

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



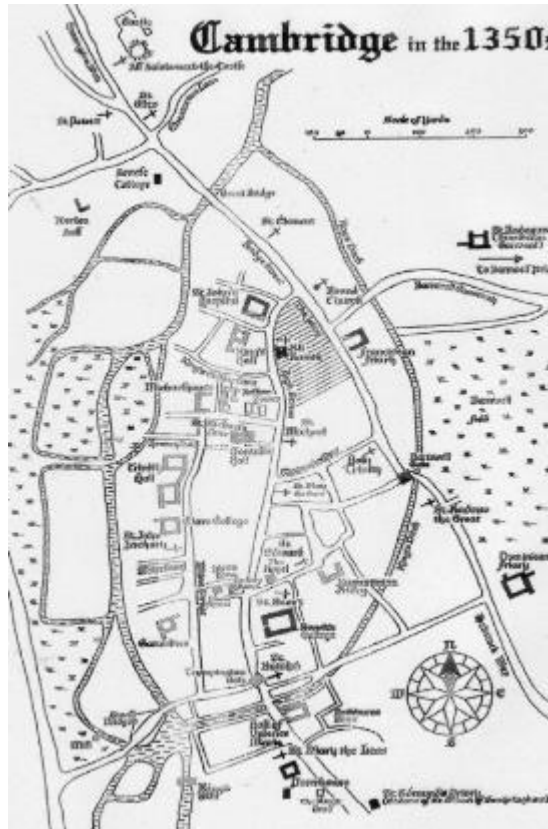
The Cambridge Murderers

The social highlight of the crime fiction year, nicely captured here on the cover of David Roberts' new novel *Sweet Sorrow*, is undoubtedly the "Bodies in the Bookshop" event at Heffers in Cambridge on July 21st when over fifty crime writers will gather to meet their readers and – best of all – *none of them will be allowed to make a speech!*

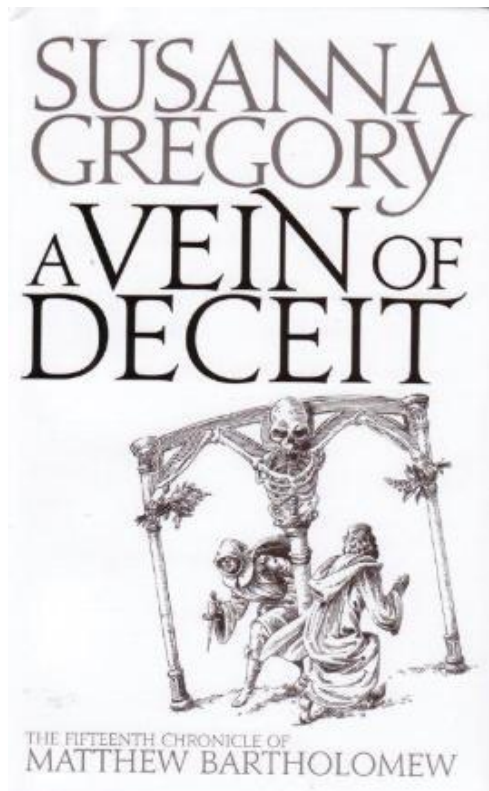


Established 19 years ago, the event gives the public the chance to sample the courtyards, cloisters and even wine cellars of the famous St Heffers College, the only Cambridge college to teach crime fiction to the exclusion of all other academic subjects. Visitors will be able to observe the famous traditions of the college – the doffing of caps to the Master, Professor Richard Reynolds; the orderly queuing as graduates line up to be allocated their places at the tables groaning with books; the ringing of the college bell whenever a book is sold; and so on. [Full details can be obtained by emailing literature@heffers.co.uk]

New and prospective students are of course welcome and a shiny new Prospectus will be published to mark the event. St Heffers is situated in central Cambridge and the unique H shaped quadrangle is clearly visible on this map opposite King's Hall.



I am, incidentally, grateful for the use of this excellent up-to-date map (look, for Cambridge this is as up-to-date as we want) which I have taken from Susanna Gregory's fabulous new medieval thriller *A Vein of Deceit* from those smashing people at Sphere and which, purely by coincidence is set in Cambridge in the year 1357, well before some of the more *arriviste* colleges began to fill in the green-field sites.



