

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



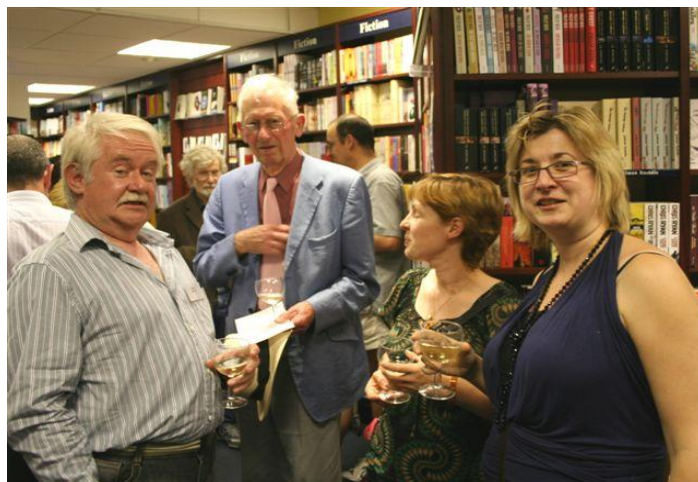
The Gathering of the Alumni

There was a splendid turnout for the 18th meeting of the alumni of St Heffer's College, Cambridge (which is known the world over for its academic concentration on only the one subject: crime fiction) and the college precincts positively heaved in the sultry, humid evening.

It was a delight to see new faces and meet such stars of the genre as Roger Morris (remarkably charming and approachable for such a successful author), Lee Jackson (amazingly charming for somebody born in Lancashire) and Sharon Bolton who revealed that she had received so many glowing reviews of her debut novel that she could not possibly remember any of them. We await her second novel with interest...

A special mention in the minutes must be made of the utterly delightful Rebecca Stott, not only the author of the acclaimed *Ghostwalk* but clearly a fine and noble human being, for she was seen to desert her own fans in order to bring succour and refreshment to some of the older members of the college overcome by the heat.

At one point, caught on camera, I did have to restrain my bodyguard and factotum Waldo from drawing his concealed sidearm when a group of autograph hunters surged forward on the mistaken assumption I was signing cheques.



And it was an honour to be able to exchange a few words with Laura Wilson in between her many public engagements this summer.



In the few brief moments her hectic timetable allowed, Laura gave me a strong hint that her next novel would feature the occult and, specifically the menace of zombies roaming the streets of Cambridge. It is possible, of course, that I may have misunderstood her, for it was very humid and we desperately trying to take on more liquid, but I sure she told me she had just seen some of “the undead”.

Without doubt the highlight of the day, apart from the launch of the college’s prospectus (18th edition) which lists over 700 crime and mystery novels, was the annual High Table dinner presided over by the Master, Professor Richard Reynolds.



The Master was obviously moved to receive a small token of appreciation from the *alumni* (a second-hand book) and the vote of thanks was eloquently proposed by Ruth Dudley Edwards who, following her predicted Last Laugh award triumph at Crimefest last month, is officially the funniest crime writer in Britain.



At an emergency meeting of the Refreshments Committee held after dinner (in The Pickerel Arms), it was agreed that if attendance at these reunions continues to grow at the current rate, then by next year we are going to need a bigger High Table.

The Last Tarot

The results of the recent Crime Writers/Duncan Lawrie awards have convinced me that it is time to burn my Tarot cards and retire from the business of predicting winners, something I did on race courses and in casinos many years ago.

I felt sure that Minette Walters' *Chameleon's Shadow* and Philip Kerr's *A Quiet Flame* would be hot favourites for the Gold and Steel Daggers this year and yet neither even made the short-list. I am, of course, delighted at the success of my old friend Frances Fyfield, although I do not believe she has ever really forgiven me after our appearance at The Stoke Newington Festival of Unpleasantness some years ago – she has certainly never knowingly agreed to appear with me in public since.

However, I think Frances will be appreciative of the fact that I did not tip her novel *Blood From Stone* thus enabling it to avoid the Curse of the Ripster. I cannot claim I did this deliberately, for the truth is I had not read the book, having been tippexed from the Little,Brown review list for the first half of 2008. But in the spirit of avoiding the Curse of the Ripsters in the Ellis Peters Award, coming later this year, I would like it known that I am not forecasting wins for Philip Kerr, Ariana Franklin, Lee Jackson, Alan Furst, Laura Wilson or Barbara Nadel though you have to admit, that would make a stunningly impressive short-list should anyone seek my opinion on such things, which they never do.

