

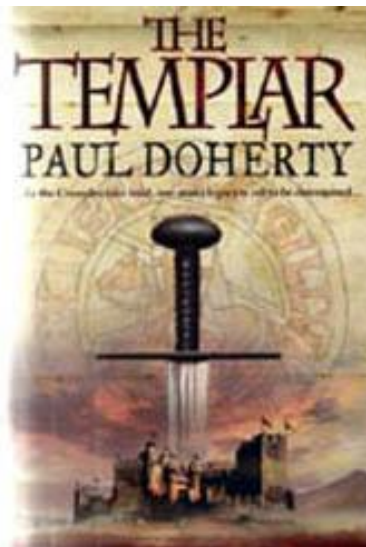
Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Christmas Cheer

I was unable to attend the annual Christmas Party thrown by the Crime Writers' Association, partly because no one invited me, but mainly because the event clashed with the launch of my old friend Paul Doherty's new novel [The Templar](#), splendidly published by those charming people at Headline.



It was back in 1990 that I first met Paul when we both spoke at an evening seminar at Redbridge Library. He was already an established master of the historical mystery (under several pen-names then, including Paul Harding, Michael Clynes, C.L. Grace, Anna Apostolou and Ann Dukthas) whereas I was only marginally less unknown than I am today and had just published my second novel.

[A splendid evening](#) ensued in one of the several baronial halls situated on the Doherty estate in Epping Forest and it is obvious from the picture that

Paul was delighted to be able to greet myself and SHOTS editor Mike “Tombstone” Stotter.



I was not at all surprised to discover, lurking behind a crate of books, none other than Ralph ‘The Postmortem Man’ Spurrier. I have already reported on The Postmortem Man’s tenacious approach to obtaining the signatures of authors on first editions of new novels, which he then retails through his vast business empire.



The Postmortem Man’s own website (www.postmortembooks.com) not only contains numerous slanders about myself (which have been referred to my solicitors, Motley & Slapp Ltd.) but even advertises signed first editions of a book not due to be published for another six months. It caught my eye as it is the latest Joe Sixsmith adventure, *The Roar of the Butterflies*, by my friend and mentor Reginald Hill, and is due from that delightful publishing posse at HarperCollins in June 2008.

I do hope The Postmortem Man does not pester Reg, a gentle and charming fellow, unduly in search of his signature. On nights where the claret has flowed and I have eaten cheese at a late hour, I have recurring

nightmares of poor Reg being pursued across the Cumbrian Fells by the fanatical Postmortem Man in his armoured Humvee.

We are the Campions

In the *Daily Telegraph* just before Christmas, Booker prize-winner A.S. Byatt penned a loving eulogy to the work of Margery Allingham, creator of that “Golden Age” sleuth Albert Campion.

“I have never been able to read Agatha Christie” she wrote and always preferred the writing of Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and, best of all, Allingham, who “gave us elegantly plotted love stories mixed in with the threads of death and detection.”

For many years, Margery Allingham lived in the Essex village of Tolleshunt D’Arcy where she hosted week-end house parties and cricket matches with teams of visiting celebrities (for whom the Duke of Edinburgh used to turn out). Merely noting that brings back fond memories of the thwack of leather on willow and the gurgle-splash of ale drawn from a wooden cask. Happy days indeed.

Dame Antonia’s article has reminded me of my own brief encounter with Albert Campion back in 1989. The BBC were filming their disgracefully forgotten adaptations of the Campion books in the Suffolk village of Kersey, where a local pub had been called into service as *The Three Drummers*, which featured in Allingham’s 1931 novel *Look To The Lady*.



The TV series featured former Dr Who Peter Davison as the mild-mannered Campion and the wonderful Brian Glover as his butler Magersfontein Lugg. Fine actors though they be, they were made to wait until my vital role in the production had been performed, for in those days I worked in the brewing industry and I had been called in as a consultant to the set designers to advise on how to make the interior of a 1989 Suffolk pub look convincingly like that of a 1931 Essex pub.

Fortunately, this being Suffolk, the task was not an onerous one and my work was swiftly done I was able to allow filming to continue.

Badly Kept Secret

I have received the usual “confidentiality agreement” from those terribly serious publishing people at Century, which I always receive when a new John Grisham novel is in the offing.

As my legal advisor, Sir Bufton Tufton, assures me that these agreements are worth less than the tree that died to provide the paper they are printed on, I always ignore them, as I did the latest one which demands that, in return for a review copy, I keep “the Text strictly confidential” not submitting the Text (the novel *The Appeal*) to any “outside party in any circumstances” before the publication date of 25th January 2008.

