

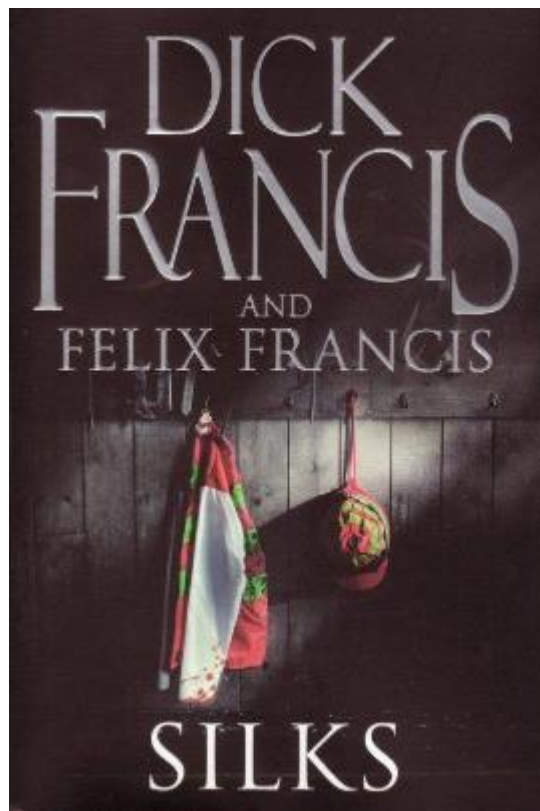
Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



In Town Tonight

To London, for the most glittering party of the year so far, to mark the publication of *Silks* the new novel from the Dick Francis/Michael Joseph stable.



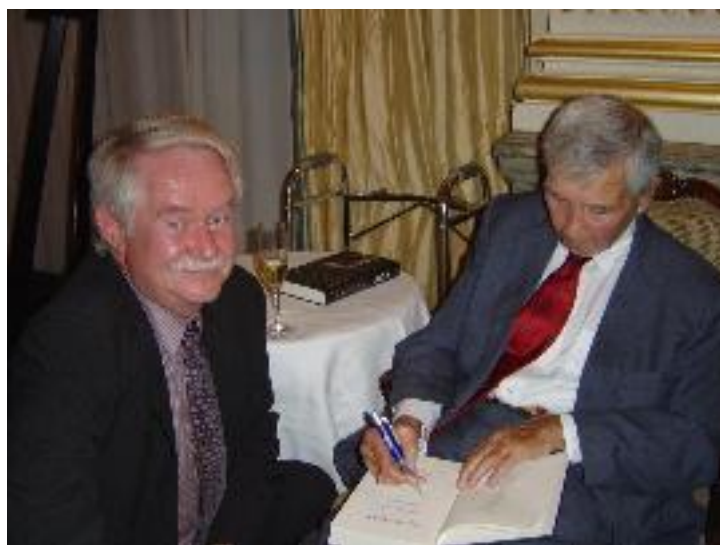
It is always a pleasure to stay at Claridges, however briefly; though in years gone by the launch of a new Dick Francis novel was traditionally held at The Ritz. It was, however, only fashionable socialites such as Professor Barry Forshaw, who noticed the miniscule differences in quality (if there were any at all) of the delicious canapés and the champagne which flowed like...well, like champagne should.

The book we were celebrating is a product of what was charmingly referred to as “the family firm” of Dick and his son Felix, and Dick generously admitted that it was only a matter of time before Felix received “top billing”.



The great and good of the crime and mystery world were present to celebrate the event: Colin Dexter, Harry Keating, Margaret Yorke, Simon Brett and prize-winning crime writer (and art connoisseur) Frances Fyfield, along with numerous distinguished members of the legal profession. (The more astute reader will have deduced that “Silks” is a term employed in both the law and in horse racing.)

But there was no denying that it was Dick Francis himself, now in his 88th year, who was the star of the evening. I was able to steal a few moments with Dick and we chatted about the days, long ago, when my London office shared accommodation with The Jockey Club in the once-fashionable Portman Square.

