

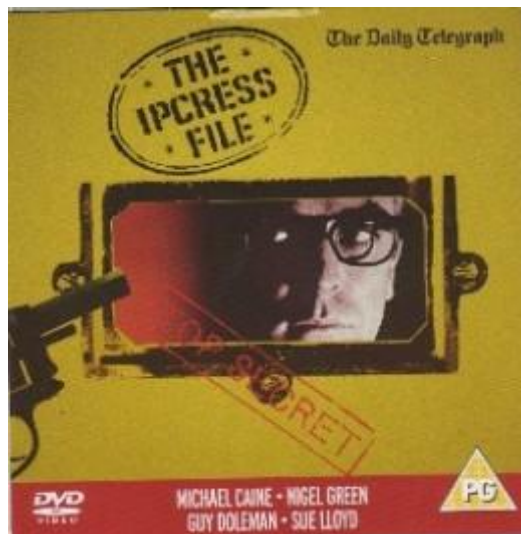
# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### Ahead of the (spy) game

The recent SHOTS appreciation of spymaestro Len Deighton to mark his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday was not only well received internationally (judging by the fan letters from a Mrs Trellis of North Wales) but seems to have started, or at least predicted, a bit of a trend. Suddenly, Deighton is everywhere.



Not only is that once-great newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* giving away a free DVD copy of *The Ipcress File* – the film which starred a young Michael Caine very ably supported by stalwart Brit character actors Nigel Green and Gordon Jackson as well as the sexy Sue Lloyd (who was born in the beautiful Suffolk coastal town of Aldeburgh seventy years ago this summer) – but there is more than a nod towards Deighton's contribution to the genre in a brand new spy series which starts in May.



*Free Agent* is the debut novel of journalist Jeremy Duns and will be published by those Super Scoobies at Simon & Schuster as the first part of a trilogy which, they promise, will herald a new “Dark Age”. Now anyone who has made even the most cursory study of the real ‘dark ages’ from, say, St Patrick’s autobiography to the sermonising of Gildas the Wise, as most people will have (or is it just me?), should not be offended by the publishers usurpation of the phrase.

The point is, you see, that the hero of *Free Agent* is a senior British intelligence officer called Paul Dark. But *is* he the hero or really the villain? Is he actually a long-serving Soviet mole? Well, yes he is – and I am not giving too much away by saying that as it is made pretty clear that Dark is a “wrong ’un” by the end of Chapter One. From then on the plot turns into a race against time to see if Dark can (a) stay alive (an easy one that, considering this is the start of a trilogy), (b) escape being unmasked as a mole, and (c) along the way foil a plot to assassinate the British Prime Minister. With an important back story taking place in Germany in 1945, most of the action takes place in 1969 London and Nigeria – a Nigeria rent by civil war and the breakaway state of Biafra.

And a rattling good yarn it is, told with the pace of a Bourne movie and packed with espionage tradecraft as convincing as John le Carre. It also achieves the near-impossible by persuading the reader to care for, indeed cheer for, the villain of the piece.

Author Jeremy Duns wasn’t born when the Sixties swung and the world gasped at the horrors of the Biafran war, but he has done his research well and cites among his sources *The Biafra Story* by Frederick Forsyth (his non-fiction and very passionate first book) and that seminal work from 1967, *London Dossier*, edited by Len Deighton.

Not only does Duns credit Deighton as a source, but in the final section of his novel there is a wonderful *homage* to a famous scene in *The Ipcress File*, the bit that critic Philip Purser calls a *trompe l’oeil* in the current Shots Appreciation.

### A Third Dark Age?

Just as I was coming to terms with the fact that there was a second (Paul) Dark Age thanks to Jeremy Duns, my brain threatens to explode at the news that there will be a *third* one with the launch, in January 2010, of ‘The Dark Chronicles’ by those perky publishers at Penguin.

