

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



North To Alaska

Last month I reported that a well-travelled copy of *Angel Underground* had been used to taunt penguins in the Antarctic and was en route for Alaska and the Arctic Circle.



I can now reveal that the humble volume made it there safely and the above photographic evidence was provided by that intrepid explorer Caroline Wolf.

The book continues its globetrotting and its itinerary includes: the deserts of Sudan, the gardens of Japan, Milan, Yucatan, the wilds of Borneo and, in all probability, the vineyards of Bordeaux.

Streets of London

Age and infirmity now mean that my visits up to old London town are much curtailed. However, I still offer a lunching service, making myself available to publishers or agents who are either lonely or in need of some witty table talk to liven up a dull meeting.

At one such luncheon recently in a sumptuous restaurant in the fashionable part of Marylebone I took my usual window seat so that I could see the colourful street-life below me and, of course, *be seen*. Invariably on these occasions, I always spot a notable personage and this was no exception for I spied none other than distinguished crime writer Simon Brett strolling casually out of the shadows of the BBC's Broadcasting House

as if blissfully unaware of the notorious gangs of footpads, painted whores and cut-purses which frequent those dark alleys. Indeed so unperturbed was he that he paused mid-stride to give me a jaunty wave.

The reason for the spring in Simon's step became clear when I consulted the *Radio Times* to discover that Radio 4 had produced more dramatisations of his excellent Charles Paris comedy mysteries starring the wonderful Bill Nighy, beginning with *Cast in Order of Disappearance*.

Reading at Reading

I hear that the dashing Mark Mills, whose novel *The Information Officer* was the Shots Thriller of 2009, is to appear at the Reading Crime Festival which takes place between the 16 and 19th September. Among other star guests this year will be Val McDermid, Scottish funster Christopher Brookmyre and Welsh funster Malcolm Pryce, along with my old and distinguished friends from the world of history mysteries, Lindsey Davis and Paul Doherty.

Oh and I'll be there too, making up the numbers on the comedy-crime panel which will be effortlessly chaired by that urbane polymath Peter Guttridge.

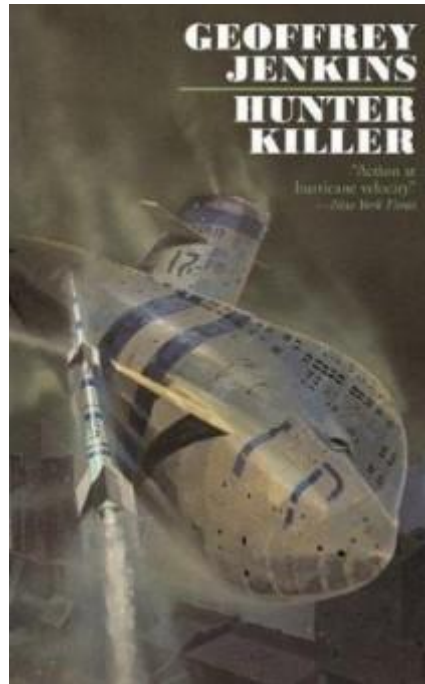
Small World (War II)

I did not know until recently – which just proves that one is never too old to learn – that the author of some of my favourite adventure thrillers, South African-born Geoffrey Jenkins, was a war correspondent in London during the Second World War. It was there he met and became good friends with fellow journalist Ian Fleming (then serving in Naval Intelligence) who was also to make quite a mark on the thriller-writing scene in the 1950s.



Jenkins, who died in 2001, wrote cracking yarns which brilliantly evoked the desert coastlines of Africa and the wild southern oceans and there was usually a shipwreck or sunk U-boat in there somewhere.

There was also a spooky connection with Ian Fleming's James Bond in that in *Hunter Killer*, Jenkins' action hero Commander Peace fakes his own funeral by being buried at sea, fired from the torpedo tubes of a nuclear submarine. It was a scene similar to the one which later appeared in one of the Bond movies.



Actually this isn't really spooky or surprising as (according to recent revelations on the jolly old interweb) back in 1966 Geoffrey Jenkins was approached by the estate of Ian Fleming with a view to continuing the 007 novels' franchise. It is said that Jenkins actually did deliver the manuscript, now lost, of a Bond book called *Per Fine Ounce* under the pen-name 'Robert Markham'. For some reason the Fleming estate did not like the novel, though they seemed to like the pen name as it was used by Kingsley Amis when he wrote the first post-Fleming Bond book to be published, *Colonel Sun*.