I cannot really believe that an author as successful as John Grisham (though he is a lawyer so I must be careful) needs to generate such an obviously fake air of excitement among reviewers, when millions of genuine fans will be waiting, wallets open, for his new book anyway.

By any other name

I have discovered, quite by chance, that my old friend Gillian Linscott is now writing under the name Caro Peacock.



I do not know the reason for this change of identity but I used to love Gillian's splendid (and prize-winning) mysteries featuring Nell Bray, whose theme song was surely 'Once you're a suffragette / You're a suffragette / All the way from your first cigarette / To your last dying day' which she would perform with gusto, a top hat and a cane, though only a rare fragment of a photograph survives.



The first Caro Peacock title, *Death At Dawn*, is published by those utterly super people at Harper (Collins) and is set in the 1830s, featuring a new heroine, Liberty Lane, which I have to say gives more than ample scope for punsters and headline writers fond of *double entendres*.

However, since the *Hands Up Miss Seton* scandal of many years ago, reviewers have for the most part curbed their naturally childish senses of humour.

Groves of academe

It seems that more and more crime writers are turning their faces away from the sordid commercialism of actually writing novels and towards the groves of academe by teaching others how to do it instead.

Janet Laurence, a former CWA chairperson, began the trend last year with her *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay*, although “how to” books are by no means a new phenomenon. My old friend H.R.F. (Harry) Keating produced one of the most famous ones – *Writing Crime Fiction* – in 1986, when it was recommended by Ruth Rendell as “a private godsend”.

But to the best of my knowledge, the first “e-book” on the subject has now appeared, composed by Mark Timlin. (I have to admit that for many years I assumed “eee-books” was something one said on entering a public library in Yorkshire).

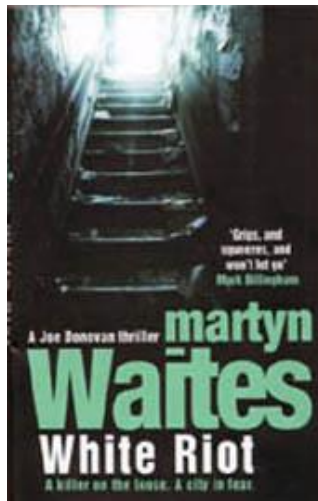
Available for ‘download’ (whatever that might mean) at www.60daybooks.com for the paltry sum of £14.75 or thereabouts, Mark’s instructional manual is pithily titled *Write A Novel In 60 Days That Will Sell*. The accompanying promotional blurb makes much of the fact that Mark “tells the time on a genuine Rolex watch” but also points out rather incongruously that, being an e-book, this title “cannot be bought in any bookstore”.

Another former Chairman of the Crime Writers’ Association, Russell James is also forsaking crime fiction for reflection on crime fiction, or at least on fictional detectives. His “illustrated compendium of sleuths past and present” entitled *Great British Fictional Detectives* will be published in March by the Remember When press, which I believe to be an American company.

I am unsure as to whether the title implies that the book covers fictional detectives from the British Isles or whether they are really *Great* Detectives. Either way, Russell has found over 400 of them, though as he has always prided himself on writing crime novels about crime and criminals rather than detectives, it is highly unlikely that any of his own fictional creations will feature.

The new year begins well too for Martyn Waites, known to his friends in many of Her Majesty’s prisons as “Sven”. His is known to a far wider audience for his acting career and indeed who will ever forget his

performance as “Duty Constable” in the *Dead On Time* episode from Series Six of the hit show *Inspector Morse*?



Not only does he have a new novel, *White Riot*, out from those fun-loving people at Pocket Books, but I learn that he has been created Literary Fellow at the University of Essex.

I myself have never previously met a Literary Fellow, though I have come across several Good Fellows. It can only be a matter of time before Cambridge University appoints its first Lecturer in Crime Fiction.

Legal Eagles

I have long been astounded at the inordinate number of lawyers in America who have such light case loads that they have turned to crime writing, in many cases with appalling success.

In Britain, such literary legal eagles are thinner on the ground, though there are some notable ones: John Mortimer (now surely a National Treasure), the elegant Frances Fyfield (who always seemed far too nice to be involved with the law) and Martin Edwards, who is a practising solicitor on Merseyside and therefore cannot possibly have any spare time on his hand.

