

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Banvillegate to Berlin, via Kensington

If only I had known that the literary spat of the year would kick off at the Horrorgate Festival in July, I would have had the plastic surgery done and attempted to attend despite the various Restraining Orders on me.

It seems that Booker prize winning novelist John Banville, who writes crime fiction under the name Benjamin Black, was appearing with my old chum Reginald Hill when he let slip (or inferred, or was misunderstood to say) that he found it much easier to write his crime rather than his ‘proper’ novels. This obviously went down like a lead balloon – it was a crime writing festival after all – and the temperature dropped further when Banville ‘joked’ that what he actually wanted to do was win the Nobel Prize. (Presumably Reg Hill had to reconcile himself to an empty life; or at least a life empty of everything except a 30-year run of bestselling crime novels, a highly-rated TV series spin-off and a Gold or Diamond Dagger or two.)

At this point an enterprising and youthful member of Her Majesty’s Press began searching for *vox pop* quotes among the audience, finding one crime writer whom he quoted as saying that Banville “was slumming”.

This then triggered a rather patronising rebuttal by John Banville who claimed the quoted writer ‘ought to have known better’ whilst admitting that some of his ‘jokes’ at Horrorgate had not been good and he had learned from the experience that “A sheep should not venture into a pen of wolves” although I am personally curious to know what sort of wolves live in pens? (He also made a stab at establishing his crime fiction credentials and named the crime writers he admired. What a pity there were no living ones on his list.)

Throughout August the row rumbled on, particularly in the blogosphere and the Irish press, which is interesting as (and I know this for a certainty as I was not there when he said it) Banville/Black has regretted setting a crime series in 1950’s Ireland “as there wasn’t any crime there then”....

However my point, to which I will get eventually, is that coverage of this ‘status of crime writers’ story in *The Guardian* newspaper was illustrated with a stunning group photograph from 1987 showing Julian Symons, Eric Ambler, Reginald Hill and Anthony Price all standing in front of a still-erect Berlin Wall.

It is a truly fabulous photograph and quite an historic one in crime writing terms, all four were popular and influential writers (Reg still is) and three out of the four were awarded the Cartier Diamond Dagger, though why Anthony Price never got one simply beggars belief.

Anyhoo, the point was I wanted to share this brilliant photograph with the devoted readers of this column but sadly the fees and licensing arrangements demanded by *The Guardian* were too exorbitant even for Shots Magazine, which everyone knows is done for tax-avoidance rather than profit.

And so here instead is a picture of Anthony Price taken from the jacket of one of his later novels, *A Prospect of Vengeance*.



I discovered the superb spy stories (all liberally spiced with lashings of archaeology and military history) of Anthony Price in 1979 and became an instant fan, eagerly awaiting each new title. I still rave over his distinctive (and breathless) narrative voice and the brilliance of his short story *The Boudicca Killing* and even forgive him the mis-spelling of ‘Boudica’ (a common enough mistake at the time).

Imagine then my pride – and nervousness – when my *very first* public appearance as a published crime writer turned out to be at a mini-crime festival in a London bookshop on 16th September 1988, where the main guest was Anthony Price launching his new novel.

I found him an utterly charming man (I have found that most spy writers are) and totally supportive of a fledgling writer. I proudly cherish my copy of *A Prospect of Vengeance* which he signed for me with the salutation: “Comrades of Hatchards in Kensington”, which I’ve always thought had a certain ring to it.

Not long afterwards – and I am sure *totally* unconnected with our meeting – Anthony decided to retire after 19 novels (plus a short-lived TV series of adaptations starring Terence Stamp) and Dr David Audley, his academic spy hero, started to fade from the memory of all except those who like their thrillers to be both intelligent and erudite. Sadly, he has never been persuaded to come out of retirement and although he won the Crime Writers Silver Dagger with his first novel and the Gold Dagger with his fourth, that Diamond Dagger has eluded him. So far.

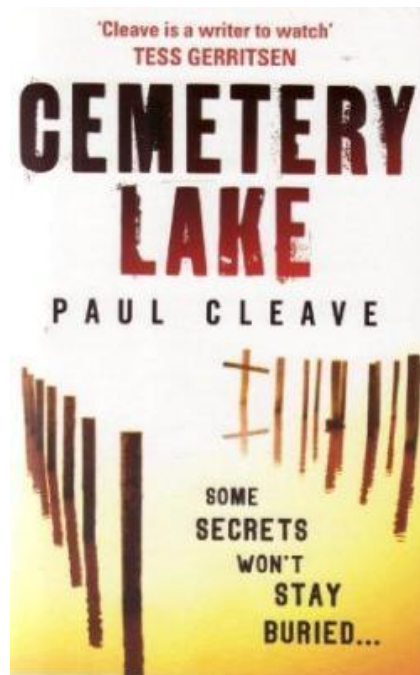
Sounds like sound advice

One of the most influential of the younger generation of crime fiction critics, Jake Kerridge, offered some advice recently in that crusading newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, aimed at “anybody looking for good, lightly humorous crime novels” these days:

“read a lot of Henning Mankell, so that all other crime novels seem lightly humorous in comparison...”

