

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley

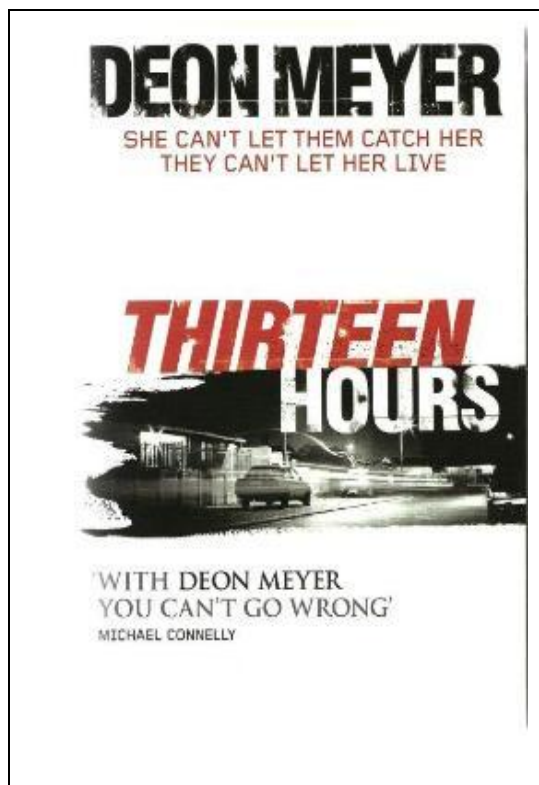


May 2010

In Translation

It is surely not too early in the year to start predicting the crime writing Oscars for 2010, by which of course I mean my *Shots of the Year* awards (which come with no trophy, no prize-money, very little publicity and minimal prestige).

I raise the matter now because I have just finished the best ensemble police crime novel I have read this year, and it is eligible for both *Crime Shot of the Year* and the *Shot in Translation* titles.



Translated from Afrikaans, Deon Meyer's *Thirteen Hours* (Hodder) is simply brilliant and puts the South African author up there with Michael Connelly and Ian Rankin – yes, it's that good.

Meyer has created a great cast of policemen and women with the alcoholic Inspector Benny Griessel taking the lead and, in *Thirteen Hours*, acting as a mentor to junior officers working two seemingly unconnected cold-blooded murders, wrapping them both up in thirteen breathless hours of one chaotic Cape Town day, complete with horrendous traffic jams, power cuts and casual violence. The twin strands of the plot dig into a resurgent South African music scene and a particularly unsavoury form of human trafficking which is almost as sleazy and corrupt. And readers of a delicate persuasion should be warned there is one particularly gruesome (though not gratuitous) piece of violence.

Benny Griessel as an alcoholic cop with marital problems hardly sounds a unique creation, but unusually for crime fiction he manages his guilt humanely and without resorting to preachiness. But it is the ensemble cast of cops under Griessel's reluctant command which really impress – whether white, black or 'coloured' - especially the overweight Zulu woman detective Mbali Kaleni.

Thirteen Hours is a tour-de-force of story-telling which sets a blood-pumping pace at the outset and maintains it to an awesomely complex conclusion. It shows a fractured South African society trying desperately to come to terms with its tribal divisions, whilst the good guys have to fight old cultural battles as well as very new forms of greed and corruption. I also found the book invaluable in teaching me how to swear in three new languages.

While I have no hesitation in putting *Thirteen Hours* in the frame for Best Crime Novel of the Year (or cursing it by doing so), I will wait to pronounce on the *Shot in Translation* award until I have read the two latest thrillers from the energetic and always interesting Bitter Lemon Press.

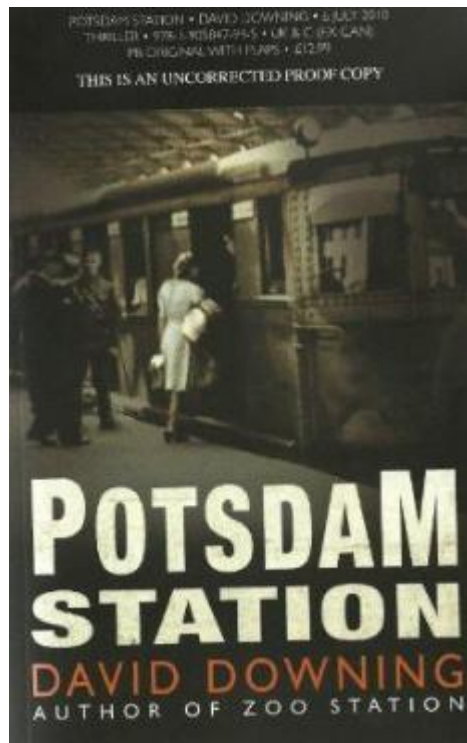


These could, if nothing else, expand my vocabulary of expletives in two more languages: Spanish and Polish.

Needle in a Haystack by Ernesto Mallo is a first novel, already being filmed in Argentina, set in Buenos Aires in the late 1970s under the military junta, featuring detective Superintendent Lascano, who is already pencilled in for a series. The protagonist of *Entanglement* is Warsaw state prosecutor Teodor Szacki and his creator is a journalist and a rising star of Polish fiction, Zygmunt Miłoszewski. Interestingly, now they have changed the rules, his name adds up to a mind-boggling score at Scrabble.

Tempting Fate

If it's not tempting fate (it probably is), I will continue with my awards predictions and say that the new David Downing thriller, coming in July from Old Street Publishing, *Potsdam Station*, is already my hot favourite for Historical Shot of the Year.



