

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



The Peters Principle

It is a truth universally acknowledged that authors and reviewers in search of an excellent party now place the annual Ellis Peters Awards at the top of their social calendar.

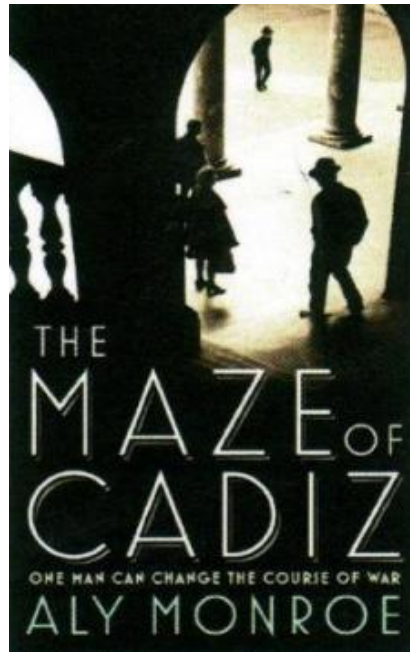
Held in the Georgian splendour of London's Fitzrovia, and splendidly organised by Ross Hulbert of Headline, this year's party attracted the great and the good from the crime and mystery scene, several travelling many miles in from the country. Some, indeed, coming from other countries entirely, such as Wales, although three London-based reviewers were noticeable by their absence and several others, obviously in need of a hot meal, scurried away disgracefully early to attend a dinner party given by a visiting American thriller writer. Still, in these days of credit crunch, one can hardly blame them and it meant there was more champagne for we who remained loyal.

It was delightful to rub shoulders with genre experts such as that dynamic duo Jeremy Jehu and Jake Kerridge who are rapidly becoming known as the Gilbert and George of the mystery scene, reviewing as they do for that once-great newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*. And it was a pure pleasure to see the familiar faces of that voluptuous legal eagle Ayo Onatade, the delightful Jessica Mann, the shapely Liz Hatherall, that wise old owl Geoff Bradley and my fellow member of The Black Gardenia Health Club and Spa, Mr Rob Ryan.

It was impossible to move without bumping in to a famous crime writer: Simon Brett, Andrew Martin, Andrew Taylor, my good friend Ariana Franklin and a disgustingly fit and youthful Philip Kerr

I failed miserably to discover whether Philip actually does have a portrait picture in his attic, but he did confide to me that another of his excellent Bernie Günter books (where Bernie goes to Cuba in the late 1950s) will be published by Quercus next year. Sadly, as the champagne was by now taking its inexorable toll and the fact that I have been erased from Quercus's mailing list, I can neither remember nor discover what the title is. I am confident, however, that Philip will be present at the Awards in 2009.

The winner of the 2008 Ellis Peters Award (for historical mysteries) was, as I predicted, Laura Wilson for *Stratton's War*. I also went so far to predict to the judges (in fact to anyone who would listen) that a place on the shortlist for 2009 should be reserved right now for Aly Monroe's debut novel *The Maze of Cadiz*, published later this month by those magnificent people at John Murray.

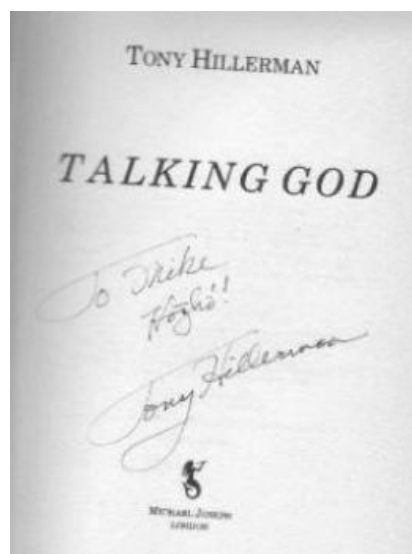


I have been quite captivated by Aly Monroe's novel, which I believe to be the first of a planned trilogy, describing the adventures of a debutant British spy investigating the suspicious death of the resident British agent in Cadiz in Franco's Spain. The book had me totally convinced that Ms Monroe knows her Spain and, more to the point, knows the Spain of 1944. This is a wonderfully atmospheric, very well-written novel worthy to stand comparison with the historical espionage tales of Alan Furst and David Downing.

