

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### In Town Tonight

It was, as it always is, a pleasure to attend the social event of the crime-writing year – the launch of a new Dick Francis title – in the modest surroundings of Claridges Hotel where the canapés glowed and the champagne flowed.

The new book, *Even Money* (from the magnificent Michael Joseph), is of course by Dick and Felix Francis and has, unusually if not uniquely, a bookmaker or ‘turf accountant’ as the hero. This was a point I raised with Dick, now in his 89<sup>th</sup> year, over a glass of champagne, suggesting that as he had (many years ago) had bankers as his heroes and in the last novel, *Silks*, he had lawyers, he was rapidly running out of unlikely protagonists and may well soon have to resort to weaving the Francis magic on other unpopular characters such as literary agents or even publishers.



To fit the occasion, the launch party was organised as a ‘race evening’ with video-taped horse races and turf account tally stands. Each guest was given on arrival a wodge of Bank of Francis money with which to place a token bet.



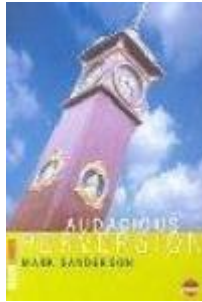
Despite being told several times by Felix Francis that the token money was unfortunately not accepted in the bar at Claridges, several crime-writer guests were seen sneaking in that direction, tightly clutching their “winnings”.

Fortunately, that elegant socialite Mark Sanderson was on hand to generously share the benefit of his latest “six figure advance” for his new crime novel and introduce me to the mysteries of Claridge’s famous champagne cocktails.



Mark’s forthcoming (in January) book, entitled *Snow Hill* is said to be the first part of a trilogy and has been forecast to “do for 1930s’ London what Jake Arnott did for the 1960s.” The initial announcement of the Snow Hill trilogy apparently took place at a publisher’s “crime fiction dinner” some time ago, but for legal reasons (not being invited) I was unable to attend.

However, Mark and I were stable-mates for a short time at the much-missed Do-Not Press which published his first foray into crime fiction, *Audacious Perversion*, in 1998.



For those of my readers not familiar with the metropolis, I enclose a small map showing the Snow Hill area, taken from the indispensable Bartholomew's London Pocket Atlas. Now I do believe that my edition (the 1938 one issued to my cousin *Staffelkapitän* Otto von Ripsterhausen) may be slightly out-of-date, but I still find it an invaluable guide to facilities of the capital and I rarely venture there without it.



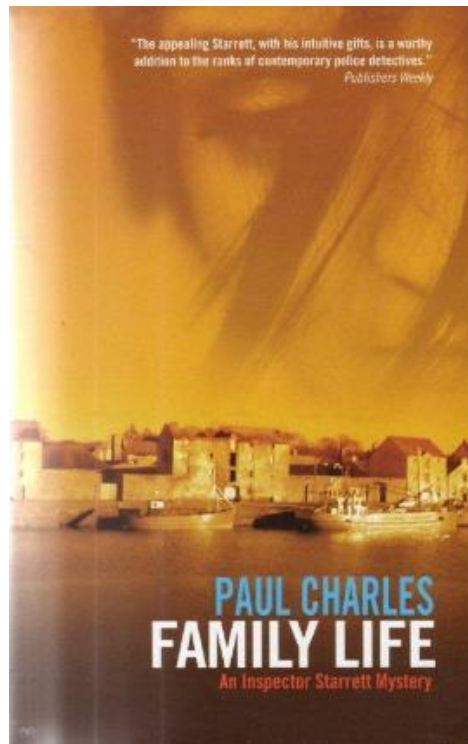
### An Inspector Calls

I cannot mention one of the famous *alumni* of the Do-Not Press without mentioning several others making the news. Firstly, my old friend Paul Charles.

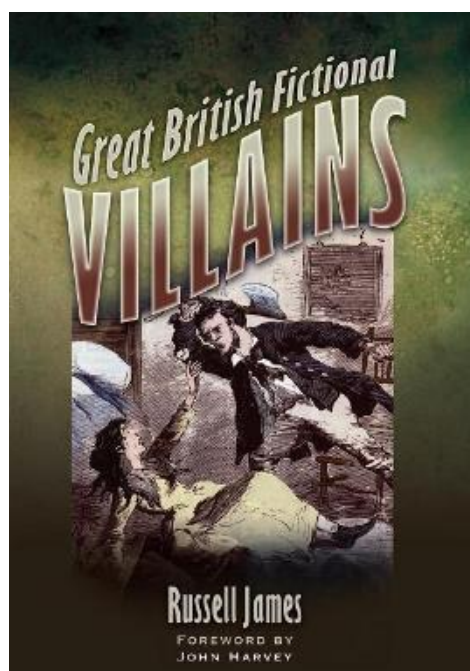


After a distinguished career in the music business, working with and promoting such artists as John Lee Hooker, Ray Davies, Ry Cooder and Robert Plant, Paul turned to crime fiction in the 1990s, creating the Inspector Christy Kennedy novels, which were mostly set in the urban jungle that is Camden Town.