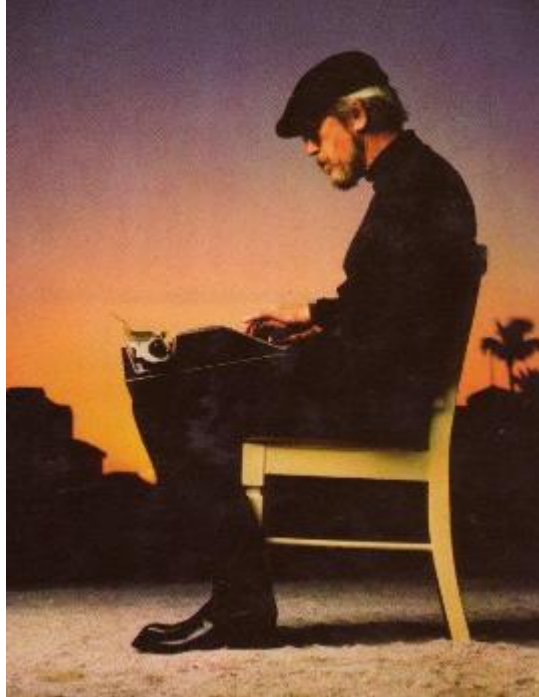


Playing mercilessly on his generosity of spirit, I persuaded him to sign copies of his books for some of the younger guests who were too over-awed by the occasion to ask him themselves.

More Family Business

If the Francis family business is doing nicely, thank you, then so to is the Leonard dynasty of Detroit, which I believe to be in North America.

Elmore Leonard, widely regarded as the crime writer's crime writer and undoubtedly one of the most distinctive and most influential voices in crime writing in the second half of the 20th century, and now in his 83rd year, has just signed a two-book deal with those wonderfully erudite publishers Weidenfeld.



Appearing in April 2009 will be *Comfort To the Enemy*, which will feature “Hot Kid” hot-shot lawman Carl Webster and then in November, bank robber Jack (*Out Of Sight*) Foley makes a smooth reappearance in *Road Dogs*, which also promises to feature several other characters from previous Leonard books.

But for those fans who cannot wait for next year, Elmore's son Peter has his debut novel *Quiver* published here next month by those ferociously cool people at Faber. I am sure many critics will employ the phrase “it's a chip off the old block”. I've just done it first.

But sadly...

That great bear of a hardboiled poet, James Crumley, died this month at the ridiculously young age of 68 following a history of medical misfortune.

Having been asked to write his obituary for *The Guardian*, I observed that just as an entire generation of British school kids can perfectly recite Monty Python's “parrot sketch”, there are few true fans of hardboiled crime writing (at least the post 1980 generation) who cannot recite the opening lines of Crumley's *The Last Good Kiss*:

When I finally caught up with Abraham Traherne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts, in a ramshackle joint just outside Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.

In a thirty year period, Crumley produced only seven crime novels, though his cult status was assured after the first three, not to mention the stories of mammoth drinking sessions, five marriages and mythical tales of his time in Hollywood as a screenwriter, when it is thought that not one word of

anything he wrote made it on to the silver screen. (Interestingly enough, one of the projects he worked on was an adaptation of James Ellroy's *The Big Nowhere*).