Before the grand reunion of the alumni of St Heffers, however, the college grounds will be put to good use for the launch of *Angel With Two Faces* on 8th July at 6.30 p.m.



Published by those absolutely fabulous people at Faber, *Angel With Two Faces* (and I do like the title for some reason) is the second novel by Nicola Upson which features crime-writer Josephine Tey as the detective in a 'Golden Age' mystery which takes her to – you've guessed it – an impressive country house on the coast of Cornwall in 1935.



Last year's debut *An Expert In Murder* was extremely well received and no doubt Nicola will be hoping that her creation, Josephine Tey the sleuth, will become as fondly regarded as Josephine Tey the author of such classics as *The Franchise Affair* and *The Daughter of Time*.

Angels on High

I have always had a soft spot for pubs called “The Angel” though I cannot think why, and now I hear that crime-writers Joan Lock and Lesley Grant-Adamson will be appearing at the historic Angel Inn in Debenham in Suffolk as part of the Debenham Arts Festival this month.

I hasten to add, they will not be pulling pints, but talking about their writing on the 10th and 11th July in these convivial surroundings and full details can be found on www.debenhamartsfestival.co.uk.

All in the Family

If you are a fan of ‘true crime’ as opposed to crime fiction – and I have to admit I am not – you will probably recognise this fresh-faced young chap.



Charles Manson (for it is he) is now entering his 75th year, thankfully behind prison bars. The Manson ‘Family’ and the horrific murders they perpetrated in California forty years ago, are still bywords for evil and the very dark side of the Swinging Sixties.

The complete story of the Manson case is now the subject of a chilling biography, *Charles Manson: Coming Down Fast* by British music and film journalist Simon Wells (published by Hodder).

Updates and Corrections

In my last column I congratulated author John Harvey on chalking up the most number of public appearances by a crime writer this year *and* on his 100th published book. But that was almost a month ago now and the information needs to be updated as, since then, he has published his 101st in the form of *Minor Key* from Five Leaves Press in Nottingham, which is a collection of essays, poems and short stories, four of which (previously uncollected) feature his much-loved series hero Charlie Resnick.

A Seven Year Itch(x 2)

In a personal letter which went out with proof copies of George Dawes Green's *Ravens* to be published in August, Little Brown CEO Ursula Mackenzie explains why she (and presumably the author) waited 14 years for Green's new book, "a thriller unlike anything I have read before". If that really is the case, I would suggest Ms Mackenzie gets out more, for *Ravens* is clearly in that noble tradition of tough American noir writing going back through Elmore Leonard, Charles Willeford, Charles Williams and Horace McCoy.



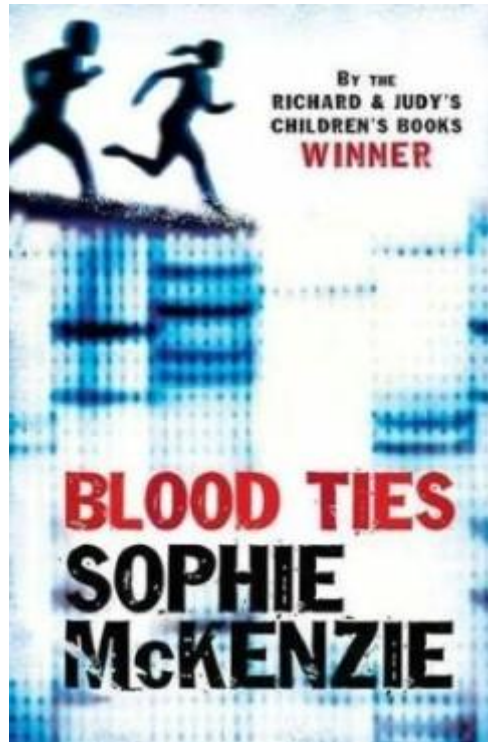
And the book – Green's first thriller since *The Juror*, which reputedly sold over three million copies when published in 1995 – certainly stands up to being mentioned in such distinguished company, for it is the slick, chilling, tragic tale of a pair of blithe psychopaths (as Charles Willeford would have called them) who see a gravy train passing and jump aboard.

