

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### P-p-Penguin P-p-Party

I have recently enjoyed attending my first party hosted by perky publishers Penguin for four years and I see now why I have been excluded in the past.



Obviously Penguin were aware that I suffer from chronic hypertension and therefore, very considerably, kept me at a distance from their authors and charming staff, who seem to consist entirely of fantastically beautiful females and incredibly tall males – both of which do, I admit, influence my blood pressure.



There was even time, amid the festivities, to meet some of the celebrities present, including writers Ruth Downie (above), Charles Cumming, Nicholas Stone, Esq.; bookseller extraordinaire Maxim Jakubowski and critic Professor Barry Forshaw. And the distinguished author Andrew Taylor informs me that “the elegantly cosmopolitan Peter Guttridge” (his words) was also present.



It was also a pleasure to meet a visitor from the colonies in the shape of the charming Marcus Sakey (seen here restraining his gorgeous wife, out of concern for my diastolic reading), who is from somewhere called “Chikagoa” which I believe to be a small frontier settlement near Canada.

I must admit, though, that my knowledge of geography was by this time somewhat hazy, having drunk deeply at Penguin's fountain of hospitality, and so I made my excuses and hired a passing lamplighter to see me safely through the streets of Soho to where my omnibus awaited me for the long journey home to the Eastern Marches.

### Tootles Ash

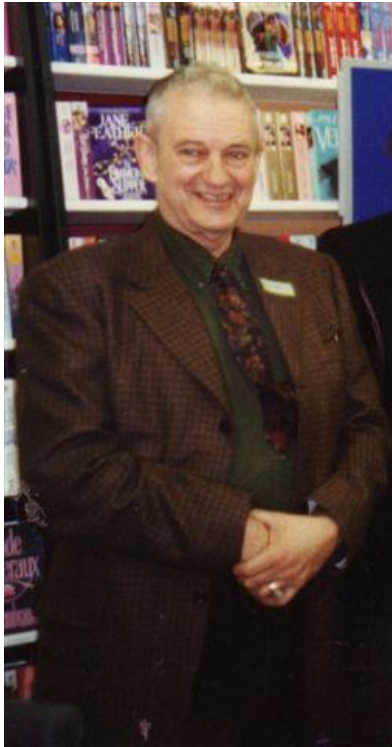
I have always been an admirer of my fictional friend Tootles Ash, or Mr Albert Champion as he was better known to the police. In our younger days, arriving home at his Bottle Street flat just as dawn was breaking, we would often de-trouser a passing milkman just for fun, despite disapproving glances from his mentor, Mrs Youngman-Carter, or Margery Allingham as her publishers insisted on calling her.

I was sad, therefore, not to be able to attend the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday party of the Margery Allingham Society in March, though anyone seeking further information on this noble organisation should, post haste, contact [honsec@margeryallingham.org.uk](mailto:honsec@margeryallingham.org.uk).

### To Nottingham, once too often

I first met Julian Rathbone in Nottingham at one of the legendary Shots On the Page conventions and found him to be an engaging, intelligent man and a writer with few pretensions, despite two Booker prize nominations to his credit, among novice scribblers (such as myself and the fresh-faced Ian Rankin) and fans alike.

Although he admitted to me that had never actually met his distinguished distant relative, Basil Rathbone, we shared many a pun and bon mot misquoting lines from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* in which Basil had played the evil Guy of Gisburn. Similarly, Julian was happy to represent the family name in the spirit of Basil's other great cinematic role, as Sherlock Holmes, when we asked him to present the first ever *Sherlock* awards in 1999, which he did with aplomb.



At a subsequent ceremony, one of the awards went to the late Ian Richardson, and the actor confessed later that he was just as pleased to have met “a genuine Rathbone” as he had been to collect his award.

I was a great fan of Julian’s historical thrillers such as ***The Last English King***, ***Kings of Albion*** and ***A Very English Agent***, which were sprinkled with what used to be called “garlicky puns”.