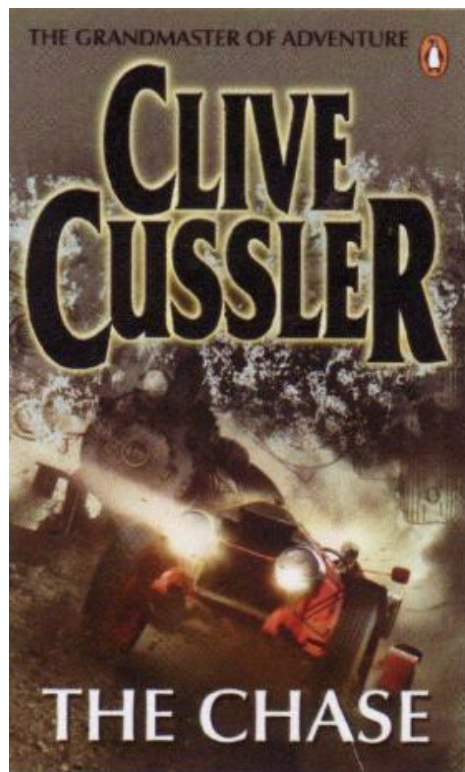


I met him only once, at a Shots On The Page convention in Nottingham in 1994, when he visited the UK to promote *The Mexican Tree Duck*, his first novel after a gap of almost ten years. In 2002 I was on the judging panel which gave him the CWA Silver Dagger for *The Final Country* but he was beset with medical problems and too ill to travel to collect it.

My friend the millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim met him more recently in America. Indeed it was he who broke the sad news to me that Crumley had died in hospital in Montana on September 17th.

Cussler Bargain

I look forward to passing a long winter night (they are almost here) with the new Clive Cussler blockbuster *The Chase* which has just been published by those perky people at Penguin.



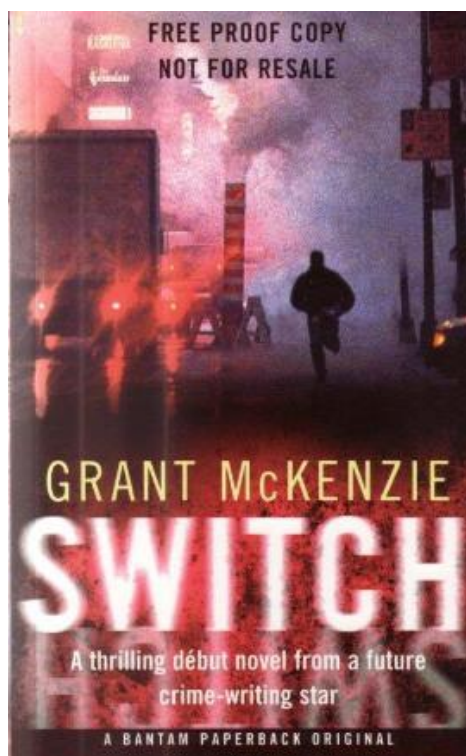
My factotum Waldo, however, can hardly contain a smug self-satisfied smile, for whilst my paperback retails at £6.99, Waldo, on his weekly shopping trip, picked up a first edition hardback of the same book for £3 in Sainsbury's this week. And he got Nectar points.

Wither Canada?

Publishers Transworld seem to have been shopping in Canada as they are proudly promoting two upcoming paperback originals for November and December, both of which hail from that most civilised of colonial outposts.

The Calling by Inger Ash Wolfe (from the Corgi imprint) is set in Port Dundas, Ontario and there has already been the subject of considerable debate on the jolly old interweb over the identity of Inger Ash Wolfe. I believe it to be the pen-name of a Canadian academic, but I will not hold that against the author and will certainly try the book which comes highly recommended by Kate Atkinson, Mo Hayder and Peter Robinson among others.

Like Peter Robinson, the author of *Switch*, Grant McKenzie was born in Britain but moved to Canada many years ago and now lives on "British Columbia's Sunshine Coast". His debut novel, *Switch*, published by Bantam, seems to be set mostly in Portland Oregon and is a must-read title according to the enthusiastic recommendation of – who else? – Lee Child.



In his 21st such recommendation so far this year by my count (and I may have missed a few), the thriller-writing supremo describes the novel thus: "*Think Saw meets Payback moving at warp speed – with the emphasis on warp.*" I fear I may have to make several visits to my local Blockbuster video-rental emporium before I can fully understand the literary references. They do still do Betamax; don't they?

