, who was with him at the bar just before the accident, that two no-goodniks were trying to talk Horace into doing something he didn't want to do, and that one of them put something in his drink.

Aunt Myrtle comes to the rescue as Maggie needs a job. Auntie helps her get one with a cousin in a newspaper office. Her romance with Joe continues.

Meanwhile the no-goodniks are trying to find out what she knows, thinking it's more than it is, and they work at tactics to scare her, or even worse, get rid of her.

Another man turns up dead, in a separate case involving the newspaper, which she helps solve. She turns her information over to Joe and he tackles the technical aspect of both cases. The situation gets even more serious as the FBI becomes involved with the second murder.

At the end we learn what happens with the no goodniks from their POV, but the book is mostly from Maggie's. The story is as good as the chocolate cake that is present quite often in the meals mentioned in the book.

Gay Toltl Kinman

DEATH AT THE ALMA MATER

G. M. Malliet

January 2010

Midnight Ink

Homecoming means different things to different people, but one of those returning to fictitious St. Michael's College of Cambridge University didn't expect it be permanent--as in the last resting place.

Told from the POV of several returnees--Lexy Durant, her former spouse Sir James Bassett and his wife, India Burrows Bassett. Other characters include: Constance and Karl Dunning, Hermoine Jax and Gwennap Pengelly (crime reporter), Augie Cramb (American millionaire), Sebastian Burrows (India's son who will do anything for her) and his lover Saffron Sellers, Americans Constance and Kare Dunning, and, of course, sleuth Portia De'Ath (no, I didn't make that up) who is also the lover of Chief Inspector Arthur St. Just, the lead on the murder investigation.

St. Just asks Portia about each of the characters involved--she knows all of them as she is a resident of the college.

Needless to say, there are a few conflicts and 'history' among them, as he soon finds out. He tells her to stay out of the investigation. (Where have we heard that before?)

They have all been invited by Dr. Marburger, the Master of the college, to attend the special homecoming weekend--as they are rich, and the college is in need of funds.

Sebastian goes rowing on schedule, as he always does, and returns to find a body by the boathouse. Alibis are established for everyone, so who did it and why?

There is a list of characters at the beginning of the book which helps keep them straight.

Gay Toltl Kinman

DEATH OF A VALENTINE

M. C. Beaton

2010

Grand Central Publishing

Followers of Hamish Macbeth, a police sergeant in Lochdubh, a village in northern Scotland, will enjoy his latest adventure. Hamish is a bachelor and many people are trying to change that, especially his new assistant constable, Josie McSween. She requested this outpost for a reason--Hamish. Apparently she is about to succeed in changing Hamish's status as the opening chapter is set at the altar. Yes!

But Hamish is praying "Dear God, if there is a God, get me out of this!" The rest of story is a flashback.

We feel for Hamish as he tries to elude the matrimonial streak that seems to be in all the females of the area. Don't they know he's happy on his own, relishing his bachelorhood and enjoying the company of his cat and dog?

The main mystery involves a beauty queen who receives an explosive valentine package. Literally. As Hamish, with Josie in tow, delves into the girl's background, they don't find the angel she appeared to be. Au contraire! But who would want to kill her and in such a gruesome way? Hamish looks for those with explosive-making experience. In the meantime he captures a lion, and a few other miscreants along the way, in spite of Josie's 'help.'

Another winner in this over two-dozen book series!

Gay Toltl Kinman

DOUBLE BLACK

Wendy Clinch

January 2010

Minotaur

This lady has a future. Billed as a 'Ski Diva Mystery', Stacey Curtis from Boston ends up at a small Vermont resort in the winter. That part is okay, because she loves to ski. The bad part is that she has no money and has to sleep in her car--or find an empty condo. The latter is quite empty--except for the body. She calls the police anonymously, then skedaddles. She doesn't want to stick around and answer a lot of questions--that she has no answer for.

Her job at a local watering place, the Broken Binding, gives her enough money to rent a room--but with the local sheriff's family. Ah, well, any port in the storm, and there are few in this town. The victim was the son of a rich family and that puts a few complications into the investigation. Since it's a small town, and everyone knows everyone... Danny, a homeless man, tries to put things together. Is he going to be expendable? Is Stacey? The author switches POVs in the chapters, so one page will be of Stacey, another of Danny, some of the Sheriff, and so on. Mostly written from Stacey's POV. Seamlessly and well-written. Good plot. Interesting look at the skiing industry.
Gay Tolt Kinman

DRAGON MOON

Rebecca York
2009
Berkley

Vandar, ruthless vampiric ruler of a parallel universe, has managed to enslave its inhabitants including those with psychic abilities, a trait identified early and nurtured diligently. Why cultivate science and the arts when you can use mental powers to move objects, inflict pain and smooth out any remaining rough spots? Unfortunately for Kenna, a lovely psychic slave in Vandar's kingdom, her master isn't satisfied with ruling his side of the universe. He knows enough about the universe of humans to know that science rules, and many humans who have psychic abilities have never received any training. Easy prey. Kenna is groomed as a spy, subdued by Vandar's ability to inflict crippling headaches from another world, and sent forth to bring back objects and information about Vandar's next conquest. But Vandar didn't count on love or the existence of his own twin, Ramsay Gallagher. Kenna meets Talon Marshall, a werewolf and member of a clan of werewolves. Eventually he learns about her abilities and the place she calls home. Kenna and Talon are neither strange nor frightening to each other, and Talon finds himself bonding with her as his lifemate, a process that is only partially voluntary. In order to forestall Vandar's invasion, the Marshall werewolf clan and Vandar's twin Ramsay Gallagher join forces to battle Vandar in his own lair. This book combines elements of science fiction, horror, and in the end, classic melodrama with the nearly helpless damsel in distress, an incomparably evil villain, and an unlikely hero. A fast and furious read!
JoAnna Senger

A DUTY TO THE DEAD

Charles Todd
2009
William Morrow

A promise made to a dying soldier, a sinking ship and one nurse. Charles Todd takes us on a gripping ride through England in 1916 and Bess's Crawford's journey. Bess is a volunteer nurse on the ship Britannic at the break out of World War 1, she becomes close with one of her patients, Lieutenant Arthur Graham, as she watches Arthur pass away she makes a promise to him. A promise that will change her life forever. After the ship sinks, Bess makes her way to the Graham household to deliver Arthur's message and finds herself in the middle of scandal and murder. Bess never thought delivering one message could be so complicated. Charles Todd delivers again, a gripping, page turner that you won't be able to put down. Find out what unfolds for Bess at the Graham house, who did it, and what exactly did they do?
Christy Hintz

EGGS BENEDICT ARNOLD

Laura Childs
2009
Berkley

Billed as "A Cackleberry Club Mystery," it is the second in the series featuring Suzanne Dietz as an amateur sleuth. She and her friends, Petra and Toni, own and operate an upmarket restaurant and bookstore in Kindred, a small town. Suzanne takes a cherry pie to Ozzie Driesden, owner of a funeral home. She discovers he has now become his own client. George Draper, his partner; Bo Becker, his assistant; and Earl, the former husband of Missy, who was Ozzie's girlfriend, are all suspects on Sheriff Roy Doogie's list. Plus there's a mysterious homeless man running around.

Missy wants Suzanne to find the killer. First, Suzanne has to find out why Ozzie was killed. In running the business, the three owners have several events that keep them busy and several other adventures. Embroiled in this, Suzanne is able to pick up some information.

Lots of talk of food throughout, and recipes at the end. Childs also writes *The Tea Shop Mysteries*, and the *Scrapbooking Mysteries*.