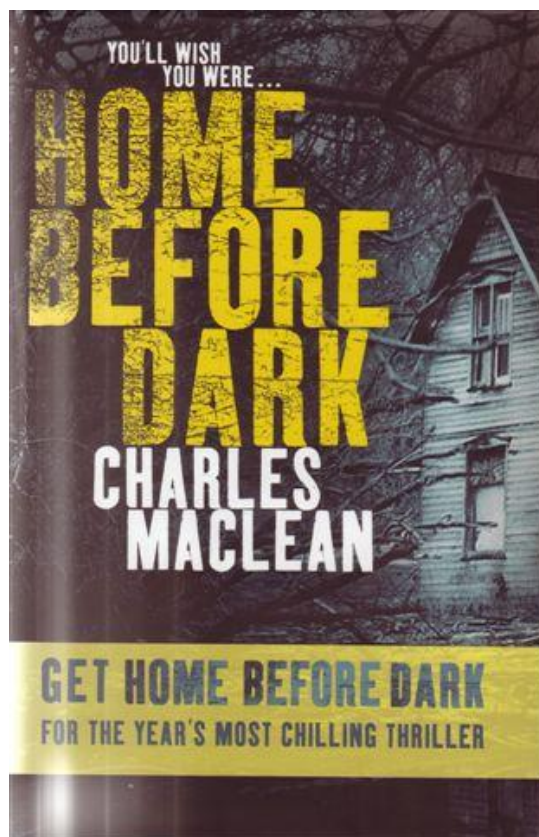
However, I am not alone in being outfoxed by the CWA Judges. That literate and highly informative website www.eurocrime.co.uk which has a passionate interest in the International Dagger category recently ran a poll asking its readers to vote on the shortlist of Dagger contenders in translation. The overwhelming majority of votes went to the late Steig Larsson for *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* and actually no-one at all voted for Dominique Manotti's *Lorraine Connection* which won.

There were further red-faces in evidence, or so I am told, at the awards ceremony when an official of the CWA called for (the late) Steig Larsson to step forward and take part in group photograph of Dagger nominees.

In cyberspace, no one can hear you scream

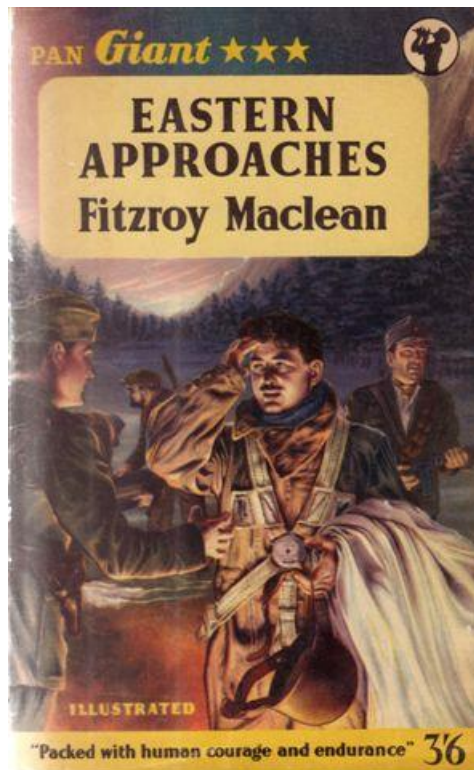
As a founder member of the Campaign for Real Quill Pens and Ink, I have long held a sceptical distrust of most things to do with the jolly old interweb. It does, I admit, have some advantages. How else could I purchase Viagra for only 2 Euros per tab, or an invaluable fake Rolex so that I may leave my original at home when taking an evening stroll through some of the less salubrious areas of Southwold or Downham Market? The choice of online Casinos I have nowadays is quite fantastic and my factotum Waldo is kept fully occupied replying to those charmingly personalised emails from young ladies who live behind what we used to call the Iron Curtain and who are seeking a pen-pal.

But on the whole, I am not one for modern technology and so I was prepared to be disappointed (and baffled) by *Home Before Dark* by Charles Maclean, from those sensitive souls at Hodder & Stoughton, for it is a book where the characters seem to spend every waking moment on a mobile phone, or on a 'video conference call', or watching a web-cam or scrolling through their emails. When they do have a spare moment, they instinctively 'log in' (see how I'm picking up the jargon and getting down with the kids?) to an interweb chat room or play a deeply suspicious 'virtual reality' game in cyberspace.



