

# Getting Away With Murder

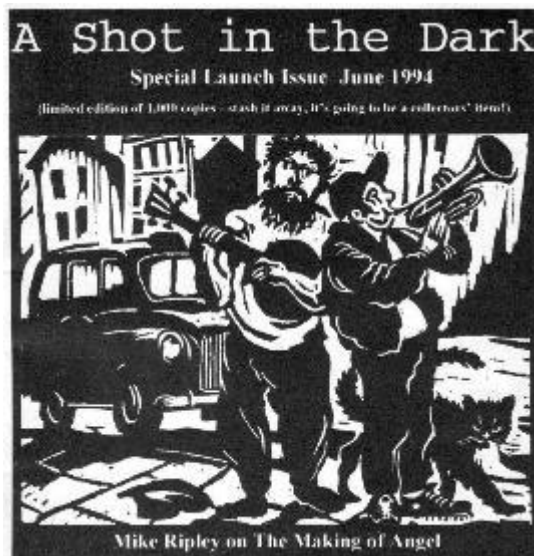
## Mike Ripley



### New Year Resolutions

I have decided to make only two Resolutions for 2009.

Number One is to take every opportunity to remind publishers and publicists, as well as writers and indeed strangers in the street, that SHOTS (and naturally this column) now gets an average of 22,055 visits *per day* from crime fiction fans using the jolly old interweb. I should not claim all the credit for this, though I will, but this surely must make [www.shotsmag.co.uk](http://www.shotsmag.co.uk) one of the biggest such sites in the world, or at least that is what I will tell people.



It is sobering to think (which is not something I ever say lightly) that this global electronic organ has grown from that rough-and-ready launch issue produced for the 1994 Shot In The Dark convention in Nottingham,

which (purely co-incidentally had a cover based on one of my own novels).From such humble origins to world domination in fifteen years... the SHOTS production team of webmasters, internet wizards and warlocks are to be congratulated.

My Number Two resolution is that in 2009 I will not hear a word said against Lee Child – a wise and gentle soul as well as a generous human being and man of impeccable taste.

### Crime Queens

I have often said that here in the Eastern Marches we always respect our crime writing legends and on March 11<sup>th</sup> this year, as part of the 2009 Essex Book Festival, it's a case of 3 for the price of 2.

At 2.30 in the afternoon Julia Jones will be speaking in West Mersea library on Mersea Island (aka Pirate Island off the Essex coast) and her subject will be Margery Allingham who lived and wrote (and indeed is buried) at nearby Tolleshunt D'Arcy on the mainland.



Julia Jones certainly knows her subject, for under her maiden name of Julia Thorogood, she wrote the authoritative biography *Margery Allingham* published by Heinemann in 1991.

And in the evening of the same day, a few miles away in Witham Library, Laura Thompson, the most recent official biographer of Agatha Christie will give the 2009 Dorothy L. Sayers Lecture, entitled '*DLS, Agatha and the real Harriet Vane*'.

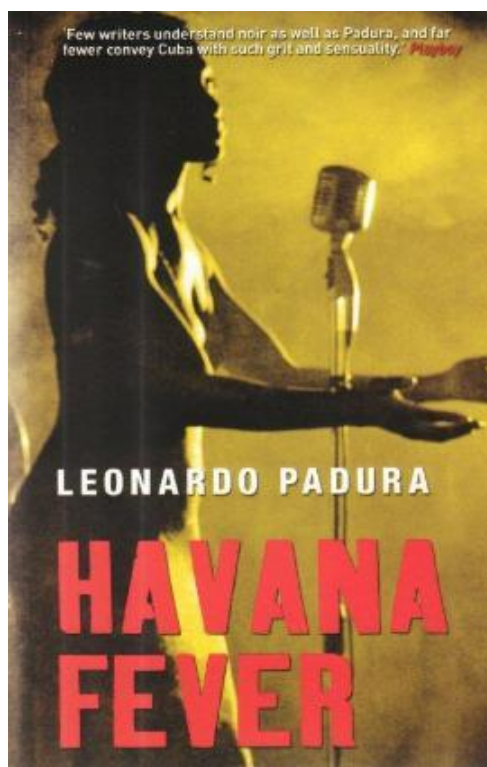
I am sure we will see many other distinguished writers participating in the Festival in March/April, but the good ratepayers of Essex can sleep safely knowing that (once again) I will not be one of them.

