

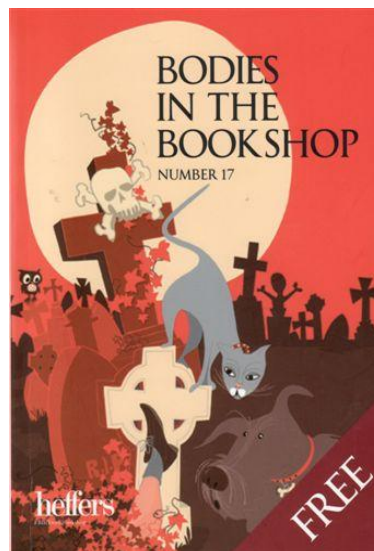
# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### Alma Mater

The annual reunion of the alumni of St Heffer's College, Cambridge will take place on 15<sup>th</sup> July and will see the launch of the eighteenth edition of the college prospectus, copies of which rapidly become valuable collector's items.



The gathering of the alumni, all graduates in crime writing (the only subject St Heffer's teaches) will see the usual parade and doffing of caps ceremony before the Master, Dr Richard Reynolds. Once again, this ceremony will be open to the public ([literature@heffers.co.uk](mailto:literature@heffers.co.uk)) and will be followed by the annual High Table Feast which sadly is now restricted to senior members of the college under the Health and Safety Act following an unfortunate incident with a stuffed swan some years ago.

For those wishing to attend who are unfamiliar with Cambridge, or *Grantebridge* as we more accurately call it, the main gates of St Heffer's are to be found between the Porters' Lodges of Fisher College and St Martha's.

It seems that the College has branched out and is now offering short, sandwich courses to first degree level (as opposed to full time MSc – Master of the Scene of Crime). These are known among the students as “Crimecracker” sessions and tutorials are held in the cavernous wine cellars built under St Heffer's in the days of the first Master, Sir Ranulph Reynolds.



I am told these seminars are popular, not just because of the ample supplies of Sack, Malmsey and Claret on offer, but because of the presence of visiting tutors from abroad. This month, the guest tutors taking advantage of the tropical Cambridge climate, were Canadian Louise Penny (the recent winner of an Agatha Award) and American Brian Freeman, the author of the splendid thriller *Immoral*, from Minnesota.

### In Town Tonight

With the London season well underway, I attended what is traditionally the loudest party of the year, that thrown by those shy and retiring publishing people at Mssrs Headline & Co. in what I believe is called a ‘Night Club’ in fashionable Covent Garden.

Present were guests from around the globe, many having been jetted in for the occasion, some from as far away as North Yorkshire. High on everyone's wish-to-meet list was visiting American mystery diva Karen Rose and our esteemed editor, Mike ‘Deadwood’ Stotter, made a point of being one of the first to welcome her.



Karen, whose most excellent thriller *Scream For Me* is published here this month, holds a special place in the hearts of SHOTS readers for in the Acknowledgements section of her dedication in that book, she boldly states *All mistakes are my own*. Here at SHOTS we are sure there aren't actually any mistakes, but it is refreshing to see an author willing to take the rap if they have to. So: Kudos, Karen, as I believe our colonial cousins are want to say.

It was a chance to catch up with old friends. There was Veronica Stallwood, who had braved the dangerous journey from darkest Oxfordshire and, in expansive mood, there too was millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim, who was so taken with the canapés on offer that he made the club's pastry chef an offer he could not refuse.