But now those cheerful people at Avon Books launch a new legal name upon the world: Helen Black, with her debut novel *Damaged Goods*.



Although she now works in the fields of criminal and family law (which after the recent festive holiday I regard as one and the same thing) in London, Ms Black's heroine Lily Valentine is a tough-talking Yorkshire lawyer.

I am lead to believe that Ms Black herself hails from “oop north”, specifically the West Yorkshire metropolis which is Pontefract. (From the Latin: *Ponte-* bridge; *fractum* – knackered.)



In years gone by – a long way by – I was indentured to serve my journalistic apprenticeship on that noble organ the *Pontefract & Castleford Express*, which involved slaving over a hot typewriter for up to 26 hours a day and quaffing pints of unspeakable Darley's bitter, both activities being supervised by a cruel regime of sub-editors who were armed with whips and clubs.

Still, it never did me any harm and some of my fondest memories are of summer mornings lazily strolling, thigh deep, through the waving

liquorice fields of Pontefract, from which the local population made small black cakes on an industrial scale. On one such morning I happened across a tousle-headed junior reporter covering the annual liquorice harvest for one of those new fangled television stations. He was a charming lad with a thick Yorkshire accent and almost-clean boots, who introduced himself as “Michael Parkinson”.

I often wonder what became of him.

Festival Fury

In a previous column I sang the praises of the Harrogate/Theakston’s Old Peculier Crime Festival, even though my own presence there is clearly not required. I thought I had done them proud, all things considered, but it appears not, for I have received complaints from one of the organisers that I did not praise or promote the festival *enough*.

I will therefore repeat that Theakston’s Old Peculier is an exceptionally good beer and that Harrogate is somewhere in the north, and will never mention literary festivals again.

Apart, that is, from Crimefest which is to take place in Bristol in June (www.crimefest.com) and features Ian Rankin, Lee Child, Karin Fossum, that elegant sprite of the Canadian timber forests Louise Penny and, I see, *both* Danuta Reah *and* Carla Banks. Surely, an unmissable line-up, though I of course cannot attend for legal reasons.

And I cannot fail to mention the annual convention of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, which will take place in August at the University of Surrey.

I am obliged to mention the DLS Society (www.sayers.org.uk) as I was invited to accompany the new Vice-Chairman, Seona Ford, at a brief memorial event to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Sayers’ death in Witham, Essex just before Christmas.



And, as we're in Essex, I might just slip in the fact that during the Essex Book Festival this year, the following crime writers will be strutting their stuff: Stella Duffy (March 6th in Braintree), Minette Walters (March 10th in Rayleigh), Jim Kelly (March 12th, Witham), Ariana Franklin (March 14th, Clacton), David Hewson (March 17th, Mersea Island), Sam Hayes (March 18th, Hullbridge), Judith Cutler and Edward Marston (March 19th, Hadleigh), Frances Fyfield (April 2nd, Maldon) and Paul Doherty (April 4th, Saffron Walden). Full details on www.essexbookfestival.org.uk.

But apart from that, there will be no further mentions of Festivals in this column, unless, of course, I am invited .

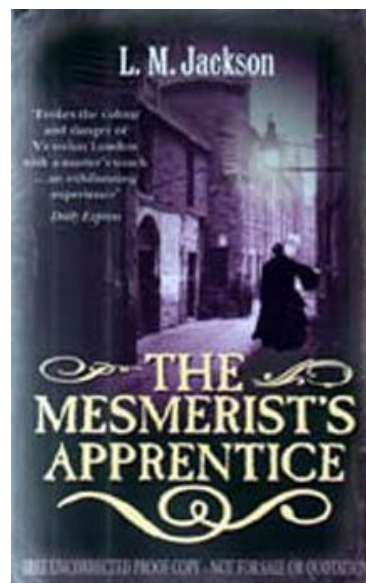
Deadly

Ellis Peters winner (as confidently predicted by this column) Ariana Franklin, who is appearing at the Essex Book Festival, though I have promised not to mention that, has another claim to fame in that she has made the cover of that prestigious American magazine *Deadly Pleasures*



And though it may be pushing my luck (it usually is), I wonder if it is too early to start nominating for the 2008 Ellis Peters Award?

I had better not say too much and will refrain from putting the Curse of the Ripsters on *The Mesmerist's Apprentice* by Victoriana expert L.M. Jackson, better known as Lee Jackson, the author of the splendid *London Dust* a few years ago. But I am certainly looking forward to Lee's new novel, which is published by those happy Heinemann people in April.