This, I am told, is a new ‘serial killer series’ (can the world have too many?) centred on an FBI agent called Steve Dark, and is the work of American Steve Zuiker, the creator of the massively successful *CSI* franchise.



But wait – there is more. This is not merely a series of books, for The Dark Chronicles actually marks the introduction of the *Digi-Novel* which will offer: ‘*a comprehensive online and digital component featuring exclusive cinematic content...(with)...20 cyber bridges to enrich the experience.*’

Now I know there are Luddites out there who will not have the faintest idea what any of that means but I urge you to embrace the new technology as I do. I think nothing these days of settling down of an evening and firing up my trusty Betamax video-imaging-capturer to watch a movie in the comfort of my own ancestral hall, and indeed have made sure that all the cars in the garages at Ripster Hall are equipped with eight-track recorders to provide the latest popular music in stereophonic surround-sound.

### Blurbwatch

Following the success of the section “Criticwatch” launched in the last column (and I always equate threatened legal action to success), I think it only fair to extend the concept to those, not necessarily professional critics or reviewers who are persuaded to lend their name to a “blurb” on a book’s cover.

Take, for example the advice offered by Manda Scott, a writer of crime novels much admired by myself, which forms the blurb for Nick Drake’s impressive thriller of Ancient Egypt, *Tutenkhamun* from Bantam:

*“Nick Drake has woven a bright, luminous tapestry. This is brilliant, make sure you read every line.”*

Every line, Manda? Good heavens, that could take ages and is surely advice which will not be welcomed by the majority of professional reviewers.

## Triple Echo

Not too long ago certain publishers in the crime genre adopted the rather ruthless policy of “three strikes and you’re out” to many authors. In fact I notice from my files that I wrote about this policy back in 2005, but now the pendulum seems to have swung in favour of the three-book deal.

Last month I mentioned Anglophile Canadian Eliot Hall’s fabulously futuristic take on the private eye story, *The First Stone*, which he assured me, over some modest refreshment in a Whitehall tea room, was to be the first of a trilogy.



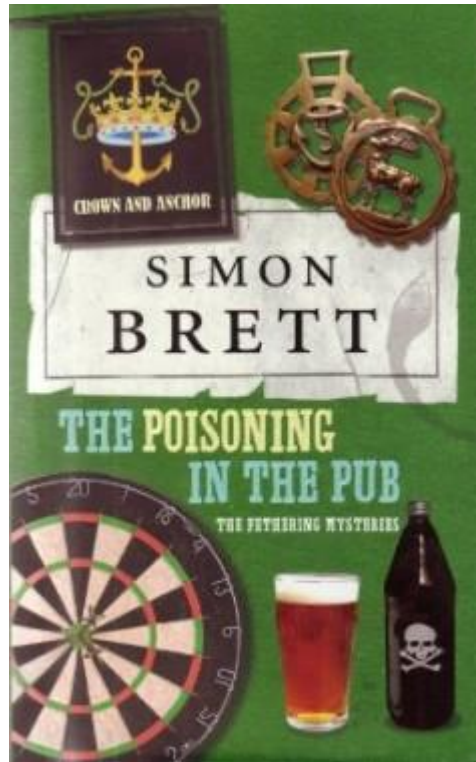
Those who have been paying attention will have noted that *Free Agent* is the first of a three-book deal and next month, of course, discerning readers will be rushing to buy the third John Madden mystery, *The Dead of Winter*, by Rennie Airth.

Now comes news of a new three-book series – the “FBI Series” – by American Allison Brennan, with titles *Sudden Death*, *Fatal Secrets* and *Cutting Edge* to be published in the UK by Piatkus. There is, however, a difference worth noting that whilst Rennie Airth’s Madden trilogy took ten years to reach us, Ms Brennan’s three volumes will hit the bookshop shelves within five months, being published in April, June and August.

## Down the pub

You know the scene. You’re having a quiet pint in a traditional English country pub and suddenly the people at the next table jump to their feet and start throwing up all over the horse brasses. Be honest, we’ve all been there.