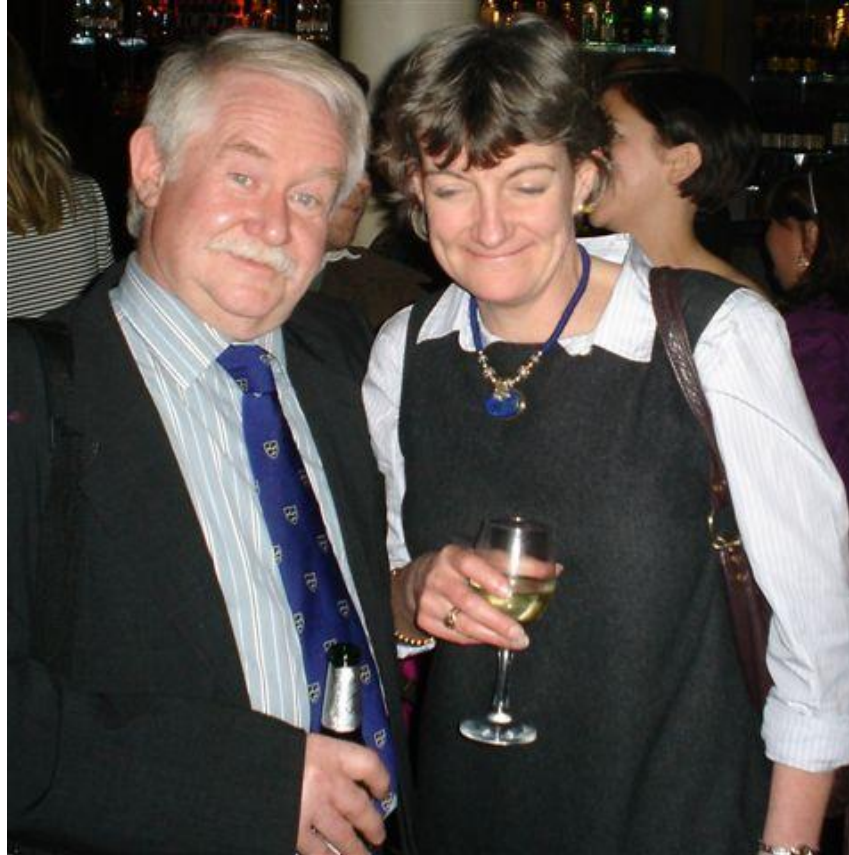
One of the (many) highlights of the evening was a chance to catch up with those stalwart supporters of many a writer, Magna Large Print, in the form of Boudica Allen and her team. The night was still sadly young when they had to leave to catch the Polar Express home to the land of the Northern Lights.



And so I was left to mingle among the crowd of famous faces present. There was 'Bateman', the writer previously known as Colin, on a rare visit to the mainland; the multi-talented Barbara Nadel, whom I was charmed to meet for the first time; and my old friend Paul Doherty and I managed an all-too-brief discussion on the Pelagian Heresy in 5<sup>th</sup>-century sub-Roman Britain, a discussion I attempted to continue with critic Jane Jakeman but without success.



When I realised that normally vivacious agent Broo Docherty was actually asleep at my shoulder, I decided that perhaps it was time to change the topic of conversation, make my excuses and leave.



No sooner had I recovered from one social blur, I made the long and arduous trip back to London for luncheon with yet more of the great and good of crime writing, partly to honour visiting South African authors Michael Sears and Stanley Trollip and Louise Penny (who seems to be everywhere these days except her native Canada, so goodness knows how all that timber will get cut this year).



The luncheon was also partly to say farewell to Headline's Becky Fincham, the Mary Poppins of publishing publicity, on her departure for a new job with Faber & Faber. This naturally drew distinguished guests

such as Maxim Jackubowski and Professor Barry Forshaw and took place in the fashionable, if not trendy, Joe Allen's restaurant.

Professor Forshaw is, of course, a regular diner there and was recognised by the staff who enquired politely if he would like the usual table he shared with Cliff Richards, whom I believe to be a singer in a popular beat combo.

### Mystery Solved

A mystery which has been puzzling me for twenty years has finally been solved thanks to Stephen Jones' biography *Basil Copper: A Life In Books*. In this magisterial volume (from PS Publishing), Mr Jones tells the story of his first meeting with his hero, the prolific crime and horror writer, Copper.