If I feared that most of this would leave me slightly cold I was right, for I find it difficult to empathise with supposedly intelligent, successful and rich characters who have to be surgically removed from their electronic gadgets in order to get a life even if they all seem to smoke like chimneys as we all used to do. However, *Home Before Dark* is a very well-written thriller with some moments of genuine suspense and jeopardy (especially a double murder on a train going from Venice to Paris).

A Luddite like me was never going to be enraptured by a book like this, but I will not hear a word said against it as the author is the son of Sir Fitzroy Maclean, a name close to my own heart and the author of the classic (and true) war story *Eastern Approaches*.



Not only is Charles Maclean now the 16th Captain and Keeper of Dunconnel in the Isles of the Sea – a noble hereditary title if ever there was one – but he is also the author of such seminal works as *Maclean's Miscellany of Whisky* and *Scotch Whisky: A Liquid History*.

Added to which, he produces his own single malt, **The MacPhunn**, named after a 17th century murderer and sheep stealer (the latter being the more serious crime in the Western Isles), and as long as a case of this nectar continues to arrive monthly at Ripster Hall, I will continue to recommend **Home Before Dark** to all and sundry.

As an aside, I must also press my friends at Headline Review to consider republishing *Eastern Approaches* if it is out of print, for they have recently produced attractive editions of “forgotten classics” from WWII including Richard Pape's *Boldness Be My Friend* and Jerrard Tickell's *Odette*.

A Danger to Santa

It is quite likely that Santa Claus is in for some heavy-lifting this Christmas, at least in the crime-writing world, for my distinguished colleague Professor Barry Forshaw tells me that his epic (possibly two volume) *British Crime Writing: An Encyclopaedia* is to be published by Greenwood World Publishing in December in time for Christmas.

Indeed it is already available to pre-order on Amazon where the published price of £90 automatically qualifies it for free delivery.

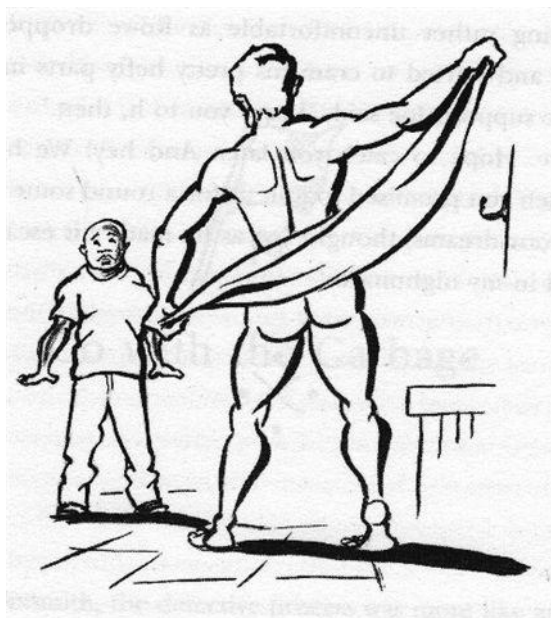
And speaking of Professor Forshaw, he is to be congratulated as I understand he has been nominated for a prestigious “Macavity” Award at this year's Bouchercon in October, for his rough *Guide To Crime Fiction*.

Oh, I'm sorry. That should of course read his *Rough Guide To Crime Fiction*.

Spot the Ball Competition

I have long resisted attempts by the editor of this esteemed organ to inject an element of sordid popularism into this column by running a “quiz” or “competition” of some kind. (Frankly I thought the editor would have learned his lesson following the premium-rate phone line scams of recent months.)

However, should another threatening memo arrive from the editor’s office (The 4-Ale Bar of *The Fallen Strumpet*, High Holborn) I will respond with this modest offering as a possible Caption Competition.



My illustration comes from *The Roar of the Butterflies* by Reginald Hill and features his Luton-based private eye Joe Sixsmith confronting a suspect in the showers of the Royal Hoo Golf Club.

Or at least that’s his story.

