

Getting Away With Murder #14

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Mike Ripley



Great party, Edith

The party of this year's London season was undoubtedly that held to celebrate the 2007 Ellis Peters Award for historical crime fiction in the extensive grounds of a lavish Georgian mansion buried in the heart of the capital and hosted by the glamorous Becky Fincham of Headline.



The winner, as I accurately predicted, was Ariana Franklin for *Mistress of the Art of Death* and she is pictured here, thanks to the efforts of Prince Ali Karim, who was on hand with diamond-encrusted Instamatic, with her husband, the film critic and pickled onion magnate, Barry Norman.*



This prestigious award, and one I have the honour of being disqualified from in 2005, is named after Ellis Peters who was famously the creator of the Brother Cadfael mysteries but to some of us old stagers is best remembered for her sadly undervalued Sergeant (later Inspector) Felse series which she launched in 1951 under her real name of Edith Pargeter. I have recently learned that her first novel, published in 1936, was set in Ancient Rome, but is for medieval mysteries that she is best known.

I believe that Ariana Franklin's excellent novel is the first time this prestigious prize has actually gone to a novel set in the Middle Ages. Indeed, in recent years the award has gone to novels set as recently as the 1950s.



I discussed this very point with the dashing Mark Mills (whose entry into the party was signalled by the sound of ladies swooning), himself a short-listed nominee for his wonderful book *The Savage Garden* which is set in 1957.

After less than hour of listening patiently to my theory that any book set in a year *when I was alive* cannot reasonably be classed as “history”, he found himself in total agreement with me. Sadly he was called away before I could develop my second point.

{* Barry Norman’s Pickled Onions are now on sale in Sainsbury’s and very good they are too.}

Tomorrow belongs to...

Following his *tour-de-force* performance at the Institut Francais recently, my distinguished colleague Barry Forshaw, author of the ***Rough Guide to Crime Fiction*** and now entering his seventy-seventh consecutive year (possibly misheard) as a judge for the Crime Writer’s Dagger award, must surely be looking to expand his editorial claims in Europe.

Following the success of ***Le Guide Degolas des Romans Policier***, can ***Der Unbequem Reisefuhrer zu Krimis*** be far behind?

’Cos I could

I am delighted to see that the vivacious Claire Seeber has fallen under the mentorship of those giants of crime fiction criticism, my faithful colleagues Peter Guttridge and the aforementioned Barry Forshaw.



I recently took Ms Seeber to task for inventing the word *cos* and using it repeatedly in her debut novel ***Lullaby*** (Avon Books) and therefore Mr

Guttridge made a point of introducing her to me. Ms Seeber seemed genuinely unaware of her grammatical mistake and was charmingly (and unnecessarily) apologetic.

I know how hard it can be for first time novelists. If only there was some one to help them by reading their manuscripts before they are despatched to the printer. We could give them a name and call them “Editors” (from the Latin *editio*). It is just a thought. The idea will probably never catch on.

Moving pictures

It has long been a tradition here at Ripster Hall to provide uplifting entertainment during the long summer evenings for the hundreds of itinerant workers who flock to our gates seeking seasonal employment as strawberry-pickers, game-beaters and scarecrows. Most popular are the twice weekly film shows, when a moving picture is projected by my factotum Waldo, on to the whitewashed wall of the big barn where many of our temporary staff prefer to sleep, nestled in the warm straw.

Waldo has run these shows for many years now with a library of classic movies starring the likes of Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton (although we withdrew a two-reel Tom Mix adventure as it excited the audience too much). If the weather is fine, the Lady Ripster will have one of her grand pianos carried out to the barn and will provide musical accompaniment.

I mention this tradition solely because the latest book by Stuart Pawson, cunningly entitled *Grief Encounters*, begins with a visit to a cinema “complex” (I think the more vulgar term is “multiplex”) by a gentleman of some years with a coquettish 30-years-younger lady on his arm. Not that there is anything wrong with such a miniscule age difference, I’d have you (and the Court of Appeal) know.

What struck me was that this opening scene quite specifically takes place in July 2005 and that the film the couple see at this modern “complex” is the wonderful *Shakespeare In Love*, a film made, I believe, in colour and with sound and released in 1998. Obviously the setting for the book is somewhere up North, where the pace of life is agreeably slower and it takes seven years for an Oscar-winning film to get there.

