

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



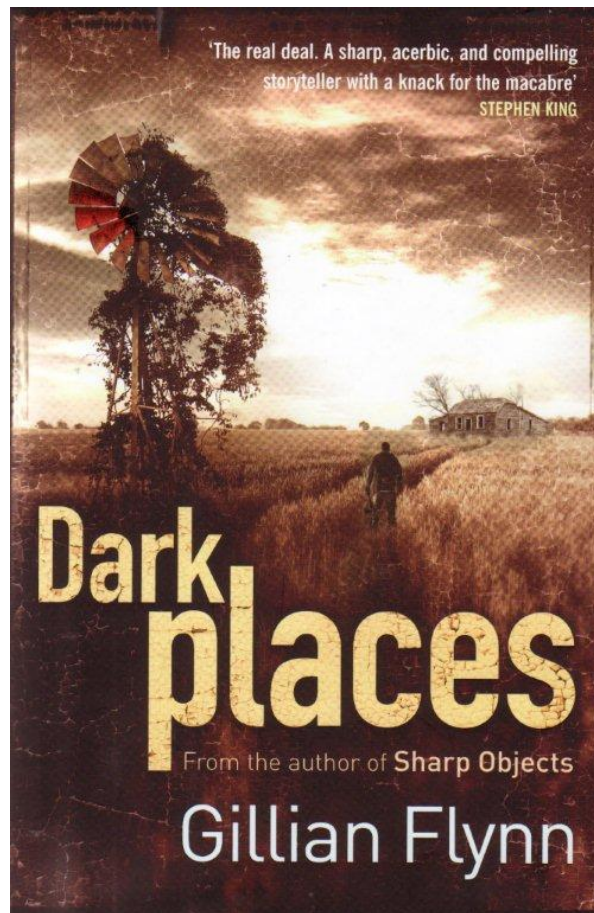
In Town Tonight and Every Night

The October crime writing social scene was particularly exhausting this year.

First, courtesy of publishers Orion, there was a chance, in the civilised surroundings of The Groucho Club (i.e. upstairs, as opposed to the far less civilised Saloon Bar on the ground floor) to meet their trio of star American authors: Harlan Coben, Gillian Flynn and Lawrence Block.



Now Harlan Coben and Larry Block need absolutely no introduction but up until now, though I know not how, the work of Gillian (pronounced with a hard 'g' like 'Gilligan') Flynn had escaped me. Not anymore. Having read her latest, *Dark Places* (from Weidenfeld) I am a confirmed admirer although I am utterly bewildered as to why this should have been short-listed for this year's Steel Dagger for thrillers instead of the Gold Dagger for the crime novel it clearly is - and a thrilling one to boot.



Dark Places is a totally hypnotic story dealing with the aftermath of a savage family murder (and the key word here is “family”) on a farm in the depressed agricultural heartland of America. One family member, a girl child aged seven, survives the horror and over twenty years later is persuaded by the ghoulish ‘Kill Club’ (an organisation for fans of true crimes) to relive her experience and perhaps recant the childhood testimony which resulted in her brother being sent to prison for life.

Whilst not dwelling on the blood and gore, this is a genuinely creepy book and terrifically gripping. Gillian Flynn can also do what Ruth Rendell and Minette Walters (and few others) can: she can make the reader care what happens to a cast of characters who are themselves so odious you would not cross the road to help them if they were on fire. That’s a rare skill, but Flynn has it.

I took the opportunity of Orion’s hospitality to catch up on gossip hot from the crime fiction forest with my old friend and fellow *boulevardier* Marcel Berlins of *The Times* – or, as our colonial cousins insist on calling it, *The London Times*.



And then we were off to our second party of the evening, courtesy of the Jolly Magnificent John Murray, who had requisitioned a public house in the West End for a soiree with visiting 'tarheel' John Hart (a 'tarheel' being a person of noble birth from North Carolina, I believe).



