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| **Farewell Reg**  The New Year started badly, with the death of Reginald Hill, one of Britain’s finest crime writers and someone whom I was proud to know for almost 23 years. The tributes in newspapers and on line have been fulsome and from the messages I have received, they have hopefully inspired a new generation of readers for the amazing body of work he left behind.    When I was first published by the legendary Collins Crime Club, I had been reading the novels of Reg Hill (and of Patrick Ruell, not realising it was Reg in disguise) for ten years and he was one of my crime-writing heroes. I was delighted to meet him, and positively excited that he seemed delighted to meet me! In fact, I was not special. Reg was just extremely polite and seemed genuinely delighted to meet everyone.    And everyone seemed delighted to meet Reg. In all my time in the crime writing world – which can be extremely bitchy despite what they say about the Romantic Novelists Association? I have never heard anyone say a bad word about Reginald Hill.    His novels (and some superb short stories) speak for themselves. I retain fond memories of Reg as a loyal supporter, an encourager of new talent, a needle sharp intellect and a fantastically witty guy who never let a good deed go unthanked.  Pix      When I reviewed one of his books, in 2008, and although he needed neither my praise nor endorsement, he e-mailed me:  Mike, I don't care what your friends, family, probation officers , police records, and the Archbishop of Canterbury say about you, I think you're bloody great. Thanks, mate! Reg    But he could be a caring as well as a funny correspondent. When he (rightly) detected a note of depression in one of my letters, his response was immediate:    (You) sounded as if you were having one of those black dog days which cock their legs at all of us some time. Boot it away with great vigour…. keep at it; don't let the bastards grind you down!       As always, Reg’s advice was sound.  \*  In memory of Reg, Bob Cartwright, one of the founders of *Shots* and the original editor of the printed version *A Shot in the Dark*, adds his own tribute to this column:     |  | | --- | | Reg Hill was one of those writers who once discovered was never forgotten. Read Dalziel and Pascoe once and you were immediately addicted for life. For ever after you would be afflicted by fits of laughter which quickly ascended into tears. You could almost certainly guarantee that if you saw anyone on a train hiding behind a book with eyes misting over and shoulders heaving with suppressed laughter they would be reading one of Reg's books and being treated to Big Andy's take on the world.  But Reg was also one of the most sophisticated writers of crime fiction. His own reading was undoubtedly comprehensive and catholic in the extreme. You never knew where the inspiration would be found for his storylines - Jane Austin in the wonderful Pictures of Perfection, Dante for Underworld, which remains my favourite of Reg's books. And whatever subject matter he selected, the reader was assured that it would be impeccably written. No one, but no one in crime fiction could write as well as Reg. If you don't believe me just read the introductory paragraphs of Pictures of Perfection.  It was saddening in some respects that while he was rightly lauded by other crime fiction writers and millions of crime fiction readers, Reg was never fully recognised as the great writer he truly was. If he had not chosen to inhabit the crime fiction backwaters he would have been more widely accepted among the mainstream of British literature, alongside the likes of Melvin Bragg, Alan Sillito, Stan Barstow. That to my mind is a tragedy.  Reg was also one of those authors who was always the subject of kindly tributes from his fellow crime fiction writers. They could bitch quite happily about other writers but never Reg. He was the one they all seemed to admire. He was also the most unaffacing about his own talents and the most generous towards other writers. Maybe that's why they all seemed to like him so much. It was around 1994 that I found out for myself just why Reg was so popular among his peers.  