## Bitter Sweets

One of the most adventurous publishers in the UK must be Bitter Lemon Press, who specialise in foreign crime novels in translation. The thrill of discovering a new author is always exciting and well worth the occasional disappointment of a clunky translation or a novel which isn't really a crime novel at all (at least in our cynical culture in Britain).

But it is always a joy to see the Bitter Lemon advance catalogue and in the first half of 2009 they are offering their usual exotic selection.

First up this month is probably the best-known author of crime novels in Spanish, the Cuban Leonardo Padura, famous for his *Havana Quartet* featuring Inspector Mario Conde, who is also the hero of the new novel, *Havana Fever*.



In the coming months, Bitter Lemon will publish an early novel by Dutch bestseller Saskia Noort (*Back To The Coast*) and novels from veteran Belgian crime writer Jef Geeraets (*The Public Prosecutor*) and the even more veteran German novelist Hans Werner Kettenbach (*David's Revenge*).

A new name on me entirely will burst forth in June with what is I think the first novel in English translation from Argentine writer and film director Sergio Bizzio, *Rage*.

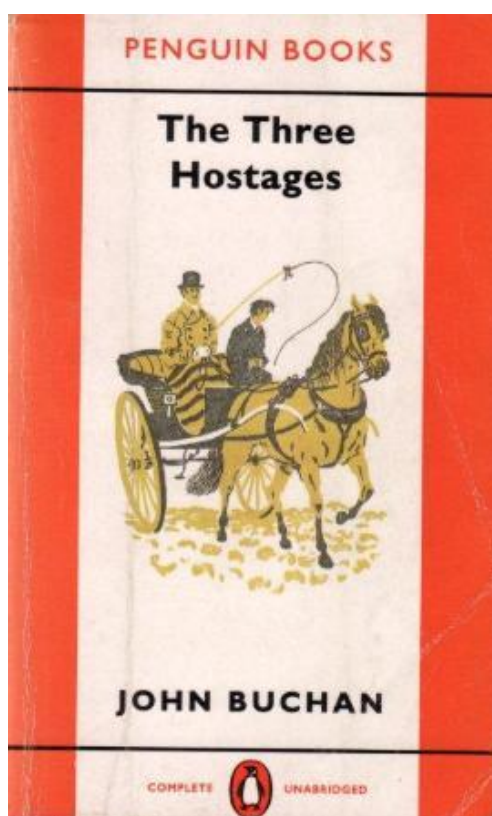
## Clubland Hero

Well over sixty years after his death, John Buchan continues to make news. Not that long ago, a BBC Radio 4 adaptation of *Greenmantle*, with its WW1 Ottoman Empire setting and rumours of an Islamic ‘holy war’, was pulled after the first episode in case its political incorrectness offended modern day sensibilities.

This Boxing Day just gone, we saw a new BBC television version of *The 39 Steps* and the stage play which has been wowing audiences on both sides of the Atlantic is Patrick Barlow’s fond spoof of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1935 film version of the story. (And I highly recommend the latter. For me it was the best night out at the theatre since I saw my old friend and fellow *boulevardier* Johnny Gielgud in *Caesar and Cleopatra*.)

And yet I feel that somehow Buchan’s novels are largely overlooked these days. He had, as we would say today, three series heroes: Dickson McCunn, Sir Edward Leithen and, of course, Richard Hannay, by far the best known. But how many people can claim to have read (or even name) a Hannay thriller other than *39 Steps*?