Gay Toltl Kinman

THE END OF THE ROAD

Sue Henry

2009

Obsidian

The end of the road is Homer, Alaska, but it's also the end for two people in the story. Maxie McNabb and her doxie, Stretch, meet a man while they are out walking on November 1. He tells her his name is John Walker and he's a visitor who has always wanted to see Alaska. She invites him, her son and a few friends over for dinner. A good time is had by all.

However, the next day John E. Walker is found dead with a bullet through his head. There's no identification in his wallet. Why he killed himself is the mystery. Maxie goes about her business taking us on a tour of life in Homer and Anchorage where she goes for a few days with Stretch and picks up a few pieces of information.

A picture is found in a book John gave her, but his identity is still a mystery.

When Maxie comes home more mysterious things happen and another body is found. This time she puts the puzzle together and also puts herself in danger. When she needs him most, Stretch falls asleep on the job. Bad dog!

Quintessent cozy from this multi-published author. Billed as a Maxie and Stretch mystery.

Gay Toltl Kinman

FACES OF THE GONE

Brad Parks

2009

Minotaur Books

Four people with no apparent connection to each other are executed in a vacant lot in Newark. The local cops, in an effort to keep the lid on trouble, leak a story to the media calling the murders revenge for a bar holdup. But investigative reporter Carter Ross' nose-for-news tells him that there's plenty wrong with this explanation. Ross sets out on his own to run the true story to ground. Along the way he runs into strippers, the homeless, drug dealers, and gang members before he learns the one thing that all four of the victims had in common. Even once that is discovered, Ross still has no idea who the killer is. But the killer knows who Ross is and targets him.

This is an entertaining first novel from Brad Parks, who describes himself as "an escaped journalist." While the subject matter is grim, the author brings a solid (and at times laugh out loud) sense of humor to the story to keep it from being too grisly. Parks tells the story primarily from Ross' first-person viewpoint, but between each of the chapters, the reader is given a brief third-person glimpse of the villain. At first this seemed awkward but eventually it helped give definition to a villain who otherwise might not have been fleshed out otherwise.

Carter is surrounded by a well drawn though predictable cast of characters. There is the gay newspaper intern, the curmudgeonly boss, the sexy editor who wants to make a baby with Ross, the deadly villain, and the like. If the identity of that villain is too easy to spot, it's still fun seeing Ross unmask him in the tense finale.

Ted Hertel

THE FIRST RULE

Robert Crais

2010

Putnam

First line: "Frank Meyer closed his computer as the early winter darkness fell over his home in Westwood, California, not far from the UCLA campus."

Joe Pike returns to the forefront in Robert Crais' sixteenth novel, *THE FIRST RULE*, when a man and his family are murdered during a home invasion. The man, Frank Meyer, happens to share a distinct characteristic with Joe Pike, red arrow tattoos on his deltoids.

When Pike is questioned about the murders, his mercenary past resurfaces. Frank Meyer was once part of Pike's team. Now Pike is determined to find out who took down one of his men so he can make them pay. A simple enough task for Joe Pike until the stakes are raised when an infant child being used as a bargaining chip is thrown into the mix.

Whenever you think that Robert Crais can't get any better, he publishes another book. Joe Pike has always played the

part of an enigma. And while he still plays that role, Crais has given us a tiny peek at the workings of this mysterious character who spends most of his time hidden behind his department-issue sunglasses. Crais does not, however, let us inside Pike the way we are permitted inside Elvis Cole. The Joe Pike novels are written, appropriately, in third person. One of the elements of the Elvis Cole/Joe Pike novels that has always fascinated me is the relationship between Joe Pike and Elvis Cole's cat. I've always felt that the relationship is a reflection of Pike's closeness to nature and the ultimate good. The cat doesn't have all the gray area that humans create; it's simply a life of survival. Crais brings that even more to the forefront in *THE FIRST RULE* through Pike's connection to the infant boy.

On the surface Pike is a loner, but the reader who sees the Pike Crais has created throughout this series knows Pike may physically walk alone most of the time, but his relationships define him. In *THE FIRST RULE* we see his relationship to his "team" long after the team has been disbanded. We see his relationship to the infant child. And, of course, we see his relationship to Elvis Cole. It's these relationships that drive Pike to smash "The First Rule" under his heel and hurl it into the Pacific.

Even at 320 pages, *THE FIRST RULE* is a one-sitting book. The plot is fresh and fast. Crais' penchant for witty dialogue and breath-taking writing has never been stronger. The only warning I offer for *THE FIRST RULE* is prepare to leave a bit of your soul with Joe Pike.

Jen Forbus

THE FOURTH ASSASSIN

Matt Beynon Rees

February 2010

Soho

Billed as an Omar Yusef Mystery, the story is set in New York City in the present. Yusef, from Palestine, is part of a delegation to the U.N. headed by the country's president. Yusef visits his son, Ala, in a large Palestinian community in Brooklyn. The story, set in winter, opens as he goes into his son's apartment and finds him dead. Or so he thinks. While he is contemplating this, his son walks in and identifies the body as that of one of his three roommates--Nizar, Rashid and Ismail--a hint at the title.

However, Ala is arrested and Yusef feverishly goes around the neighborhood trying to find the real murderer.

Whether the community is true to the bone or not, it feels like a real microcosm. Although they are living in another country, the people try to duplicate their life in Palestine, even down to the crime they left there, including the drug dealing. So it turns out, they left nothing behind, whether they wanted to or not.

Yusef meets a Palestian-American NYPD officer, and with the police chief of Bethlehem, also part of the delegation, they try to prove Ala innocent.

Like a Russian novel, some characters have two names. The author won the CWA New Blood Dagger, and that won't be his last award. Fantastic story!

Gay Tolt Kinman

THE GIRL IN HITCHCOCK'S CLOSET

Robert Graysmith

2010

Berkley

Graysmith is probably best known for *ZODIAC*, a true crime book that really stands out and is still read today. His obsession with that case was documented in the film *Zodiac*. It's pretty obvious that when Graysmith gets his teeth in something he doesn't let go. I've recently re read *ZODIAC* and still really like the book and think it is classic true crime. In *THE GIRL IN HITCHCOCK'S CLOSET* (also true crime) he examines a mystery that started in the early sixties.

Jennifer Leigh's body double for the movie "Psycho" was a woman named Marli Renfro. Stories surrounding her are the stuff of the best urban legends. She was killed or disappeared and links to a serial killer inspired by the movie abound.

Graysmith does what he does best. He tracks down every thread and piece of evidence as far as he can. I won't reveal what he discovers, but will be a surprise to many.

Filled with anecdotes and information about filming on "Psycho", Hollywood of the sixties and with research that just won't quit, Graysmith has put together a book that is entertaining, informative and engrossing.

Jon Jordan

THE GLASS OF TIME

Michael Cox

2008

Norton

Reading a Victorian novel.

Each time I pick it up it comports itself like Nytol on my body and brain and I am soon in very deep sleep. In my dreams, under the tomes affect, I lay on my bed, asleep, struggling to wake. At times I make it as far as lifting my drugged head and torso from the bed as heavy arms struggle up and graceless hands grab at a blanket that acts as securing web on my

head. And I sink back down. And once down the dream begins again. I must wake. I must wake. But body and brain won't listen! I must wake! I must wake!

Hours later I wake from this imposed nap and find the day has slipped away along with the Victorian novel from my hands. I shan't pick it up again.

Jen Jordan

GRINDER

Mike Knowles

2009

ECW Press

Picking up GRINDER you'll notice blurbs from Ken Bruen, Victor Gischler and Thomas Perry, which are the first clue that this is straight up crime fiction. Clue two comes from the noir-ish silhouetted person on the cover. All doubt is removed upon reading; this is crime fiction in a world with bad decisions and bad men and lots of shades of gray.

