

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley

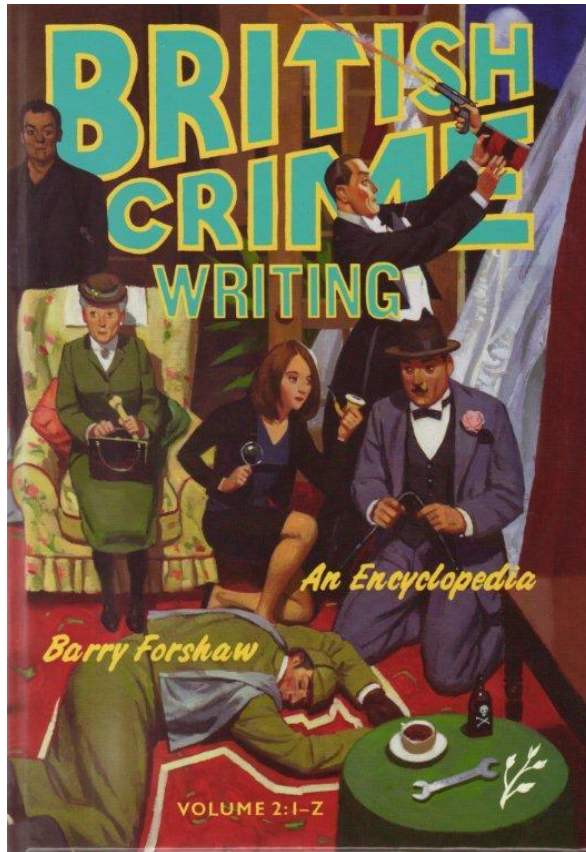


### National Treasure

At last it is official. I am a National Treasure. I know this because Professor Barry Forshaw's definitive (and almost completely accurate) *British Crime Fiction: An Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Publishing, 2 Vols; £90 the brace) says so.

An overly generous entry (pages 651-653 in Volume 2) written by the astute Mark Campbell, whom I do not know from Adam (though the cheque, as they say, is in the post) concludes: *In the crime-writing community, Mike Ripley is something of a treasure.*

How kind.



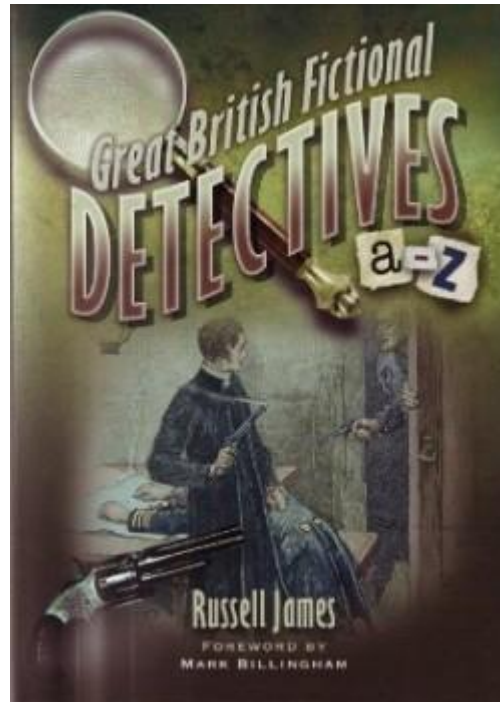
The Encyclopedia, even the volume I am not featured (much) in, is a truly magisterial work and only the pedants will notice the absence of thirty or forty British crime writers who really should have been included, and also the exclusion of that other national treasure, Lord Jeffrey Archer. (And why an entry on *Get Carter* but not *The Italian Job*? And where, oh where, is *Edge of Darkness*?)

Bravely, and I suspect uniquely, Professor Forshaw also includes entries on many crime fiction *editors*, those shadowy figures who normally prefer to stay out of the limelight (although sadly he does not include the late Elizabeth Walter of Collins Crime Club, or Miles Huddleston of Constable). However, this part of the Encyclopedia will be an invaluable resource for aspiring authors who will now know exactly to whom to send their precious manuscripts.

Many congratulations are due to Professor Forshaw and his army of contributors (numbering over 50 though the late Susannah Yager seems to go un-credited) for a job well done.

I look forward to the second edition with anticipation.

And a further boost to my ego, were such a thing at all necessary, came with the arrival of Russell James' illustrated guide *Great British Fictional Detectives* (published by Remember When, an imprint of Pen & Sword Books and a snip at £19.99).



Not only does my fictional hero Angel grace its pages (pp 45-46 to be exact), but so does a rare photograph of myself and to boot, editor Russell has kindly knocked a entire decade off my writing life by stating that the Angel series began in 1998.