“The Harrogate, The Harrogate”

The organisers of the most excellent Harrogate Festival of Crime Writing (unfairly known as “The Horrorgate” in some circles), which takes place somewhere in the North in July 2008, have kindly sent me details of their ‘headline acts’.

And mightily impressive they are too, including, as they do: Peter Robinson, Jeffrey Deaver, Robert Crais and the name which immediately caught my eye, Tess Gerritsen, whose thriller *Vanish* of a couple of years ago was, in my not-so-humble opinion, an absolute cracker.



Dr Gerritsen has a new novel, *The Bone Garden*, published by those energetic people at Bantam in January, which I will devour before deciding whether or not I will attend next year’s celebrations.

It will be five years since I was allowed at the Festival and although the share price of the sponsors (Theakston’s brewery) has since recovered, I believe there may still be some lingering animosity. Otherwise they would surely have lifted the Restraining Order by now.

Full details of this rather peculiar festival can be found on crime@harrogate-festival.org.uk or by ringing the ‘hotline’ on 01423 562303.

Essex Girls

More festival news, just in. The 2008 Essex Book Festival will feature a strong contingent of crime writers appearing throughout the county in a month long programme starting on 6th March.

My sources tell me that the star-studded cast list will include: Minette Walters, Frances Fyfield, Stella Duffy and Ariana Franklin. David Hewson (whose excellent new thriller is mercilessly plugged later on) and history-mystery maestro Paul Doherty will also appear, representing Essex Lads.

The ratepayers of Essex can sleep soundly in their beds, however, as I have not myself been asked to appear and talk about my own literary efforts. I did appear at the Festival once, back in 2002, where I must have said all that needed saying, for I have never been asked to return.

Essex Girl Remembered

One particularly famous crime-writing Essex Girl, Dorothy L. Sayers, died fifty years ago this month and those dedicated and enthusiastic people at the Dorothy L. Sayers Society are determined to make sure that the anniversary does not go unnoticed.

On the actual anniversary (17th December) there will be simultaneous memorial ceremonies in St Anne's Church, Soho, where DLS's ashes are buried and in Witham, Essex, where she lived (and died). The Society are also encouraging churches to ring **The Six** Tailors on their bells. (Not the Nine Tailors, as for a female death it is traditionally the Six. – Bet you didn't know that! I didn't.)

On the 15th January 2008, there will be a more formal Service of Commemoration at St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey, where the address will be given by Baroness (P.D.) James of Holland Park, with a reception afterwards at the University Women's Club.



Details of the DLS Society can be found on www.sayers.org.uk.

New Year, Old Friends

In January I will, of course, be joining my fellow critics and reviewers on the Greek island of Skyros for our annual retreat where we open those bulging brown envelopes from publishers (hopefully, some will have money in them this time) and decide among ourselves which crime and mystery titles will be reviewed in 2008.

Among the fresh-faced debutantes and new arrivals in translation, I will be urging my colleagues to reserve space on their shelves for two firm favourites who richly deserve the red carpet treatment.

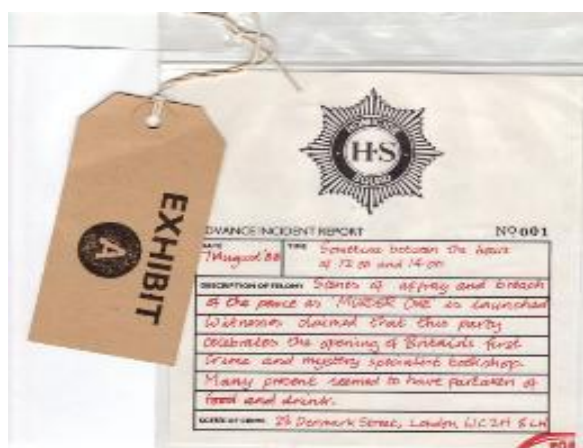
Inspector Ganesh Ghote, the creation of Harry (H.R.F.) Keating, first pounded those mean streets of Bombay (now Mumbai) over 40 years ago. In his 81st year, Harry Keating gives us *Inspector Ghote's First Case* from those charmingly modest people at Allison & Busby. Also in May 2008, the same publisher completes a notable double with the return of Lovejoy in Jonathan Gash's *The Faces in the Pool*. Jonathan Gash is a mere stripling in his early 70's, and his roguish, antique-dealer hero first appeared in 1977, spawning a hit TV series which in turn gave rise to an entire industry of cash-in-the-attic/car boot sales/ road-show programmes for which neither the original character nor the author should be held responsible.