Wilson is a man who got out; he left the violence behind along with his previous life. But like most who live that kind of a life it's never gone for good. He brought back to his old home by a local mobster named Donati to find the missing nephews the mobster feels responsible for. Doanti can't trust anyone so the only logical step was to bring in someone who is no longer a part of the game. But Wilson soon finds that he falls back into the lifestyle with ease while searching for the missing boys.

I won't get into an argument about the difference between noir and hardboiled writing here, I'll just say that this is picture perfect hardboiled writing. Knowles has a real grasp of the underbelly running under society and his characters all breath with authentic boozy cigarette breath. A great read and a great new voice.

Jon Jordan

GUTSHOT STRAIGHT

Lou Berney

January 2010

Harper Collins

Charles "Shake" Bouchon is being released from prison. But first he has to defend himself against Vader Wallace, a man who wants him dead. Using his street smarts and his preferred weapon of choice, a phone book, he escapes his would be killer.

Now on the outside he has to deal with two new issues. One issue is he is too nice for the work he does. The second is waiting for him in a limo outside. Alexandra Ilandryan, the head of the Armenian mob, his former boss and lover. She has a job for him. It will set him up with enough cash to open his dream restaurant. This brings up his an old issue. He can't say no.

The job is a cakewalk. Take one package and deliver it to a guy, pick up a briefcase from said guy and bring it back to Alex. If only it were that easy. The package turns out to be a housewife, Gina, and she is to be delivered to a guy who works for Dick Moby, aka the Whale. Shake decides to free Gina and is now on the run from Dick, Dick's goons, Alex and Alex's mob.

GUTSHOT STRAIGHT is a page-turner. You feel for Shake. You want to make sure he is OK. And it sinks the reader knee deep in prison life, the seedy underworld side of Las Vegas strip clubs and Panama!

Lou Berney's debut novel is a hit right upside the head with a phone book. I'm looking forward to more novels with Shake.

Jon Jordan

HARDBALL

Sara Paretsky

2009

G. P. Putnam's Sons

Set in Chicago in the present, V.I. Warshawski, the author's series P.I. heroine, searches for a man who disappeared forty years ago. And does she open a can of worms!

The story starts with a flash forward when V.I. goes into her office and finds it trashed. Her only clue is a white bracelet that her just-graduated-from-college cousin, Petra, wore. The security video shows Petra entering the code on the building's key pad with a man on each side of her. Her accomplices? Or was she coerced or forced to open the door, and then later kidnapped?

Then the story goes back to what set Petra on this course, and what the men were looking for. V.I. case is from an old woman who wants to find out what happened to her nephew as he disappeared in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King riots of forty years ago.

As V.I. digs deeper she learns a murder was committed that may have involved her uncle, Petra's father, Peter, along with members of the Chicago Police Department--including her own father, Tony. Does she want to go there?

The title comes from the type of 'game' the players in this story played. Vintage Paretsky.

Gay Tolt Kinman

HER HIGHNESS' FIRST MURDER

Peg Herring
January 2010
Five Star

Henry VIII is on wife number six. His children tread very lightly around him, as he is in almost constant pain and liable to do just about anything, no matter who is brave enough to intercede. Elizabeth is living, at least temporarily, at Hampstead Castle. When one of her attendants breaks a leg, a physician is called in. An unlikely friendship grows between Elizabeth and the physician's son Simon. Simon is not perceived by those around Elizabeth as a threat; he has a physical deformity and is thought too young to be angling for power.

Prostitutes have been found dead in London, dressed as nuns and with their heads removed. This causes Henry VIII some distress, for obvious reasons. He allows Simon and Hugh, a captain in his Welch Guard, to investigate, but only after a woman of some social standing is killed. Elizabeth becomes very discreetly involved because the woman was living at Hampstead at the time of her death.

The religious situation in England makes it very difficult for the sleuths to ask some of the questions they'd like to ask. The fact that the victims cross social lines also makes investigation difficult. Herring makes good use of the various skills of her sleuths in order to bring the killer to justice. All of this without sending the king on a rampage.

Herring has done a great job. She conveys the complexity of Henry's court, the strains this places on everyone around him, in a manner sympathetic yet neutral to the political back-story. She manages to bring contemporary thought about serial killers, their motivations and actions, to the sleuths in such a way that those thoughts do not seem anachronistic.

The budding romance between Simon and one of the servants in Elizabeth's household is handled well; the potential for growth in that relationship bodes well for the next book in the series.

Herring also gives us a complex portrait of Elizabeth before she becomes queen: a young woman unsure of her future, giving a great deal of thought to what happens around her, and constantly assessing what those happenings may mean to her. One can easily see how her young life made her into the queen she eventually became.

P.J. Coldren

INVISIBLE

Paul Auster
2009
Henry Holt

In spring 1967 aspiring poet and Columbia University student Adam Walker meets the enigmatic Frenchman Rudolf Born and his seductive girlfriend Margot. Born offers to fund a magazine idea that Walker has. But things begin to go very wrong one evening after Walker sleeps with Margot while Born is out of town. Born and Walker are mugged on their way to a restaurant. Born stabs the attacker, then refuses to allow Walker to call for an ambulance. The attacker dies and only later does Walker's conscience make him call the police. He considers his failure to act as "the most reprehensible thing I have ever done."

Thus begins Paul Auster's fifteenth novel. Three different narrators from 1967 to 2007 tell the story in four parts. Much of the novel is in the form of manuscripts of a proposed book by Walker. It is, as one would expect from Auster, a literate and literary tale. While filled with sex and violence, it hardly can be classified as either a mystery or much of a crime story. Instead it is actually a character study of each of the narrators and, to some extent, what the respective narrators come to believe about the others involved. Auster tells a coming of age story where truth is bent (perhaps shattered completely), as different tellings of events come Rashomon-like to the surface. In the same way that history is written by the victors, so too is other "nonfiction" written from the viewpoint of an author, in this case Walker, an author who will put his or her own spin on the "facts." It is then up to the reader to decide what is truth and what is fabrication.

Overall the book hit as often as it missed. I found it an interesting experiment on the part of Auster, but one I would not want to repeat.

Ted Hertel

THE LAST EMBER

Daniel Levin
August 2009
G.P. Putnam's Sons

Attorney Jonathan Marcus is called to Rome to consult on a high-profile antiquities case for his law firm. Having been a former doctoral student in the classics, he's in high demand for cases such as this one. But in this case he finds himself opposite his old flame, UN preservationist Emili Travia, until secrets begin to emerge related to the fragment of a stone map Jonathan is called to examine. When Jonathan and Emili join forces and begin to follow the clues, they find

themselves traveling from the ruins of Rome to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in order to preserve Judaic and Christian history.

There were parts of THE LAST EMBER that reminded me of THE DA VINCI CODE and parts that reminded me of an INDIANA JONES movies. It is filled with Biblical history, intrigue, politics, and adventure. The book is written with a pace that is quick and there's constantly action ensuing. THE LAST EMBER is definitely a plot-driven novel; it's a treasure hunt. The exotic locales of the novel add to the intrigue in the plot, and the rich symbolism from Biblical stories adds to the mystery. Anything surrounding Jerusalem is dripping with political issues and power struggles. History has shown time and time again that people will go to great lengths for their beliefs. Not having a vast knowledge of all the issues surrounding this plot, I can't speak to their validity. I did find the plot complex and fascinating in its depiction of various theories and beliefs with a few well-placed twists to add to the suspense. The plot also requires the reader to have a certain element of faith.