Naturally, I can or I would not have posed the question. (Do I not know what rhetorical means?) And recently I embarked on a re-read of *Mr Standfast*, *The Island of Sheep* and *The Three Hostages*.



In *Three Hostages*, written in 1924, Hannay finds himself observing the goings-on in a seedy London night club, whose decadence he describes as follows:

...there was a fierce raucous gaiety about it all, an overpowering sense of something which might be vulgar but was also alive and ardent. Round the skirts of the hall was the usual *rastaquoere* crowd of men and women drinking liqueurs and champagne, and mixed with fat Jews and blue-black dagos the flushed faces of boys from

barracks or college who imagined they were seeing life.

Hmm. Perhaps there *is* a reason why some of the books are no longer in print in their original form. I mean, who uses words like “rastaquouère” these days apart from Thomas Pynchon? (It is a French/Latin American term for a social upstart, if you have to ask.)

Oh, and did I mention the casual racism, so sadly prevalent in mysteries of this era?

### Happy Birthday, Barney

One of my most interesting Christmas presents arrived in the Diplomatic Bag from an eastern European capital, but if I told you which one I would have to have you killed. It was a new edition of Douglas Lindsay’s *The Long Midnight of Barney Thomson* specially revised by the author to mark the tenth anniversary of its first publication in 1999.



Long before ‘Dexter’ appeared on the scene, Douglas and his dysfunctional Glasgow barber hero, Barney Thomson, were spoofing the serial-killer genre and scoring some sharp satirical points of the state of modern Scotland. (A fair target, especially if you live and work in eastern Europe.)

Disgracefully discarded by British publishers (and shamefully overlooked whenever anyone mentions the Scottish crime scene or over-uses the cliché ‘Tartan Noir’), Douglas eventually set up Long Midnight Publishing in Inverness to keep the Barney stories in print and develop new titles. His books have always had a loyal following in Germany, a country renowned for its sense of humour and I find it mystifying that they are

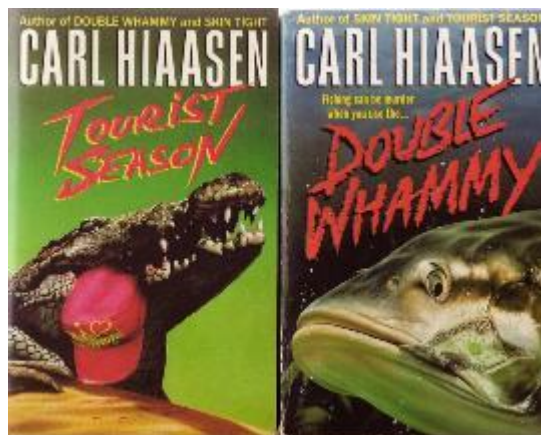
not better known in the UK.

### Transfer Window

Word reaches me that star crime editor David Shelley, who was once briefly – very briefly – my editor in a past life, has tempted the undisputed king of American comedy crime Carl Hiaasen to his Sphere imprint at publisher Little,Brown in a two-book deal starting as of 2010.

It must be twenty years ago that I was introduced to Carl Hiaasen's anarchic and violent (but always ecologically sound) Florida thrillers and his early novels are still, I maintain, master-classes in the art of comic timing. It was Maxim Jakubowski, of London's *Murder One* (then in Denmark Street) who first recommend him to me, but the first one I bought was a Futura/Macdonald paperback for 99p from a remainder bin in a branch of Littlewoods on Oxford Street.

The book was *Tourist Season* which I devoured immediately and lent to a good friend. Naturally, I never saw it again, but what really annoyed me was that Macdonald, who had brought Hiaasen to the UK market in 1987 had seemingly dumped him so unceremoniously.