Now he returns to his Irish roots with a new hero, Inspector Starrett, who calls (as Inspectors are wont to do) in on a family birthday party in the wilds of Donegal. Needless to say in *Family Life* (from Irish publisher Brandon), the news Starrett has to deliver isn't good.



And I am also delighted to see that other Do-Not Press Gang member, the Godfather of British *noir*, Russell James has provided crime buffs with the ideal Christmas present this year with his *Great British Fictional Villains* from Remember When (an imprint of Pen & Sword Publishers).



His book does exactly what it says in the title and is, of course, the natural companion volume to his *Great British Fictional Detectives* – a remarkably comprehensive, nay, encyclopaedic, study of the genre from ‘Angel’ to ‘Zen’ and probably some characters created by people not called Michael.

### Should Have Gone To SpecSavers

My valet and general factotum, Waldo, has adopted an unbearable and seemingly permanent smirk since he heard the short-lists for this year’s (or perhaps last year’s) crime writing Oscars. With great glee he pronounced “you could not tip more rubbish if you had a JCB” (a piece of earth-moving equipment which I believe our colonial cousins refer to as a ‘backhoe’).



**A smirking Waldo**

He is alluding, unfairly, to my appalling record of trying to second guess the likely candidates for what I must, I’m afraid, refer to as *The Specsavers Crime Thriller Awards 2009 Crime Writers’ Association’s Gold Dagger Sponsored by Booksdirect*.

In fact, I actually predicted only one of the Gold Dagger (I can’t be bothered to repeat the full title) short-list correctly: Kate Atkinson’s *When Will There Be Good News*. Naturally I wish it well when the final judgement is announced later this month, but I cannot hide my disappointment that Elizabeth Wilson’s *War Damage*, Val McDermid’s *A Darker Domain* and Sophie Hannah’s *The Other Half Lives* are not also in competition.



When it comes to the (*Specsavers etc.*) *Ian Fleming Steel Dagger*, then I did a lot better – twice as well in fact, predicting *two* of the short-list: Olen Steinhauer’s *The Tourist* and Andrew Williams’ *The Interrogator*.

Hiding my disappointment not to see Lee Child’s *Gone Tomorrow*, John Le Carré’s *A Most Wanted Man* or Charles Cummings’ prophetic *Typhoon* in contention, I will, of course, be rooting for Andrew Williams for not only has he done a fantastic research job and written a jolly good book, but he cheekily includes Ian Fleming as a character. He is also the only Briton on the list, which is surprising and more than a little depressing and does mean that if the organisers insist on the attendance of the five short-listed authors who have to fly the Atlantic, then this makes it one of the most environmentally *unfriendly* awards going.

However, I have to own up to not guessing a single one on the short-list of the (*Specsavers etc.*) *CWA John Creasey (New Blood) Dagger Sponsored by Louise Penny and Michael Whitehead* and can only assume that the judges, who I am sure are entirely distinguished whoever they are, have set the bar incredibly high to be able to ignore Aly Monroe’s *The Maze of Cadiz*, Jeremy Duns’ *Free Agent* or Elliott Hall’s *The First Stone* not to mention Andrew Williams’ *The Interrogator*, which...er...just happens to have been shortlisted for the Steel Dagger....

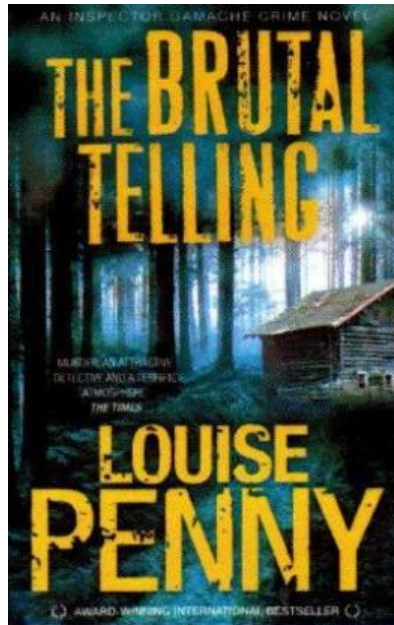
Perhaps the judges have spotted talent where I have missed it. Perhaps, as Waldo suggests, I should have gone to...



#### In for a Penny

One cannot mention the CWA/Specsaver/John Creasey/New Blood (etc.) Dagger without mentioning Louise Penny. Well, one can, but it would be churlish not to mention the generosity of that fine Canadian writer and her husband Michael Whitehead who have sponsored the Specsaver/John Creasey (etc.) even though Louise is one writer who cannot possibly win it, as she has won one already (along with a load of other awards).