When the franchise was revived again in 1980, it was thriller-writer John Gardner who took on the mantle and, I believe, actually wrote more Bond books than Ian Fleming did.

Continuing the 'small world' theme, I have also discovered that the fondly-remembered thriller writer Victor Canning (whose centenary it is next year) attended an army officer training school in Wales during WWII where he befriended fellow cadet Eric Ambler.



Canning then went on to serve for a time in Anti-Aircraft batteries, just as did Hammond Innes, who actually wrote a novel about it entitled *Attack Alarm*.

Long Live Libraries

Throughout February the sound of corks popping mingled with cries of "Huzzah!" and "Trebles all round!" as the literary world (or rather a small section of it) celebrated the annual pay-out from that most noble body, the Public Lending Right. The PLR has been compensating authors for many years now on the basis of how many times their books are borrowed from the UK's public libraries.

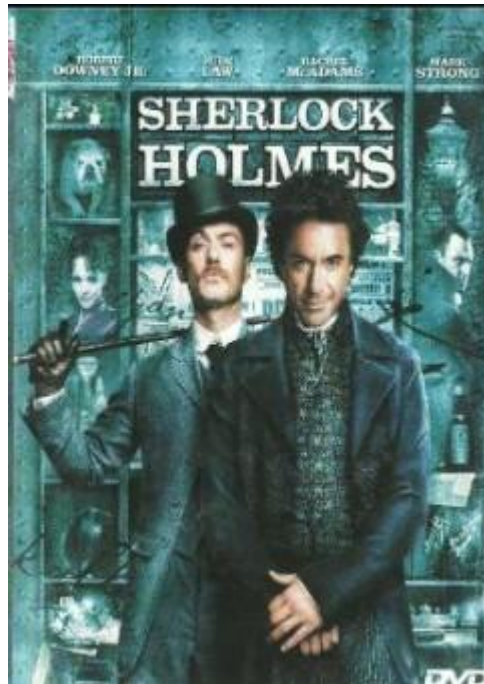
The general public automatically assume that anyone who struggles to get a book published instantly becomes a multi-millionaire with earnings such as those enjoyed by a Dan Brown or an Ian Rankin. The truth is that most writers earn an awful lot less – just as a professional footballer playing for, say, Hartlepool, does not enjoy the £160,000 a week pay packet of a John Terry playing for Chelsea (let alone the fringe benefits).

So spare a thought this year for the 14,188 registered authors whose books were *not* borrowed at all and who received *no* payments whatsoever and prospective writers should bear in mind the fact that 75% of all the published authors in the scheme who did qualify received a stipend of less than £100.

The Game's Afoot

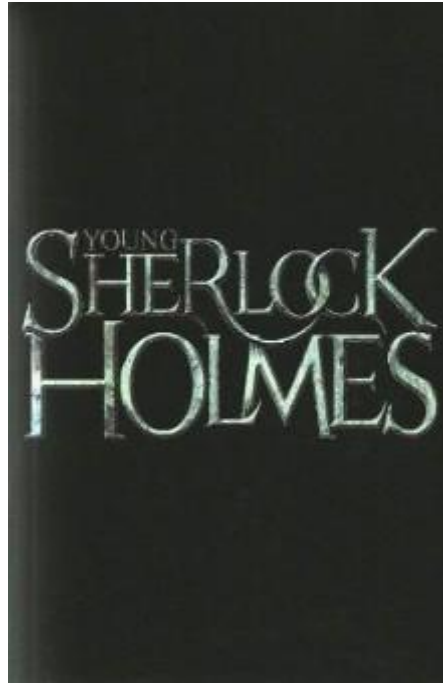
Ripster Hall is often visited by an itinerant projectionist who provides a film show in one of the capacious barns for the young people of the estate after they have completed their daily duties in the fields, the lambing sheds or the slaughterhouse.

'Captain Sparrow' as he is known (I believe the rank is a nautical one) had a rare treat for us last month, a film he assured me was "really hot" though I was not clear in what sense he meant. The new *Sherlock Holmes* film, directed by that talented young chap Guy Ritchie, is certainly a ripping yarn and has been so well-received that a sequel has been rushed into "pre-production" – or so Captain Sparrow tells me.