In 1988, Mysterious Press (the UK version with Hutchinson) published *Double Whammy* (still my personal favourite) but it was not until 1990 that Pan Macmillan started to push him that he began to get reviewed and noticed. I remember one particularly heated – I say ‘heated’ but I really mean ‘slightly warm’ – meeting of the Crime Writers Association where a young editor from Macmillan had to face bluff and bluster criticism from certain quarters about the black humour in the books. One specific source of complaint was the use of a stuffed Marlin as a murder weapon, although most readers thought it very funny. (Though not as funny as the infamous rabid pit-bull scene!)

In Britain, excellent reviews, press coverage and sales followed and at some point the Hiaasen canon transferred to publishers Transworld and now comes his fifth move, to Little,Brown.

In one of those curious plot twists that real life throws up, Carl's first British publisher, Macdonald/Futura was bought in 1992 by none other than Little,Brown. Funny old world, eh?

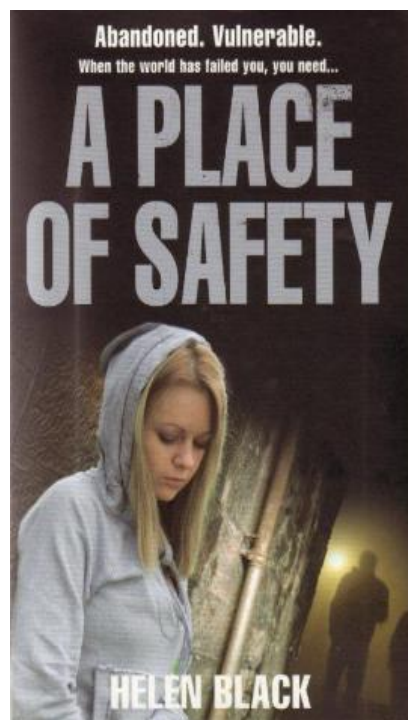
Another American author moving house over here is Alafair Burke, who has forsaken her father James Lee Burke's imprint Orion for the launch in February of *City of Fear* by Avon books, a division of HarperCollins. I

may be wrong, but I thought this book is known as *Angel's Tip* in the USA, a title which I feel has a certain ring to it.



**Familiarity...**

Just before Christmas I received a copy of Helen Black's second novel this year *A Place of Safety*, published by Avon, and featuring her lawyer heroine Lilly Valentine.



I know that through age and alcohol, most of my brain cells have gone missing-in-action, so I no longer rely on entirely on my memory but I was sure I there was something familiar about this book. It wasn't the title, which has been used both by Caroline 'Midsomer Murders' Graham and for a Trish Maguire novel written by Natasha Cooper, the favourite author (nay, idol) of my factotum Waldo.

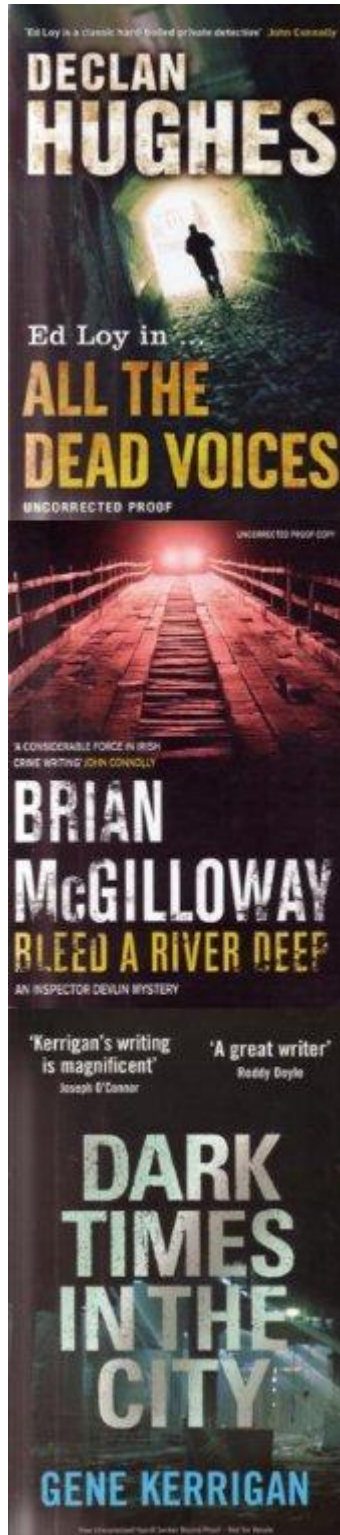
No, it was not the title. Perhaps it was the name Lilly (or Lily as the accompanying press release has it) Valentine which rang a faint bell, for surely it was the name of a forceful character from some literary work I had read in the past. Unable to bring the character to mind, I resorted to Googling on the jolly old interweb and instantly my search was rewarded, for Lilly Valentine is none other than the generously endowed, Canadian born porn star who also goes under the name 'Katalinka'.