Dissed by a Penguin

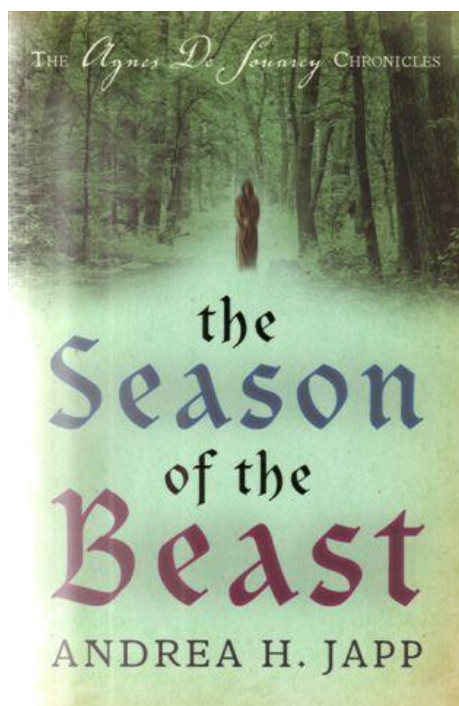
The Ripster family solicitors, Motley & Slapp, recently drew to my attention the fact that I may have grounds for legal action following a gross misrepresentation by Penguin Australia Ltd., who have issued statements about “the Machiavellian Mike Ripley” who is described as “enormously fat ..(with)..a face that looks like a scrubbed potato.”

However, all became clear when I discovered that the “Mike Ripley” in question is a character in a novel entitled *Boned* by an anonymous author who goes imaginatively under the name “Anonymous”, which reputedly lifts the lid off male chauvinism in the Australian television industry.

Australians as *male chauvinists*? Good heavens, who would have thought that? It must be a really, really imaginative piece of fiction.

L’autopsie

The first in a series of historical mysteries set in 14th century rural France, *The Season of the Beast* is about to appear in English from the aptly-named Gallic Books.



It is written by France's reigning "Queen of Crime" Andrea H. Japp and was first published in France in 2006 as *La Dame Sans Terre 1: Les Chemins de la Bete*.

Apart from being an award-winning author in her own right, Madame Japp has another criminal claim to fame. She happens to be the French translator of the novels of Patricia Cornwell.

Legal Eagles

As I have been invited to speak at this year's national conference of the Criminal Law Solicitors' Association, I thought it wise to start looking more closely than usual at that predominantly American sub-genre, the legal thriller.

With immaculate timing by those immaculate publishers Orion (and I say that even though I have been blackballed from their parties) I am sent an advance proof of Michael Connelly's *The Brass Verdict*, to be published in October.

Despite having a cover which looks like a hundred other American legal thrillers, I look forward to this book with great relish for it is the second outing for Mickey Haller, the hero of Connelly's 2005 novel *The Lincoln Lawyer* which I thought was an excellent read. In fact I remember saying at the time I reviewed it that Michael Connelly had already proved himself the master of the modern police procedural *and* the stand-alone thriller and had now conquered the legal thriller, which gave me three reasons for hating him.

The proof comes with a front-page blurb with the advice "Move over John Grisham" from someone called Mark Billingham. Surely a writer of Michael Connelly's stature hardly needs such playground endorsements and if he did they really ought to come from a trusted source. Lee Child, perhaps?

Manga Cum Laude

Just when you think you've seen it all, crime fiction throws up something new. *Death Note: Another Note* by Japanese author "Nisioisin" and published by VIZ Media is, as far as I know the first (and possibly only) crime novel based on a 12-volume "manga" comic series which has reputedly sold over 21 million copies (in Japan).

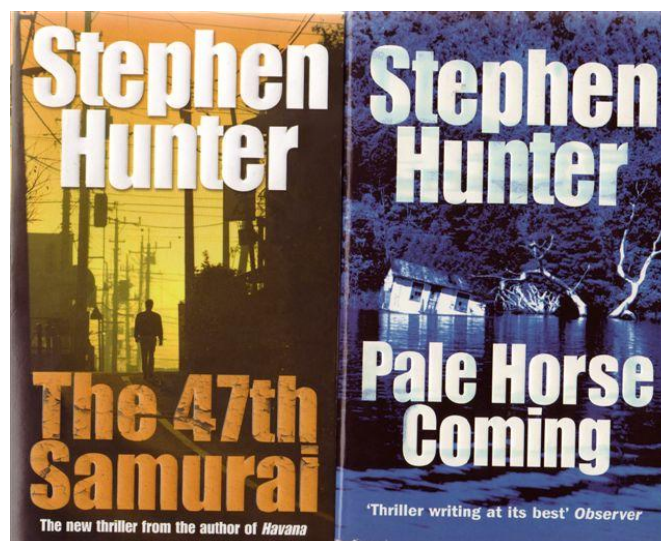


The novel is, it seems, a prequel to the *Death Note* 'manga' comic series and introduces the series hero, a super sleuth known only as "L" on the track of a serial killer in Los Angeles. With a cast of characters named: Beyond Birthday, Believe Bridesmaid, Quarter Queen and Backyard Bottomslash, this is, perhaps, an acquired taste.