Set in Berlin in the (rabid) dog days of the Third Reich, this is the fourth in Downing's impressive series of historical thrillers each named after a Berlin station, which follow the convoluted struggle for survival of Anglo-American journalist John Russell, a man torn in his private life as much as in his political leanings.

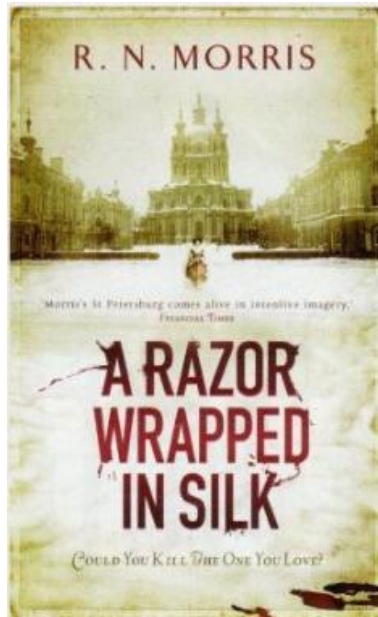
As a foreign correspondent covering Europe's descent into war and with a German wife and son, the left-leaning Russell was an obvious target for recruitment by the intelligence services of, well just about everybody, including Soviet Russia, America and even Nazi Germany. To complicate matters more, his marriage failed, his new girlfriend Effi is an actress (and one of Josef Goebbels' rising stars of Nazi cinema) and his son Paul becomes an enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth.

The first three books in the series – *Zoo Station*, *Silesian Station* and *Stettin Station* – cover the period up to America joining the war. The new novel picks up in April 1945, after Russell and Effi have been separated for three years (he in America, she in hiding in Berlin) and Russell's son Paul is now in the last line of Nazi defence as the Russians close in on Hitler's besieged capital.

In an audacious attempt to get into the city alongside the conquering Russians to find Effi and Paul, Russell uses his old Communist contacts, but finds himself being used by the NKVD in a desperate mission to enter Berlin *before* the Red Army to secure information which could prove vital to the Soviet atom bomb project and even if the mission is a success, Russell realises that he knows too much to be allowed to live.

Potsdam Station is a tense, brilliantly researched thriller which does not gloss over the horrors of the war and its effect on ordinary human beings, with some memorable scenes and characters – the Hitler Youth conscripts clutching at any shred of hope even though the war is clearly lost and the heart-breaking story of one particular eight-year-old Jewish girl. On its own, *Potsdam Station* is an outstanding thriller; as a whole, David Downing's 'station' series is a quite remarkable achievement.

And having (fatally) tipped David Downing for my Historical Shot of the Year, I must immediately hedge my bets by mentioning Roger Morris' most excellent *A Razor Wrapped In Silk* (Faber), his third adventure for the nineteenth century Russian magistrate-detective Porfiry Petrovich, the character originally created by Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*.

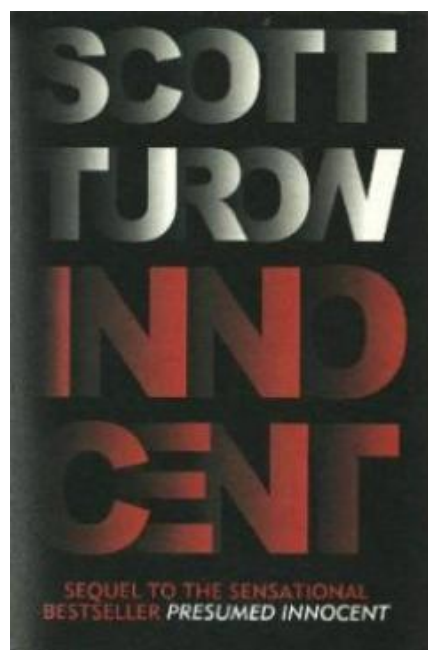


Once again, Roger creates a brilliantly atmospheric sense of place, contrasting a *demi-monde* murder (with royal connections?) and the abduction and murder of children who toil as factory workers in the St Petersburg of 1870, including in the Nobel munitions works (and the significance of this explosive theme is not lost on the reader who knows anything of Russian history). The world-weary Porfiry also discovers that the Tsarist police have a nice line in supplying unclaimed, unidentified bodies to anatomy students.

I think I am right in saying that each of Morris' Porfiry books adopts a particular season of the year. In *A Razor Wrapped in Silk* it is Autumn and we have previously had deep Winter and Summer. So can we look forward to a fourth instalment, set in a St Petersburg Spring? I do hope so.

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| Presumed Bestseller |
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Already trailed as one of the publishing events of the year (and with one of the most luxurious advance reading proofs I have ever seen), the crime fiction world waits with bated breath to see whether *Innocent* will have the same impact as Chicago attorney Scott Turow's first novel *Presumed Innocent* had 23 years ago.



Since about 1991, when John Grisham burst on to the scene, it has been his name which is always automatically linked to that peculiarly American sub-genre known loosely as ‘the Legal Thriller’. Yet many a commentator would credit Scott Turow as the Godfather of the modern legal thriller (deferring to those who insist on holding a torch for *Bleak House*) and I think I would go along with that, for *Presumed Innocent* and its successful film adaptation starring Harrison Ford, did have a huge impact on the crime fiction scene back in 1987, winning a Crime Writers’ Silver Dagger in the UK though not, oddly, an Edgar in the US.