I’ll be mostly reading...

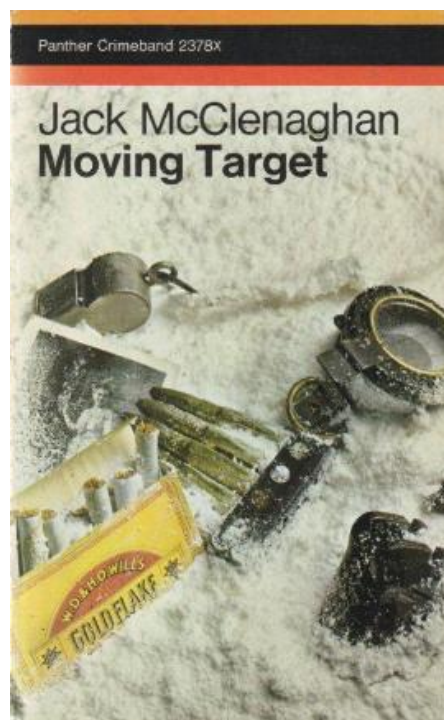
I myself am currently trying the new novel by Paul Cleave, *Cemetery Lake*, which is published here as an Arrow paperback.



I am looking forward to it partly because I have not yet tried one of his thrillers starring private eye Theo Tate and partly because the book is set in Cleave's native New Zealand and one simply doesn't get much chance in this country, it seems, to keep up to date with the Kiwi crime scene. Paul Cleave, I believe, is a bestseller in Germany, though hardly a household name here; which seems slightly odd, as surely no translators need to be hurt in the production of a UK edition.

Given that New Zealand has roughly half the population of Sweden, then statistically speaking we ought to expect them to produce about half the number of crime novels – say around about a thousand a year (or is that just what it feels like?) – but they do seem to be as rare as hobbits wearing Jimmy Choo high heels.

Whilst most readers think of “crime” and “New Zealand” and then, instinctively, of Dame Ngaio Marsh, I tend to automatically go for the sadly forgotten Jack McClenaghan.



His 1966 thriller *Moving Target* was a stunning first novel and described by Francis “Malice Aforethought” Iles as: *one of the most exciting man hunts I remember*. The late Gavin Lyall, who knew a thing about thrillers, agreed and called it: *As simple, subtle and hot as an Armstrong trumpet solo. The best manhunt since Household’s Rogue Male*.

Basically, *Moving Target* is about a tough diamond draft-dodger called Dougherty who, rather than do his army service, decamps for the mountains with an axe and a rifle and squad of soldiers on his trail. It is, as Gavin Lyall pointed out, a logical successor to *Rogue Male* and in its own way, a precursor to David Morrell’s *First Blood* which introduced Rambo to the world six years later.

Attica Rising

Publisher Serpent’s Tail have an impressive record for discovering new talent in the crime and mystery field, with the names of Stella Duffy, Nicholas Blincoe, David Peace and Walter Mosley easily springing to mind.

Now Serpent’s Tail boss Pete Ayrton thinks he has another rising star on his hands in the shape of young American Attica Locke.





Named by her activist parents after the Attica prison riots of 1971, Attica’s first novel, *Black Water Rising*, will be published in the UK in November and comes highly recommended by James Ellroy, George Pelecanos and our own John Harvey.

Remember; you read it here first.

A Good Bank

I have been upbraided for my recent slightly disparaging remarks about bankers, so let me say straight away that there is one bank I have absolute faith in which is the one used when two of my keenest fans send me a cheque for some of my crime novels. (Have I ever mentioned that I used to write crime novels?)