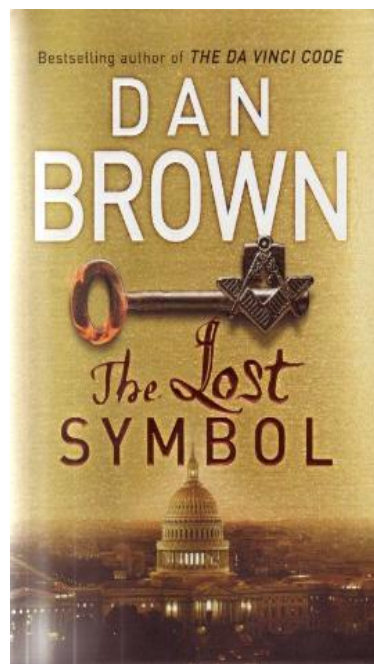
All members of the CWA should immediately run out and order her new book, *The Brutal Telling* (published by those happy purveyors of homicide Headline) in gratitude for selflessly stumping up the prize money. They won’t, of course, because crime writers are notoriously badly-read, but I know thousands of Louise’s fans will.



*The Brutal Telling* is, I believe, the sixth novel to feature Chief Inspector Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec, a character once described by an intelligent and discerning reviewer as one of the most human and endearing fictional detective creations of recent times. Yet perhaps even the most ardent reader of Penny's fiction is unaware that thoughtful and humane Armand Gamache is closely modelled on the charming and gentle Michael Whitehead. Far less of a secret, of course, is Louise Penny's international reputation as a lumberjack (or rather 'lumberjill') and her skill at blending 90% -proof bootlegged maple syrup.

#### Missing in Action in September?

Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*, the much-trailed follow-up to *The Da Vinci Code*, arrived like a hurricane coming ashore in September, sweeping everything before it and creating aftershocks in the book trade with finger-pointing and name-calling about 70%+ discounts which enabled the book to be retailed at £4.99 instead of the £18.99 cover price.



The chattering classes were also waiting in ambush, demanding to know if the new book “could be as bad” as the last one (which I seem to remember sold rather well).

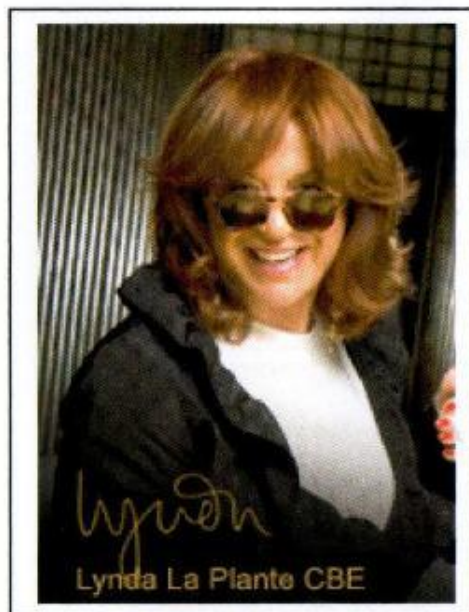
I have to admit I’m rather enjoying it, though Freemasonry leaves me pretty cold (and was much better ‘done’ by Reginald Hill over 25 years ago) and I did get the sneaky feeling that I was intruding on to the set of one of those hammy *National Treasure* movies. But then, I am fairly benignly disposed towards our colonial cousins who like to elevate their Founding Fathers to either super-hero or super-villain status. Whatever one feels about the subject matter and the at times rather laboured explanatory style, there’s no doubting Mr Brown can hook a reader and string them along at a pretty furious pace.

Yet with all the over-hype and hysteria which greeted the mega-seller last month, many a decent thriller probably went missing-in-action. Some, thankfully, did not, at least not in this column.

There was, for example, the 17<sup>th</sup> thriller starring series hero Sean Dillon *The Wolf at the Door* (HarperCollins) from veteran Jack Higgins now in his 80<sup>th</sup> year.



Not to mention the new female detective inspector tracking a murderer whilst fighting her own battle within the police force, in *Silent Scream* (Simon & Schuster) from a writer who has made that particular sub-genre entirely her own, the vivacious Lynda La Plante.





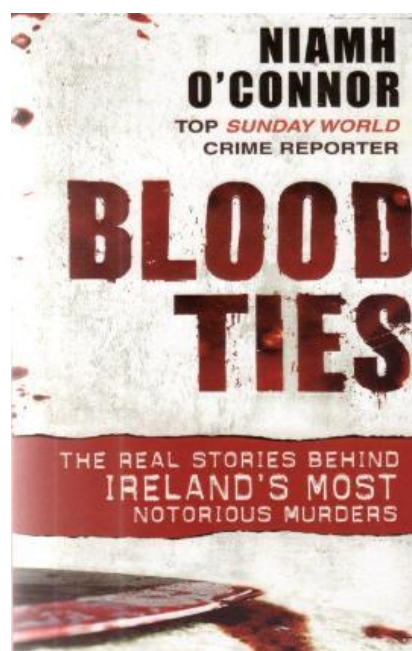
And I am delighted to report that Douglas Lindsay's seventh Barney Thomson book, *The Final Cut* (from Douglas's own imprint Long Midnight Publishing) has not slipped under the radar either.