Birthday Treat

No mention of the coming year can be made without reference to the fact that in August, the flagship crime fiction bookshop Murder One celebrates its 20th birthday and that will surely be the occasion for the party of the year.

Now many crime writers have claimed that they had a book published the day Murder One opened by Maxim Jakubowski (originally at 23 Denmark Street) in 1988, but I maintain that only two crime writers come close to that honour.

The official opening party took place on Wednesday 17th August 1988 as my original invitation shows.



In those days, books were rarely published on Wednesdays but on Thursday 18th August, Collins Crime Club released two titles on to an unsuspecting world. One was *The Final Analysis of Dr Stark* by American Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (a highly respected academic authority on Judaism) and the other was *Just Another Angel*, by yours truly.

So new was my first novel that there was actually a gap in the 'R' section of the shelves when I arrived at the party. The gap was quickly plugged by the arrival, in a black Austin taxi, by legendary Crime Club editor Elizabeth Walter bearing a box of first editions. Needless to say, a good time was had by all and I look forward eagerly to the coming celebrations.

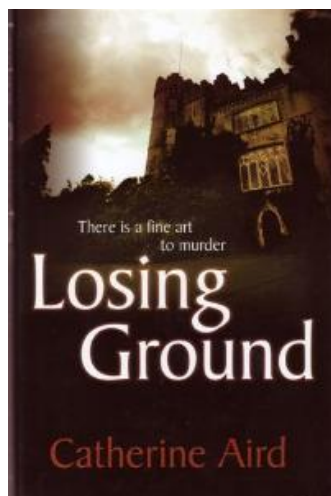
A near relative

My old and distinguished friend Catherine Aird is no stranger to the world of archaeology, being something of an expert on late Saxon sites and early Norman churches in her home county of Calleshire.



In her detective fiction she has made use of her expertise, most notably in *A Late Phoenix* back in 1971, and though her latest novel *Losing Ground*, from Allison & Busby, is not directly concerned with archaeology, the books refers on numerous occasions to a bequest to the famous Greatorex Museum in Berebury, Calleshire from that well known local archaeologist “*the late Professor Michael Ripley*”.

How kind of Miss Aird to name-check the late Professor, who was of course a very near relative of mine, thus acknowledging his contribution in shining a small flicker of light on to the Ages previously known as Dark.



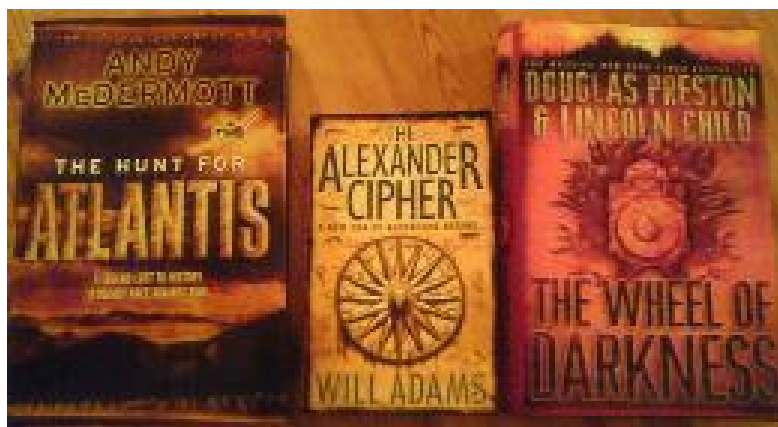
His time spent excavating in Calleshire was counted among the Professor’s happier years. It is typical of the generosity of Miss Aird that

she deliberately did not dwell on his subsequent, rather questionable, activities involving the Temple of Doom, the Little Yellow Eye scandal, the Moscow Brass Monkey affair and the final fiasco of his build-your-own Stonehenge flat-pack scheme which resulted in his tragic death.

Ripping Yarns

I have been sorely tempted of late to retrieve the Indiana Jones-style hat which I wore constantly during my own archaeological career, from the trunk where it is stored along with my trowels, compass, entrenching tool and a not inconsiderable collection of gold coins and jewelled torcs.