Swaggering On

Stephen Hunter is an American thriller writer who has also turned Japanese in his latest, *The 47th Samurai*, which is published here as a paperback original from those straight-arrow people at Arrow.

I cannot say I am a regular reader of Mr Hunter's work because, for reasons I simply do not understand, I seem to miss more books than I hit. I do remember, as does everyone who read it, his debut, *Dirty White Boys*, though my favourite by far is his 2003 epic *Pale Horse Coming*, which I lobbied for in that year's Gold Dagger stakes but was outvoted, outnumbered and outgunned. None of which is likely to ever happen to Hunter's two generations of protagonists: WWII hero Earl Swagger and his son (and Vietnam hero) Bob Lee Swagger.



The fortunes of father and son Swagger are linked in *47th Samurai* –which features an ageing Bob Lee – by a legacy from the battle for Iwo Jima. To cut (and there is a lot of cutting in this book) a long story short, Bob Lee turns medieval Samurai in modern Japan to avenge the murder of a fellow soldier and his family, inspired by lots of ‘slashing sword’ DVDs and ending up an accomplished swordsman with, it seems, almost as little training as *The Karate Kid*.

But then if a tough 60-year-old ex-alcoholic, ex-Marine who speaks no Japanese can get away with multiple killings (by sword) of assorted *Yakuza* gangsters anywhere, it’s in a Stephen Hunter book. No-one, but no-one writes better scenes of violent action and Hunter knows every familiar trick from the movies, both Japanese and traditional Westerns, and he utilises them splendidly here, though his master-class, I maintain, is *Pale Horse Coming*.

Hard Labour

I have discovered, to my horror, that the London offices of publishers Allison & Busby close at 1p.m. and those of Little, Brown at 1.30 p.m. on Fridays during the summer. This is quite shocking as I had no idea that a cruel management was forcing the wage slaves at these proud firms to work on Fridays *at all*.

Things have certainly changed in publishing. I remember the entire industry being up in arms when that great Prime Minister Edward Heath tried to impose a full *three-day* week. (And we all know what happened to him as a result...)

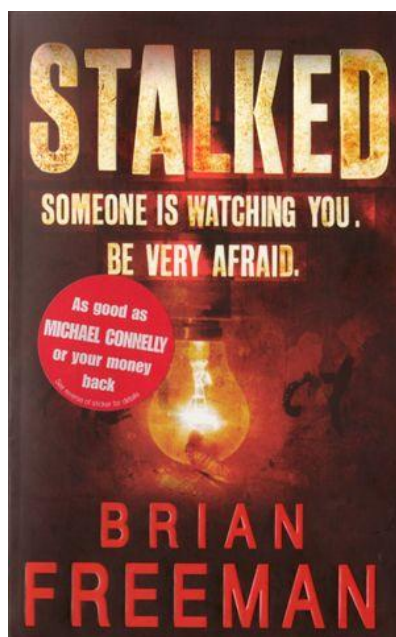
The profit-driven culture of ruthless efficiency has obviously gone too far and I would not be at all surprised to hear it suggested that publishers’ luncheons will be curtailed to a maximum of four hours. That surely will be the last straw and editors and publicists from the Embankment to Uxbridge will rise up in revolt and the Central Line will become a war zone.

I fear the writing is on the wall (and an editor will get back to you on it in about three months).

Money Back Guarantee

I have to admit that I had always assumed that “Duluth” was a figment of the satiric imagination of my old friend and fellow boulevardier, Gore Vidal. I remember him telling me the outline of one his novels during a game of darts in Harry’s Bar in Venice, and mentioning that the tile he had chosen was indeed *Duluth*.