Sadly, this could well be the last in Douglas's hysterical experiment in the extended barbershop death junky novel and the end of Barney Thomson – Scotland's most misunderstood hairdresser and a positive magnet for any serial-killer going.

### Irish Crimes

No sooner did I admit that I find reading "True Crime" quite scary, then I receive a copy of *Blood Ties - The Real Stories Behind Ireland's Most Notorious Murders* by leading Irish crime reporter Niamh O'Connor.

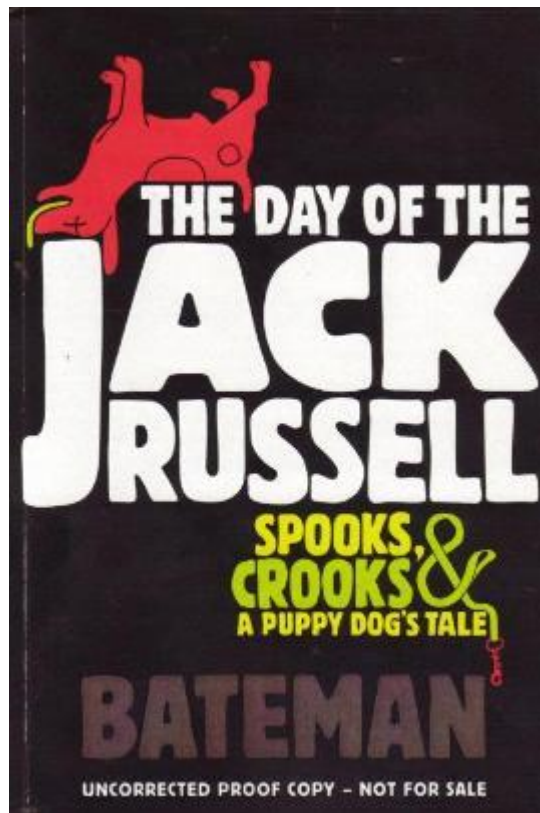


The book chronicles three bloody, family-related murders all from the last decade, none of which I was previously aware of (which is probably why I slept well until now). I am sure many aficionados of such reportage will find the book fascinating, but for me the most interesting bit was the Epilogue interview with Niamh O'Connor herself where she talks about the perils of investigative journalism in Ireland when it comes to organised crime – and I have indeed heard of the extreme dangers of such a profession.

She also reveals that she is turning to crime fiction with a debut novel *If I Never See You Again*, featuring a female Garda detective, Jo Birmingham, which will be published here by Transworld in April next year.

**The Outrageous Artist formerly known as Colin**

Not content with one highly successful comic crime novel this year, Ulsterman Colin Bateman has produced a second – *The Day of the Jack Russell* – which will be made available to mere mortals by Headline in November.



Featuring the same anonymous, petulant, anally-retentive Belfast bookseller-cum-private eye who blundered through *Mystery Man* earlier this year (a book which contains the best *Titanic* joke since James Cameron's initial budget proposal), *Day of the Jack* – as it is bound to become known – is certainly going to give *Mystery Man* a run for its money for the title Funniest Crime Novel of 2009.

Not that it will be to everyone's taste, for the humour is often dark and very cruel, especially if you know someone who has had a stroke, or if you frequent specialist crime book shops (such as No Alibis in Belfast), or if you have a mother, or if you are Norwegian.

Norwegian? Well, here is our un-named hero discussing Scandinavian crime fiction: "*I am not entirely convinced by the recent vogue for Scandinavian crime fiction – who's to say if it's the author who is a genius, or his translator? Also, it's difficult to care if a Norwegian gets murdered...*"

There are lots of good jokes about crime writers and crime writing, though James Patterson and John Grisham may not agree; an excellent gag about Frankie Valli and a not half-bad one about Kylie Minogue. All of which

makes – though it pains me *greatly* to say it – “Bateman” (I hope he can see me making the inverted commas with my fingers) the funniest working crime writer around.

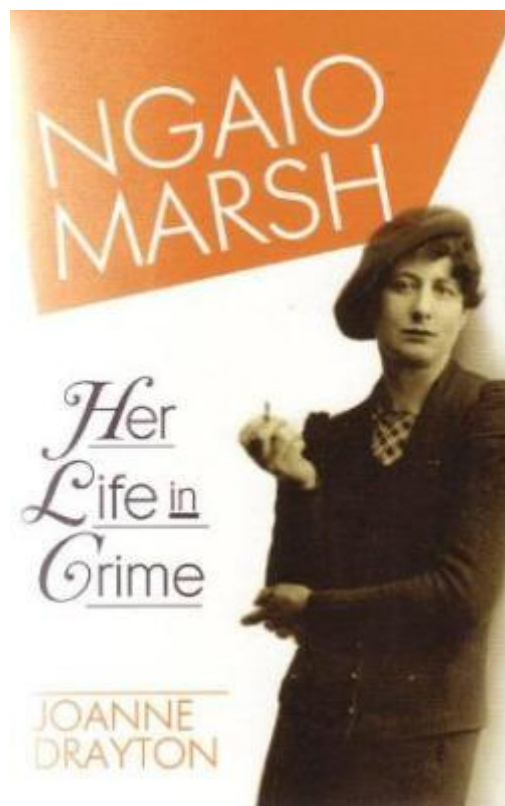
There is already talk of adapting the two “Mystery Man” books for screen and as soon as you mention Belfast, the actor Jimmy Nesbitt springs to mind – at least into the mind of the average television executive. But Nesbitt is far too *hench* for the main character (who is a sort of Norman Bates, but with Attention Deficit Disorder) and I would like to suggest Irish actor Chris O’Dowd from TV’s *The IT Crowd* and the Richard Curtis movie *The Boat That Rocked*.

