

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley

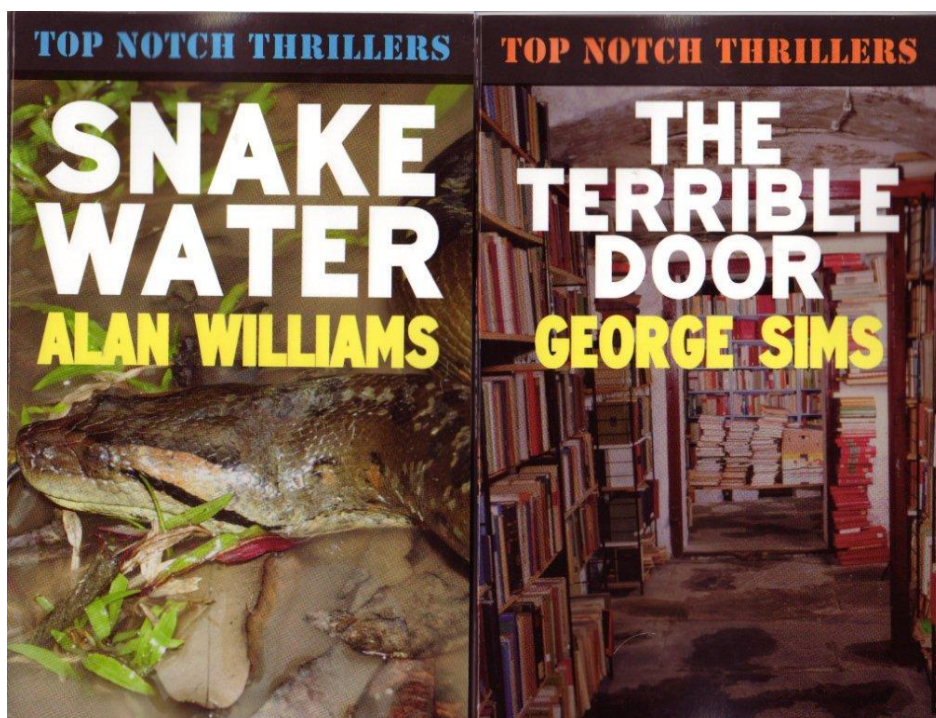


Poacher Turned Gamekeeper

As regular readers of this column will know, I am not one to blow my own trumpet, even though it is a classic 1919 B-flat model from Boosey & Hawkes. I *may* have mentioned in the past that I once wrote some crime novels which, in the last century, won an award or two and I *could* have remarked, in passing, that I served as the crime fiction critic for ten years on the *Daily Telegraph* when it was once a great newspaper. But I have never admitted – or had to admit – to being a *publisher* until now; may the gods of writing and the spirit of Sarah Caudwell forgive me.

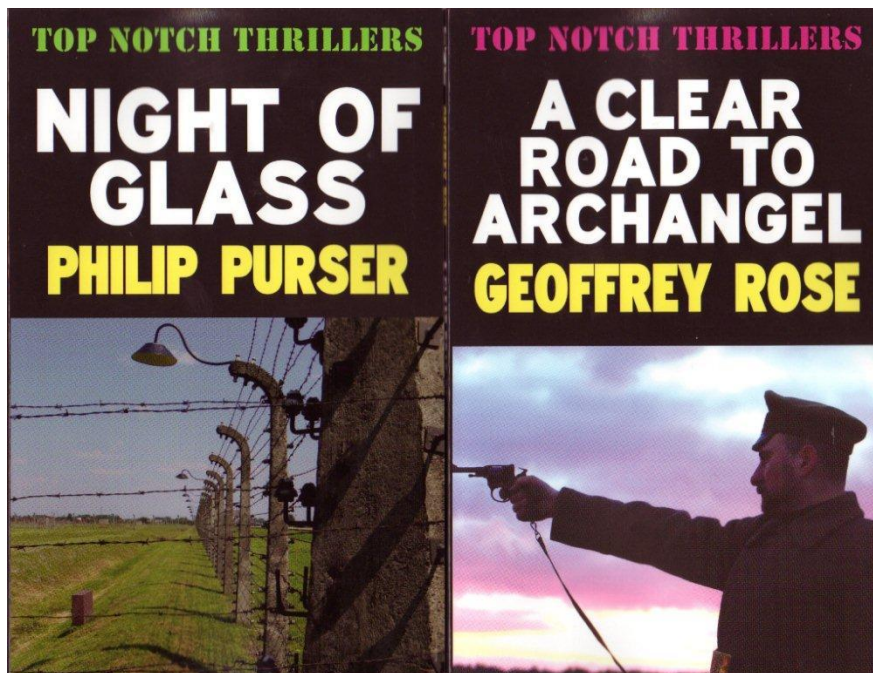
I can, however, remain in the closet no longer and declare myself to be the series editor for the Top Notch Thrillers imprint of Ostara Publishing, a relatively new print-on-demand publisher which has already had some success reviving classic detective stories.

