

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



August 2010

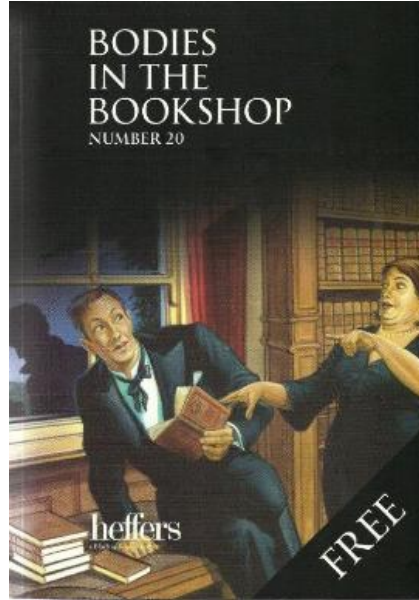
High Table



At the feast of the alumni of St Heffer's college, following the annual reunion this month, the loyal toast was proposed by *Shots* editor Mike Tombstone Stotter, seen here seated between the two halves of the married couple who write together, Michael Jacob and Daniella De Gregorio, otherwise known as The Michaels Gregorio. Adjacent are crime fiction translator Judith Forshaw and her husband Professor Barry, along with special guest, His Honour Martin Feldman, the distinguished United States district court judge, with whom I had a long and fruitful discussion on the statute of limitations on traffic violations in the state of Louisiana. Our official photographer also caught by accident Judge Feldman's bodyguard (standing), who was known only as The Zyg and is believed to have been a former member of the elite Polish Special Forces, the *Wojska Specjaine*, who always look after Judge Feldman on his visits to Cambridge.

Reunion

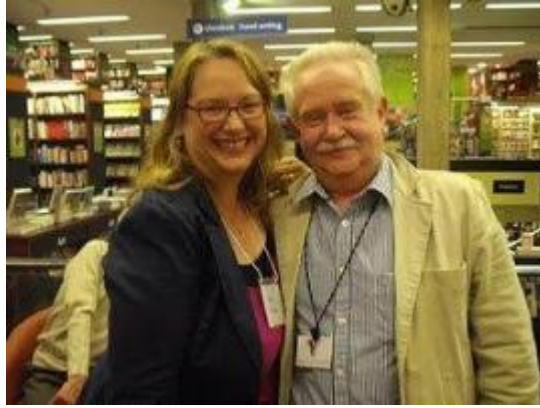
The annual reunion of graduates of St Heffer's is always a joyous occasion where crime writers mingle effortlessly with hundreds of their adoring readers and copies of the college's annual report become collectors' items.



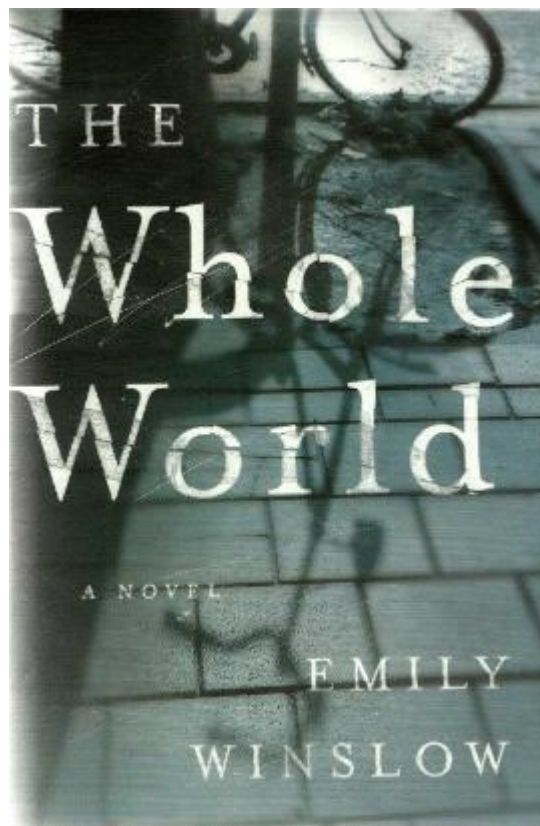
It is a chance to catch up with old friends, such as Baroness Cohen (who writes as Janet Neel) looking remarkably refreshed after hosting a positively Lucullan feast in the House of Lords to mark her recent birthday.



And it was on Janet Neel's recommendation that I sought out debut mystery writer Emily Winslow, an American who has wisely chosen to live in Cambridge.

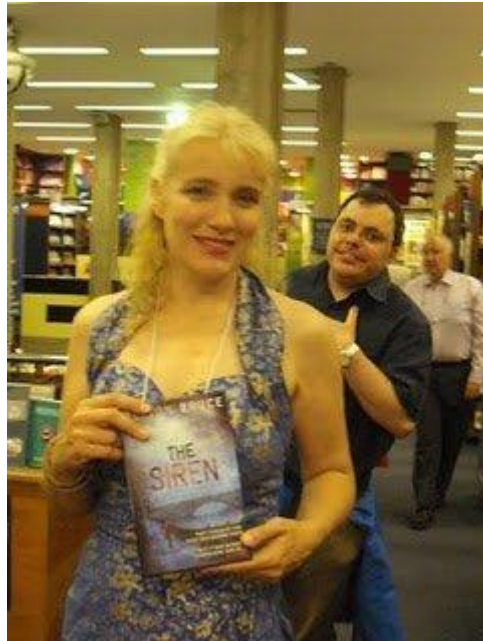


The Winslow Girl, as she will undoubtedly become known, even presented me with an American edition of her first novel (for legal reasons I had not seen the UK edition), *The Whole World*, which, fittingly is set in Cambridge. She even personalised it to me with a dedication “to Mike so he can’t sell it on eBay.”

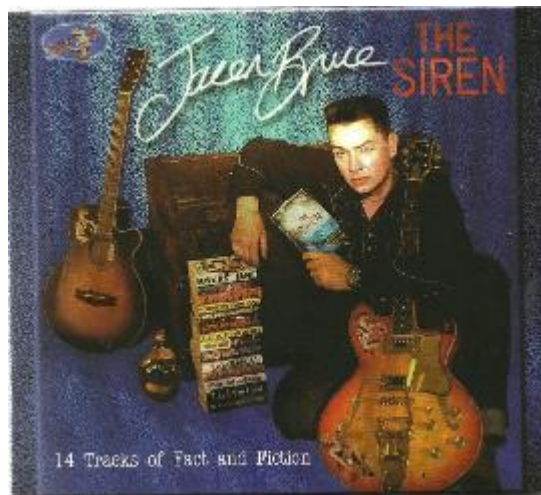


I am, however, not one to shirk a challenge and I do believe that bidding is still open....