Quite what the purist Sherlockian will make of it I neither know nor care, but I certainly enjoyed it despite the fact that Robert Downey did not know how to use cutlery as a Victorian gentleman would. So too did many of the children of my tenants, bless their little urchin hearts, who formed an orderly line at the staff entrance to Ripster Hall to receive the a copy of one of Conan Doyle's excellent books – in lieu of wages of course.

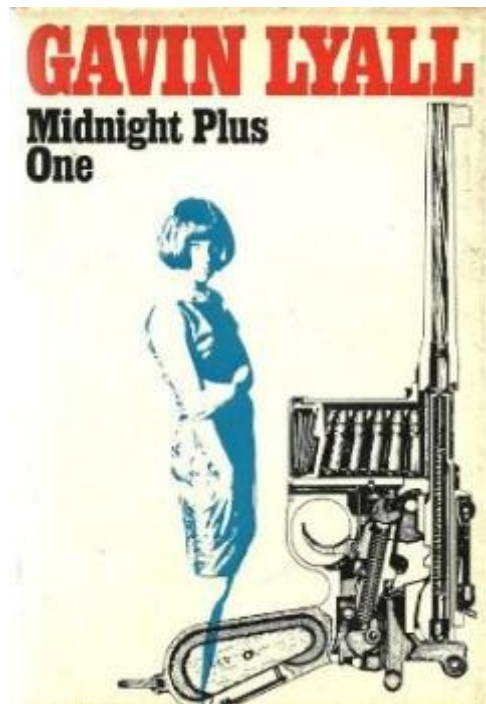
Having no doubt heard of my philanthropic work with the youth of today, publishers Macmillan are taking it one stage further and publishing, in June, the first children's book to be authorised by the estate of Arthur Conan Doyle. *Young Sherlock Holmes: Death Cloud* by Andrew Lane will no doubt be the first of a series which begins with the Great Detective's school days.



Andrew Lane kindly provides a glossary of pre-decimal British currency used in 1860, gently explaining terms such as ‘farthing’, ‘half-a-crown’, ‘sovereign’ and ‘guinea’. Young readers will no doubt be fascinated, but for some of us this is pure nostalgia.

So soon forgotten

That respected Scottish commentator on all things crime fictional, Calum MacLeod, writing recently for that distinguished interweb “blog” *The Rap Sheet* bemoans – quite rightly – the fact that seven years after his untimely death, only one of Gavin Lyall’s excellent thrillers, *Midnight Plus One*, seems to be still in print.



As Calum rightly fears, Gavin Lyall is in danger of joining the ranks of those unjustly-forgotten British thriller writers who published in the 1960s and 70s – a period which was something of a ‘Golden Age’ for the British action/adventure novel and spy story.

I first met Gavin round about 1988/89 and had several opportunities to play the gushing fan and tell him how much I rated his early ‘stand alone’ thrillers such as *Midnight* and *The Most Dangerous Game*. At the time, I was the fledgling author of a solitary novel and he had published about a dozen successful ones and served as Chairman of the Crime Writers’ Association.

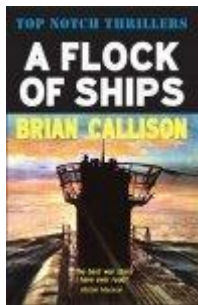
I found him a patient and polite listener and he showed a devilish wit by starting the rumour that there was an organisation being formed called THUG – Thriller-writers Hoping to Unseat Gorbachev. At the time, Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* were in danger of depriving thriller writers of their traditional Russian bad guy. If the Soviet Union were to go all liberal on us, Gavin said, where on Earth could we turn to for our villains? Even though not a spy writer, the idea of THUG appealed greatly to me and I happily joined in the rumour-spreading to such an extent that we had several visiting American authors to the 1990 London Bouchercon totally convinced that there actually was such a campaigning body.

But not forgotten...

Many thumping good British thrillers do not deserve to be forgotten – and many haven’t been thanks to Print-On-Demand technology and the splendid efforts of Ostara Publishing’s new **Top Notch Thrillers** imprint, and it’s dynamic editor who is of course....er...me.

The latest batch of titles are now out in attractive trade paperbacks (a snip at £10.99) and available from Amazon or through major booksellers (despite what the staff may say!).