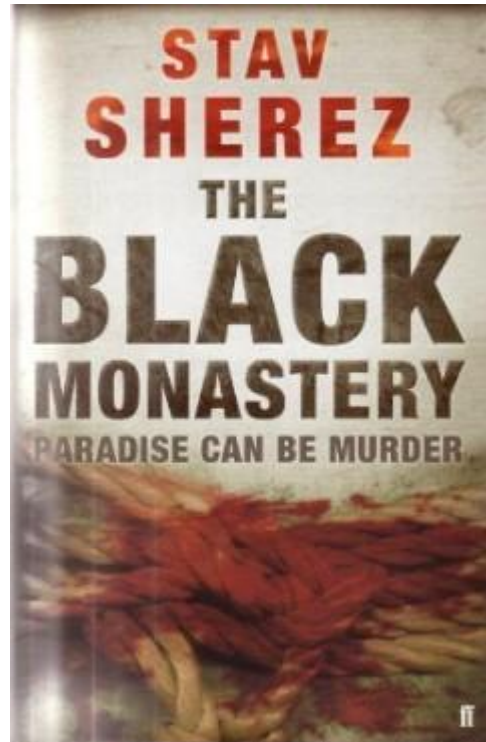
But I didn’t expect that sort of thing to happen in the cosy surroundings of Fethering, that jewel in the crown of the Southern Home Counties. Once, however, you know that Simon Brett is behind the unpleasantness down the Crown & Anchor, everything falls into place.



*The Poisoning in the Pub* is Simon's latest novel (from Macmillan) in a series which has included blood spilled at the bookies, bodies on beaches, death on the (Sussex) Downs, hangings in hotels, murders in museums and stabbings in the stables. As the titles might suggest, these are all fairly cosy mysteries featuring amateur detectives in the traditional format and Simon would probably be the first to describe them as deliberately old-fashioned. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with saying that. Frankly, after a crime fiction career covering over 30 years and at least 36 books, he can say what he likes.

#### Greek Gifts

To be honest – something I always try to avoid in this column – I was slightly worried that *The Black Monastery*, on first sight, was going to be yet another Dan Brown clone involving religious ephemera in a medieval monastery, probably situated on the edge of a Himalayan precipice.



I am happy to report that Stav Sherez's new novel, published by those absolutely fabulous Faber people, is an inventive, suspenseful and very exciting thriller set on a Greek island (whose identity is I think disguised for legal reasons, or certainly should be!). Ritual murders going back several decades, the mass suicide of a strange hippie cult, dead priests and the return of a reluctant Greek policeman, all make up the rather uneasy history of the island. Add into the mix a visiting British crime writer who is clearly paranoid (aren't we all?), who brings in her wake her very own stalker – a wannabe British crime writer equally paranoid) and you just know something nasty is going to happen on what should be a holiday paradise.



Except this island is a long way from paradise. Stav Sherez has painted us a portrait which combines secretiveness, resentment and primitive violence with a no-holds barred view of the impact of the tourist trade which has made muggings and drug-taking every-day events. The bars are seedy and vomit-splattered, the police seemingly disinterested.