John Hart bravely offered to pose for a group photograph with assorted hooligans from the crime scene, including Professor Barry Forshaw, the voluptuous Ayo Ontade, Anglophile American Mike Carlson (and by Anglophile I think I mean legal resident) and a fresh-faced Youth Opportunities trainee doing work experience for the *Daily Telegraph*.

Absolutely unfazed by such unruly behaviour, John went on to win the Steel Dagger for best Thriller the very next day at a glittering evening of prize giving organised by the Crime Writers' Association (and others).

For legal reasons I could not attend the CWA function, though I am reliably informed that the tickets, so reasonably priced at seventeen shillings and sixpence, included a free glass of Lambrusco and chicken and chips in the basket.

Shots editor Mike ‘Tombstone’ Stotter was there of course, as was millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim and his new personal bodyguard who he insisted on introducing simply as “Jean”.



I am delighted to see Prince Ali looking so well for he has had a punishing schedule of late. Not only is the task of interviewing for a new bodyguard a serious and time consuming business (as well as covering up what happened to the *old* bodyguard...), but Prince Ali’s rock band, *The Slippery Noodles*, has just finished a series of concerts at the O2 Arena which they gave at very short notice when the previously advertised attraction mysteriously pulled out.



Despite fierce restrictions on photography at live concerts by the *Noodles* under an obscure provision of the Not In Front Of The Children Act (1999), I have managed to obtain a rare snap of Prince Ali in action with the leader of his backing singers, the legendary Whispering Bob Randisi.

Again for legal reasons I was unable to attend the launch party for James Twining’s new novel *The Geneva Deception* which was a very sad disappointment as James has been known to throw excellent parties in the past.



I had hoped to ask him if *The Geneva Deception*, which is newly published as a paperback original, is indeed the same book as *The Ivory Key* which was listed as forthcoming this year by Professor Barry Forshaw in his infallible crime fiction “Encyclopedia” and if it was, how could James have made such a mistake?

I decided to take the matter up with Professor Forshaw himself when I ran into him at the Ellis Peters Awards for historical mysteries, but it completely slipped my mind when the news was announced that Barry has been appointed Judge For Life for the Ellis Peters Awards in addition to his role as Judge in Perpetuity for the CWA’s Gold Dagger. Naturally, the news had to be celebrated with copious quantities of champagne and fortunately copious quantities were on hand.

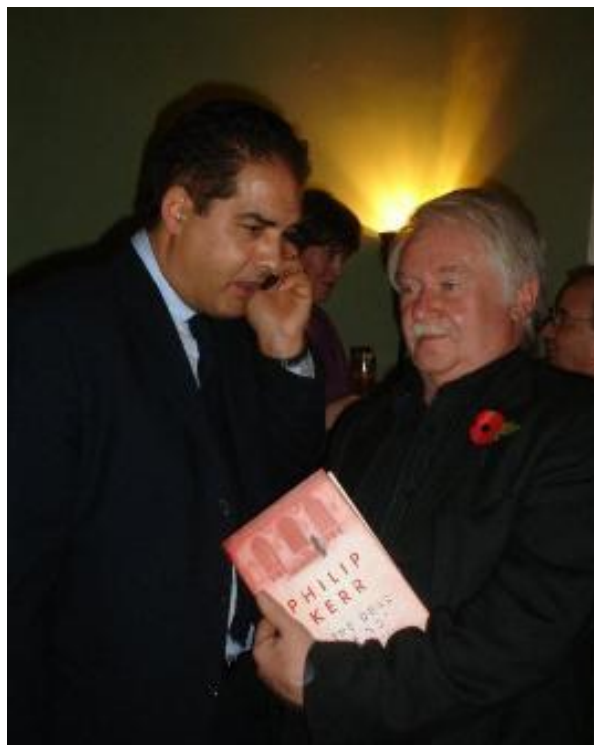


This was without doubt down to the brilliant organisation of the evening by the lovely Samantha Eades, the talented publicist with those ever generous publishers Headline. Indeed, Samantha looked positively shocked when I firmly refused my third magnum of bubbly, as the night was still young.