I was also lucky enough to snap a picture of the rarely-photographed Alison Bruce and one of her many admirers, showing me the cover of her new book which, also for legal reasons, I have not yet read.



Sadly, therefore, I can tell you little about her new book but I was given an excellent CD entitled *The Siren*, which may perhaps be connected, and which shows off the song-writing and guitar-pickling talents of Alison's husband Jacen to great effect.



As I am unable to pass comment on Alison's novel *The Siren* as I haven't read it (yes, I know, that doesn't usually stop me), I can certainly recommend Jacen Bruce's "14 tracks of fact and fiction" (one of which is titled "The Siren"). It is a joyous, guitar-twanging, foot-tapping celebration of the rockabilly style of popular music, as I believe the young people call it, absolutely crammed with cultural references, many of which were not lost on me: 'Brando in One-Eyed Jacks', 'make my day', a homage to Michael Curtiz's film *Casablanca*, and 'Dimple Whisky'.

The CD packaging – they were called sleeve notes in my day – is a very professional production number and the eagle-eyed will spot some lovely mock-up pulp book covers and possibly, unless my failing eyesight betrays me, a picture of Alison Bruce, who can also be heard on backing vocals.

The Siren CD is now available absolutely everywhere (including on Amazon or via www.jacenbruce.com) and makes for ideal nice and easy – in the best possible sense of the word – listening. I highly recommend it, played loudly out in the garden on a sunny afternoon – especially if, for legal reasons, you don't have a book to read.

Popular Books in Middle Earth

It is undeniable that New Zealand is a spectacularly beautiful country and I know from personal experience that it is a country where native crime *writing* is being taken more and more seriously. But what about the *reading* habits ‘down under’?

Thanks to the Shots dedicated satellite which now orbits the Earth, I am able to zoom in and bring photographic proof that the average Kiwi cannot keep his nose out of a good book even when strolling along somewhere as picturesque as Mission Bay with its stunning view out towards Rangitoto Island. Whatever could he be reading so intently?



Intrigued, I employed the latest spyware technology carried on the Shots satellite to produce a close-up of the book which gripped our beach-combing reader, who is clearly a man of taste and discernment.



Toothsome

I discover to my eternal shame that the genre I have always referred to as ‘vampire chick-lit’ turns out to be more properly called ‘Urban Fantasy’ (which rather begs the question as to what constitutes ‘Rural Fantasy’ – *The Archers* perhaps?).

Between now and December, Gollancz alone will publish 16 titles in this genre and I know other publishers will be striving to equal or exceed that output. Among my favourites, which positively roll the tongue, are: *Bitten & Smitten*, *Fanged & Fabulous*, *Lady and the Vamp*, and the very seasonal December title *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe*. (Didn’t Sir Cliff Richards do a cover version?)

You Heard It Here First

It was well over a year ago that this column broke the exclusive news that there was to be a fourth 'Jackson Brodie' novel from multi-award winning writer Kate Atkinson, the Queen of Magic Realism – even though she dislikes that term and I am not sure I really understand it.

However, I am positive that *Started Early, Took My Dog*, which is published by Doubleday later this month, will be just as intelligent, as exhilarating, as outrageously funny and as successful as her *When Will There Be Good News?* which was my pick of the year for 2008.



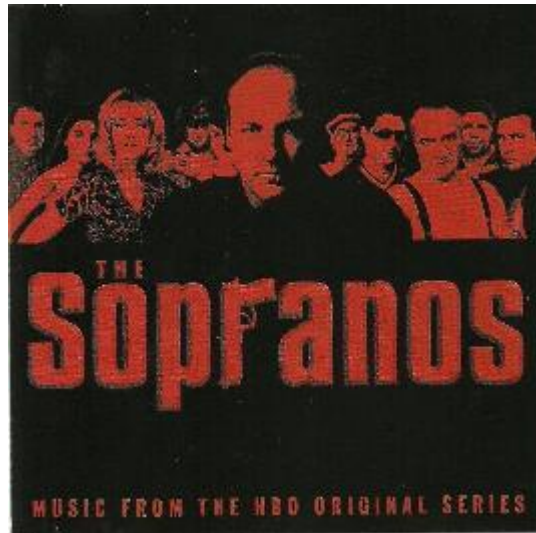
Heard it here second, or maybe third

I cannot claim to be the first with the news (I read it myself in the *Southend Echo*) that my old chum Martina Cole has gone into the music business.



Martina, one of Britain's biggest-selling crime writers (and quite possibly *the* biggest) has, it is reported, established Hostage Music and signed up the modern beat combo which goes under the misleading name of *Alabama 3* – misleading because the band is from London, not Alabama, and there are more than three of them.

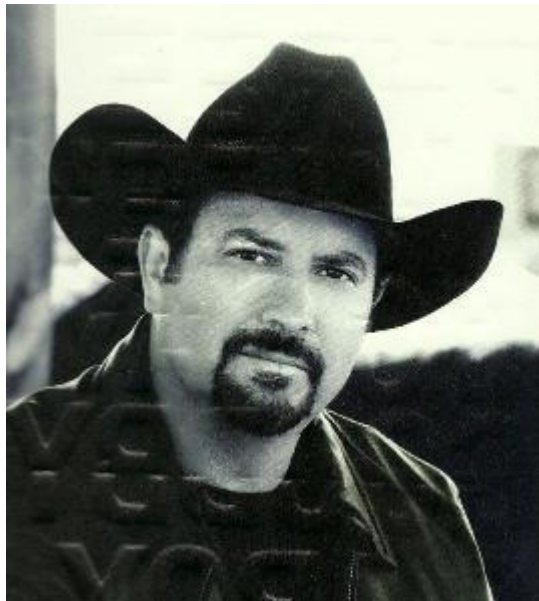
Fans of family-based crime sagas will not be surprised at the synergy here, as one of the band's legendary hits was the song *Woke Up This Morning*, which was used as the title theme to that marvellous show *The Sopranos*.