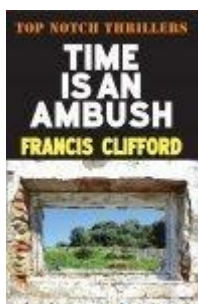
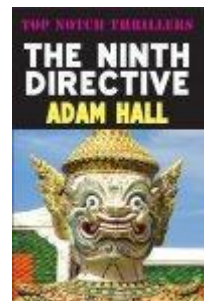
Whilst two of the titles may be unfamiliar to the ill-read or terminally young, two ought not to be. Brian Callison launched his thriller-writing career forty years ago with the huge bestseller *A Flock of Ships* described by Alistair Maclean as “The best war story I have ever read”.



Brian is still writing thrillers in his unique, breathless, machine-gun style prose and sharing his experience of forty years and over twenty bestsellers with new writers under a writer mentoring programme following a three-year tenure as a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the University of Dundee.

Trevor Dudley Smith (1920-1995) became a bestselling novelist twice, once as ‘Elleston Trevor’ (most famously for *Flight of the Phoenix*) and again as ‘Adam Hall’ for a variety of thrillers including the 19-novel ‘Quiller’ series.

When Quiller, the tightly-wound obsessive super agent first appeared in 1965, spy fiction had seen nothing like him and among early fans were Kingsley Amis and John Dickson Carr. *The Ninth Directive* was the second book in the series, with Quiller in Bangkok planning a long-range rifle assassination (five years before *Day of the Jackal*) and the TNT edition comes with an Afterword by Adam Hall’s son, Jean-Pierre Trevor, describing life growing up with his father’s famous creation.

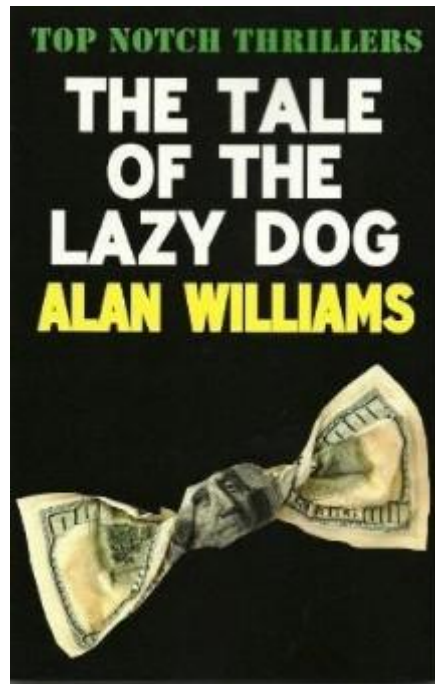


The two other titles should be better known than they are, but memories in publishing tend to be short and are probably getting shorter.

It is certainly over forty years ago that I first read *Time is an Ambush* by Francis Clifford, but it stays fresh in my memory as a subtle, deliberately slow-paced suspense thriller which is really about love, mistrust and forgiveness.

I am certainly not alone in admiring the award-winning work of Francis Clifford and discovered many years ago that my admiration was shared by Diamond Dagger winner Margaret Yorke, who was one of the first to bemoan (back in 1988) the fact that Clifford's fine writing was no longer in print.

In the 1970s, Alan Williams hit the big time with spy novels such as *Gentleman Traitor* and *The Beria Papers* but had earlier cut his teeth on some fine thrillers, often in the 'Englishman abroad, out of his depth in an exotic locations' school.