Focus in this book was not on the characters; they are static characters who serve their role in the grand scheme of the plot, and I didn't find that I made any great connections with any them.

All in all THE LAST EMBER is an entertaining, enlightening read.

Jen Forbus

LOCKED IN

Marcia Muller

2009

Grand Central Publishing

Muller has done something different this time. McCone is in a Locked Down Syndrome after being shot. Her mind is active, but the only body movement she can control is blinking her eyes. So how can an author write a book with the main character in this situation? Muller will show you.

Each chapter, two to three pages, is from the POV of a different character. If you are a fan you'll recognize the names. Of course, they include husband Hy Ripinsky, her P.I. Agency operatives, nephew, sister-in-law, and others. They are all working on cases and report back to her when they are stuck. She gives them a clue in what direction they should be going, but mostly it's them, just talking it out and seeing what they should do.

Who shot her has to be linked to one of the cases, but which one?

Very clever format. Of course, we get McCone's thoughts, as she is quite frustrated at not being able to talk or move, but happy to be alive and able to think and reason.

It's 281 pages, so you won't be staying up all night--only part of the night. And, in case you're worried, there will be more McCone books.

Gay Toltl Kinman

MINT JULEPS, MAYHEM AND MURDER

Sara Rosett

April 2010

Kensington

The title covers it all. This series, set in North Dawkins, Georgia, features Ellie Avery, a military wife, mother of two young children, a stalwart member of the Mom Stroller Brigade, and a professional organizer. The latter job opens doors for her so she can gather information about murders.

Her husband's squadron commander is killed and his wife, Denise, is the suspect. Ellie doesn't believe Denise did it. Hard on the heels of this, her husband's cousin, who is visiting them, is shot and wounded. Homemade bombs are placed around, but there seems to be no pattern as to when and where they go off, and no reason why they are set.

Ellie spends time with Denise to help her to pack up, and she helps another wife get organized. She learns several secrets from both that help her pinpoint the killer.

Lots of information about being a military wife, life on a base, the politics thereof, and managing two young children. Most chapters end with organizing tips. Rosett is the wife of an Air Force pilot, so knows what she's writing about. Cozy.

Gay Toltl Kinman

THE MISSING INK

Karen E. Olson

2009

Obsidian

Billed as "A Tattoo Shop Mystery," and that's where the 'Ink' in the title comes from. What a wild ride in Henderson and Las Vegas NV! In the Venetian Hotel, Brett Kavanaugh has her shop with three assistants, Joel, Bitsy and Ace. No lack of work apparently.

A woman comes in requesting 'devotion,' as it's known in the trade--a heart with a name in the center--'Matthew'. The woman says her name is Kelly Masters and gives Brett a rough sketch of the proposed tattoo. Brett tells her she will work on a final sketch and have it ready when she returns tomorrow for her appointment.

Then the wild ride starts. The woman disappears. Brett is questioned because she may have been the last to see her. Brett learns her customer's name is Elise Lyon, not Kelly Masters. And--Elise was supposed to be married over the weekend to Chip, whose father, Bruce Manning, is a very rich developer. Chip's name is not Matthew, however his best friend / chauffeur's name is, and so is the brother of a friend. Brett's head is almost in the Venetian canals. What is going on? Brett and her shop get lots of publicity, as this is the hot story of the moment. A body is found, possibly one of the women, but which one? Lots of questions are posed, but very few answers are available.

Brett's housemate is her brother who is a police officer for LVPD and he reveals a little information, but he gets more than he gives as Brett is in the thick of a mix-up, and Elise has left something at her shop that someone wants.

Lots of humor, and an inside look at the tattoo trade. Cozy.

Gay Toltl Kinman

THE MONSTER IN THE BOX

Ruth Rendell

2009

Scribner

Set in Kingsmarkham, Inspector Reg Wexford, Rendell's series character, sees Eric Targo, a man he suspects has killed a few people. He has no proof other than his intuition. Plus, he feels the man has stalked him on two occasions, as though to flaunt his crimes. Even if Targo did the killings, Wexford cannot come up with a motive, nor can he connect Targo with the victims. He tells his partner, Mike Burden, about his feelings but Burden dismisses Targo as a killer.

Another thread in the story is Dora, Wexford's wife, and her friend, Hannah, who are trying to help a 16-year-old Pakistani girl to stay in school. They suspect the family is trying to arrange a marriage instead of letting her attend school. Hannah keeps going back to the family and following up on all leads as the girl is missing, but no one will admit it.

Of course, the two threads come together.

The title refers to Wexford's feeling about Targo--that he is a monster, and the man is constantly on his mind. Wexford's daughter was taking a counseling course years ago and told him to put all of his thoughts on the subject in a box, maybe even a match box, then to close the box and put it away somewhere. So Wexford does exactly that about the man he thinks is a monster.

Another great Rendell book.

Gay Toltl Kinman

NO MERCY

Lori Armstrong

January 2010

Touchstone

The oft-told advice to write what you know is taken by Lori Armstrong who has a history in the firearms industry and as a South Dakotan. One thing she is not is an ass, which her new protagonist, Mercy Gunderson, is. Writing a strong female lead that isn't merely "feisty" can lead to broad strokes which may well be justified by Mercy's background as a black op (of sorts) sniper in an ugly war. On leave due to an injury she doesn't care to disclose to her family, she finds herself back on the ranch after her father dies with all eyes in the family and the community looking to her for an answer to one question: will she sell?

Will she sell to those wanting water and grazing rights? Will she sell and share the money with the only family she has left, a sister with a rebellious teenage son? Or will she sell to those who want to divvy up the land into hobby ranches for the rich?

The body of a friend of her nephew Levi is found on her land and this opens up old ones as well as new. Levi is an angry young man seemingly involved in a gang fresh off the reservation. This brings the man that replaced her father as sheriff to her home and Mercy does not take kindly to the smolderingly hot Mason Dawson. Mercy is told by others that this new sheriff is doing little to nothing to solve the murder and Mercy takes it on herself to find the killer. The more hard-drinking, reluctant detective Mercy finds out, the closer trouble comes to roost in her home. A home she left by choice and was forced to come back to.

The bodies pile up quickly in NO MERCY. Too quickly for this reader. I am not offended by high body counts and loved David Bowker's literal pile in RAWHEAD IN LOVE. But here adding more murders to the mix didn't move the story, a good story, forward. Isn't one murder enough to affect a family and, truly, a whole community?

Body count aside, Armstrong has created an unequivocally strong character. One that is strong enough to carry a series and complex enough to evolve and stay fresh. The Dakotas are wonderfully depicted and the possibility of addressing crime on and off the reservation will bring me back to Mercy.

Jen Jordan

NO MORE HEROES

Ray Banks

March 2010

HMH

It seems almost like a tradition that each year we write a near love letter to the work of Ray Banks. His Cal Innes series had an incredible start with SATURDAY'S CHILD, and somehow expanded and improved upon itself with DONKEY PUNCH and with the third installment, NO MORE HEROES, Banks continues to prove his worth not simply as a crime author, but a novelist with something to say about the dark heart of modern Britain. So let's get the punch line out of the way: NO MORE HEROES is likely to be among the best British Crime Novels of this year. In fact, scratch the likely. This is crime writing at its most powerful, the way we wish it could be all the time.

What marks this series out from many others is the willingness of the author to not only create a fairly selfish and absorbed lead character - despite his protestations to the contrary, Cal Innes isn't any kind of traditional hero - but to allow him to grow (and not necessarily up) as a character. This doesn't mean he learns any lessons, consciously or otherwise, but rather that you feel he is not quite the same by the end of the novel as he was at the beginning and, even more surprisingly, he carries that into the next book of the series. Cal Innes makes mistakes, changes his mind, acts unreasonably, frequently does the wrong thing when the right thing is staring him in the face... this isn't the action of your typical British lead. It's not the action of your typical crime lead. It's the action of a character who's had the strait-jacket of dramatic convention removed. Oh, this isn't your granny's crime fiction.