We last met at my 2005 book launch party and he was polite enough (he always was) to ask about my forthcoming historical thriller on Hereward the Wake, and I promised to send him a copy when it came out later that year.



Of course I never did, which I regret deeply now, following his death last month. I was, just as my eloquent young chum Ian Rankin put it, “gutted” to hear the news.

### I was Robin Cook

Eighteen years ago, in the dead of winter, the train I was travelling on was stopped in a snowdrift and delayed for about four hours. This was no Orient Express moment, in some snowy Balkan pass however; this was more a Leyton Orient moment, as I was trying to get into east London.

I had only one book with me for the journey (I have always since carried a back-up), and that was the newly-published *I Was Dora Suarez* by ‘Derek Raymond’ whom I knew as Robin Cook from the many seminars we had attended in either the French Pub or the Coach and Horses in Soho now renamed simply ‘Norman’s’ which will need no explanation to anyone familiar with the social scene in Soho. We had even appeared together on writers’ panels in the days when it was possible (almost compulsory) to smoke in public and had been interviewed together on the state of British crime writing for Canadian television.



I can't say I *liked* *Dora Suarez*. I don't think anyone could *like* its relentless gore and sexual horrors, but no one can deny the power, passion and anger which comes through the writing. There is no doubt that this is one of the classics of British *noir* crime fiction which has gone so far to the dark side it has created its own Black Hole.

Now there is a new paperback edition out, from those dedicated Raymondistas at Serpent's Tail, to match their reissues of Derek's 'Factory' series of bleak crime novels and his earlier 'Soho' novels which he wrote as Robin Cook.

It will be interesting to see if readers and critics are as shocked today as they were back in 1990. In one way, it will be sad if they are not and we should all be grateful to Serpent's Tail for keeping the Derek Raymond legend alive.

### ALCS News

I have been a member of ALCS – the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society – for a number of years now. This is a selfless and utterly noble body which operates, in conjunction with Interpol, the FBI and the FSB (which was called the *Okrahna* in my day) to track down missing royalties for impoverished authors. They have even, in the past, sent me a small postal order to compensate me for loss of earnings from illicit photocopying of my work in the Sudetenland.

Normally, the highlight of the bi-annual publication *ALCS News* is the “where are they now?” section which attempted to track down missing authors to whom royalties are owed. The latest issue, for Spring 2008, is full of more serious stuff, however, with thought-provoking pieces by two famous names from the world of crime writing: Scottish *capo di capo* Ian Rankin and Joan Smith, much respected critic and creator of feminist academic sleuth Loretta Lawson, whose adventures were so refreshing in the early Nineties and are much missed.

As the whole point of the ALCS is to increase the earning power of authors, not surprisingly money features in both the interview with Ian and in Joan's column.

When asked about the reported earnings of younger writers (under 35), which are ‘a median’ (whatever that is) of £5,000 a year, Ian cheerfully admits that his first novel, published in 1986, brought him £400 and “My first Rebus novel earned an advance of less than a grand.”

{Ah yes, Ian, but remember that in those far off days when we young, you could have a pint of Heavy and a deep-fried pizza in the Oxford Bar and still get change from a ten-shilling note.}

Joan Smith's wonderful essay is a rallying call to writers to carry on despite the obstacles set before them (mostly by publishers!) and I would love to quote it in full, except that the ALCS bloodhounds would quickly be on my trail demanding royalties for her.

Suffice it to say, she begins: “This should be the year we (authors) get angry and stop beating ourselves up. No one likes us much: the general public imagines we're all earning as much as Dan Brown, and if we aren't it's our own fault for not being popular enough. Publishers don't like us because we're not Dan Brown, and they don't know how to sell books by writers who aren't already bestselling authors.”

There's more, much more, meaty stuff in Joan Smith's article and it really deserves to have a bigger audience than the magazine of the ALCS, where it is surely preaching to the converted.

### Writers in public

It always interesting to observe writers speaking in public, to audiences of devoted fans who then wait patiently for autographs, for it must be a strange experience. At least it is for me.