*It was in 1988, at the lunchtime opening of a new crime and mystery bookstore in London's West End, named after one of his Mike Faraday novels.*

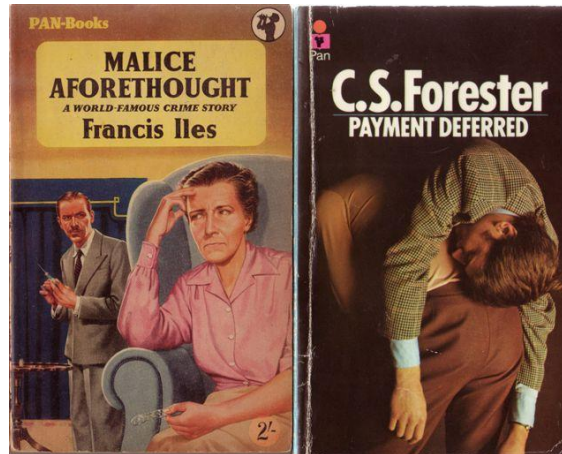
How interesting. I had often wondered where the name *Murder One* had come from, not realising until now that it was taken from the title of one of the 52 (yes, *fifty-two*) "Mike Faraday" private eye novels written by Basil Copper between 1966 and 1988. How clever of founder Maxim Jakubowski to take his inspiration from that particular Basil Copper novel. Where would we be if he had chosen one of the other titles from the extensive Mike Faraday canon such as *A Good Place To Die* or *Tight Corner* or even *Big Rip-Off*?

### Malice Afterthought

I had always regarded the brilliant *Malice Aforethought* by Francis Iles as the pioneer "psychological suspense" crime novel – the one that broke the mould of the so-called "Golden Age" Monopoly (or should that be "Cluedo"?) of whodunit detective stories. It did so, of course, by telling you who did it in line one of Chapter One, which caused quite a stir in 1931, and the rest of the book was really a question of *does he get away with it?*

It was one of my students on the course I teach for Cambridge University (a course entitled with due homage *With Malice Aforethought: Aspects of*

*the Crime Novel*) who reminded me that there is another book which can claim pioneering status in this field.



C.S. Forester became famous for *The Gun*, *The African Queen* and of course, the Hornblower books, to such an extent that two of his earliest novels – crime novels – are almost totally forgotten.

*Payment Deferred*, written when Forester was only 25 and published in 1926, could be said to have beaten *Malice Aforethought* to the punch by five years. If not in that dramatic opening line, but certainly by the end of Chapter One, Forester tells you who has done the murder, why, and how, and the rest of the book is how the murderer gets his comeuppance, although no detectives are involved and almost all violence is described ‘off-stage’.

It is also a *suburban* murder – not a country house in sight – and a wonderful examination of lower middle class morals and manners in a closely observed family unit, only one of whom (the most cynical) actually survives. This is not a novel of detection, rather a novel about the consequences of a grubby little murder and a stunning portrayal of how the fear of being discovered (rather than any feeling of guilt) gnaws away at the murderer.

His second (and last?) crime novel, *Plain Murder*, appeared in 1930 (still a year before *Malice Aforethought*) and, again using a suburban lower middle class setting, begins with a murder conspiracy and a murder echoed in Len Deighton’s *Funeral In Berlin* more than three decades later. The whodunit, whydunit and howdunit are all given in the opening chapters and the main plotline follows the disintegration of the conspiracy and how the murderers turn on each other.

Both are pioneer crime novels of psychological suspense rather than “detective stories” and, given the tragic inevitability of the events set in train by the murders and their nihilistic tone, I might even suggest they are prototypes of *noir* fiction.

The creator of *Mr Midshipman Hornblower* as the great-grandfather of British *noir*? Who’d have thought it?

### Things in common

Manda Scott is a writer whose crime novels I much admired, particularly *Hen’s Teeth* and *No Good Deed*. At one time I would have suggested we had much in common. We both live in the East of England, we have both written crime novels and we have both written books about the Iron Age Queen Boudica, even spelling it the same, correct, way, albeit I only did one and Manda four. We also both have new paperbacks out this summer.

But there the commonality ends, for the paperback edition of Manda’s *The Crystal Skull* (published by Bantam with immaculate timing considering the exploits of my old friend Professor Indiana Jones), comes replete with the review: “*Original, scary, rooted in the past but as current as tomorrow’s nightmare. An enthralling read*” from none other than the inexhaustible Lee Child.