Cal Innes's scars are not simply physical - although he could take the prize for most abused character in crime fiction history, making even Ken Bruen's creation Jack Taylor seem like a man whose life is all happiness and sunshine - but also mentally. He reacts to bad situations by building up his psychological armour, by subscribing further to his own deluded fantasies about his own self. He rebuilds and recreates himself. He lies. And worse, believes these lies himself.

His addiction to prescription medication should take the blame for much of this, but that's only one facet of Cal's self-harming policy. He seems to throw himself deeper and deeper into bad situations, mixing with bad people because he then has an excuse for thinking; *I'm better than this*. Working for a slum landlord is a step down from his oft ambitions to be a PI at the beginning of SATURDAY'S CHILD, but it's easier for Cal to cope with, making someone else's fuck-ups rather than his own. The fact that he doesn't even like his employer - sleazy dodgy-dealer, Mr Plummer - is only one more symptom of Cal's search for a hard-luck story. He deliberately seeks out the bad work, the dodgy work, the down-at-heel life because then he doesn't have to blame himself. He can maintain his personal fantasies about being a good guy in a bad situation.

But Banks throws Cal a real curveball here, turning him into an accidental hero when he saves a bunch of students - and Cal can't even stand the bastards - from a house fire. He briefly becomes something of a local celebrity, even starts up his PI business again, albeit due to his running off at the mouth when interviewed by the local paper rather than through any real sense of ambition. But he doesn't become a hero. Oh no, that would be pat and simple. And Banks doesn't like to offer such neat turn arounds or developments. To do so would be a betrayal of everything that has made this series - even in such a short time - one of the most complex and intriguing sequences of novels that modern British crime writing has had to offer.

Instead he offers hard questions about choice and responsibility, a running theme through his work. Cal's new status brings with it a responsibility that he simply can't face up to. It's a responsibility other characters - very specifically Paulo, who runs the local lad's club - seem to recognise and encourage Cal to embrace, but it's clear he doesn't fully understand the opportunity that's been thrown his way. He's still - as in SATURDAY'S CHILD - confusing a kind of play-acting (as a PI, as a local hero) with real responsibility and accountability. He can say all the right words when he wants, but it's rare that he has the follow through and you soon realise this is because he doesn't want to face the truth of his situation. Banks's work - like the best kind of crime novels - is focused very strongly on character. But more than most, these characters feel very real and conflicted. Many writers use weaknesses in their characters to highlight strengths, or to simply provide a degree of dramatic tension where Banks uses character as far more than plot device, allowing his cast to create an absolute illusion of reality and the sense that - quite literally - anything could happen to them.

And it helps that he uses them to disguise his themes rather than bring them directly to the surface. Part of the novel deals explicitly with right wing movements, but does so without ever once feeling like an "issue led" plot line. While Cal feels disgust at the attitude of certain characters - particularly the appallingly middle class woman who asks him to sign her petition in the supermarket - it is more an extension of the character than a substitute for the author. Banks is an expert at subtext, allowing his concerns to bubble gently beneath the surface so that when you start discussing character and action in the novel you suddenly realise that - without ever intending to - you're talking about far larger issues.

Indeed, there are few writers who truly capture modern, urban Britain with the authenticity and sobriety of Ray Banks. Nothing about the setting feels hysterical or reactionary. More, it feels solid and recognisable; a portrait of the UK as seen from the street level. The move away from this setting in DONKEY PUNCH only highlights the grim nature of urban life in Britain as seen here, and the contrast between the near dreamlike City of Angels seen during Cal's excursion and the gritty, shitty concrete world in which he finds himself working for a slum landlord is startling and affecting. This is a crime novel grounded in the real world. We've praised Banks before for shying away from serial killers and grand

schemes and NO MORE HEROES continues this tradition of showing us a world that feels concretely real. The far right "villains" aren't scheming, manipulative geniuses so much as they are fools who try to justify their anger against others. The coppers aren't out trying to solve that one big crime so much as they are part of the background, probably taken up more with paperwork than law and order. Drug dealers aren't necessarily evil so much as businessmen, and thugs aren't always evil as much as daft - perhaps even coming close to "lovable" (or as close as one can in a Banks novel) with the brilliant supporting character of Daft Frank, who complements Innes perfectly in their work together for Plummer. The fact is that Banks, rather than writing a crime novel, is actually chronicling the street level society of modern Britain with a brutal honesty that sets up questions about the world without ever offering pat answers.

There are no moral absolutes. There are merely people, their hopes, fears and delusions.
This is noir.

This is NO MORE MORE HEROES.

Russel McLean - author of THE GOOD SON and LOST SISTER

OUT FROM UNDER

Brian Shaughnessy

2009

Shannon Road Press

Retired NYPD cop, Brian Shaughnessy's experience is evident in OUT FROM UNDER, the second thriller in his UNDER series, after MAN UNDER. The cop-speak, the teasing and testing of mettle, the heroism, camaraderie and competition all ring true, and we get an authentic look at what it's like to be a cop in the big city. But Shaughnessy shines the spotlight not only on New York's Finest, but also on a few of its dirtiest.

The book begins with a brief flashback to September 11, 2001 when hero Firefighter Tommy Bowen repeatedly enters the flaming North Tower of the World Trade Center to rescue its fleeing occupants. He thrusts a woman out the door to safety, and then turns to help one last victim. Dust and smoke roil around them, glass shatters, rubble begins to fall, and then the building collapses.

The annual memorial service held in honor of fallen 9/11 heroes includes Tommy Bowen, who, only the day before had been set to go on trial before OATH (Office of Administrative Trials & Hearings) for extreme misconduct, which would have ended his career and possibly landed him in prison.

Now six years later, witnesses and members of that disciplinary board are being systematically murdered, and Detectives Kevin McCaffrey and Vinnie Venera, of the Major Case Squad, must find the killer. All the evidence points to a ghost, especially after the final woman to escape the North Tower swears she has seen Tommy Bowen.

Office politics and sexual tensions abound in Shaughnessy's taut thriller. And as the jaws of the law tighten around the killer, he seems always to evaporate before their eyes. Suspense and uncertainty build for the reader, as the thin trail leads to a showdown full of surprises. And for good measure, the author adds a thoroughly satisfying mop-up epilogue.

Jackie Houchin

PARIAH

Dave Zeltserman

2009

Serpent's Tail

In his fourth novel, Dave Zeltserman has managed to outdo himself and created even more worthless characters than those who peopled his last book, Small Crimes, perhaps best exemplified by its protagonist, Kyle Nevin. To say that Kyle is unsympathetic is to greatly understate the matter. The right-hand man of "the" mob boss in his South Boston neighborhood, he had done whatever was asked of him, e.g., killing people, breaking legs, picking up protection money, and robbing banks, the last of which put him in prison for eight years for armed robbery. Kyle served the whole length of the 5-8 year sentence imposed, so as not to be troubled by any potential parole conditions or plea agreements.

As the book opens Kyle, now 42 years old, has just been released from prison, fueled in equal parts by plans of revenge against the man who had set him up - none other than his former boss/mentor/protector [for whom he had worked since he was 11 years old], as well as straightening things out - one way or the other - with the woman he had loved, who had broken off all contact with him the day after his sentencing. Self-described as being "like a pit-bull, all he needed was the smell of blood to bring out his true nature," seemingly comprised in equal parts of rage and sang-froid. And just when you think things can't get any worse - well, you know how that tune goes.