I understand that Mr Barry Forshaw, the eminent critic and polymath, having chaired a seminar on French crime novels in translation, now turns up the hissing flame of the gas lamp and prepares to chair another high-powered seminar, this time on Victorian-set mysteries.

Under the title *Gaslit Vices*, the seminar takes place in Waterstones (which I believe to be a bookshop) in Hampstead (which I believe to be north and west of Baker Street) in London on the 7th February at 7 p.m. The line-up of authors is truly elementary: not only the aforementioned Lee Jackson, but also Andrew Martin (whose books remind us of a time when the trains ran on time, or at least ran), Frank Tallis (whose new Dr Max Leibermann novel *Fatal Lies* is out any day now from Century) and R.N. (Roger) Morris (whose second Porfiry Petrovitch thriller, *A Vengeful Longing* is eagerly awaited from those friendly people at Faber in February).

That's quite an impressive line-up and I am assured that buckets of oysters and quarts of stout porter will be made available on the night, although only to members of Her Majesty's Press. I will have Waldo shine up my best brown boots and brush my bowler (*with* the grain, this time) and order me a handsome, for I certainly intend to venture to the capital, despite the footpads and painted whores roaming the thoroughfares, for an evening of such delights.

From the archives

After my recent mention that my old friend Andrew Vachss has a new book, *Terminal*, out in the USA, my factotum Waldo has uncovered a crumpled press cutting from the huge collection he has amassed over the years but which he rarely lets me see.

Dating from, I think, 1993, it shows Andrew (with the eye-patch) and his good friend Oprah Winfrey patiently waiting in line for what seems to be a newly-published author to sign a copy of his new book.



I am afraid to say that neither Waldo nor I have any idea who the writer at the signing session is, though Waldo is convinced he “connected” with the writer’s wife while she was backstage cutting the crusts off cucumber sandwiches for the refreshments which Americans generously provide in all bookshops during book signings.

Demanding A Recount

In his column in that esteemed organ *The Observer*, on 9th December, my fellow crime critic Peter Guttridge wrote that were “some 250 new crime novels published in 2007 – in the UK, presumably.

How dull life must be in the capital these days, for out here in the provinces, I counted 607 new titles in 2007.

I will take the matter up with him when we meet on the island of Skyros in the wine-dark Ionian Sea next month for the annual get together of critics, where publishers’ bribes are shared out and we decide which books will get reviewed in 2008.

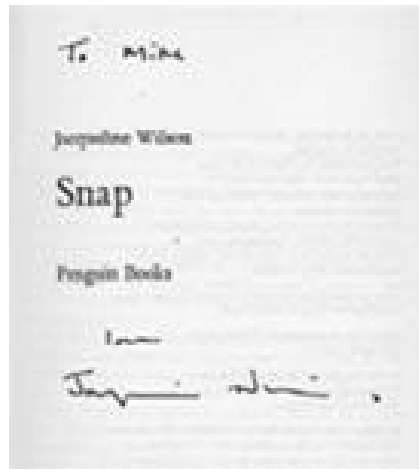
It’s an Honour

I was delighted to see that Jacqueline Wilson, the former Children’s Laureate and the biggest-issuing author from public libraries, was created a Dame of the British Empire in the Queen’s New Year’s Honours List. I first met Dame Jacqueline in the St Stephen’s entrance of the House of Commons as we were both going through the metal detector and we got talking as a friendly policeman examined all of Jacqueline’s wrist and arm bracelets for explosive substances.

Before she became an award-winning children’s author, Dame Jacqueline was a crime writer though she somehow seems to have been airbrushed out of the roughest of guide books to the genre. I could never understand why, for her four suspense novels from the early 1970s: *Truth or Dare*, *Snap*, *Let’s Pretend* and *Making Hate*, are truly wonderful.

Originally published by Macmillan, I own three of the four in their Penguin paperbacks but it was only some thirty years after reading them

that I managed, on the terrace of the House of Lords (or “the Lounge Bar” as we regulars call it) to get the author to sign them.



Most used to signing copies of her Tracey Beaker books, she remembered those early Penguins well and still maintains that *Truth or Dare* is one of “the best covers” she’s ever had. I still cannot comprehend why these books are not better known and it is a mystery as to what – apart from huge commercial success, recognition as the Children’s Laureate and a Damehood – ever persuaded her away from crime writing.

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