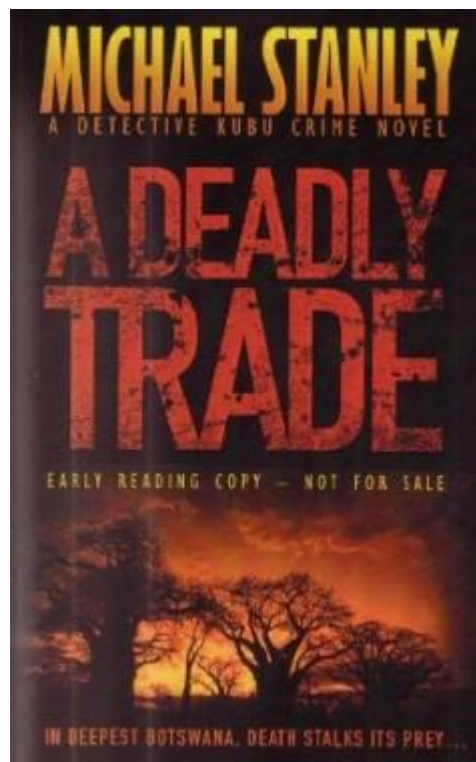


*The Black Monastery* is an impressive thriller but probably one best not taken on holiday to Greece. In fact after reading it, you might just want to alter your holiday plans and go somewhere more relaxing. Baghdad, say, or Basra.

### Out of Africa

Those who, like me, are fascinated by the dark continent of Africa but prefer their crime fiction a little darker and less sugary than the current television adventures of Precious Ramotswe, should turn immediately to the second Botswana-set thriller by the writing team “Michael Stanley” (in reality, a charming pair of not-so-grizzled old Africa hands called Michael Sears and Stanley Trollip).

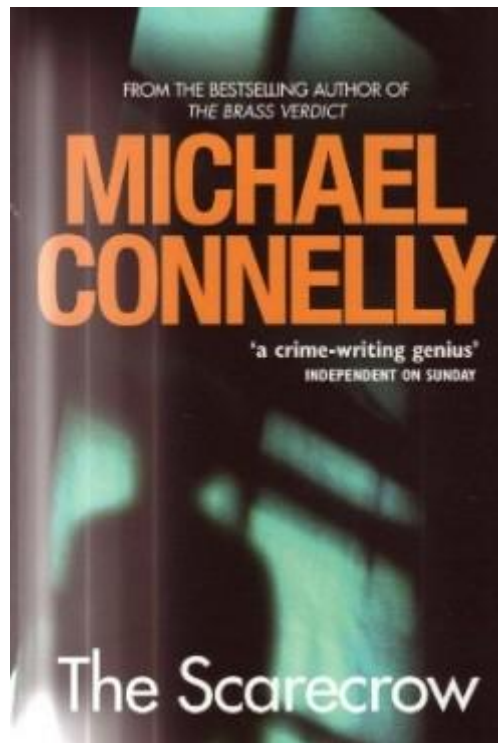
*A Deadly Trade*, coming this June from those party animals at Headline, which sees the return of detective David ‘Kubu’ Bengu of the Botswana CID, investigating what at first appears to be a classic revenge killing at a tourist camp.



The authors kindly provide a Glossary of African terms for the benefit of younger readers, although anyone who has attended a British public school will recognise *pap* and *rusk* as two of the major food groups, and anyone from Merseyside who has a passing interest in football will know the meaning of the Afrikaans word *koppie* or ‘Kop’.

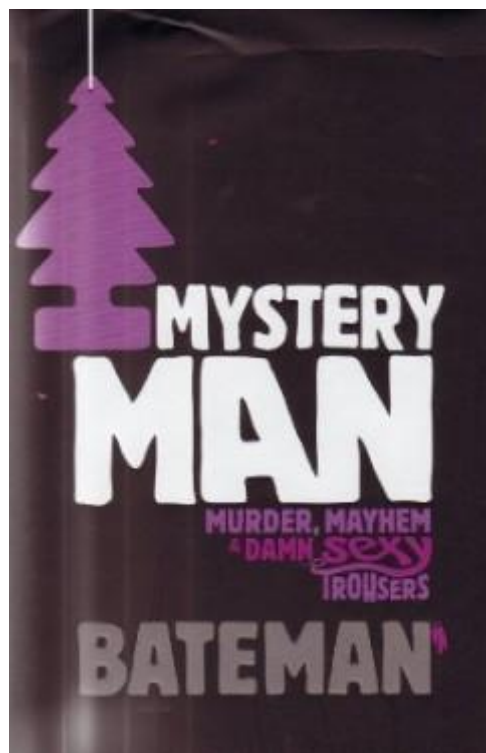
### The Sacred and Prolific

My heart sank when I took delivery of an advance copy of what will certainly be yet another Michael Connelly best-seller: *The Scarecrow* (although I cannot name the publisher for legal reasons).



