

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### Death Among The Dons

Little grey cells have been working overtime in the groves of Academe this summer as crime writers took a break from sordid commercialism to discuss the more intellectual aspects of their craft.

I myself was a contributor, albeit in a very minor role, to a debate on the art of plotting a detective story featuring Harry Keating and Catherine Aird at the Dorothy L. Sayers Convention held in Cambridge courtesy of Girton College.



For DLS aficionados this was the second conference of the year, the earlier one taking place in Wheaton College, Illinois. I was unable to participate in the American conference on medical grounds, having discovered that the college ran a 'dry' campus where alcohol is prohibited.

Meanwhile, the crime conference at St Hilda's college in that more junior university of Oxford (which I believe is somewhere near Wales) was

enlivened by the participation of two truly Great (with a capital G) British crime writers: P.D. James and Colin Dexter.



Sadly, a long standing Exclusion Order keeps me from attending the annual St Hilda's gathering, for I would dearly have liked to have heard my old and distinguished friend Rosemary Rowe's lecture on poisons used during the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods of Imperial Rome.

I do hope Rosemary did not succumb to the current trend of "dumbing down" and gave her lecture, as usual, in Latin. There are, after all, certain standards which must be maintained.

Another lecture which I missed only on the technicality of not being invited, was that given by my fellow critic and crime writer, Jessica Mann, of the *Literary Review*. Jessica was invited, along with a frighteningly intellectual array of other lecturers to speak on an aspect of "the arts" at the Barbican in London, to mark the retirement of Sir John Tusa.

Her chosen topic was "Sticks and Stones – The Language of Crime Fiction" and she has been kind enough to send me a copy of the text. I do hope it reaches a wider public in some printed form or other, as it certainly deserves to.

### **Essex girls**

American crime writer, and former President of the Mystery Writers of America, Margaret Maron has never made any secret of the fact that she

was inspired to write after reading the classic Lord Peter Wimsey novels of Dorothy L. Sayers.

In the year which marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of DLS, Margaret managed to make a pilgrimage to Dorothy's home in Witham in Essex and is pictured with the statue erected in honour of the town's most famous ratepayer.



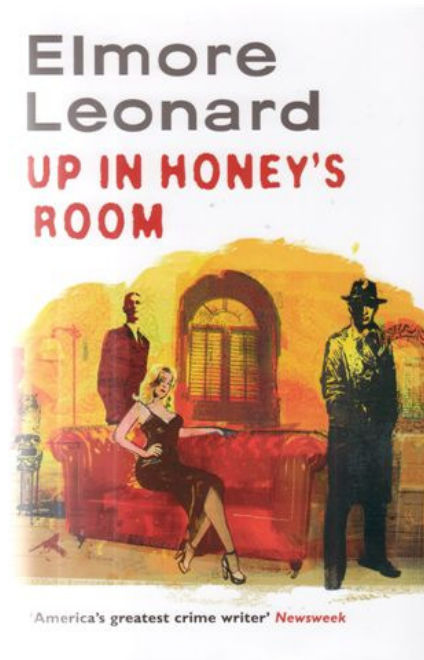
Lovers of trivia will already know that the bronze of DLS and her cat Blitz, is one of only two statues in the country which feature a cat represented at actual life-size. Is it also possibly the only statue of an English crime writer? I know of statues of Sherlock Holmes and there surely is one somewhere of Arthur Conan Doyle in Scotland, but can anyone think of any others? Answers, on a postcard please, to anyone but me.

### **Be cool; the Boss is back**

Those charming and talented people at Weidenfeld sent me an early copy of the new Elmore Leonard, which is always a treat. When Elmore – sometimes known as The Dutch Master – was published here by Penguin I of course never saw his new titles for I appear to have been surgically removed from their address book.

But that is a minor matter. What is important is the new novel by one of the most influential crime writers around. In many ways it is a return to

Elmore's roots as a Western writer, for *Up In Honey's Room* features his gun-slinging US Marshal Carl Webster on the trail of escaped Nazi POWs in 1945 Detroit.