A truly great party, which enabled me to ‘network’ (as I believe the young people say these days) with fellow hacks and hackesses Jeremy Jehu, Jane Jakeman, Bob Cornwell and Geoff Bradley, as well as ‘schmoozing’ (if that’s a word) with writers and friends old and new, among them Veronica Stallwood, Mark Mills, Andrew Williams and Simon Brett.

The highlight of the evening though was the announcement that the 2009 Ellis Peters Award was to go to Philip Kerr for his sixth Bernie Gunther novel *If The Dead Rise Not*.



I have no hesitation in recommending this brilliant book even though I have not actually read it yet and Philip was a popular winner on the night, having been shortlisted three years running. Being a canny Scot and mindful of needless waste, Philip naturally gave the acceptance speech he wrote “just in case” three years ago.

I have been a fan of Philip’s imaginative – and above all, intelligent – thrillers since 1990 since we appeared on either side of a promotional book mark (now highly collectible) very early in our careers.

<p>Crime Writers for the 1990s</p> <p>PHILIP KERR</p> <p>"A terrific writer with a rough sense of humour." - <i>The Observer</i></p> <p>Philip Kerr brings a refreshingly rough wit to his tough narratives drawn into releases of Raymond Chandler, but if you ever have a model you could call a hero. And Kerr is better on his side and well researched background than the names." - <i>Evening Standard</i></p> <p>"High-powered storytelling." - <i>The Independent</i></p> <p>"Willfully provoking." - <i>The Sunday Times</i></p> <p>"Beautifully written." - <i>The Listener</i></p> <p>"Delicious, delicious and well worth your while." - <i>Livestory Review</i></p> <p>MARCH VIOLETS (Penguin, £5.99) THE PALE CRIMINAL (Viking, £13.99) and coming in 1991: A GERMAN REQUIEM (Viking, £13.99)</p> 	<p>Crime Writers for the 1990s</p> <p>MIKE RIPLEY</p> <p>"An English crime writer who may be mentioned in the same breath as George V. Higgins and Elmore Leonard." - <i>Sat Night</i></p> <p>"Tasty, brittle, subtly sinister. Crime crime is difficult to master but Ripley is coming out strong." - <i>Livestory Review</i></p> <p>"Unflinching, amusing, subtle challenge and not a dull page." - <i>Worcester Review (The Times)</i></p> <p>"One of only a handful of writers who can make me laugh out loud." - <i>Margaret Blaine (Times in Colour)</i></p> <p>"Mike Ripley is one of the best things to have happened to British crime fiction for years." - <i>J. E. Penton (Birmingham Post)</i></p> <p>JUST ANOTHER ANGEL (Futura, £2.99) ANGEL TOUGH (Gollins Crime Club, £8.95) ANGEL HUNT (Gollins Crime Club, £11.95) and coming in 1991: ANGELA IN ARMED</p> 
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Enter a villain...

Anyone expecting Russell James' magisterial *Great British Fictional Villains* [Remember When, £25] to provide them with a crib-sheet of "whodunit" in their favourite detective stories will be sadly disappointed, for this is a directory of villainous characters which goes way beyond the conventional detective story from 'Alex' the Droog in *A Clockwork Orange* to Zenith the Albino, who was, it seems, one of the (many) adversaries of Sexton Blake.



The book shows James' obvious love for Victorian melodrama and the breadth of his reading seems exhaustive. He is, however, less sure of his ground when it comes to *Lord of the Rings*. Sauron is, of course, listed as a notable villain (though Saruman only gets a supporting mention), yet there is no entry for the deranged and murderous Gollum – oh, and by the way, Frodo was not the son of Bilbo Baggins, they were actually first *and* second cousins once removed.

And whilst I have my blue pencil out, the villain in *Rogue Male* was Quive-Smith, not Quiver-Smith, and why-oh-why is *Sid James* listed as a Great British Fictional Villain? I admit that some of the *Carry On* films were little short of criminal and he might have been a bit of a rogue in his private life, but essentially he was an actor who may have played a few villains (though I am reminded of that excellent American and very villainous actor Jack Elam, who was once arrested in Mexico simply for being Jack Elam!).

