

Getting Away With Murder

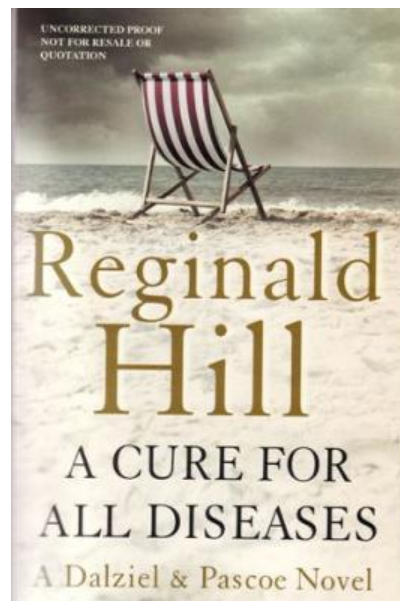
Mike Ripley



Rejoice, You Mugwumps

Hands up all those who were (for a microsecond) fooled into believing last year's rumour that Reg Hill was killing off Fat Andy Dalziel in *The Death of Dalziel*. For once, the clue wasn't in the title. Superintendent Dalziel is back, roaring from his hospital bed with the immortal words: "HELLO! HELLO! DALZIEL SPEAKING! LOOK ON MY WORKS YOU MUGWUMPS, AND DESPAIR!"

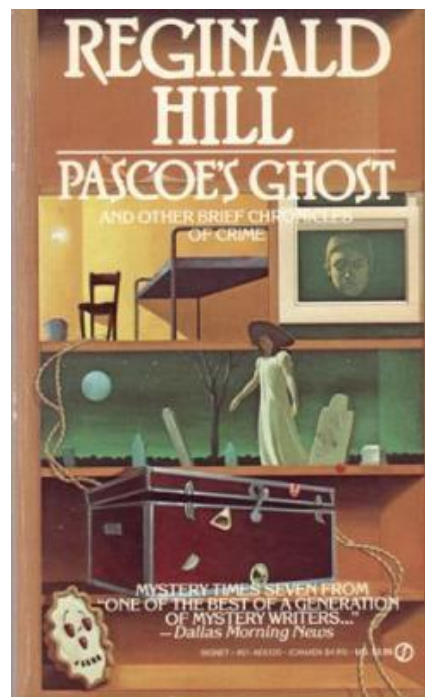
We will not, of course, despair. We will rejoice and rush out to buy *A Cure For All Diseases*, from those perfectly clubbable women at HarperCollins, next month.



I have had the delight of reading an advance copy and will say here and now that despite containing some of the longest, most rambling e-mails in internet history, the new novel shows Reg and Andy Dalziel at the absolute top of their form, which i'nt half saying summat (as we would say in mid-Yorkshire).

And there's more good news from HarperCollins concerning Reg, apart from a new Joe Sixsmith novel later this year, in a long-overdue reissue of an anthology of his short stories: *There Are No Ghosts in the Soviet Union*, from 1987 (when there was a Soviet Union).

This is a fine collection which I devoured some years ago, although I have to say I have a sneaking preference for his earlier anthology, *Pascoe's Ghost*, from 1979. I remember that this was quite a difficult book to find in England, and I was delighted to stumble upon an American edition whilst on a visit to San Francisco in a bookshop called Arthur Gwynn Geiger's Rare Books and DeLuxe Editions.



This excellent volume (surely the perfect companion to *There Are No Ghosts*) contains two delightful stories, *Pascoe's Ghost* and *Dalziel's Ghost*, which top and tail the collection. Moreover, it also contains Reg's superb chiller *Exit Line* for which I am probably sure he won an award, though if he didn't he should have.

Rumours (and cash) Fly

Rumours fly on the jolly old interweb about a “six-figure advance” for a first novel by a young British writer still several years short of his thirtieth birthday. I refuse to get excited about such things as I well remember the resentment and jealousy when, as a fairly callow youth myself, I received my first six-figure advance of nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings and eleven pence.