Not surprisingly, much is expected of the long-awaited sequel and not just because it is the sequel to Turow’s blazing debut but also because it marks the arrival of a new fiction imprint by publishers Pan Macmillan, Mantle.

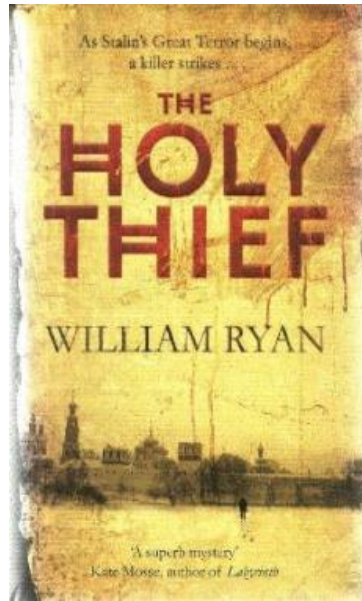
With a very appropriate capital ‘M’ as its logo, Mantle is described as “the perfect vehicle... to reflect the breadth and distinctiveness” of the personal tastes of Maria Rejt, one of Britain’s most distinguished crime fiction editors.

With a line up of stellar authors – including Turow, Minette Walters, C.J. Sansom and ‘Benjamin Black’ – the Mantle imprint is surely a fitting tribute to Maria’s dedication to the UK publishing industry over the past 20 years. I remember her showing that dedication even under the most trying of circumstances.



Many years ago, en route by train to a Shots On The Page convention in Nottingham she refused to be distracted from her manuscript-reading duties by either my attempts at photography or by a young (ridiculously young) Ian Rankin enthusing about the benefits of living in France and being able to claim a generous Duty Free allowance.

Although for legal reasons I could not attend the champagne and caviar party to launch the new imprint, Mantle’s first title is in the bookshops already. Irishman William Ryan’s debut *The Holy Thief* is a historical mystery set in Stalin’s Russia of the 1930s and introduces a new fictional detective, Alexei Korley, of the Moscow CID.

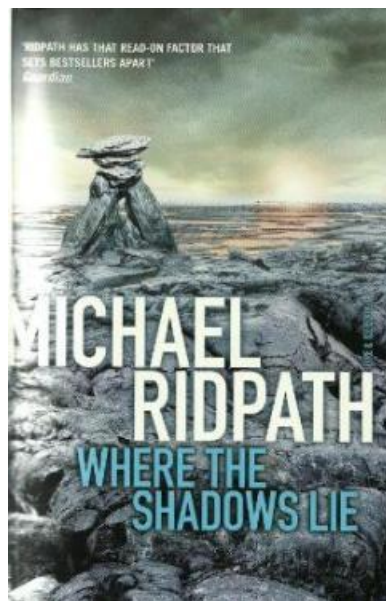


Russia seems to be a popular setting for historical mysteries just at the moment, with Roger Morris (see above), Sam Eastland, Tom Rob Smith and Andrew Williams all having found inspiration by pointing their pens eastward recently.

In the Land of Mordor...

For legal reasons, I was unable to attend the sumptuous event at the Swedish Embassy in London where my old friend millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim received the Nobel Prize for services to Scandinavian crime writing. I have never received such an honour, although my dedication to Nordic crime fiction is a constant source of comment among the chattering classes.

Not only have I championed the career of newcomer Nisse Ektorpe (and look forward to a more hands-on role in the future) but am delighted to report on one of the best Icelandic thrillers I have ever read. (OK, so I haven't read that many.)



Where The Shadows Lie by Michael Ridpath (from that enthusiastic new imprint on the crime scene, Corvus) is a superbly entertaining thriller which looks like being the first in a very successful series under the banner

“Fire and Ice”. As everyone knows, Iceland is the land of fire (or at least volcanic ash) and ice and as my more discerning readers will know, is also a land famed for its sagas. Michael Ridpath taps into that rich history by audaciously suggesting that a lost Viking saga from the twelfth century might just have been the basis for one of the 20th century’s greatest sagas: *The Lord of the Rings*.

Has the missing saga actually turned up (along, spookily, with an ancient ring) and does the Tolkien connection add enough value to make the thing worth murdering for? Of course it does, and Ridpath cleverly spices his mystery with *LOTR* fanatics as well as a well-drawn supporting cast of Icelanders, both civilian and police, including the island’s one and only black policewoman.

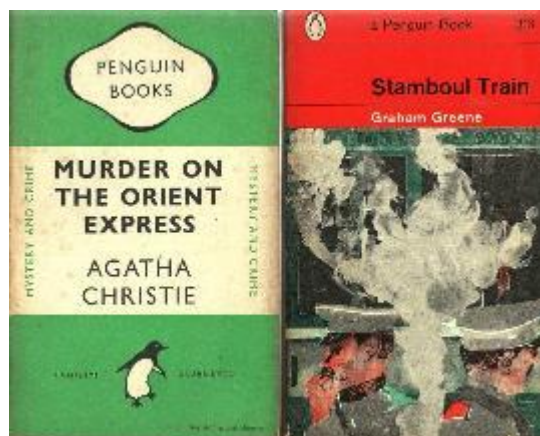
The hero, though, is American/Icelandic detective Magnus Jonson who is temporarily back on the island of his birth because the Boston mob have a contract out on him and whilst you might have thought he was safe on Iceland, the mob have branches everywhere. Magnus Jonson is an engaging enough character who acts as a foil for the oddities of Icelandic culture as well as providing a tense sub-plot to the main mystery.