Hozho, Tony

Sad news indeed from New Mexico, where that extraordinary crime writer Tony Hillerman has died in hospital, aged 83.

The creator of the Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee mysteries (his two detectives being from the Navajo Tribal Police), Hillerman's books attempted to dispel the international ignorance surrounding Native American Indian culture. A Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, Hillerman was also remarkable for being one of the few (the only?) mystery writer about whom no one ever had a bad word to say.



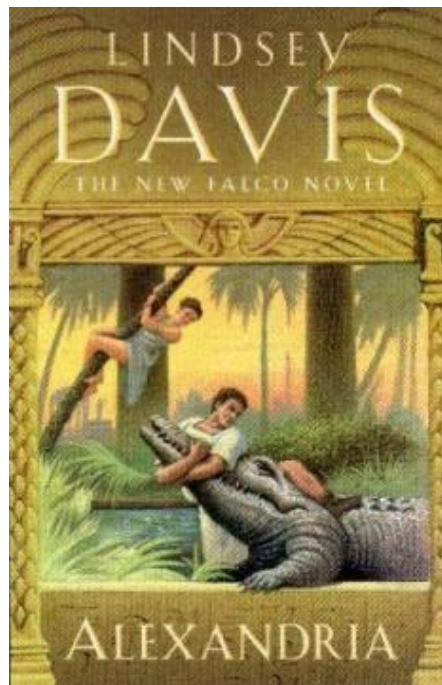
Tony has been dogged with ill-health for many years and it is many more since I saw him in London on a promotional tour. He signed his novel *Talking God* to me with the Navajo word “Hozho” which I understand to be a state of being which, roughly, means being balanced and content and walking in step with beauty and joy.

It seems a sadly fitting time to return the blessing and wish “Hozho” to Tony.

Prospects for 09

I have already received notification of well over 100 new crime-mystery-thriller titles for 2009 and we are not yet at All Saints Day 2008. More worryingly, only a measly *four* seem to be by James Patterson and, astonishingly, only two come recommended by Lee Child. Still, there is plenty of time for both those figures to pick up.

I am particularly looking forward to the new Lindsey Davis novel *Alexandria* from Century in February, which sees the very welcome return of Marcus Didius Falco, surely the most popular fictional private eye in Flavian Rome.



And in March, from Jonathan Cape, comes another historical thriller, *Cold Blood*, set in revolutionary Russia in 1917 which is worthy of note for its author is James Fleming, nephew of the rather famous Ian.

I do not know if James Fleming is in fact the son of *Peter* Fleming (Ian's brother), but if he is, then his publishers are doing him a disservice by promoting him as 'the nephew of Ian' rather than the 'son of Peter', for Peter Fleming was a superb travel author, an excellent popular historian and, frankly a far better writer than his brother.

And the crashing sound you just heard was any chance of me ever winning the Ian Fleming estate's Steel Dagger going out of the window...

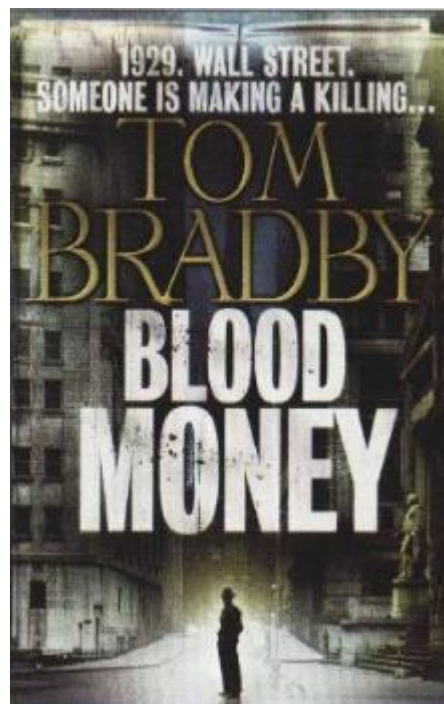
But I am grateful to Jonathan Cape for yet another historical novel, in April, Iain Pears' *Stone's Fall* which is modestly described as his 'most dazzling and brilliant' book since *An Instance of the Fingerpost*.