Over the last few weeks I have been blessed to see three accomplished writers in action in public and have been assiduously taking tips on how they deal with crowd control.

David Hewson, the creator of the splendid Nic Costa series set in Rome, adopts the classic 'karaoke' approach to addressing an audience, pacing masterfully in front of his audience like a matador taunting a bull. It is, I believe, a skill he learnt in his youth whilst observing the professional bingo-callers working the Promenade boardwalks of those Yorkshire Riviera resorts of Bridlington and Scarborough.



Then there is this year's Dorothy L. Sayers Lecturer, Jim Kelly, who is so focused that he manages to write another quick chapter of his next novel even as adoring fans queue up for him to sign copies of his previous ones.



And then there is Ariana Franklin, a study in concentration, who, even when interrupted whilst she is reading a good book (something called *Angel Underground* it seems), makes time with courtesy and good grace, to sign a pile of her own paperbacks.



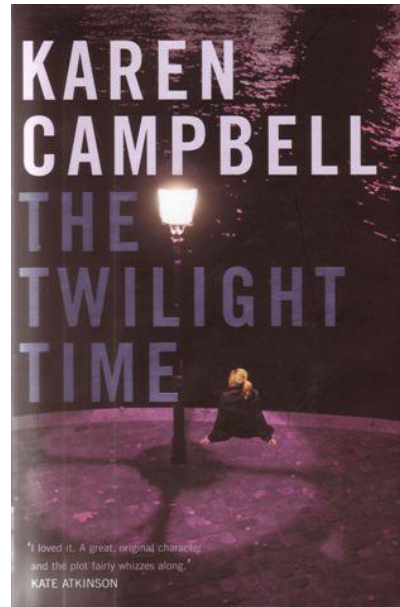
Ariana – the Ellis Peters Award winning author of *Mistress of the Art of Death* – will, I suspect, get little personal reading time this summer for she will surely be mobbed by her growing army of fans now that the news has leaked out that she will be appearing at *Crimefest* in Bristol in June. I know I would be first in line there for her autograph were it not for the Restraining Order which prevents me from attending .

### Mean Streets of Glasgow

I cannot claim to be particularly familiar with the city of Glasgow, but it seems you can see some funny things on its streets these days.



My only reference for this is the opening page of the forthcoming debut novel ***The Twilight Time*** from Hodder, written by former police constable Karen Campbell (a fine Scottish surname which is, I believe, particularly popular in the Glencoe area).



In the opening scene of the novel, the police detective heroine is walking towards her new office and crossing the road when she is narrowly missed by: *A man, near prone in a Sinclair C5 ...*

The driver of this Sinclair C5 turns out to be the detective's new boss: a character called Rankin – another popular Scottish name. But the interesting thing, surely, is the C5. When they were first produced I purchased a dozen of them so that the more elderly and frail among the staff here at Ripster Hall could better navigate the lengthy corridors so that I could enjoy my breakfast toast whilst still warm, but they were not popular and I disposed of them to a passing rag-and-bone man.



I had often wondered what had become of them, but now I know they are being ridden around Glasgow by people called Rankin, I must make plans to visit the city – and read beyond page one of Ms Campbell's intriguing new novel.

### Whither Walthamstow?

I have discovered that one of the most innovative crime writers of the last decade, former probation officer Jeremy Cameron, is alive and well and living in Walthamstow. The author of the mould-breaking **Vinnie Got Blown Away** now has his own website, [www.jeremycameron.co.uk](http://www.jeremycameron.co.uk), which he maintains whilst indulging his twin passions for growing vegetables and supporting Norwich City.

As Jeremy informed me only the other day: "Almost everyone I have ever met has lived in Walthamstow at some time. It's a step on the ladder, sometimes upwardly mobile, sometimes downwardly. Those that haven't lived here have driven through it. Quickly."