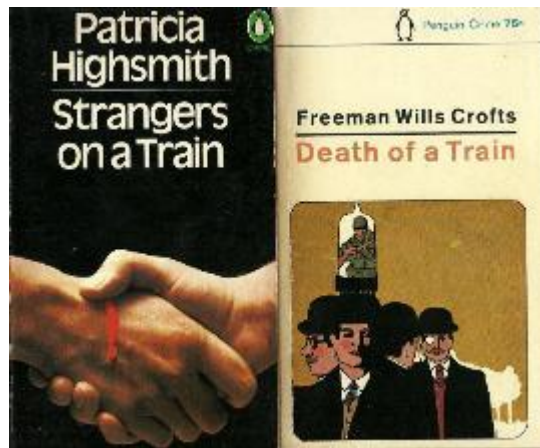
Michael Ridpath, no stranger to big sales figures, has another hit on his hands. I suspect he has a Ring of Power hidden away somewhere.

Trainspotting

That invaluable asset for the impoverished reader www.abebooks.co.uk is a website of second-hand book dealers run with Teutonic efficiency and occasionally contacts its regular customers with special offers on particular themes. A recent such promotion centred on “Top 10 Train Thrillers” and though I had never for a moment considered myself a trainspotter (and I do not possess an anorak), I was surprised to discover how many of the train “list” I had read – and enjoyed.

Naturally, Patricia Highsmith’s *Strangers On A Train* came in at number one, with Ethel Lina White’s *The Wheel Spins* (filmed by Hitchcock as *The Lady Vanishes*) hot on its heels – or buffers. And not surprisingly, Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* and Graham Greene’s *Stamboul Train* (which, I learn, pre-dated the more famous Christie by over a year) followed close behind. Among the other arrivals at the Train Thriller platform were Dick Francis’ *The Edge* and John Godey’s *The Taking of Pelham 123*.



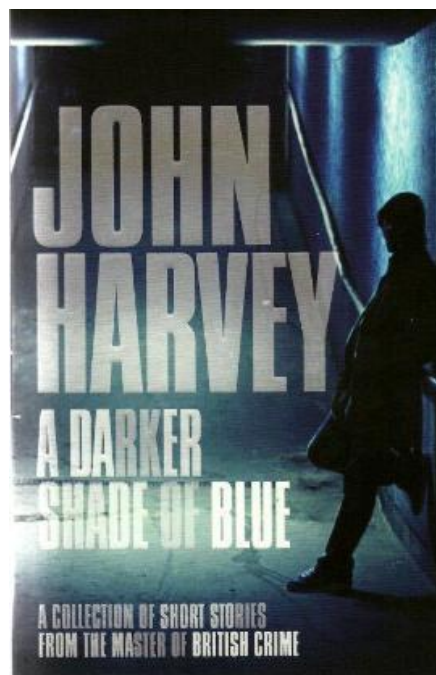


Oddly, though, there was no mention of any title by Freeman Wills Croft, who actually was a railway engineer as well as a prolific mystery writer, and yet there on the list was Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, which is certainly a very good book, but one I've never heard described as a thriller before now.

Mr Isherwood is, of course, best known for his "Sally Bowles" stories of pre-war Berlin, which reached a wider audience as the play *I Am A Camera* and later as the musical show and film *Cabaret*. I have a great fondness for the Sally Bowles character for in my student days I earned a crust as an assistant stage manager in a small theatre in Cambridge during a production of the musical with crime writer (now historical novelist) Sarah Dunant playing the role. Later in life I became great friends with Sarah Caudwell, the daughter of the lady on whom the character was said to be based.

Roll of Honour

That venerable British crime writer John Harvey has another collection of his short stories out in June – *A Darker Shade of Blue* (Arrow) – which is quite an achievement given that people have been saying there is no market for short stories for ... well, as long as I can remember.



As well as writing excellent novels, John Harvey has remained loyal to the shorter form of fiction when many another crime writer has lost faith and given up entirely on it, or simply found it too difficult (myself included).

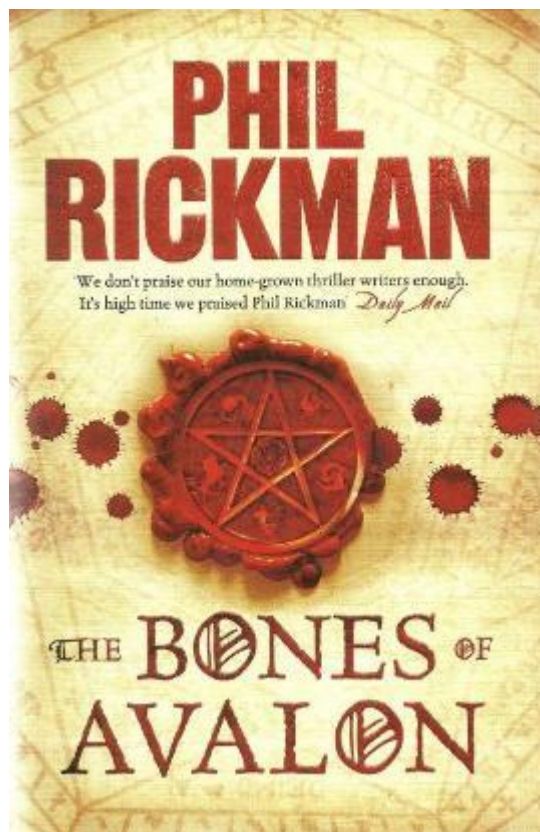
John is not only a master practitioner of the short story, but a writer who is actually sought out for inclusion in anthologies

This, I think, can be demonstrated by the editors of the anthologies from which John's latest collection have been drawn, for it reads like a roll of honour of the crime fiction business. In *A Darker Shade of Blue*, the roll call includes: Michael Connelly, Ed Gorman, Marty Greenberg, Robert Randisi, Otto Penzler, Simon Brett, Martin Edwards, Karin Slaughter, Duane Swierczynski, Peter Robinson and Maxim Jakubowski.