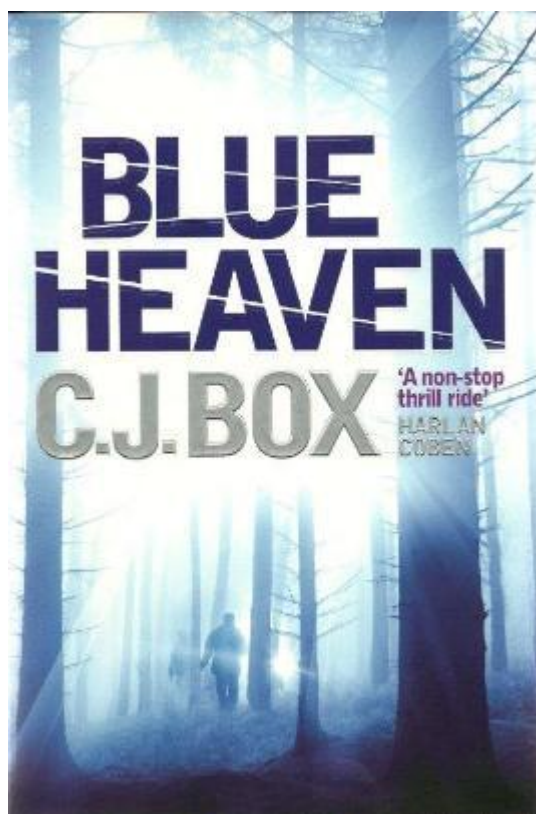
Should Martina and Hostage Music be looking to develop raw and untried talent, I must put in a word for my son, Master Hendrix Ripster, and his own beat combo, *Monterey*, who are currently reduced to rehearsing in one of the cow sheds here at Ripster Hall with drastic impact on milk yields.

My Blue Heaven

The name of American mystery writer C.J. Box first entered my befuddled consciousness in about 2002 when Robert Hale began to publish his novels featuring Joe Pickett, a Wyoming game warden, in this country.



Today he is a household name in the US and likely to become one over here now that the dynamic Corvus imprint is publishing his stand-alone thrillers, including the Edgar Award-winning *Blue Heaven*, which I have just read at a single sitting and declare to be utterly worthy of its Edgar and the many other awards it should win on this side of the Atlantic.



The 'Blue Heaven' in question refers to an area of North Idaho now being populated by 'incomers' in the form of retired Los Angeles policemen (a similar set-up as in the movie *Copland*), where real estate prices are booming at the expense of the traditional ranch. Everybody has a gun (several in fact) and most know how to saddle a horse when the need comes to ride for help.

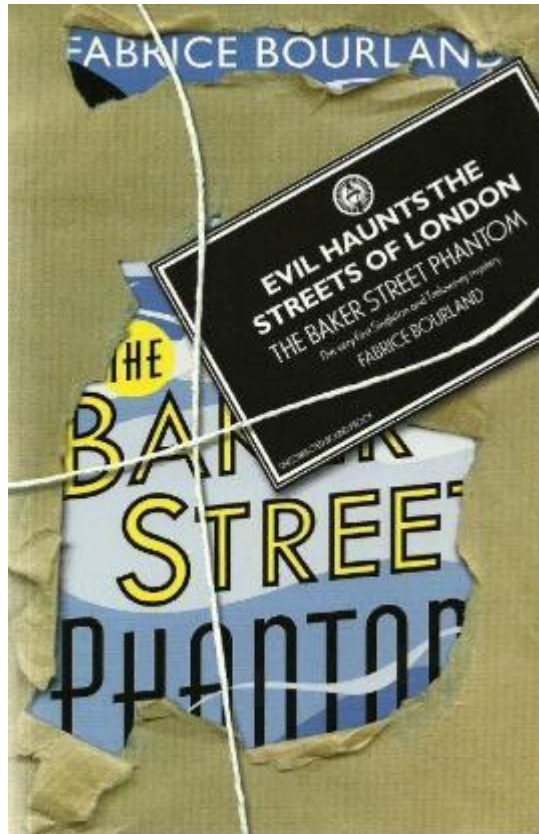
If this sounds like a Western of the old school, then so be it, for it follows the best and most noblest of Western traditions with a lone hero – a grizzled, 63-year-old rancher whose ranch is going under – standing tall to protect two innocent kids from the bad guys. (In movie terms, Sterling Hayden or Robert Ryan would have been perfect.)

The plot, though, involves a very modern crime and a murderous cover-up which ends in an all-guns-blazing shoot-out. C.J. Box deftly handles all the core elements of the thriller: plot, pace and suspense, and has characters you can believe in and care for (or be scared by) along with a lovingly described setting which is an unusual one for British readers who for the most part only associate 'Idaho' with 'potato'.

With *Blue Heaven*, C.J. Box has well and truly ridden into town and seems set to stay as a big player in the thriller stakes.

Taking the Michel

I was intrigued to receive a copy of a slim volume, *The Baker Street Phantom* the first 'fantasy crime novel' by Frenchman Fabrice Bourland, from that enterprising publisher Gallic Books.

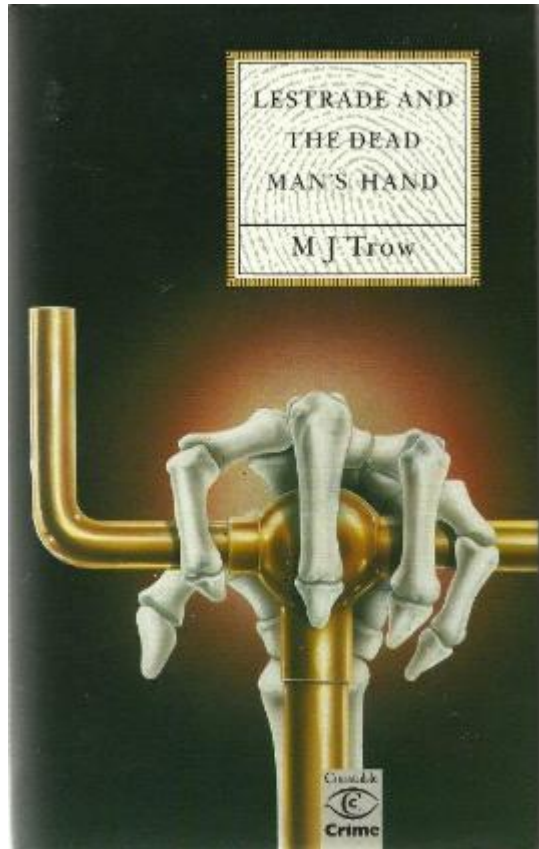


Set in 1932, a pair of oddball private eyes are called in to investigate mysterious supernatural happenings in a certain house in Baker Street (guess which one) by none other than the widow, Lady Arthur Conan Doyle....