Date for the Diary

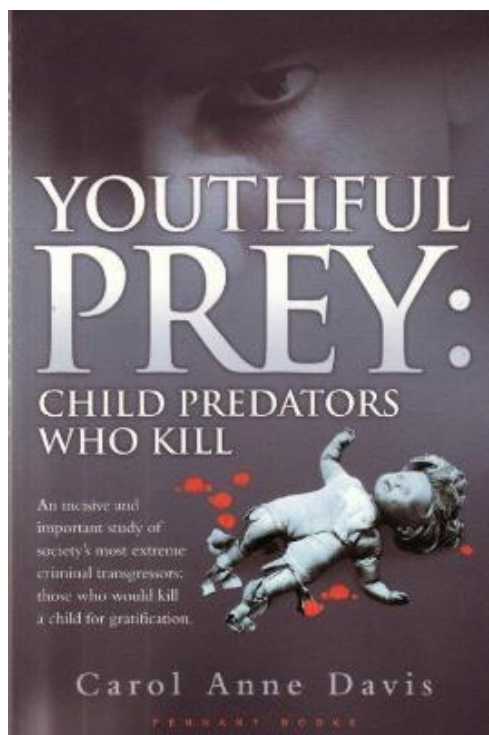
I do not yet have a diary for 2009 (at my time of life it is best not to tempt fate) but if I had, there would be one entry already, on the page containing **Wednesday 11th March**, for that is when Laura Thompson, the most recent biographer of Agatha Christie, will be giving the annual Dorothy L. Sayers Lecture.

The Lecture, which forms part of the 2009 Essex Book Festival, will be given in the Library at Witham in Essex. The Library on Newland Street, Witham, appropriately enough, is virtually next door to the house in which Dorothy Sayers lived for many years until her death in 1957.

Chilling indeed

Carol Anne Davis writes crime fiction which I admire greatly and true crime non-fiction which terrifies me.

Her new book, *Youthful Prey: Child Predators Who Kill* (Pennant Books) reaches me with a note from Carol who hopes I find it “an interesting – if chilling – read.”



And what a chilling catalogue of paedophile murderers it is too, written with the author's usual professionalism and authority. On a personally chilling level, it brought back details I thought I had forgotten of the awful massacre at Dunblane in Scotland. Although a mere twelve years ago, I had quite forgotten (or obliterated) the name of the madman who perpetrated that terrible crime. It was Thomas Watt Hamilton.

Writer's Table

The latest writer awarded the honour of picking a “writer's table” of books to be promoted by bookseller Waterstone's, is Philip Pullman. The idea behind the promotion is that the guest writer chooses 40 books (which have to be in print) which have influenced them during their lives.

I am delighted to see that Mr Pullman, the author of *Northern Lights* (though the name of the film had to be changed to *The Golden Compass* because Americans thought the book referred to a type of ale brewed in Newcastle) has chosen to place on his table: John le Carre's brilliant *A Perfect Spy*, Lionel Davidson's stunning *Kolymsky Heights* and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (though I would have gone for *The Moonstone*).

Ultimate kudos to Mr Pullman for also including *The Best of Myles* by Flann O'Brien and *Molesworth* by Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, not because they have anything to do with crime fiction, simply because they are very, very funny.

This has, naturally, set me thinking of my own “crime/suspense/thriller table” and which 40 books (in print) I would choose to place on it, in the unlikely event that Waterstone’s should ask my opinion. You might like to try this at home: naming the 40 crime novels which have impressed or influenced you, and *which are still in print*. That could, sadly, be a sticking point.

Bad Friends

Last year I was taken to task for criticising the un-apostrophed use of the word *Cos* (for “because”) in the debut novel *Lullaby* by Claire Seeber, pictured here with cosmopolitan man-about-town Peter Guttridge.



My pedantic observations did not prevent *The Observer* newspaper’s crime critic from describing the book as “An accomplished, disturbing debut”, nor did it (I am delighted to say) daunt the vivacious Ms Seeber from continuing her crime writing career. Indeed, her second novel, *Bad Friends*, is already out from publishers Avon.