The mission statement (see how I'm down with the modern lingo?) is to “revive Great British thrillers which do not deserve to be forgotten” which, I am sure you will agree, is a noble aim.



The first four Top Notch titles are now available – in time to make excellent Christmas presents – and can be ordered from any bookshop or from Amazon over the jolly old interweb. They make not only excellent reading (which is why I chose them) but taken together show what a range and variety the British ‘thriller’ covered. Alan Williams, who later made his name with excellent spy stories, cut his novelist teeth on tough tales of violence and adventure in exotic locations of which *Snake Water*, set in the mountains, swamps and deserts of a South American banana republic, is a prime example.

The late George Sims, in his debut suspense thriller of 1964, restricts himself to the world of rare book collecting, a world he knew well as in real life Sims was a well-known antiquarian book dealer. In *The Terrible Door*, the suspense comes through the increasingly weird and at times Dickensian characters encountered by mild-mannered book dealer Robert Sheldon on the trail of some missing (and probably scandalous) literary letters. Sims, who was later to be elected to the Detection Club, was a master of the uneasy atmosphere and here he is particularly good at describing a tired and shabby London on the eve of the Swinging Sixties.



Philip Purser’s 1968 thriller *Night of Glass* is an absolute gem though I have to admit I only discovered it after reading the follow-up *Lights in the Sky*, which was written some 35 years later! Disgusted with Appeasement and the British handling of the ‘Munich Crisis’ in 1938, four Cambridge undergraduates decide – almost as a Rag Week stunt – to engineer the escape of a prisoner from Dachau concentration camp. To begin with they have little idea what they are up against, but an ex-inmate now a refugee in London briefs them on life in the camps – and provides an absolutely heartbreaking sub-plot to the main story.

A Clear Road to Archangel by Geoffrey Rose is, as one reviewer put it “pure chase”. A un-named, badly trained and ill-equipped British spy, pursued by secret police and the mysterious ‘Captain S’, is on the run across northern Russia in the icy winter of 1917 dodging both Red and White armies, deserters, bandits and wolves. Geoffrey Rose only wrote three novels but they stand out for their unique style and his ability to conjure up fantastical and slightly surreal landscapes.

More Top Notch Thriller titles are planned for 2010, drawn from the 1960s and 70s, which I have come to regard as just as much a Golden Age for British thrillers as the 1930s was for the English detective story. It was a period when thriller-writing names such as Alistair Maclean, Hammond Innes, Len Deighton, Ian Fleming, Francis Clifford, Adam Hall and Gavin Lyall (I could go on) dominated the bestseller lists to the exclusion of conventional crime novels with detective heroes. That, of course, was to change, probably from the mid-1970s

onwards and the fictional police detective rose to prominence in the UK whilst American writers such as Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum, Clive Cussler, David Morrell et al, staked a claim to the thriller.

Names such as Fleming, Maclean and Deighton live on, but many other fine craftsmen and imaginative writers are fading from the memories of publishers and booksellers. We should not let them go quietly into that dark night and I know I am not alone in feeling this. My friend millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim has already “blogged” about Top Notch Thrillers on one of the many websites he owns on the interweb. I am told he was also “whiffing” and “twittering” but I understand there are tablets for that sort of thing these days.

In Town Tonight

Top Notch Thrillers were, naturally, the talk of all of London’s pre-Christmas publishing parties this month and there were quite a few of them. Recession? What recession? Trebles all round!