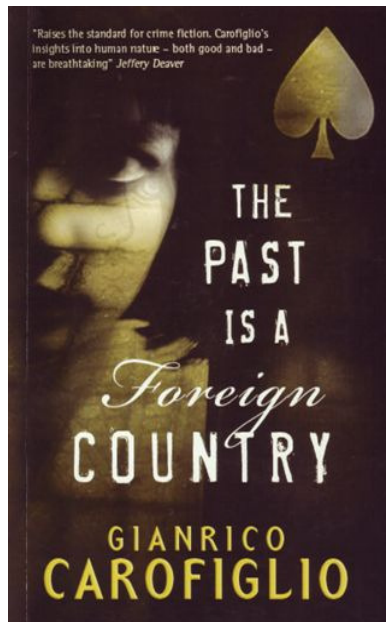
Interestingly, one of these on-the-run Nazis is SS Sturmbannfuhrer Otto Penzler, a name which seems strangely familiar, who survives the book, marries a Jewish businesswoman and opens a bookshop devoted to crime fiction or “mysteries” as our colonial cousins call them.

I have a twinge of regret that Elmore did not insist that his publishers retained his original working title: *Hitler's Birthday*. But I can see how that might have been misunderstood.

### Import, Export

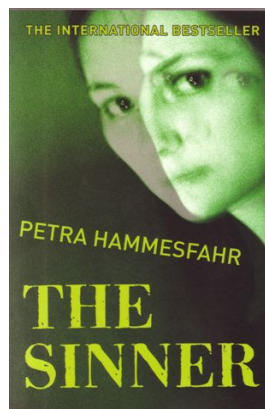
Almost half the crime novels published in Britain this year will have been written by non-British authors. The majority of these are, of course, American, but the number of ‘others’ (ie: other than British and American) has increased by a third this year to over 70 titles, which is more than one a week in old money.

A few are written in English by Irish, Canadian and Australian authors, but the rise of crime in translation seems irresistible.



Hardly pausing for breath after his visit to England to promote *Reasonable Doubts*, Italian legal eagle Giancarlo Carofiglio is back to talk about his non-series novel *The Past Is A Foreign Country*, from Old Street Publishing.

And coming up on his heels, from Eurocrime, are Spaniard Eugenio Fuentes with *Blood of the Angels* and Swiss journalist turned novelist Martin Suter with *A Deal With the Devil*, which not only won the 2007 Friedrich Glauser prize but was, I am assured, a #1 bestseller in Switzerland. Not to mention the arrival of a writer hailed as 'the German Patricia Highsmith', Petra Hammesfahr with *The Sinner* from Bitter Lemon Press.



With my anorak tightly zipped, I notice that *The Sinner* is translated from the German by one John Brownjohn and cannot help but wonder if

he is related to the J. Maxwell Brownjohn who so brilliantly translated Hans Helmut Kirst's *The Night of the Generals* back in 1963.

And not far behind will come new novels from those sparkling Scandinavians Henning Mankell and Peter Hoeg and, in January 2008, a new Icelandic talent, Yrsa Sigurddottir, debuts here from Hodder with *Last Rituals*.

### Thorn in his side

I became an instant fan of American poet and crime writer James W. Hall some twenty years ago when his first novel *Under Cover of Daylight* appeared, regarding his Florida-based loner hero Thorn as the best placebo for those of us still pining for Travis McGee. (James Hall lives in Florida and actually has a dog called Travis.)

The Thorn books, of which there have been about eight, were patchy to say the least. Some were stunning whilst others had plots which ran wildly out of control, but the quality of Hall's prose was always top-drawer. In fact there was a time when to write the best American crime fiction, it appeared that an author simply had to be called James: be it Ellroy, Crumley, Lee Burke or Hall.

Now I hear that after a gap of four years, a new Thorn novel, *Magic City*, is out, at least in the USA, but I can find no indication that it is to be published here in the UK.

### Kelly's Eye

Here in East Anglia, we treat our famous crime writers with respect. One of them, Dorothy L. Sayers, apart from having a statue and a small museum room in the local library, even has an annual lecture in her honour.