Tragically, as the book covers fictional detectives, something which Russell's own novels are famous for not having (as he concentrates on criminals), I do not believe any of his own books feature in this excellent guide to the genre. Which is a pity, as they are well-worth seeking out.

As indeed are some of the great fictional detectives not included. There appears to have been no space for Anthony Gethryn, the long-serving (four decades) detective created by Philip Macdonald; nor for Quintilian Dalrymple, the futuristic Edinburgh detective of Paul Johnston's delicious satires; nor for Francesca Wilson and policeman husband John McLeish, from the books of Janet Neel; nor, sadly, for Inspector Frederick Troy in John Lawton's brilliant "backwards" series; nor Andrew Martin's creation of Jim Stringer, "Steam Detective". I would also have liked to see a more prominent mention of Detective Chief Superintendent Lockhart from *No Hiding Place*, the television series which ran for 235 episodes from 1959, was cancelled in 1965 and then famously reinstated following a public outcry.

There are, however, two and a half pages dedicated to Inspector Maigret, who qualifies as a "Great British Fictional Detective" because....well, I don't really know.

That said, *Great British Fictional Detectives* is the best stab at an illustrated guide to the subject since *Whodunit?*, edited by Harry Keating in 1982 and contains details of several sleuths I had not heard of, many I had forgotten about and, I admit, a few I wished I could forget, in an attempt to cover crime novels since Dickens and radio and television since Sexton Blake and 'PC 49'.

One thing does niggle, however, in that both Barry Forshaw and Russell James make mention of the 1956 film version of Margery Allingham's brilliant thriller *The Tiger In The Smoke* without noting the fact that the most infamous thing about it was that it dumped entirely the character of her famous detective Albert Campion!

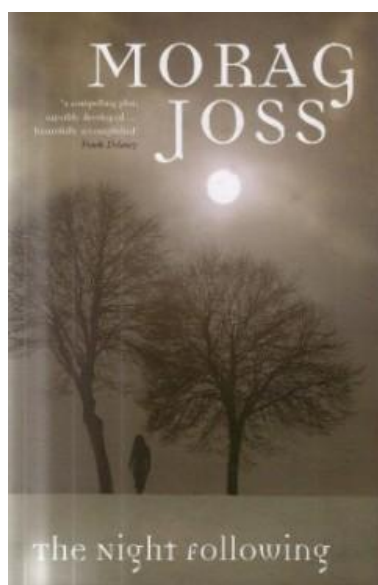


### Happy Birthday Ed

The 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Edgar Allen Poe will be, I am sure, lavishly celebrated in April in New York with the award of the 2009 ‘Edgars’ presented by the Mystery Writers of America, an organisation of which I was once a member until they tightened security. (And I hear that the MWA’s incoming President is to be none other than Lee Child, possibly the organisation’s first Aston Villa supporting leader.)

Owing to a dreadful misunderstanding involving various off-shore accounts and something called ‘sub-prime lending’, I cannot of course be present in New York though I would have liked to have been there to support some very worthy short-listed pieces of work. In the screenplay section, for instance, I would have raised a glass of Guinness in the cause of the wonderful and blackly comic film *In Bruges* and probably a tooth-mug of gin in support of Kate Summerscale’s superb *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* in the ‘Best Fact Crime’ category, a brilliant book which missed out in the British Dagger awards last year.

But I would save the champagne to toast the candidacy of Morag Joss’ *The Night Following*, the solitary British hope in the ‘Best Novel’ section.



I am ashamed to say that it has taken the Americans to pick out and highlight this fabulous novel which, inexplicably, slipped under the radar of the crime scene in the UK when published by Duckworth late last year and hopefully the Edgar short-listing will give the book the higher profile it so definitely deserves.

*The Night Following* will almost certainly be labelled as a classic example of the British ‘psychological suspense’ school and comparisons inevitably made with Minette Walters and Ruth Rendell. For once such comparisons would not be misplaced, for the book really is that good. Solid, rural middle-class, middle-English lives are disrupted by the discovery of an adulterous affair and then a shocking hit-and-run fatal accident. The characters begin to unravel before our eyes – and what is more, they do so before their own eyes, which is what gives the book its power and generates an all-pervading atmosphere of doom. This is not a mystery about big crimes and its narration through multiple points of view will not be to the more conservative taste, but it is a wonderfully well-written examination of emotional loss, betrayal and psychological disintegration.