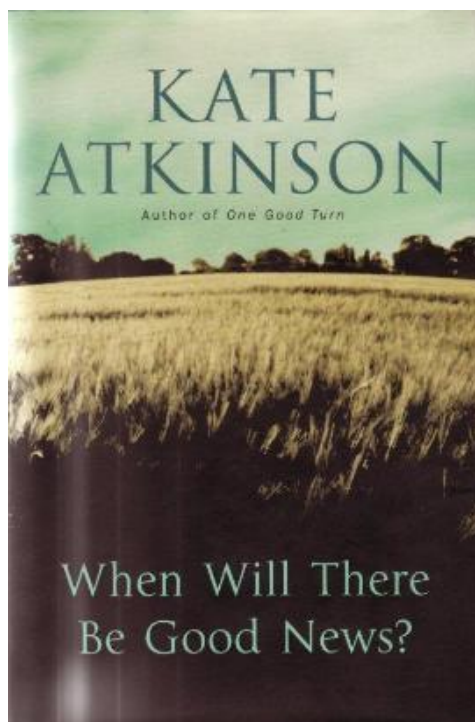
I do have a Scooby – now

What are the odds, I hear you ask, on someone reading two crime novels one after the other, which *both* feature feisty female Scottish police detectives and which both have characters who use the phrase “I haven’t got a Scooby” (as in “Scooby-Doo” = “clue”).

Naturally when this happened to me earlier this month, I telephoned my bookmaker only to find he had relocated to the Cayman Islands. I was therefore unable to ascertain the odds I was seeking, but the novels in question were Kate Atkinson’s *When Will There Be Good News?* and *A Darker Domain* by Val McDermid, pictured here in rather serious mode, who is enjoying great success on the small screen at the moment, with adaptations of her *Wire in the Blood* series and her stand-alone novel *A Place of Execution*.



I have to admit to being a late-comer to the crime fiction of Whitbread Book of the Year winner novelist Kate Atkinson, but my goodness, I'm impressed. *When Will There Be Good News?* (from Doubleday) is far from a conventional detective novel, even though it involves several detectives and numerous crimes, and it will not appeal to the more conservative crime reader.

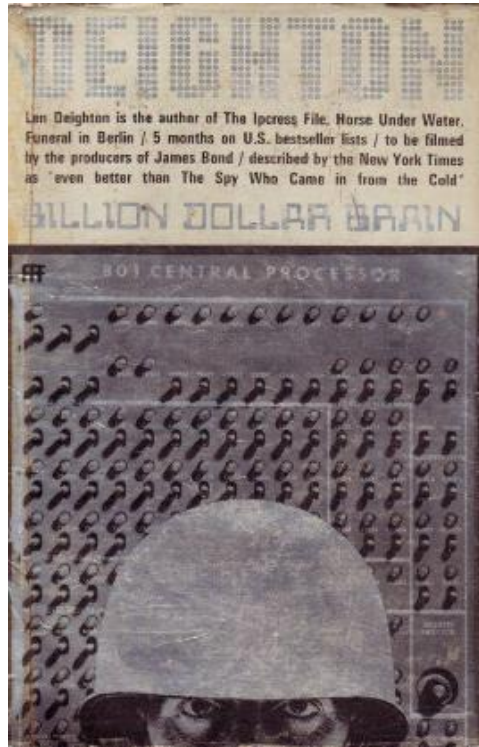


But I would urge thriller fans of all persuasions to give it a try, for Ms Atkinson has a truly fascinating approach to plotting as well as a highly intelligent and witty writing style. Is this the shape of crime writing to come? It might just be.

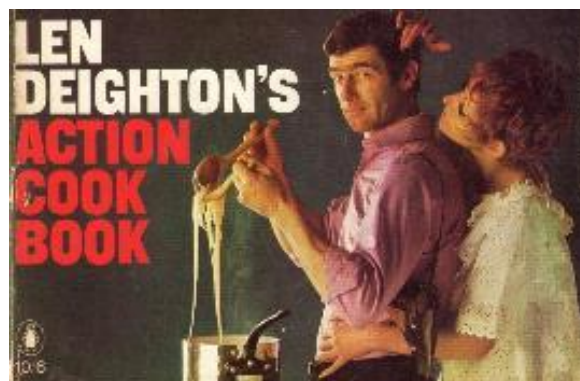
The Deighton File

I have discovered a new site on the jolly old interweb dedicated to one of my heroes. Set up by dedicated fan Rob Mallows, www.deightondossier.net does exactly what it says on the tin: it is a dossier about the works of Len Deighton.