And that impressive list of credits doesn't include anthologies in France and Finland, whose editors and not named, nor...er...John Harvey, who has edited himself in an anthology before now.

Dead Cert

It is always tricky to predict the ingredients needed to make a best seller but I think Phil Rickman has covered most of the bases with his latest, *The Bones of Avalon* (Atlantic). For a start, his setting is Elizabethan England, which is an increasingly popular setting for historical mysteries, a plot which delves into the classic legend of King Arthur (always a winner) and a hero detective in John Dee, the prominent mathematician, astronomer, mystic and prototype archaeologist (who was said to have 'dug' the Sutton Hoo ship burials).

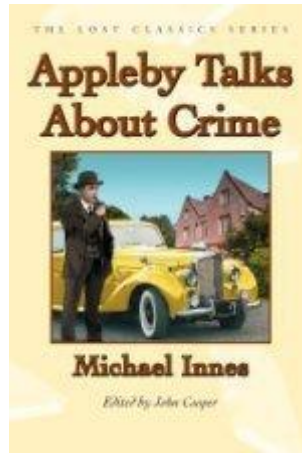


For many years John Dee, a favourite of Elizabeth I, lived in Mortlake, now in London, and his home (and famous library) is indeed in Mortlake in the course of this novel. I find it very odd, though, that Phil Rickman makes no mention of the fact that Dee's house could not have been more than a quart-jug throw away from the cradle of the British brewing industry, already well-established by John Dee's time. Why on Earth did Phil Rickman not think to mention that from his house, Dee would have seen a hallowed panorama for the drinker – the (originally monastic) brewing site which was to give us such famous British beers as Fosters... Budweiser... and...Watney's Red Barrel?

Oh, I see now.....

Appleby's (Latest) End

Almost 75 years since he created that most erudite and donnish of detectives John Appleby, John Innes Mackintosh Stewart (writing as Michael Innes) is commemorated (he died in 1994) in *Appleby Talks About Crime*, an anthology edited by John Cooper and published in America by Crippen & Landru.



As well as eighteen previously uncollected short stories, this splendid volume contains an essay on Appleby by his creator and a memoir by his daughter, Dr Margaret Mackintosh Harrison.

Professor Stewart/Michael Innes was a prolific author and, at least when it came to his crime fiction, his own severest critic. In his memoir *Myself and Michael Innes* in 1987 he looks back on his early Appleby novels with a somewhat jaundiced eye, but he defends some of his more fantastical plotting and surreal characters by claiming his impulse had always been to “bring a little fantasy and fun into the detective story”. It was an impulse that led to him being labelled one of the genre’s greatest *farceurs* by the critic Julian Symons, though he did not seem to mind this, saying: *Detective stories are purely recreational reading, after all, and needn’t scorn the ambition to amuse as well as puzzle.*

I cannot understand why Michael Innes’ gentle thrillers are so unfashionable these days, for they are always intelligent and invariably funny. (The words ‘gentle’, ‘intelligent’ and ‘funny’ probably explain why.) Yet critics of the genre – or at least the well-read ones – all agree that his 1938 Appleby mystery *Lament For A Maker* is a classic and it was no surprise when it was selected for the “Top 100 Crime Novels of the 20th Century” by *The Times* in 2000.

Once is Happenstance...

In one of those odd coincidences in life, hearing Sir Ian McKellen and a star-studded cast in Radio 4’s adaptation of *Goldfinger* drew me to the ‘Fleming’ shelves in the library here at Ripster Hall.



The lay reader would, of course, immediately think of Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond.

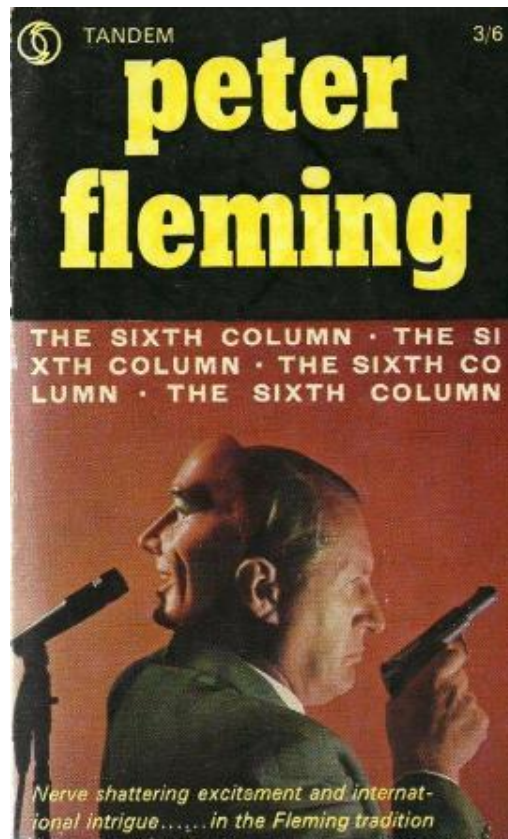


But there was more than one talented Fleming and I have to admit that I own more books by Peter Fleming than those penned by his famous brother.