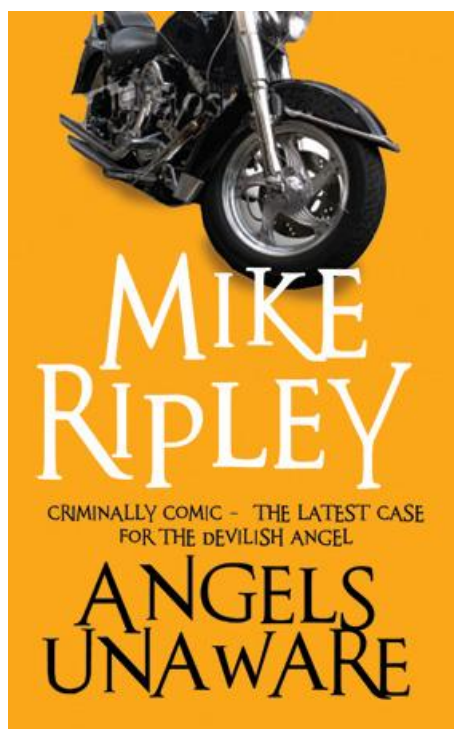
But now I believe the city actually exists and my enlightenment comes courtesy of meeting Brian Freeman, the talented and utterly charming author of a series of mysteries featuring Lieutenant Jonny Stride of the Duluth police department. Those jolly friendly people at Headline have kindly sent me a copy of Brian’s latest book to appear in paperback, *Stalked*, and very good it is too with a serpentine plot, several wonderfully sick and twisted villains and enough red herrings and mis-directions to keep the reader glued to 500 pages.



Stalked is also interesting for reasons other than simply being a good thriller. For a start it tells ill-informed Eurotrash like me something of life in Duluth and the state of Minnesota (which I hear is near Canada), where winters are cold, the ice thick and the snow deep. Obviously the climate has an effect on the population because every character (and I do mean *every*) in this book has problems with relationships or some dark sexual fantasy, usually both. And despite the prevalence of TV channels on cable and lots of excellent books (such as this one), the residents of Duluth still have to resort to entertaining themselves in a secret sex club for “swingers”, which I believe is a person of liberal attitudes rather than physical description. Oh, those long winter nights!

Brian Freeman’s book also comes with a sticker proclaiming *As good as Michael Connelly or your money back*.

This is a stroke of marketing genius which is sure to catch on and already I can announce that it is being taken up by other publishers.



Later this month Allison & Busby's next bestseller, *Angels Unaware*, will carry a special promotional sticker declaring: *As funny as Mike Ripley or your money back.*

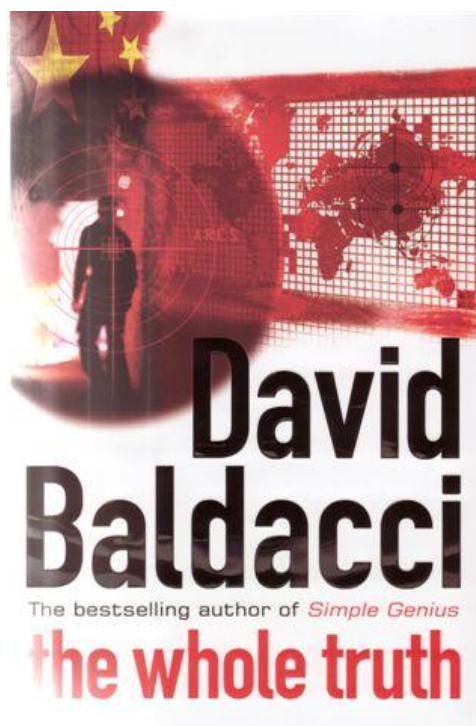
Branching Out

Another mystery writer branching out into the 'young adult' market (James Patterson, Andy McNab and Jack Higgins have already gone there) is Diamond Dagger winner John Harvey, whose novel *Nick's Blues* is to be published by Five Leaves in August.

The novel was originally published in France in 2005 which, says John, "shows the French know a thing or too." Mmm, I'm not to sure about that. I have to admit to having reservations about any country which still thinks Jerry Lewis funny and where the national sport is cycling and requires the wearing of so much spandex.

Believe it or not

Those shy and retiring people at Macmillan have recently sent me a copy of David Baldacci's "terrifying global thriller" *The Whole Truth*.



The professionally-crafted Press Release which accompanied the book informs me that one of the characters in it is "an award-winning, ambitious journalist (who) will do anything to get to the top of her profession" by the name of *Katie James*.