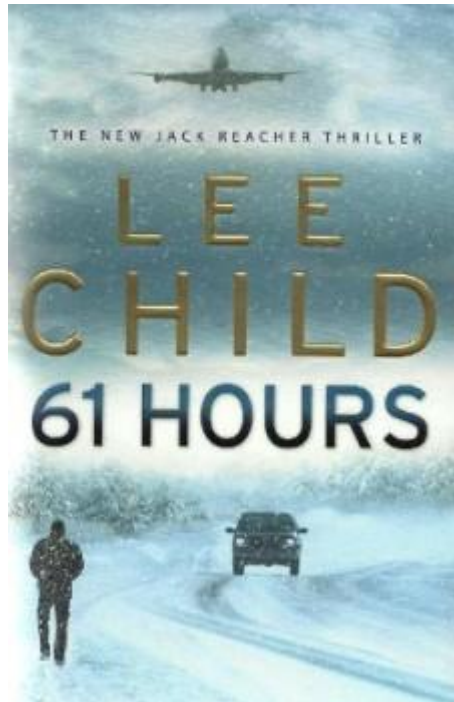


The exotic locations almost certainly came from Williams' impressive track record as a foreign correspondent in some of the world's political hot-spots, including Hungary during the 1956 uprising, Algeria, Northern Ireland and south-east Asia, from where sprang the inspiration for *The Tale of the Lazy Dog*. This 1970 heist thriller sees an unlikely crew of modern day pirates attempting to steal \$1.5 billion in US currency, using the Vietnam War as cover! This slickly-plotted novel not only evokes the faded French colonial atmosphere as well as Graham Greene did in the 1950s, but brings together two of Williams' series rogues (he tended to prefer series villains to heroes), the mad, bad and very dangerous to know Sammy Ryderbeit and the sinister French gangster Charles Pol.

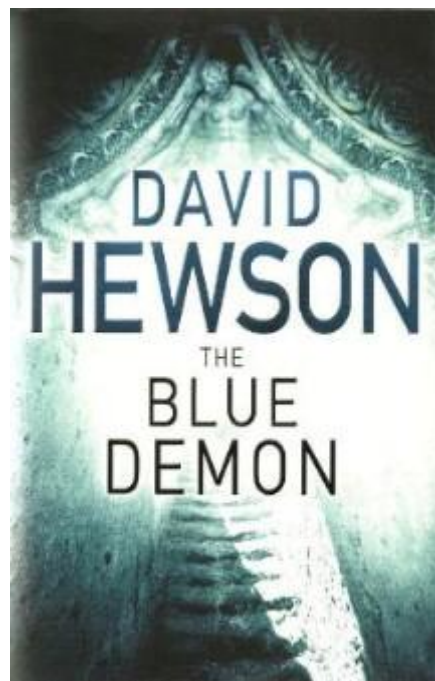
And coming up....

I must, of course, mention the newest crop of thrillers and it seems to be a fine Spring harvest this year.

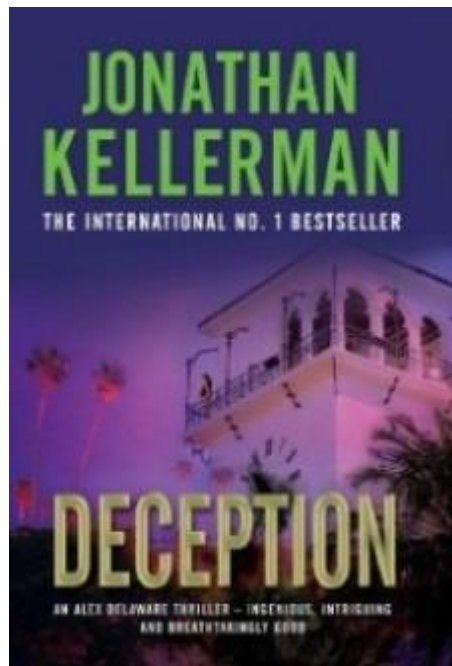
First up, and I would bet on this being a Number #1 bestseller, is Lee Child's *61 Hours* from Bantam, which comes with a high temperature cliff-hanging ending. Is it possible we will be seeing the end of hero Jack Reacher? I wouldn't bet on *that*.



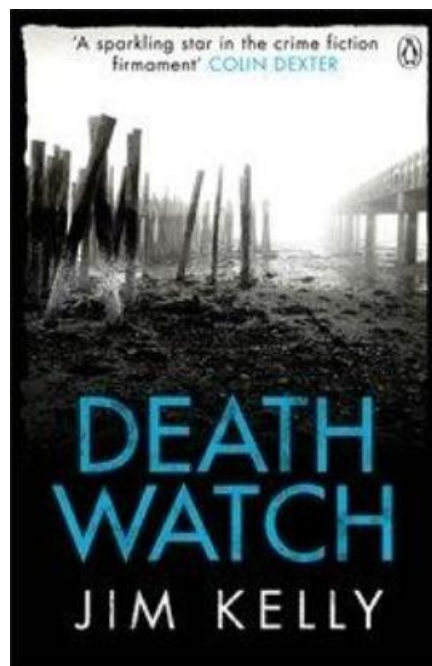
Another case for Rome detective Nic Costa, which will surely enhance the growing (and glowing) reputation of David Hewson, is *The Blue Demon* (Macmillan). Although an Englishman, nay even better, a Yorkshireman, Hewson has cornered the market in thrilling *policiers* with an Italian setting.



