

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley

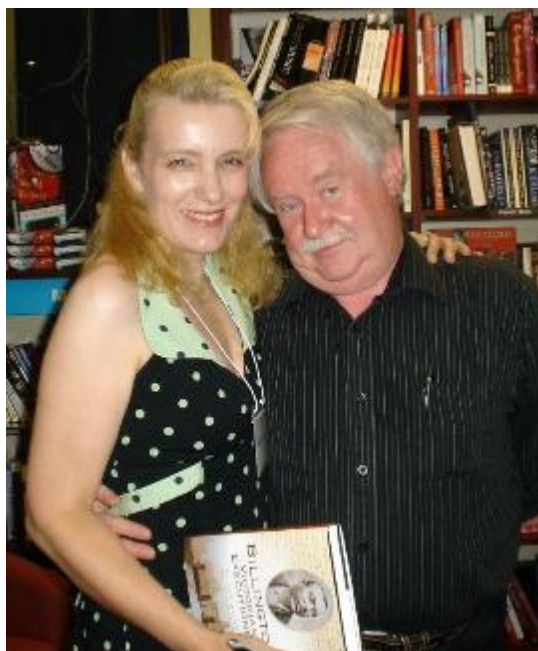


Bodies Everywhere

The nineteenth reunion of the *alumni* of St Heffer's College Cambridge this year saw the older graduates and many undergraduates mingling in the new layout of the college buildings. At first somewhat confusing, once it was realised that the whole college had been arranged along the lines of the board game *Cluedo* (the Braille edition) and the free bar opened, everything fell into place.

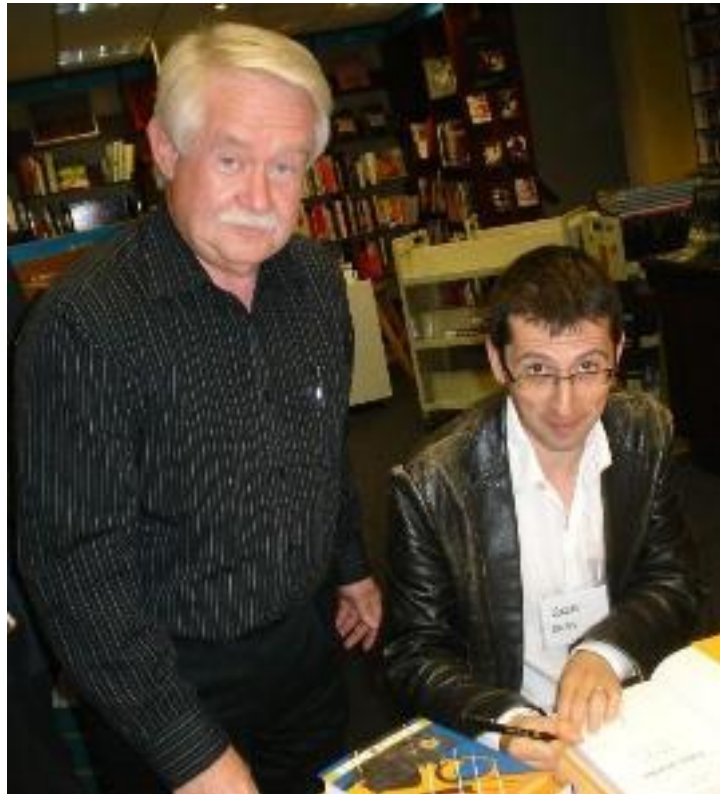
A few did remain confused, though, notably my old friend the delicate Natasha Cooper who seemed convinced that the college was full of "white haired old men" who all looked like Stephen Booth, but things soon settled down.

It was a pleasure to welcome new students such as the delightful Alison Bruce who had a disarmingly charming method of selling her book *Billington* – a biography of the Victorian public hangman.



“It’s a bit depressing really ...everybody dies in it,” she told potential readers, but actually, that’s probably a good thing when talking about a professional executioner.

Nearby, also on the undergraduates’ table, I was able to supervise the talented Jeremy Duns as he signed his fantastic debut spy novel *Free Agent* with the inscription “I owe it all to appearing in the *Getting Away With Murder* column”.



But then I was recalled to duty with my old and distinguished friend Ruth Dudley Edwards as we put on our best smiling faces to supervise the “Dead Funny” seminar room where the comedy crime was situated. Our duties were not terribly onerous, merely crowd control on the hundreds of readers pushing and shoving to buy the books of those witty and popular writers Colin Cotterill and Len (L.C.) Tyler.



Sadly this year’s High Table feast was decimated by late cancellations mostly attributed to the pandemic of swine flu sweeping the crime-writing world, though in one case, the charming E.V. Seymour excused herself on

the grounds that she wanted a private dinner “with a man” and her excuse was duly noted in the College Minute Book. (Though, oddly, it was not the first time this excuse had appeared.)

However, a jolly sociable time was had by all, with Shots Editor Mike Tombstone Stotter and millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim inducting new members Jeremy Duns and Stav Sherez, author of one of this year’s best thrillers: *The Black Monastery*.



Among the other distinguished guests (albeit avoiding the camera for legal reasons) were Deryn Lake, Philip and Ann Purser, Barry Norman, Ariana Franklin and, of course, the Master of St Heffer’s, Professor Richard and Lady Reynolds.