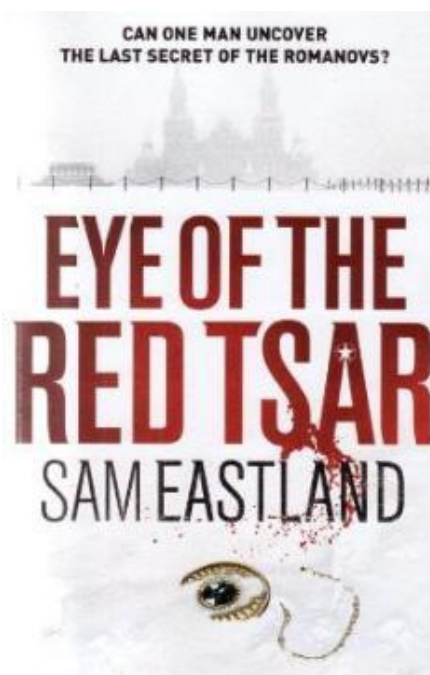
oasis BANK OF BURNAGE		01-09-17 30/06/2009
PAY	MR MICHAEL RIPLEY	Date _____
THE SUM OF	SEVENTY SIX POUNDS AND 60p ONLY	£ 76.60
Amount of pounds in words, pence as in figures		
NOT TO BE USED WITH A CHEQUE GUARANTEE CARD		For and on behalf of SJM Limited Bank of Burnage
NatWest Warrington Branch 23 Sankey Street, Warrington WA1 1XH		 Noel Gallagher
National Westminster Bank Plc www.communisid.com 8508 SJJA007 Any enquiries or to re-order call 0900 3260671		 Liam Gallagher
@008 703 0 09 1 7 58 78 36 5 2		

Those lovely boys Noel and Liam have been fans for many years and when they can afford it, they pool their pocket money and buy one of my old first editions, which are surprisingly valuable these days. In their youth the Gallagher boys often expressed a desire to form themselves into a modern beat combo and play music of the rock and roll persuasion. I wonder if they ever did?

New Year's Revolution

As I no longer have the patience to wait for the CWA's Gold and the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger *shortlists*, let alone winners for 2008-09, I have decided to start predicting (with my usual catastrophic success rate) the winners for 2010!

A strong contender in both categories will surely be *Eye of the Red Tsar*, a debut novel (another category), which is set in Russia shortly after the 1917 revolution (so an Ellis Peters contender as well).



Published by those fabulously frisky people at Faber in January 2010 and written by Sam Eastland who, I believe is a Brit but lives in the USA, *Eye of the Red Tsar* is part crime story, part thriller, part treasure-hunt all told fluently and with great pace against a truly turbulent historical backdrop involving the death of the Romanov family, Siberian labour camps, missing jewels, the first awful hints of Collectivisation and one absolute monarch (Tsar Nicholas) being replaced by another (Stalin). But apart from the action – which is pretty much non-stop – the book also has fully-fleshed characters and a hero who manages to survive the terrors of both Old and New Regimes despite personal loss (and I shall resist the temptation to quote “We’ll always have Paris” here, despite a poignant scene at the Finland Station).

Russia just before and during the Bolshevik Revolution is a rip-roaring setting and this is a rip-roaring adventure story which delivers more than its fair share of thrills. Yet Sam Eastman isn’t the first to exploit this particular chunk of history.

Robert Harris and Tom Rob Smith have both had a fair stab at historical Russia in later periods, but the chaos of the revolution and subsequent civil war have provided the backdrops to two of my favourite thrillers, both, co-incidentally, published in 1973:



Kolchak's Gold by that wonderful American thriller writer Brian Garfield, harks back to when the Tsar’s imperial treasure went ‘missing’ during the bloody civil war between Reds and Whites.

A Clear Road to Archangel by Geoffrey Rose is a lone man-on-the-run story of a British spy trying to evade the winter – and the revolution– of 1917 both threaten to engulf him. Although it is some years now since I read it, I remember it being a very powerful, very tense, very atmospheric novel, which reminded me in many ways of that other Geoffrey’s [Household] classic *Rogue Male*. The author, who obviously had bags of talent, wrote two other thrillers I am aware of – *Nobody On The Road* and *The Bright Adventure* – between 1972 and 1975, but after that seems to disappear off the radar, or at least mine.

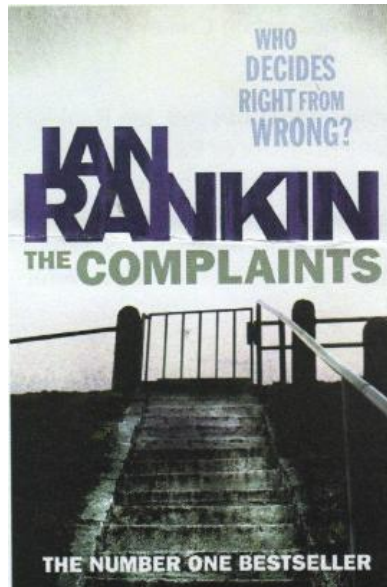
Naturally I attempted to look up Geoffrey Rose in the recent Encyclopaedia of British Crime Writing (Sole Prop. Professor B. Forshaw), but in vain.

No Complaints

All those sulking readers who have taken to living under archways with a bottle of Buckfast since Inspector John Rebus was retired by Ian Rankin should take heart and make their way into the daylight, trampling empty cans of Irn Bru and the remains of fish suppers underfoot, to welcome with acclamation Inspector Malcolm Fox to the pantheon of fictional detectives.