But there is much to savour – and discover – in this catalogue of criminal, gothic, supernatural and downright bonkers characters from fiction going back to Shakespeare and Marlowe and even *Beowulf* though not, oddly, Chaucer. The one unavoidable conclusion to be drawn from the book is that modern British crime writers seem to have lost the knack of creating memorable villains, for very few seem to have been worthy of mentions since the golden age of Blofeld, Goldfinger and Rosa Klebb. In fact from the last 50 years of crime and thriller fiction, the only entries I spotted were for Freddie Forsyth’s “Jackal”, Michael Dobbs’ Francis Urquhart and Ian Rankin’s Big Ger Cafferty.

Perhaps these days we need a hero rather than a villain.

Red Carpet

My old and distinguished friend from our days at the Do Not Press imprint, Ken Bruen, assures me that he has reserved me places on the red carpet for the Leicester Square premieres of not one, but two films recently made from his novels.



And star-studded affairs these promise to be if my spies in Tinseltown are to be believed. The film version of Ken’s 2001 novel *London Boulevard* has a quite amazing cast including: Kiera Knightley, Colin Farrell, Ray Winstone, David Thewlis, Anna Friel and the wonderful Eddie Marsan. It is, however, the film version of his 2002 book *Blitz* which is if anything more noteworthy for it stars not only Jason Statham, Paddy Considine and David Morrissey, but Ken Bruen *himself* in a cameo role as a priest.



Father Ken

Will success turn Ken Bruen's head? Well if it doesn't now, it never bloody well will, for Ken has also just been awarded the prestigious Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière for 2009 and (yes, there's more) the filming of a 10-part television series of his book *The Guards* starts this month in Galway.

Oh, and by the way, he has a new Jack Taylor novel, *The Devil*, coming out in May next year.

Bookshop Outrage Shock Horror

There was extensive media coverage last month of an incident when popular chanteuse Leona Lewis was seemingly punched in the face during a book-signing session in Waterstone's, Piccadilly. Quite why this attracted so much attention is beyond me as, in my day, such incidents were commonplace if not compulsory.

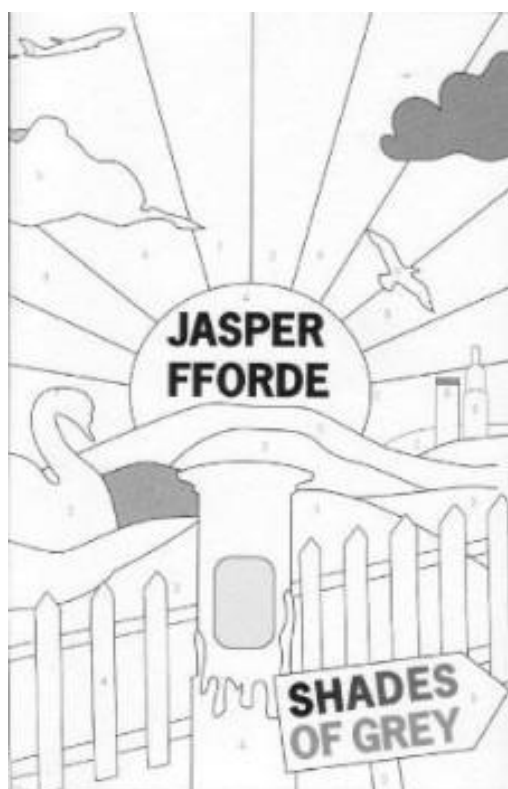
Few who ever saw it could forget the power of Dorothy Sayers' right hook and no book launch was complete without Dame Agatha adopting the 'spitting crane' stance and demonstrating her martial arts on an unsuspecting reviewer. Indeed publishers and literary editors of a certain age still talk wistfully when in their cups about the legendary brawl between John Dickson Carr and G.K. Chesterton which spread from a Foyle's bookshop, out on to the street and into several nearby public houses causing an extensive amount of damage to property and disrupting the West End traffic for several hours.