Now I have nothing against prolific authors as such, but when an author is as prolific and as *good* as Michael Connelly, I begin to despair. I mean, it's just not fair on the rest of us, is it?

And ever fond of a tenuous link, I should point out that Michael Connelly will be visiting Belfast to give a talk on May 15<sup>th</sup> organised by the splendid crime bookshop No Alibis, which brings me neatly to *Mystery Man*, the new novel from 'Bateman' – the artist previously known as Colin – to be published by those cheeky chaps and chapesses at Headline later this month.



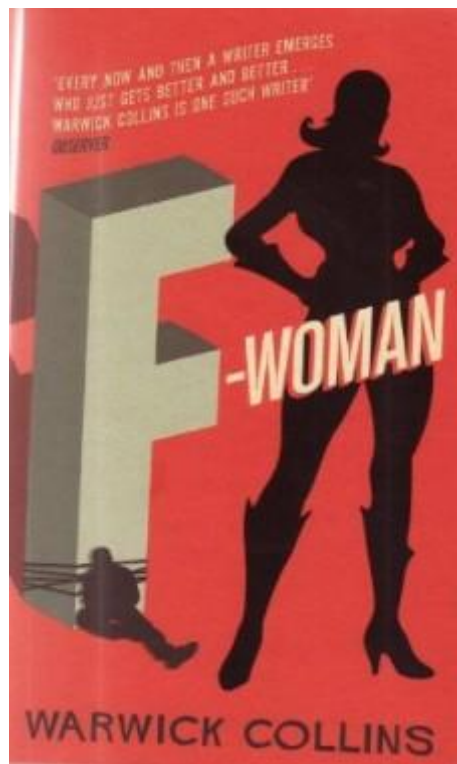


The tenuous link in question is that the hero of Bateman's new compendium of excellent jokes, daft dialogue and some damn sexy leather trousers, is the depression-prone owner of a Belfast mystery bookshop called...you guessed it... No Alibis, which just happens to be next door to the office of Belfast's only private detective. (Check out the special offers in 'Serial Killer Week'.)

Naturally, this being Bateman's Belfast, confusion and mayhem result as crime bookseller turns, reluctantly, into crime fighter, although the Ulster Scamp, as Bateman is known among his admirers, reserves some of his best gags for the mystery bookselling world. Watch out in particular for the surprise visit to No Alibis of "John Grisham". Hilarious.

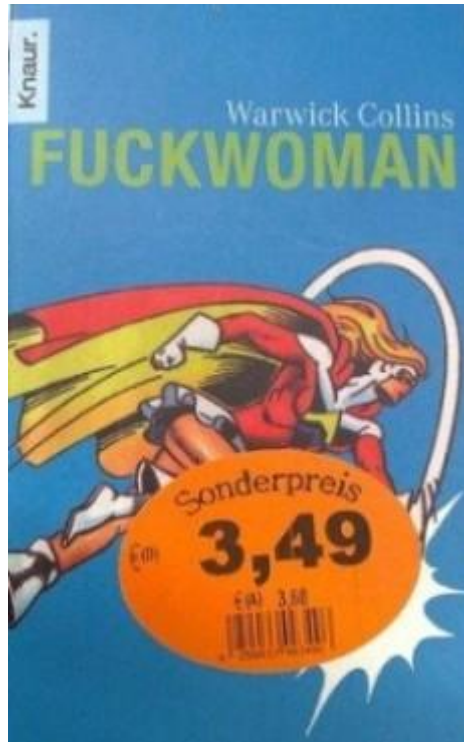
### Wonder Woman?