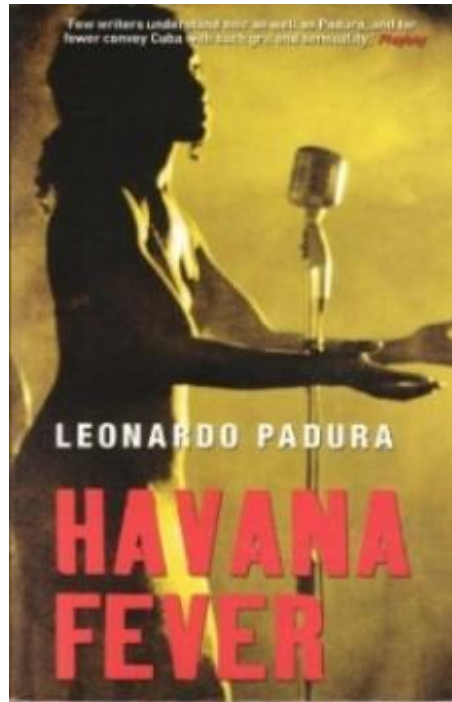
### Havana Noir

It is always a pleasure to break bread with those charming and cosmopolitan publishers Bitter Lemon and especially a treat to be invited up to London’s West End (well, west of Holborn) to a lunch in honour of visiting Cuban writer Leonardo Padura. Even better, the lunch offered the opportunity to renew an old friendship with veteran MP Gerald Kaufman, who is perhaps better known as the crime fiction reviewer for *The Scotsman*. (Seen here with Leonardo and Bitter Lemon boss Francois von Hurter).



Leonardo’s new novel *Havana Fever* marks the very welcome return of his hero from the ‘Havana Quartet’ novels, Mario Conde, even though he is now ‘retired’ from police work and scratching a living dealing in antique books.

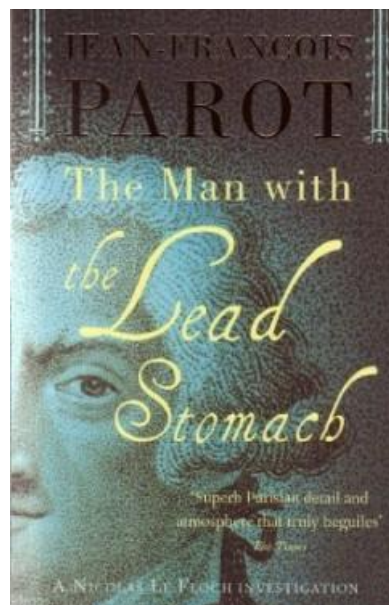
During one particular deal, buying a library from an impoverished pair of former (pre-Castro) *aristos* down on their luck – described in a wonderfully sympathetic scene – Conde turns up an ancient press clipping about a famous bolero singer from the 1950s who disappeared mysteriously. Immediately, Conde’s investigative appetites are awakened – as indeed are all his other appetites as the deal’s profits go on a single, spectacular, blow-out meal.



Padura doesn't hide the shortcomings and shortages of modern Cuban life, but neither does he try and apologise for them and his obvious love for, and pride in, Cuban literature (the detail of which will be lost on ignorant non-Hispanists like me) shines through.

#### Parot Sketch

An early contender for strangest title of the year must go to the second Commissioner Le Floch mystery set in the Paris of 1761. Written by French historian Jean-Francois Parot, *The Man With The Lead Stomach* is published in English by those charming people at Gallic Books and is officially supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs through a programme run by the Cultural Department of the French Embassy in London.



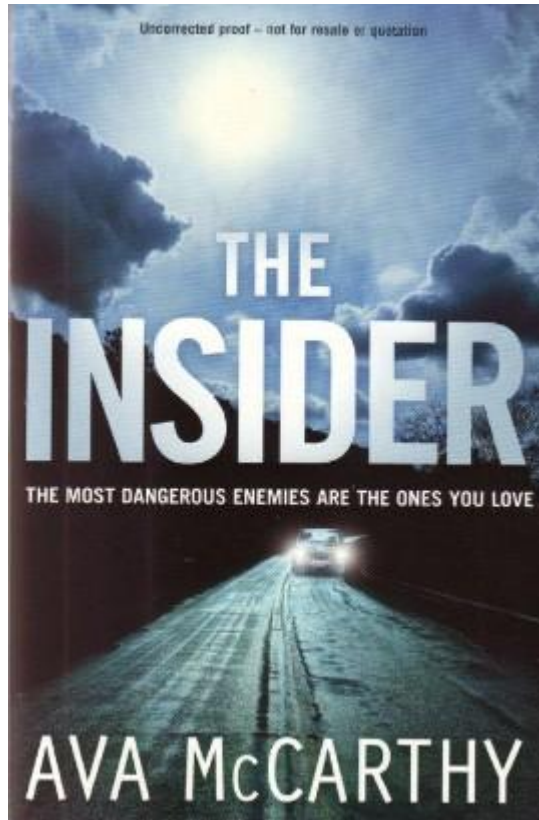
I only mention this in the hope that there will be a launch party and that I will be invited, for the canapés in the French Embassy are truly wonderful, or so Professor Barry Forshaw, Francophile and expert in publishers' lunches, assures me.