The Americans have a term "home invasion" which probably equates to "aggravated burglary" in Britain. In *Ravens*, two drifters, Shaw and Romeo, stumble on a family of lottery winners (and they are *big* winners) as they travel through the 'chigger states' of the US. With a little help (quite a lot actually) from various Facebook sites, they decide they deserve half of the \$300 million jackpot. Their method is what I can only describe as "life invasion" and their plan of violence and threatened violence is audacious and terrifying.

For a while you think it might come off and sometimes the reader will have little sympathy for the victims (and less for their hanger-on friends), but this is classic *noir* fiction brought bang up to date, so you just know it's not going to end well.

In Da Red House

One literary award which went off without a hitch last month, though seems to have been widely ignored because it was presented in Birmingham, was the Red House Children's Book award for 2008, which went to *Blood Ties*.

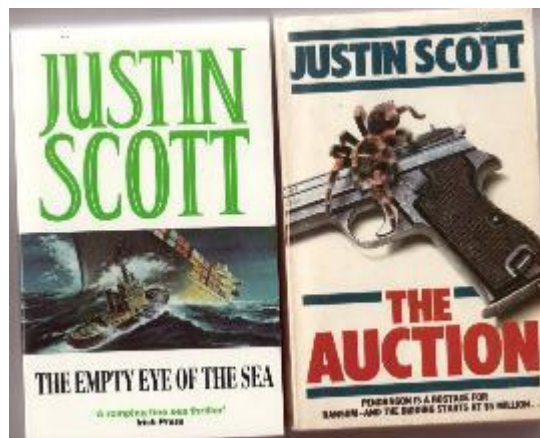


Written by Sophie McKenzie and published by Simon & Schuster, *Blood Ties* is described as ‘a gripping thriller which explores genetic engineering and personal identity’ and I am delighted that thrillers and mysteries for younger readers are gaining more recognition these days. (Charlie Higson’s ‘junior’ Bond books have certainly helped.)

I believe the Mystery Writers of America, with a wise eye on the reader of the future, have long made awards for Juvenile and Young Adult mystery fiction, areas which the British crime-writing establishment has studiously ignored.

Cruel to Clive

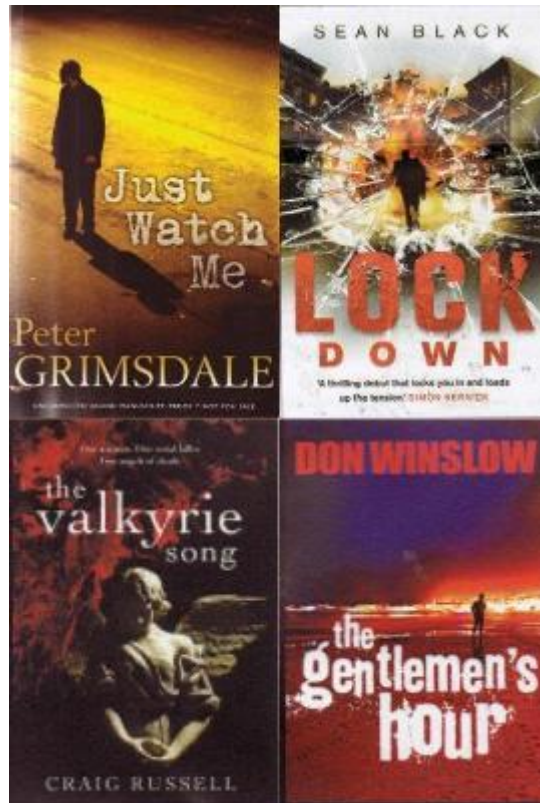
My old billiards coach Justin Scott, who has written a thriller or two under both his own name and that of Paul Garrison, has enquired whether I will be attending Thrillerfest in New York later this month.



Much as I would like to, I of course cannot due to an unfortunate trans-Atlantic misunderstanding over the words “sub”, “prime” and “lending”. Last year, British thriller writer David Hewson urged me to attend, but then David was brought up in the East Yorkshire seaside town of Bridlington so his desire to travel far across an ocean is perfectly understandable.

The highlight of this year's festivities, says Justin, will be attending a "Clive Cussler roast" on the Saturday evening, which I have to admit sounds rather barbaric. What on earth has the nice Mr Cussler done to deserve being roasted by an angry mob of fellow thriller writers?

And speaking of thrillers, there's quite an interesting crop of them coming out over the next few weeks.