Isn't modern technology wonderful?

<b>Irish Eyes Smiling</b>
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April should be a good time to be Irish (assuming there isn't a rugby match then) as three publishers go head-to-head and unleash their Irish crime writers, who all come highly recommended.





John Murray launch the fourth Ed Loy private eye mystery, *All The Dead Voices* by Declan Hughes, which comes highly praised by John Connolly and Michael Connelly. Macmillan publishes the third Inspector Devlin story, *Bleed A River Deep* by Brian McGilloway, which is again highly rated by John Connolly and also Ken Bruen. And Harvill Secker will release *Dark Times In The City* by novelist Gene Kerrigan, who is a new writer to me, but not to Joseph O'Connor and Roddy Doyle, who blurb him enthusiastically.

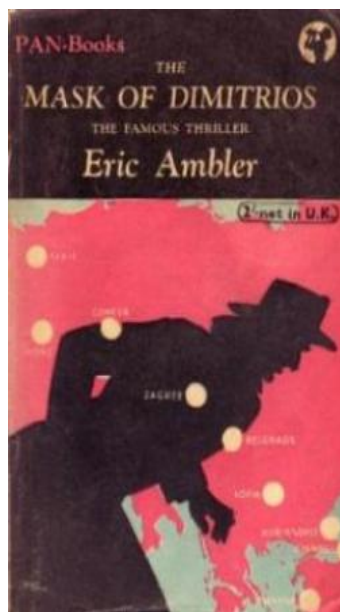
## Fantasy Pub Quiz

In my Ultimate Fantasy Pub Quiz on crime fiction, one of the questions would be: Where would you have found the director of *The Maltese Falcon* and the author of *The Mask of Dimitrios* working in common cause? The answer would of course have been in Italy in 1943 where the lottery of war threw together brilliant American film-maker John Huston (smoking, left) and brilliant English thriller writer Eric Ambler (centre).



I am utterly delighted to learn that those splendidly perky people at Penguin are to reissue five of Ambler's early, trail-blazing thrillers this year to mark the centenary of the author's birth in the London borough of Charlton in 1909. Soon after his death in 1998, it was discovered that none of his books were in print in the UK – surely a national disgrace – and there is no doubt that there is a bit of a revival in good spy writing going on at the moment.

There is also a considerable buzz among those readers who prefer their spy fiction intelligent and well-written over the proposed covers for the reissues which I am told will take an atmospheric black-and-white approach.



My favourite Ambleresque cover from the library here at Ripster Hall is the 1949 Pan edition of *Mask of Dimitrios* (called, I think, *A Coffin for Dimitrios* in the USA). Those were the days, when you could get a chop supper, a good bottle of claret and a damned good thriller and still have change from a ten bob note!

### Busy People

It is well-known that publishers are busy people who, these days, may well take anything from three to thirteen months (you know who you are) to reply to a letter. Now it seems that literary agents are equally overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work piled upon them.

Here at the Ripster Hall School of Creative Crime Writing and Guerilla Warfare (a summer school I run for tax purposes), one student recently approached a well-known literary agent, by email, asking humbly and politely if it would be permissible to submit a manuscript for the agency's consideration.