According to author Bourland, he writes “a combination of detective and fantasy fiction...reviving a subgenre of crime fiction that was very popular in the past, that of detectives of the strange or the occult”.

Be that as it may, with a character called John D. Macdonald and a Native American psychic spirit guide called Black Hawk Dawn, I suspect the book could be a lot of fun and will probably upset the loyal legions of Sherlockians.

My own favourite Holmesian pastiches were the overlooked and almost forgotten Inspector Lestrade books by Meirion James (M.J.) Trow.



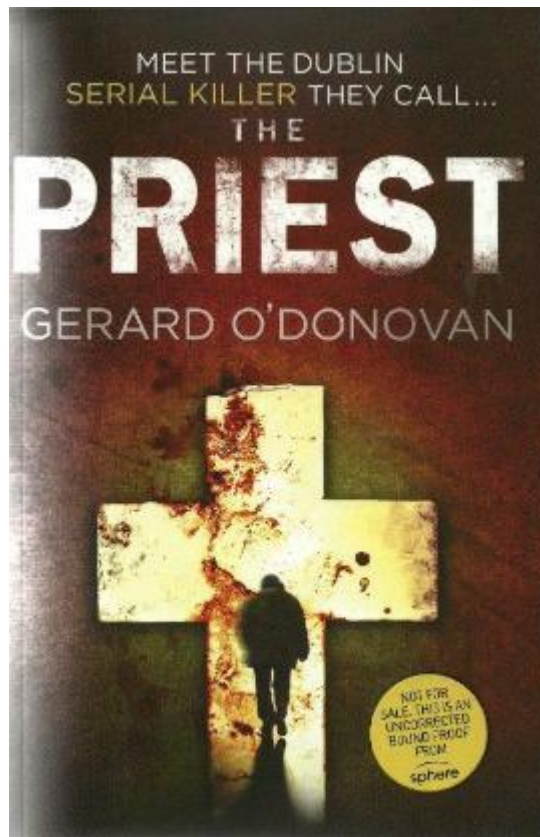
Working on the basic idea that Holmes and Watson were complete twits and it was the long-suffering Lestrade who did all the real detective work, the 16 Lestrade books were published between 1985 and 1996 in the UK, but only began to appear in the US some years later. They were supremely silly – full of garlicky puns, sly references to *Star Trek* and cod historical explanations – and very, very funny. One in particular contains the best George Bernard Shaw joke *ever*; and I say that without fear of contradiction for I have political friends at Scotland Yard.

For reasons I do not know, Mei Trow abandoned Lestrade and began his ‘Maxwell’ series featuring a schoolmaster turned sleuth. More recently he has turned his pen towards non-fiction, particularly history and archaeology. However, he has not forgotten the base commercialism so vital to a writer, as his new book is *A Brief History of Vampires* which will be a must-read book this summer; at least among commissioning editors.

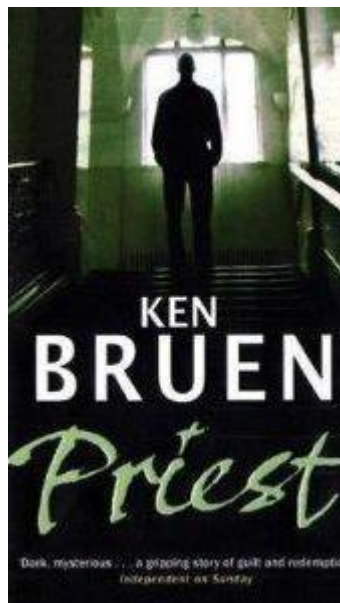
New Graduates

One of the pleasures of attending the annual reunion of the alumni of St Heffers is to meet new graduates stepping forth on their careers as crime writers, for it is vital to know the competition one faces and, ideally, nobble it at an early stage.

I was delighted to be approached by fresh-faced debut thriller-writer Gerard O’Donovan who enthused about his forthcoming (from Sphere) novel set in Dublin, *The Priest*.



For an instant – and I showed my stupidity by saying this aloud – I thought the book could be mistaken for a novel of a couple of years ago by my old friend Ken Bruen.



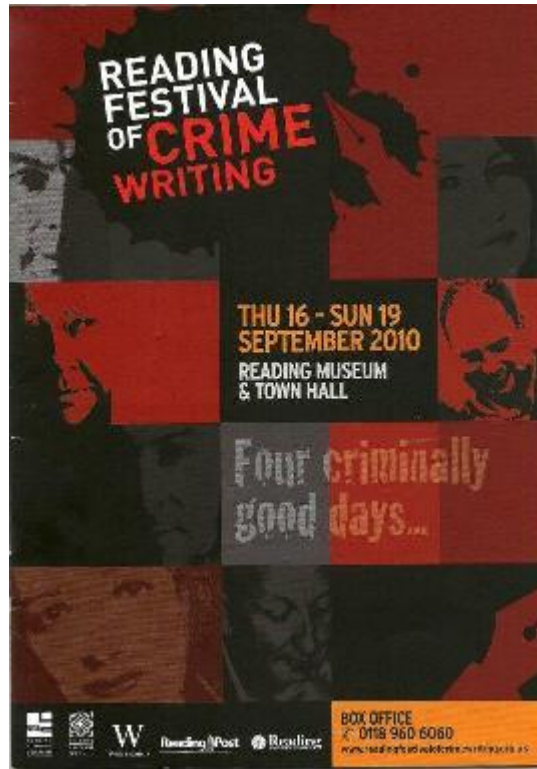
However, I was quickly reassured that my fears were unfounded. Gerard's book is clearly entitled *The Priest*, whereas Ken's is *Priest* so there could not possibly, in a rational mind, be any confusion.