Now *that* was the Golden Age.

Happy New Reading Year

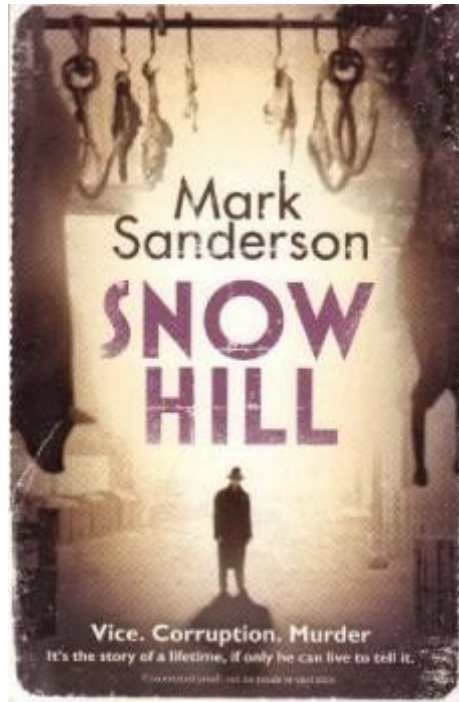
It will soon be time for the staff here at Ripster Hall to compose their annual letters to Santa Claus, which I collect and personally deliver to The North Pole, a small alehouse and gin shop in a nearby village, where they provide endless amusement in the dark autumnal evenings. I feel it my duty to amend these lists so that the staff (particularly the under-stairs maids and the stable-boys) have something more elevating than the X-Pods, i-boxes and LP records which they usually request. This invariably results in all the staff receiving book tokens which they are expected to spend on my recommended list of forthcoming crime fiction.

On my 'approved' list of titles for January will certainly be the new Jasper Fforde novel *Shades of Grey* (Hodder), even though this is a bit of a departure for him and fans of his time-travelling, cliché-busting heroine Thursday Next may take a while to get used to this vision of dystopian fantasy. Could grey be the new noir?



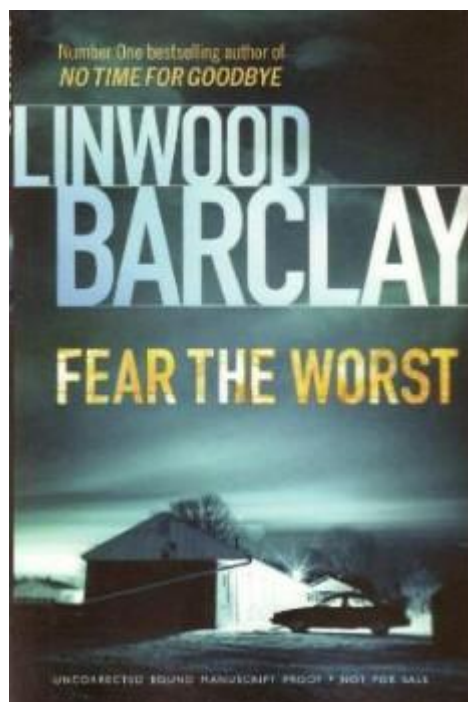
I will also be pointing the staff towards the new Robert Goddard *Long Time Coming* (Bantam), for even though I have not seen it yet, I am told there is quite a “buzz” about this book in “the trade” and it has always seemed odd to me that such an enormously popular thriller writer is not more of a household name.

I have already flagged up the much gossiped-about six-figure-advance-crime-novel-set-in the-1930s *Snow Hill* by the urbane socialite Mark Sanderson. The book appears in January from HarperCollins and proof copies carry glowing endorsements from Jake Arnott and someone at the *Sunday Telegraph* who says: “I recommend this extraordinary book most highly”. I must ask Mark who is responsible for such a recommendation. He may well know as he writes the Literary Life column in...er...the *Sunday Telegraph*.