In my own Deighton file I still treasure a battered (“much loved” if any dealers are reading this) first edition hardback of *Billion Dollar Brain* which I had to lend to my public school English teacher as he could not wait for the paperback (and which probably insured me higher marks than I deserved).



And apart from devouring his fiction, at university I was never without his invaluable cookery books *Ou est le Garlic?* and *Action Cook Book*



and indeed I became quite well-known, especially among the ladies, for being able to produce a stunning Baked Alaska (thanks to Len's recipe) in a student kitchen in the small hours of the morning after a heavy night with the university Glee Club.



Such fond memories and the thrill of discovering the Deighton Dossier site are only tempered by the realisation that the mould-breaking author (mould-breaking at a time when moulds needed breaking) has never been honoured within the genre.

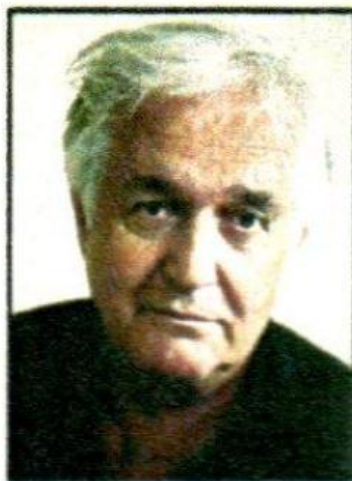
If only there were some sort of award or prize which would recognise his outstanding contribution to the thriller genre. Such a hypothetical award for lifetime achievement would surely be appropriate in 2009, the year of Len's 80th birthday. His publishers here, HarperCollins, certainly intend to do the decent thing by him as they are reissuing eight of his novels next year, including the four "Harry Palmer" novels: *Ipcress File*, *Horse Under Water*, *Funeral in Berlin* and the aforementioned *Billion Dollar Brain*, which the late Julian Symons (who championed Deighton when he could not get reviewed in the early years) rated as the best.

I am sure there are millions of readers (as well as film-goers and student chefs) to whom he has given immense pleasure for almost half a century and all the writers of subsequent generations, myself included, who were influenced and inspired by his stylistic and plotting genius, who would love to see him get some sort of award next year.

If only there was one. Perhaps we at SHOTS Magazine should put our thinking caps on and come up with one. Who knows, we may even find a prestigious international company to sponsor it.

The Name's Wallander; Ken Wallander

Whilst Swedish crime writing superstar Henning Mankell, who is probably his country's most important export since Volvo, is busy in Africa having funded the construction of a village for orphans in Mozambique, those dedicated publishers at Harvill Secker are publishing a collection of his short stories under the title *The Pyramid*.



Meanwhile, Mankell's series detective hero Kurt Wallander is set to become a fixture on our television screens, with the BBC's production of three films (adapted from the novels) starring Kenneth Branagh. At least two of the films are listed as "post production" and a tentative broadcast date is late November on BBC1.