“Bateman” and his hero will be relieved to hear that I make no charge for this valuable piece of casting advice.

### The Fourth Queen

Just as 69 AD, as everyone knows, was ‘the year of the four emperors’ in Rome (Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian if you need reminding), so the 1930s is thought of as the age of the Four Queens of British crime writing. The three queens everyone knows were, of course, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. The fourth one was Ngaio Marsh, famed for her rather snobby detective Inspector Alleyn, country house murders and, quite often and very knowledgably, her theatrical settings.

If Marsh’s name is not automatically linked to the other three queens, it could be because she is perceived as being something of a late-arrival to the Golden Age, her debut novel being published 14 years after Agatha’s, 13 years after Dorothy’s and five years after Margery’s. Yet apart from Christie, she was probably the most prolific, publishing no less than 32 crime novels.



To mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her debut, *A Man Lay Dead*, in 1934, Harper are publishing a biography (previously published in New Zealand): *Ngaio Marsh: Her Life in Crime* by Joanne Drayton along with the entire Marsh canon in 11 volumes as a ‘Diamond Anniversary Collection’ and Volume 11 contains not only her

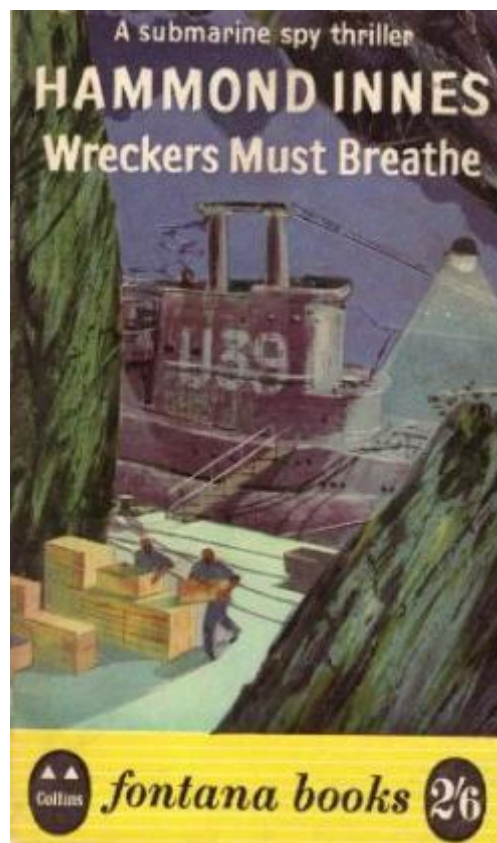
later crime novels *Photo-Finish* and *Light Thickens* but also her overlooked autobiography *Black Beech and Honeydew*.

My one and only contribution to the diamond jubilee celebrations is a piece of Ngaio Marsh trivia certain to turn up in a crime quiz at some point: which British actor played both Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn and Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford in television adaptations? There are no prizes, but anyone guessing George Baker would not be wrong.

**Why *not* mention the war?**

On the right-hand side of the Atlantic it has been impossible to miss the commemoration of the outbreak of WWII 70 years ago in September 1939.

Naturally it put me in mind of Ralph Hammond Innes, who lived here in the eastern marches and was an expert sailor on its beautiful waterways and coastline. In September 1939 Hammond Innes, already the author of four thrillers (now so rare they would cost you £1,200 each if you could find a copy), was on holiday in Cornwall and saw the Royal Navy fleet assembling to defend the Channel. The main topic of conversation among local sailors, coastguards and fishermen was of the perceived (and very real) threat of German U-boats to the British coast. Innes the born story-teller didn't need much prompting and the result was the rip-roaring tale of espionage and adventure *Wreckers Must Breathe* {aka *Trapped*} which was published in 1940, before the war was a year old.