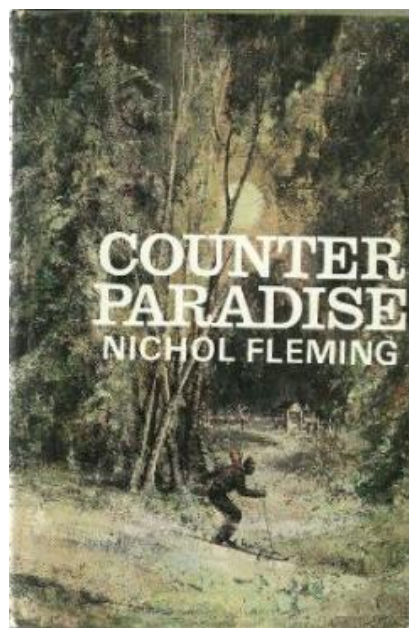
Peter Fleming made his name in the 1930s as a travel writer with best-selling books such as *Brazilian Adventure* and *Travels In Tartary*; and then went on to write popular military histories including an excellent one on the 1900 Boxer Rebellion in China (*The Siege at Peking*) and the definitive account of the Nazi plan to invade England in 1940, *Operation Sea-Lion*. He married Celia (“Brief Encounter”) Johnson and in the 1960s took an active role in managing the James Bond literary estate after the untimely death of his younger brother.

I had, however, quite forgotten that Peter had written a spy thriller, *The Sixth Column*, which was dedicated “To My Brother Ian” and published in 1951 – two years before *Casino Royale* appeared.



To be honest, *Sixth Column* is more of a social satire on the paranoia in post-war England about Soviet Russia rather than a blood-and-thunder thriller and no one would argue (least of all Peter Fleming) that it in any way influenced the birth of James Bond. It is, however, finely written, razor-sharp in its observations of a class-conscious Britain and in parts extremely funny.

Peter's son (and Ian's nephew) Nichol Fleming came closer to his uncle's school of writing when he dipped a toe in the thriller market of the 1960s with three novels, the first of which was *Counter Paradise* in 1968.

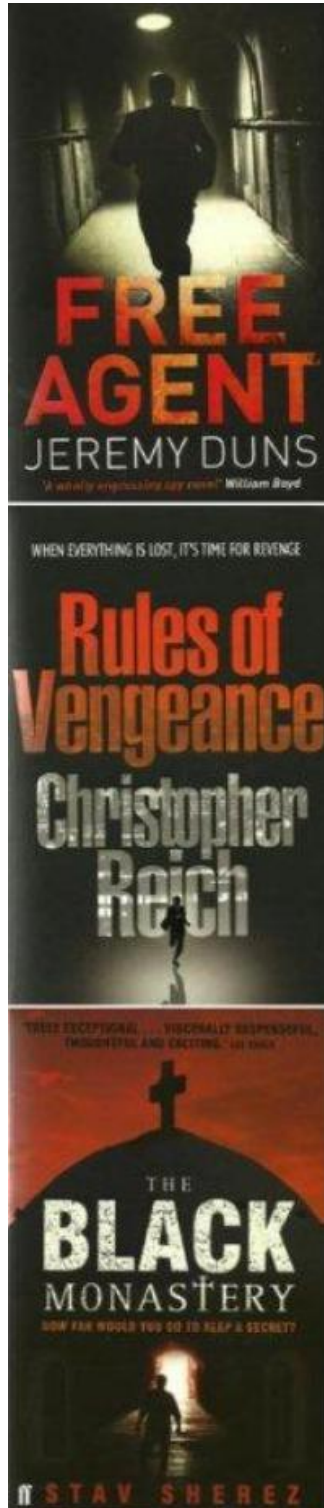


Interestingly enough, my Thriller Book Club edition of Nichol Fleming's novel carries an advertisement for another recent Thriller Book Club selection of 1968, *Hand Out* by my old friend and fellow boulevardier the

late Julian Rathbone, of which I confess I was unaware. This must have been Julian's first or second novel, certainly somewhere very near the beginning of a distinguished career which saw him short-listed for the Booker Prize on two occasions. (And I think he is still the only crime writer about whom that can be said.)

Running Man Syndrome

Publishers still seem to be afflicted with RMS – Running Man Syndrome – when it comes to designing covers; a subject I have covered before and will, it seems, continue to.