International Incident

Once again the Crime Writers Association seems to have courted controversy with its International Dagger Award, which appears to have been isolated, if not quarantined, from what used to be its most prestigious award, the Gold Dagger for best crime novel. (Actually, the jewels in the CWA crown used to be the Gold and Silver Daggers, but the Silver seems to have disappeared and there is now a Steel Dagger for “thrillers”.)

The recent award of the International Dagger to, once again, that effervescent French writer (and botanical archaeologist) Fred Vargas got the jolly old interweb positively humming. There was even a rumoured outburst from a translator of crime fiction that “they should rename it the Fred Vargas Dagger” although I for one, with my limited knowledge of cyberspace, failed to verify this.

There was muted surprise, if not dumb astonishment, from the *Eurocrime* website where for some time now polls have been run among its readers as to their views on which book would (and which should) win. The joint clear favourites had been, inevitably, the late Stieg Larsson’s *Girl Who Played With Fire* and Norwegian Jo

Nesbo's *The Redeemer*. The rank outsider, garnering only 4 votes (less than 4% of the poll) was Fred Vargas with *The Chalk Circle Man*, which I believe was her first novel written over ten years ago but not translated into English until now.

Still, 4 votes was an improvement for the site's expert readership as last year (as the site itself points out) absolutely no one voted for the eventually winner, which was of course.....er....?

I was foolishly expecting the shortlists for the Gold, Steel and New Blood Daggers to be announced at the same time but it appears we will have to wait until "the Autumn" for that titbit. Meanwhile all eyes will be on the new format for an awards ceremony in October as part and parcel of, or possibly a joint venture with (I am not clear), the ITV3 Television crime awards.

This new sponsorship/partnership/event/thing will apparently be called the Crime Thriller Awards and will involve, I suspect, many well-known faces from showbiz and fictional TV detectives – so many that mere writers will struggle to get a look in.

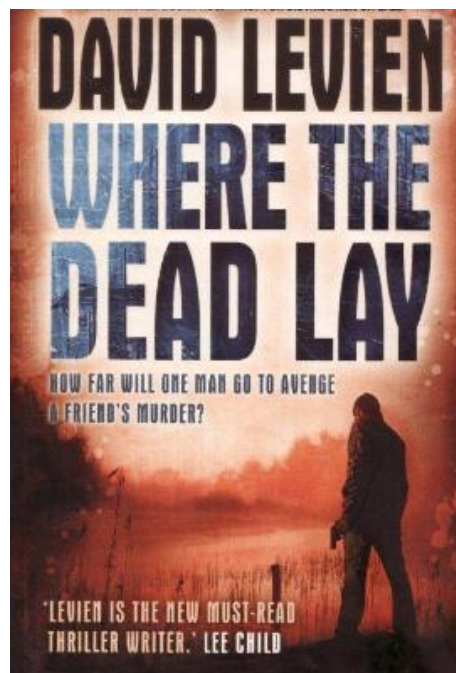
I am relieved that I am unlikely to participate in any capacity as I am not sure I could get my head around categories such as *The CWA and Crime Thriller Awards' Ian Fleming Steel Dagger* or *The CWA and Crime Thriller Awards' John Creasey (New Blood) Dagger*.

Still, the situation has been somewhat simplified by the dropping of "Duncan Lawrie" from the awards. I wonder whatever became of him, or indeed, who he ever was.

Minutes of the Book Club

I do so enjoy the monthly meetings here at Ripster Hall of Lady Ripster's 'Book Club', which includes amongst its members my old Fag from schooldays who is now the Archbishop of Norwich.

The book under discussion this month came to the club highly recommended by none other than Lee Child and was an American thriller of the hard-boiled persuasion called *Where The Dead Lay* written by David Levien and published by Bantam.



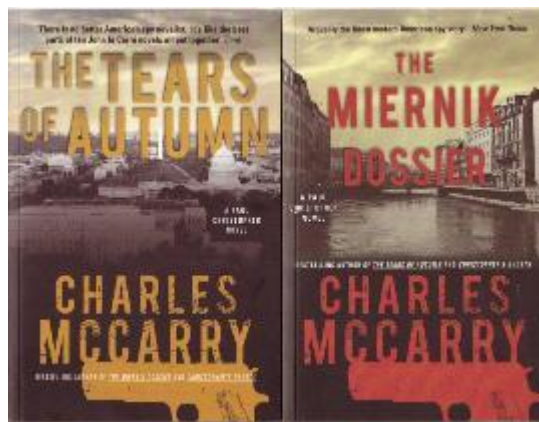
The group thought the book quite exciting though there was one particular passage which caused some confusion among almost all present: *He took another deep whiff, then reared back, ripped off the jimmy hat and gave her an eight-roper across the belly.*

I had to admit to being totally bemused by the passage, as we all were, save for the Archbishop who tapped his nose and said quietly: “Genesis, Chapter 38. It got Onan killed.”

I wonder what he could possibly have meant?

Where the spies are

I have said before, and will again, that there is some seriously good spy fiction around at the moment and I believe a major revival of interest in the genre is underway. As evidence, I would cite the major adaptation on Radio 4 of the complete Smiley canon from the (still bestselling) pen of John le Carre and recent or pending reissues of classic works by Eric Ambler and Len Deighton.