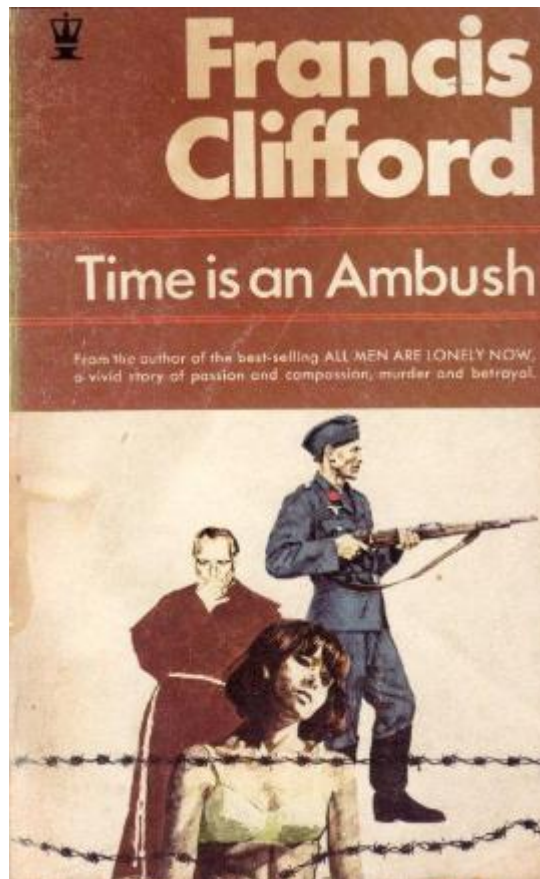
Whilst I was never totally convinced that the chemical reaction crucial to the plot would actually work (but I am no scientist), it is still a cracking story of a secret U-boat base operating from a cavern in the Cornish cliffs, justifying the opening line of the book: *Cornwall is a wrecker's coast*.

It was the first Hammond Innes novels I ever read and remains a personal favourite as do two of his sea-faring classics: *Wreck of the Mary Deare* and *The White South*. It is now over ten years since Hammond Innes died, age 85, after a string of best-selling thrillers spanning half a century.

Sadly, except in second-hand bookshops in coastal towns where there are marinas, his novels are not easy to find, although his name is always mentioned with affection and reverence when ageing crime writers gather around roaring log fires in the dead of winter and tell tales of who they read in their youth.

I am afraid that Innes is in danger of slipping into the limbo to which good writers are often unfairly consigned – and yes, I can hear a High Horse coming so I will not hesitate to jump into the saddle.

Possibly the one author most mentioned by professional writers as being undeservedly consigned to “thriller limbo” is Francis Clifford, who died in 1975 and very quickly, and disgracefully, faded from the memory of all but the discerning reader.



Long before he adopted the writing name Francis Clifford, Captain Arthur Leonard Bell Thompson was hailed as a hero for his leadership, in 1942, of a group of allied soldiers on their on a 900-mile march through Japanese-occupied Burma. He wrote modestly about his exploits and those of his brave ‘Karen’ and Indian troops in *Desperate Journey*, though the book was not published until after his death. {One feels that he and Joanna Lumley might have ruled this country as benevolent despots really quite well.}

As a thriller-writer, he sold well over five million copies of his novels and several were filmed, most notably *The Naked Runner*, which starred Frank Sinatra, was directed by Sidney J. Furie (who also did *The Ipcress File*) and was produced by Brad Dexter (the first member of *The Magnificent Seven* to be killed on screen). And surely there are at least half-dozen Trivial Pursuit questions in there somewhere.

Yet the name Francis Clifford is a mere echo today in bookshops and libraries and I have searched in vain for anyone who might have dealt with his books. If anyone out there in interweb land has any idea of his literary agent of the heirs to his literary estate, I would be grateful to hear from them.

## The Wrecking Crew

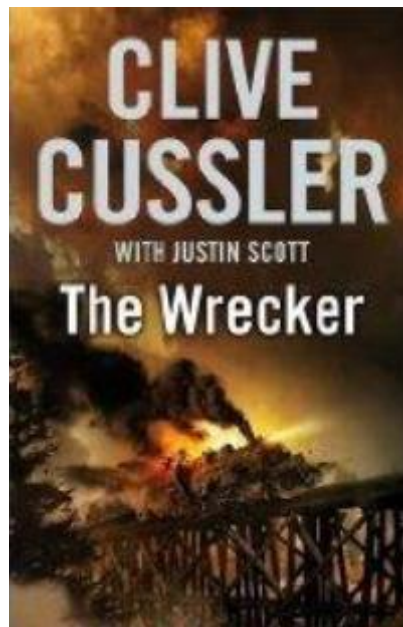
From Cornish wreckers to American railroad wreckers is a fairly logical segue, at least for this column, and I really looking forward to the first collaboration from a new ‘wrecking crew’ comprising my old friend and fellow *boulevardier* Justin Scott and that maestro of the adventure thriller, the legendary Clive Cussler.



Picture: Barry Campbell

Published here in November by Michael Joseph, *The Wrecker* will be the second novel to feature Isaac Bell of the Van Dorn Detective Agency, the character created by Clive Cussler in *The Chase*. The year is 1907 and the setting is the still pretty wild American west where a master criminal known only as ‘The Wrecker’ is disrupting (with extreme violence) the regular running of the railroads.