Who? I hear you say.

Well, Inspector Malcolm Fox is the hero of Ian's new novel *The Complaints* (from those great supporters of crime fiction, Orion) and I think that he is set for a series of his own, especially now he has met, on his debut, the perfect side-kick in Detective Sergeant Jamie Breck.



Of course they don't start off as partners in crime fighting, in fact to begin with they are more or less investigating each other: Fox as a member of the Complaints and Conduct Department (Lothian Police's "internal affairs") and Breck on a murder investigation where the victim just happens to be the abusive, n'er-do-well partner of Fox's alcoholic sister. Nobody ever said life was easy in law enforcement in dear old Edinburgh, did they? And of course things go from worse to even worse when dodgy property developers and the local gangster squirarchy begin to take an interest and it emerges that there are very few policemen (or women) they can trust.

This being an Ian Rankin novel, though, one of the main characters is, naturally, Edinburgh itself and this time it's a credit-crunched Edinburgh in the process (it seems) of suffering death by a thousand cuts as a new tram network is constructed, but as well drawn as ever. If I have a criticism it is only that the author resisted the temptation to make an awful lot more jokes about Scottish bankers. (I know I could not have.)

The internecine warfare among the various police forces and their departmental units is one of the key features of *The Complaints* and I reckon Ian Rankin has found a rich seam to mine here. I cannot think of a better example of the workings of the police's internal "complaints" units since John Wilsher's Bafta-winning TV series *Between The Lines* in the early 1990's, which starred Neil Pearson, brilliantly supported by Siobahn Redmond and Tom Georgeson (who went on to play John Harvey's Inspector Resnick on radio).

The Complaints is very, very good indeed and will be greedily devoured by anyone suffering Rebus-withdrawal symptoms. I will be horrified (though not necessarily surprised) if it isn't in the running for next year's Gold Dagger and dismayed if this turns out to be a one-off, as the ensemble cast and the police procedural set-up, not to mention the Rankin/Edinburgh synergy and his eagle-eyed observation, simply cry out for a series.

To create one crime writing icon in John Rebus is an achievement most authors would kill for – even Booker Prize winners. Could Malcolm Fox (plus or minus Jamie Breck) be a second fictional legend in the making?

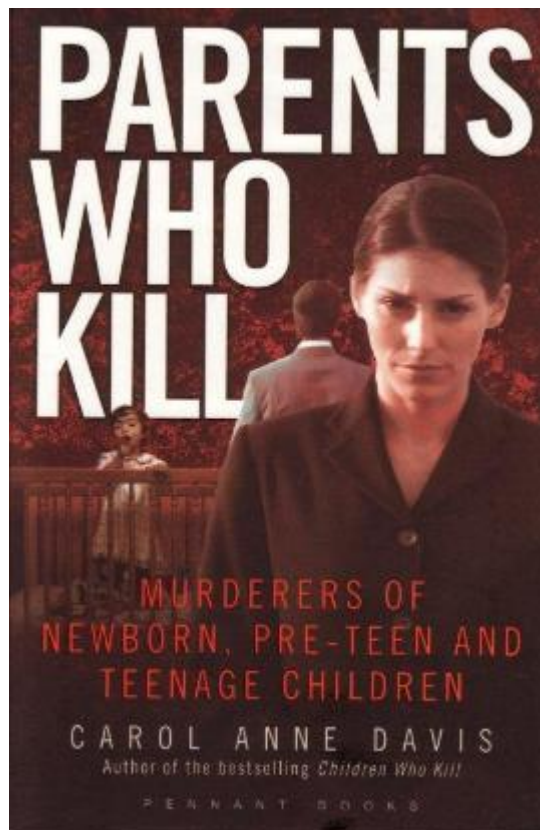
I do hope so, for Ian Rankin, although still appallingly young, has learned his craft over something like 22 years now. I, of course, remember the days when he was a fledgling member of the *Fresh Blood* movement of young, disadvantaged and mostly ignored British crime writers. In those days he had to augment his meagre

royalties with part-time jobs as a swineherd, a vine-grower, a music journalist and even as a model for the promotional t-shirts produced by his publishers.



Pity the Children

With uncanny, and uncomfortable, timing the press was full of new revelations about the ‘Baby P’ case (and if anything could spark a clamour for the return of capital punishment, that could) the week I received a copy of *Parents who Kill* by Carol Anne Davis (published by Pennant Books).



Now I know Carol best as a writer of spine-tingling crime novels such as *Shrouded* and *Sob Story* but she is probably more widely known for her work in the True Crime field, which I admit scares the hell out of me more than her fiction does.