### Irish Eyes

I estimate that in the two weeks following St Patrick's Day, there will be at least four new crime novels by Irish authors published in the UK. The latest to be announced is a debut thriller from the delightful Ava McCarthy, who as well as working on the Stock Exchange, also holds degrees in Physics and something called "Nuclear Medicine" though I have to admit I have no idea what that is.



*The Insider* (for legal reasons I cannot name the publisher) is described as "an amazingly accomplished and page-turning debut" and introduces a heroine named Harry (who has a father named Sal) on the track of twelve million missing Euros.



The publisher's hype confidently predicts "global success" for this first novel which introduces "Harry Martinez, a sexy, sassy new heroine for the *Casino Royale* generation" (my italics).

Now I have no idea what "for the Casino Royale generation" means (and cynics may say they should have waited for *Quantum of Solace* before rushing to hyperbole) and so I thought I would consult my old friend Pierce Brosnan.



Sadly, he had no idea either but we agreed that we are both of the '*Goldfinger* generation' should such a thing exist, as we both saw the film in its first week of release (though not actually together – me in Cambridge, him in Wimbledon).\*

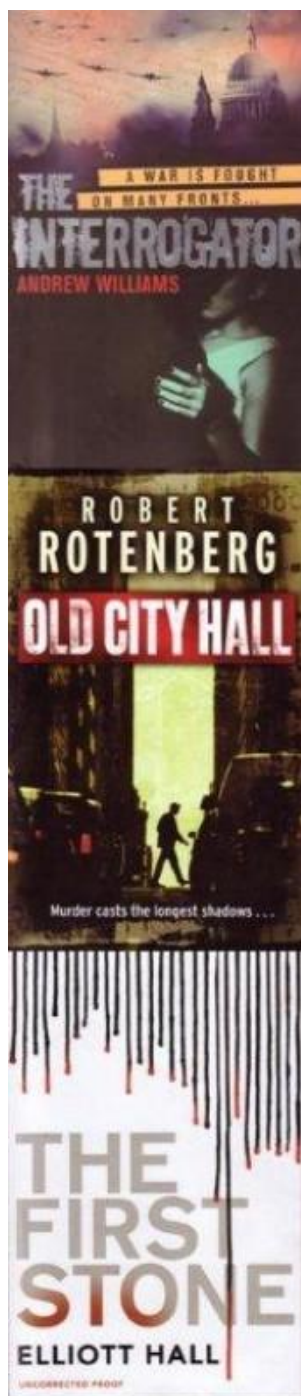
[\* This is a true fact and worthy of note as one of the few to ever appear in this column.]



## Origins of the Species

Those jolly magnificent people at publisher John Murray are certainly doing their bit to ensure the survival of the crime and thriller genres, despite having a busy year celebrating one of their rather well-known authors, Charles Darwin.

I guess there will be around 60 debut crime novels published in the UK in 2009 (out of 600 titles in total). John Murray can proudly boast three already and it's only March! They are all, rather worryingly, also rather good.



*The Interrogator* is a World War II thriller centred on the Battle of the Atlantic and the workings of British Naval Intelligence. Not only is this a gripping thriller, by BBC documentary maker Andrew Williams, but is confidently researched and cheekily written enough to include a cameo role for that real life Naval Intelligence officer of the day, a certain Ian Fleming.

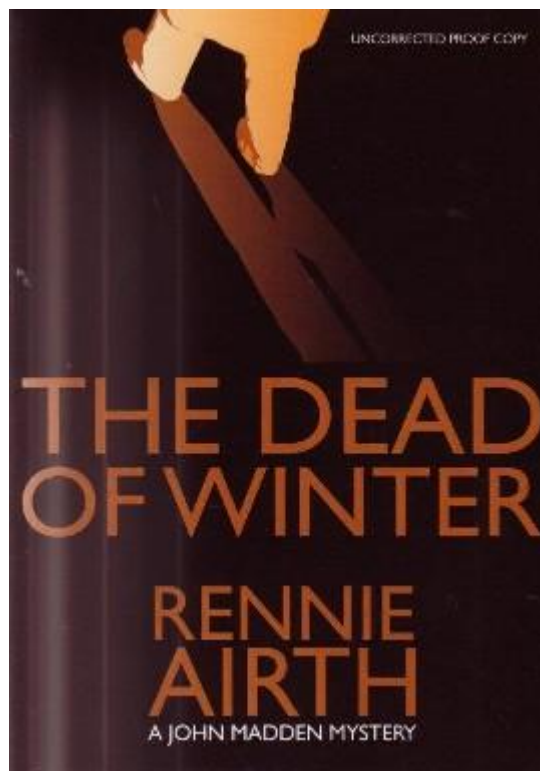
Highly-tipped in the awards stakes this year is Canadian Robert Rotenberg's *Old City Hall*. Part legal-thriller, part murder investigation, Rotenberg (himself a lawyer) really gets under the skin of that fine city of Toronto and the many ethnic strata which make up the population of modern Canada. It is already being said that he does for Toronto "what Ian Rankin does for Edinburgh". Does that mean that somewhere in downtown Toronto there is an Oxford Bar where the prices have just gone up?