Besides, Ken Bruen is, famously, Irish, whereas Gerard O'Donovan is...er... Irish.

Reading Festival of Reading

Or to give it its proper title, the Reading (a town just west of London if you have to ask) Festival of Crime Writing, takes place this year over four 'criminally good' days (expanded due to popular demand), 16th-19th

September. It is a festival which is growing not only in size, but in stature, and doing so at an impressive pace for a convention established so recently.



Modesty forbids me from highlighting (again) the comedy crime segment *Dead Funny* (Saturday 18th September at 4 p.m.; if wet in the Town Hall), but highlights will include Professor Barry Forshaw talking about classic crime fiction, Sophie Hannah on a panel discussing women in crime fiction and Andrew Taylor and my old friend Bernard Knight (who really is a professor) on historical crime, as well as the utterly charming Elizabeth Corley on ‘the return of the Great British thriller’. There is also a stellar cast of individual authors talking about their work, including: Christopher Brookmyre, Nicci French, Lindsey Davis, Paul Doherty, Val McDermid and Mark Mills.

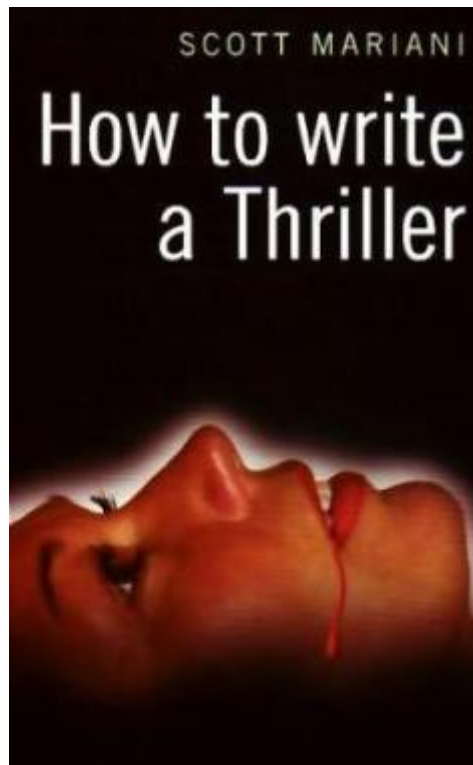
Full details of the festival (and its attractive programme) can be obtained from the Reading Arts box office on 0118 960 6060 or go to www.readingfestivalofcrimewriting.org.uk.

How Does He Do It?

I have already reported on the success of the prolific Scott Mariani, who has moved into the underworld of vampire bestsellerdom with *Uprising*, the first in a new series from publisher Avon.

This, I believe, is Scott Mariani’s *sixth* published novel since 2007 – and a *seventh* is to be published in January 2011. There must be a secret to his success somewhere.

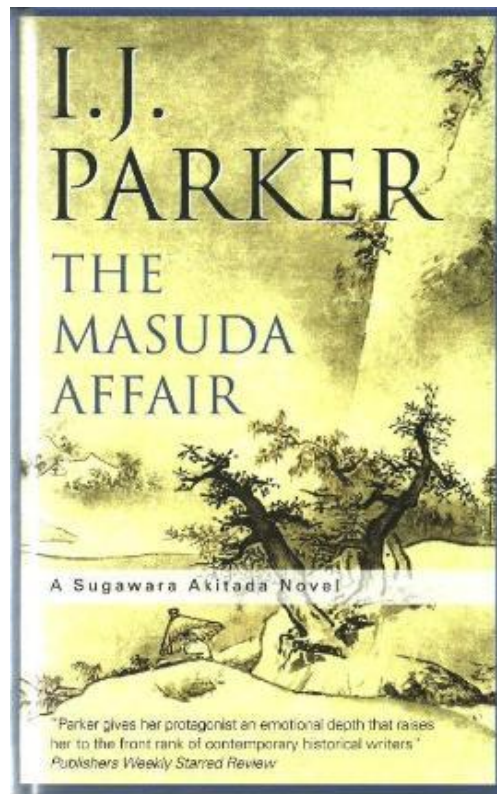
Could it possibly be the self-help book *How To Write A Thriller*, published in 2007, when Mr Mariani started to be published?



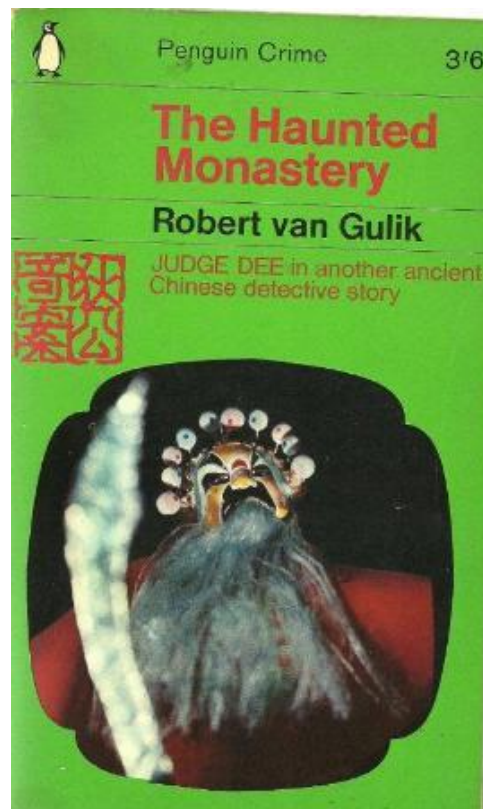
Not that Mr Mariani had to resort to a *How To Write A Thriller* for inspiration, as he is the author of that notable work of reference. I am mildly curious though to know which he wrote first – that or his first thriller, for both were published in the same year.

Eastern Approaches

Mysteries set in eleventh-century Imperial Japan are few and far between, but I.J. (Ingrid) Parker's series featuring Government official Sugawara Akitada has established a firm fan base in the US since his first appearance in a Shamus Award-winning short story in 2001. Seven Akitada novels have followed, but the latest, *The Masuda Affair*, is the first to be published in the UK – by that far-seeing publisher Severn House.