I admit that inflation has taken its toll since those days (and my factotum Waldo fondly reminisces over the one million Reichs Mark note, now long gone), so one should not be shocked at the rumour that Simon and Schuster have forked out £200,000 for the UK rights to *Child 44*, a thriller set in Stalin’s Russia and therefore bound to be labelled “a *Gorky Park* for the 21st Century” (whether it is or not) by Cambridge graduate Tom Rob Smith.

The full interweb “buzz” actually alleges that the total publishing deal for Mr Smith’s debut is worth over \$1,000,000, which is less than 500,000 of our English pounds. I am unclear, though, as to whether this includes the reported film deal with that noble Geordie, Sir Ridley Scott.

I am afraid I do not know Mr Tom Rob Smith, though obviously would love to meet him during licensing hours. He is rumoured to be a television scriptwriter who has contributed to a dramatic programme called *Doctors*, which I believe is shown during the afternoons, probably to get the blood flowing before the daily mental gymnastics of *Countdown*.

I did, however, find a reference to a Tom Rob Smith who appeared as an actor in *Tooth and Claw*, that jolly exciting episode of *Dr Who* where Queen Victoria is attacked by a werewolf at Torchwood House. I wonder if they could be the same person. The interweb site www.TV.com lists this Tom Rob Smith but furnishes no details, simply declaring that “This person does not have any trivia.”

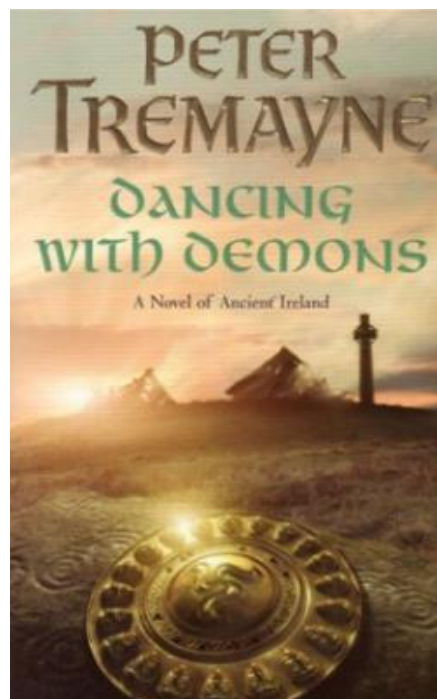
He does now.

A Thousand Welcomes

Because of the idiotic and quite ridiculous restrictions on international travel which have been imposed upon me (for reasons I cannot go into here), I will not, sadly, be able to enjoy *Féile Fidemla 2008*, the second international festival centred on the Sister Fidelma books by Peter Tremayne, which takes place from 5th to 7th September as part of the Cashel Arts Festival in County Tipperary in that ultra-hospitable country of Eire.

For those not in the know, Sister Fidelma is the 7th-century Irish Nun/Lawyer sleuth whose first adventure appeared in print in 1994 and now has an International Sister Fidelma Society (with members in 20 countries) named after her.

Author Tremayne is better known in Celtic scholarly circles under his real name of Peter Beresford Ellis, but began his career in fiction in the horror genre, back in 1977, with *Dracula Unborn*. He will, of course, be one of the speakers at the Fidelma Festival in September (www.cashelartsfest.com) along with some distinguished Irish academics all showing off their knowledge of what I believe is called the Brehon law system, and Karola Hagerman, who, when not enjoying life as a Sister Fidelma fan, is a training instructor with the Lower Saxony police force.



The latest Sister Fidelma novel, which I think is the eighteenth (in 14 years!), *Dancing With Demons*, is now out in paperback from those Happy Historians at Headline. A new title, *Council of the Cursed*, is scheduled for July.

Angels Unaware

On perusing the new Robert Hale catalogue, as you do, I am delighted to see that Yorkshire-based author Roger Silverwood (who lives, sensibly, “on the outskirts of Barnsley”) has a new book out: *Find The Lady*.

My only reservation is that Mr Silverwood’s detective hero in his fiction is one DI Michael Angel. Whilst I am sure there are hundreds of examples of heroic figures in fiction called ‘Michael’ (though I can think of nary a one off-hand), the very idea of having a hero called *Angel* is quite preposterous.