Coincidentally, the debut author of *The First Stone*, Elliot Hall, was born near Toronto although now lives in London and his novel is in many ways the most intriguing of new John Murray crop. *First Stone* is a slightly futuristic (hopefully very futuristic thanks to the election of Mr O'Bama) vision of an America run by Christian extremists. Houston has been nuked (by Islamic terrorists?) and America has embarked on a Holy War in the Middle East, one of the damaged survivors of which, Felix Strange, now operates as a reluctant private eye in a New York where the religious thought police hold sway and anti-gay riots in Greenwich Village are positively encouraged.

If this sounds heavy-going and apocalyptic, it isn't, for Strange is a very sympathetic hero, who does what private eyes do best by stirring the hornets' nest (and these are some pretty whacky hornets) and a fabulous sense of pace is engendered from page one. This is a very impressive first thriller indeed. More are promised; or if they're not, should be.

#### At Last

Rarely do I get to a chance to say that here is a book I have genuinely waited five years for; but now I can, so I will.



Rennie Airth's third thriller featuring Inspector John Madden, *The Dead of Winter* is due from Macmillan on 1<sup>st</sup> May, but I now have my hands on a proof and so don't really care about you lot out there.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about, you should rush to read the other two books in this gripping historical series (the new one is set in 1944), the magnificent *River of Darkness* (from 1999) and *The Blood-Dimmed Tide* (2004). Only then will you get some idea of what you've been missing and find yourself, like me,

in need of another 'fix'. However, mere mortals like you will have to wait until May. I'm off to the potting shed with my proof copy right now.

### Return of the Rawlings

Fans of the Queen of Georgian Mysteries, Deryn Lake, will be delighted to hear of the return of her apothecary hero John Rawlings in his thirteenth mystery, *Death and the Black Pyramid*, published by those modest and unassuming publishers Severn House in April.

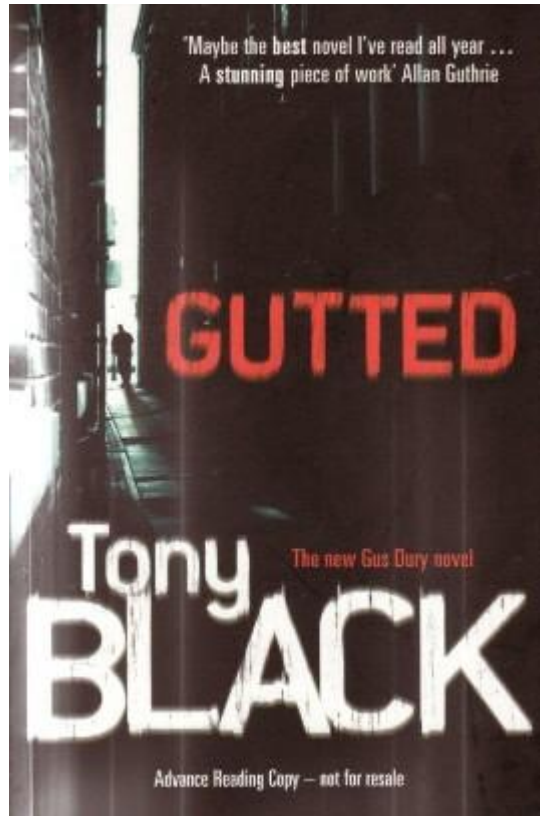


I have known Deryn Lake for some years and often offer her advice on the whereabouts of the latest social events. Indeed I once had the pleasure of introducing her to the Hip Hop scene in one of London's famous subterranean youth clubs, which Ms Lake rather wittily compared to the eighth (or was it the ninth?) level of Hell.

### Tartan Noiristas

The explosion of gritty, often ultra-violent, *noir* writing which has burst forth from Scotland in the last few years has been well documented and it is clear that the practitioners of the school of tartan noir intend to stick together.

One of the latest arrivals on the scene is Tony Black, whose second novel *Gutted* features "a truly memorable character – an alcoholic, embittered ex-journalist". Which must be unique; I mean, who, outside of fiction, would think that an embittered alcoholic journalist could actually exist?