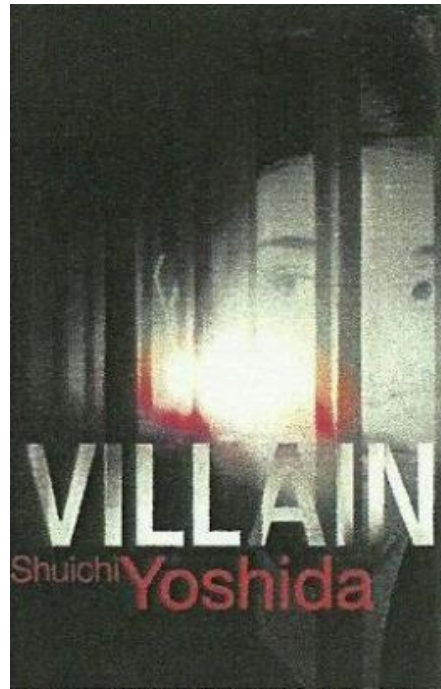


Readers of medieval mysteries fancying a change of scene could do no better than to try this fascinating series which is as carefully crafted as the finest piece of lacquer work. They remind me of the 'Judge Dee' mysteries set in 7th century China in the Tang dynasty by Robert Hans van Gulik, the Dutch diplomat and orientalist who died in 1967.



The Judge Dee stories were very popular in my youth and were adopted for television in 1969 in the UK, then in the US in 1974 and subsequently in China. Sadly, they are virtually forgotten these days, but I.J. Parker's Akitada series seems perfectly placed to provide a similar touch of historical exoticism.

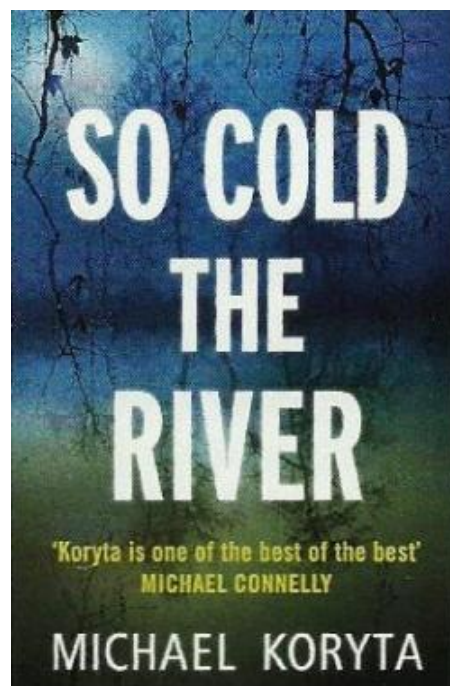
Whilst talking of Japan, I must mention *Villain* by Shuichi Yoshida, published this month by Harvill Secker.



Yoshida is a prize-winning author in Japan, though I believe this tale of murder in a desolate seaside town which is said to be part police procedural, partly 'dirty realism', is his first novel to be translated into English. A film based on *Villain* (but called *Akunin* in Japan) is to be released later this year.

Chilling Out

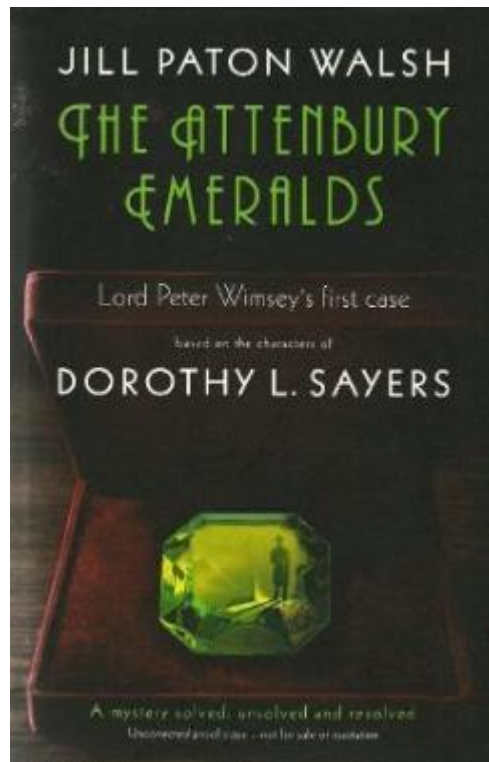
I am not quite sure why those charming people at Hodder & Stoughton sent me an advance proof of Michael Koryta's *So Cold The River*, which they are to publish in September, but I'm jolly glad they did.



This is far from a conventional crime novel – more a supernatural thriller involving the mysterious natural springs and a ‘lost’ river in a mid-western health spa, though in truth the best advice to visitors would be to take their whisky straight and avoid the branch water.

It’s hokum, but fantastically well-written hokum, with excellent characterisation and great pace. Just the thing to induce a chill on the back of the neck during the long, hot summer.

I am on more familiar territory with another advance proof from Hodder, for a book also published in September, *The Attenbury Emeralds* by Jill Paton Walsh.

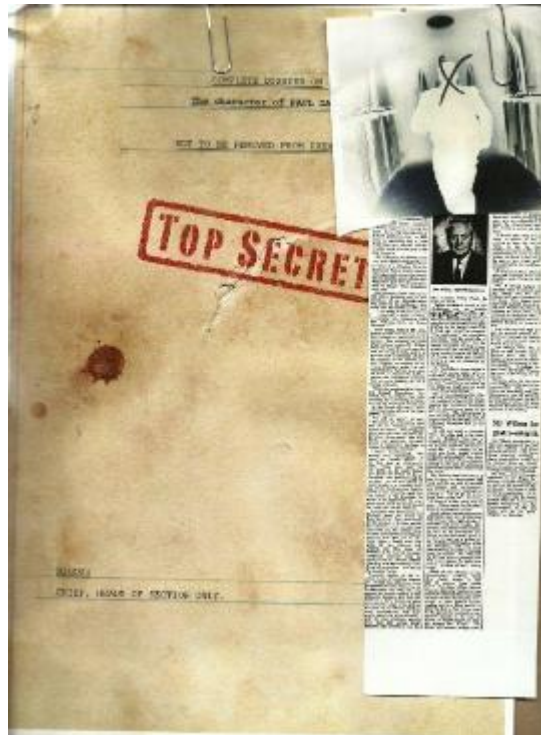


The significance of the title will not be lost on dedicated fans of the work of Dorothy L. Sayers, for the mystery of the Attenbury emeralds (and their recovery in 1921) was the case which launched the detective career of Lord Peter Wimsey, the most celebrated aristocratic amateur sleuth in crime fiction history.