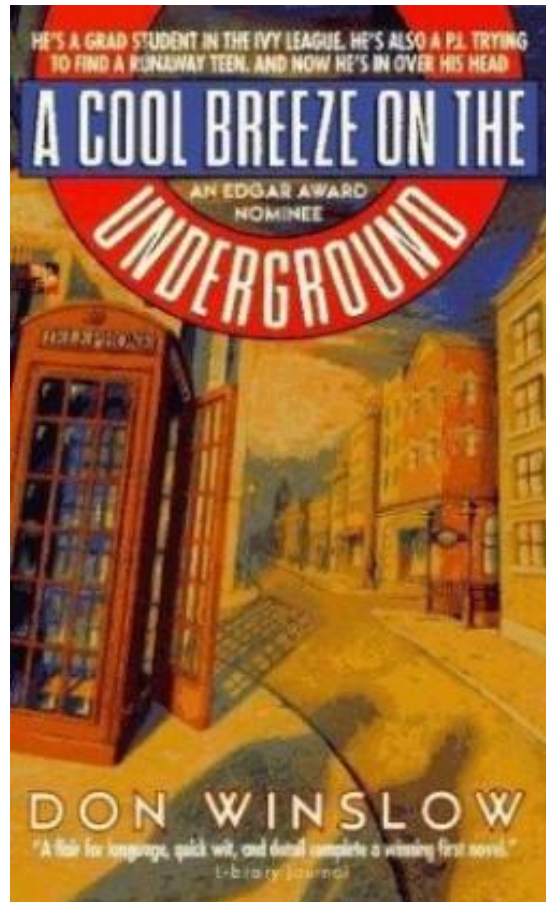


From Orion comes a second novel, *Just Watch Me* by television producer Peter Grimsdale who is said to have been responsible for a series of *Big Brother* though that probably shouldn't be held against him. *Just Watch Me* features ex-soldier Dan Carter, a veteran of Afghanistan with a more recent history in covert operations which has resulted in he and his family living undercover and under pressure but you have to wonder why such a professional operative sets off for the airport and a much-needed family holiday without checking he has his passport. Surely a clever hero would have had at least three. Events conspire to make life even more difficult for the short-tempered Carter, and by the end of Chapter 2 the reader is booking him in for anger-management classes.

Lockdown is the first in what is threatened to be 'a major series' featuring ex-soldier Ryan Lock, now an elite bodyguard in America. The debut author is Scottish person Sean Black, so naturally the book's advertising strap-line is "The New Black" – one which, I suspect, will run and run. A television scriptwriter, Sean Black takes his thriller writing seriously, reputedly spending two weeks in an army camp and a week in the Czech Republic doing firearms training. To research his follow up novel, he plans to 'do time' in America's Pelican Bay Supermax prison (I had no idea pelicans were so dangerous). What's the betting the book will be called *Lock Up?*

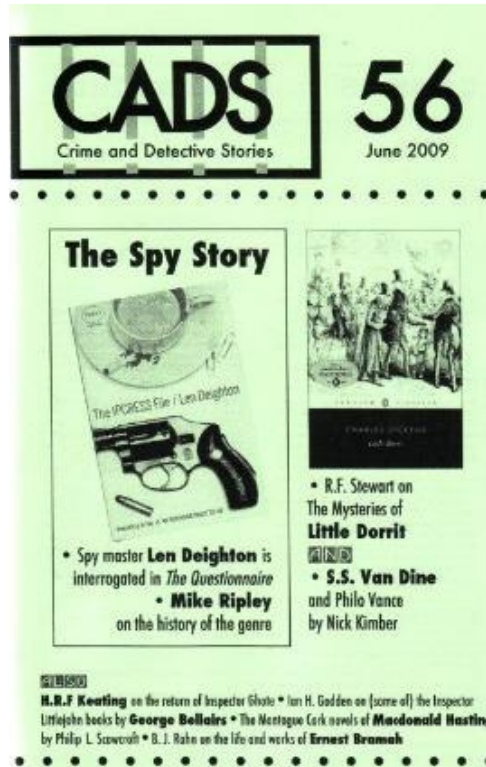
Another Scottish author is Craig Russell and his new thriller from Hutchinson, *The Valkyrie Song*, doesn't rely on former soldiers, or even former-soldiers-turned-policemen, like his slightly better-known Fife-born crime-writing compatriot Ian Rankin. Russell's hero is Jan Fabel, a detective in charge of Hamburg's murder squad. The Fabel books have already won Russell the Hamburg *Polizeistern* (Police Star) and a Dagger In The Library Award but his next, *Lennox*, is rumoured to be set closer to home, in the gangland Glasgow of the 1950s.