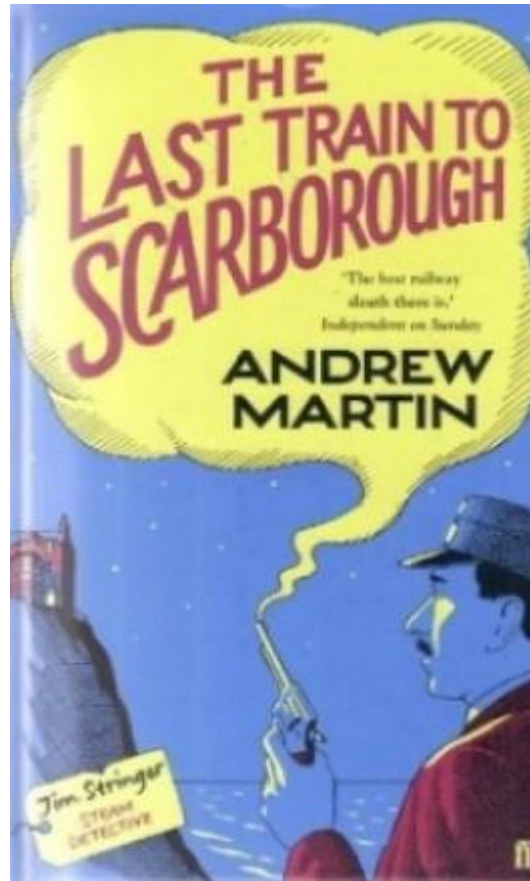
*Gutted* is published by those progressive publishers Preface in June this year, but advance reading proofs were circulated *in the first week of January* with an endorsement from fellow tartan noirist Allan Guthrie saying “Maybe the best novel I’ve read all year” which is rather a presumptuous thing to say before Twelfth Night.

It could be of course that Mr Guthrie read *Gutted* in proof in 2008, in which case it might well have been the best novel he read *last* year, although one is then sorely tempted to suggest he should get out more.

### Trainspotting

I do hope that Fabulous Faber author Andrew Martin is undeterred by the unfair trousering his Ellis Peters Award short-listed *Death on a Branch Line* received in a recent edition of the American magazine *Deadly Pleasures*. Such a grumpy review is unlikely to dent the prospects of his new ‘Jim Stringer, Steam Detective’ adventure, *The Last Train To Scarborough* published this month.

Whilst the title doesn’t quite have the ring of *Last Train to Clarksville* (and the cover is a tad *TinTin*-ish, though that’s no bad thing), his sixth historical mystery set in the heyday of steam trains (in this case 1914) will only cement his growing UK fan base particularly, I suspect, in Yorkshire where the natives are known for their excellent taste in crime fiction.



The charming and debonair Andrew Martin is absolutely nobody's idea of the average anorak-wearing trainspotter, as anyone who saw his excellent BBC documentary *Between The Lines*, which looked at railways in film and literature (featuring thriller heroes Richard Hannay and Jason Bourne among others) can testify. I myself was particularly taken with the film, for it featured an interview with distinguished economic historian Dr Terry Gourvish, now of the LSE, who was once my university tutor. It was pleasing to see that Terry had finally recovered from those exhausting tutorials we shared all those years ago.

#### Criticwatch

His untimely death and the posthumous publication of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* along with the ecstatic, almost drooling, reviews it received, made Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson a hallowed, virtually untouchable figure in crime writing. Now the sequel, and second of three books, *The Girl Who Played With Fire* is out in the UK and garnering slightly less reverential reviews.

Only one critic, though, has dared to come out and put his finger on the main flaw of this staggering trilogy, the fact that it is staggeringly *long*. Writing in that once-great newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, that knowledgeable and discerning, not to mention brave, reviewer Jeremy Jehu observes: "*The sequel's bulk seems justified only by an author's passion for a fictional creation so grand as to make Dorothy L. Sayers' love affair with Lord Peter Wimsey look like a casual fling.*"

If this sounds like sacrilege to any sensitive souls out there, it is probably a good thing that they did not read the *Times Literary Supplement* (for few people do) on 11<sup>th</sup> February, for in it, Sean O'Brien, who I am told is a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, really goes to town on a few crime writing idols.

The new John Grisham novel he describes as "like reading toothpaste without the unbearable excitement" whilst Alex Kava's latest "lacks any idea of voice or atmosphere". Professor O'Brien also takes a swipe at Dennis Lehane ("bleeds life from the plot and most of the characters"), Patricia Cornwell ("who now seems to find the

English language inadequate to her requirements”) and Dean Koonz, whose new novel “opens in a world which is perhaps only visible from an airport bookstall”.