With more naivety than sense a few of us more pretentious readers got together and inflicted **A Shot in the Dark** on the world of crime fiction. Nominally our intention was to provide a vehicle for readers to exchange views on the books and the authors we devoured so lovingly and more generally to beef about our perception of the genre as something that most publishers would prefer not to sully their hands and reputations with. But once we got started we found that our abiding motivation was the joy of being able to talk on a regular basis to almost all of the writers we had previously only admired from afar. Reg was right up there at the top of that list. What was even nicer was the growing appreciation that several of those writers actually liked what we were trying to do and gave us their full support. Once again Reg was one of the foremost among that number. That was Reg. He certainly didn't need for one moment our fledgling efforts to promote crime fiction. But, unlike some of his stature (who shall be nameless) Reg was ever happy to encourage our efforts, always responding positively to requests for an article on the origins of Big Andy and an interview, even when he could quite justifiably have pleaded to other demands on his time. Over the limited lifespan of the magazine we got to know and form an attachment to many crime fiction writers. And there were a few who we genuinely came to love and admire. Reg was certainly one of those.  Bob Cartwright |     **Cover Art**  It is early days I know, but the image of choice for 2012 among jacket designers of crime fiction seems to be the ‘walking-away man’ – or the man who occasionally breaks into a run. This is the sort of thing I mean:   I have spotted this trend on covers of books either just out or soon to be published and have noted my mystery man on: Stav Sherez’s ***A Dark Redemption***, (though those fabulous Faber people at least add a walking-away woman to tie in with a major theme of the novel);  David Levien’s ***The Contract*** (Bantam); Joseph Finder’s ***Buried Secrets*** (Headline); Philip Carter’s ***Altar of Bones*** (Simon & Schuster); Barbara Nadel’s ***Dead of Night*** (Headline); Simon Kernick’s ***Siege*** (Bantam); and the new Jo Nesbo, ***Phantom*** (a mere 452 pages from Harvill in March), puts him in a snowscape to give the requisite chilly Swedish feel.     Of course there are minor differences and tweakings – sometimes he wears a traditional trench coat, others it’s a smart, short car-coat; sometimes he’s backlit and walking forwards - and I suspect we will see many more variations on the walking man theme before the year is out.  **Screen Time**    I am told that the first big screen appearance of Stephanie Plum, possibly America’s cutest bounty hunter, will be in February when she will be portrayed by Katherine Heigl (whose previous film credits include **Bride of Chucky** and **Under Siege** **2**) in the film of **One for the Money.**     The source material for the film is of course the novel by Janet Evanovich from 1994, though her Stephanie Plum series now extends to eighteen books and has probably made the author the most successful purveyor of comic crime there has ever been.     There will be a slightly longer wait – until March – for fans of Sophie Hannah who are awaiting the ITV adaptation of her excellent (possibly my favourite) chiller **The Other Half Lives**, but to while away the hours until then, publisher Hodder have generously provided us with her brand new psychological thriller, **Kind of Cruel.**  **Americana**  Is it me, or is there an upsurge in the number of American “rural noir” novels coming ‘down the pike’ just at the moment? Tom Franklin’s Dagger-winning **Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter** (set in Mississippi) may have started the trend last year, and coming in March from Doubleday is **A Land More Kind than Home** by Wiley Cash, set in the mountains of North Carolina. Then in May, as I have already flagged up, we will see Gillian Flynn’s **Gone Girl** (Weidenfeld) which takes place in a small Missouri town.     At the moment though I am greatly enjoying an advance proof, kindly supplied by those marvellous Mullholland Books people of  **Edge of Dark Water** by Joe R. Lansdale, which will be available to the general public on March 15th. Although set in East Texas, this atmospheric nugget of gothic noir has a cast, a river and a raft which all bring to mind a famous tale by Mark Twain. But where the river to freedom once led to Cairo (Illinois), in **Edge of Dark Water,** the rafters are aiming for Hollywood – or anywhere away from their grindingly poor, bigoted and ignorant present lives.      The prolific Joe Lansdale (who was first published more than 30 years ago) found a great champion over here in the legendary *Murder One* bookshop and I distinctly remember proprietor Maxim Jakubowski heartily recommending a trio of titles – **Mucho Mojo, The Two Bear Mambo** and **Bad Chili** – which featured Lansdale’s detective duo Hap and Leonard, in the mid-1990s. For a while, I was sure that Lansdale was set to become a cult author over here, but then my attention must have wandered for this is the first of his books I have read this century.    