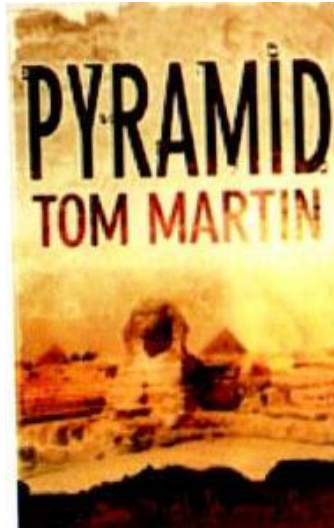
What has reminded me of my digging days is the positive plethora of ripping yarns harking back to ancient history and legend published recently.



With the exception of the new title from that adventurous duo Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *The Wheel of Darkness* [Orion], whose *Riptide* I thoroughly enjoyed a few years back, most of these titles seem to be by previously unknown authors.

Andy McDermott's *The Hunt for Atlantis* [Headline] does, I suppose, exactly what it says on the cover whilst Will Adams' *The Alexander Cipher* [HarperCollins] brings "the truth and legend of Alexander the Great to life", hopefully more convincingly than Oliver Stone's biopic.

And no sooner had I stacked these three volumes on my "To Read" pile, than a fourth appeared: a debut "action-thriller" *Pyramid* [Pan] by Tom Martin which features "codes, cartography and ancient civilizations."



I have a theory that this current publishing fad has been triggered by the success of that prolific (and disgracefully young) Australian Matthew Reilly who has produced at least twelve novels in a career of less than ten years which began, I believe, with him self-publishing his first title.

I am afraid I have to admit that I have not kept pace with the modern “action adventure” genre since Alistair MacLean was writing at his peak (i.e. up to and including, but not beyond, *Ice Station Zebra*) for I have a totally irrational hatred of writers (and editors) who feel the need to *spell out* the sound of gunfire, as TAC-TAC-TAC-TAC or BLAM-BLAM-BLAM or even DADADADADADA.

Friends Like This

My old mess-mate Colin Dexter once coined the phrase “mean-pocketed” about his fictional creation, Inspector Morse, which is much more subtle than simply saying “mean-spirited”.

There must be a suitable “mean-something” epithet to describe the author of the following extract describing the historical novels of the prolific Keith Miles, who also writes as: Conrad Allen, Martin Inigo, Christopher T. Mountjoy, A.E. Marston and Edward Marston.

And the quote in question: ‘An author whose period romps have die-hard fans *by the dozen.*’ (My italics)

The quote is attributed to that industry publication *The Bookseller* and is surprisingly reprinted in latest Allison & Busby catalogue to encourage sales of precisely such a “period romp”.

New Year's Resolutions

As the New Year looms, the popular press, devoid as it is of original ideas, will be devoting acres of space to totally spurious predictions for 2008. And so, here are mine.

One of the most talked-about debuts will be that of Sharon Bolton with her novel *Sacrifice* from those charming people at Bantam Press in February. Set in the Shetlands, *Sacrifice* is a CSI-meets-The Wicker Man thriller with an intelligent and feisty heroine who is a consultant obstetrician who can ride, sail and handle a humane-killer horse gun with aplomb, yet still insists (as is traditional) in going out alone in the dead of night to confront the baddies, though she does not, in this case, trip and sprain an ankle whilst running through the dark woods.



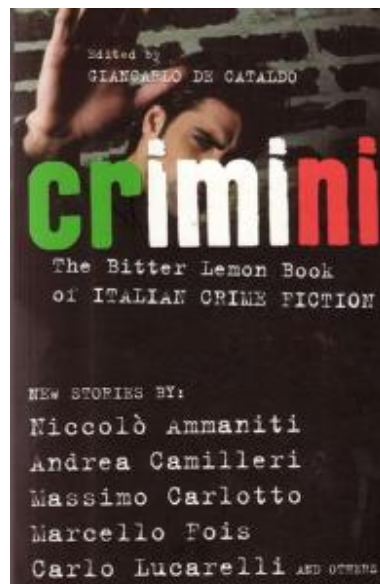
Would it be too rash and unkind of me to tip the author, who writes as “S.J. Bolton” (perhaps to appeal to undiscerning male readers?) for the Crime Writers’ First Blood Award, or whatever it is called this year?

Modern Italy has long been a popular location for crime novels written by non-Italians. I remember with great pleasure Reginald Hill’s *Another Death In Venice* from 1976 and the late Michael Dibdin, in his pre-Aurelio Zen days, cut his teeth with *A Rich Full Death* ten years later

before going on to dominate the field. Many others have dipped a fork into the pasta sauce of Italian crime: the late Sarah Caudwell, the late Magdalene Nabb and, I hear you scream, Deon Leon.