And now comes news that the Grand Wizard of the American spy story, Charles McCarry, is to have his distinguished backlist republished here by those delightful Duckworth people, starting with *The Miernik Dossier* (from 1973) and *The Tears of Autumn* (1974).

Loose Women

I was startled to see the sudden appearance of my old friend Martina Cole on one of my favourite television programmes, the philosophical discussion show *Loose Women*, which I never miss. Fortunately I had my Box Brownie to hand to capture the event, not realising that the magnesium flare flash would make a bit of mess of the picture once the film came back from the chemist's.



There is absolutely no logical reason why I should have been startled by Martina's appearance for she was certainly in the news at the time, with one of her novels adapted for a major drama series on Sky TV and her books being published in the USA for (amazingly) the first time.

I first met Martina at a Shots convention in Nottingham many years ago, not realising at the time that she had burst on to the crime scene at a ridiculously young age and was already well on her way to becoming Britain's biggest-selling crime writer. I have always found her to be incredibly sociable, a kind and generous host and incredibly polite and affectionate to her legions of dedicated fans with whom she clearly shares a strong bond.



I am not sure what our colonial cousins will make of her tough and grittily realistic thrillers, usually with very strong female characters, for I have a sneaking suspicion that American mystery readers still expect English crime fiction to be sprinkled with butlers, drawing rooms and aristocratic detectives.

From the Divine Shades

Almost five years after his death, the much praised Swedish author Stieg Larsson could be picking up yet another award for his posthumously-published novel *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* and this one might even leave his most dedicated fan, millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim, speechless.

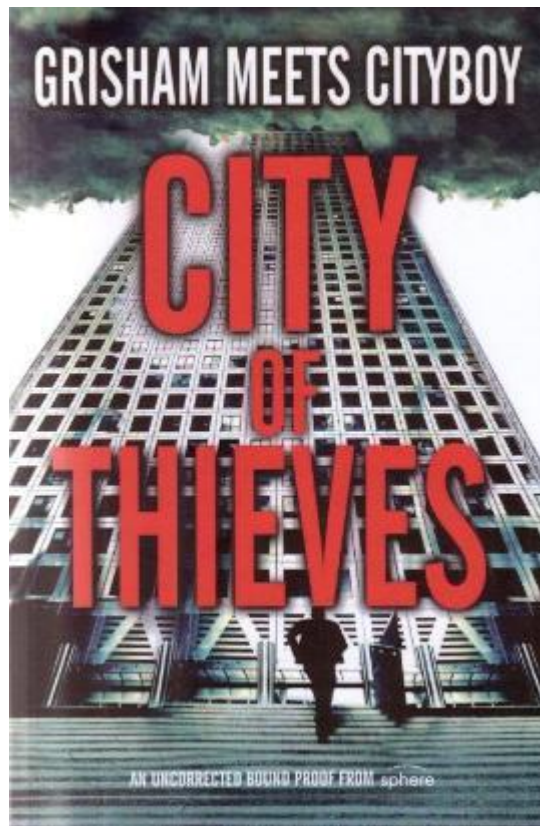
The award for which Larsson is shortlisted is the annual 'Barry' Award presented jointly by the American magazines *Mystery News* and *Deadly Pleasures* and the category Larsson will probably triumph in is: Best **British** Crime Novel!

Now this is not to suggest that Americans simply look at a globe and note that Britain and Sweden are so close together (in comparison, say, to Arizona and Rhode Island) that they must be roughly the same country.

The actual award is described as *Best British Crime Novel published in the UK but not necessarily written by a British writer nor set in the UK*, which is, admittedly, a bit of a mouthful. Wouldn't "Best Non-American" have been easier?

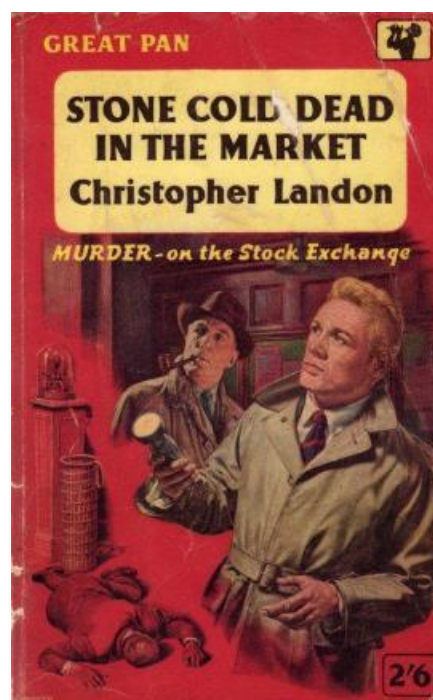
Dirty Old Heart of the City

Considering its propensity for venality and double-dealing, I find it odd that the City of London and the institutions therein has not been featured in more crime novels than it has. Recent events have certainly raised the profile of the banking industry and only the other day I suffered abuse from some hooded youths on a street corner who attempted in vain to attract my attention with cries of "Oi! You old banker!"