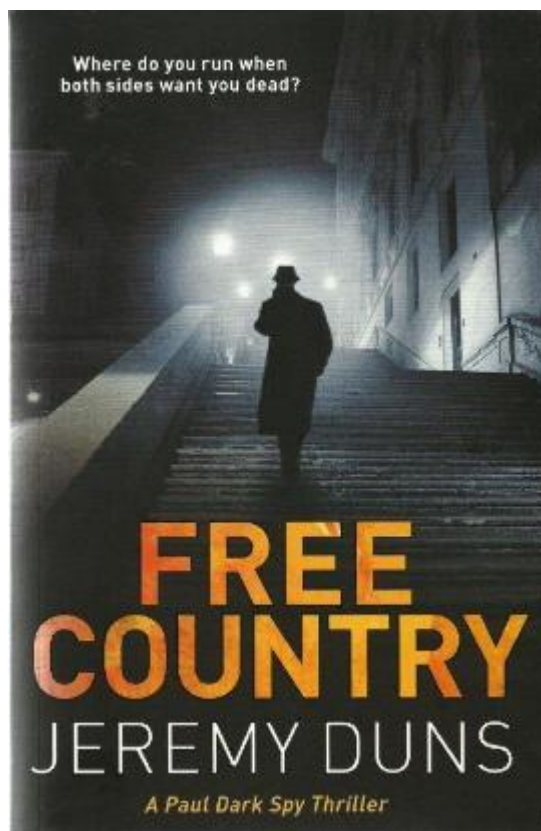
Details of the case, however, have been shrouded in modest mystery until now, when Jill Paton Walsh once again steps into Dorothy Sayers’ sensible shoes. As she has proved twice in the past, they are shoes that fit her perfectly.

Divided Loyalties

It is not often that a review copy of a spy novel arrives accompanied by its own secret dossier – I can recall an early Len Deighton and Robert Harris’ *Fatherland* being two cases in point – but one has now and with only a moment’s pause to consult my somewhat dog-eared copy of the Official Secrets Act (1911), I broke the seal, and began to read.



It is, of course, a clever ruse to tempt the reviewer into reading the new thriller by Jeremy Duns, *Free Country* from those imaginative people at Simon & Schuster, not that anyone in their right minds would actually need much tempting if they had read Jeremy's stunning debut *Free Agent* last year.



Neither is it often that one is encouraged to fear for, and sometimes cheer on, the bad guy but that is exactly what the clever Mr Duns manages to do, for his hero Paul Dark is not only a rising star in MI6, but also a double-agent working for Soviet Intelligence and a cold-blooded killer to boot. In fact *Free Country* starts with

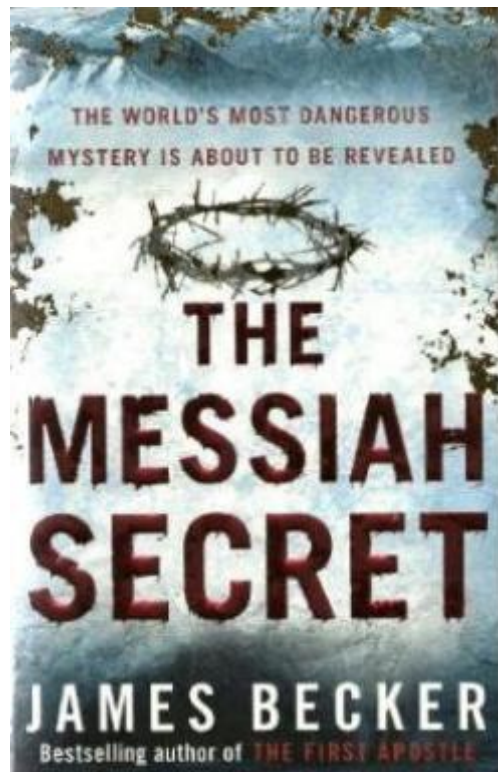
Dark in St Paul's Cathedral, giving the funeral oration for his former MI6 chief – a man he himself murdered – when a sniper opens up and it seems that it is payback time, though on who and for what is a mystery. To solve it, our anti-hero zooms off to Italy and then on to Istanbul, on a mission to protect his life – and his cover.

The Paul Dark series (a trilogy is planned) is something of a homage to the spy thrillers of the 1960s. Indeed, the action takes place in 1969, and contains some wonderfully evocative contemporary colour such as having to find a sixpence in a public phone box (remember either of them?) and the way that BEA (British European Airways) was always referred to as 'Bastards Eventually Arrive'.

Steeped in the spy-craft and paranoia of the Sixties, *Free Country* is a worthy follow-up to *Free Agent* and a succulent appetizer for the third instalment. I cannot of course tell you what this will be called or when it is due, for then I would have to kill you.....

World's Most Dangerous....Really?

The blurb for James Becker's new Bantam paperback original *The Messiah Secret* informs me: "*The World's Most Dangerous Mystery is About to be Revealed*".



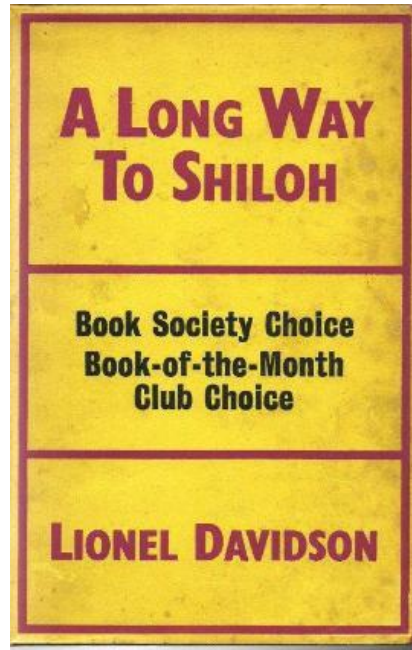
Naturally, I was intrigued. Was I at last going to be told the truth about Area 57 and those "Moon Landings" we all thought we saw in 1969, even though it is almost certain the Nazis landed there in 1945 from their secret base in Antarctica? Or perhaps it was confirmation that the atomic bomb doesn't actually work, or that General De Gaulle really was assassinated by a sniper in 1963? Perhaps it's the one about Atlantis turning out to be the island of Guernsey all along or that long-suppressed prophecy of Nostradamus concerning Scotland and the 2014 World Cup?