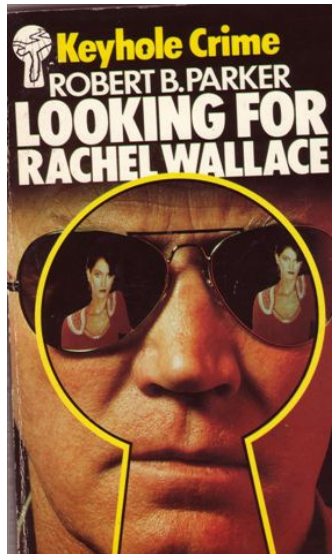
The DLS Lecture is invariably given by a distinguished crime writer and the roll of honour already includes Minette Walters, Jill Paton Walsh and Simon Brett. My spies tell me that next year's lecturer will be Jim Kelly, who lives in Ely, in the heart of Fen country and is the author of *The Skeleton Man*, published in July by Michael Joseph.

Sadly, as Jim Kelly's new book is published by the Penguin Corporation, who have for some reason blacklisted me when it comes to review copies, press releases or even returning emails, I have not the faintest idea what the book is about. I am sure, however, that it is jolly good.

### Spenser, Parker and Selleck

I first discovered Robert B. Parker back in 1982 when *Looking For Rachel Wallace* was published here by Keyhole Crime: remember them? There were a sort of book club where you signed up for four paperback titles a month by post I think (my memory fails me) for about a fiver and you took pot luck.

I am not sure how long Keyhole Crime lasted as an imprint but it introduced me to writers such as Sheila Radley, Charlotte Armstrong, Mark Hebden (John Harris), Robert Barnard and Simon Brett as well as Parker.



Parker's famous Boston-based private eye, Spenser, has entertained readers and influenced many a crime writer (Robert Crais, Mark Timlin and others) for over 30 years, but has never had the mass sales in the UK you might have expected, although the Parker flag has been kept flying here by those noble people at No Exit Press. His latest book, from No Exit, is just out and features female private eye Sunny Randall in *Spare Change*.

Parker's second string series featuring small town police chief Jesse Stone garnered good reviews here (whereas Sunny Randall was described

by one critic as “Spenser in a dress”), but it is Spenser he is known for, at least in the UK. The popularity of the series, though, was not exactly boosted by the TV version *Spenser For Hire* starring Robert Urich, and Parker himself was said to be unimpressed.

I did not know until recently, that Robert Parker, whom I met once in Murder One in London, but who was hurried away by a publisher’s PR minder before we could go for a beer, had written TV scripts himself for another version starring Joe Mantegna, which I believe have never been seen on this side of the pond.

Nor did I know that the Jesse Stone novels had been made-for-TV starring Magnum PI heart-throb, Tom Selleck. (Better known to some of us for that grossly under-rated ‘western’ set in Australia: *Quigley Down Under*). It appears that the first Selleck outing as Jesse Stone, in 2005, was a ratings smash which left Parker “close to actual tears at hearing my language so artfully interpreted”.

However, the latest TV movie, *Sea Change*, is not so much an adaptation of Parker’s novel but, he sighs, “an approximation”.

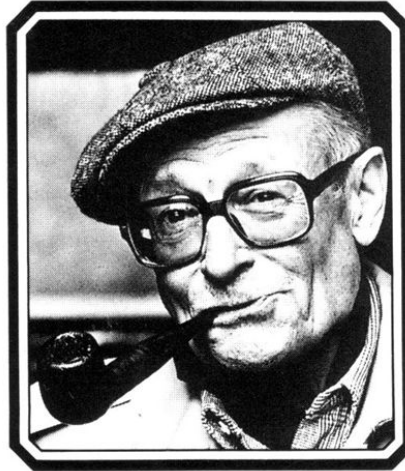
I am unaware of any plans to show the Jesse Stone TV movies in Britain but I am scouring the afternoon schedules of E4+1 quite closely. Goodness knows, now that news has reached me that *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* have been dropped, I am anxious to find something to fill the hole in my viewing life.

### Rough Guide to Paris

I was very flattered recently to be told that one of the fans of my ‘Angel’ books (the other is still awaiting parole) had taken his wife on holiday to Paris and had followed the route walked by my hero in the Marais and Left Bank districts in *Angel In The House* (still available in paperback from those small but perfectly formed people at Allison & Busby).

Little did my fan know that when I researched the book on an exhausting trip to the French capital (so many restaurants, so little time), I was following in the footsteps of ace detective Nestor Burma, as created by that king of French pulp (or *pulpe*) fiction Leo Malet.