The most lavish hospitality was on offer at the Publishers Publicity Circle party held in the historic Kettners restaurant in deepest Soho, where I arrived to find that urbane American-in-exile Mike Carlson the lone male in a room squeezed full of feminine pulchritude.



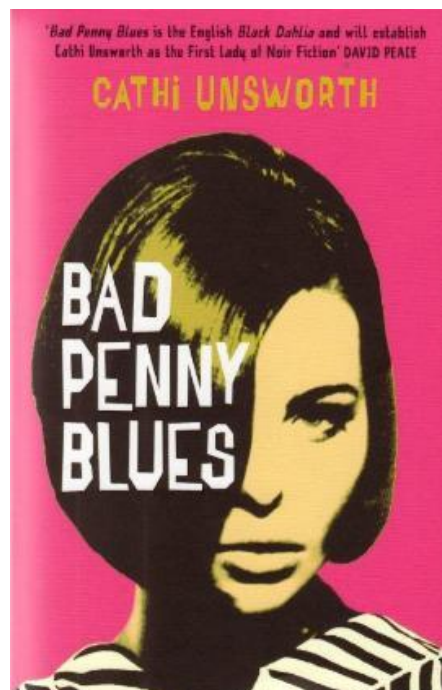
But soon the pub next door emptied and the party was joined by assorted hacks and scribblers and I managed to catch Peter Guttridge of *The Observer* making a point – no doubt about Top Notch Thrillers – to the young but ruggedly handsome Jake Kerridge of the *Daily Telegraph*.



Then it was off to the curiously name Horse Hospital in Bloomsbury for a party in honour of the vivacious Cathi Unsworth.



Or rather in honour of Cathi's new novel, from Profile, named I am sure after that seminal recording by the late Humphrey Lyttleton, *Bad Penny Blues*, which is set in the Ladbroke Grove area in the years 1959-1965 – an area terrorised by a serial killer who preyed on prostitutes and became known to the police and the media as 'Jack the Stripper'. From this officially unsolved case, Cathi has crafted an atmospheric novel which comes with advance praise from such notables as Jake Arnott and David Peace. And I am sure, had he been still with us (or at least in *The Coach and Horses* in Soho) Derek Raymond would have been similarly enthusiastic.



On the invitation to the launch party, given the setting of the book, I was advised that the Dress Code was “Party Like It’s 1959” and it was such a relief not to have to get dressed up for once.

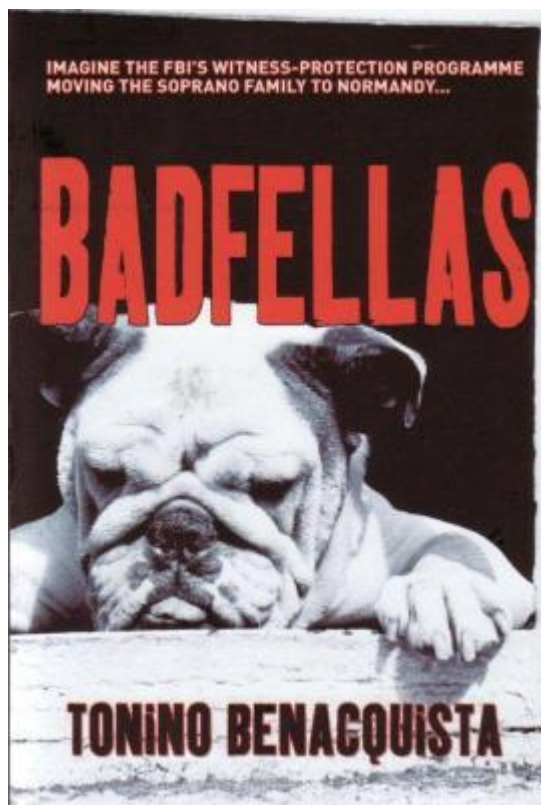
Next up was an evening with my old and distinguished dancing partner, the elfin Stella Duffy at the Writer’s House courtesy of the Authors Collecting and Licensing Society – a noble institution to whom many of us are ridiculously grateful.

I was also entreated, nay begged, to attend the Crime Writers’ Association’s Christmas party by at least one person and two CWA members who ought to know better offered to smuggle me in as their guest/lover/bodyguard/evil twin. But good sense and the spirit of Christmas prevailed. It is now ten years since I darkened the doors of the CWA and I saw no reason to spoil their party.