Neither do newcomers Tom Rob Smith or Tom Bale come off well, nor indeed the entire “eurocrime” (as he calls it) school of Scandinavian crime fiction where “glacial pace seems to be used to ward off accusations of banality, but a little of this goes a long way.”

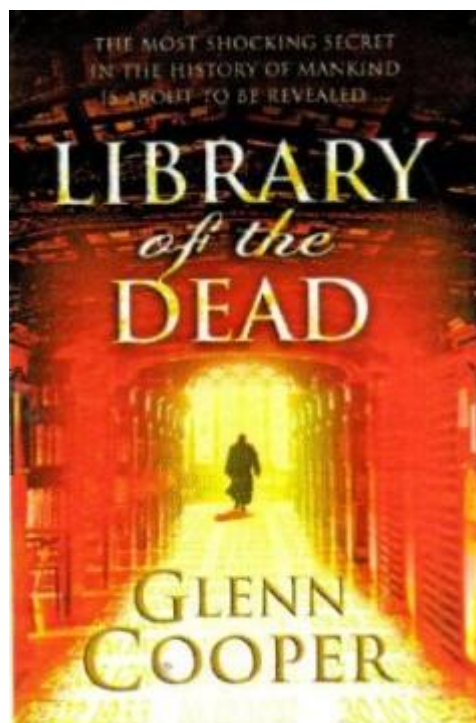
Whilst I am tempted to admit he might have a point there (about Scandinavian mysteries), I cannot think – in the course of 20 years reviewing crime fiction – when I was ever given so many column inches in which to trash so many books and authors.

The article has inspired me to have some T-shirts printed (a limited edition) bearing the legend: SO MUCH BILE, SO LITTLE SPACE.

### Name dropper

‘I have always hated name-droppers’ I once said to my old friend Gore Vidal during a game of Cat o’ Nine Tails in the Snug of Harry’s Bar in Venice. Anthony Burgess, who was scoring for us, immediately agreed.

Yet it is a fact of life that publishers tend to drop names with gay abandon when they attempt to launch a new author. For example, my proof copy of the forthcoming paperback original *Library of the Dead*, published by the Arrow imprint of Random House, has a whole inside-cover full of recommendations by high profile notables within the genre, all praising the debut author, Glenn Cooper even though his c.v. hardly seems to need shoring up as he is a Harvard graduate in archaeology, also has a medical degree, has been the chairman and CEO of a biotechnology company and is a scriptwriter and film producer with his own production company. Fortunately for us, he has now found time to turn novelist.



*Library of the Dead* comes with endorsements from such Famous Names as: Rob Waddington (“a complete page-turner”) the Sales Director of Cornerstone; Oliver Malcolm (“If every hotel, nursing home and hospital in Britain replaced their copies of the Bible with Glenn Cooper’s *Library of the Dead*, we would be on the verge of spiritual revolution!”) the rather restrained Sales Manager of Cornerstone; Claire Round (“Perhaps the most

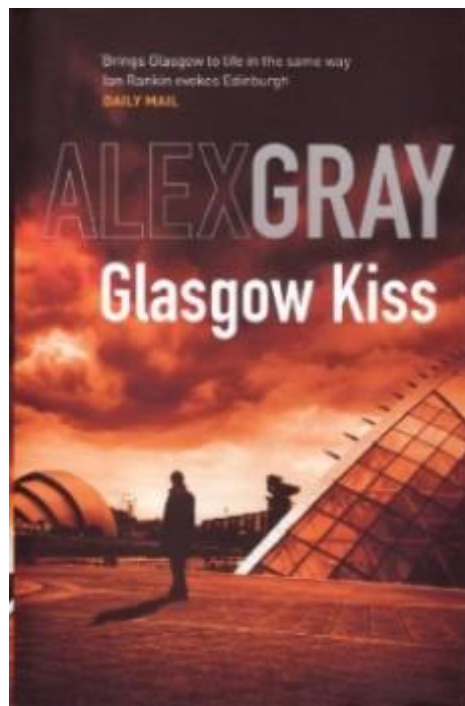
exciting thriller I've ever read") the Marketing Director of Cornerstone; and Adam Humphrey ("Extraordinary is really the only word for it"), the Senior Marketing Manager at Cornerstone.

Now the more astute reader will have noticed that all these enthusiasts for Glenn Cooper's book represent something called 'Cornerstone'. Would this, by any chance, be Cornerstone Publicity – part of the Random House publishing group? I think we should be told.

[As an afterthought, I would pick up of one of those endorsements and agree entirely that if every hotel, nursing home and hospital replaced their Bibles with one of my novels, say, *Angels Unaware*, then I would certainly be "on the verge of a spiritual revolution". I would, I suspect, be on the verge of upgrading all my spirituous intake, starting with a change from Jack Daniels to the most excellent Woodford Reserve Distiller's Select or even Blanton's Original Single Barrel. I mention this only to give American authors a few ideas on how best to elicit a glowing recommendation from this particular column.]