One of the things that sets this book apart, in addition to the fast-moving plot, is that its narrative form is apparently a proposed manuscript being written by the now celebrity-gangster-turned-author for whom the public has apparently developed a voracious appetite. The satire invited by this is done to a turn. But the book is unquestionably very dark, and its protagonist utterly despicable.

Gloria Feit

THE RAIN GODS

James Lee Burke

2009

Orion

Hackberry Holland is a Texas sheriff carrying around haunting ghosts from his past. Pete Flores is a young Iraq vet with ghosts of his own. The two men and their ghosts cross paths when Hackberry uncovers a shallow grave filled with nine murdered illegal immigrants. Hackberry's investigation and Pete Flores' knowledge of the crime bring both men into the cross hairs of a passel of criminals who will do just about anything to keep the mass murder buried.

James Lee Burke introduced Hackberry Holland back in *LAY DOWN MY SWORD AND SHIELD*. Hackberry still had a story to tell and thus he returns in *THE RAIN GODS*, where Burke remains at the top of his game.

As is par for the course in a Burke novel, the setting comes alive and takes on a character role in the story. In addition to his masterful use of setting, Burke also has a gift with character development. And he doesn't relegate that development strictly to the protagonist. Burke's villains are as complex and layered as any other character in the novel. Preacher Jack Collins is a prime example of that complexity. The reader would be hard pressed to find a character from literature with a blacker heart or a more kaleidoscopic development, which makes him all the more intriguing.

What continues to baffle me as a reader of Burke's novels is how he can build up a villain to be repulsive and evil and yet there's always some element, sometimes very minute but still present, of sympathy. James Lee Burke has a way of tugging at the reader's every emotion. Maybe it's the beauty of the language, or his extraordinary talent with a tale. He certainly didn't disappoint in *THE RAIN GODS*.

I listened to *THE RAIN GODS* on audio book, read by Tom Stechschulte. I thought Stechschulte did a nice job narrating *THE RAIN GODS*. His tone matched what I would imagine Hackberry's to be: slow, measured. I found myself imagining Sam Elliot. I think Stechschulte did an outstanding job with Preacher Jack Collins and bringing out a sense of judgment on the world. Overall a good narration.

Jen Forbus

THE SECOND DEATH OF GOODLUCK TINUBU

Michael Stanley

May 2009

Harper

Detective David "Kubu" Bengu is summoned to Jackalberry bush camp when a double murder occurs. One of the tourists was shoved off a cliff while another was mutilated in an almost ritualistic manner. The local police and camp owners theorize that Goodluck Tinubu was killed in a drug transaction gone bad. But as Kubu begins to investigate, drug dealing doesn't seem to fit with the character of the Zimbabwean teacher. The further Kubu investigates and the closer he comes to the truth, the closer danger comes to Kubu's own front door.

In the follow-up to *A CARRION DEATH*, the writing team of Michael Stanley brings Kubu back bigger and better than ever. This time Kubu heads to the northern area of Botswana. *THE SECOND DEATH OF GOODLUCK TINUBU* has a complex, multi-layered plot that brings the lands, the people and the issues of Botswana alive in a plot more linear than *A CARRION DEATH*.

Kubu's full character keeps with the traits that made him so endearing in *A CARRION DEATH*. His love of family, food, and spirits, mixed with his humor and intelligence create a character readers can easily connect with. *THE SECOND DEATH OF GOODLUCK TINUBU* taxes Kubu more, however, as he deals with the threats against his family, which adds a new dimension to his character. Even Kubu's parents play a slightly larger role in this novel, again reinforcing the importance of family to the detective.

I continue to look forward to my visits to Botswana with Kubu. They may be filled with murder but the mystery of the land and the convivial detective make it all worth the while.

I listened to *THE SECOND DEATH OF GOODLUCK TINUBU* on audiobook, read by Simon Prebble. Prebble does an outstanding job with the good detective, bringing each character to life. In this novel, Prebble had to also incorporate an Australian accent, which he did seamlessly. I also think Prebble does a commendable job switching between genders. It is a wonderful recording and well worth listening to.

Jen Forbus

SERPENT IN THE THORNS

Jeri Westerson

2009

Minotaur

Crispin Guest, a 'defrocked' knight, earns his living as a Tracker, or a medieval detective, in London. His current case is from a dimwitted woman, Grayce, who says she killed a French emissary. She also tells him the body is in the room she shares with her sister, Livith. Crispin goes with her and finds the body with an arrow in it. Now he is sure she didn't murder

him. He also finds a box that contains a relic sent by the French king as a peace offering to the English king and brought by this emissary.

More arrows fly, but with a few injuries. One misses the king. Crispin is not a prudent man when it comes to keeping himself out of harm's way and acts more like a medieval Dave Robicheaux.

He tries to protect the two women by moving them from their lodgings and work to another place, but they go from the frying pan--as does Crispin. He does manage to 'hide' them in plain sight, and there's a bit of irony there. Jack Tucker, a young boy who has attached himself to Crispin, and considers himself his servant, plays a part in this story. He's a cutpurse thief and brings trouble with him. Lots of everyday life in the settings--definitely not the good old days.

Crispin expects another attack on the king, so he's in the thick of it, and ends up being the prime suspect. Lots of action.
Gay Tolti Kinman

SNOW ANGELS

James Thompson

January 2010

G. P. Putnam's Sons

James Thompson's debut novel, *SNOW ANGELS*, features Inspector Kari Vaara investigating the brutal murder, and possible hate crime, of a beautiful, well-known Somali immigrant...in Lapland...near Christmas...on a reindeer farm.

As Inspector Kari Vaara begins to investigate this murder, he discovers ties to his ex-wife and her present lover, as well as ties to the son of one of his detectives. The closer he comes to the case, the more his pregnant, American wife begs him to back away before something disastrous happens.

Lapland, Finland in December is night 24 hours a day; they call it *Kaamos*. The day-long dark contrasted against the stark white snow is perfect symbolism for this stunning crime novel. It is chock full of contrast, the setting being the most visual use of contrast.

Thompson himself was born and raised in Kentucky but has lived the last ten years in Finland. He brings his two worlds together through Inspector Vaara and Vaara's American wife, Kate. Through their union he is able to incorporate contrast between the two countries in the way people think, live, and deal with crime.

And sometimes the starkest contrast occurs in perceptions.

Thompson emphasizes how silent a culture Finland fosters, and this lends itself well to the traditional noir hero. That makes the use of the first person point of view vital to the reader's connection with Vaara. Otherwise, he would likely come off as an emotionless robot.

Vaara in many ways is alone in his investigation, partly by circumstance and partly because of this culture of silence. But his relationship to Kate is close and life-renewing for him, again contrasting with his first marriage that destroyed him emotionally. Kate has to step away and let Vaara deal with the case alone, but she tells him that she'll be there when he returns.

Written in the tradition of classic noir, *SNOW ANGELS* quickly pulls the reader in to this foreign, exotic land draped in darkness. It is an essential debut for the noir lover, so bring your flashlight, let's read.

Jen Forbus

THEREBY HANGS A TAIL

Spencer Quinn

2010

Atria

THEREBY HANGS A TAIL is Spencer Quinn's follow-up to his New York Times Bestseller, *DOG ON IT*. In this outing, P.I. Bernie and canine sidekick, Chet, are called on to find a missing contessa and her show dog, Princess. The ante is raised even further when reporter Susie Sanchez also winds up missing. This adventure separates Bernie and Chet, takes them to "Nowhereville," and matches their wits with a pair of nomad Hippies. And everything is told from the point of view of Chet.