For legal reasons (not being invited), I was unable to enjoy the festivities arranged by Serpent’s Tail and, yet again, HarperCollins, from whose guest lists I seem to have been thoroughly tippexed in the last twelve months though I honestly can’t think why, but I am sure there is a good reason.

Badfellas

Imagine the Soprano family being relocated to Normandy under a witness protection programme. *Mon Dieu!* Well, that’s the premise (or at least the tag line) of Tonino Benacquista’s new novel *Badfellas* from those specialist importers of crime fiction from faraway places, the Bitter Lemon Press.



I have long thought that Bitter Lemon deserve more credit than they get for promoting crime fiction in translation without resorting to even further saturation of the Scandinavian market.

Their forthcoming titles for 2010 show their range, which includes not only the latest Benacquista (French born of Italian parents), but also the second novel, *Entanglement*, by Zygmunt Miloszewski, a Pole whose first (horror) novel had him acclaimed as “the Polish Stephen King” and *Needle in a Haystack*, in June next year, from Argentinian playwright and screenwriter Ernesto Mallo.

But probably their most significant title in 2010 will be the English edition of *A Jew Must Die*, which caused quite a stir when first published, by noted Swiss author Jacques Chessex, who sadly died after giving a library talk in October.

Essex Girl With Pistol

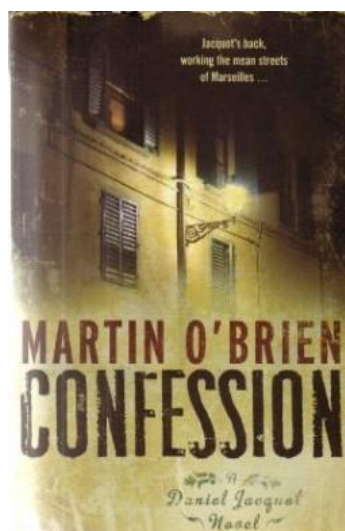
It was a pleasure, as it always is, to visit the Dorothy L. Sayers Centre house in the public library in Witham, Essex, last month for a crime fiction coffee morning. The speakers included the charming Seona Ford of the Dorothy L Sayers Society and the awesomely knowledgeable Barry Pike of the Margery Allingham Society for both Margery and Dorothy were honorary Essex Girls who lived, for many years, less than ten miles apart in that fine and cultured county.

I was particularly fascinated by one of the artefacts Barry Pike brought along, a percussion-cap pistol presented to Margery Allingham on her being voted “Best Active Mystery Writer” by the readers of the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine in 1951.



Double Indemnity

I remember being mightily impressed with the early adventures of rugby-playing French policeman Chief Inspector Daniel Jacquot when Englishman Martin O'Brien launched his series a few years ago.



I seem to have lost sight of the adventures of this Marseilles based cop recently, but now I can correct that with the (I think) fifth in the series *Confession* from O'Brien's new publisher Preface.

I will do that whilst also catching up with *Storm* and *Avalanche*, the adventure thrillers of Jack Drummond, who just happens to be a certain Martin O'Brien.

Shots of the Year

It's that time again, when I dish out those most-misheard of awards the *Shots of the Year* for 2009; the only awards in crime fiction which come with absolutely no financial reward, no glitzy ceremony, no photo opportunities and a total lack of regard for democracy in the selection process.

It was a very good year for thrillers, especially thrillers with an historical background (a large number of them set in or around WWII) and just to confuse matters, several books qualified in multiple categories.

So I shall plunge straight in as declare that the *Shots Thriller of the Year* was *The Information Officer* by Mark Mills, a memorable story set on the besieged island of Malta in 1942 and my *Historical Shot of the Year* also goes to a wartime thriller, Andrew Williams' fantastically assured first novel *The Interrogator* which includes in its cast-list a real life Naval Intelligence officer called Ian Fleming!

My *Shot In Translation* goes to the veteran (and oddly overlooked) Cuban writer Leonard Padura for *Havana Fever* whilst the *Crime Shot of the Year* goes to the up-and-coming young American writer Marcus Sakey for *At the City's Edge*, a stunning but thoughtful mystery as hard as the streets of its Chicago setting. And talking of hard-boiled settings, the *First Shot* for a debut novel goes to Stuart Neville for *The Twelve* - an absolute tour-de-force as a modern revenger's tragedy set in a Northern Ireland supposedly post The Troubles.