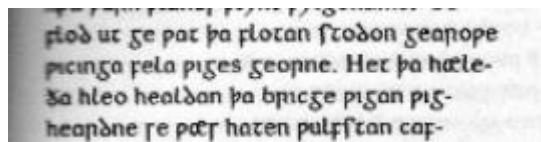
For those who can hang on until February, I have no hesitation in pointing them towards the latest Roman Britain mystery by Rosemary Rowe, *Requiem For A Slave* (from Severn House) which is actually the 11th title in her impressive and enjoyable 'Libertus' series. And a writer famed for medieval mysteries, Bernard Knight, comes smoothly up to date – well, almost – with *Where Death Delights* (also from Severn House), set in 1956 and kicking off a new series set in the western marches starring a forensic pathologist and a Home Office scientist. Not only does Professor Knight know the setting (the Gower coast, the Wye Valley and Tintern) very well, but as a former Home Office pathologist himself, I suspect the technical background is pretty accurate also.

I do not think I will need to force many towards the new Linwood Barclay, *Fear The Worst* (from Orion) that month. After two staggering bestsellers already, I can only assume his third book will be just as popular.



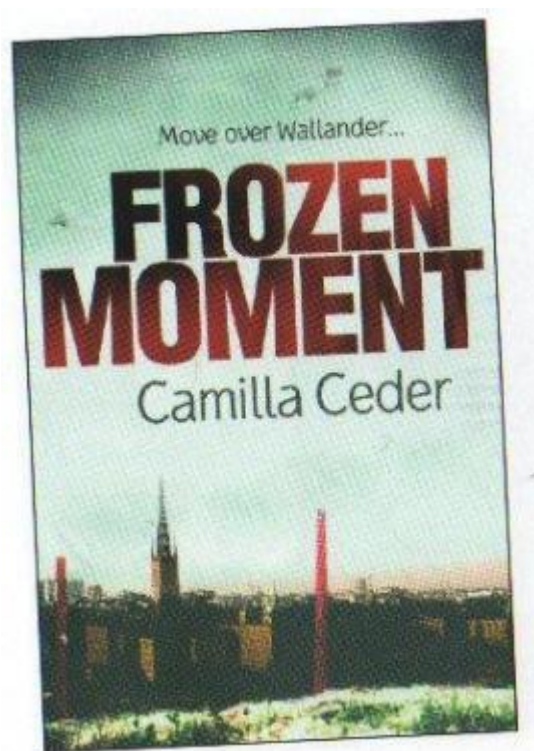
Scandinavian Crime: A Warning From History

I am often taken to task, nay pilloried and sometimes abused in public, for my refusal to accept without question that “Scandinavian crime Fiction” is the greatest thing since sliced Ryvita, but I now cite as part of my defence an unimpeachable source which my more intelligent readers will have no trouble deciphering from the Old English.



There, quite clearly, in the text of the epic poem *The Battle of Maldon* (which took place in August 991 AD), is the warning written over a thousand years ago by an unknown Anglo-Saxon monk: *So many Vikings keen to advance.*

And there's another one on the way.



I am not sure what the actual murder rate is in Sweden, but the current impression given by the crime fiction it exports is that it's a pretty dangerous place. Fortunately, there's a new kid on the block to enforce the law, Inspector Christian Tell, making his debut in *Frozen Moment*, which was published in Sweden earlier this year and appears in English translation in July next year from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.



Its author is the new kid on the Nordic crime writing block, Camilla Ceder, and I do mean new kid, for Ms Ceder was only born two years *after* the last Viking invasion of Europe (and the world), when Abba won Eurovision with *Waterloo*. Truly, we have a lot to thank Sweden for.

Poor Victor

Some time ago, for that scholarly magazine CADS, I wrote a short piece in praise of John Bingham's excellent 1958 crime novel *Murder Plan Six*. This is an interesting book on several counts, partly because its author was actually John le Carré's superior officer in the security service at the time, but mainly because it featured its publisher Victor Gollancz as a character in the story.

The legendary Gollancz imprint, with its distinctive yellow dust-jackets, was a trusted quality mark for the best science-fiction and crime-fiction around, with such famous names as Charles Willeford, Russell James, Michael Innes, Lionel Davidson and Anthony Price among its many distinguished authors.