After various careers as a cabaret singer, anarchist, poet and surrealist (and in Montmartre, these are serious career paths), Malet took to crime writing in 1943, clearly inspired by the American hardboiled school.

Although he died in 1996, he is still remembered for his “Paris” series starring private eye Nestor Burma, where each book takes place in one of the 18 arrondissements of the city. A few years before his death, Pan Books made a valiant effort to reissue *Les Nouveaux Mysteres de Paris* in English, at least one title having an introduction by Derek Raymond, who was a great fan.

I make no secret of the fact that I was inspired, when writing *Angel In The House*, by Malet’s description of the Hotel de Ville district in his 1958 thriller *Mayhem in the Marais*, although I have to admit that there was not a McDonald’s there in 1958.

The sound you hear is Leo Malet turning in his grave.

### **Bristol Fashion**

I hear rumours that a crime writing festival to out-do the annual celebrations at Harrogate (with its famous Karaoke element) is being planned for that jewel of the west, Bristol, in 2008.

The main attraction of this “Crimefest” will undoubtedly be the appearance of the utterly charming Natasha Cooper in a role I have not heard of before, that of *Toastrix*. Now this is not a word in English, nor in either of the other languages I speak (Latin and Greek) but at £125 a

head conference fee, I would gladly sell some of my children in order to have my breakfast toast served by the delightful Natasha.



I discover that next year's "Crimefest" also offers, for the paltry sum of an additional £80, a crime writing workshop (surely a "masterclass") run by leading crime writers Peter Guttridge and Janet Laurence. I feel I must remonstrate with these two authors, noble though their intentions no doubt are, on behalf of their millions of expectant fans. They are devoting far too much time to teaching fresh-faced youngsters the craft of crime writing and it has obviously had an impact of their own output of fiction, for the last novel to flow from Janet's elegant pen was in 2002, while my old friend Mr Guttridge last entertained us with *Cast Adrift* in, I believe, 2004, although of course I do not count his bestselling work under the pen name of John Twelve Hawks.

But fans can take heart at the news that Janet Laurence does in fact have a new book out this year, entitled *Writing Crime Fiction – Making Crime Pay* and that the Talented Mr Guttridge has been forced to abandon his role as film critic for this august organ in order to finish a novel. (I wonder what he is reading?)

The 2008 "Crimefest" will also see the awarding of something called the *Last Laugh Award*, which I always used to think was an award given by the Crime Writers Association. Certainly, the two I've got were.

## The rumble rumbles on

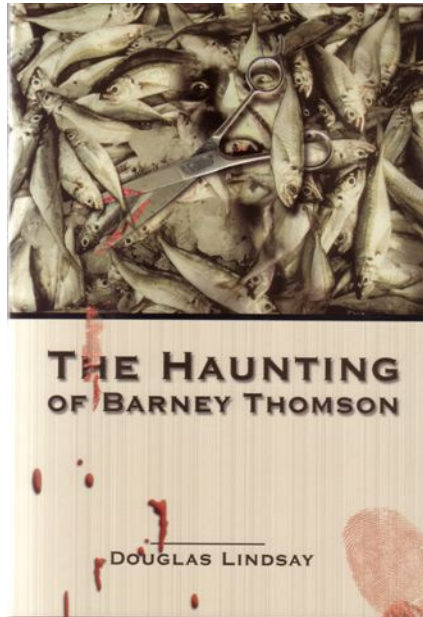
The summer is traditionally known as the “silly season” in the media and it comes as no surprise that a large amount of column inches, airtime and whatever the electronic equivalent on the jolly old interweb is, have been devoted to the question of who writes the most blood-thirsty crime novels, men or women?

This ‘debate’ (if it merits such a description) was ignited earlier in the year by comments from first Ian Rankin and then Val McDermid, but as both these fine writers are (a) known to me, (b) far more successful than I and (c) Scottish, I shall refrain from adding any contribution of my own. The media, however, seems reluctant to let the matter lie and the topic was raised, rather gratuitously, by a Radio 4 interviewer at the end of August when talking to crime writer Mandasue Heller about her latest novel.