I first met the disgustingly talented Mr Pears when, many years ago we shared a publisher (I forget which) and we were both classed as "crime writers".



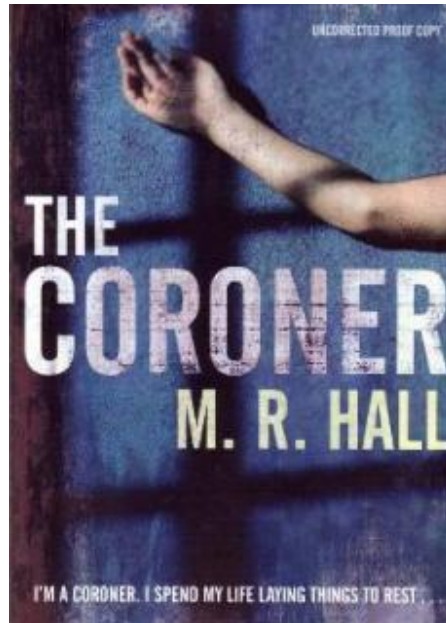
Clearly we were very young in those days and our publisher had assigned us a pair of bodyguards to keep us out of trouble – they were called Steed and Purdey and always sat between us to keep us apart. Shortly afterwards, Iain broke away from art world mysteries (though he did return to them occasionally) and hit the big time with *Instance of the Fingerpost* a truly remarkable novel set in Oxford in the 1660s with nary an Inspector Morse in sight. If *Stone's Fall* is half as good, that's my Easter vacation taken care of.

And yet another historical thriller, this time set during the Wall Street crash of 1929 (how's that for timing?), comes from the fiction pen of the dashing handsome political editor of ITV, Tom Bradby.



Blood Money comes out in February from Bantam Press, an inventive and persuasive publisher who have also managed to persuade Lee Child to stop reading books and write *Gone Tomorrow*, the latest Jack Reacher thriller, which appears in April.

To actually see in the New Year though, I will be sampling the first in what I suspect will be a series: *The Coroner* (Macmillan, 2nd January) by M. R. Hall.



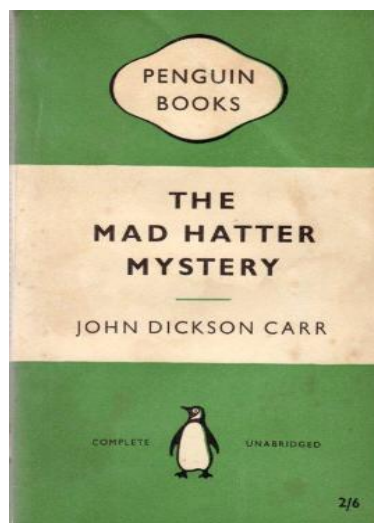
Much of the advance publicity places the book in the same league as Lynda La Plante's *Prime Suspect* television dramas, which is high praise indeed but a not surprising comparison given that the author, Matthew Hall is an experienced scriptwriter and TV producer with episodes of *Kavanagh QC* and *New Street Law* to his credit.

And I must make special mention of some interesting titles on the way from those shy and retiring publishers Severn House, who prefer to run their business from the Surrey countryside rather than in the hurly-burly of London.

Not only, in January, are they publishing the new Inspector Alvarez (of Mallorca) mystery by octogenarian Roderic Jeffries, *Sun, Sea and Murder*, but also a new collection of "his best ever" short stories from Peter Lovesey entitled *Murder On The Short List*.

And in February and March respectively, they re-publish two classics of the genre in what I am told to call 'The Otto Penzler Facsimile Reprint Series'.

First up is Ellery Queen's *The Egyptian Cross Mystery*, which was originally published in 1932, rapidly followed by John Dickson Carr's *The Mad Hatter Mystery*, from 1933.

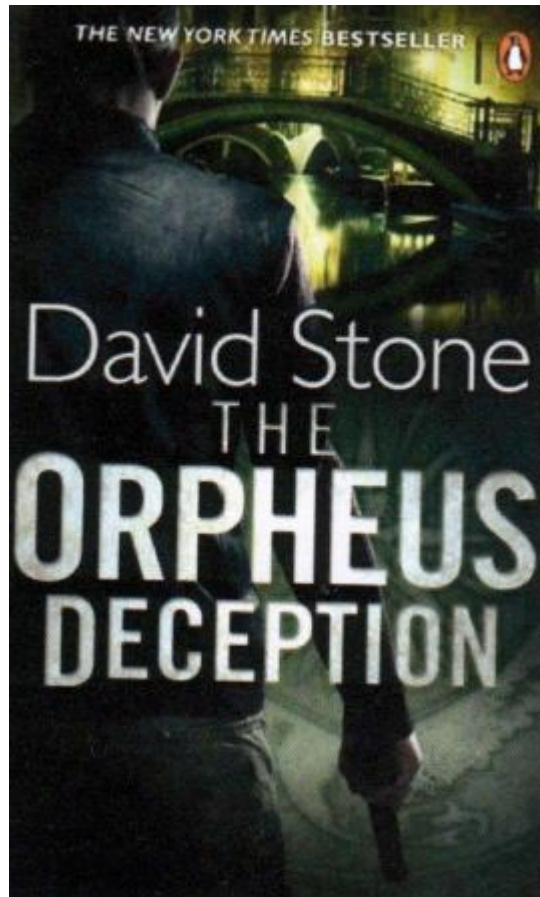


Now I have to admit I am no expert on, or particular fan of, John Dickson Carr or his Chesterton-clone detective Dr Gideon Fell, although I know many students of the genre who are. However, I have always warmed to *Mad Hatter* as its opening line is: “It began, like most of Dr Fell’s adventures, in a bar.”

And, be honest, we’ve all been there.

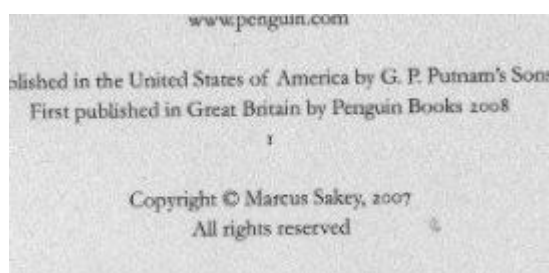
Scoop Denied

For moment I thought I had a genuine scoop on my hands as I examined my copy of a spanking new ‘global thriller’ *The Orpheus Deception*.



All I knew of the author, the mysterious David Stone, was what the book told me, which was that this was a ‘cover name’ for a former military man and intelligence officer in North and Central America and, ominously, south-east Asia. Such a mystery needed unravelling and using my own ancient tradecraft I thought I had discovered that “David Stone” was the cover name for none other than that young and extremely talented Chicagoan Marcus Sakey.

To prove my deductions, I referred to the copyright page of *The Orpheus Deception* and found:



Sadly, I am informed (by a very confused Marcus Sakey, among others) that this not really Mr Stone's true identity, but a simple printing error. I do hope that Marcus has not already begun to spend Mr Stone's royalties, for one really shouldn't annoy ex-military types with intelligence service experience.

Absolutely Faber-lous

There was a time when the publishing house of Faber (sometimes called Faber & Faber for tax purposes) had a short, but very distinguished, crime list. In essence it comprised P. D. James and Michael Dibdin.

Michael is, sadly, no longer with us but Baroness James is still writing finely-crafted murder stories in the traditional mode and I, among many others, really enjoyed her recent *The Private Patient*.

But now Faber have expanded their crime list with a plethora of talent which I was only able to give scant mention to last time. So here are just some of the criminal Faber faces, of whom you will hear much more in the future:



Clockwise from top-left, my fab Faber-ites (surely not "Fabians"...) are: Jason Goodwin (*The Bellini Card* and, in April 2010, *The Bulgarian Claimant*); a rather serious looking Roger Morris (*A Vengeful Longing* and, in January 2010, *A Razor Wrapped in Silk*); Nicola Upson (*An Expert in Murder* and, in July 2009, *Angel With Two Faces*, her second novel featuring the legendary crime writer Josephine Tey as her protagonist); and Stav Sherez, whose first thriller for Faber, *The Black Monastery*, is published in April 2009 with a recommendation from – who else? □ Lee Child.

And another Faber crime writer, K. O. Dahl, will be taking part in a celebration of Norwegian writing as part of *Norway In Words* at King's Place, 90 York Way, London (on the once infamous side of King's Cross station) on Tuesday 18th November at 7.30 p.m.

An unquiet calling

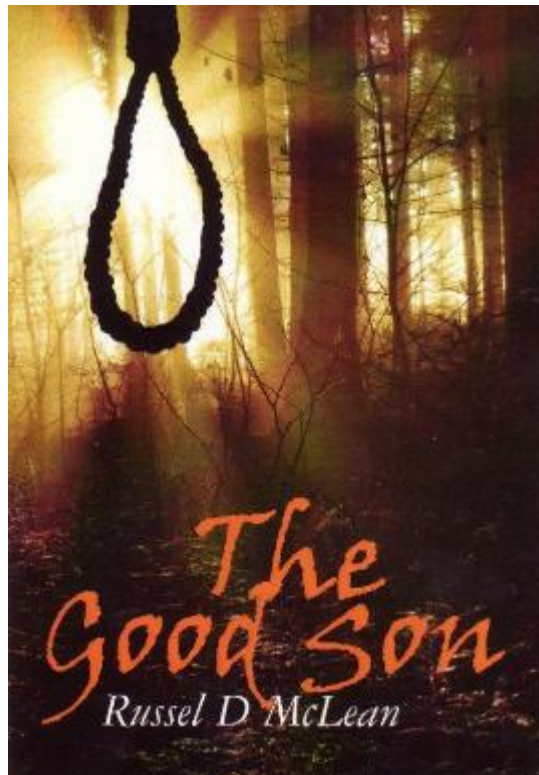
I know that the religious life is far from the peaceful ideal of charity and contemplation which it ought to be. Not for nothing is the archbishopric of Canterbury known as The Cruel See within the Church of England.

But I had not appreciated just how dangerous the monastic life could be until I read three recent thrillers: Chris Kuzneski's *The Lost Throne* (Penguin), which begins with a Greek monastery being attacked by an elite (Ninja?) group of warriors; Tom Martin's forthcoming *Kingdom* (Macmillan), which opens in a Tibetan monastery overrun by Chinese soldiers; and then there is Andy McDermott's *The Secret of Excalibur* (Headline) which starts with an attack on a parish priest in rural Sicily.

Is nowhere safe these days?

Jute City Blues

Dundee is a city (somewhere above the 52nd degree of Latitude I believe) famous for jam, jute, journalism and now crime fiction with the launch of *The Good Son*, the debut private eye novel written by Russel McLean and published by Five Leaves Crime.

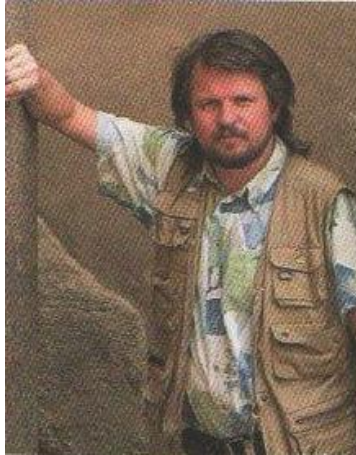


Apart from being a prolific blogger, short story writer and internet reviewer, Russel is also a high-powered executive in the Waterstone's book retailing empire and I understand that following this blatant plug, Waterstone's Dundee will display the largest stock of copies of *Angel's Share* to be found in a bookshop north of Hadrian's Wall.

It better had.

Raiders of the Lost Ark

As an archaeologist I am forever being asked: exactly who were the raiders of the lost ark? Now it appears the truth can be told, as Norwegian thriller writer Tom Egeland has hit upon the idea that they were Vikings!



In his new novel, *The Guardians of the Covenant*, to be published by those jolly magnificent people at John Murray in June 2009, Egeland's hero is "quirky archaeologist" (is there any other sort?) Bjorn Belto, who discovers that a raiding party of Vikings looted the Ark from an Egyptian tomb in 1013 AD.

Mayhem and conspiracy ensue and no doubt time-teamer Bjorn will only have three days in which to solve the riddle.

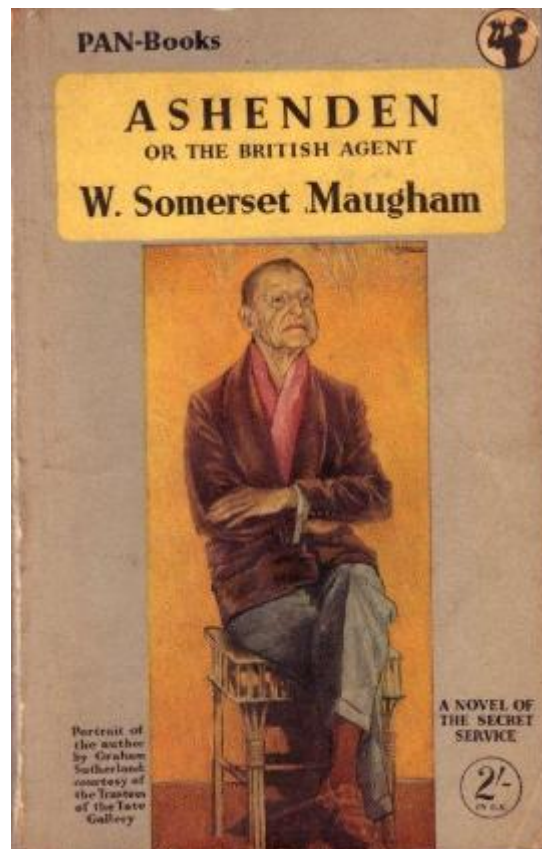
On His Majesty's Secret Service

I am so happy for my old friend Willy that those rambunctious people at Random House are reissuing his classic work, *Ashenden*, in their Vintage Classics series (in June 2009).



First published in 1928 under Willy's code name, Somerset Maugham, *Ashenden* blew the gaff on what life was like in the jolly old secret service back in the days when Europe had more empires but fewer countries and life was somehow more straightforward.

I remember Colonel R's face that night in the RAC Club when he was told that Willy was going to publish his memoirs albeit under the guise of "fiction". The poor man, a distant relative of mine but above all our boss, almost choked on his Spotted Dick and demanded to know if I'd had a hand in it. Fortunately, Willy left me out of the tale altogether, though many had been the night when the two of us had stepped out as *boulevardiers* together along the shores of Lake Lucerne to rendezvous with some defecting Austrian or Hungarian, or possibly both simultaneously.



Thanks to Willy's economies with the whole truth and nothing but; my cover remained intact and I was able to continue serving his majesty's secret service for several more years; right up to the next major bit of unpleasantness in 1939 (1941 for American readers) and beyond. But once he'd published that damned book, as Colonel R called it, I'm afraid Willy's spying days were over.

Funnily enough, one of the young whipper-snappers who replaced him, a lad called Graham Greene (from a family of brewers in East Anglia I seem to recall) ended up penning a good story, *The Third Man* and that too is to be reissued as a Vintage Classic next year.

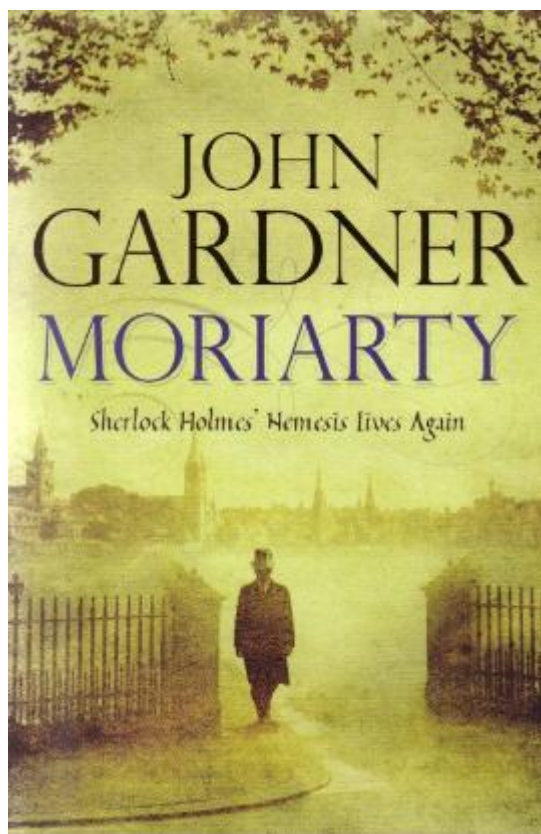
That same imprint will also be publishing new editions of Edgar Allan Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but I'm afraid I have no anecdotes about them. Both Ed and Chuck were before my time.

Holmeski and Watsonovitch

I am sure that members of the Crime Writers Association of a certain age and with long memories, will be storming the bookshops in December to buy a copy of the new Robert Hale title *Sherlock Holmes in Russia* by Alex Auswaks, who is described on Wikipedia (and therefore it must be true) as a "crime writer and man of letters".

Moriarty Returns – Again

Fans of the late John Gardner, among whom can be listed American *uber*-editor Otto Penzler (yes, him again), can celebrate the posthumous publication by Quercus of *Moriarty*, the third volume in his trilogy which began with *The Return of Moriarty* in 1974 and then *The Revenge of Moriarty* in 1975.



It has been a long wait for the faithful, but dedicated fans will feel it worth it and their joy will only be confined by the fact that the author, who died last year, is no longer around to celebrate with them.

Streets of San Francisco

No sooner has the dust settled on Bouchercon 2008 (the international convention for crime and mystery writers and readers named after American reviewer Anthony Boucher), than plans have been leaked for Bouchercon **2010** which is to be held in one of my favourite cities, San Francisco.

I have fond memories of Nob Hill and Fisherman's Wharf, although it is many years since I was there. I do hope the hotels have improved as mine – charmingly situated on an island in the magnificent bay there – could have done with a lick of paint and I never did see the need for all those iron bars on the windows. Room Service left something to be desired as well.

But I digress. The big news is that the 2010 International Guest of Honour will be that talented Scottish firebrand Denise Mina. And among the other categories of distinguished guests will be a new one (at least new to me), that of *Distinguished Contribution To The Genre* [Guest], who will be, of course, Lee Child.

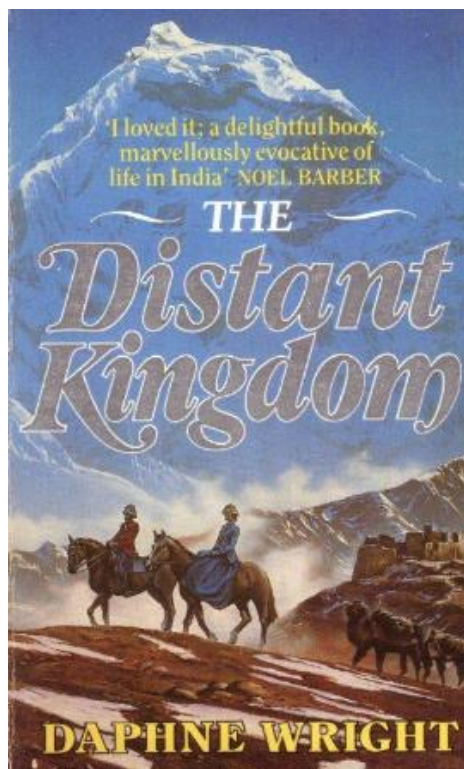
I am not sure what the criteria are which make up a “distinguished contribution to the genre”, but the organisers probably know exactly what they mean and I couldn't possibly comment.

Fickle Fans

In the archives here at Ripster Hall, I recently discovered this early daguerreotype of my factotum Waldo in his youthful, *boulevardier* days, which I know will please crime writer Natasha Cooper who is always demanding more news of Waldo's activities.



Sadly there is little of interest to report as for several days now, Waldo has confined himself to the gamekeeper's hut (abandoned by that swine Mellors, of whom we no longer speak), engrossed in a romantic historical novel set in India and written by someone called 'Daphne Wright'.



I do hope Natasha is not disappointed.

Postman Rung Thrice

To get a letter from a publisher these days is a rare event, for they are very busy people and the minimum time for a reply to an “eeeemail” (whatever that is) is said to be three months. Imagine my surprise then, to receive a letter from one editor rapidly followed in the next post by *two* from another.

My first correspondent turns out to be the delightful Jane Morpeth of Headline, who writes to urge me to read the new Carol O’Connell novel, ***Bone By Bone***, which they are to publish in December.

I certainly will, partly because I always do what I am told by publishers, but also because I have happy memories of meeting visiting American Carol when she came to London in 1994 to launch her debut novel, ***Mallory’s Oracle***. I remember the book well as it something of a publishing sensation in its day: an American debut novelist taken off the “slush pile” by a British publisher, who then sold the book back to America in a rumoured \$800,000 deal.

Naturally, since becoming a lady of considerable means, I have heard nothing from Carol in over a decade, but I shall look forward to reading her latest in her new publisher’s colours.

And then came two communications from dynamic Little, Brown publisher David Shelley, who urges me to read two more American novels to be published in the New Year by Sphere, Erica Spindler’s thriller ***Breakneck*** and a ghost story, ***The Birthing House*** by debut novelist Christopher Ransom.

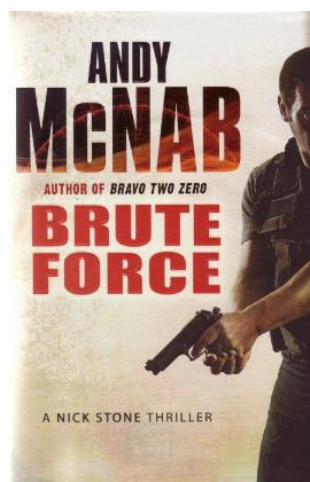
I will, of course, try both of them (though there seems to be more than one new Erika Spindler title coming soon), but I cannot help but feel a pang of nostalgia for the days when publishers did not have to resort to writing letters. I remember when publishing firms would employ platoons of bright young women, all graduates of Cheltenham Ladies’ College, whose sole task was to supply vast quantities of delicacies and the finest wines known to humanity to reviewers, critics and the hacks who made up Her Majesty’s Press.

Now that was the way to get your book noticed. Ah, happy days.

The Talented Mr Stone

I am naturally delighted that my friend and fellow *boulevardier* Sir Nicholas Stone has agreed to become this organ’s reviewer of motion pictures, many of which I believe are in colour these days.

Apart from his obvious talents as a writer of award-winning and highly successful thrillers, I can also reveal that Nick Stone is the hero of the latest Andy McNab bestseller, ***Brute Force***, which will be a sure fire hit for publishers Bantam.



The cover proudly declares the book to be “A Nick Stone Thriller” and he must be very proud of the fact that there will now not be a bookshop in the land which does not stock a Nick Stone title. Thanks to the Talented Miss Highsmith, I know exactly how he feels.

Blog Power

Within weeks of reporting, in this very column, how invaluable to my university career were the cookery books of that great thriller writer Len Deighton, I learn that one of them, *Len Deighton's Action Cook Book*, is to be reissued in May 2009 by those devilishly clever people at Harper Perennial.

Surely, it's even more brilliant companion volume on French cuisine *Ou est le Garlic?* deserves to be reissued as well and no-one can complain at the price charged (£9.99) even if my first editions were a modest 10/6d each. [That's 50.5p for younger readers.]

That makes nine of Len Deighton's books to be republished next year to mark his 80th birthday.

It's a start.

Pip! Pip!

The Ripster