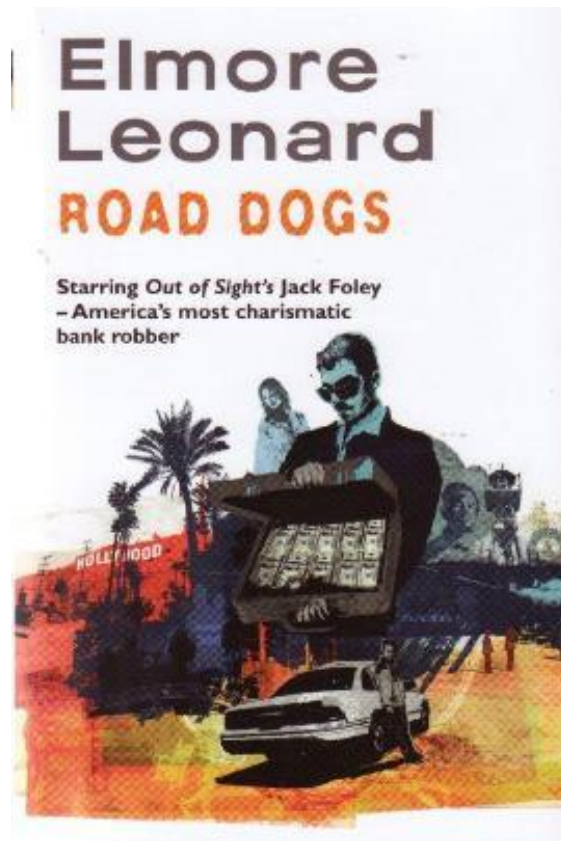
Now, though, the Gollancz list is dominated by a positive roost of vampire novels all seemingly aimed at the teenage female market. Indeed this category of publishing seems to be called "Paranormal Romance" and is marketed under the slogan "Scary has never been so sexy" with titles such as *A Quick Bite*, *Love Bites*, *Some Girls Bite*, *Single White Vampire*, *Friday Night Bites*, *Bitten & Smitten*, *Night Life*, *At Grave's End*, *Halfway To The Grave* and my favourite, simply because no one thought to change the title for a British audience brought up on the wit and wisdom of Victor Meldrew: *One Foot In The Grave*.

I wouldn't be surprised if Victor Gollancz was turning in *his* grave; or at the very least bursting out of it once darkness falls....

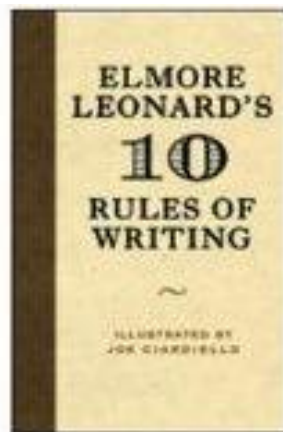
More Americans

October/November is certainly becoming the prime time for the American big hitters on the crime scene. Perhaps Dan Brown sells more, but writers who have stamped their individual stylistic marks on crime writing all have new books out.

I have already flagged up the new Michael Connelly (the excellent *Nine Dragons*) and the new James Lee Burke (*Rain Gods*) and now comes the long-awaited return of bank robber Jack Foley (synonymous now with George Clooney) in Elmore Leonard's *Road Dogs* from Weidenfeld. Any slightly doubting fan who was worried about The Boss's recent 'historical' titles such as *The Hot Kid* and *Up In Honey's Room* need not worry as *Road Dogs* is classic Leonard up there with *Get Shorty*, *Stick* and *LaBrava*.



And as an added treat *Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules of Writing* will be published in March 2010 as a small hardback (with line drawings) priced at £7.99, also by Weidenfeld.