For my money, though, the best practitioner of this “outsider’s” art is Yorkshireman David Hewson who has been clocking up the plaudits with his series set in Rome featuring the cop duo Costa and Peroni. His new title is *The Garden of Evil*, from those shy and retiring folk at Macmillan, in January and I have been privileged to read an advance copy and very good is it too. I am loathe to use the term “breathrough novel” which is much beloved of publishers (for if a book does *not* “break through”, does the author go back to writing less popular novels?) but *Garden of Evil* certainly ought to bring David Hewson to the attention of a much larger readership.

On almost all my visits to Italy (except the first, where my only view of the country was from the cockpit of a Halifax bomber), I have been told that there were no ‘home-grown’ Italian crime writers and indeed the genre did not exist in Italian publishing. This is blatantly untrue and to finally bury the lie, those cheerfully enthusiastic people at Bitter Lemon Press are to publish *Crimini*, the first anthology of Italian crime writing, by Italians. Many of the contributors will be completely new to an English-reading audience, though the inclusion of Sicilian Andrea Camilleri will ensure the collection gets noticed.



Unlike Italy, Russia since the demise of communism has been relatively ignored in (English language) crime fiction. There are notable exceptions of course: the superb Renko books of American Martin Cruz Smith and

Philip Kerr's impressive, but oddly overlooked, *Dead Meat* from 1993, which was filmed by the BBC as *Grushko* with Brian Cox in the lead.

Now another American, Brent Ghelfi, takes up the challenge with the violent, adrenalin-charged gangster thriller *Volk's Game* which will appear, slightly later than previously listed, in May, from those jolly decent people at Faber & Faber. I am sorely tempted to invoke the Curse of the Ripsters by predicting that this will be the Thriller of the Year even though it might just miss the cut-off point for consideration for the 2008 Ian Fleming Steel Dagger prize. (Though I have never been privy to the workings of that award and so, as usual, have little idea of what I am talking about.)

For devotees of Scandinavian crime there will be a steady Viking invasion throughout the year and though I have often declared myself to be immune to its undoubted, if gloomy, charm, I will be seeking out Norwegian thriller-writer Jo Nesbo's new one, *The House of Pain* from Harvill.

Joining the growing ranks of writers who have opted for World War II as a setting for their fiction (John Lawton, Barbara Nadel, the late John Gardner, Anthony Horowitz, Sarah Waters and others) is the effervescent and totally charming crime writer and, importantly, critic, Laura Wilson.



Ms Wilson and I were once caught by the paparazzi in a fashionable London tea room (it is known as being “trapped and papped”) and she has used wartime Britain as a setting to excellent effect before now; notably in *The Lover* in 2004. Not that those two facts are in any way connected.

Her new novel, the start of a promised series featuring a Detective Inspector Ted Stratton, is published by those awesomely efficient people at Orion in February and is entitled *Stratton's War*. Unlike such worthies

as Andrew Taylor, Mark Mills and Robert Goddard, who have provided what I believe are known as “blurbs” for the novel, I have only had a chance to read the opening page. I am delighted to see that action takes place in picaresque Fitzrovia, an area of London renowned for its chop houses, ice-cream parlours and public houses. Possibly the most famous of these is The Fitzroy Tavern and mere mention of the name brings back joyous, if slightly hazy, memories of evenings spent there listening to a young Malcolm Lowry explaining the transcendental meaning behind his masterpiece *Under The Volcano* before, as was his custom, he would fall over quite dramatically and his head would become wedged behind the brass foot-rail at the bar. Oh how we used to laugh! Happy days.

My Kinda Women

Another reason for liking Canadian crime diva Louise Penny apart from her excellent mysteries, is to be found on her personal website (www.louisepenny.com) where she candidly revealed a lifelong fear of flying.

Since become a bestselling author, however, cruel publishers have insisted on a punishing schedule of promotional visits across at least one continent. Bravely, Ms Penny agreed to try and conquer her fear of flying and, as her publishers were paying, opted to go business class. Remarkably any fears she might have held in the past quickly disappeared as she realised that what she had suffered from all along was a fear of flying *economy*.

Armed and dangerous

I have never been comfortable with the idea that crime writers should be armed and I find it somewhat disconcerting to see writers, especially British ones, posing with large weapons in their hands.