But just to show that Belfast has a sense of humour, the *Comic Shot* of the Year goes, without question, to Colin Bateman for either *Mystery Man* or *Day of the Jack Russell* or perhaps both.

One tries to give back...

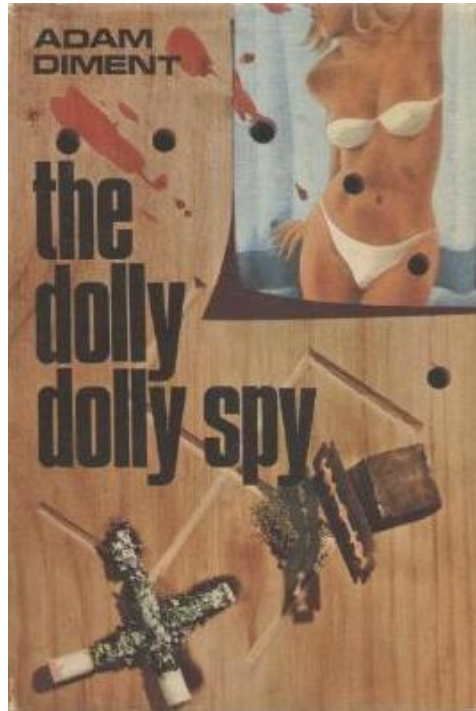
It has become something of an annual tradition now for me to give my bespoke Creative Crime seminar, which is open to all with a passing interest in crime fiction. Usually held in the Gun Room (for obvious reasons) here at Ripster Hall, a redecoration project by the Lady Ripster, heavily influenced by her addiction to *Feng Shui* (and Gordon's gin) resulted in a minor disaster when she insisted on placing the rock directly next to the hard place.



However, superb alternative accommodation was quickly found at that historic inn, The Swan at Lavenham in Suffolk. To coin a phrase: went the day well? Well, yes, I think it did, as part of the first ever Lavenham Literary Festival.

The Missing, Missing Author

Since my involvement with Top Notch Thrillers became known, I have been inundated with requests from readers to try and include their favourite books in the imprint. The majority of suggestions, I am happy to say, were for authors and titles which I had already placed on my mental ‘shopping list’ but one name, which came up many times, did surprise me: Adam Diment, author of *The Dolly, Dolly Spy*.



Adam Diment became the poster boy for the crime scene in Swinging London when his debut novel appeared in 1967 when he was a mere 24 years old. His spy hero Philip MacAlpine embraced the lifestyle of the period to such an extent that he is regarded as “the real Austin Powers” and his creator was never shy when it came to being photographed in fast cars or with a super model (or ‘dolly bird’) on his arm.

Yet the really interesting thing about Diment is that after four novels (the last published in 1971), he disappeared and I do mean *disappeared*; he simply dropped off the grid as the young people say these days. Rumours have abounded ever since: that he followed the hippy trail to India and still lives there in an ashram, that he went on the run after being framed in a currency swindle, that he is currently a successful businessman in Thailand or an arable farmer in Kent.

Whatever happened to this once very high-profile author is a mystery and makes the idea of getting his books back in to print a tempting one. I am told he was an influential writer by several figures in the literary world who, when they arrived on the London scene in the Sixties, used his novel *The Great Spy Race* as an A-Z guide of the social scene and after-dark hot-spots.

A Fair Pair

Everyone associates, as they should, the name of Erle Stanley Gardner with that of his most famous creation, Perry Mason. But few readers on this side of the Atlantic are familiar with the adventures of Bertha Cool and Donald Lam which Gardener created under the pen-name A.A. Fair. I have to admit I was one of them.



Until, that is, I had the opportunity to acquire a brace of paperbacks published in 1959 and 1960. And what a fine pair they make. Indeed they don't make them like that anymore – the small Corgi paperbacks I mean – and I will be settling down in front of a log fire during the Festive Season to devour them at my well-earned leisure.