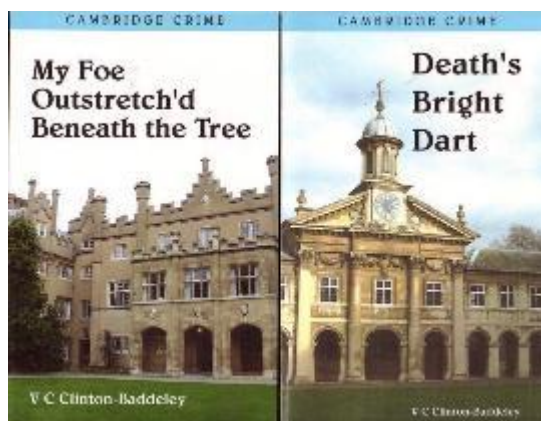
As usual, Carol manages to get some amazing interviews and casts her usual compassionate eye on a subject which in less caring hands would be easily sensationalised. This is a serious case history of infanticide, surely the most incomprehensible of crimes, rather than the screaming tabloid headlines and a worthy study of an awful subject.

And then, oddly enough, I hear that Sophie Hannah's new novel *A Room Swept White*, due from Hodder in February 2010, will feature a TV documentary-maker working on a film about miscarriages of justice involving mothers accused of murder.

I am delighted that Sophie has a new book coming out and I am sure it will do well as I was worried that having praised her last, *The Other Half Lives*, I had inadvertently invoked the Curse of the Ripsters and put a jinx on her career.

Those Light Blue Blues

Thanks mainly to my old *contubernalis* Colin Dexter, it is Oxford (a town near the industrial heart of the Midlands) rather than Cambridge, here in the glorious eastern marches, which is probably more famous for crime fiction.



However, it was not always thus and the small but perfectly formed Print On Demand publisher Ostara is ensuring the finer traditions are not lost forever by making available a series of paperbacks under the *Cambridge Crime* imprint. Among these are two titles by V.C. Clinton-Baddeley: *Death's Bright Dart* and *My Foe Outstretch'd Beneath the Tree*, which feature the detective skills of elderly Don Dr R.V. Davie, of St Nicholas' College (a thinly disguised Jesus College).

Fans of Dr Davie will be delighted to hear that Ostara aim to make his entire canon (there are five novels) available and anyone pining for a 'Golden Age' or 'Fair Play' detective story peppered with unashamedly digressive dialogue and some wonderfully bitchy academic put-downs, would do well to discover them, for they were in danger of becoming lost gems.

The odd thing about these determinedly traditional mysteries is that they were written so long after the so-called 'Golden Age'. The brace of titles illustrated here were first published in 1967 and 1968, when John Gardner was writing his Boysie Oakes books, Adam Hall was sending Quiller off on deadly missions, Michael Crichton was experimenting with medical thrillers, John le Carre was turning into a serious novelist, Desmond Bagley had a stranglehold on the adventure thriller and Alistair Maclean was knocking out a little pot-boiler called *Where Eagles Dare*.

It seemed an odd time for a crime writer to hark so pointedly back to the Donnish mysteries of the 1930s, but then Victor Clinton-Baddeley (1900-1970) didn't exactly have a conventional career.

Originally an actor, a theatrical historian and critic (he reviewed *Brideshead Revisited* for The Spectator in 1945), he did not turn to crime writing until past the normal retirement age, though there is no doubt on reading his books that he thoroughly enjoyed writing them.

Ironically, considering that Clinton-Baddeley was also employed as an editor on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, his name is missing from a certain well-known *British Crime Writing- An Encyclopedia*.

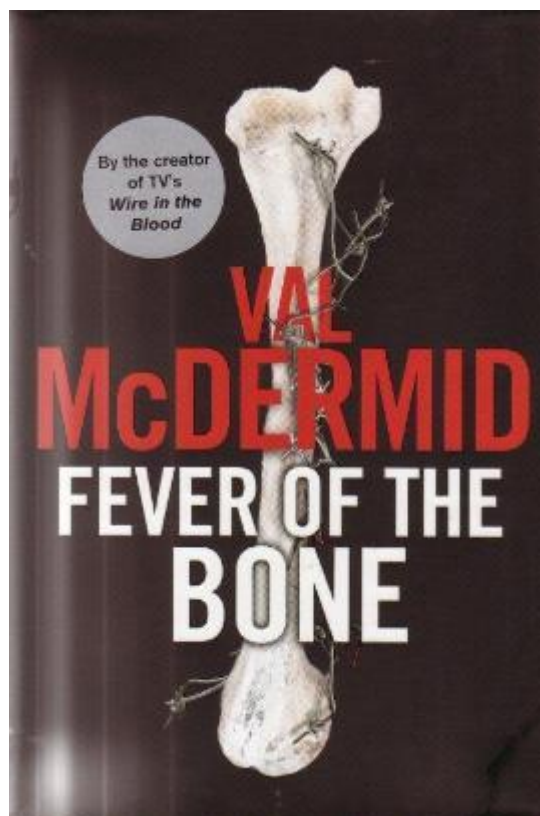
Best of British?