Jonathan Kellerman, the patriarch of an irritatingly talented family, revives his famous series hero Dr Alex Delaware, in *Deception* (Headline). Surely bestsellers will soon follow from his wife and son to steal the father's thunder, for after all, that's what fathers are for.



I am also delighted to report that Jim Kelly, who lives in the desolate and icy Fen country of the legendary Hereward the Wake, has struggled through the snowdrifts this winter to deliver the manuscript of his new book *Death Watch* to publishers Penguin.



Jim's *Death Watch* features his new(ish) police heroes Detective Inspector Shaw and Detective Sergeant Valentine, and should not on any count be confused with other books titled *Death Watch* by Sally Spencer, Cynthia Harrod-Eagles, John Dickson Carr, Elizabeth Forrest, Jack Cavanagh, Jerry Ahern or even Leo Kessler.

The Really Useful Guide

Any would-be writer of crime fiction who wants to get their facts right (something which has never deterred me) especially when it comes to crime scenes, should rush out immediately and arm themselves with the pocket-size but authoritative *Forensic Science – A Very Short Introduction*.

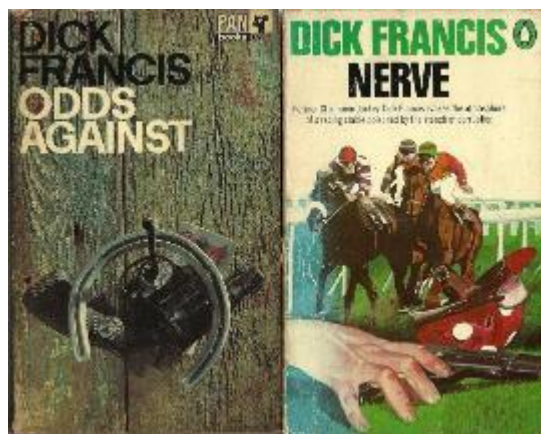


Written by Professor Jim Fraser, the Director of the Centre for Forensic Science at Strathclyde University, and published by Oxford University Press, this is an invaluable guide to anyone who feels baffled by the bifurcation of fingerprints, the polymerase chain reaction or the mark up on cocaine in the UK from a “farm gate” price of £325 per kilo to a “street price” of £51,659.

A Racing and Writing Legend

What can one add to the thousands of tributes paid to Dick Francis, who died in February aged 89?

That he invented the horse-racing thriller sub-genre? Well, I think Edgar Wallace probably claimed that honour back in the 1930s, but since Dick’s early (and best) racing thrillers, he has had more than a few imitators.



That his wife helped him write his novels? Well, so bloody what?

That he was a gentle man as well as a true Gentleman? Certainly. That he threw the best book launch parties in London? Probably. That he had one of the most loyal readerships any writer could ever ask for? He certainly did; with branches in Royal circles. That his straightforward no-nonsense style got people who wouldn’t normally read a thriller to read thrillers? I’m sure of it. That he had a wry sense of humour and an amazing memory? I know it.



At his last book launch in September last year, I suggested to Dick that having made a lawyer and then a bookmaker his heroes in his most recent books, surely he would struggle to find an equally unpopular hero for his next. “How about bankers?” I suggested helpfully. “Too late,” said Dick with a sly wink. “I did them years ago.” Which of course, he had.

When I first met Dick, he had just turned 70, and I had a bone to pick with him. At the time I worked for that august body The Brewers’ Society which had palatial offices in Portman Square in London’s West End. So palatial were the four-storey offices, that the third floor was sub-let to The Jockey Club, though I never, in all my years there, ever got a decent tip on a horse race out of them.

In one of his earlier thrillers, Dick had his hero burgle The Jockey Club to steal a file and had him come in through the roof of the offices in Portman Square. Unfortunately Dick had not realised that there was a Brewers’ Society floor (the 4th) above The Jockey Club (3rd floor), so his hero had actually broken in to the Brewers’ historic beer-mat collection!

“That would have been more interesting than the Jockey Club files,” said Dick with a grin. “Fancy another glass of champagne?” Much to my surprise, not to mention pleasure, Dick recalled the incident when we met last year, some nineteen years on.