I know I should not worry about these things but I do and the Giant Rat of Sumatra has caused me more sleepless nights than I care to mention.

A quick look at Mr Becker's backlist might give me a clue, for he is the author of those huge bestsellers (e-book as well as real-book) *The First Apostle* and *The Moses Stone*. Is it possible to see a theme developing here?

The International Code of Crime Reviewers (it's more Guidelines really) prevents me from giving away the plot of course, as does the fact that James Becker is, according to his biography, "an accomplished combat pistol shot".

I must say, however, that the opening Prologue of *The Messiah Secret* (which is set in 72AD in somewhere called Ldumra) bears an uncanny resemblance to the opening Prologue of Lionel Davidson's 1966 Gold Dagger winning thriller *A Long Way To Shiloh*.

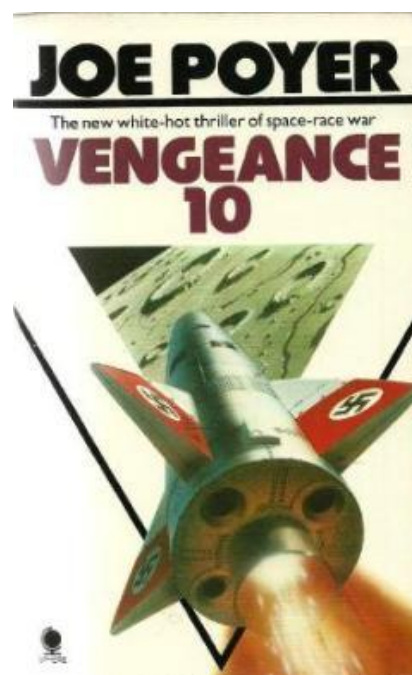


So much did it bring back fond memories for me, that I immediately dusted off my first edition (signed by the much-missed Lionel) and was distracted into re-reading it for what must, I think, be the fifth time.

Nazis on the Moon

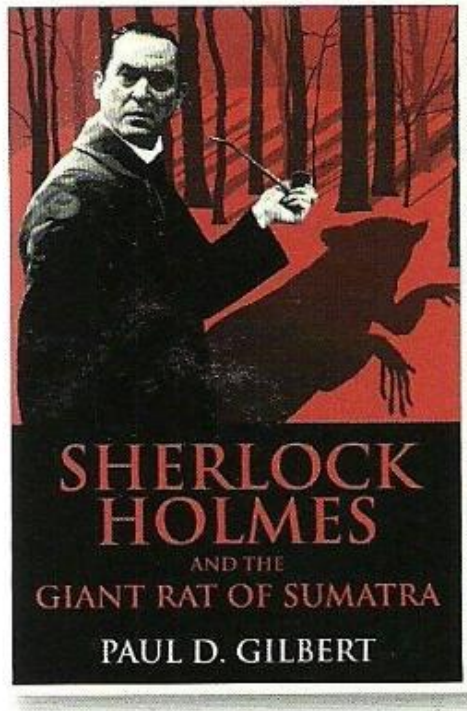
And to prove that my fears of the World's Most Dangerous Plots are not groundless, I would remind my reader of that excellent thriller *Vengeance 10* written in 1980 by Joe Poyer which has a prologue set in 2009 where American astronauts establishing a lunar base discover the crash site of a manned Nazi space rocket launched in 1945!

Joe Poyer was a major force in thriller-writing in the late 1970's, though I suspect he was better appreciated in Britain and Europe than in his native America and he certainly seemed to become disillusioned with American fiction publishers, though he continues to write non-fiction and I believe has established a technical publishing business. Certainly his thrillers were all characterised by technical know-how and detailed research and whilst his most popular titles were probably *North Cape* and *Tunnel War*, for sheer *chutzpah* in outrageous plotting, *Vengeance 10* takes some beating.

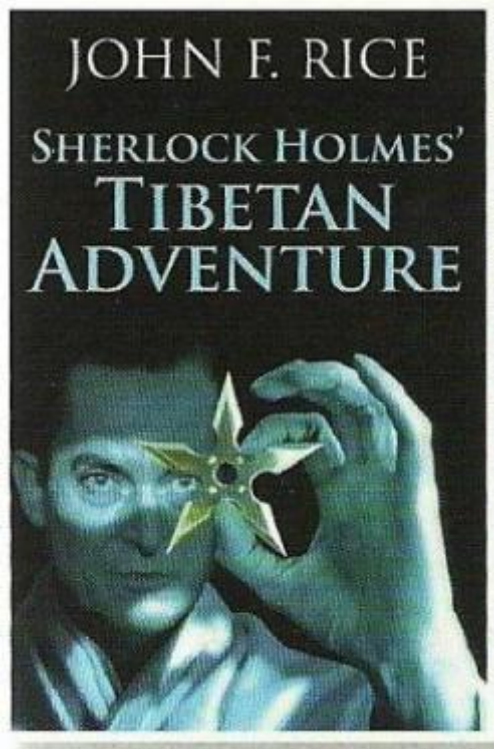


And I think Mr Poyer laid the seeds of something thirty years ago, for I hear that production has finally started on the latest Finnish (yes, Finnish) blockbuster, *Iron Sky*. For those who do not keep up with the international film scene, *I* would point out that the premise of *Iron Sky* is that the Nazis colonised the Moon in 1945 and now *they're coming back*....

If that is not enough to give me nightmares, I no sooner mention the GRS (Giant Rat of Sumatra) than I am informed by publishers Robert Hale that their lead title for this month is *Sherlock Holmes and the Giant Rate of Sumatra* by Paul D. Gilbert.



Coincidentally, in October, Robert Hale will publish the debut novel of one John F. Rice: *Sherlock Holmes' Tibetan Adventure*.



Interestingly, both titles use cover images of Jeremy Brett from the television adaptations of the Holmes canon, an actor widely regarded as the best interpreter of Sherlock Holmes since Robert Downey Jr. Or should that be Benedict Cumberbatch?

How to Worry a Mystery Writer



Sneak up behind them and start reading one of their books in an ostentatious manner.

*Pip! Pip!
The Ripster*