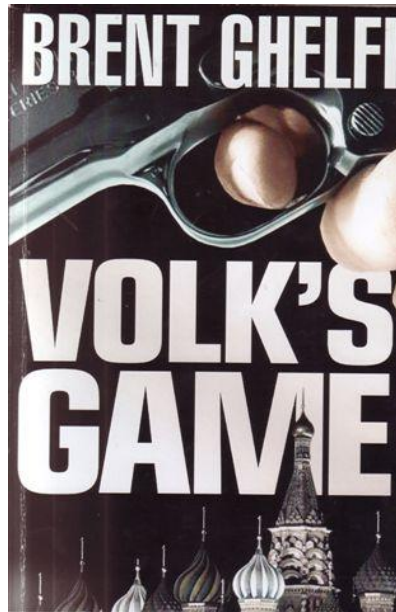
### Life in the Blurbs

I have had to enlarge my reading list for the coming year as I have now discovered new titles which come highly recommended.

There is, for example, Steve Hamilton's **Night Work** from Orion, which I am assured by Lee Child is "An automatic book of the year". I am already looking forward to October, when Penguin publish Chris Kuzneski's **The Lost Throne**, a tale of "high stakes, fast action, vibrant characters – not to be missed" or so it is described by...er...Lee Child, presumably just after he'd finished the "truly excellent" (Lee Child) **The Blade Itself** by Marcus Sakey and after he'd recovered from reading P.J. Parrish's **A Thousand Bones** (coming from Pocket Books), which he describes as "American crime fiction at its finest."

### Volk's Delay

Some while ago I was sent a proof of American Brent Ghelfi's debut thriller **Volk's Game** by those fantastic folk at Faber and I immediately began to devour it, finding it jolly exciting indeed.



I paused in my reading of this most excellent Russian gangster thriller on being told by publishers Faber that UK publication was being delayed until May. Briefly, I wondered if anything had gone wrong. Some glitch with the contracts, perhaps? Or had the Russian Mafia taken pre-emptive measures? My mind positively whirled with suspicion.

However, the new Faber catalogue reassures me that all must be well, for the *second* Brent Ghelfi novel, *Volk's Shadow*, is advertised for publication in November. Even more reassuring, it comes with a front cover recommendation from none other than Lee Child.

Phew! What a relief!

#### Turning leeward

I am saddened to report that Lee Child, whose literary recommendations I hang on, has found himself unable to attend the forthcoming jollities at Crimefest in Bristol, 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> June ([www.crimefest.com](http://www.crimefest.com)).

There will, however, be at least one Lee there, in the form of debut novelist Lee Weeks who is described as “the female James Patterson” on the cover of her book *The Trophy Taker*, published by Avon.



In the past, I have taken to task those editorial Avon ladies for allowing the use of the word **Cos** without the appropriate apostrophe [**'cos**] when referring, in a rather cavalier manner, to the word “because”. Now call me a nit-picking pedant (as many do), but I must take them to task again.

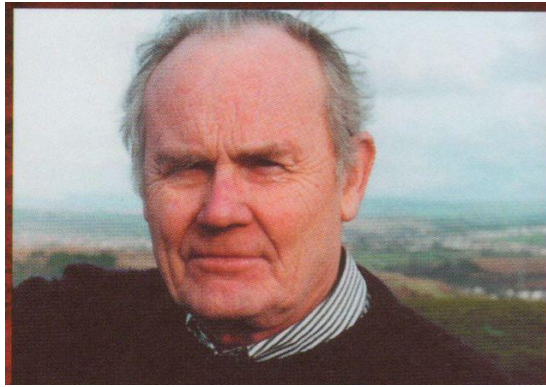
The biographical blurb in the front of ***The Trophy Taker*** (which looks to be a jolly exciting serial killer thriller set in Hong Kong) tells me that: “Lee Weeks left school at 16 with one **O’level**....”

Could it be that an **O’level** is some form of Irish qualification with which I am unfamiliar, or do they mean the old GCE qualification of **O-Level**? In any case, Ms Weeks is clearly too young to have had to take O-Levels, which I am told were abandoned by the educational authorities at some point in the last century.