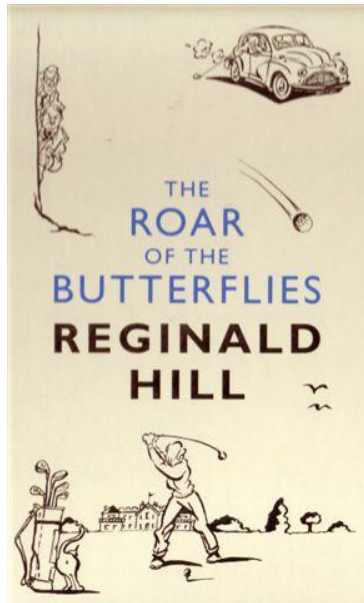
At this point I have to humbly bow out of any comparisons, for I cannot boast a Lee Child endorsement on any of my 18 titles.

### Father’s Day

Reginald Hill’s ‘other’ series, featuring Luton-based private eye Joe Sixsmith, has been fairly well eclipsed by the popularity of his stunning Dalziel and Pascoe novels, even though Sixsmith has made numerous appearances in print since his debut in 1993. Personally, I blame Luton for this.

However, Joe is due for a boost in a superbly packaged (and illustrated) new novel, *The Roar of the Butterflies*, from Reg’s perky publishers (for the last 38 years) at HarperCollins.





Published in June, with a clever eye on the Father's Day market, *Butterflies* starts with scandalous goings-on in the local golf club and murder before we reach the safety of the 19<sup>th</sup> hole. I am resisting the urge to create an armoury of reviewer's epithets such as "A hole in one" (if it's good) and "Below par" (if it falls below Hill's own high standards), and will keep my powder dry.

I will admit now, though, that I have never been a golfer as I have never seen the point of putting the bar at the end of such a long and convoluted stroll. And then there is Luton. Why Luton? It doesn't even have a football team as good as, say, Hartlepool.

### Dawn Patrol

My cap is doffed in deference to those hardy devotees of crime fiction who will be attending *Crimefest* in Bristol this summer ([www.crimefest.com](http://www.crimefest.com)) for they will have many difficult choices to make. I do not mean who they should vote to win the Last Laugh Award for comedy (for that has surely already got Ruth Dudley Edwards' name on it), but rather they must decide how to be in three places at once, given the packed programme on offer.

How can any rational person possibly choose between the following panels, which all run at the same time: "How To Write A Thriller" (chaired by SHOTS' very own Mike Deadwood Stotter and featuring my fellow *boulevardiers* Mr Nicholas Stone and the Hon. Charles Cumming); "Scared To Death – Chills and Thrills" moderated by Irish

Private Eye writer Declan Hughes; or, possibly the pick of the bunch, “Does Size Matter?” chaired by the voluptuous Ayo Ontade?

An impossible choice, though an easy one for me, were it not for the Restraining Order which prevents me from attending, as these three panels are not only all on at the same time, but all commence *at 9 a.m.* (in the *morning*). The dedication of the panellists who are willing to share their wit and wisdom at such an unearthly hour (normally reserved for attending Matins or exercising the gun dogs) is to be commended and I hope they get the audiences they deserve, though I suspect these particular delicacies are in danger of being spread a little too thin.