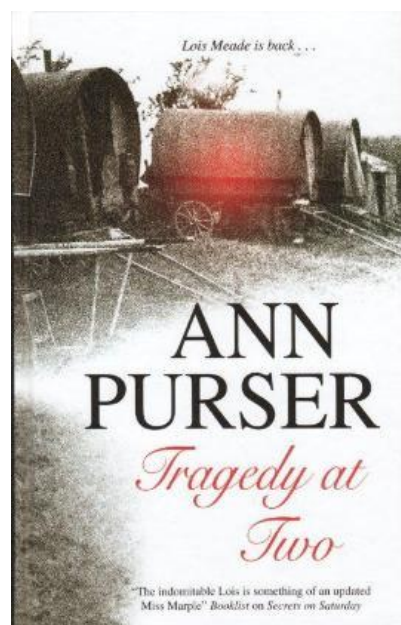
Epitaph for Mr Jones?

Mystery Book News reports that “much to our dismay” that fine actor Tommy Lee Jones has pulled out of the proposed movie version of Michael Connelly’s *The Lincoln Lawyer* in which he was due to co-star and direct. But, says *Mystery Book News*, “Matthew McConaughey, much to our dismay, apparently is still attached to play the lead”.

Mr Lee Jones has not had a happy time with American crime fiction this year. His long-awaited debut as Dave Robicheaux, the Louisiana detective of James Lee Burke, has been viewed only by the lucky few – which is not a description often applied to the French. In April, the much-delayed film version of *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* was released, but only in France.

Murder, Me Duck?

It is not often that one comes across what I have always thought of as an East Midlands accent in a crime novel, but I have now, and I think it an authentic one.



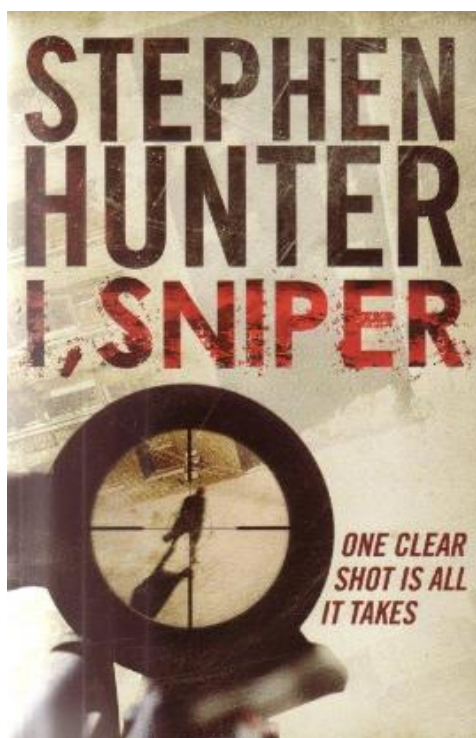
Ann Purser's latest novel *Tragedy at Two*, from those sophisticated out-of-towners Severn House, features her new series sleuth Lois Meade, a sensible mother who runs her own cleaning business and who helps the police out with their stickier cases whenever she can. What caught my eye, in these books set 'in the heart of England', was that Lois' husband constantly refers to people as "me duck" in a rather endearing way, though I am sure someone will be dying to tell me how politically incorrect that is these days.

Christmas Reading

More in hope than expectation, I always make a list of suitable Christmas presents for myself to avoid all that time usually spent queuing at the Returns Desk in Marks & Spencer in January. Naturally I list books, for whilst one can have far too many socks, one cannot have enough books, although I do take a break from crime and thriller fiction at this time of year, preferring something lighter.

At the top of my wish list is Chris Wickham's *The Inheritance of Rome*, which is said to shed light on the Dark Ages, and I simply must catch up on *Hitler's Empire* by Mark Mazower.

Yet I have already received an unexpected early Christmas present from those sensitive souls at Simon & Schuster in the form of *I, Sniper* by that terrific American thriller writer Stephen Hunter.