Anyone who thinks co-writing a western would be a daunting prospect for Justin (who is best known for sea-going thrillers and delicately subversive New England mysteries) would be mistaken, for his father Leslie Scott was a prolific author of ‘pulp westerns’.



I do not believe, however, that Justin has ever written in collaboration before but when I asked him how he felt about the process, he had clearly enjoyed the process: *“What I had not expected out of collaborating was the fun. It’s fun to work with somebody. Looking back on the early days of my career I realise that in the days when editors were still at the centre of publishing there was a lot of collaboration in the writing of books. Clive has revived that atmosphere of making things together and for that I am grateful.”*

Hmm..... editors “at the centre of publishing”? Those must have been the days.

### Very Glittering Prizes

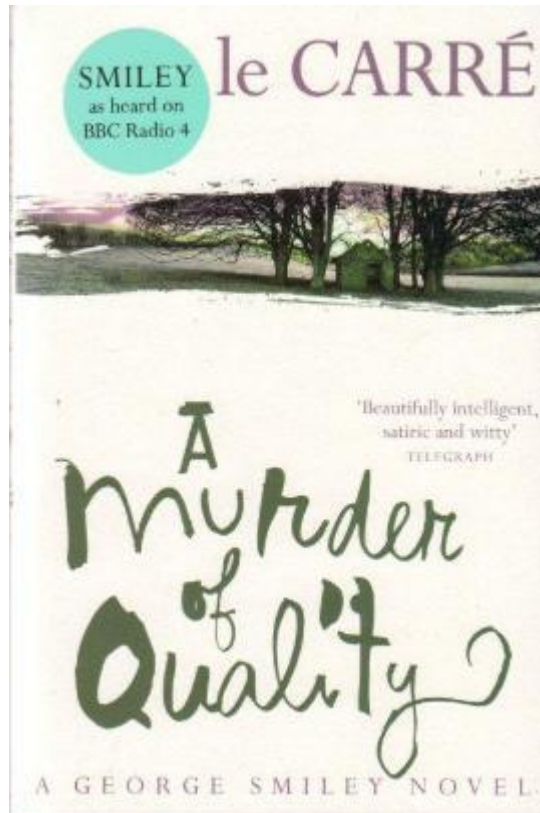
I hear that my old and distinguished colleague Philip Kerr has won something called the RBA International Prize for crime writing, which I have to admit I did not know existed (and still don't know what 'RBA' stands for). The prize, as reported by Her Majesty's Press, was a chunky sum indeed – 125,000 Euros, which is around 100,000 of your English pounds – and was supposedly for his latest novel *If The Dead Rise Not* which is the sixth in his fantastically good Bernie Gunther series. It is possible that the book has already been published in the UK, but for legal reasons I am not sure of this. I certainly have not seen a copy, though I have been looking forward to it for some time. I suspect I will have to wait until it comes out in paperback, unless Philip could see his way to lending me a few Euros....

And Philip and his new book are also shortlisted (him for the third year running) for this year's Ellis Peters Award for historical mysteries, the winner of which will be announced later this month.

Also on the short list are Shona Maclean (the niece of Alistair) although (for legal etc.) I have not seen her book; Andrew Williams' *The Interrogator*, Mark Mills' *The Informnation Officer*, Laura Wilson's *An Empty Death* and Rennie Airth's *The Dead of Winter*, all of which were excellent reads. And that makes one heck of a strong short list. I will not blight the chances of any of these authors (some of whom still talk to me) by tipping one of them to win.

### Reissues of the Month

Without doubt: the four early novels of John le Carre from the early 1960s, attractively repackaged by Sphere.



These include, naturally, his highly influential *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* and the lesser-known but very interesting *The Looking Glass War*, and also his first two ‘Smiley’ books *Call for the Dead* and a personal favourite of mine, the wonderfully observant (and superbly bitchy) *A Murder of Quality*.

### The Plinthster

A figure guaranteed to strike fear in the hearts of newly-published authors was the legendary Postmortem Man, aka Ralph Spurrier, who would appear as if by magic whenever a new mystery came out and force, with extreme strictness, innocent authors to sign hundreds of copies of their books for his “business” ([www.postmortembooks.com](http://www.postmortembooks.com)) until many expired from cramp or dehydration.

Although rarely photographed, the Postmortem Man was once caught on camera by my factotum Waldo when I was employed as a bodyguard for Inspector Morse creator Colin Dexter. (My duty was to form a human barrier between Colin and rapacious autograph-hunters and be prepared to “take a pen-nib” if necessary.)



I say ‘rarely photographed’ until now, that is, for The Postmortem Man has broken cover in a truly spectacular way in order to promote the crime novel he himself is writing.

Last month he came out of the Postmortem book cupboard and burst into the public eye in his new super-hero identity, The Plinthster. Taking his place on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square as part of Anthony Gormley’s “living art” exhibition.