An eagle-eyed reader has pointed out the flaw in the logic of my last column when I suggested that the Barry Award category of 'Best British' crime novel (though not necessarily written by a Brit, or set in any part of Englandshire) –an award for which the dead Swede Stieg Larsson has been nominated – would be better called simply 'Best Non-American'.

I realised this was obviously a foolish suggestion the moment I was reminded that the 2008 Barry Award for Best British went to *Damnation Falls* by Edward Wright, who was born in...er....Hot Springs, Arkansas in the good ole U.S. of A.

Fever

The new Val McDermid novel, *Fever of the Bone*, appears this month from her new publisher Little, Brown under the Sphere imprint and has an impressive cover spoilt only by one of those annoying stickers (which never come off cleanly) reminding us that Val is “the creator of TV’s *Wire in the Blood*”.



I'm sure it will do very well and join the ranks of the bestsellers she had with HarperCollins (though I first came across her work when she was published by The Women's Press and Victor Gollancz some twenty years ago). I only mention her previous publishers, because Val's transfer to Little Brown was one of last year's 'water-cooler' moments in British publishing.

Val also seems to have acquired the services of a well-known public relations firm who issued the press release about her new book. I cannot believe, though, that Val, who was an old-school newspaperwoman in a previous life, got a chance to see the release in advance, for surely her sub-editor genes would have kicked in.

After describing *Fever of the Bone* as “the latest exhilarating instalment of the escapades” of psychologist Tony Hill and policewoman Carol Jordan and the sixth in the successful, television-adapted series, there is an unattributed quote – presumably from Val herself – which I find rather confusing. Having just said that the new book is the sixth in an established series, the press release then goes on:

“People talk a lot about starting over. But not many of them actually do it. They think just moving house or switching jobs or changing lovers will make everything different. But you understand what it really means. Dealing with your list, it’s a cleansing. It’s like someone going into a monastery and burning their worldly goods, watching what holds them earthbound going up in flames. And once that history has turned to smoke, you can truly start over. A whole new set of aspirations and ambitions. An acceptance of what’s possible and what’s past.”

After this rather enigmatic quote, the release continues as if nothing had been said and tells us more about the Tony Hill/Carol Jordan books, Val’s international sales figures and the fact Val has “published 22 bestsellers”. A couple of paragraphs later, the release repeats the fact that Val “has written 22 bestselling novels” and then possibly getting carried away a little, the Release concludes that she “has written **23** bestselling novels.”

Finally, the Release offers the equally enigmatic advice to editors: *Val McDermid may be available for interview.*

Cards on the Table

It is always a pleasure to have lunch with thriller supremo Lee Child and I managed to catch up with him towards the end of his recent gruelling promotional tour of the UK.

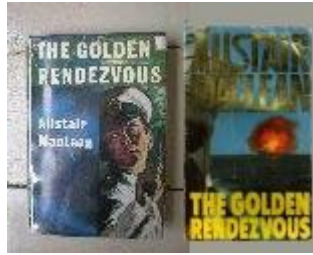


As readers of this column know full well, I always try to follow Lee’s recommendations when it comes to thriller fiction but now he tells me he is about to branch out and recommend the top *forty* books (of any sort) which had an influence on him.

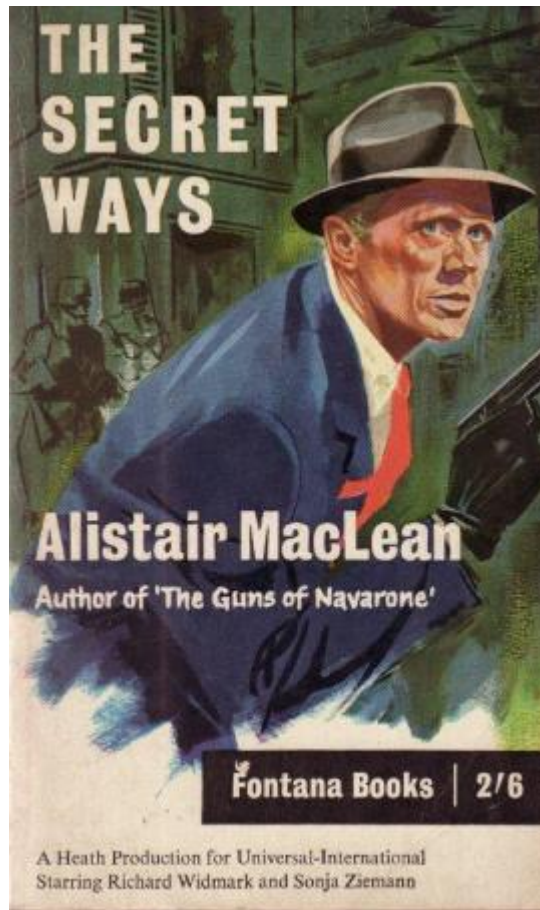
Lee has been asked by Waterstone’s to take part in their “Writer’s Table” promotion where notable authors (Sebastian Faulkes, Nick Hornby and Philip Pullman have already featured) select forty still-in-print titles which have influenced them; the forty titles then being piled on a table (the clue was in the title) in every branch of Waterstone’s, which I am told is a high street bookshop chain.