### Knight Errant

I am delighted to see that my old and distinguished friend Professor Bernard Knight is to celebrate the twelfth Crowner John mystery ***The Manor of Death***, published by those saucy socialites at Simon & Schuster.

The Crowner (think “coroner”) John novels set in the wild and woolly west country in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century are already acknowledged as a National Treasure. I know this to be true for it says so on the new book’s dust jacket and the authority it quotes is unimpeachable.

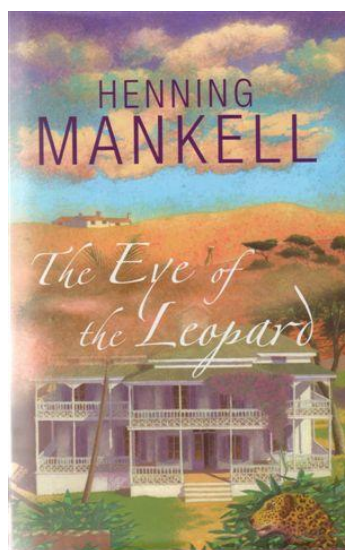


But Professor Knight, CBE, is himself something of a National Treasure, after a forty-year career as a pathologist with the Home Office during which he performed over 25,000 autopsies. He also, I am reliably informed, gives a highly informative lecture to young medical students on how crime writers get their forensics wrong!

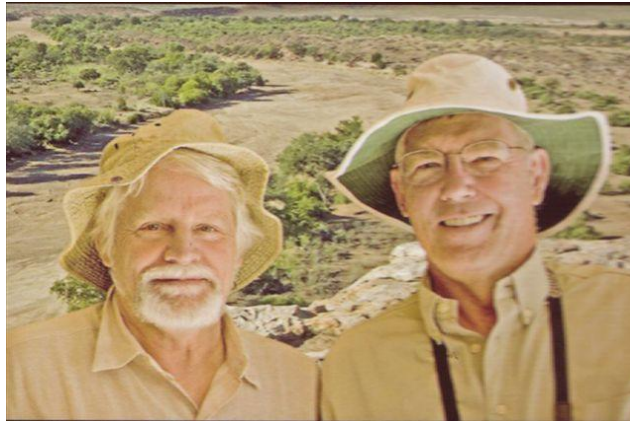
### African Skies

I suppose it was inevitable that with the televising of *The No1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (or *Wild At Heartbeat* as one wag called it) that publishers should see Africa as a happy hunting ground.

Of course for those of us brought up on the excellent Kramer and Zondi books of James McClure back in the early 1970s, this is not unexplored territory. And one should not be surprised at iconic Swedish crime writer Henning Mankell choosing to set his new novel *The Eye of the Leopard* (from those super souls at Harvill Secker) in northern Zambia, for Mankell actually lives in Africa, presumably to get away from all those gloomy policemen and serial killers in southern Sweden.



But a new novel from those lovely Headline hobbits threatens to reveal “the real Botswana” through the adventures of Assistant Superintendent David “Kubu” Bengu in *A Carrion Death* by “Michael Stanley”.

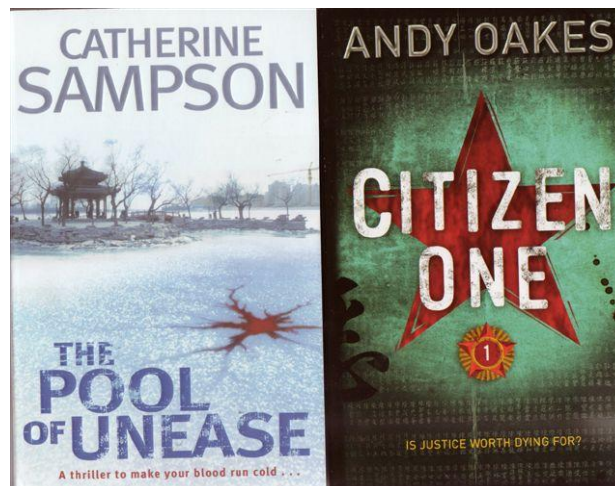


I can exclusively reveal that “Michael Stanley” is in fact the pen-name of a writing team of old Africa hands: Michael Stanley, who lives near Johannesburg (and is something of a Bill Oddie lookalike) and Stanley Trollip, who lives in Minneapolis, which I believe happens to be on another continent.