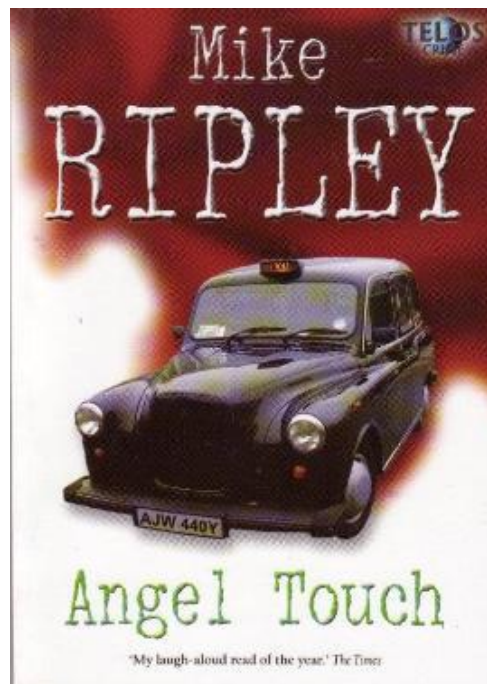


However, those smashing people at Sphere have brought us the debut mystery *City of Thieves* by one Cyrus Moore, who I am told was a major player in investment banking in the City and even set up “an investment research boutique” before turning to fiction, although cynics might say that many in the City have been living in a fictional world for several years now.

Other crime writers have touched on the workings of the City in the past, notably Christopher Landon (better known for the Carlsberg advert *Ice Cold in Alex*) in 1955 with *Stone Cold Dead in the Market*.



And then there was the 1989 winner of the CWA's Last Laugh Award, *Angel Touch*, by...er...me.

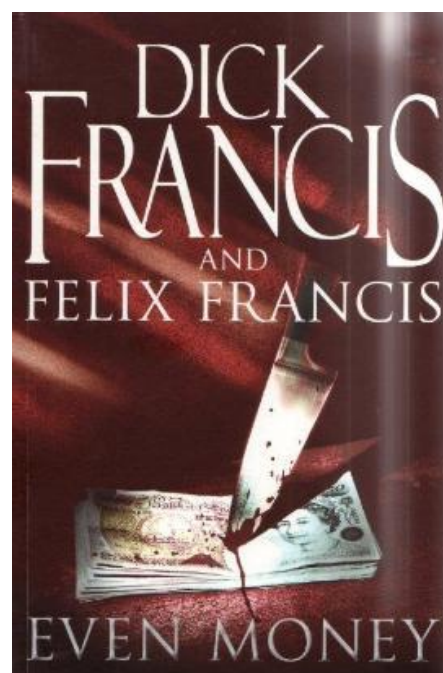


Beautifully reissued by Telos Books, *Angel Touch* is now available in all good bookshops (and possibly even Waterstone's) and will be joined in the Telos imprint in 2010 by two other early 'Angel Tales' which somehow had managed to slip out of print: *Angel City* and *Angel Confidential* from 1994 and 1995.

Both these new (old) novels will come with a specially commissioned Introduction from the author just as soon as he gets round to writing them.

Challenge to Dan

Whilst the new Dan Brown is the odds-on favourite to be leading the bestseller charts next month, the latest offering from the Fantastic Francis Family Firm is at least even money to make a strong challenge.



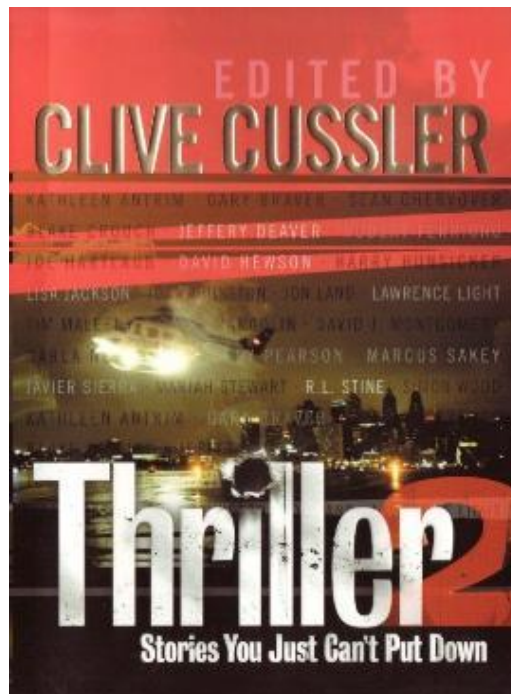
In fact the new novel from father-and-son team Dick and Felix Francis is actually called *Even Money* (published by Michael Joseph on 3rd September) and has a characteristic opening at Royal Ascot but an unusual hero in the shape of a turf accountant or bookie to me and you.

In any other year, this would be a dead cert to be the #1 bestseller, probably by several lengths. This September, it might be a photo-finish.

Thrillfest

Those jolly energetic people at the (relatively) recently-formed International Thriller Writers {...Guild? Association? Club? Cabal? Consortium?....} have to be admired for the way they are sticking to their task of promoting the *thriller* and by putting their writing where their mouth is by producing another anthology containing the work of some of their impressive membership list.

Thriller 2, published here by Mira Books (and excellent value at £10.99 as opposed to \$24.95 in the US), is edited by Clive Cussler and contains more famous names than a Christmas box of Elizabeth Shaw liqueur chocolates.