Warwick Collins is an inventor (he designed a new keel for sailing boats it seems), a novelist and an 'evolutionary philosopher' but his latest book, *F-Woman* (published by those innovative people down at Old Street Publishing) is his first foray into what might be called the crime field.



By day, Cynthia Lelague is a mild mannered (hardly!) journalist but by night she patrols the streets of Los Angeles hinting down sex criminals as *F-Woman* and rapidly attains super-hero (or rather super-heroine) status. This extravaganza is not set in LA for nothing as it's clearly intended as a satire on Hollywood and has already been published in France and Germany where I am told it received much critical acclaim.

I of course read the German version when something about the cover caught my eye.

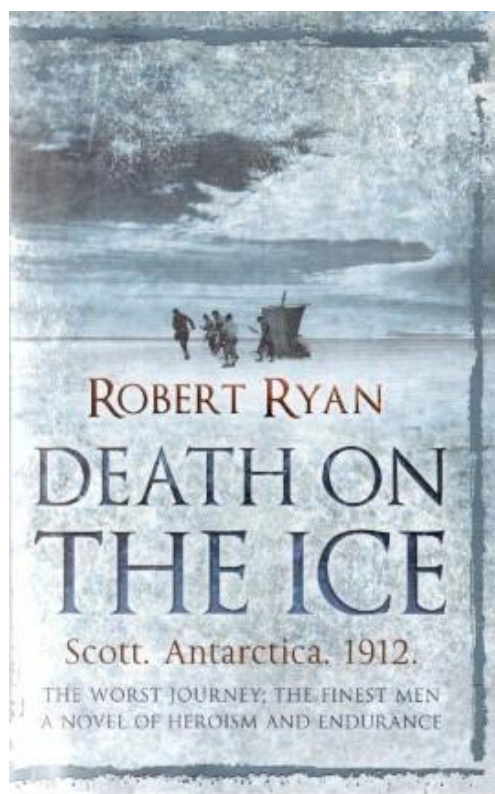


I wonder what it could have been?

### Going Straight

It seems that my old chum and fellow boulevardier Robert Ryan has finally gone straight and turned away from crime fiction to produce excellent and thoughtful historical novels. Having recently re-examined the career of T.E. Lawrence in the sands of the Arabian desert, he now turns to the career of Captain Robert Falcon Scott in the wastes of Antarctica.

*Death on the Ice*, published by Headline later this month, is a magisterial piece of historical fiction which looks at that 'worst journey in the world' – the race to be the first to reach the South Pole in 1912.



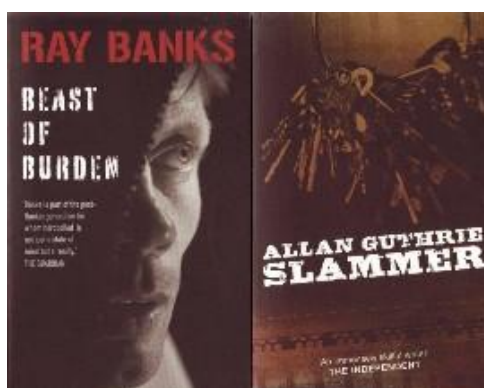
Rob Ryan also points up a link (which I did not know) between his two recent ‘heroes’ – Scott of the Antarctic and Lawrence of Arabia – but I will have to read the book carefully to spot the author’s traditional inclusion in all his fiction of a reference to a famous Western film, usually one which starred his namesake, that great American actor Robert Ryan.

#### Chocolate Votes

Voting has now closed for the 2009 Galaxy British Book Awards, where there was strong British representation on the short list in the Best Crime/Thriller category. So all that is left for me to say is good luck to: *The Business* by Martina Cole, *Child 44* by Tom Rob Smith, *Revelation* by C.J. Sansom and *When Will There Be Good News* by Kate Atkinson, which readers of this column will remember got my vote as Crime Shot of the Year for 2008.