One author who needs little introduction is American Don Winslow, whose *California Fire and Life* has achieved legendary status in crime fiction. His latest, *The Gentlemen's Hour*, published by William Heinemann, is set on the surfing coast of California and features laid-back private eye Boone Daniels. I have to admit that I had no idea until now that the quintessentially Californian Winslow's first novel, *A Cool Breeze on the Underground*, published in 1991 and now quite rare, was set in London.



Crime and Detective

Crime and Detective Stories, universally known simply as 'CADS', describes itself as "an irregular magazine of comment and criticism about crime and detective fiction." Issue #56 is now out and its contents form a positive cornucopia of delicious items on: Dennis Wheatley, Macdonald Hastings, Inspector Ghote, Philo Vance, Ernest Bramah, John Bingham and Little Dorrit, not to mention a history of the spy novel and, best of all, an interview with that reclusive 'poet of the spy story' Len Deighton.

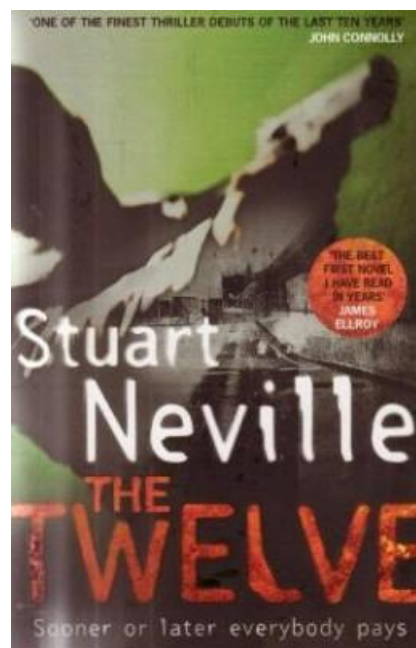


Details of subscription to CADS are available from the editor Geoff Bradley on Geoffcads@aol.com.

Emerald Noir

After ‘Tartan Noir’ comes ‘Emerald Noir’ to describe the recent flood of hard-boiled crime thrillers from Ireland, not that it’s an expression I can claim to have coined. If I had I would have used it freely about ten years ago to describe the books of Ken Bruen such as *Rilke on Black* and the wonderful *Hackman Blues*, even though Ken was mostly writing about London gangland.

I guarantee that someone will use the ‘Emerald Noir’ tag on a new thriller which comes highly recommended by none other than Ken Bruen himself: *The Twelve*, which is published by Harvill Secker.



The premise of the book is that a washed-up IRA hit-man is seriously hitting the bottle in the back street bars of Belfast, but he's far from a solitary drinker as he is constantly in the company of the ghosts of the twelve people he has killed and the only avenue of redemption, it occurs to him, is to kill the terrorists, gangsters and politicians who ordered the 'hits' he carried out. Only thus will his twelve ghosts be exorcised, and so he sets about his self-appointed task with dogged determination.

Once you accept this premise, everything makes sense and as killer Gerry Fegan embarks on his bloody quest, the countdown of his new victims is balanced by the gradual disappearance of the ghosts of his earlier ones. Yet the troubled foot-soldier's personal paranormal vendetta stirs up a whole new hornet's nest of violence and retribution and threatens to destabilise the delicate Northern Ireland peace process.



Stuart Neville's take on Northern Ireland is bloody, brutal and harsh, dealing with the facts of life and death on some very mean streets indeed. There are no snap judgements on the causes or rights and wrongs of the tribal warfare which has raged there for generations, just an awful, fatalistic acceptance that violence will breed violence and there is nothing the innocent bystander (if there is such a thing) can do about it.

Which is a very *noir* trait indeed, and *The Twelve* [to be called *The Ghosts of Belfast* in the US] certainly justifies its use. This is a powerful, gripping, almost breathless novel which many will not like, but all should read. It is, remarkably, a first novel and a very fine one too.

Was that a dagger I just saw behind me?