I did notice, however, that in covering the ‘story’ *The Times* (16<sup>th</sup> August) chose to publish a short extract from Val’s new book *Beneath The Bleeding*, presumably to illustrate a point about her penchant for violence. Yet the passage chosen, which comes quite early in the book, is actually a very dramatic piece of action showing what happens when a mentally ill patient in a poorly-managed maximum security hospital runs amok with a fire axe. It has nothing to do with violence against women (the nub of the rumbling ‘debate’), indeed the protagonists are both male, and whilst it is certainly frightening and disturbing, it is not in any way gratuitous.

Unless, of course, it is taken completely out of context; something that would surely not happen in a reputable newspaper.

But if you are actively seeking blood and carnage, all done with a wink and a smile (and by another Scot), you can do no better than rejoice at the return of that “barbershop death junky” Barney Thomson in *The Haunting of Barney Thomson* published by Long Midnight Publishing of Inverness.

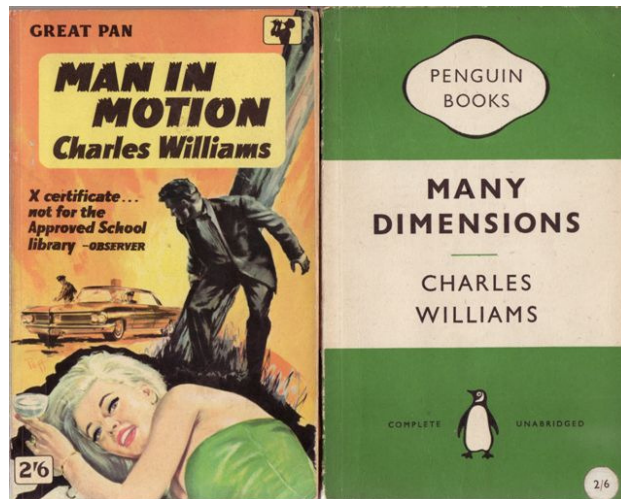


My personal copy arrived through the diplomatic bag from Warsaw, where the author, Douglas Lindsay is currently located. I cannot of course tell you *why* Douglas is stationed in Poland, for then I would have to kill you. All you need to know is that after being shoddily treated by the British publishing industry, Douglas set up his own firm in Inverness to carry on supplying his hysterically funny tales of the world's worst and most misunderstood serial killer to loyal and discerning readers.

**Buy the book; buy the bookshop**

Any crime fiction buff looking to find that long-lost title would do well to contact Melvyn Barnes out in the beautiful wilds of Suffolk.

I must thank Melvyn for supplying me with a rare copy of *Many Dimensions* by Charles Williams, as I had not read any of his fiction before. I am, of course, referring to the English theologian and writer of supernatural thrillers in the 1930s who should not be confused with the American hardboiled author of the 1950s and 60s, whose work is well-known to and admired by me.

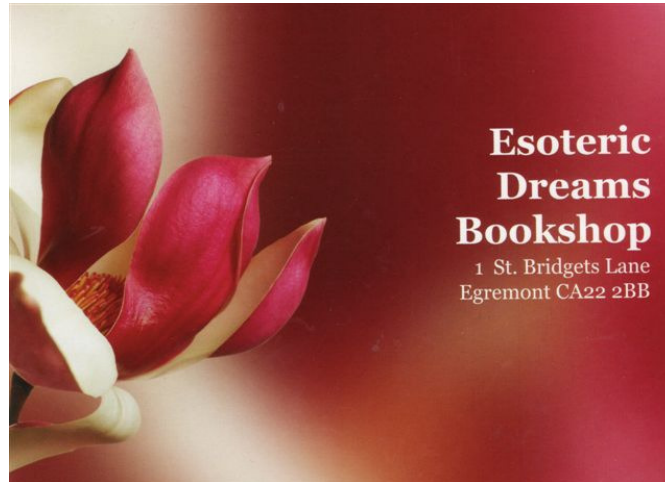


I first came across the English Charles Williams (a friend of Dorothy L. Sayers) when asked to assess, for a posh American literary magazine, his work as a reviewer of crime novels for the *Westminster Chronicle* and *Daily Mail* during the so-called Golden Age. Until now, though, I had never even seen one of his novels, so thank you very much, Melvyn.