New Year’s Honour

I am reliably informed that the most significant of the Honours to be dispensed so far in 2008, is the granting of honorary membership of the Crime Writers’ Association to Geoff Bradley, the editor of *CADS (Crime and Detective Stories)*, who served for many years as the non-voting chairman of the Dagger Awards judging panel.



As a former judge myself, I can vouch for Geoff's dedication to duty, total impartiality and diplomacy when dealing with judging panels of writers, critics and academics. {So many egos; such a small room!}

This honour will have been announced (or "gazetted" as we used to say) in the monthly journal of the CWA, *Red Herrings*, although as I am not entitled to see this august organ, not being a member of the CWA, I can only hope that the news has been published and is freely circulating in the crime writing community.

I must say this is recognition of service well above and beyond the call of duty and thoroughly deserved, and whoever suggested it deserves commendation.

That Dare Not Speak It's Name

I have sworn not to mention, publicise or blatantly plug any forthcoming crime writing conventions or festivals unless I am invited to them.

Several of the ones I will therefore not be mentioning in this column are: *Love Is Murder* in Rosemont Illinois, which features ex-pat Brit Lee Child; *Sleuthfest* in Deerfield Beach, Florida, which features Lee Child; or *Crimefest* in Bristol here in the UK, which features...er...Lee Child.

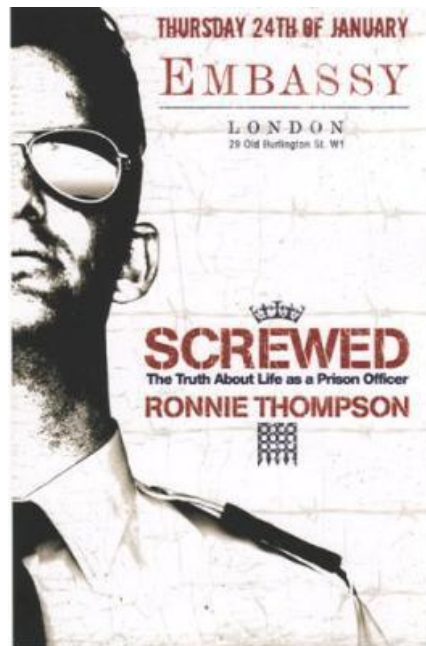
Nor will I mention *Malice Domestic* which is to be held in Arlington, Virginia and will be graced with the distinguished presence of our own Lindsey Davis and Peter Lovesey. And as for *Bouchercon 2008* in Baltimore (www.charmedtodeath.com) in October, where John Harvey is guest of honour; well, you will not find a single mention here.

I would quite like to mention *Deadly Ink*, though I do not know what it is, which is to be held in June in Parsippany, New Jersey, though I have no idea where that is. It sounds wonderful, though. Parsippany, that is.

Friends on D Wing

I was unable to make the launch of *Screwed*, the memoirs of former Prison Officer "Ronnie Thompson" (a pseudonym) in January. To be honest, I have been somewhat un-nerved by the recent television documentary *City of Vice*, depicting the seamier side of London and my doctors advised that the music to be played at the swanky launch party in

a West End club (“dirty house/hip hop/rock”) might adversely affect my pacemaker.



Nor have I actually seen the book (published by those sparkling people at Headline) and so I cannot comment on its merits, although I would say it does seem to be part of a trend. After years of (unfortunately) successful “true life” memoirs from well-known criminals, it now seems that their custodians in the prison system are cashing in on their side of the story, for it is barely a month since we saw the publication of *The Loose Screw* (Apex Books), the memoirs of former prison officer “Jim Dawkins” (which may or may not be a pseudonym).

I have not seen that book either, and so I will consult with my chums in the Reading Circle which operates on D Wing at HMP Chelmsford to ascertain their views.

Diamonds Are Forever

This year’s Cartier Diamond Dagger ‘supersleuth’ is American Sue Grafton, author of the famous “alphabet” series of private eye novels featuring Kinsey Millhone.

Her latest title published in the UK is *T is for Trespass*, which if my maths holds up, indicates that there are six more to go before Ms Grafton completes her quest to tie-in a book with every letter.

I must confess that Sue Grafton was a mere snip of a girl when I met her, way back around “G” or “H”. Her British publisher Macmillan had invited her over here and thrown a party in her honour at a swanky hotel, if memory serves (which it rarely does these days) in London’s Park Lane area.