The Curse of the Ripsters strikes again it seems. Last month I apologised in advance to those authors I thought worthy of being shortlisted for the annual crime writing Daggers and in a pathetic attempt to be topical, my suggestions were timed to coincide with the official shortlist announcement. I now have to apologise to *all* writers eligible, for I seem to have put a hex on the whole proceedings as the CWA's awards shortlist is being announced in at least two parts, which I believe is unprecedented.

Shortlists for the 'International' Dagger (actually for a book in translation) and the short story and Debut categories *have* been announced, but for the main awards – the crime writing Oscars – of Gold and Steel Dagger (for crime novels and thrillers though I have never been told the difference), it appears we have to wait until later this month, with breath bated and bosom heaving, for the announcement of the shortlisted titles.

The Crime Writers' Association website tells me that the dramatic announcement of the shortlists will take place at an exclusive London night spot (tickets, which cost £45, probably include a small sherry and complimentary Twiglet) on July 15th, though I for one will be closely reading the pages of *The Times* for a few days prior to that date as that newspaper has an uncanny track record of publishing the lists first.

I note also that the Dagger previously known as the Duncan Lawrie Dagger has now reverted to the more traditional, simple Gold Dagger. I have no idea what has become of Mr Lawrie (or the vast prize money he has offered the winners for the last three years) but I have a sneaking suspicion his name may well turn up in a crime novel in the near future, possibly as a victim...

At the moment there is only one announced shortlist I can reasonably be disgruntled with and that is the 'International' one. Predictably, the list reflects the love affair between Nordic crime and the chattering classes, with five out of the six books being from authors of Scandinavian origin (four of them alive).

There seems to be no room on the list for Sebastian Fitzek's *Therapy*, translated from the German and a huge bestseller in Europe, nor for the outstanding Cuban crime writer Leonardo Padura's much praised *Havana Fever*.

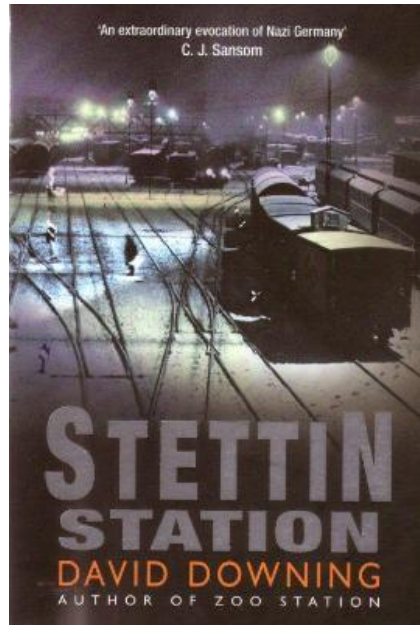
One doesn't want to open old wounds (oh, why not?) about whether there should even be a separate Dagger for crime fiction in translation, but it does strike me as rather odd that with *less than 25* translated novels slated for publication in calendar year 2009 (so far), this segment of the genre seems a rather specialised one.

[To put it crudely, a foreign author with a book translated into English has a 1 in 4 chance of being shortlisted for a Dagger, whereas for an author writing in English the odds are close to 1 in 100.]

The CWA's Last Laugh Award for comic crime-writing was discarded over ten years ago on the grounds that the best crime novel was the best whether or not it was a comedy, although the same logic does not seem to apply to crime in translation. As a former, very proud, winner of the Last Laugh (though no longer a likely contender), I cannot help but feel that entertaining writers such as Christopher Brookmyre, Colin Bateman, Ruth Dudley Edwards, Simon Brett, Michael Pearce, Peter Guttridge, L.C. Tyler, Suzette Hill, Liz Evans, Jasper Fforde, Malcolm Pryce, M.C. Beaton and no doubt many others, have somehow missed out.

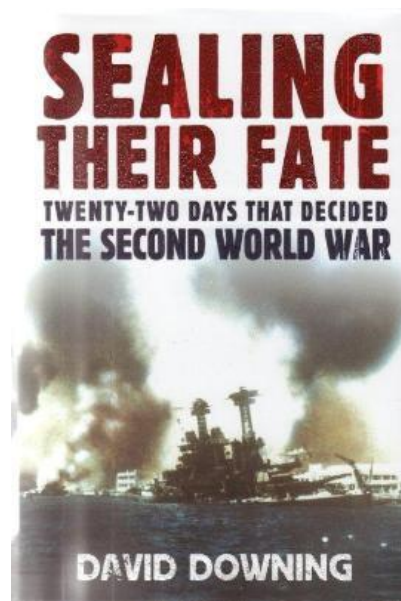
22 Days Before the Mast

David Downing's much-anticipated third historical spy thriller featuring Anglo-American journalist John Russell, opens quite specifically on 17th November 1941.