Thus it proves the old maxim that you don’t have to live in Botswana to write about it.

### New China Hands

With immaculate timing as the Beijing Olympics loom ever nearer, those perky publishing people at Pan have produced a brace of thrillers set in China, or Cathay as it was called in my day.



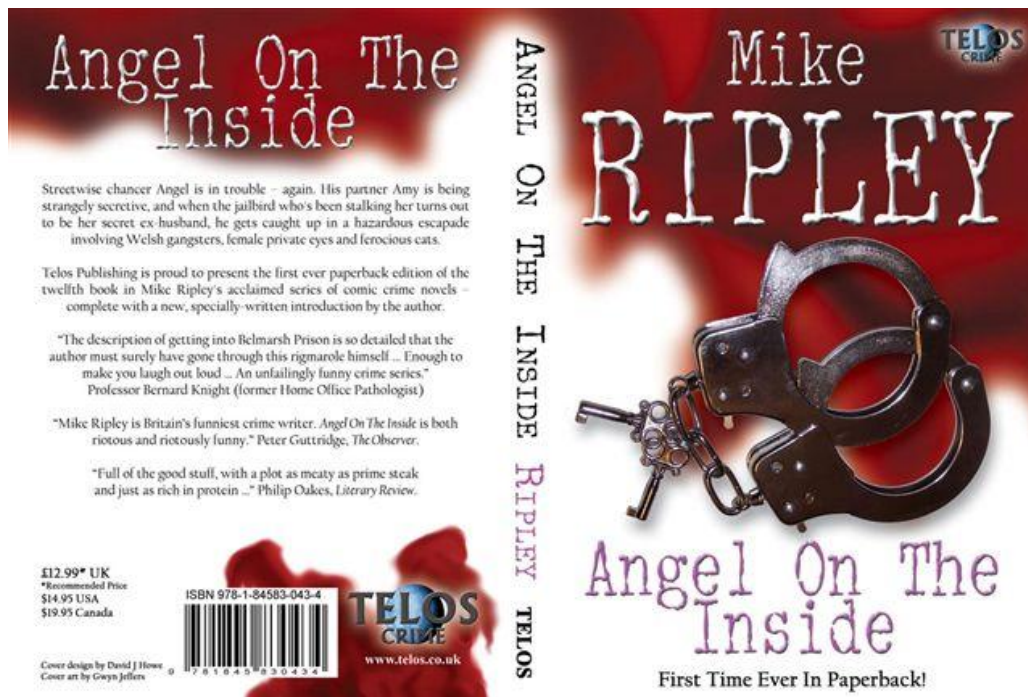
And just when I had reported on the first Beijing private eye last month, I find there is another one, called Song, who features in Catherine Sampson’s ***The Pool of Unease***.

In Andy Oakes’ second novel, ***Citizen One***, there are bodies in the foundations of the new Olympic stadium in Shanghai and the recently demoted chief investigator Sun Piao lands the case.