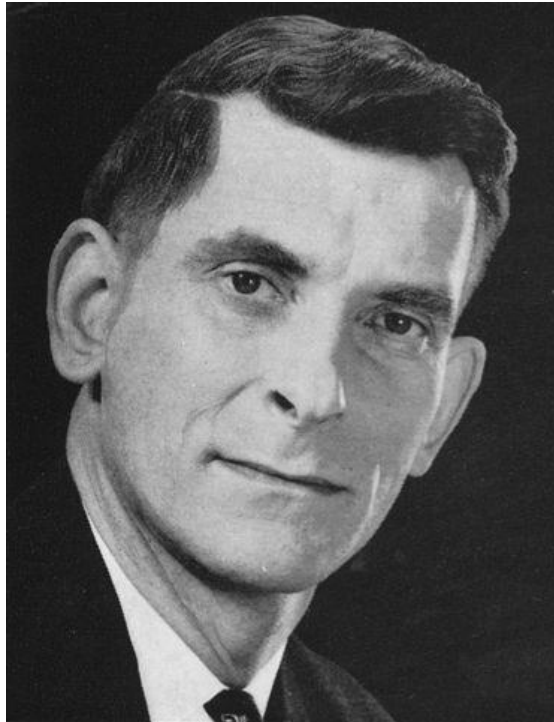
But what do I know of crime writing conventions? In the heady days of the original Shots On the Page conventions in Nottingham back in the last century, it was not until the fourth year that I realised there *were* panels.

### Return of the Hero

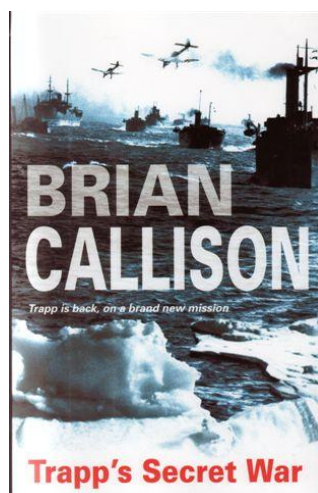
I freely admit to boyhood hero-worship when it came to the early maritime thrillers in the relentless machine-gun prose of Scotsman Brian Callison, ever since I discovered his 1970 classic *A Flock of Ships* back in the days when a new hardback first edition cost £1.50 (or thirty shillings in real money.)



That wartime cat-and-mouse chase in the South Atlantic was a cracker and probably the best naval thriller since *HMS Ulysses*. What made it stand out was Callison’s delivery of prose seemingly bursting out of a pressure-cooker and whatever he wrote about ships and merchant seamen you believed. He had, after all, served his time in Merchant Navy and you just knew he’d been there and done that.



But it is his writing ‘voice’ which singles out Brian Callison as a unique stylist (in the same way Anthony Price in his spy stories had a unique, though different, narrative voice), and I am delighted to say that, at the age of 74 (and now Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Dundee University), Callison’s writing has lost none of its trademark pace. His new novel, from those modest people at Severn House, *Trapp’s Secret War*, is just out and fans will welcome the return of one of Callison’s finest creations: that utterly disreputable, professional survivor, Edward Trapp, a professional pirate who probably shares Captain Jack Sparrow’s gene pool.



With a setting of the Arctic convoys to Russia in 1943, this is a book ideally read in front of a winter log fire, accompanied by a large mug of cocoa heavily laced with Watson’s Trawlerman’s Rum.

## Terrible Admission

I have always been slightly bemused when people tell me, quite openly, that they indulge in “blogging”. For many years I was under the impression that this activity involved acts of a sexual nature between consenting adults in a municipal car park, a practice which was long ago banned on National Trust property.

However, I am now sufficiently down among the kids to realise that “blogging” is something which takes place on the jolly old interweb and it is clear to me that personal blogs perform a cathartic function as a form of electronic confessional.

How else can one explain the awful confession of crime writer Martin Edwards, who has recently “come out” (as I believe the modern expression is) and admitted publicly to the millions of readers of his “blog” on [www.martinedwardsbooks.com](http://www.martinedwardsbooks.com) that he has *never read anything* by John D. MacDonald or Ross Macdonald.

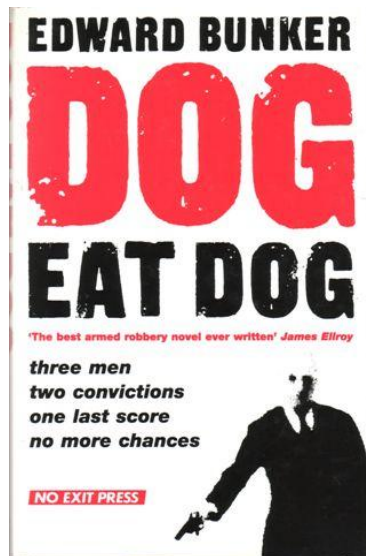
Such a staggering confession surely deserves a penance of huge proportions from a spiritual higher authority, and I shall take my time deciding what it should be.