The charming Ms Grafton was understandably somewhat overwhelmed at first by the presence of several hundred press photographers surrounding the hotel – a throng which I, along with other hacks from the crime fiction world, were forced to slash our way through, clearing a path with sabre-like strokes of our furred umbrellas. Only when the publisher’s party was in full swing did we realise that the jackals of the press were lying in wait for someone called ‘Madonna’ who was staying in the same hotel.

At first I thought it quite reassuring to see the British press taking an interest in religious matters but then I was informed that this ‘Madonna’ was a visiting American singer in the popular style, probably a member of one of those modern beat combos.

I often wonder what became of her.

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| In receipt of funds |
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The corridors of Ripster Hall echoed this week to the sounds of the celebrations which greeted the arrival of the annual Postal Order from those wonderful people at the PLR. It means, of course, that the children will not have to be sold for medical experiments, that Lady Ripster’s line of credit with the local licensed victuallers can be reduced (in part), and that the under-stairs boot boys may, at last, have boots of their own.

The Public Lending Right is a wonderful institution which reimburses writers for theoretically lost sales due to lending of their books through our marvellous network of public libraries. As long, that is, as the writer is British and preferably alive. Some 24,000 writers received payments from PLR this year, though of course these are by no means all writers of crime fiction, or even fiction at all. I understand that in recent years, several cooks and potboys, whose names (Oliver? Smith? Stein?) are known below stairs here at Ripster Hall, have even written *cookery* books and received payments from PLR. Which is nice, for the catering trade is often as poorly paid as crime writing.

A lucky few (242 this year) received the maximum payout of £6,600 whereas, sadly, over 18,000 received sums in the range of £1 to £99. Saddest of all, though, were those 11,000 authors who received absolutely nothing, as their books failed to achieve a significant number of borrowings.

Viking Invasion

I have to admit to deliberately resisting, in the past, the growing tide of Scandinavian crime-writers. My reasons for this are not irrational. We in the East of England have long memories and there are still unresolved matters as a result of the last Viking invasion of Maldon (991 AD). True, it was mostly Danes involved, but old scars run deep.

I am however, instructed to throw off such churlish attitudes by those vivacious publishing pixies at HarperCollins, get out the pickled herring and *aquavit* and prepare myself for the arrival in the UK in April of ***The Ice Princess*** by Camilla Läckberg, one of the leading (at a shockingly young age) Swedish crime writers.



Ms Läckberg's crime novels featuring her hero Patrick Hedstrom have sold more than a million copies in her native country, which means that, roughly, one in every nine Swedes owns one. (I wonder what the ratio is for Volvo ownership?) I am also aware that she is highly rated in Holland.

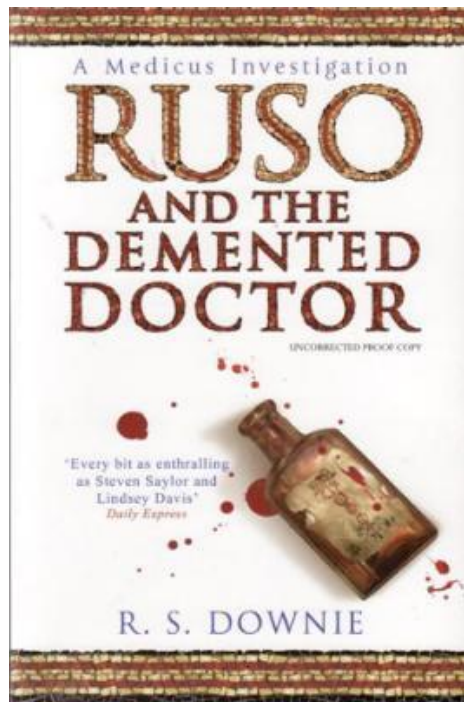
I need no further convincing. I will make a note in my diary and await *The Ice Princess* eagerly. If it is successful in its English translation, I have little doubt that *The Preacher*, *The Stonecutter* and *The Jinx* will follow as smoothly as long ships sailing up the Humber.

Veni, vidi, etc.