I am, however, very grateful to Mulholland for bringing this new, finely-written tale to my attention and I have been made aware that it has also impressed the leading crime fiction critic in Australia, so I am not alone in my admiration.   For readers who prefer their serial killer fiction to be traditional and American (rather than the present fad for Scandinavian), then a new name on me is Katia Lief.  Actually she has three new names on me, for Katia has written novels under her maiden name, Katia Spiegelman, and under the pen-name Kate Pepper, before plumping for her married name of Katia Lief, which is the name on the cover of **Five Days To Die**, just published in the UK by Ebury Press.      If, on the other hand, your taste is for the traditional hard-boiled school, then from what I hear I am almost sure I can recommend **Choke Hold** by Christa Faust, published here by Titan Books.             I say it is ‘almost sure’ I can recommend it, because for legal reasons I have not read it, nor even actually seen a copy, just heard about it.  My colleague, the vivacious Cathi Unsworth, has however and reviewed it in a recent edition of the *Guardian.* It appears that she quite approved of it, declaring that: “Faust pumps pulp fiction into contemporary focus with the acerbic wit of a demonic Dorothy Parker and the caustic eye for the human condition of vintage Jim Thompson.”      For those who like their hard-boiled fiction really hard, X-rated (as we used to say) and for grown-ups only, then your main man is Andrew Vachss; and his new novel ***That’s How I Roll*** is published by Pantheon in America in March.      This is classic, gritty Vachss, who writes prose you can strike a match on,  as he proved in his 18-book ‘Burke’ series which not only created its own dystopian universe of urban savagery, but also showed that Vachss has a crime-writing ‘voice’ as distinct – and as important – as those of James Ellroy, George V. Higgins and Elmore Leonard. In ***That’s How I Roll*** he gives that voice to Esau Till, a top line assassin for hire who sits on Death Row awaiting the lethal injection and writing his life story. But Esau’s not providing a death-cell confession; he’s intent on looking after his only family, his brother, even after he’s gone. |  | **M.C. Beaton’s Recipe for Success**  I find it hard to believe that ***Death of a Kingfisher***, which is published in March (though for legal reasons I have not seen a copy), is the twenty-eighth novel to feature Scottish cop Hamish Macbeth in Marion Beaton’s delightful series which began in 1985, when Robert Carlyle, who played Hamish on the small screen, became an instant heart-throb.  Now anyone with a basic grasp of arithmetic will realise that is an output of just over a book a year which, among crime-writers is not necessarily that prolific. However, if you needed reminding, the effervescent Marion Beaton (with whom I was delighted to share a platform at the 2010 Reading Festival of Crime Writing) has also been responsible, since 1992, for twenty-two novels in the popular Agatha Raisin series.    You do the math.  **Redemption Song**  I really rated ***The Black Monastery*** by Stav Sherez (crazy name, crazy guy) back in 2010 not just because it was a good thriller, but because it created a really creepy, downright spooky, atmosphere in what should have been an idyllic Greek island setting.   Reading his new one, from Faber, **A Dark Redemption,** I initially got the feeling that Sherez had decided to play safe and create a fairly conventional police detective duo working a gruesome murder case in traditional police procedural fashion in a contemporary London setting – not that modern London couldn’t do with a decent fictional detective pairing; it could, and on that score, Sherez delivers fully, but then he goes one stage further.    Detective Inspector Jack Carrigan is the (traditional) maverick detective with the troubled past and Detective Sergeant Geneva Miller is the new girl on the cop shop block who is put on the case as much to keep an eye on Carrigan as anything. The case in question is the particularly brutal murder of a young Ugandan student with connections to some extreme African ‘liberationists’ and DI Carrigan comes with heavy emotional baggage from an earlier incident in his student youth – in Africa.      So far, in a good way, so conventional – at least in crime writing terms; but just before the half-way stage, Sherez turns down the thermostat and the whole narrative takes on a distinctly chilly and unsettling air, which is something he does very well indeed. To give away any more would be crass (though always remember Africa), but I would recommend **A Dark Redemption** to anyone looking for a satisfying policier which deserves to be the opening shot in a long and successful series.  **Time Machine**  The wonderful thing about crime fiction – well, one of the wonderful things – is that it can go back in time and add a healthy chunk of history to the standard attributes of plot, suspense, pace and characterisation which appeal to readers. (I have found it less successful when it attempts to jump forward in time in a sort of ‘sci-cri” fiction.)      The fashionable setting for historical mystery, at least this month, seems to be the 1840s and, interestingly enough, in both British and American locations.       I must first mention ***The Pleasures of Men*** by Kate Williams, which comes with quite stunning cover art (above) from Penguin; indeed this trade paperback is a quality production number all round. Set in the Spitalfields area of London (famous among my generation for having pubs which kept “market hours”) just as Victoria takes the throne and with a very vicious killer known as the Man of Crows on the rampage, this is a first novel by Dr Williams, an academic who is something of an expert on British royalty and Victoriana.     Following in March will be Lindsay Faye’s ***The Gods of Gotham***from Headline Review, which is set in New York City (and the infamous ‘Five Points’ district) in 1845, just as New York takes the momentous decision to establish a police force.  ***The Gods of Gotham***immediately brings to mind Herbert Asbury’s classic 1927 “informal history” ***The Gangs of New York***(subsequently filmed by Martin Scorsese) and the early proof edition comes with a ‘Vocabulum’ or ‘Rogue’s Lexicon’ of  contemporary gangland slang from those very mean Gotham streets.     One entry might surprise those distinguished residents of Attleborough in the county of Norfolk (which include on occasion the sainted Sir Stephen Fry). It appears that in 1845 New York, an Attleborough meant an imitation, or something fake, likely to deceive. It seems the use of the word came from the town’s reputation for making jewellery from base metals passed-off as precious; something I did not know before now as the subject has never come up on the show QI. Perhaps it should.  **Dirty Deeds in Old Peking**   It is some time now since I received a parcel wrapped in newspaper which did not explode or require the services of the Health and Sanitation departments. However, those perky publishers Penguin have excelled themselves in their presentation of advance proofs of  ***Midnight in Peking***by Paul French, which they publish in May.  The proof comes cunningly wrapped in a clever facsimile page of a broadsheet newspaper where the ‘stories’ are all authentic (as far as I can see) press cuttings about the murder of 17-year-old British girl Pamela Werner in Peking in 1937, which is of course the subject of the book.      The author, Paul French is a respected commentator on and analyst of China, where he has lived for twenty years.  He sounds like what my old comrades Dikko Henderson and Gerry Westerby might have called ‘an old China hand’ in bygone days.   Mr French clearly knows his stuff and don’t be surprised if **Midnight in Peking**turns out to be this year’s **Suspicions of Mr Whicher*.***  **Nordic News**  There has been much talk in Euroland of ‘ratings agencies’ lately, but the agencies which rate Scandinavian crime fiction have so far kept a low profile. However the firm of Ragnarok, Odin and Bluetooth (*Berserkers At Law*) has recently put out a three star rating on a film entitled *Troll Hunter*.     As with all things flat-packed or Scandinavian, I look forward to its opening and I am convinced that the eponymous Inspector Hunter will establish himself as a firm favourite. Meanwhile, there are signs that some of the excesses of recent Scandinavian crime writing have not gone unnoticed. In a recent review of Hans Koppel’s ***She’s Never Coming Back*** in the *Independent*, that staunch defender of this geographical sub-genre Professor Barry Forshaw admits that some readers of the book will find it ‘hard to take’ the “appalling sexual humiliation and brutalisation of its heroine”.    Yet the most ardent criticism comes from the website *Crimescene* – a site not usually known for its squeamishness. The object of *Crimescene’s*  ire, if not disgust, is Jo Nesbø’s **The Leopard** which the site describes as a “bloated shock fest of serial killer torture and mindless splatter” and goes on to suggest that “fans of films such as *Saw, Final Destination* and the charming *Hostel* series will no doubt *love* this book.”     But *Crimscene’s* reviewer is just getting his second wind: “marketeers try and convince you that Nesbø is the new Stieg Larson. This is not true. He is Thomas Harris with a chainsaw and a tool-kit full of sharpened screwdrivers.”   