I take the view shared by my close friend Fitzroy Maclean Angel that the only weapon an Englishman or woman should be pictured with is a fitted Purdey 12-bore and even then only when grouse are in season. I take his advice seriously as he is a member of that bastion of American democracy, the National Rifle Association and even has a (genuine) certificate to prove it.



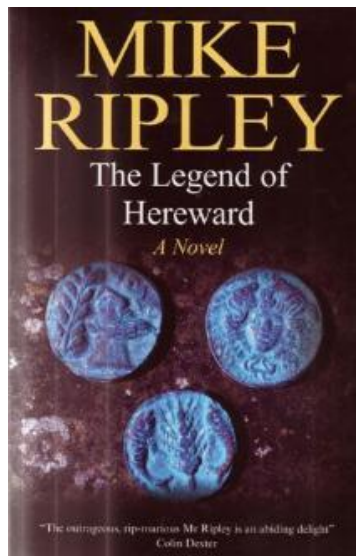
I was therefore rather shocked to see thriller writer Zoe Sharpe pictured toting a handgun in a feature article in this very magazine (see Interviews section) but when I remonstrated with the editor of our esteemed organ, Mr Mike “Tombstone” Stotter, his response was rather curt. “That’s mighty big talk for a one-eyed fat man,” he spat through a stream of tobacco juice. Mustering all the dignity I could, I replied: “Fill your hands, you son of a bitch”.

Blatant Plugging

Whilst recently prowling the jolly old interweb I discovered an appeal from an American blogger and fan of crime fiction (noting Michael Connelly and John Grisham among her favourites), who was seeking new authors to discover.

I was heartened by the response – she received well over 200 replies – but totally shocked to discover that these were mostly, almost exclusively, from American authors recommending their own books!

It would certainly never occur to me to have put forward my own historical thriller *The Legend of Hereward* even though a paperback edition has just been published by Severn House at the reasonable price of £9.99 and the cover carries hearty recommendations from such luminaries as Colin Dexter, Professor Bernard Knight and Bernard Cornwell.



I'd Like To Thank

The promotional blurb for the debut thriller of Susan Arnout Smith, *The Timer Game*, asks of the reader “*Can you hold your breath for 512 pages?*” which would indeed be a catchy selling point were it not for the fact that proof copies of the book contain only 494 pages of text.

That does not include the five pages of thanks and acknowledgements by the author (which still only gives a total of 499 pages). Counting quickly, for I was holding my breath, I estimate that Ms Arnout Smith has thanked no fewer than 80 named individuals in this section, which makes it worthy of an Oscar winner’s speech.

Who said writing was a lonely business?

Christmas Presents

The Christmas season is almost upon us (or Saturnalia as we call it in the Eastern Marches), and I have decided not to give presents this year, but awards, thus reducing my carbon footprint and at the same time reviving a tradition dating back to the last century when this magazine existed only in ink-and-paper form.

In those far-off days they were known as the Golden Shots or sometimes Shots Of The Year and I was actually named a Shot Of The Year once myself. At least I *think* that’s what the person who telephoned me said, for I was slightly confused by the kerfuffle of having to accept a reverse charge call.

I will therefore get into the Christmas spirit, as did my old friend John Young, the chairman of Young's Brewery of Wandsworth, when he delivered seasonal hampers to all his tenants...



...and announce my own SHOTS awards for 2007.

Best Crime Novel: **The Chameleon's Shadow** - Minette Walters (Macmillan).

Best Thriller: **The One From The Other** - Philip Kerr (Quercus).

Best Historical Mystery: **Mistress of the Art of Death** – Ariana Franklin (Bantam).

Funniest Crime Novel: **Don't Cry For Me Aberystwyth** – Malcolm Pryce (Bloomsbury).

Best In Translation: **The Père-Lachaise Mystery** – Claude Izner (Gallic).

Best First Novel: **Little Moscow** – Mick Scully (Tindal Street Press).

And there you have it. Thanks to me, all these authors are Total Shots at least for 2007.

If you disagree and have your own choices, or think new categories should be added, do let me know by emailing shotsgawam@yahoo.co.uk

Please note, calls cost at least £25, possibly more if from your own phone. Always ask permission of the bill payer.

[Note to Editor: I am not sure if this disclaimer is necessary but better to be safe than sorry, eh? Especially after we got burned with the *Blue Peter* scam.]

Pip!Pip!
The Ripster.