The likes of Jeffery Deaver, Philip Margolin, David Hewson (sadly the only UK-based contributor), Ridley Pearson and Robert Ferrigno (with a lovely piece of swampy *noir*) need no introduction but the fun of such anthologies is discovering new writers you've not come across before.

And if they are unfamiliar names to you, let me suggest you immediately check out Spaniard Javier Sierra and Americans Sean Chercover (recent winner of a CWA Short Story Dagger) and Marcus Sakey and just remember you heard of them first here.

Summer Daze

A year ago I noted that the start of Wimbledon marked the time of the year when publishers began closing their offices at midday on Fridays (if not Thursday evenings), thus reducing the awesome pressures of working a full five-lunch week. I notice that even more publishers – and indeed some literary agents now – are adopting the

practice this year and publicly announcing that they will operate “Summer Hours” for the months of June, July and August.

As an old newspaperman I fondly remember similar work-time directives, though of course in those days they were known as “Spanish Practices”.

Summer Reads

It is good to see that crusading newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* is taking this column seriously. In the *Telegraph’s* “50 Summer Reads” supplement for this year, it recommends nine crime/mystery titles, no fewer than six of which have been already rightly praised here: Elliot Hall’s *The First Stone*, Jeremy Duns’ *Free Agent*, Malcolm Pryce’s *From Aberystwyth With Love*, Nicola Upson’s *Angel With Two Faces*, Colin Bateman’s *Mystery Man* and Reg Hill’s *Midnight Fugue*.

Viking Raid

I have been accused in the past of being somewhat disparaging of Scandinavian crime fiction, but whilst I admit to still feeling the hurt of the battle of Maldon (991 AD) I can also claim to be one of the staunchest supporters of the work of Swedish crime writers Maj Sjöwall and Peter Wahloo, whose 10-book Martin Beck series written between 1965 and 1975 ought to be one of the cornerstones of any crime fiction library.



But it is true that, quite recently, I was censored by the *Eurocrime* website when I wrote that I could think of many “terminally-serious, glacially-paced Scandinavian crime writers who should lighten up and try a crash course in (the sheer bloody *humanity* of) Reginald Hill.”

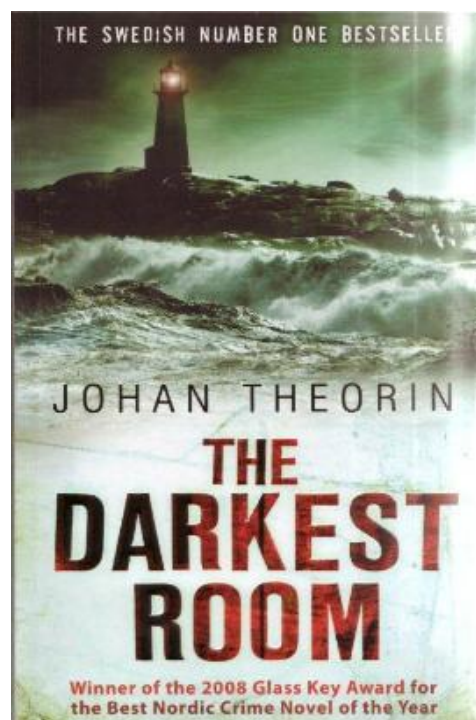
Okay, so maybe I do have issues with the chattering classes who think that if it's Scandinavian crime-writing it must, by association, be upmarket, fashionably flat-packed and therefore good. Its fans tend to be just that, fanatical; going into raptures about the latest Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish or Icelandic writer they have 'discovered'. (I am not aware of any crime-writers from Greenland or the Faroes yet, but it is surely only a matter of time.) And this is where I want to impose a reality check on the fans: not *all* of it *is* good, some of it is dull, formulaic and unimaginative (not to mention invariably *gloomy*) – just as British and American, or any other, crime fiction can be.

And I admit to not liking the Scandinavian bandwagon on which many publishers are jumping. In another life in another century, I worked in the British brewing industry (when there was one) and saw many examples of what was then called "Me-too" marketing. If one company, for example, introduced a foreign 'lager' beer, then every other company fell over themselves to introduce – and extensively promote – their own brand which was marketed as even more 'foreign' and therefore somehow more exotic, though not necessarily of higher quality. Similarly, the (deserved) success of Henning Mankell sparked an unseemly, often undignified, rush by British publishers to sign a Scandinavian crime writer of their own – *any* Scandinavian, even those whose books were not thought worth translating in pre-Mankell days.

And then there's the problem with translations. Several years ago at a literary event (chaired by the elegant Peter Guttridge no less) on crime fiction in translation, I asked the professional translators there (who worked in French and Spanish) whether they read crime fiction themselves. Red faces all round as they admitted they did not and indeed could not name a living crime writer writing in English between them!

Now I may be wrong (I usually am) but I think that without a working knowledge or at least a passing acquaintance with crime writing in English, a simple translation of the words, however technically accurate, will lose out on the rhythms and pacing which crime fiction readers are familiar with (and which may well be present in the native language). I am also pretty sure that many crime novels translated into English are simply translated and not subsequently copy-edited in any way by an English-reading editor. (One publisher of crime in translation has admitted this to me.)

However, I thought I had better put my niggles aside and read the Swedish Number One bestseller and most recent winner of the Glass Key Award for the best Nordic crime novel of the year: ***The Darkest Room*** by Johan Theorin (published here by Doubleday).