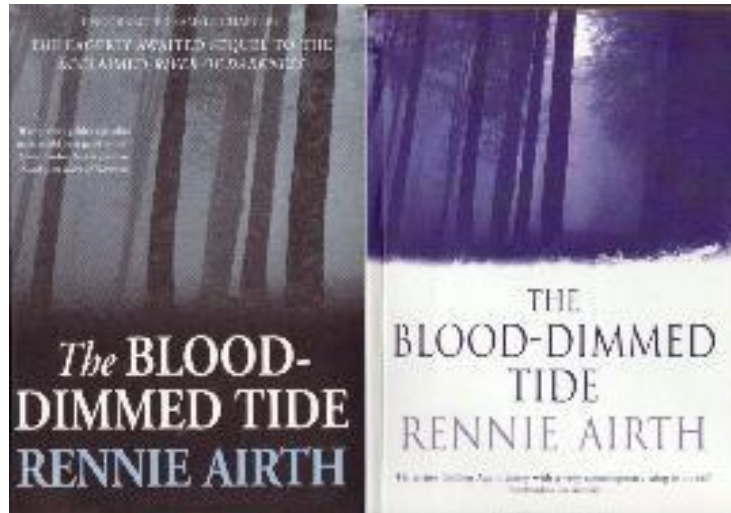
It is not, however, Wallander's first outing on the small screen, for Swedish TV ran a 13-episode series simply called *Wallander* in 2005-06, starring Krister Henriksson (below) in the title role.



Fingers Crossed

I remember writing a rave review of Rennie Airth's *River of Darkness* back in 1999 and complaining vociferously when it was shamefully overlooked in the crime writing awards that year and I awaited the follow-up with eager anticipation.

Publishing that second mystery (starring Inspector John Madden) proved to be something of a saga in itself. Initially a 68-page booklet of "sample chapters" from *The Blood-Dimmed Tide* was produced and freely distributed by publisher Macmillan, announcing that the complete novel would appear on 20th April 2001.



Anxious readers and frustrated reviewers fumed when they heard that publication was to be delayed to April 2002, then they totally despaired when 2002 and 2003 both passed without any sign of it. Then, early in the new year, a few lucky reviewers received proof copies of *Blood-Dimmed Tide* and the promise that the book would finally appear, as it did, in October 2004.

It was, I am happy to say worth the wait, and I am keeping my fingers crossed (though not, at my age, holding my breath) now I hear the news that the third John Madden novel, *The Dead of Winter*, which is set in a 1944 London suffering a Blitz by V1 and V2 rockets, is scheduled for publication in May 2009.

I have a particular interest in that I have estimated that round about May 2009, I am due to write my 1,000th review of a crime novel for the printed media, having begun my reviewing life on *The Sunday Telegraph* in 1989. I would be personally delighted if my 1,000th review turns out to be the new Rennie Airth.

Any fans who suffer depression or disappointment if *The Dead of Winter* does not appear as promised should take the matter up, not with me, but with the excellent Eurocrime site (www.eurocrime.blogspot.com) from which I stole the information.

Early Doors

Only eight days before publication, I received a review copy of the new Ian Rankin novel *Doors Open* – no, don't panic, it's not a new Rebus tale but rather a 'stand-alone' thriller featuring an art heist in Edinburgh.



My surprise was total for I had no idea that a new Rankin novel was due at all, although it was probably announced with great fanfare at one of the many Orion parties to which, of course, I am not longer invited.

The bigger worry of course is that there simply are not enough days in September to allow me to read all the splendid new novels appearing in what is rapidly becoming the crime publisher's favourite month. (Something to do with the Frankfurt Book Fair in October perhaps?) Among the other big names with new titles out this month: Dick Francis, P.D. James, Robert Goddard, James Lee Burke, Lynda La Plante, Chris Ryan and Val McDermid.

However, one expected name which is sadly missing from my groaning bedside table, is Lovejoy, for Jonathan Gash's new novel *The Faces in the Pool*, which was originally slated for July but delayed, has been delayed yet again and is now expected to be published towards the end of the year.

Absolutely Faberlous

It was a delight to avail myself of the hospitality of those fab people at Faber and Faber at a party in their penthouse Board Room famed for its hanging roof gardens which surely eclipse in splendour those of Babylon.

The occasion was the launch of the Faber crime list (about which I will be writing next time) and it gave me the chance to mingle with the young *glitterati* (horribly young) now on the mystery scene, such as ace publicist Becky Fincham and reviewer Jake 'Scoop' Kerridge of that once-great newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*.