However, one of the best examples of name dropping (and possibly backhanded compliments) surely comes from publisher Hodder who have taken to describing their American author Brad Meltzer as "*the thinking man's Dan Brown*".

And yet, however tempting it may be, one should not always blame publishers for the press and crime fiction reviewers are occasionally prone to name-dropping. Take, for example, the sixth novel by Glaswegian crime writer Alex Gray, the wonderfully-titled *Glasgow Kiss* published by Sphere this month.



The book, which features Alex's hero DCI William Lorimer comes with notable comparisons from the press such as '*Brings Glasgow to life in the same way Ian Rankin evokes Edinburgh*' (Daily Mail); '*Gray more than holds her own against the likes of Rankin...*' (Daily Express); '*Glasgow's answer to Ian Rankin*' (Good Book Guide); and '*DCI Lorimer...a real threat to Inspector Rebus*' (Glasgow Herald).

I wonder if Ian Rankin's ears are burning and that the old codger Rebus must be relieved that he has hung up his warrant card.

### Proud to be British (Council)

Whilst idly surfing the jolly old interweb, I chanced, as you do, upon the site of The British Council and an article entitled *The Politics of Writing Crime* by my old and distinguished friend Denise Mina, who is also a Scottish person.

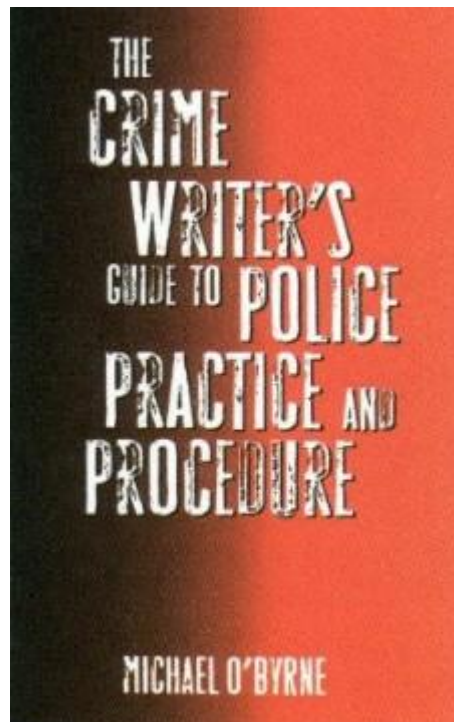
Written, I think, four or five years ago, the article discusses the position of crime writing vis-a-vis “literary writing” in an intelligent and most engaging way and suggests that one way to tell ‘crime’ and ‘literary’ writers apart is to observe them drinking:

A visit to the bar at any crime event will tell you that crime writers are very work-man like about writing: no one talks about literature, metaphysics or who they’re reading at the moment. The talk is all of deadlines, how much money we’re making and where we got to visit on our latest promotional trip.

I see Denise’s point even though in my experience, talk at the bar revolves around: deadlines smugly met, how much money everybody *else* is making, how the hell you *get* a promotional trip out of your publisher (or The British Council), and, most importantly, who is buying the next round? Still, Denise’s essay is an interesting one and required reading for any serious student of the genre. It can be found on: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-matters-state-mina.htm>.

### Job Done

It is too late for all would-be and many existing crime writers to call on Santa Claus, but the Easter Bunny may still be approachable, for surely a copy of *The Crime Writer’s Guide To Police Practice and Procedure* has to be high up their wish lists.



Certainly the author of this guide, published next month by Robert Hale, has the perfect qualifications to write it. Michael O’Byrne joined the police as a teenager and has served with the Royal Hong Kong Police, the Met and Thames Valley Police before ending his active service as Chief Constable of Bedfordshire.



## Ripsterpedia

Encouraged by the success of those gurus of crime and mystery fiction, Professor Barry Forshaw and former chairman of the Crime Writers Association Russell James, I have decided to set down the distilled wisdom I have acquired over the past nine or ten decades and write *The Compleet Ripsterpedia*.

I intend to mention every crime novel and mystery author who ever lived in the world/Space, EVER, in alphabetical and then chronological order or perhaps both simultaneously. This mammoth undertaking will be published in six volumes at an estimated cost of £1,120 each when published by Grabber & Grabber in (approximately) 2030.

Advance subscriptions can be placed now to my appointed charity – Caring for Authors Suffering Hardship, to whom all cheques should be made payable, although to save on keystrokes, just the initials C.A.S.H. would be perfectly acceptable.

***Toodles!***

***The Ripster***