## Dog Days

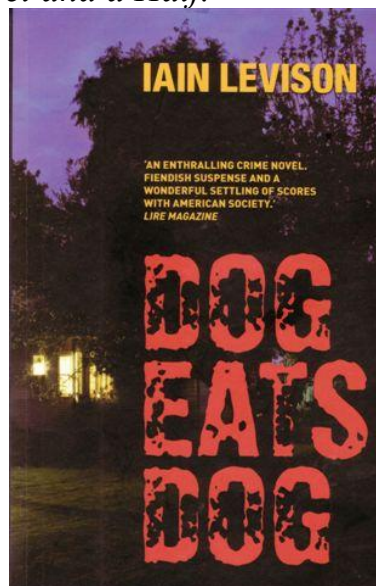
I know there is no copyright on titles, but publishers usually try their best to avoid confusing bookseller and reader. I myself was once forced to change a title because an American thriller writer also had a book called *Angel Eyes* due for publication from the same publisher. I naturally accepted their decision with good grace and rumours of my attempts to change my name to Eric van Lustbader have been grossly exaggerated.

But I am worried about the recent publication of another novel with the title *Dog Eats Dog*.

The original one of course, was written by Edward Bunker (famously “Mr Blue” in the film *Reservoir Dogs*) and published here in 1996.



And now comes *Dog Eats Dog* by Iain Levison, published by those usually inventive people at Bitter Lemon Press, and it is a book, like its famous predecessor, which comes with a fascinating author back story. Born in Scotland, the much travelled Iain Levison now lives in North Carolina, having served in the British army (in Peru!) and been a crab fisherman in Alaska. He is the author of two non-fiction works: *Working Stiff's Manifesto* and *Since the Layoffs* but this is his first novel and was originally published in France under the title *Une Canaille et demie*. I believe this translates roughly (for modern languages are not my speciality) as *A Scoundrel and a Half*.



Now that is not a bad title – I've certainly come across worse (*Hands Up Miss Seton* springs to mind) – but it's not as good as *Dog Eats Dog*, which is a pity because it might upset hardboiled fans for the reason that those who loved the late Eddie Bunker's book will absolutely adore this

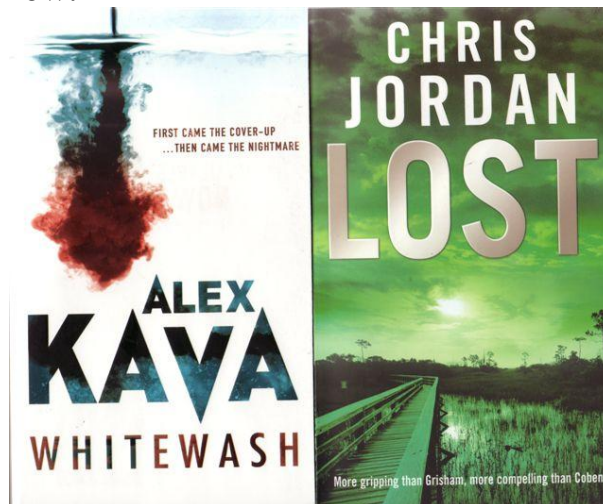
one. One of the lead characters has a career in “weapons-based financial reallocation” (armed robbery), another is a seedy, over-ambitious small town college professor writing a thesis entitled *Hitler Was Right*, and a third is a female FBI agent determined to smash through the glass ceiling of male chauvinism, or at least put a bullet through it.

The opening bank robbery which inevitably goes wrong and the subsequent interaction between career criminal, civilian and pursuing law officer, are quite brilliantly done. In fact I had to check whilst reading this book that it wasn't Elmore Leonard or Richard Stark writing under another name for tax reasons.