#### Old and New Noir

Those innovative (and very successful) Scottish publishers Polygon have launched a double-whammy of ‘Tartan Noir’ on us in the form of Allan Guthrie’s latest, *Slammer*, and Ray Banks’ fourth outing for his Manchester-based private eye Cal Innes, *Beast of Burden*.



Now I have, in the past, been accused of being behind the times (believe it or not) when it comes to appreciating modern *noir* or *hard-boiled* crime writing, particularly from the Celtic fringes of the Empire – despite giving a warm review, or so I thought, to Ray Banks’ *Donkey Punch* last year.

The thing is, I do like *noir* and I do like my thrillers boiled longer than three minutes twenty seconds (I always use old James Bond books for my egg recipes), and I pride myself on knowing the distinction between *noir* fiction and hard-boiled writing. But to be honest, the standard for such writing was set so high and so long ago (and mostly in America) that the new kids on the block are on a bit of a hiding to nothing.

And the beauty of it is that old masters still keep crossing my radar, my latest find being the wonderful Jonathan Latimer, whose most famous title, *Solomon’s Vineyard*, dates from 1941 and contains some very forthright sex scenes and a private eye hero who breakfasts on a dozen raw eggs and a bottle of brandy.



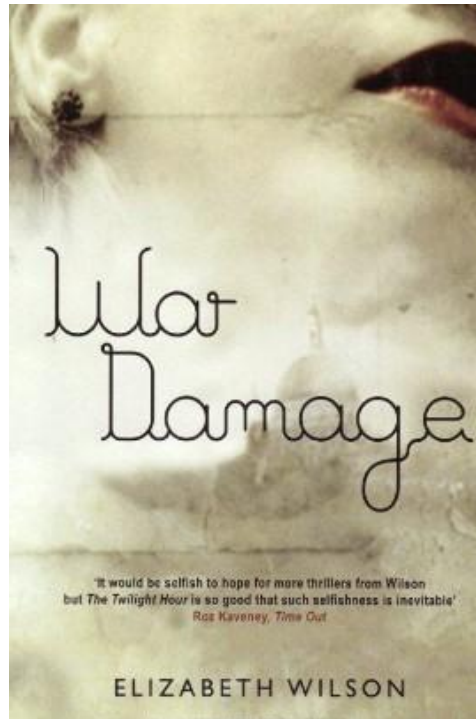
Latimer, whom I have discovered terribly late in life (my life that is; he died in 1983) apart from writing thrillers which fit wonderfully into the timeline stretching from Hammett and Woolrich, through Spillane and Thompson, to Charles Willeford and Andrew Vachss, was also a noted scriptwriter for the movies with screen credits which include *The Glass Key* and *The Big Clock*.

#### A Morbid Taste for Awards

It is probably far too early to start predicting the British crime fiction awards for 2009, though as the season seems to start earlier each year, why shouldn't I throw myself into the debate whenever the mood takes me – as it just has? After all, the Left Coast Crime awards have been awarded and the Cartier Diamond Dagger allocated and shortlists are out for the impending Edgars, Agatha Awards and the Hammett Prize.

To be honest for several years now I have found the Ellis Peters Award for historical mysteries to be a more interesting contest than those for the more 'mainstream' Gold and Steel Daggers and whatever the John Creasey award/dagger for best debut is called these days.

I suspect this year will be no exception. I have already tipped Aly Monroe's *The Maze of Cadiz* (set in 1944) as a serious contender and now I am prepared to predict (with the usual calamitous results) that another worthy winner would be Elizabeth Wilson's simply excellent *War Damage*, published by Serpent's Tail.