First off, let me get my gripes about translation/editing out of the way. For reasons which I fail to understand, the translation adopts the British system of miles and yards instead of kilometres and metres, which may be of help to the terminally stupid but frankly, looks odd. Even odder, the Imperial system is extended to a sign in a butcher's shop which offers something (it's not clear what) at "39.50 a pound" where, presumably, the "39.50" refers to Swedish *Kronor*.

There is, it seems, an importance in Sweden of *place* and lots of places are mentioned in this book, *some* of which are actually relevant to the plot, but many are there because (I guess) they make sense to a Swedish readership. The book comes with a map of its main setting, the island of Oland, which is over 90 miles long and has a population of 25,000 people. (I looked it up). A non-Swedish reader may well have trouble keeping up with the action as it flits from one place to another on Oland itself (which is why there is a map) but the significance of knowing that characters come from or live in other places such as Bromma, Emmaboda, Hagelby, Byxelkrok, Vaxjo, Saltfjardem, Malmtorp, Bondegaten and Ostermalm, could be totally lost on them.

That said *The Darkest Room* is an intriguing book, which teeters on the edge of being a ghost story rather than a crime novel. All the interesting characters (dead and alive) are women, in particular a young just-out-of-the-academy policewoman and a monstrously cold and unfeeling mother-in-law. There are brief (too brief), almost cameo, appearances for a very scary pair of psychopathic burglars and the policewoman's grizzled old great-uncle who, albeit months later, realises that a murder has been committed even though the police, the pathologists and the forensic experts seemed to have missed it.

Needless to say, there are few laughs in *The Darkest Room*, not even ironic ones when the motive for the murder of a drug-addict seems to have been that she was lowering the tone of the neighbourhood.

So yes, you could say it was gloomy and most of the characters, who appear and then disappear for a hundred pages or more at a time, seem to go out of their way to avoid showing any signs of humanity. This is especially so of the main male character, who may or may not be (a) haunted, (b) going crazy or (c) both; Joakim Westin, who is widowed early on in the story and who shows a distinctly chilly and uncaring attitude to his two children (particularly his infant son who hardly gets a look in throughout the book), leaving them out in storms, in blizzards or alone in a haunted house during a gunfight! I am afraid the total lack of sympathy engendered for Westin (even his late wife didn't confide in him) is one of the main weaknesses of the book. I simply didn't care what happened to him; in fact I wanted to slap him for his remoteness and emotionless attitude to his kids, his lack of *humanity* and his sheer bloody *glumness*.

This book may have won The Glass Key but I doubt it will win any awards from the Swedish Tourist Board or the Swedish police, who don't exactly come out of it covered in glory.

Local Life

The pub, as everyone knows is at the heart and liver of every community and nowhere more so than for those of us who live in the Eastern Marches well away from the hustle and bustle of city life. We even have a pub here in the grounds of Ripster Hall, though it is too far these days for a personage of my great age to walk to, so I often send one of the young under-butlers on his bicycle to fetch me a glass of ale. (Their continued employment depends on the amount of liquid in the glass on their arrival back at the Hall.)



I have long thought of pubs as a vital part of the crime writing scene and was delighted to be proved right when I journeyed across the savannahs of beautiful Suffolk in July to attend the Debenham Literary Festival. On arriving in that historic village what should immediately catch my eye but a banner on the High Street proudly proclaiming that crime-writer Lesley Grant-Adamson was in the Red Lion.



How perceptive of the parish council, I thought, to advertise where the nearest crime-writer should be in case one was needed in an emergency, but it turned out that the Literary Festival events originally scheduled to take place in the Angel Inn had been moved owing to the sudden and no doubt tragic closure of that hostelry only the week before.

Although it is now (staggeringly) eleven years since Lesley Grant-Adamson wrote a crime novel, she easily charmed a capacity crowd with stories from her writing career, including one or two insights into the perilous world that is being-adapted-for-television or “Development Hell” as it is known in the trade.



By a strange coincidence, one of Lesley’s cautionary tales about TV adaptations involved the work of another female crime writer, Sarah Dunant, and only that morning before departing on my expedition to Suffolk Sarah’s name had been mentioned over breakfast at Ripster Hall when one of the servants (who is paid a small stipend for scouring the popular press for me) noticed an excellent review of her new novel *Sacred Hearts* in *The London Times*, as our colonial cousins insist on calling it.

It is also, amazingly, some eleven years since the divine Sarah wrote a crime novel, having “gone legit” and turned to historical novels such as *Sacred Hearts*, which was dramatised on Radio 4 recently.

How odd that I should be reminded of the excellent mysteries of two of our once most prominent female crime writers on the same morning. I must go to the pub more often.

Special Offers Galore

I was forced recently to travel to the nearest town to purchase a bottle of ink for the solid gold fountain pen awarded to me by the Crime Writers' Association at some point in the last century.

Visiting that famous stationer W.H. Smith for the first time in many years I naturally drifted into the "books" section. To my amazement, virtually everything on sale there was subject to a special offer of one sort or another. I could buy one and get one half-price; buy two and get one free; or buy any of their selected top selling fiction at a fraction of the cost indicated on the cover.