Call me an old cynic (as many do), but I think *Crimescene* may just have put their finger on the secret of the book’s success.   And speaking of Professor Forshaw, I find his name being taken in vain in the *Financial Times*, no less. Not by me, I hasten to add, but by new Swedish crime-writing superstar [Mons Kallentoft](http://www.shotsmag.co.uk/interview_view.aspx?interview_id=228), whose **Midwinter Sacrifice** is currently published by Hodder.    “I met Barry Forshaw at a dinner for crime fiction aficionados,” writes Kallentoft. “Forshaw came across as humble, intelligent and perceptive.”    Had I been present at that dinner, I would have been tempted to demand: *Who are you? And what have you done with Barry Forshaw?*  **The Name’s Iggulden, Conn Iggulden**   I am looking forward to World Book Day in March and especially to a new ‘Quick Read’ by historical novelist Conn Iggulden.   In something of a departure from the fiction he is best known for, Mr Iggulden has penned the intriguingly titled short thriller **Quantum of Tweed** which for some reason (possibly legal) seems to have at least two potential cover designs.    I have no idea which one will be finally selected, but I think both are quite splendid.  **What a Wonderful World (wide web)**    The worldwide interweb never ceases to amaze me. I was browsing one of my favourite sites, *Tipping My Fedora* (thinking, originally, that it was Victorian slang for something completely different) and joined in a ‘blogging’ or whatever they’re called, on the subject of the crime novels of E.V. Cunningham from the 1960s. My more discerning readers will, naturally, know that ‘E.V. Cunningham’ was one of the pen-names of Howard Fast, the prolific American author (of Spartacus among other best sellers) who was black-listed for many years for his membership of the Communist Party and who died in 2003 aged 88.   I happened to mention, in passing, that I had thoroughly enjoyed Howard Fast’s  1947 historical novel **The Last Frontier**which I had always believed to have been the basis of the John Ford film **Cheyenne Autumn** even though it had gone un-credited.     To my amazement this provoked an interweb comment from none other than Mimi Fast, the widow of Howard, who confirmed my suspicions and said that her late husband and John Ford had “long, heated conversations” about the film’s production but Ford eventually decided that Cheyenne history was in the public domain and he could, therefore, do more or less what he wanted with it.      How exciting to have one’s theories – about a book written over 60 years ago and a film made in 1964  -  confirmed almost instantly from a distance of at least 3,000 miles. What a wonderful thing is the jolly old interweb. What will they think of next? I am told that you can actually purchase goods and services on it somehow. I must see if I can find some more of those new-fangled Betamax tapes for my televisual recording device.  **Cargo Challenge**  When that great mystery writer (and Essex Girl) Margery Allingham died in 1966, she left an incomplete ‘Albert Campion’ novel, **Cargo of Eagles**, which was completed by her husband Pip Youngman Carter.   On publication it was said that no one could ‘see the join’ where one writer took over from the other, but recently I was told that the distinguished critic and author of the classic **The Moving Toyshop**, Edmund Crispin claimed to be able to tell where Pip replaced Margery.  Now as I admired Edmund Crispin both as a crime writer and a reviewer and I love the Campion books of Margery Allingham, I decided to take up the challenge myself.     On re-reading **Cargo**, I have a feeling that the (sadly necessary) change in authors came in Chapter 7, though I would be delighted to hear from any Allingham fan with an alternative theory. Sadly there are no prizes and no ‘correct’ answers as Pip Youngman Carter died in 1969 and Edmund Crispin in 1978.  **Awards, Awards**  As I was saying to my neighbour Lord Julian of Fellowes only the other day, I am perplexed as to how the series *Downton Abbey* is garnering so many awards. I am not saying it does not deserve them, simply that I am surprised that a fly-on-the-wall documentary showing the humdrum goings on at a typical, if modest, English country house would have such international appeal, especially among our colonial cousins across the Atlantic.   Goodness knows what the documentary film makers would make of the daily routines of the upstairs, below stairs and grounds staff, not to mention the stable-boys, gamekeepers, topiarists, gardeners, farmhands, maltsters and brewsters, who work here at Ripster Hall. I can only think it would make terribly dull viewing.  ***Pip! Pip!***  **The Ripster** |