## Missing Angel

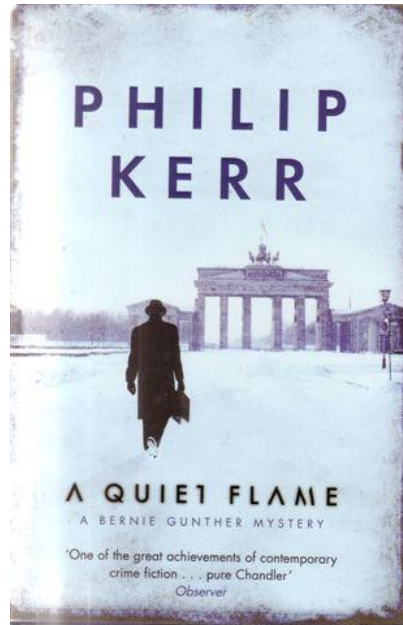
I am constantly being asked (well, occasionally) about what has become known as the “missing” novel in my ‘Angel’ series, ***Angel On the Inside*** which appeared some years ago in hardback but was never issued in paperback. I am sure there was a good reason why this was the only one of fifteen titles in the award-winning series (oh, did I say that out loud?) not to appear in paperback, but at the time of publication I was otherwise engaged in hospital having a stroke. It discovered that the planned paperback edition had been axed some months later when I read my (then) publisher’s catalogue only to find I wasn’t in it.

Now those terrific types at Telos Books have jumped in to fill this extraordinary literary gap and will be publishing the first ever paperback edition, complete with an introduction by the author, around about July, just in time to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the very first ‘Angel’ tale which appeared in 1988.



## Curse of the Ripster

It is rather early in the year to be invoking the Curse of the Ripsters but I will do so nonetheless.



I may be wrong (I frequently am), but I do believe that Philip Kerr's outstanding new Bernie Gunther novel ***A Quiet Flame*** is eligible for the three major crime writing prizes in this year's awards calendar, whatever they are called at the moment. I am thinking of the Crime Writers' Gold Dagger (which may or may not still be called that), the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger for thrillers and, of course, the Ellis Peters Award for historical crime.

Philip's new book qualifies brilliantly in all three categories and I have no hesitation in tipping him to scoop a unique treble and win all three. Having said that, of course, the weight of history shows that I will of course be wrong, and ***A Quiet Flame*** will probably go disgracefully unrecognised.

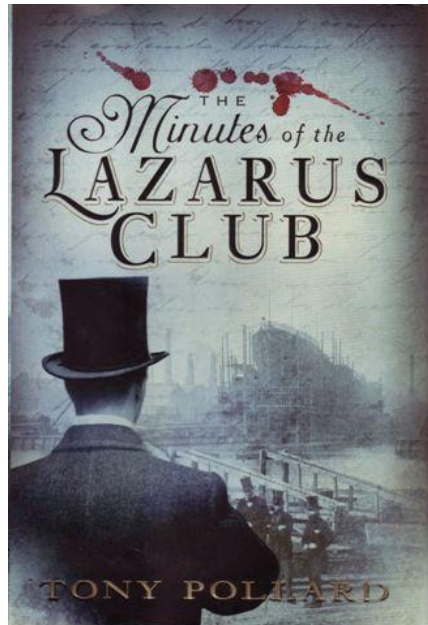
Sorry about that, Philip.

### **Raiders of the Lost Manuscript**

It is unusual, but not entirely unknown, for archaeologists to forgo the fame and riches which accrue from that noble profession and downsize into the world of writing crime fiction. When it does happen, it is always a wrench with many a tear shed as a fedora is doffed or a bullwhip cracked for the last time. Slowly, realisation dawns that there will be no more adventures with crystal skulls in temples of doom; that the last crusade has indeed been and gone and perhaps that pesky Ark will remain lost forever.

So my heart goes out to Dr Tony Pollard who has abandoned the glamorous lifestyle of the relic hunter and traded in his trowel for a word-processor to produce his debut novel ***The Minutes of the Lazarus Club*** for those stunningly attractive publishing people at Penguin.





Set in Victorian London, this may well be Dr Pollard's first attempt at fiction (something which could not be said of some of my archaeological site reports!) but it is certainly not his first published work. Who could forget his masterly co-editing of the bestselling *Fields of Conflict: Progress and Prospect in Battlefield Archaeology* from 2001? Or indeed, his superb paper in that same slim volume: "Place Ekowe in a state of defence": the archaeological investigation of the British fort at KwaMondi, Eshowe, Zululand?