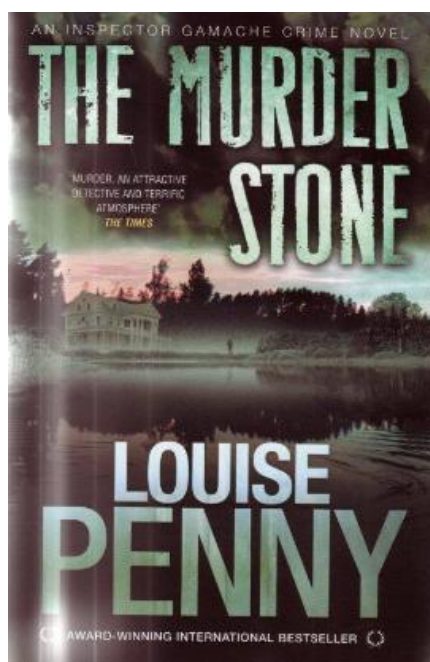


I also caught up with my fellow alumni of St Heffer's College, Roger Morris. Roger's third novel to feature St Petersburg detective Porfiry Petrovich, *A Razor Wrapped in Silk*, will be published in January 2010 he told me. Roger (who writes as R.N. Morris) also introduced me to the delightful and fantastically well-read "Crimeficreader" which is a *nom-de-guerre* used in or on something called "the Blogosphere".

Whatever – as the kids say these days. I can report that Crimficreader is an absolutely charming young lady despite being Welsh and I look forward to reading her review of whatever she'll be reading next.

Vintage Quebecois

A consignment of spirituous liquor cunningly disguised as *Sirop D'Erable Pur* has arrived at Ripster Hall from Canada. It can only mean one thing, that lumberjill and author Louise Penny must have a new book out and she has – *The Murder Stone* coming from those hedonists at Headline in early October.



It is a little known fact that Louise cuts down the maple trees herself (she's a lumberjill and she's ok) and then tramples the leaves and allows them to ferment for up to ten years. The result is a brew almost 45% alcohol by volume (80 Proof in old money) which for legal reasons, has to be passed off as 'Pure Maple Syrup'. With a stroke of genius, she markets the product in cans with a French label which completely fools the over-zealous officials in Customs and Excise who seem to frown on such activity.

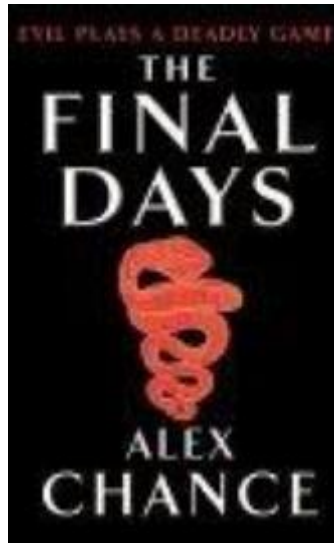
Bootlegging is such an ugly word, isn't it?

Dedicated Followers of Fashion

Many years ago, back in 1993, certain Young Turks of the British crime writing scene tried their hand at male modelling and were famously featured in the glossy magazine *GQ* (*Gentleman's Quarterly*) wearing the expensive trench-coats which were supposed to be in fashion that year. I think I am right in saying that it was not a career which any of us – myself, the late Michael Dibdin, Philip Kerr, Mike Phillips and Mark Timlin – pursued with any success, however we have proved to be trailblazers.

The current edition of the magazine *Arena* features an extensive spread under the title 'Murder They Wrote' of the most fashionable and sartorially turbo-charged young British thriller writers, including, I am delighted to say, my fellow boulevardiers Sir Nicholas Stone and the Hon Charles Cumming.

One of the thriller writer *fashionisters* actually appears in the photo shoot a month *before* his first novel actually appears: Alex Chance, who lives in London, but hails from Stockton-on-Tees, though sets his debut thriller *The Final Days* (from Arrow) in the badlands of Utah.



I urge you to rush out and buy a copy of *Arena* immediately; providing your arms are long enough to reach to the top shelf of your newsagent's.

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