Although the selection process – a bit like choosing your “Desert Island Discs” – sounds like a fun challenge (and one I may well take up even though no one has asked me to) the problem, Lee confided, was the stipulation that the books you want to recommend be “in print”.

I believe this was a stumbling block for at least one title on Lee's wish list (although the full list has yet to be made public) and I have every sympathy for Lee who had to compromise and select Alistair MacLean's sea-going thriller *The Golden Rendezvous*.



Worthy selection though this is, Lee admitted to me that his first choice of MacLean titles would have been his 1959 spy story set in communist Hungary, *The Last Frontier*, which would also certainly have come high on my list of MacLeans. By 1961, this cracking thriller had been retitled *The Secret Ways* to coincide with a film adaptation starring the wonderful Richard Widmark.



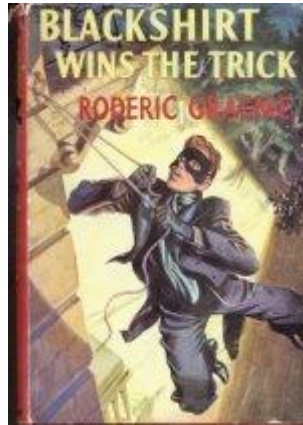
Sadly, Waterstone's could not find this book in print – and they're not having my copy!

Third Strike

In my third and final (for this month) gripe at the omissions from this year's most expensive reference book *British Crime Writing, An Encyclopedia* (sic), I invoke the name of Roderic Jeffries, whose 156th novel (yes, one hundred and fifty-sixth if my maths is right) *A Question of Motive* is to be published by Severn House in December.

And although this achievement does not merit inclusion in the Encyclopedia (sic), there is an entry on Roderic's father (1900-1982) who wrote as Bruce Graeme and is perhaps best known for his series of "Blackshirt" books from the 1920s onwards. Now I hasten to add that the "Blackshirt" of the title had absolutely nothing to do with Oswald Moseley or the *Daily Mail* but rather refers to the masked hero of the stories, a gentlemen thief very much in the 'Raffles' mould, called Richard Verrell.

The "Blackshirt" series became a family franchise when Bruce Graeme's son Roderic began writing them in the early 1950s before launching on a crime fiction career of his own.



Although he has published under a variety of pen-names, he is perhaps best known for his Inspector Alvarez series set on the island of Mallorca, where he and his family have lived since 1972.

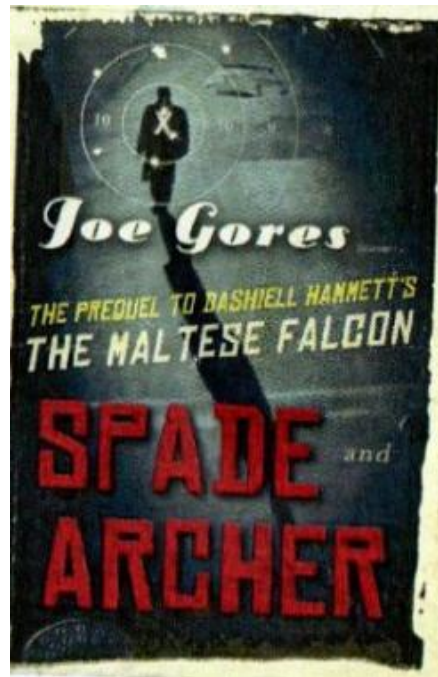


The siesta-loving Alvarez made his debut in 1974, thus pre-dating the invention of both Timothy Holme's Achille Peroni and David Serafin's Superintendent Bernal as European detectives created by Brits (Holme and Serafin are also missing from the "Encyclopedia"). Michael Dibdin, Magdalene Nabb, Robert Wilson and David Hewson (who are included) all followed the path laid by Jeffries, who is still hard at it, with *A Question of Motive* being Alvarez's 34th adventure.