He will be much missed and it was a privilege to have known him, however fleetingly. I understand that just before he died, Dick and his son Felix completed a new novel, *Crossfire*, which will be published in September by Michael Joseph.

Zen there was television

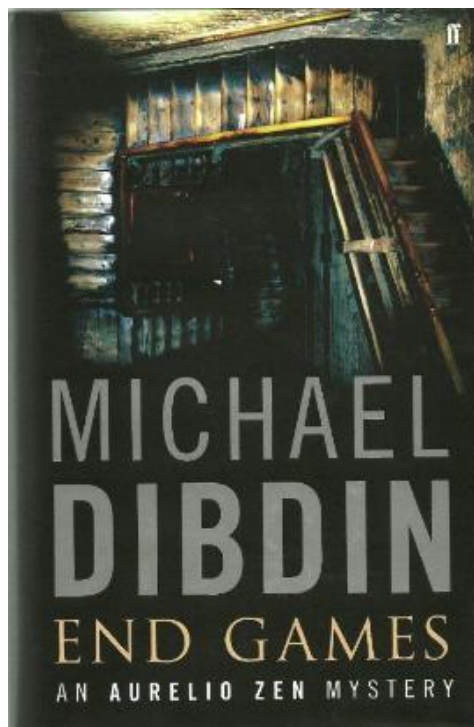
Almost exactly three years after his untimely death, I hear the Aurelio Zen thrillers of my old friend Michael Dibdin are to be filmed for television in a BBC joint-production starring the darkly handsome Rufus Sewell as the Italian police detective.

I have always regarded Michael as one of the finest stylists of that crop of crime-writers who emerged in the late 1980s (although he had published earlier, the first Zen novel was 1988) and on one notorious occasion, half-a-dozen of us budding bestsellers were invited to be models for the latest fashions in very expensive overcoats at a photo-shoot for *GQ Magazine*.



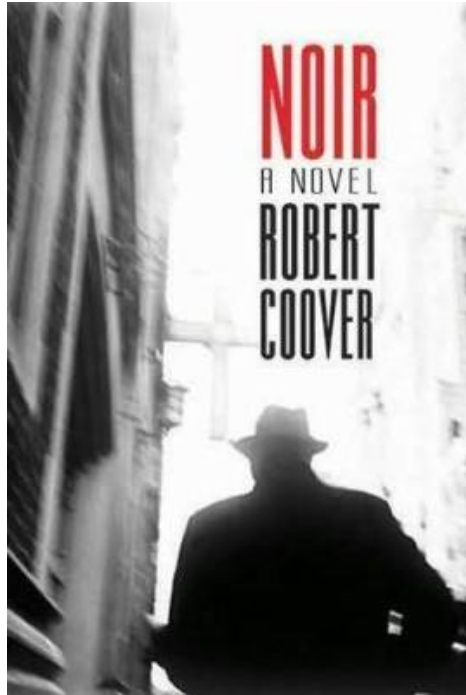
Michael, seen here in trilby and trench coat talking to Philip Kerr whilst we were ‘on set’, was never tempted (none of us were) to pursue a career as a male model and quickly returned to writing excellent and highly-regarded novels, though I always regarded it as a personal failure that I could never persuade him to write a short story for the inaugural *Fresh Blood* anthology. (I don’t think he ever wrote any short stories at all.)

The last Zen novel, published posthumously, was titled, with an irony which would have amused him, *End Games*.



The Postmodernist Always Rings Twice

Another giant from the serious world of literature has taken to crime: 78-year-old American short story maestro Robert Coover with the novella *Noir* published in the UK by Duckworth.



On the face of it this is “the case of the vanishing Black Widow” but nothing here is really straightforward, as you would expect when the hero is a private eye called Philip M. Noir! No cliché is left un-stoned and let’s face it, many of them needed a good kicking, but there are certain deliberate usages of England English (as opposed to American English) which threw me completely off any trail I was supposed to be following.

Perhaps I’m just out of touch, but is “yob” (as in young hoodlum) in common use in the US these days and do people other than Philo Vance refer to telephones as “blowers” My favourite, though, was when the hero “taps a fag” (out of a packet of presumably 20)....

I am sure it is all very clever stuff, just far too clever for me.

Toodles!

The Ripster