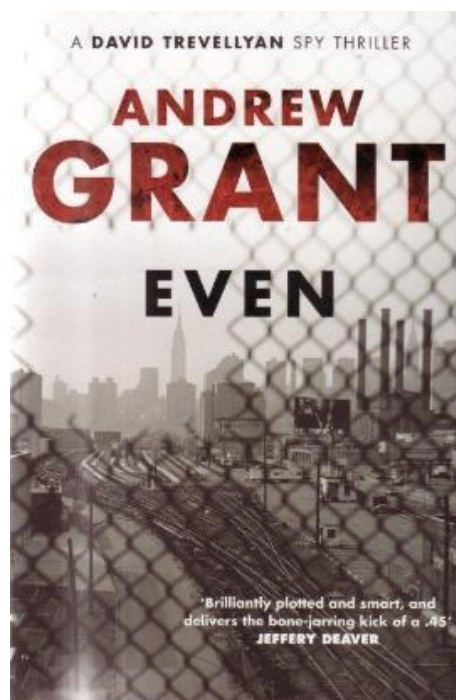
Amidst this plethora of offers, I attempted to find a book which did *not* have a sticker obscuring the cover, but in vain. One particular promotion did, however, catch my eye: were I prepared to pre-order the forthcoming Dan Brown blockbuster, I would qualify for a *free* Simon Kernick title.

Tempted though I was, I resisted and stocking up on the latest issues of *Men's Health*, *The Racing Post* and *The Tablet*, I beat a hasty retreat.

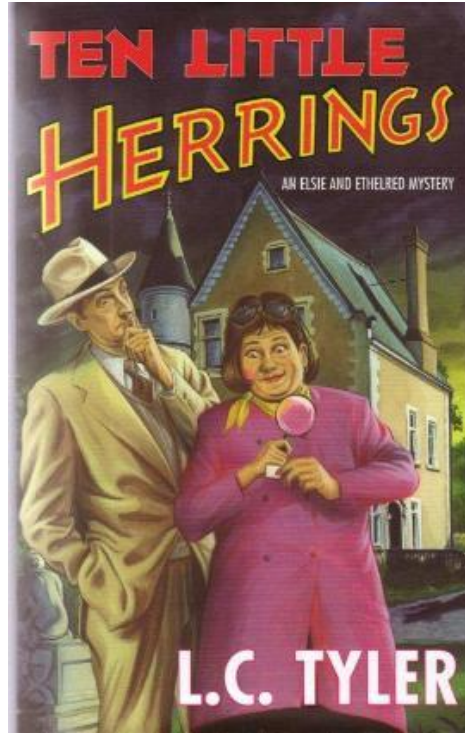
Table Talk

It's always the way, isn't it? After ten years of not being invited to any Macmillan parties, three invitations, like London buses, arrive at once and I am unable to attend any of them due to infirmity and increasing senility not to mention the prohibitive cost of travel now that Parliamentary expenses and allowances have been so brutally curtailed.

I would certainly have liked to have celebrated the launch of the debut thriller *Even* by Andrew Grant, which comes highly recommended by Jeffery Deaver and Tess Gerritsen.

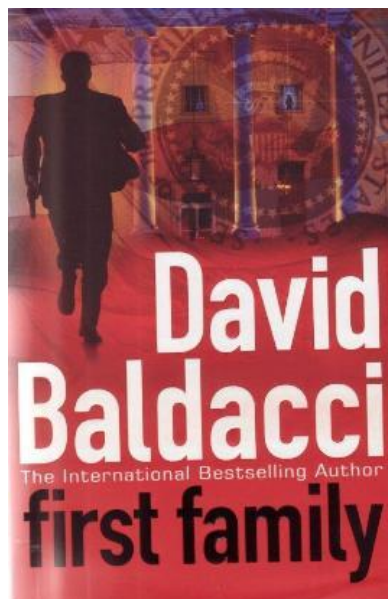


Now normally, I only follow the recommendations of thrill-*meister* Lee Child and, oddly for a book written by a Briton but set in America, there is no cover quote from him (for surely he is the expert in this field). But there is a very good reason for this, as Lee is doing the decent thing by refraining from ‘blurbing’ *Even* as the author, Andrew Grant, is actually Lee’s younger brother and, like him and many other notable personages, a distinguished graduate of Sheffield University.



Similarly, I missed the launch party for L.C. Tyler’s splendidly unserious *Ten Little Herrings*, starring Ethelred Tressider and Elsie Thirkettle, although I was able to welcome Len Tyler into the alumni of St Heffer’s in Cambridge. {And I strongly advise every budding author to read Elsie Thirkettle’s basic rules of being a literary agent, for they are painfully accurate.}

I was also unable to attend the lavish lunch thrown in honour of American author David Baldacci, in London to mark the publications of his latest thriller *First Family*.