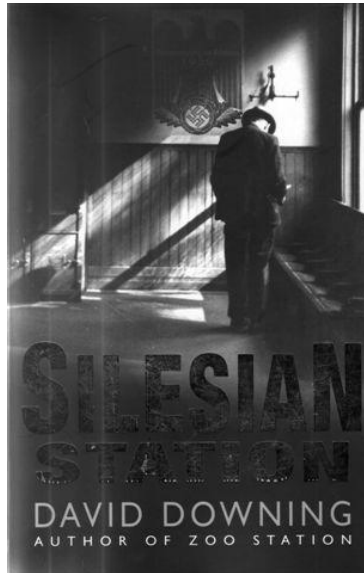


For those not instantly familiar with the historical backdrop, the fort at Eshowe was the scene of one of the lesser-known engagements (come on, you've seen the films) of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, where a British garrison of some 1700 soldiers were besieged for almost three months. Although vastly outnumbered, the British had the Gatling gun and the Zulus did not.

**The Station now arriving...**

Those wonderful young people at Old Street Publishing ([www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk](http://www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk)) have finally managed to persuade me to read a David Downing novel and I am very glad they did.

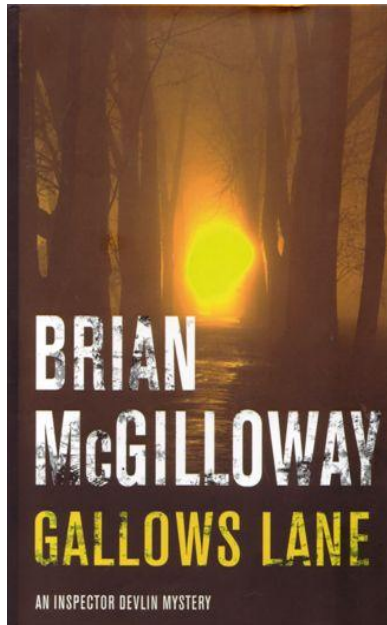
Mr Downing's latest, *Silesian Station*, is a fabulous thriller, rich in historical detail, which covers politics, a bit of private detective work and the problems facing a journalist working for three rival intelligence services at once. All this done in the setting of Germany and Eastern Europe in the summer of 1939 as the world slides inexorably into war.



It is always a pleasure to discover a new thriller writer, especially an intelligent one with a good grasp of history and so I am further delighted to discover that the first book (in what I hope will be a long series), *Zoo Station*, is now out in mass-market paperback.

<b>Not paying attention</b>
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At some point last year, I thought I made it clear that there was far too much crucifixion creeping into crime fiction (Irishman Ken Bruen and Scottish person Allan Guthrie were among the unusual suspects). Obviously my pleas fell on deaf ears, for what should arrive – in Easter Week! – but a copy of the new novel *Gallows Lane* ([Read The Shots Article](#)) by one of the rising stars of Irish crime writing, Brian McGilloway.



Wouldn't you just know it, but one of the murders investigated by Garda Inspector Benedict Devlin in the book (from those innovative imps at Macmillan New Writing) involves a body nailed to a tree.

I believe this to have been a method of execution employed by the Romans in Britain during their somewhat heated religious debates with the native Druids, and had assumed it had fallen out of favour over the last 1,900 years. Strangely, it seems, not in Scotland and Ireland.

### Canada Far From Dry

On a recent visit to the Metropolis, I chanced upon members of the emergency services normally concerned with crowd control (mounted police, fire brigade water-cannon crews, St John's ambulance staff and of course the Salvation Army) engaged in an extensive training exercise in Trafalgar Square near the entrances to Canada House.

A security exercise of this magnitude can only mean one thing: the impending visit to this country of Louise Penny. No wonder the airport authorities were hurried into opening Terminal 5 at Heathrow before it was fully operational.

***Pip!Pip!  
The Ripster***