As I have the dual qualifications of having worked as an archaeologist *and* having one of my historical thrillers disqualified from the Ellis Peters Award, I am always interested in crime fiction set in or at the time of the Roman Empire, being a great admirer of the work of old friends such as Rosemary Rowe, Paul Doherty and Lindsey Davis, with whom I am pictured (below) in our student days, no doubt arguing a point of Scottish history with a young Ian Rankin.



Now a new name flits across my desk in the shape of (Mrs) R.S. Downie and her second novel, *Ruso and the Demented Doctor*, which is due from Penguin next month. Such is my surprise and delight at receiving any communication from Penguin Books (for I feared I had been airbrushed from their mailing lists), that I will of course read this mystery set in first-century Roman Britain.



And just when you thought it was safe to go back to the Dark Ages, Richard Blake sets his debut historical thriller in AD 609, when Rome was in decay if not distinctly ripe. According to those cheerful people at Hodder, *Conspiracies of Rome* combines the intrigue of *The Name of the Rose* with “the most compelling anti-hero since Flashman.”

I presume, of course, that they mean the “Flashman” as brought to life by the wonderful George MacDonald Fraser, who sadly died on 2nd January. And I mention him because he too would probably have been disqualified from the Ellis Peters, and also because I take every opportunity I can to recommend his absolutely fabulous book of recollections of his wartime experiences in Burma, *Quartered Safe Out Here*, which was first published in 1993 but paper-backed by HarperCollins in 2000 and hopefully (if there is any justice) is still in print.

Sweet Smell of Success

Ex-pat American author Joan Brady is reported in the *Independent On Sunday* as having won a £115,000 compensation settlement when solvent fumes from a local shoe factory in Totnes, which I believe to be in Devonshire, rendered (if you’ll pardon the pun) her “low-brow”.

Instead of the “serious” novel she was working on, “all she could manage” was a crime novel. Unable to concentrate on a “proper” novel

because of the fumes, Ms Brady produced *Bleedout* as (she is quoted): “It is much easier to write a thriller.” That may be so, but it doesn’t mean the book is easier to *read*. I know, I tried.

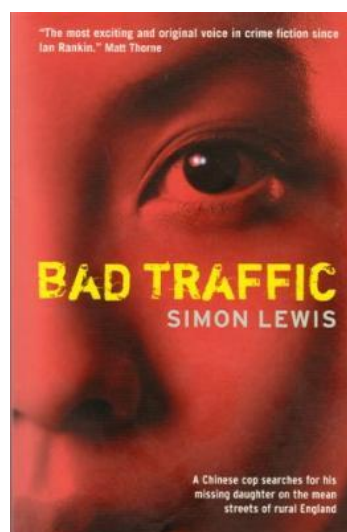
But this got me to thinking of the secondary fumes I have been forced to inhale over the years. Firstly, there is the overwhelming aroma of gin which follows Lady Ripster everywhere, not to mention the persistent whiff of glue which pervades my study where I make and display my Airfix models of the entire Japanese Imperial Navy (1904-1941). I will not mention my factotum Waldo, who, over the years, has smoked numerous varieties of very interesting tobaccos, many of them imported from the Middle East, in my presence.

All these fumes have obviously derailed my career as a serious novelist and the 18 books I have published have fallen into the slough of despond known as crime fiction purely by default. I will therefore take Ms Brady’s case as precedent and apply to the relevant authorities for compensation. I estimate that 18 mysteries which should have been proper novels, at £115,000 a pop, equals something in the region of £2 million give or take legal costs.

As soon as the cheque is in the post, it will be, as they say, trebles all round.

Traffic News

A book which almost slipped completely under my radar, but I am thankful it did not, is Simon Lewis’ new novel *Bad Traffic*, from the delightfully-named Sort Of Books.



Bad Traffic contains a fascinating central premise. A non-English speaking Chinese policeman travels to England in search of his missing daughter and immediately falls foul of a people trafficking gang.

It's an interesting idea and Simon Lewis makes a fair fist of uncovering a very sordid aspect of contemporary British life – an economic and social sore which really deserves to be exposed – even though the book isolates all the Chinese characters in an escalating series of fist and gunfights which are, I suspect, a hat-tip to the films of John Woo and Jackie Chan.

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster