

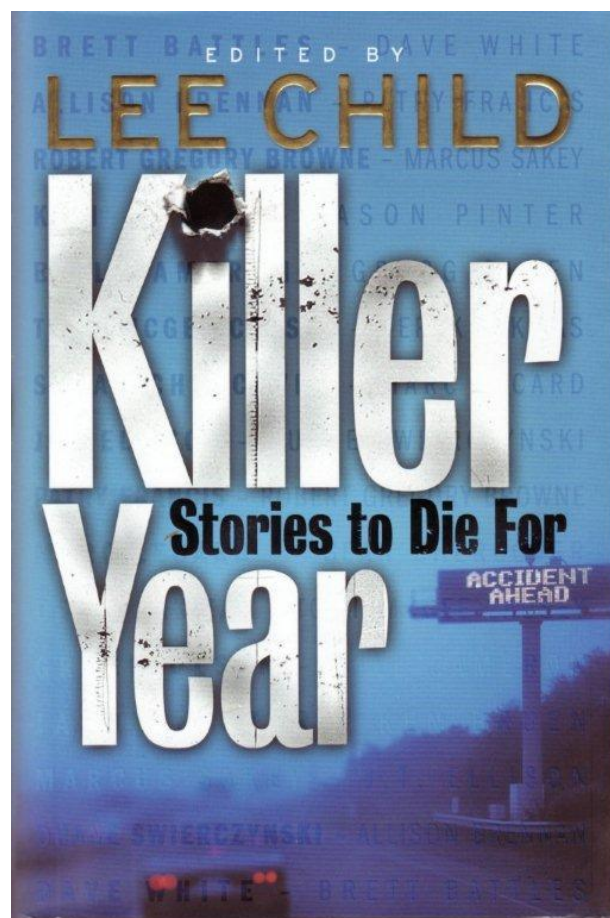
# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### Thrillfest

I have much enjoyed the recent anthology *Killer Year* (Mira Books) despite the fact that it did not come with a recommendation from Lee Child. There is a very good reason for this, as Lee is, in fact, the editor of this collection of new short stories by American writers (and Irishman Ken Bruen, who seems to hold honorary citizenship) which emerged as a result of the International Thriller Writers organization nominating 2007 as a “Killer Year” and encouraging new talent through a network of mentoring by established authors, and of course, this anthology.



The book includes wise words from Lee Child, a blessing by Laura Lippman and a short essay entitled “The Class of **Co-opetition**” (which I have to admit is a new word for me) by M.J. Rose. Other well-known names chipping in with comments and recommendations include: David Morrell, Tess Gerritsen and Joe R. Lansdale.

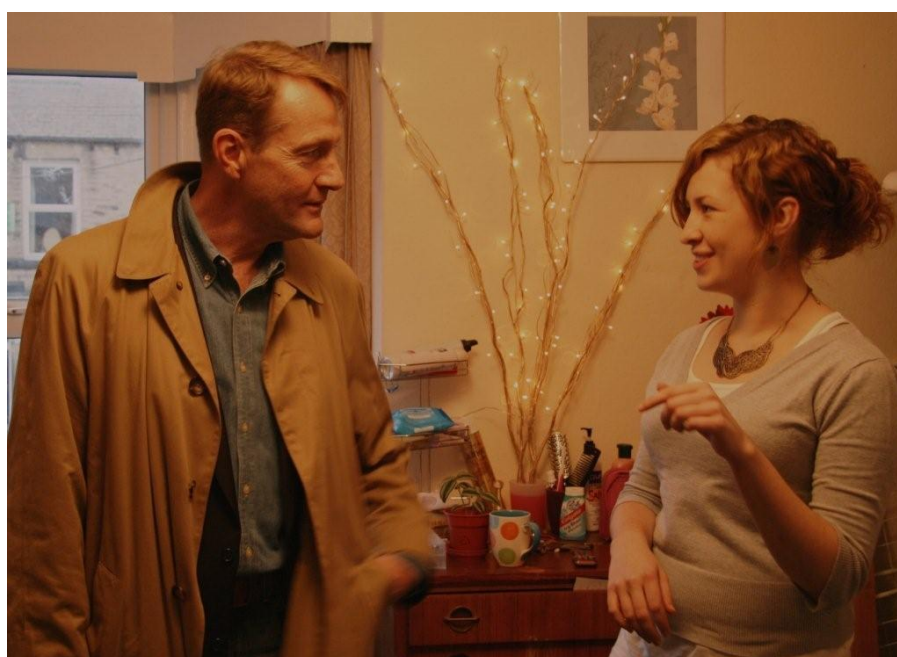
But the stars are the new kids on the block, many of whom will be unknown on this side of the Atlantic. I do know of Marcus Sakey and so turned to his gruesome little homily *Gravity and Need* first, and I wasn't disappointed; but my real delight came in discovering completely new names such as Derek Nikitas, Sean Chercover and (stylistically possibly the best of all) Toni McGee Causey.

This is an excellent “sampler” (as Lee calls it) of the rather scary wealth of talent emerging on the American crime scene. *Killer Year* aims to do what the *Fresh Blood* anthologies did for new British talent in the 1990s, when one of the showcased authors was an almost unknown Lee Child. (Oddly enough, Ken Bruen was involved in that project too. I think he must have been an honorary Brit back then.)

And speaking of Lee Child, as I occasionally do, I am delighted to report that as Visiting Professor, he recently returned to his old alma mater, Sheffield University, and even made a nostalgic visit to the house where he lived as an undergraduate law student.



The current undergraduate residents of that now famous house (and surely a blue plaque cannot be long in coming) were delighted to meet Lee and probably had several books waiting for him to read.



In fact I know for certain that one of the present inhabitants of Lee's student digs, a third-year scientist named Beth had a copy of *Angels Unaware* to present to Lee. I do hope he likes it.

## Grim (Reaper) News

It was sad and depressing to hear of the death of Michael Crichton at the ridiculously young age of 66 last month.

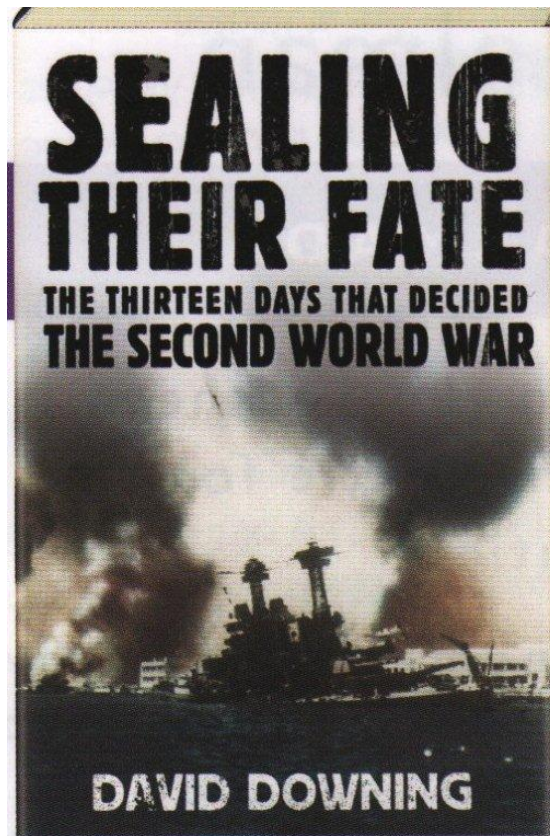
Although he will be most remembered for *ER* and *Jurassic Park*, many would say that his finest hour was in writing and then directing the movie of *Westworld* back in 1974. In fact Crichton wrote thrillers in several genres from 1966 onwards, his first at the age of 24, including the now overlooked, but I think rather influential *Binary* in 1972, which was published under his pseudonym John Lange.

There were times when perhaps the brilliant ‘high concept’ behind some of his novels didn’t *quite* work out on the printed page – *Timeline* (time travel and 14<sup>th</sup> century France) or *Prey* (when Nanobots attack) for instance – but you couldn’t argue with the breadth of the guy’s imagination, and that’s what he should be missed, and remembered, for.

## Going Straight

It seems that historical spy fiction writer David Downing is going straight, or at least as straight as a historian can go these days.

In May next year those super people at Simon & Schuster will publish *Sealing Their Fate*, a day-by-day historical survey of the days leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbour (or Pearl *Harbor* for American viewers). The only problem is that the Simon & Schuster catalogue for 2009 can’t actually agree on *how many* days the book will survey.

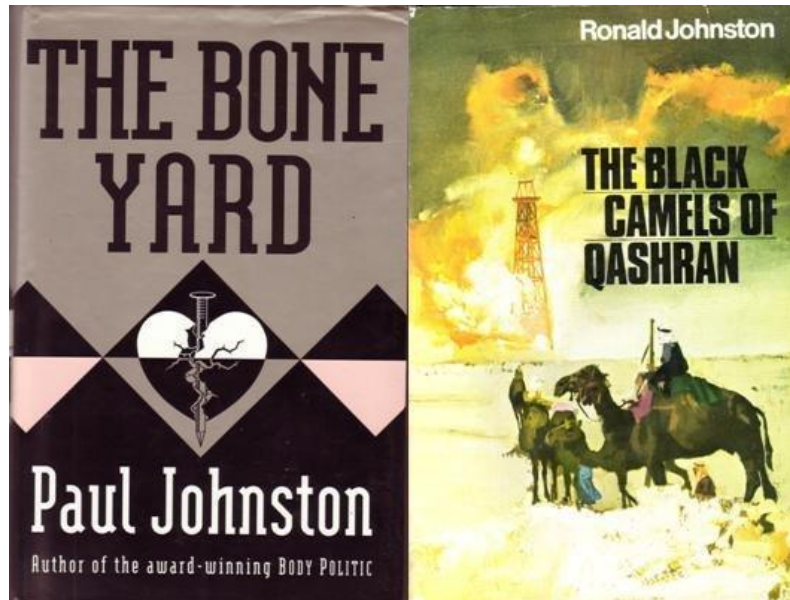


Whilst the cover illustration (above) clearly sub-titles the book *The Thirteen Days That Decided The Second World War*, the catalogue’s text states twice that the book covers the (terrifying) *Twenty-Two Days That Decided the Second World War*. But I will not carp. Whether the book covers the 13 or the 22 days immediately prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> December (or 12/7 for American viewers) 1941, I am sure the author of *Zoo Station* and *Silesian Station* will do a splendid job enlivening the dry bones of history, for he certainly does in his fiction.

## Relatively Speaking

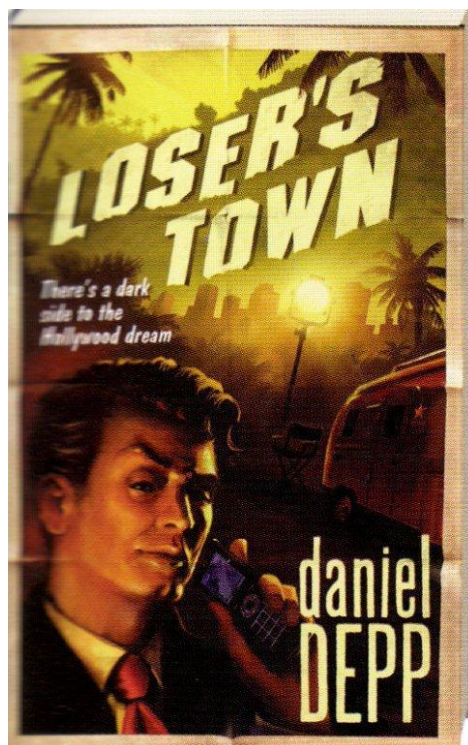
I have commented before on the dynastic connections in crime writing, which are more widespread than one might think.

There are some well-known instances of ‘keeping it in the family’: Dick and Felix Francis, Elmore and Peter Leonard, the Kellermans (all of them), Peter and Phil Lovesey and, more recently the niece of Alistair Maclean, the nephew of Ian Fleming and the son of Sir Fitzroy Maclean. (OK so he wasn’t a crime writer, but I just couldn’t resist.) And of course, I couldn’t fail to mention crime writer Paul Johnston, the son of thriller writer Ronald.



And I forgot entirely to point out last time that octogenarian crime writer Roderic Jeffries, is in fact the son of famous thriller-writer Bruce Graeme (1900-1982).

But possibly the “hottest” family connection (or so the Dowager Lady Ripster, with bosom heaving, informs me) is in the debut novel *Loser's Town*, a hardboiled private eye tale set in Hollywood to be published by Simon & Schuster in March 2009, written by Daniel Depp, brother of the slightly better-known Johnny, who I believe is a thespian of some notoriety.



I understand that Mr Johnny Depp has a small country estate here in the Eastern Marches of England, which is unusual, but not unknown for an American (for many years, that nice Miss Highsmith rented a tied cottage near Ripster Hall), and I look forward to the launch party he will undoubtedly throw to mark his sibling's arrival on the crime fiction scene.

### Wales Is History

As I never travel abroad after All Souls' Day, I will not be attending the Historical Crime Fiction evening to be held at Borders' bookshop in Cardiff on December 4<sup>th</sup> (at 6.30 p.m.).

Sadly, I will miss hearing the wit and wisdom of the outstanding panel assembled there, comprising of Andrew Taylor, Roger Morris and my old friend and sparring partner, Professor Bernard Knight the former Home Office pathologist.

Professor Knight was the only reader to spot the deliberate mistake in my own humble offering in the historical thriller field, *The Legend of Hereward*, which concerned the parentage of Giraldus Cambrensis, one of the best-selling authors of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He did, however, completely fail to spot the blatant reference to *The Magnificent Seven*, from which I do take a crumb of comfort.

### Gore Blimey

I think there must have been some sort of election over in the American colonies recently, for who should I spy appearing on television offering pearls of wisdom but my young fellow *boulevardier* Gore Vidal.

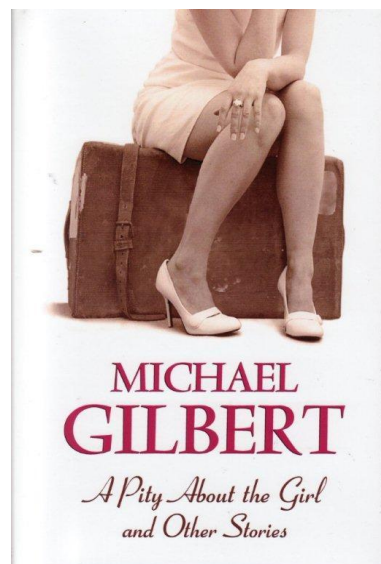
<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=k2L8iUHZ2sY>

I am not surprised at this as Gore has always had an unhealthy interest in politics and produced a stunning book in 2003 detailing the foibles of those rebellious colonists Washington, Adams and Jefferson [*Inventing A Nation*, Yale University Press] probably as a bit of light relief from writing his most excellent fiction. (Including wonderful mysteries under the name Edgar Box.)

I am informed that our American friends have indeed elected a 44<sup>th</sup> "President" which does seem rather profligate as I believe we have only had seven or eight monarchs since 1776, but I will not press the point. I am told that the new holder of the office is a Mr O'Bama, which to me suggests he is of Irish origin, and that his favourite film is *Casablanca*. Whatever the gentleman's origins or his politics, of which I know nothing, I have to admit that the man has excellent taste and judgement when it comes to movies.

### Fitting Tribute(s)

Those shy and retiring publishers, Robert Hale, have produced a fine and fitting tribute to the late Michael Gilbert in the anthology of previously uncollected short stories *A Pity About the Girl*.



The collection, edited by John Cooper, will probably be the last such retrospective of the 50-year career of one of British crime writing's true gentlemen. The stories here were written as far apart as 1951 and 1997 and include Gilbert's Sherlock Holmes pastiche, *The Two Footmen*.

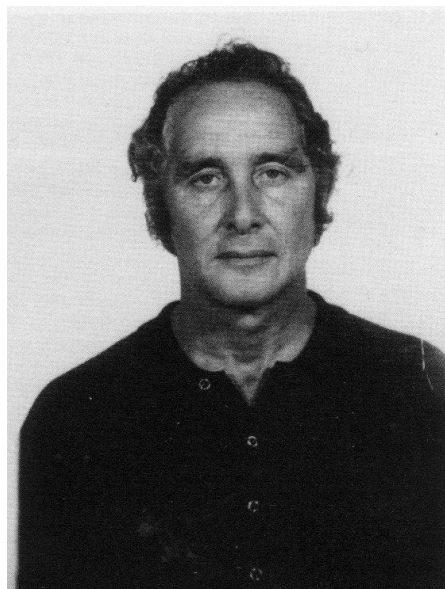
And, as extensively trailed in this column, *Moriarty* by the late John Gardner is now out from Quercus, much to the relief of the fans who have waited 33 years for this third instalment in the originally proposed trilogy.



There was a party to celebrate the event, my friend Prince Ali Karim managed to take this picture of John's children Simon and Alexis with the long-awaited book.

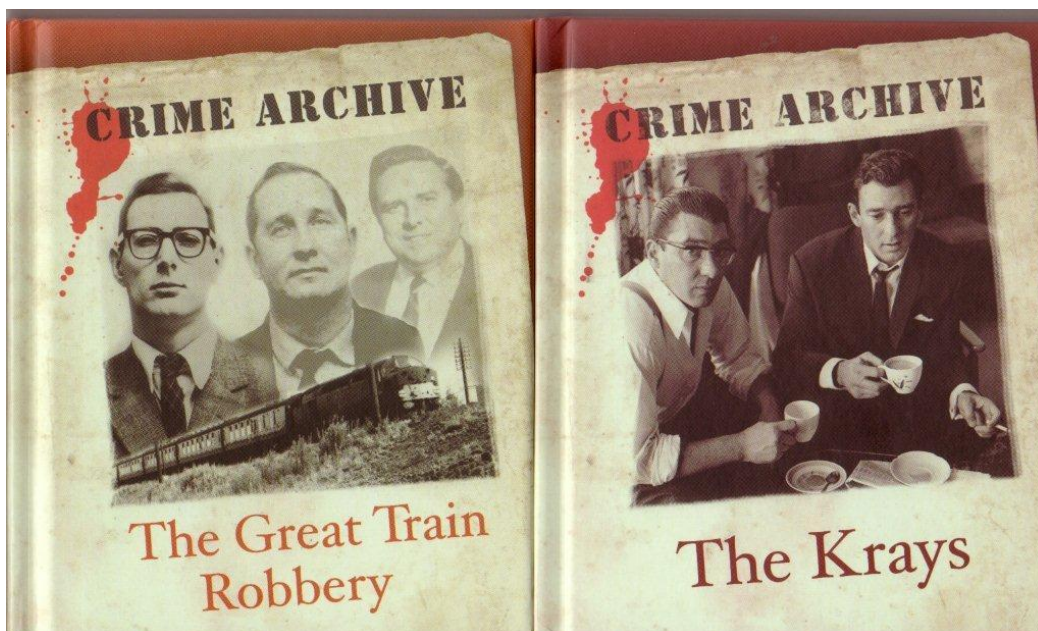
### Long Stretch

It seems like an age since I have been sent a new book to review by that distinguished critic and Professor of Creative Writing, Peter Guttridge. Coupled with his absence from the London Scene this season, I have quite forgotten what he looks like.



However, I now have his new book, *The Great Train Robbery*, to remind me of his deathless prose even though this is not a novel but rather a factual account of the infamous "heist of the (last) century" when £2.6 million went missing in a day from the railways and no one put it down to Richard Branson.

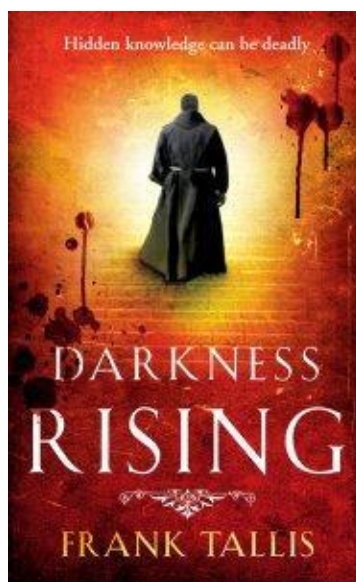
Peter's book, along with James Morton's companion volume *The Krays*, are the latest Crime Archive publications from The National Archives at Kew, which celebrate some of the more colourful aspects of British social history.



One fact missing from Mr Guttridge's excellent account of the Train Robbers, however, is that for several years Mr Ronald Biggs had his own personal chair in the visitors' room at Her Majesty's Prison Belmarsh. I know, because I was given special dispensation to rest my weary bones in it whilst visiting said establishment. Just visiting, mind; just visiting.

#### On the Psychiatrist's Couch

News that the fourth in the highly regarded Max Liebermann series, *Darkness Rising*, written by Harley Street psychiatrist Frank Tallis, is to be published by Century in January reaches me rather late in the day, for I had already spotted an uncorrected bound proof of the book for sale (at £30) on the jolly old interweb.



The series, once described as “*Cracker* set in early 20th century Vienna” is said to be in development with the BBC under the title *The Liebermann Papers* with the first two books – *Mortal Mischief* (aka *Death in Vienna*) and *Vienna Blood* □ starting the ball rolling, hopefully in 2009.

#### The British Are Coming

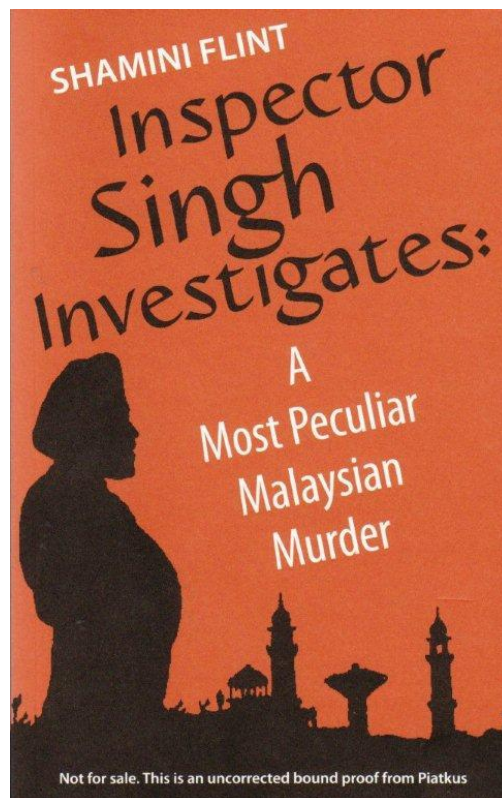
No doubt full details will be announced at a lavish dinner party to which I will not be invited, so I will mention now the forthcoming promotion by publisher Orion which goes under the banner *Best of British*.



The promotion seems to do exactly what it says on the tin, highlighting five authors which Orion class as “the cream of British Crime Writing”. All of them are well-known names in the business and deserve to be better known out there in the bookshops and the promotion will roll out over the first half of 2009. The titles to be featured are: *No Lovelier Death* by Graham Hurley (February); *Uncut* by John Connor (March); *The Edge* by Chris Simms (April); *The Man Who Wasn't There* by Laura Wilson (May); and *Still Bleeding* by Steve Mosby (June).

**Heard it here first**

Just remember that you heard it here first, but Alexander McCall Smith may have a serious rival next year.



My spies tell me that those perky publishers Piatkus are hugging themselves at the prospect of a new series of cosily gentle, but exotically situated crime novels featuring the fat (but loveable) Inspector Singh of the Singapore police, written by Shamini Flint.

The first, due round about June 2009, has the far from snappy (though totally descriptive) title: *Inspector Singh Investigates: A Most Peculiar Malaysian Murder* with most of the action taking place in Kuala Lumpur. Other planned locations include Bali and Singapore itself and I think Piatkus could be on to a winner here. This series



sounds the perfect way to experience a host of exotic south-east Asian locations without having to worry about your carbon footprint.

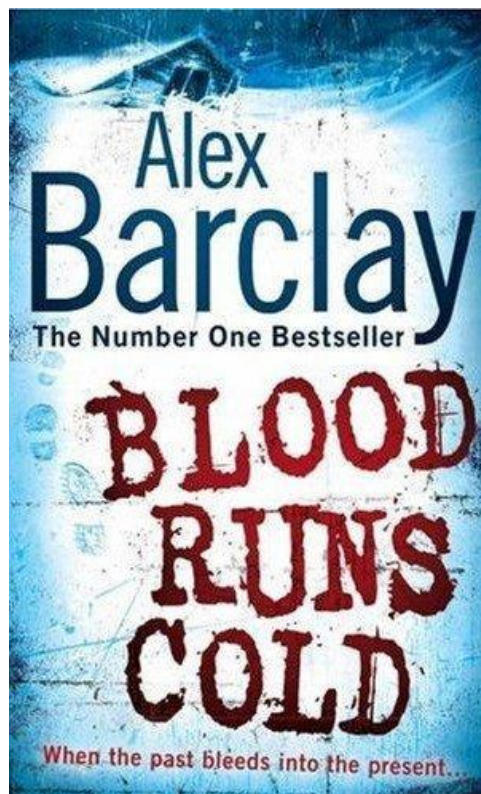
And another debut to watch out for (in February, from Orion) is “an unusual, hauntingly atmospheric crime novel” entitled *Tethered* by former congressional aide Amy MacKinnon.



I am far from clear what a ‘congressional aide’ is, but Ms MacKinnon certainly catches the reader by the throat with the opening to her novel, set as it is in the business end of a funeral parlour. On the opening alone I would say that the publicity hype of “unusual” and “haunting” seems perfectly justified.

#### Irish Eyes

Like John Connolly, Irish crime writer Alex Barclay has chosen to give her thrillers American settings and characters, or at least she has in *Blood Runs Cold* (from HarperCollins) where she introduces a “dynamic new female lead” (it says here), FBI agent Ren Bryce.



Set in snowy Colorado and with a heroine whose first appearance is in a very realistic bathroom scene, revisiting several of the drinks of the night before, *Blood Runs Cold* is a snappy, well-drawn, utterly convincing American thriller. Which is quite an achievement for a writer born in Dublin who lives in County Cork.

I have always had a sneaking admiration for writers who can *convincingly* set their books in a foreign country; or at least convincingly enough to convince *me*, which admittedly probably doesn't take much doing. (I was rather proud of the fact that I set part of one of my novels in *Wales*, for goodness sake.)

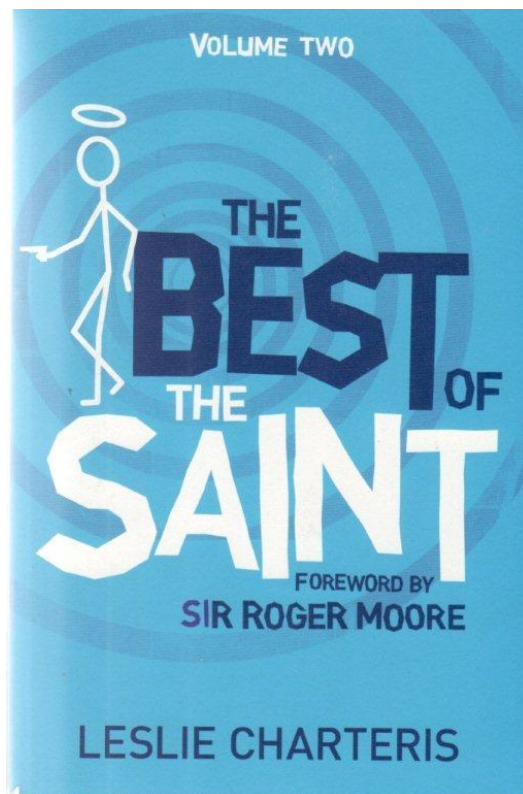
Alex Barclay has made no secret of the reason why she has opted for crime in the USA rather than an everyday story of Garda detectives in County Cork. During an interview on RTE (Irish television) last year, she openly admitted that she found America "far more sexy" than Dublin. (She also admitted that her own name was "a bit girlie" – hence the pen-name Alex Barclay).



Having had quite a hit with her debut novel *Darkhouse* in 2005, I will be interested to see how her take on the American thriller goes down in America. Actually, I am sure it will do well everywhere, for although disgustingly young (she was born four years *after* the Beatles broke up), Ms Barclay is also disgracefully talented.

#### Return of the Saint

I allowed myself a smile when I learned that publishers Hodder were reissuing two volumes of *The Best of the Saint* and then raised a wistful eyebrow on reading that the introduction to Volume 2 had been written by none other than that great thespian, Sir Roger Moore.



In it, Sir Roger reveals that he personally had tried to buy the television rights to the Saint stories in the late 1950s, but failed to interest author Leslie Charteris. By 1962, however, television mogul Lew Grade was able to announce that *The Saint* was to hit the small screen and dear Roger was given the part without an audition or screen test and by all accounts, Charteris approved of the casting, though he certainly did not approve of some of the scripts.

Four decades on from the famous TV version (and goodness knows how many decades on from the first Saint book), the two *Best of the Saint* volumes contain over two dozen stories, Volume 1 (with an introduction by Ken Follett) selecting pre-WWII stories and Volume 2 concentrating on the 1950s. They will undoubtedly feature on the Christmas list of members of The Saint Club, which is still going, with over 4000 members.



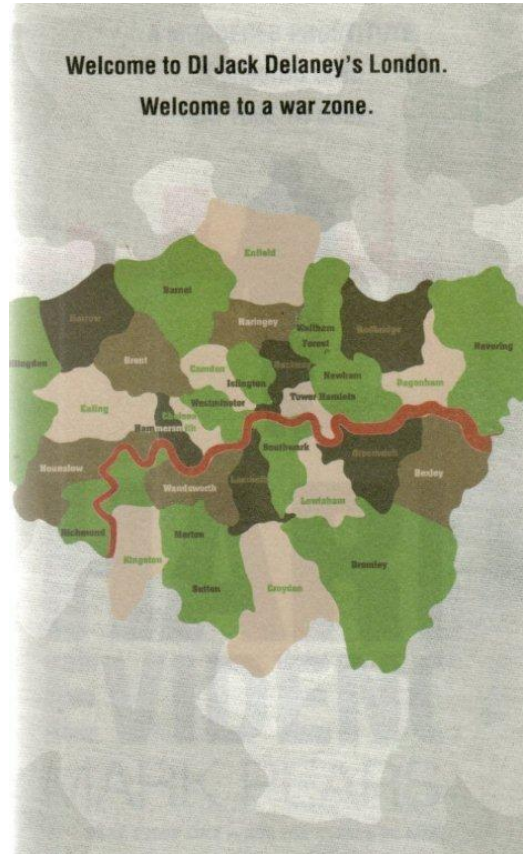
Leslie Charteris (born Leslie Charles Bowyer-Yin) was an incredibly prolific and successful writer, who wrote books, short stories and comic strips featuring his most memorable character, as well as working in Hollywood and on radio.

I met him only once, in the House of Lords, where he received the Crime Writers Cartier Diamond Dagger (thanks mainly to the efforts of Peter Lovesey), at the age of 85. Wheelchair-bound and very frail, he was as

polite and charming as his hero could be when not scuffling in fisticuffs with a dastardly villain. The crime writing community, who had almost forgotten him until then, was saddened to learn of his death shortly after, in 1993.

### Nice package

The packaging of publishers' proofs (as sent to bookshops and reviewers) rarely excites comment, unless, that is, it is so over-the-top that it pricks your conscience as to whether a tree had to die for it all.



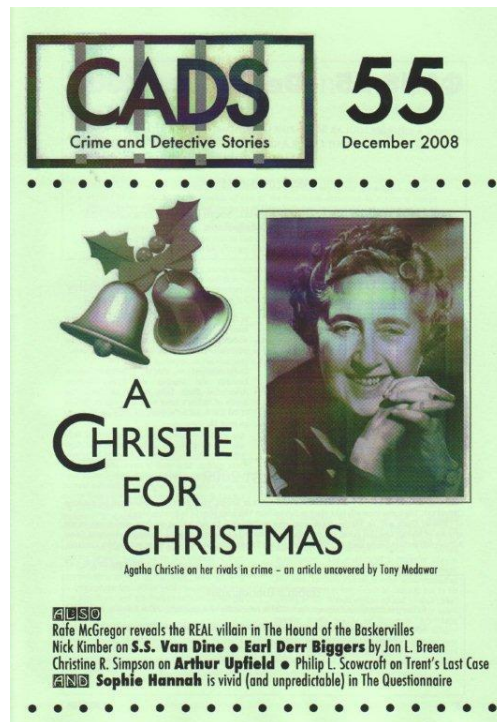
However, giving credit where credit is due, I have to say that the packaging around the bound proof of Mark Pearson's debut police thriller *Hard Evidence* (to be published as an Arrow original paperback in January) is a quite stunning, see-through effect map of London done in camouflage colours which looks for all the world like a military map of a war zone. (To go with the strap line: *Welcome to DI Jack Delaney's London. Welcome to a war zone.*)

I am not sure what the cover of the finished book will look like, I only hope it is half as eye-catching as the 'sleeve' which envelopes the proof. So, top marks to the art department at Arrow, who have certainly persuaded this jaded cynic to read the book.

I do hope it is good – the DI Delaney follow-up, *Blood Line*, is already scheduled for August 2009 and more are promised – for the London crime scene has long been in need of a police detective series to rival Edinburgh's Rebus, Oxford's Morse and Nottingham's Resnick.

### A Caddish scoop

Those scholarly types over at CADS Magazine ('Crime and Detective Stories') have a bit of a scoop on their hands in the latest issue.



It comes in the form of the first publication in English of the article *Detective Writers in England* by none other than Agatha Christie, breaking her famous reluctance to speak about her contemporaries in crime fiction.

I say “in English” for the article was originally written as the request of the Ministry of Information in mid-1945, for publication in Russian in a Moscow magazine. Its appearance in CADS #55 is thought to be the first appearance of the essay anywhere outside of wartime Russia.

For more information on CADS magazine, contact Geoff Bradley via email: [Geoffcads@aol.com](mailto:Geoffcads@aol.com).

My spies tell me that CADS may well have another scoop on their hands next year too.

### Into the Blue

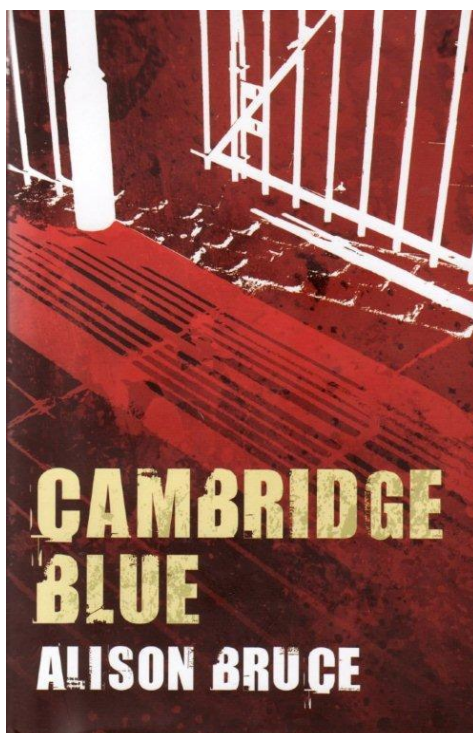
The year now credit-crunching to a close saw over 566 new crime novels and thrillers published in the UK; and those are only the ones I know about. Of them, at least 65 were debut novels by first-time authors and naturally I wish them all every sliver of good luck they can attract, for they will need it.

One first novel, however, is off to a flying start, for author Alison Bruce



has cleverly held the launch party for her debut in the hallowed precincts of St Heffer's College of Crime Writing in Cambridge.

This is surely a most auspicious start to her career, but not surprising as the book in question is *Cambridge Blue*, a police investigation into murder, suspicious death and some very dodgy family values, set in – you've guessed it – that fine city of Cambridge.



Alison Bruce's confident debut is published here by Constable and (in 2009) in America by associate company SohoConstable, by which time I do hope they have given the book a new cover for the British edition one is somewhat confusing (at least to my failing eyes) and does not do justice to either the book or one of the most photogenic places in England.

#### Shots of the Year

At this time of year, just before the port and mince pies begin to kick in, it falls to me to announce my nominations for the priceless (but sadly prize-less) **Shots of the Year** Awards.

My choices for 2008 will no doubt attract the usual amount of opprobrium and anonymous letters written in green crayon, if only for the fact that two of the category awards go to the same authors who won them in 2007. I make no apologies for this and point out that being named A Prize Shot in 2007 has done nothing to dent their careers.

Before making my choices public, I would say there have been numerous books which gave me great pleasure this year and I must make special mention of P.D. James' timeless English detective story *The Private Patient*; Ruth Rendell's edgy, almost Dickensian, *Portobello*; Michael Connelly's masterful legal thriller *The Brass Verdict*; Charles Cumming's measured and quite delicate *Typhoon*; and two excellent historical spy novels both set at the beginning of WW2: David Downing's *Silesian Station* and Alan Furst's *The Spies of Warsaw*.

But my winning choices (and I am unanimous in this) are as follows:

Crime Shot of the Year: *When Will There Be Good News?* by Kate Atkinson (Doubleday), a pyrotechnic shaking up of the genre if ever there was one.

Thriller of the Year: *A Quiet Flame* by Philip Kerr (Quercus), the fifth Bernie Gunther novel, set in post-war (if not post-Nazi) Argentina.

Historical Shot of the Year: ***The Death Maze*** by Ariana Franklin (Bantam), the second outing for Adelia Aguilar in this engaging and well-researched 'CSI Medieval' series, giving us a worthy heir to Brother Cadfael.

Shot in Translation: from the German, ***Therapy*** by Sebastian Fitzek (Pan) who cleverly offers to pull the wool over our eyes and we let him.

First Shot: (for a debut novel) ***The Maze of Cadiz*** by Aly Monroe (John Murray), historical espionage again, this time in Franco's Spain in 1944, but so densely textured and convincingly done that I had serious trouble believing it was a first novel.

Those who have followed these awards over the years will have instantly spotted that I have not chosen a *Comic Shot* this year for comedy crime. This is not something I do lightly, but in 2008, two of my favourite authors in the comedy field were playing it rather straight for a change: Colin Bateman with ***Orpheus Rising*** and Douglas Lindsey with ***Lost In Juarez***. Both excellent novels but (deliberately) low on the belly-laughs we've come to expect.

***Pip! Pip!***

***The Ripster.***