Published by that innovative outfit Old Street Publishing, *Stettin Station*, which is set in Nazi Germany, opens on this particular date because, although none of the characters know this, it is the day the Imperial Japanese First Air Fleet task force (the *Kido Butai*) sailed on its 22-day voyage to Pearl Harbour.

I am tempted to reminisce that the sea voyage did not actually seem that long, for dear old Admiral Yamamoto kept us fully entertained with games of quoits on the flight deck and ample supplies of *sake*, but I must not for the period has been expertly covered in a global context in the book *Sealing Their Fate* earlier this year, by none other than David Downing.



Downing clearly knows his history and he uses it to fantastic effect in the atmospheric and suspenseful 'Station' novels, which have put his spy stories on a par with those of Alan Furst.

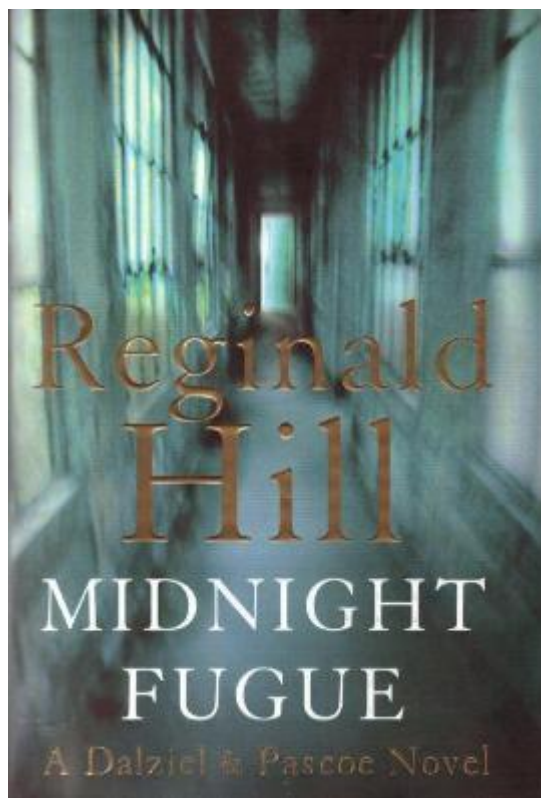
Burning of the Midnight Lamp

I have known Reginald Hill since we were callow youths auditioning for the West Hartlepool Glee Club with an ill-received *a cappella* version of *All Along The Watchtower*.



I have to admit, though, that his new novel took me by surprise, sneaking out almost under the radar from HarperCollins last month when I was least expecting it. Fortunately, I acquired a copy and, avoiding the cross-town traffic, retired to my red house to devour it and what an experience it was, as Reg has lost not of his voodoo child skills in telling a good tale.

Okay, so that's enough Jimi Hendrix references, though you'll have to read *Midnight Fugue* to see for yourself why I made them.



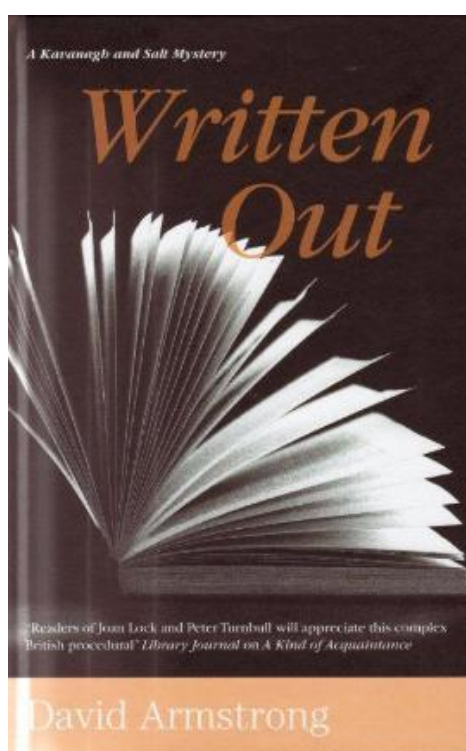
It is a Dalziel and Pascoe book – the 24th I think – but unlike any other I can remember, the action taking place over 16 hours of one particular Sunday and Dalziel even finds time to have a two-hour nap! The plot is cinematically cut between various parties, some innocent but most not, with secrets to hide or to uncover, their focal point being, of course, that unmoveable object which is Mid-Yorkshire's finest policeman, albeit still recovering from the terrorist bomb blast which almost did for him two books ago.