### Reflected in the Mira

Those relatively new kids on the crime publishing block in Britain, MIRA Books, are getting noticed for their list of fast-paced, no-nonsense thrillers, mostly by American authors who ought to be better-known (over here) than they have been.

One cannot, of course, suggest that Tess Gerritsen is an unknown quantity, and MIRA's forthcoming *Whistle Blower* is eagerly awaited. And growing in reputation here is Alex Kava, with six of her backlist championed by MIRA plus her latest heady mix of greed and corruption, *Whitewash*, out now.



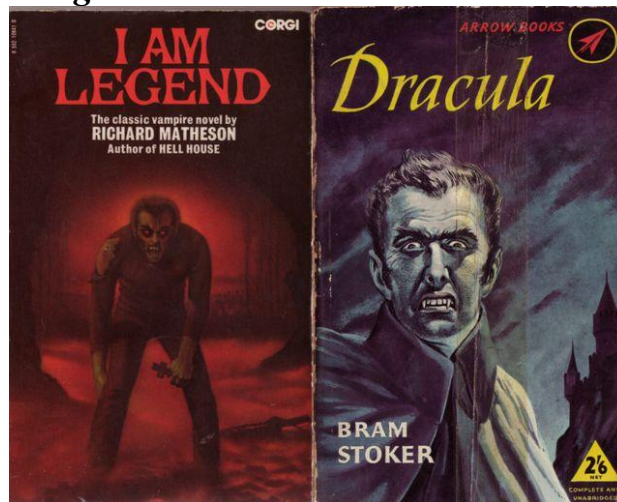
Less well-known, at least to me, is Chris Jordan, whose latest, *Lost*, was originally published in the US under the title *Trapped*. The name Chris Jordan may be a new one to many readers and author Rodman Philbrick may be better known for thrillers, private eye novels and horror stories under his other *noms de guerre* of William R. Danz and W.R. Philbrick.

## Fangs ain't what they used to be

In the latest crop of British publishers' catalogues for the second-half of 2008, there seems to be an unhealthy concentration on what I can only describe as "chick-lit vampire fiction."

Pocket Books, for example, offer the "thrilling and sexy contemporary vampire world" of Susan Sizemore. Allison & Busby have "The Morganville Vampires" series by Rachel Caine and the "sophisticated, sexy, surprising" stories of Lady Victoria, vampire slayer, by Colleen Gleason. Transworld, meanwhile, have the creator of the Anita Blake (vampire hunter) books, Laurell K. Hamilton. And Piatkus proudly publish numerous "sexy" series labelled "Undead", "Dark Hunter" and "Dark Carpathian", from authors Mary Janice Davidson, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Christine Feehan and Keri Arthur

Now I have nothing against vampire literature *per se*. Indeed, I possess all the classic vampire books – both dear Bram's *Dracula* and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*.



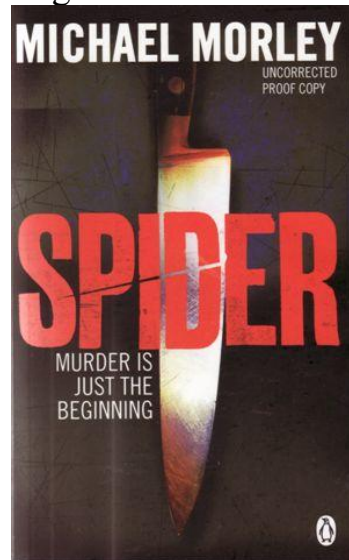
What I find slightly unhealthy is the way publishers are falling over themselves to gorge on this particular flavour-of-the-month (and surely a minority taste). Still, I suppose it happens in the crime and mystery field. Since the success of Henning Mankell, every UK publisher has been scouring Scandinavia with a ruthlessness the raiding Vikings of yesteryear would have admired.

## Spider Man

Crime novels with Italian settings have always been popular (think Dibdin, Hewson, Nabb) and serial-killer thrillers (too many to mention)

are still being churned out on a frightening scale. Why not combine the two formats?