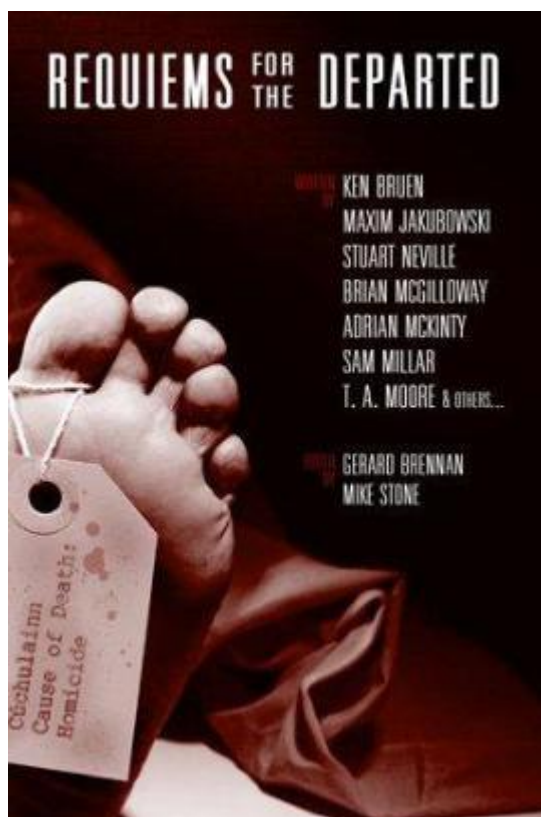


The latest authors to suffer the consequences are Stav Sherez with the paperback edition of his exceptionally spooky thriller *The Black Monastery* (Faber), Christopher Reich and his contemporary spy thriller *Rules of Vengeance* (Arrow) and Jeremy Duns and his clever retro spy novel set in the Swinging Sixties *Free Agent* (Simon & Schuster).

To be fair, *Free Agent* is the one where a *lone* running figure is a good shorthand guide to the plot, but all three are damn good thrillers and I sincerely hope that the book-buying public is not confused by the deluge of similar covers around at the moment into thinking “I’ve read that one” as their eyes skip along the groaning shelves.

Requiems

From Northern Ireland comes news of a collection of short stories “inspired by Irish mythology” but with, I suspect, fairly modern criminal themes.



Requiems for the Departed (Morrigan Books) is edited by Gerard Brennan and Mike Stone and features seventeen stories by, among others, Ken Bruen, Stuart Neville, Adrian McKinty, Brian McGilloway and the ubiquitous Maxim Jakubowski.

News from Grub Street

By mid-April, I had 300 new crime/thriller titles listed on my database for calendar year 2010; that’s *new* titles not published in the UK before now and does not include reissues, paperback editions or backlists. I make no claims to having a comprehensive database as several publishers prefer to keep their lists of forthcoming titles confidential if not top secret (at least from me), but I am confident that by the end of the year the annual total will be around 600 new books, which is about *one new title every 15 hours*.

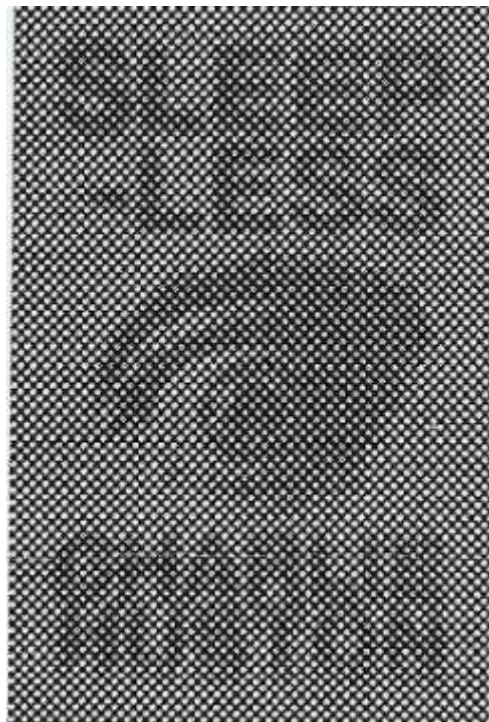
Now no one – not even I – can read and recommend all those, so I will simply pass on my choices for what will be on my ‘**To Be Read**’ bedside table over the next few months.

Firstly, two American writers new to me with good examples of the gritty *noir* school of writing arrive in July in the form of *Bad Things Happen* by Harry Dolan (Ebury Press) and *Low Life* by Ryan David Jahn (Macmillan).

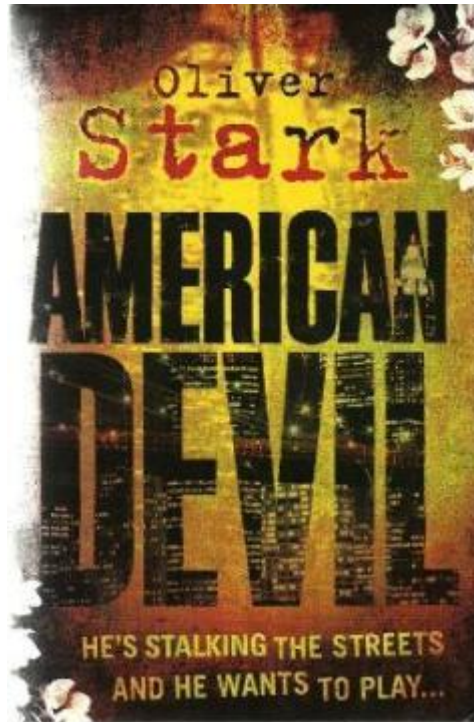


Both have their celebrity backers. The first novel *Bad Things Happen* comes recommended by Karin Slaughter, James Patterson and Stephen King, no less, whilst Ryan David Jahn's previous novel garnered some excellent reviews and this new one is blurbed by R. J. Ellory, who himself has a new novel, *Saints of New York*, out in September (Orion).