Curiously enough, the contact name for further information, printed at the bottom of the release is none other than Macmillan publicity executive *Katie James*!

I wonder if, by any chance, they are related?

Familiar titles

I am frequently reporting on the use (over-use?) of book titles, although there is no law against it. My latest example probably does nothing more than show my age.

Peter Robinson's new book, which actually marks to 21st anniversary of the first Inspector Alan Banks novel (so "Happy Birthday"), from those inventive people at Hodder, is entitled *All The Colours Of Darkness*, which has, without question, a fine ring to it. But does anybody else remember a quite well-known science-fiction novel by Lloyd Biggle Jr with the same title?

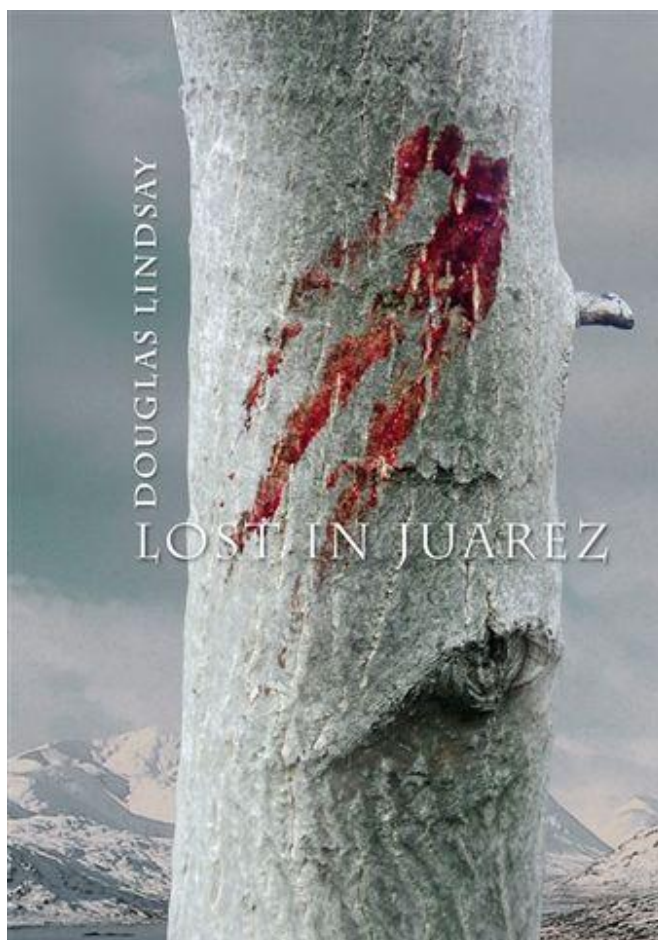
And then I am urged to read the new novel *Run* from American Jeff Abbott, published here as a paperback original by Sphere – and so urged by none other than Lee Child, making this, I believe, the 19th novel Lee has endorsed this year. So far.

Before I can, I find my mind wandering (as it often does these days) back to April 2000 when I reviewed, for the *Daily Telegraph*, a debut crime novel called *Run* by another American called Douglas E. Winter, published here by Canongate.

Mr Winter's *Run* was an amazing book, original, powerful and with a first-person narrative moving at breakneck speed. In fact I still remember the sheer *pace* of the book leaving quite an impression on me. It was, I felt, that very rare thing in mystery fiction: a distinctive writing "voice". Sadly, Mr Winter did not continue a career in crime (though he is, I believe, a lawyer) but reverted to his first love which appears to be horror and fantasy fiction and his work has included biographical studies of Stephen King and Clive Barker. He does have a new book out this December: *American Zombie*, from Borderlands Press. As far as I know, there is no other novel out there with that title.

Viva Barney

Douglas Lindsey, the creator Scotland's most famous, most innocent and most inept serial killer, Barney Thomson, is trying a new tack with a political thriller *Lost In Juarez* this summer.



Published by his own company, Long Midnight Publishers, Douglas tells me that this does not mark the end of Barney, his long-running (and very funny) series character. Barney will be back next year.

Always immensely popular in Germany, though scandalously overlooked by British publishers, Barney Thomson's adventures may well be on course for world domination as the film rights were bought by Hollywood earlier this year.

Not single spies

Discovering (albeit unfashionably late) the spy fiction of Charles Cumming and David Downing has refreshed my taste buds for this much neglected sub-genre of mystery fiction.