THEREBY HANGS A TAIL warmed this animal-lover's heart. I have not yet read *DOG ON IT*, but rest assured I will be back-tracking to do just that. The use of Chet as the storyteller is a fresh perspective on crime fiction. And as a pet-owner myself I found myself nodding and chuckling as Quinn brought out behaviors I've seen in my own dogs. The humor comes from the animal's rationale for the behavior.

The use of this perspective also throws another challenge into the puzzle of the mystery. The narrator is unreliable because he doesn't always understand what's going on and he isn't always privy to all information. On the other hand, he often has information that the humans don't, especially information related to sound or smell. But together Bernie and Chet make a great pair of detectives.

The realism of these two crime fighters is a big part of the draw for *THEREBY HANGS A TAIL*. And while the book provides a fresh perspective, it also incorporates many of the traditional characteristics of the private eye: a loner with issues. Bernie is divorced and only has partial custody of his son Charlie. Quinn hints at a problem with alcohol. And Bernie's finances are less than stellar.

From these rich characters, Quinn creates a plot including elements of the Wild West, the 60s and the Westchester

Kennel Club Dog Show. It's packed with humor, with tenderness, and with action. The combination keeps the pages turning, and Quinn leaves one last present for the very end: a cliffhanger, reassuring the readers that *THEREBY HANGS A TAIL* will not be the last tale of Bernie and Chet.

Bernie and Chet have assured themselves a place on my list of favorite P.I. pairs.

Jen Forbus

THE THINGS THAT KEEP US HERE

Carla Buckley

February 10, 2010

Orion

Not a mystery. There is a question in the beginning as to how baby William died, which is pulling apart husband Peter Brooks and wife Ann, and affecting their two young daughters, Maddie and Kate. We learn what happened in the last chapter, but the story is not an investigation of the death.

A case could be made that it's a pandemic thriller, as the story is about the avian flu virus. A long (396 pages), but interesting story about one family trying to survive the epidemic. Schools, public offices, etc. are closed to prevent the epidemic. Cities close their borders. Families quarantine themselves in their homes. No electricity, no supermarkets open, and it's the dead of winter in Ohio, not far from Columbus and set in the present. No snowplows, no gas for heating or for vehicles. People are stealing.

Peter, about to divorce Ann, is a scientist at the university, working on the virus. He describes the piles of dead birds he sees. When the facility closes, he takes his young Turkish assistant, Jasmine, to Ann, as the girl has no place to go. He stays with them, also, instead of going back to his small apartment.

People are dying to the right and left of them in the neighborhood, and one woman brings her baby to them to care for as she has the virus.

An interesting look at how people act under that kind of stress.

Gay Tottl Kinman

TICKET TO RIDE

Ed Gorman

2009

Pegasus

Ed Gorman is a legend in the mystery community and has accrued a loyal following of fans for his work. His latest book, *TICKET TO RIDE*, brings his eight book series featuring Sam McCain to a close. It began with *THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED* in 1999.

It's 1965 and Iowa lawyer McCain is not having a great year. The first resident of Black River Falls to return from Vietnam arrives home in a coffin. Groups are petitioning for women's rights, civil rights and against Vietnam. Sam gets involved with a rally against the war and as Black River Falls is a small town the anti war feelings are not commonly shared. Local leader Lou Bennet has a stroke at the rally and two murders follow Bennet's collapse. The victims seem to have ties to a woman who died in "suspicious" circumstances in a house fire two years earlier.

Gorman never fails to deliver with the whodunit angle. *TICKET TO RIDE* is no exception. It is a perfect detective tale.

What makes this book more special is the way Gorman writes of the time period. It's a snapshot of a time looked on nostalgically and with reverence but we see that not everything was wine and roses.

This is a remarkable book and a wonderful way to end a great series. Thank you Mr. Gorman.

Jon Jordan

TOMMY GUN TANGO

Brant Randall & Bruce Cook

2009

Capital Crimes Press

TOMMY GUN TANGO is not so much a mystery as it is a re-telling of the mysterious death of a real Hollywood producer in 1932. It is the author's quite believable conjecture as to how it might have happened; including the major roles played by corrupt politicians, city police, and film industry bigwigs.

Throughout the book, the author uses clips from his fictional tabloid, *The Hollywood Daily Tattler*, to recreate delicious and malicious rumors of the day, as well as factual accounts of the court proceedings. Everything about his Hollywood feels authentic to the era.

But this author's true genius lies in his ability to create extraordinary characters with distinctive voices (be they man or beast, hero or villain), and to tell a compelling story that holds readers captive until the last page is turned.

As in its prequel, the main protagonist-narrator in *TOMMY GUN TANGO* is Marshal Lawe, an ex-lawman out of work due to the absence of crime (and people) in his small hometown of Peony Springs, Massachusetts. He decides to go "out

West” to find a job and to look for Gladys, the girl he’d been “sparking” back home. She’d lost her business after the Market Crash and had moved to LA to live with relatives before Lawe had a chance to pop the question. Half way across the country the lawman runs into (literally) Al Haines, a garrulous, gambling, Irish city slicker, who’s posing as a hobo for his own good reasons. He’s a crook, but you can’t help loving him, and by book’s end you’re certain he’ll be around for the next installment.

Jackie Sue, the teen sexpot who caused all the trouble in the previous novel, has a huge role in this book. She’s come to Hollywood to be a “Star” and has remade herself into a glamorous Jean Harlow lookalike, changing her name but not her modus operandi. As Gayle Barton-Pool, she’s still using her looks and her body to get what she wants ... until she’s offered a gig she can’t refuse.

The book offers credible, if fictional closure to the question of the producer’s death. Marshal Lawe seems to solve his romantic dilemma with only a few surprises. As for Al Haines and Jackie Sue, let’s just say there’s more to their stories. Rumor has it that a descendent of either Lawe or Haines is the hero in Bruce Cook’s 2006 thriller, PHILIPPINE FEVER.
Jackie Houchin

TOO MANY MURDERS

Colleen McCullough

2009

Simon & Schuster

On April 3, 1967 Captain Carmine Delmonico is faced with twelve murders. In their wake chaos breaks out in the small city of Holloman, CT. Intensifying the expected logistical nightmare, the head of homicide must coordinate these twelve investigations without playing favorites between his two sergeants, both vying for the same promotion.

The most prestigious victim is Desmond Skeps, head of Cornucopia--a manufacturing conglomerate with several US military contracts. But murder is not the only problem at Cornucopia. Someone’s been selling secrets to the Russians. Other victims include a hooker, a student, and a benign old lady, all killed by different methods, but Delmonico is convinced that one person is behind all of the deaths, at least as an instigator.

The book’s title sums up the reader’s experience. Twelve different murders complete with victims and suspects mean a lot of names to remember. While McCullough does a good job of making each character unique, it’s difficult to connect with any of them, and having to dig back through the pages to figure out who’s who takes the zing out of otherwise shocking revelations.

The first murder is deliciously sinister and would have made a great focal point for any mystery, but it fades into the background for much of the novel while other plot threads take over. McCullough brings great descriptions to the page, and her characters are enjoyable. The novel is worth the effort because of her writing style, but it will take the reader’s full concentration to pick through the multiple murders and clues.

Jacqueline M. Vick

A TWISTED LADDER

Rhodi Hawk

2009

Forge / Tom Doherty

This saga of 540 pages is about the LeBlanc family with mind-bending capabilities. The story alternates between the past--starting with 1912 near New Orleans-- and the present. Chloe LeBlanc, a black woman born in 1895, married a white plantation owner. She has the ‘gift’ and genetically passes it on to her children, but they have to practice it starting with ‘pigeon games.’ She is still alive in 2009 and still causing havoc.