Yes, I know Thomas Harris did it a while back in *Hannibal*, but now Michael Morley has in his debut novel *Spider*, a paperback original from Penguin and jolly convincing it is too.



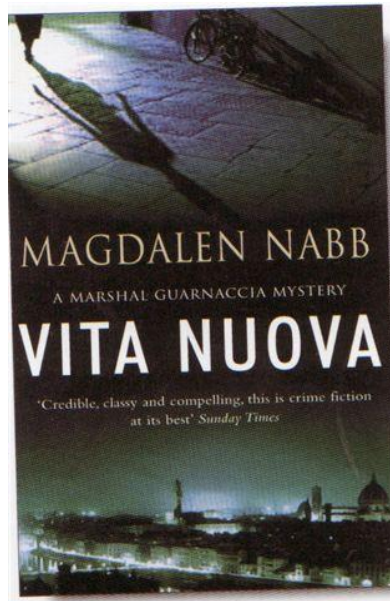
Michael Morley is a Brit, I believe, who also lives in the Netherlands, and the book is set half in Italy, half in the USA, with the obligatory loony killer and a burnt-out FBI profiler trying to forget all the professional horror he has seen.

It is very confidently written and if the idea of “criminal profiling” sounds as if it’s been done to (a suitably gruesome) death, then think again, for Michael Morley does seem to know what he’s writing about. As a television producer, he has done his research at the FBI’s Behavioural Science Centre at Quantico and was behind the controversial documentary *Murder In Mind* about England’s notorious serial killer Dennis Nilsen (who, incidentally, completes his initial 25-year sentence for murder this Autumn).

The fact that Mr Morley works for Endemol TV, which brought us such quality viewing as *Big Brother*, *Deal or No Deal* and *Golden Balls*, should not be held against him, for *Spider* is a thrilling, fast-paced read.

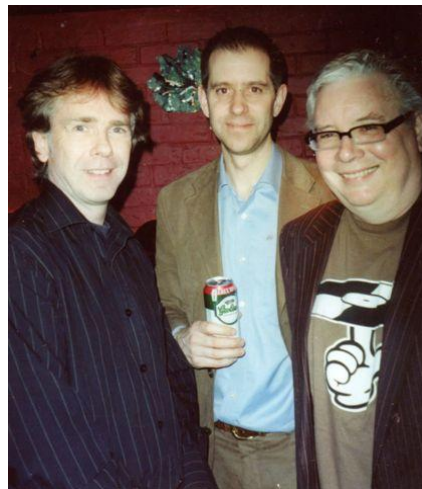
And speaking of Italy, I note that the last Marshal Guarnaccia (Florence’s Finest) investigation by Magdalene Nabb will be published, sadly posthumously, in August by William Heinemann.





### Ryan Air

One of the more unusual launch parties of the year was that for my old sparring partner Rob Ryan's excellent WWI thriller *Empire of Sand*, held in the exclusive Black Gardenia Club in one of the better-lit parts of Soho.



Sadly, my picture of Rob (right) with Headline Editor-at-Large (does that mean he's on the run?) Martin Fletcher and sales supremo James Horobin, does not do anything like justice to the capacious club, with its seventeen bars, three restaurants and more in-store bakeries than Tesco's. It is indeed a veritable Tardis of a club; much bigger on the inside than it appears from outside and above ground level. Or so it seemed after I had sampled the numerous Bourbon whiskeys on offer.

### Angel Unexpected

I have been inundated with a telegram from an irate book-dealer (Rare and Unwanted Manuscripts Inc.) demanding to know why I had been keeping secret my new novel. I have hastily pointed out that the forthcoming book *Angel Uncovered*, from Century, has certainly not been written by me, though I do admire its catchy title.

The name of the author appears to be one Katie Price, but I am afraid I have absolutely no idea who that is. I will immediately consult my extensive collection of back copies of the *Literary Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement* to find out all I can about this mysterious author. My factotum Waldo has offered me the loan of his own collection of certain magazines, which he assures will not only help but give me ‘something to think about’.

*Pip! Pip!*  
*The Ripster*