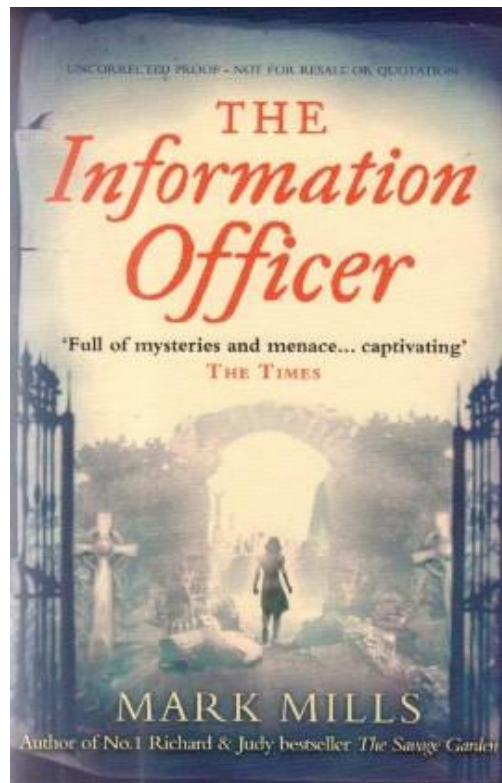


Set in the drab and dusty atmosphere of bomb-damaged London in 1949, Elizabeth Wilson's novel charts the psychological damage inflicted by the Second World War on a disparate group of middle class would-be Bohemians most of whom struggle to keep up appearances in a changing social order, although several seemed to have been damaged long before the first Blitz.

There are some memorable characters –shifty public schoolboys, flamboyant homosexuals, femmes fatales, pompous husbands, spivs and conmen, doe-eyed policemen and a lovely vignette of a young woman with a crush on her boss at the Courtauld Institute (Anthony Blunt) – and a plot which encompasses murders, blackmail and deception as fragile egos jockey to manipulate each other. *War Damage* is a superb historical thriller, as thick with ideas, observations and atmosphere as the London fogs it so eloquently describes.

I will also go out on a limb, though the author will not thank me, and suggest that Ariana Franklin's *Grave Goods* will also make the short list, even though I have not seen a copy as it is not yet published in the UK (although US editions seem to be widely available here via the jolly old interweb). The third in the 'Mistress of the art of Death' series – known amongst fans as *CSI Medieval* – *Grave Goods* has been glowingly reviewed in the New York Times recently by Marilyn Stasio (a critic of very sound judgement) thus: *Science and romance vie with superstition and barbarism in this richly detailed, almost indecently thrilling mystery.*

I am fairly confident that the dashing Mark Mills' *The Information Officer* will make the short list. Although I cannot name the publisher (for legal reasons), Mark's third elegant thriller, to be published as a paperback original in May, is a sumptuous and suspenseful tale set during WW2 on the George Cross island of Malta.



And naturally I should not rule out Philip Kerr's *If the Dead Rise Not*, the sixth Bernie Gunther novel, to be published in September (set, I believe, in late 1950s Cuba) nor indeed Harry Keating's *A Small Case for Inspector Ghote?* (coming from Allison & Busby in May), which is set in the Bombay of 1964 rather than the Mumbai of 'Slumdog'.

And perhaps I should include (in what is probably a 'kiss of death' list) *The Breath of the Rose* by one of France's queens of crime, Andrea H. Japp (Gallic Books), which is set in Alencon in 1304.

However accurate my predictions, I am delighted to say that the distinguished judges (whoever they are) are sure to have a torrid time of it. Who said history was bunk?

#### Essex Book Festival

Appearing before a sell-out audience of over 300 fans at the Essex Book Festival in Colchester last week, award-winning author Kate Atkinson confirmed that she was currently working on her fourth Jackson Brodie crime novel, the follow-up to the highly acclaimed *When Will There Be Good News?* [Crime Shot of the Year 2008]

Atkinson also revealed that she was planning a fifth crime novel, this time "an homage to Agatha Christie" with a cast of characters, including some from previous books, trapped in a country house hotel.

**Toodles!**

***The Ripster***