It’s also a story about madness. When heroine Madeleine LeBlanc sees and talks with another being that no one else sees or hears, is she going mad? Maybe. Maybe not. She is a psychologist and became one so that she could understand her family, specifically her father’s schizophrenia. A little irony here.

A man she grew up with also has the gift. He is now on trial for two murders. Madeleine is the only witness and soon that is turned against her. Madeleine’s boyfriend is also a doctor in the same field working on a different aspect of the brain. His ideas may help her survive.

Caveat: Graphic sex and violence scenes. The author won the International Thriller Writers Scholarship for this book. Beautifully written.

Gay Toltl Kinman

THE VEILS OF VENICE

Edward Sklepowich

2009

Soho Books

Urbino Macintyre, an American and long-time resident of Venice, is a good friend of Contessa Barbara da Capo Zendrini, and together they solve mysteries in the series set in this beautiful city.

The Contessa's cousin, Olimpia Pindar, is found stabbed with a pair of scissors and Barbara's maid, Mina, is kneeling beside the body of her good friend saying she killed her.

End of story.

Not quite.

It's clear to the officials that Mina stabbed her friend, and they have a confession so...case closed.

Barbara and Urbino know that Mina didn't do it. But who did? Olimpia's family lives in the decrepit palazzo, which has a small museum on the lower level. The family members are a cast of characters, to say the least, and any one or all of them had a good motive to get rid of Olimpia. But which one?

Barbara is organizing an exhibit of fabric designer Mariano Fortuny (a real person), while Urbino is researching and preparing to write the catalog of the exhibit by reading the letters the family have. These two projects give them ample opportunity to investigate the crime in the palazzo and talk to its inhabitants.

The beauty of the book, as always in this series, is Venice, which could be considered the main character. The reader is firmly in place in the setting and the life of an inhabitant. Set in the early winter season, the first snowfall dusts the Doge's palace turning it into a visual piece of confection, Urbino reports.

Gay Tolt Kinman

VENGEANCE ROAD

Rick Mofina

2009

MIRA Books

This first in a new series from Rick Mofina introduces Jack Gannon, a reporter for a Buffalo, New York newspaper going through what every paper in North America is enduring: the constant threat of downsizing or closing down. Jack, once a contender for a Pulitzer Prize, is now thirty-four and single; he had been with the Buffalo Sentinel for ten years, and still dreams of moving to New York City. When he comes upon a story where the opportunity for a huge scoop nearly falls in his lap, he seizes upon it. The story involves the horrific murder of a young woman, Bernice Hogan, who had a history of drugs and the prostitution necessary to support her habit.

Gannon's investigation into the murder suddenly takes an expected turn when he discovers the shocking identity of the leading suspect. When he convinces his editor of the legitimacy of his source, while standing by his pledge to keep that person's name secret, he lands a front-page headline, to his peril. He refuses to be intimidated, however, vowing "to see that in death, [Bernice] received the respect that had eluded her in life." And then the woman's best friend disappears, and the degree of danger, and suspense, escalates quickly.

I have to reluctantly admit that I found the writing, at least in the early sections of the book, frequently overly melodramatic. Of course I should also state that the story itself is inherently a melodramatic one, made all the more so by an underlying thread dealing with Gannon's sister, who seemingly disappeared after leaving home years ago when she was seventeen. But, e.g., when Gannon decides to stake out the house of the man the police have named as their lead suspect, and later follows him, and there are no police present doing the same thing in the course of their own investigation, I found my suspension of disbelief somewhat strained. However, as I read on, that quickly passed when, as in all Mr. Mofina's previous novels, *Vengeance Road* kept this reader quickly turning pages, anxious to find out all the answers in the tale he has spun. I will look forward to Gannon's next appearance on the page, and the book is recommended. (I should note that I started the novel on the day before Thanksgiving. The next day, I picked up the book again, pausing only for the holiday meal and foregoing the day's TV offerings - a Dallas Cowboys followed by a NY Giants football game, followed in turn by a Paul McCartney concert, recorded live only a few months before in New York City - until the book was finished. Now that's suspense!)

Gloria Feit

WATCHLIST

Jeffery Deaver et al

2010

Vanguard Press

WATCHLIST is a collection of two separate novellas, based, as the cover will tell you, on an idea by Jeffery Deaver. Deaver created the characters and wrote the first and last chapters of each novella. In between the story is taken up by a who's who of crime, thriller, and mystery writers. Watch out that the sheer star power doesn't blind you.

Both novellas feature the same protagonist, Harold Middleton; music aficionado, former military intelligence colonel, and war crimes investigator. In both stories Middleton, along with his daughter and colleagues, is dragged through a myriad events that threaten the safety of the world.

The two novellas, "The Chopin Manuscript", and "The Copper Bracelet", are excellent thrillers, and a great showcase of the talent in today's thriller community. While the "Chopin Manuscript" is told on a smaller scale, concerned with the direct implication of the plot to its characters, "the Copper Bracelet's" plot is concerned with world implications. *Watchlist* is a fine example of two different types of thrillers.

For me the most fascinating aspect was seeing different authors approach the same material, and not just themes and issues, but actual characters. How will Lee Child approach characters created by Jeffery Deaver? How will S.J. Rozan, or Lisa Scottline. Half the fun is finding out.

I like to think that I'm well read in the crime/thriller/mystery genre, but I'll confess that I hadn't read every author in the book. So if you're like me, at the very least you'll walk away from Watchlist with a few fresh names to add to your must read list.

John Warburton

WHISPERS OF THE DEAD

Simon Beckett

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Bantam Books

In Beckett's third thriller featuring Dr David Hunter, who was almost stabbed to death in 2007's *Written in Bone*, this reviewer rather wishes Dr Hunter had found himself in fictional heaven. A writer shouldn't have to hit readers over the head in tedious fashion to convey the protagonist's point of view. Nor should he have to rely on jarring changes in narrative and point of view to make the already battered reader aware of the boringly twisted inner workings of the killer. The scarred Hunter is taking a sabbatical of sorts at Tennessee's Body Farm when his mentor, Tom Lieberman, is called out to a cabin where the festering remains of bloated corpse are strapped to a table. The requisite glowering naysayers stand between our heroes and the truth but no one can deny there is a seriously sick serial killer at work. Pontificating profiler Alex Irving irks the killer enough to provoke his own abduction as each body found points to a killer who has meticulously planned these events for years.

Can Dr Hunter overcome his own fears and self-absorption in time to put a stick in the killers spokes? Well, of course. But not until there are stacks of bodies with dragonflies on the wing around them and a red herring the size of Texas lands in all its deflecting glory in the middle of the book.

Jen Jordan

THE WHITE GARDEN

Stephanie Barron

2009

Bantam

Jo Bellamy, an American from Delaware and a professional gardener, plans to go to Sissinghurst in England. She tells this to her grandfather, Jock, expecting him to be as thrilled as she is, for he had worked there as a boy.

Instead of pleasant surprise, she is devastated when he commits suicide. Jo cannot understand why, and one of her missions when she visits the famous English garden is to find the answer to that question. Her employer, a rich American, wants to replicate Vita Sackville-West's White Garden, and that was the reason Jo planned the trip.

Imogen, a Sissinghurst official, gives her access to the gardeners' papers. Jo finds a notebook with her grandfather's name on it, but the handwriting may be Virginia Woolf's. The date complicates things and she asks to borrow it overnight. She consults an expert from Sotheby's, Peter Llewellyn. And he consults another expert. Then things get out of hand. No current corpses, except for Jock, but there are some in the past of this literary hunt.

Excellent!

Gay Tolt Kinman