A collector for some fifty years, as well as the author of *Best Detective Fiction* (1975) and *Murder In Print* 1986), Melvyn has over 3,000 books he is now willing to sell to good homes. Many are first editions and vary from a slightly imperfect copy of Margery Allingham's *Black Plumes* (1940) at £300 to *New Crimes 3* edited by Maxim Jakubowski in 1991 for £10.

Melvyn is producing a comprehensive stock list and can be contacted on [Melvyn.barnes@oldnewton.com](mailto:Melvyn.barnes@oldnewton.com).

If buying books by mail order is too much hassle, why not simply buy your own bookshop?

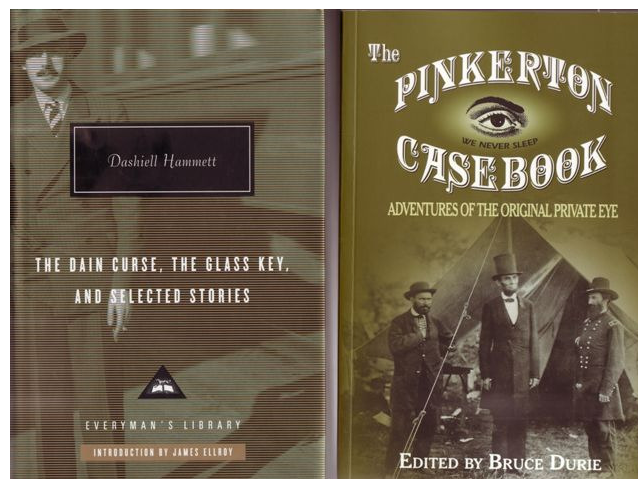


Those wonderful people at the Esoteric Dreams Bookshop in the beautiful Lake District have decided to sell up and are offering an award-winning freehold bookshop, a 4-bedroom house *and* a 2-bedroom flat in Egremont, Cumbria, which is in what is known locally as the (Reginald) Hill Country.

Unbelievably, the whole package seems to be on sale for £195,000, less than the standard advance for some of our more successful crime writers, but further details can be found on [www.BusinessesForSale.com](http://www.BusinessesForSale.com) or via Sue Wright on [suewright2000@btinternet.com](mailto:suewright2000@btinternet.com).

### I spy with a private eye

With one of those curious coincidences usually only found in crime fiction, a pair of Pinkertons came through the doors of Ripster Hall the other day. Not in the flesh, you understand; merely in print.



*The Pinkerton Casebook*, published by those wonderfully inventive people at Mercat Press up in Scotland, is described as “the adventures of the original private eye” and, ostensibly, these case-histories were written by Allan Pinkerton himself. A Glaswegian immigrant to Canada and then the US, Pinkerton made his name as a railroad detective and spy (for the Union during the Civil War). Later, his agency achieved notoriety for, among other things, its infiltration of trades unions and strike-breaking activities.

These stories, whether written or dictated by Pinkerton himself, were published in the 1870s and became the pulp fiction of their day and what they lack in style they make up for in historical authenticity.

There is a rather thick-eared introduction by the editor, Bruce Durie, who claims that the writing style is one which echoes *down through Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade to James Elmore*. (Presumably ‘James Elmore’ is a fictional detective created by someone called Ellroy Leonard????)

Mr Durie also admits to finding it “funny” that Pinkerton, a stroke survivor, died “at the grand not-too-old age of sixty-five” from an infection after he bit his own tongue after slipping on the sidewalk. He also ends his Introduction by quoting, incongruously, “Here’s looking at you kid”. Surely, a case of right actor, but wrong hero?

Far more worthwhile and an absolute must for anyone yet to discover him (there may be a few lost souls out there), is a beautifully produced collection of key works by **Dashiell Hammett** in the Everyman’s Library edition, which comes in the UK via those smashing pumpkins at Random House for the ludicrously low price of £12.99.

For that, you get the novels *The Dain Curse* and *The Glass Key*, plus the classic short stories *The House in Turk Street* and *The Big Knockover*, plus the lesser known *The Girl With Silver Eyes* and *\$106,000 Blood Money*, plus (yes, there’s more) an absolutely stunning Introduction by the one and only James Ellroy.

In real life, Hammett actually was a Pinkerton’s detective in the 1920s, as any fule do kno. He may not have been as good a detective (or businessman) as Allan Pinkerton, but by God he was a better writer!

Pip! Pip!  
The Ripster