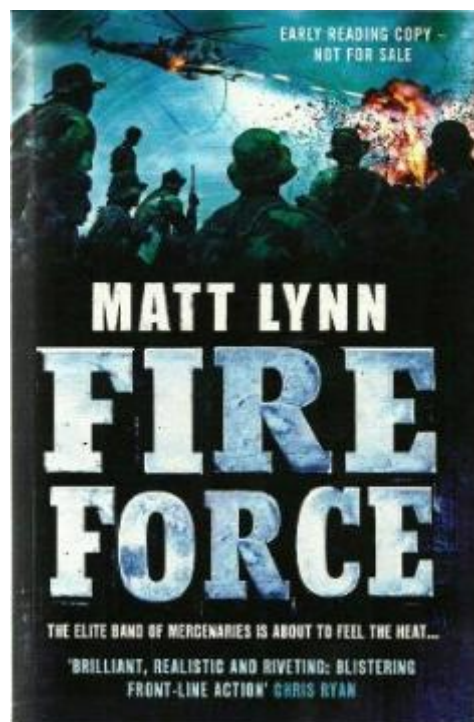
One of the most striking covers of the year (which my illustration cannot do justice to) is the bold, optically-challenging design on *Sleepless* by another American, Charlie Huston. I already have my copy and I am eager to try it despite the warning from Orion's publicity department that it is "a high concept thriller" and therefore could be beyond me.



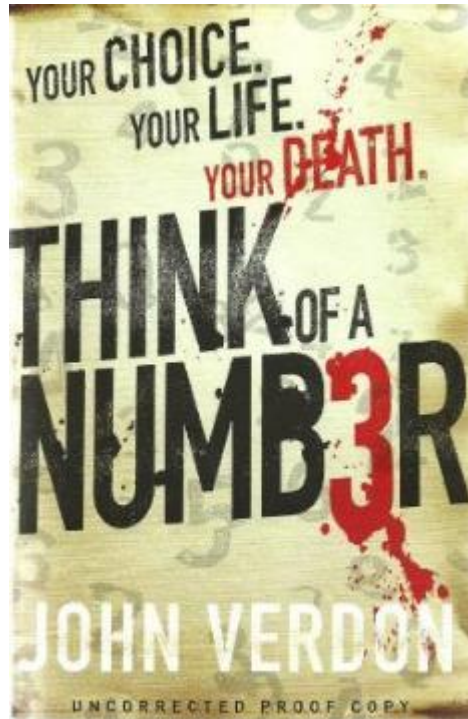
Set in New York, but a debut novel by Liverpoollian Oliver Stark, *American Devil* (Headline) promises to be the first in a series featuring an NYPD detective and a psychologist/profiler partnership.



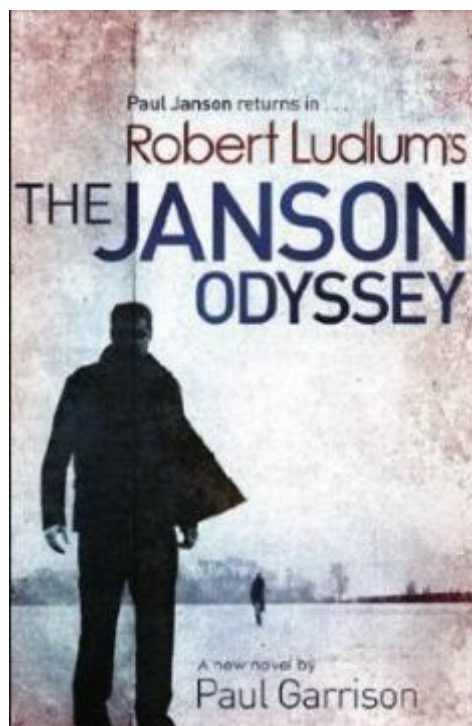
On the action/military thriller front line (a dodgy African nation to be precise), *Fire Force* by Matt Lynn comes from Headline in July with the distinct sound of gauntlets being thrown down to Andy McNab and Chris Ryan. The author, according to the promotional proof, set up The Curzon Group, “an exclusive team of British thriller writers” which has, I believe, Jeffrey Archer as their patron saint.



Meanwhile, those perky publishers Penguin are pinning their hopes of a good summer not just on the weather, but on another American debut, *Think Of A Number* by John Verdon, which comes with advance praise from Nelson DeMille and our own Reginald Hill and advance blurb which describes it as “an irresistible combination of *Tell No One* and *Twin Peaks*”. Now if that’s not “high concept” I don’t know what is.



Looking forward to the Autumn, by which time I will have reinforced the legs of my To Be Read table, I am allowing space for a new Elmore Leonard, *Djibouti*, which I believe is set in the world of modern piracy in Somalia; yet another outing (and to hell with the concept of a pensionable age) for Dave Robichaux in *The Glass Rainbow* thanks to the always elegant pen of maestro James Lee Burke; the new Michael Connelly (which I believe teams up two of his series' characters), *The Reversal*; and (*Robert Ludlum's*) *The Janson Odyssey* by Paul Garrison.



Eagle-eyed readers whose memories have yet to fail them will remember that it was this very column in this august organ which revealed that 'Paul Garrison' was in fact the *nom de guerre* of that refined American

mystery writer Justin Scott who, as well as his participation in the Robert Ludlum franchise, is also the co-author with Clive Cussler of a series of historical thrillers.

Confucius no doubt said it

I have been inundated with an email from San Francisco from a fan bemoaning the fact that she has been unable to find any of my 'Angel' novels in her local literary emporium, though why it does not stock my books is a complete mystery to me.



Toodles!
The Ripster