The Plinthster’s full oratorical performance in front of an adoring crowd can be seen on <http://www.oneandother.co.uk/participants/Ralph-The-Book> but the gist of it was the story of how Ralph the bookseller acquired a collection of books belonging to one Henry Sweetman, who was hung for murder, aged 23, in 1953. What is more, Ralph has traced the story of Henry Sweetman through the books Henry had with him in the condemned cell and, now convinced of his innocence, has turned the whole story into a novel, provisionally entitled *A Taste for Death* (although I think someone’s beaten him to that title).

Ralph’s mounting of the fourth plinth took place, aptly enough, at 9 a.m., for that is the hour at which executions for those convicted of capital crimes always took place in Britain prior to 1965. I am sure it was also a popular hour (for they are known to be early risers) among the hundreds of publishers and literary agents swarming around the Plinthster bidding for the manuscript of his first novel.

### To the Max

I read that Maxim Jakubowski, the man behind the legendary Murder One bookshop, is not retiring quietly into the Soho night but has dusted off his editor’s deerstalker and meerschaum pipe (or whatever it is editors use to



accessorize these days) to launch a new crime fiction imprint for John Blake Publishing, which until now has been better known for ‘true crime’ books.

The new imprint will be called either *Maximum Crime* or *maXcrime* depending on who you believe and will launch in 2010 with *Hit* by the Australian super-model turned crime-writer Tara Moss.

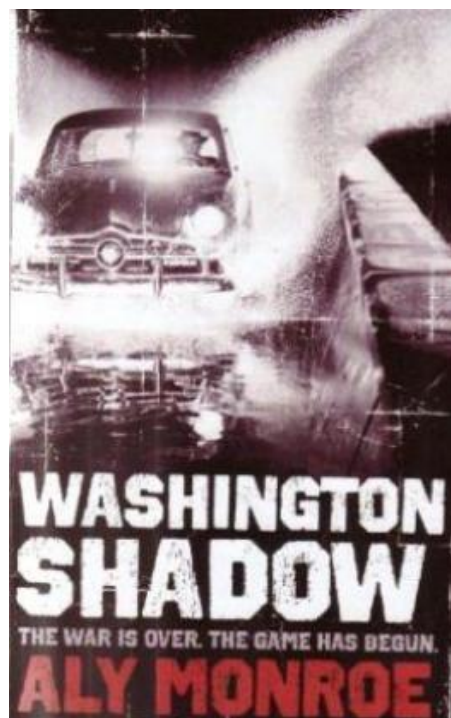


**Picture: Lucas Allen**

I confess I do not know the work of Tara Moss, who has, I believe, been selling well in Australia (and Russia) since she began writing thrillers ten years ago. Oddly enough, I do not think her books have ever been published in the UK before Maxim spotted her talent.

**This week I am mostly reading...**

I have been looking forward to Aly Monroe’s second historical spy mystery, *Washington Shadow* (from the Jolly Magnificent John Murray) ever since I read her first, *The Maze of Cadiz*, last year and I am delighted to say it does not disappoint.

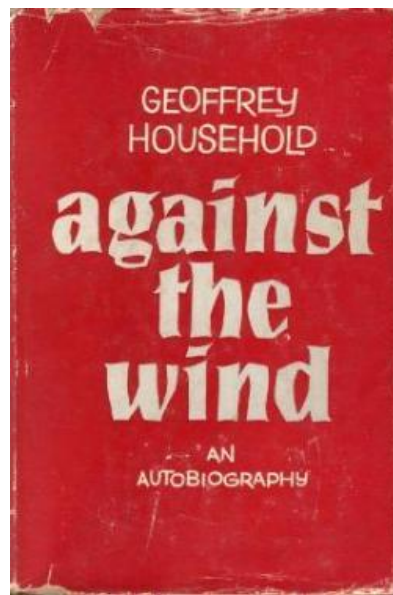


In fact, I think it's even better. Set in the economic crisis immediately after WWII – when Britain posed as the great champion of liberty and democracy but was actually flat broke and on its uppers – it beautifully captures the political skulduggery going on between supposed allies, the pomposity of formal diplomacy (and the British class system) and does something I never thought a thriller could: it makes economics interesting. Maybe not the new rock and roll; but interesting.

### The Old Master

To mark my eleventy-first birthday last month, I treated myself to a book I had promised myself ever since I discovered its existence and managed to track down a copy to a book dealer in Florida.

*Against the Wind* is the autobiography of Geoffrey Household, written in 1958, and is simply quite brilliant as one might imagine from the man who wrote *Rogue Male*.



The opening paragraph says it all, with Household admitting that in his fiction he always tried as soon as possible to describe his hero's economic background and how he has earned his living, or as he puts it:

*'What does it eat?' is the first question that the interested observer of any animal must ask.*

Substitute the word 'hunter' for 'interested observer' and you have a sentence only Geoffrey Household could have written.

***Toodles!***

***The Ripster***