My student received an answer by return! Unfortunately it was a computer-generated email reply which warned the sender that the usual response time of the agency in *opening* unsolicited emails (not manuscripts) was now *three months.....*

### Damaged Heroes

It seems that publishers have an insatiable appetite for religious conspiracy, globe-trotting thrillers (and to hell with the global warming mugwumps) and 'damaged' heroes.

Avon have two out in the first half of this year. First comes *The Domsday Prophecy* by Scott Mariani which features "Ben Hope, a damaged former SAS operative haunted by a past tragedy" and which "races across the US, Greece and Jerusalem".

And then in May comes *The Secret Cardinal* by Tom Grace which introduces Nolan Kilkenny, "a damaged ex-Navy Seal caught up in international conspiracies" which "races from the grandeur of the Vatican to the arid steppes of China."

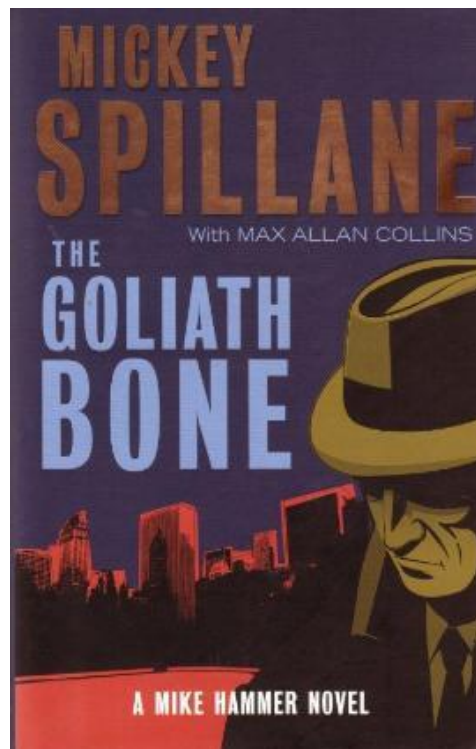
Avon's most popular acquisition, dare I say it, will be that of award-winning American Laura Lippman with a new thriller *Life Sentences* in March.



Famous for her Baltimore-set novels and one of the hits of the Bouchercon held there recently (which I could not attend due to a misunderstanding with something called Homeland Security), I discover that Laura Lippman is married to David Simon, the author of that magnificent book *Homicide: Life On The Street*.

**I, the Jury is out**

Two years after his death, Mickey Spillane has a new Mike Hammer novel out which, given that it's Mickey Spillane, probably doesn't sound that remarkable.



*The Goliath Bone* was started and planned out by Spillane before his death and completed by his long-time friend and collaborator Max Allan Collins, who is probably most famous for the graphic novel *Road to Perdition* but is such a prolific author in the mystery genre (as well as other genres) that he is shaping up to be the John Creasey of American crime writing.

Is the world ready for a revival of Spillane's own particular brand of blood and thunder, which seemed so shocking and so sexually explicit fifty years ago? I, the jury, is out on that one.

#### Right said Fred

Fans of the multi-award winning crime fiction of my fellow archaeologist Frédérique Audouin-Rouzeau (better known as Fred Vargas) will be delighted with the news that Harvill Secker are publishing, in February, the English debut of *The Chalk Circle Man*, her first novel to feature the slightly enigmatic (and often infuriating) detective Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg.