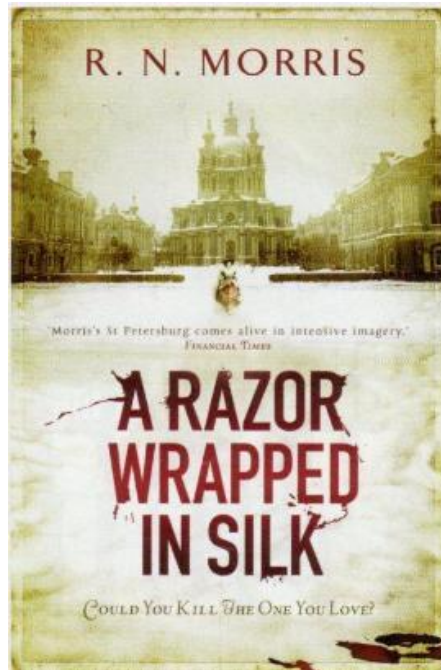


I was unaware that Hunter had a new book out over here and he is not a writer whose light should be hidden under a bushel. I have been a fan since reading his *Pale Horse Coming* in 2003, a book which, I predict, will go down as one of the classic American thrillers of the 21st Century with its intermingled themes of old movies, cowboys, slavery and a fairly unique (if radical) attitude to penal reform!

Flagging Up 2010

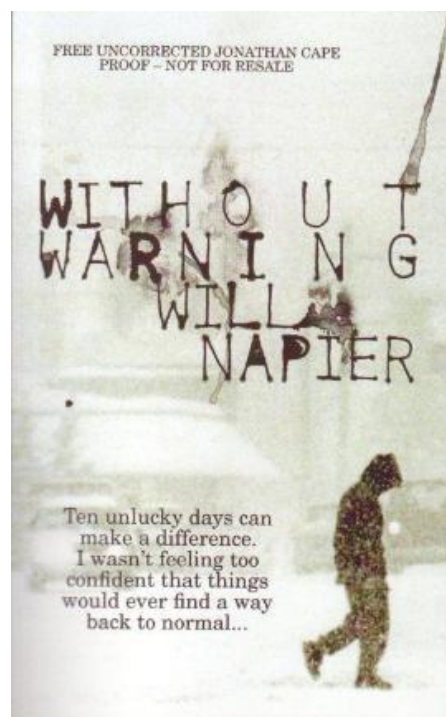
A few things have caught my eye from publishers' catalogues for the coming year and I will certainly be noting titles in my 2010 *Hunting & Shooting* Diary – assuming I get one for Christmas.

I know that a large number of fans keenly await the new Roger Morris 'Porfiry' novel *A Razor Wrapped in Silk* in April.

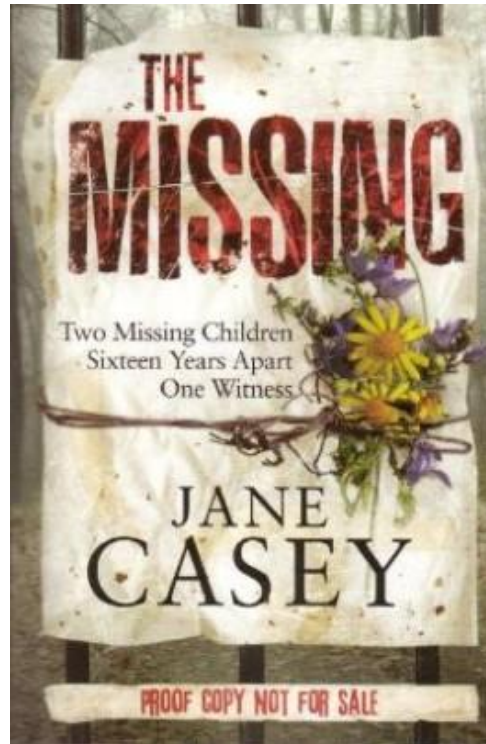


But before then, two books by new (to me) writers have been drawn to my attention.

Will Napier is, I think, a Scot who now lives in the USA where his second novel *Without Warning* is set. Publishers Jonathan Cape trumpet its arrival in February by comparisons with D.B.C Pierre and Iain Banks “and perfect for fans of *Dexter*”.



Jane Casey is Irish, but lives in London and her suspense thriller *The Missing* is published in February as well, by Ebury Press, who proclaim the book as “an utterly compelling crime debut in the mould of Nicci French and Sophie Hannah.”



Indeed advance copies come with an endorsement from Sophie Hannah who is generously enthusiastic about her new rival. Other equally gracious and generous messages of welcome come from Robert Goddard and Reginald Hill. One might say that with friends like that before the book is actually published, *The Missing* can't really miss.

Season's Greetings and Toodles,

The Ripster.