It is written with all Reg's wry humanity and *brio* and the plot unfolds at *Top Gear* pace. As is customary these days (almost obligatory in fact), there are some good gags about the Welsh and one character hails from the village of Llufrwadol. (Try reading it backwards.)

Postscriptum

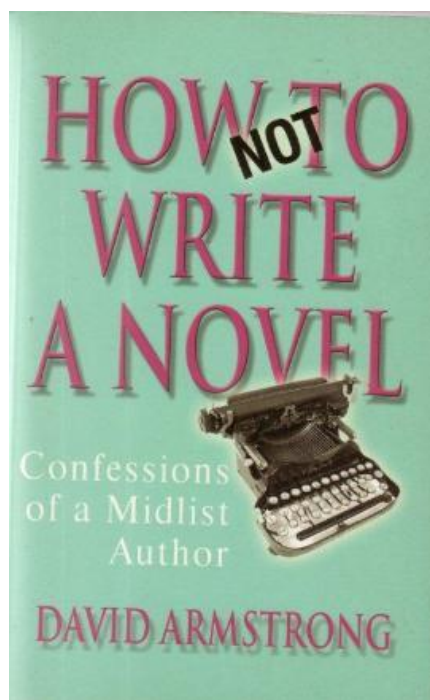
David Armstrong made an excellent crime-writing debut with *Night's Black Agents*, a book I thoroughly enjoyed and rated highly. It was cruelly shortlisted for the 1993 Crime Writers Association's John Creasey Award for best first novel and I say 'cruelly' because that was the year when the CWA judges in their wisdom announced a public shortlist of debut novelists and *then* announced that none of them "were good enough" and refused to make the award that year.

Armstrong has gone on to write a further six novels, the latest being *Written Out* from those always surprising publishers Severn House (who famously refuse to participate in the London rat race and have their offices out in the country).



Written Out, which features series police duo Frank Kavanagh and Jane Salt, centres on the disappearance of novelist Tom Oliver from the residential writers' centre in rural Shropshire where he is tutoring. This is where the more astute reader will start to ask if this is art imitating life, for David Armstrong is in fact a tutor at the Arvon Foundation, which offers residential courses for would-be writers in, among other places, Shropshire, which I believe to be somewhere near Wales.

Now I have no idea what the qualifications are for becoming an Arvon tutor, but several distinguished crime writers have taught there, including: Allan Guthrie, Andrew Taylor, Frances Fyfield, Sarah Dunant, Simon Brett and Stella Duffy. But what qualifies David Armstrong uniquely is that he is the author of that seminal work *How Not To Write A Novel*, which he poignantly sub-titled *Confessions of a Midlist Author*.



David's authorial "confession" (published in 2003) contains a frighteningly recognisable portrait of his attending, with great anticipation, his very first meeting of the Crime Writers' Association in the days when meetings were held in the attic of the Groucho Club (the 'Anne Frank wing' as it was known) in Soho. Feeling, he says, like Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, David's description of his first impressions are worth savouring again:

"Apart from a tall man in dark glasses who was wearing a baseball cap, most of the people in the room appeared to be the wrong side of fifty. I took a seat at the back of the room. A man in a blue anorak who was carrying several carrier bags, opened one of them, pulled out a carefully wrapped cheese sandwich and started to eat it."

Somehow, David managed to come to terms with the glamour of crime-writing (which can often go to a young man's head) and his views on the crime writing Establishment are remarkably restrained considering the way his debut novel was treated.

But it is the section on (writing) Courses in *How Not To Write A Novel* which is of more interest, particularly the conclusion which offers the following advice to would-be writers:

Don't do courses, they'll only encourage you.

Now that is sound advice. As any supporter of West Bromwich Albion will freely admit, it's the *hope* that gets you.

Toodles!

The Ripster