I will not want for nourishment for a trio of cracking titles have just thumped through the letter box here at Ripster Hall.



The first to be eagerly devoured is the subtle and positively piquant new novel from that classiest of writers, Alan Furst. *The Spies of Warsaw*, from those unassuming people at Weidenfeld, is really quite brilliant and is surely in line for a nomination... (No, I must *not* go there!) Set mostly in Poland in 1937, the French military intelligence officer hero plays off German and Russian spies but finds the most dangerous enemy of all to be his own inflexible High Command. As with all Furst's writing, the action is understated, the characters real and the settings immaculately researched.

For dessert, I have reserved Daniel Silva's *Moscow Rules*, from those perky publishers at Penguin. Silva's series hero is Gabriel Allon, an Israeli assassin (not to mince words) who seems to moonlight as a restorer of great works of art, with one his current clients being the Pope, no less. (Is there a growing trend in thrillers set in the art world, or is it just me?)

With my coffee and *digestif* I will settle down with Alex Dryden's debut novel *Red to Black*, from those ever cheerful people at Headline who tell me that "Alex Dryden" is the pen-name of a much travelled journalist who was actually born in Nepal, but went to school in Suffolk. (That was a hell of a school run.) Like Daniel Silva, he tackles the problems of the capitalist Russia which emerged from the old USSR and the book is promoted as "brilliant" and "unforgettable" by none other than... no, not Lee Child, but rather my fellow East Anglian, Stephen Fry.

As far as recommendations go, that one is, dare I say it, quite interesting.

The Ninja who came in from the cold

I am indebted to the Daily Telegraph, a once great newspaper, for the following story.

The Gone Away World, published by Heinemann this month, is by an author who goes under the name of Nick Harkaway. It is described as a serious novel, a love story, and it has Ninjas in it. It is also written by the son of John le Carre, whose real name of course is David Cornwell.

Having decided that he could not use the “le Carre” pen name, son Nick also had reservations about the much used (in book publishing) “Cornwell” name. When his novel was accepted, the problem of what name to put on the cover came up when Nick admitted his surname was Cornwell.

“No relation to the author?” asked the publisher.

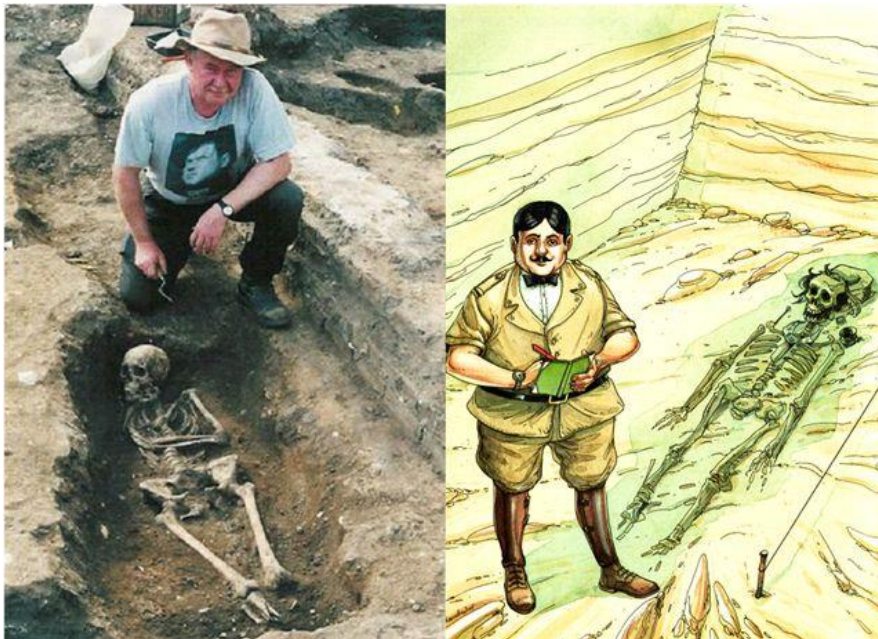
“He’s my father,” admitted the debut novelist.

“I had no idea Patricia Cornwell was a man,” remarked the publisher.

Poirot should investigate

One of these images is an illustration of the portly Hercule Poirot, as taken from the new graphic novel version of Agatha Christie’s *Murder in Mesopotamia*, from those dedicated people at HarperCollins.

But which...?



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