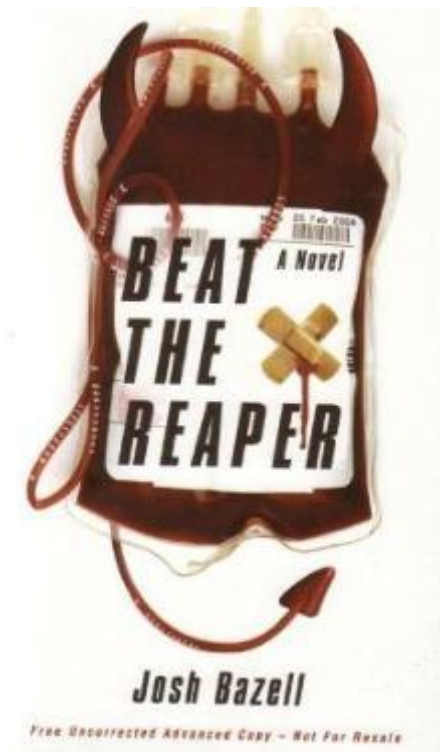


Although thought of as something of a newcomer on the crime scene here, Fred Vargas' Adamsberg books have been wowing the intellectuals of the Left Bank since this, the first, was published as *L'Homme aux cercles bleus* in Paris in 1996.

#### Reaping the benefits

Proof copies of American Josh Bazell's debut thriller *Beat the Reaper*, to be published by William Heinemann in February, come with a greeting from publishing director Jason Arthur which issues the challenge: *When was the last time you read a thriller with footnotes?*

Well last week actually, when I re-read Len Deighton's classic *Horse Under Water* and then of course there was the Gold Dagger winning *The Athenian Murders* by Jose Carlos Somoza where the crux of the entire plot is revealed through the footnotes. And then.... I could go on but I won't, for the book looks like it could be great fun.



One thing that is slightly worrying is that in the accompanying publicity blurb, the novel is compared not to other bestsellers but to films and television shows such as *Goodfellas*, *The Sopranos*, *Grosse Pointe Blank* and *Grey's Anatomy*. It even describes the book as “like *ER* directed by Quentin Tarantino” although that isn’t far-fetched, as he did direct an episode back in 1995, but I still get the sneaking suspicion that this novel is being pitched at an audience which *watches* but doesn’t necessarily *read*.

### Literary Heavyweights

I am not alone in fearing for the future of reading, for my concern is shared by none other than that one-man thriller-industry James Patterson, whose very notes to the milkman (if they have milkmen in Florida) are read more widely than anything I have ever scratched with a stylus on a wax tablet.

Louise Campbell of Random House, Patterson’s new UK publisher, tells me that the thrill-*meister* himself will be visiting the UK in April to launch the *James Patterson Extreme Reading Challenge* to encourage young boys and their fathers/carers to discover together the pleasures of the printed page. This initiative, very much a personal campaign of the bestselling author, will be run in partnership with the National Literary Trust and more information can be found on [www.readingchampions.org.uk](http://www.readingchampions.org.uk).

And before the snooty “quality” press dismiss this as a publicity or self-promotional stunt, I would point out that Mr Patterson, who is the most-borrowed author from Britain’s public libraries, is possibly the last author in the world who needs to promote himself. In fact he is one of many mystery and thriller writers who, through a variety of stratagems (Quick Reads, the BBC’s RAW campaign, National Book Day and so on) give their time and energy to promoting not their own books, but *reading* in general and such initiatives are to be applauded.

## Opening Hook

A good dramatic opening, or ‘hook’, is a pre-requisite to any action thriller and the opening to Tom Bale’s *Skin and Bones*, published by Preface, is certainly that. In fact to anyone who remembers the awful massacre at Hungerford some years back, it will have double the impact as a lone gunman goes on a killing spree in a quiet Sussex village.



There is, of course, some sort of twisted logic behind the seemingly random slaughter and, spookily, the lone nut gunman is not actually alone. And not all his victims are dead, for there is a survivor.

It is quite a stunning opening to what I believe is Tom Bales’ first thriller; though it is not the author’s first novel for as David Harrison, he made his crime debut with *Sins of the Father*, published by Creme De La Crime a couple of years ago.

## Last (Restraining) Orders

For legal reasons (in that the Editor has threatened to do something very illegal to me), I will no longer be making mention of those publishers who no longer invite me to their launch parties or sumptuous “meet the author” banquets.

Apparently certain publishers are sensitive to any discussion of such matters and, of course, their wishes must be respected, so I shall be making every effort not to mention them.

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