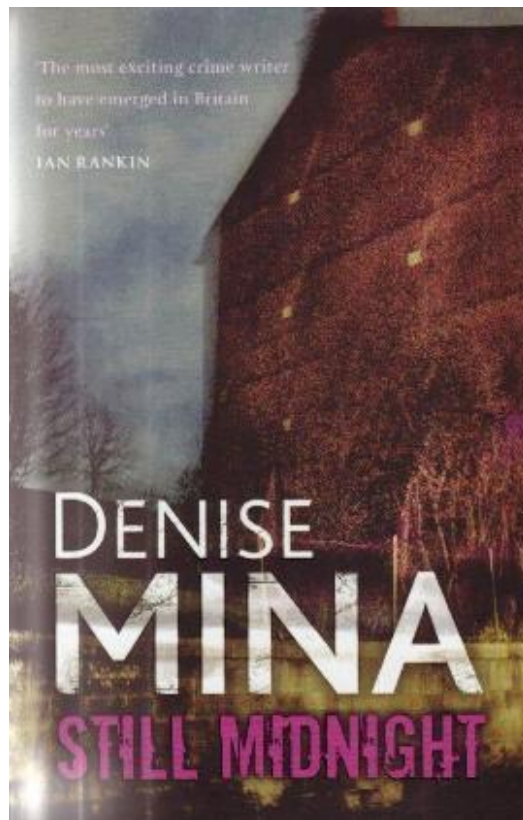


I was sorry not to have met Mr Baldacci, who I am told is a very nice man. With sixteen consecutive #1 *New York Times* bestsellers, his books published in 80 countries and 80,000,000 copies in print, not to mention a second strand of novels for young adults and the fact that he is not yet fifty years old, however, it is probably a good thing I did not meet him for naked jealousy does terrible things to my blood pressure.

I am assured, however, that he was royally entertained by the presence at the lunch of that well-known raconteur the ubiquitous Professor Barry Forshaw. Such is Barry's reputation as a pre-, after- and indeed during-dinner speaker, I believe that a volume of his reminiscences and anecdotes is being prepared under the title *Table Talk*, to be edited by Hugh Trevor-Roper with a Forward by Robert Harris.

Northern Lights

I am delighted to see that my old chum Denise Mina, who is a Scottish person, has a new book out this summer in the shape of *Still Midnight* from those go-ahead publishers Orion.



I can forgive, as one must, the publishers for their hyperbole in describing this excellent chiller as a “huge new break-out novel” whatever that might mean, but I am less forgiving when they add “from one of crime writing’s rising stars....”

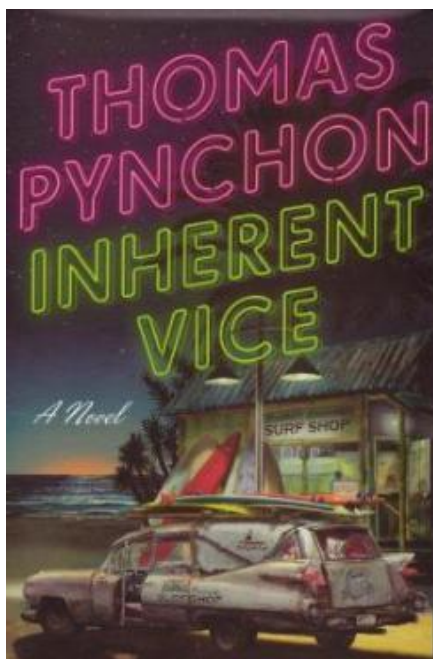
Anyone with any sense and more than six months’ experience of reading crime fiction (okay, so that lets out a lot of publishers) would recognise that Denise Mina has been one of Britain’s crime writing stars for the past ten years. What is more, she seems to have successfully, by incorporating deep and disturbing psychological insights into her writing, mostly avoided that overused tag of “Tartan Noir”.



For Denise is indeed a Scottish person, being born in Glasgow before it was landscaped, and I have to say, having had the pleasure of appearing with her in public (more times than the usual once) she is one of the funniest and quickest-witted people I have met either side of Hadrian's Wall.

This week I am mostly reading...

Inherent Vices by that giant of the American literary scene, Thomas Pynchon and published here by Jolly Cool publisher Jonathan Cape.



It is far from a conventional crime novel, set at the tail-end of the Sixties in California with a private eye hero called Doc Sportello, his company being called *Location, Surveillance, Detection* (just use the initials).

The cast is eccentric enough – and quite believable for the setting – a hippy-bashing cop called Bigfoot, an ex-con with a swastika tattooed on his forehead and a penchant for the songs of Ethel Merman, Dr Blatnoyd, the exotic Trillum, surfers and legions of luscious *stewardii*, which I presume are air-hostesses.

The plot involves something or someone called The Golden Fang but the book is really about the drug culture and one is left with the feeling that not only was it amazing that any crime got solved at all in beachside Los Angeles in the Sixties, but that anyone was straight enough long enough to commit a crime.

The writing, as you would expect from Pynchon, is dense and peppered with references to old TV shows, songs and vintage movies and packed with excellent gags and laugh-aloud scenes. If you can take the relentless stream of drugs taken or sought by the cast, you'll enjoy this aromatic romp. But you know what they say about the Sixties: if you can remember any of it, you weren't there. *Inherent Vice* reads like Thomas Pynchon was there and has suddenly, forty years on, had a revelation and remembered *all* of it.

Quote of the month

From John Bingham's *A Fragment of Fear* [Gollancz, 1965]:

I am a writer of crime stories, which means that the characters in my stories are mostly fictional, but occasionally the victim bears a resemblance to somebody I detest, and why not indeed? Every job has its perks.

Toodles!!

The Ripster.