I am indebted to Peter Bellamy of Chess Valley Books for use of the illustrations of Roderic and one of his early “Blackshirt” books, from the website he runs and which suggests to me that Roderic Jeffries published his first novel *before I was born* and I can think of no other crime writer still writing about whom I can say that. Surely that alone is worth an entry in an encyclopaedia somewhere.

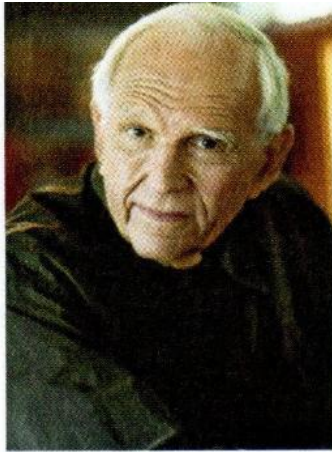
Build Up to an Entrance

It is the entrance of Miss Wonderly into the office of Sam Spade, private eye, which lights the blue touch paper to his most famous case, *The Maltese Falcon* as recounted by Dashiell Hammett and first published (in the UK) in 1930. It is this entrance which actually concludes the new Joe Gores novel *Spade & Archer* which is the ‘official’ prequel to the famous tale of the “black bird” and is published here by Orion in November.



Adding to the classics of the genre can be a poisoned chalice, as Robert B. Parker discovered when he was commissioned to complete Raymond Chandler’s *Poodle Springs* twenty years ago (as, I predict, will the author(s) of the rumoured ‘prequels’ to the Inspector Frost books). To mess with the Dashiell Hammett canon, which is small, incredibly well-known and infused with the authors left-wing politics, would seem like folly and if you are going to do it what you really need is, say, a writer who is well-versed in the subject and the genre as a whole and, ideally, had actually been a private detective in San Francisco.

Thank heavens, then, for Joe Gores, for he is the one writer (though distinctly under-appreciated over here) who fits the bill perfectly. And he had done a fine job with *Spade & Archer*, carefully resisting the temptation to do a pastiche of *Falcon* (though there is one owl/falcon joke in there) and opting instead for a sort of “Continental Op” approach, detailing Spade’s career in series of three interlinked cases over seven or so years up to the (reluctant) partnership of ‘Spade & Archer’.



Should anyone still doubt Joe Gores' credentials for taking on the sacred Hammett mantle, my advice to them is (a) read the damn book, and (b) just remember that his novel *Hammett* (yes, Hammett – geddit?) actually won the Falcon Award from the Japanese Maltese Falcon Society.

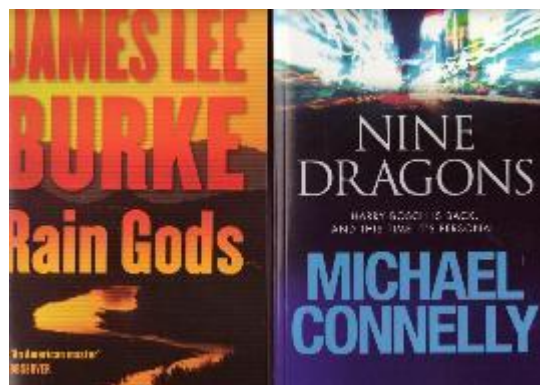
If anything, you might say Joe Gores was over-qualified for the job and despite the fact that he lacks Hammett's political cynicism, he does a fine job of recreating the San Francisco dockside underworld of the 1920s – booze-runners, union grafters, 'Portagee' water rats and all.

If I have a reservation it is a very minor one. I think Joe Gores thinks Spade is more of a hero than Dashiell Hammett did; but there again, so do I. Hell, so does everybody.

Orion's Belters

And there are more goodies to come this Autumn from those criminally industrious publishers at Orion.

Nine Dragons, published in October, is the latest Harry Bosch adventure from Michael Connelly and sees Harry taking on Chinese triads, both in Los Angeles and in Hong Kong when the case threatens his daughter. It's a cliché, but this time it really is personal and there are no clichés in Connelly's writing. He is, without doubt, simply the best craftsman there is when it comes to 'police procedurals'.



Then in November comes *Rain Gods* from the iconic James Lee Burke, introducing a new hero, Hackberry Holland, the sheriff of a dusty Texan border town.

Being British, which involves a constant state of surprise that the policemen always seem to get *younger*, I had reservations about a new policeman hero who was a Korean War POW and therefore somewhere in his mid-seventies, but to be honest, I was finding the increasingly sanctimonious Dave Robicheaux a bit of a pain – and he must also be mid-seventies by now.

So I for one am looking forward to *Rain Gods*, which begins dramatically enough with the mass murder of nine Asian prostitutes.

And I make that four Orion titles which I've said nice things about this month. The cheque, I presume, is in the post.

Toodles!

The Ripster.