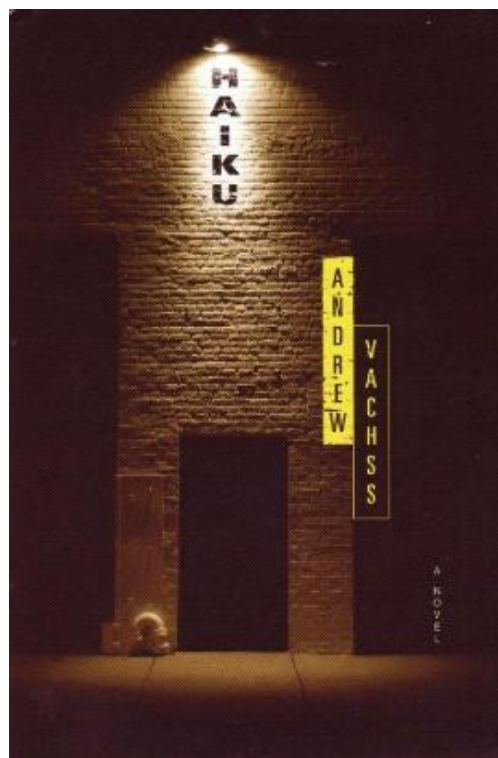


Weighing in at over 630 pages the new James Ellroy novel *Blood's A Rover* from Century certainly cements his reputation as a crime-writing heavyweight and I would say one of the most important American writing 'voices' of the last thirty years.



Ellroy's new book is the third part of his Underworld USA trilogy which began with *American Tabloid* back in (amazingly) 1995 and then *The Cold Six Thousand* in 2001. Whilst many of the American political references of the period (late sixties), especially his take on J. Edgar Hoover, may be missed by British readers, no one in their right mind can dispute the power and the fury of Ellroy's machine-gun prose.

Another distinct stylist whose prose books positively burn with righteous anger is Andrew Vachss, who really should be better known in this country and recognised for the unique and unflinching vision he has brought to *noir* fiction, in particular his 'Burke' series, since 1985.



Haiku is a short, sharp, pistol crack of a book which tracks the fortunes of a band of homeless outcasts, all addicted to something or incapable of dealing with the ‘normal’ world, lead by Ho, a Japanese *sensei* fallen from grace, and all striving to survive in a world as grey and hard as concrete.

Andrew has kindly sent me an extra copy of *Haiku*, which I do not believe is scheduled for UK publication, and I would be happy for it to go to a good home. Indeed I will send it to the first person to e-mail their postal address using the CONTACT THE EDITOR link on the Shots homepage, putting VACHSS in the subject line.

Public Hearing

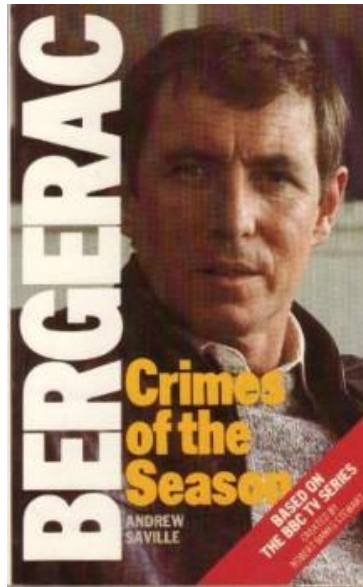
In the middle of a month of wild parties, I had to compose myself and submit myself to a public hearing by the Northamptonshire Truth and Reconciliation Committee.



As usual, I had misunderstood and this turned out to be an incredibly pleasant evening in Wellingborough public library, talking about crime fiction with some very well-read readers who were utterly charming and very friendly, even the much feared Boadicea Reading Group – the lending library’s awesome shock troops.

By the same author

Flicking through the paperback section of my library here in the west wing of Ripster Hall, I came across a novelisation of the famous *Bergerac* television series of a quarter of a century ago.



Crimes of the Season was published in 1985 and written by one Andrew Saville, about whom little is known except that he is also credited as the author of a volume entitled *Eh Brian, It's A Whopper* which, you have to admit, is an intriguing title.

Some sources suggest that this would be a good title for a television comedy series based on a coarse fishing club in the Midlands, but I don't believe that for a minute.

Toodles!

The Ripster