

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Parties ON

This season's round of publishing parties began in the shadow of Big Ben with a wonderful launch for the wonderful *Murdering Americans* by the wonderful Ruth Dudley Edwards.



Oddly, no one from Ruth's new publishers (Poisoned Pen Press) attended the party in deepest Westminster and poor Ruth had to rely on a conveniently present lawyer and a passing Noble Lord to make the obligatory speeches, both being joyfully received by the assembled *glitterati* of the crime world, which included Lindsey Davis, Clare Francis, Francis Fyfield, uber-agent Jane Gregory and the Master of St Heffer's College Cambridge, Richard Reynolds.

Martina Cole, at the launch of her best-seller *Faces* (actually an official best-seller even before the first cork popped), on the other hand had to stand stoically as her publisher (Headline) sang her praises and sales figures, sparing her no blushes. To her everlasting credit, once handed the microphone, Martina refrained from bursting into “My Way” and made one of the most inspiring and crowd-pleasing speeches I have ever heard. She urged her audience of devoted fans gathered in one of the West End’s swankiest night clubs to get a drink in as “Tim’s paying”.



Judging by the number of television producers and scriptwriters present at the party, I suspect that more small-screen adaptations for Martina’s outrageously popular novels (which are often imitated but never surpassed) are in the offing.

And then it was to a discrete private members’ club off The Strand (no, not the sort of private club you would find in a Maxim Jakubowski novel) to celebrate the publication of James Twining’s latest arty thriller *The Gilded Seal* from those truly scrumptious people at HarperCollins.

I say “arty” thriller not in a disparaging way at all, as James’ thrillers are about art and his hero, Tom Kirk, is actually a reformed (?) art thief. In a quiet moment at the party, James confided to me that he was recently returned from Rome where he had been making an extensive study of the works of Caravaggio. I was unable to discover if this was a hint to the plot of a future novel for it was then that James’ ridiculously youthful editor Wayne Brookes (surely the Peter Pan of publishing) started the speeches, which were polite, generous and mercifully brief.



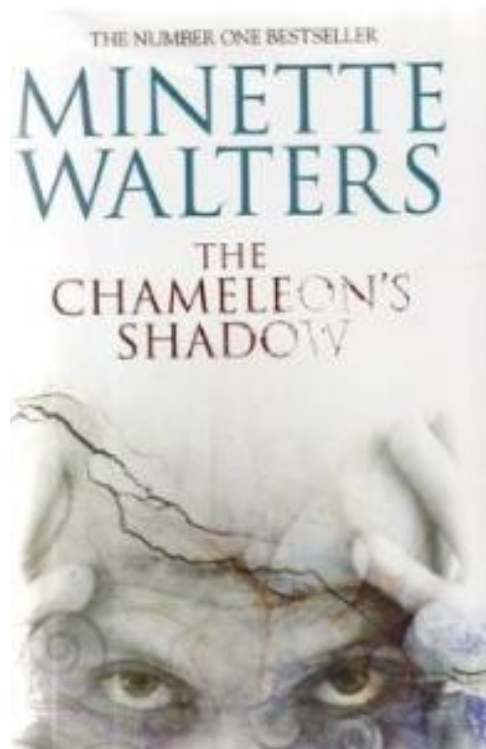
One party I was sadly unable to attend was held in the *Institut Francais* in swankiest South Kensington, following the lecture by Professor Barry Forshaw on “Gallic crime from Napoleon to Fin de Siecle Paris”. An ardent Francophile, Barry is of course best known for his iconic reference work *Le Guide Degolas des Romans Policiers*.

That was surely the one occasion when no one could have complained about the length of the speeches, for it is always a pleasure to hear Professor Forshaw declaiming in his charmingly fluent Breton-accented French.

The Postmortem Man Always Rings Twice

I always fear for my friends who are successful authors when they have a new book out, for as if the constant round of parties, bookshop signings and radio interviews was not enough, they tend to be ruthlessly pursued by specialist book dealers seeking signed first editions for their customers.

A case in point is almost certainly my old and distinguished friend Minette Walters, whose latest and most excellent chiller, *The Chameleon's Shadow*, is rightly doing gangbuster business for her publisher Macmillan.



I happen to know that Ms Walters is currently in hiding in the far West Country, in a fortified and well-defended stone cottage, attempting to avoid the attention of possibly the most infamous of these specialist dealers, Ralph “Postmortem Man” Spurrier.

From his high-tech bunker in the southern home counties, Ralph Spurrier tenaciously tracks new books from popular crime writers, then hunts down their authors and forces them, often at gunpoint, to sign first editions of their new books. Needless to say, of course, he has rarely troubled me, but I was once witness to his relentless pursuit of Minette Walters on the publication of one of her earlier best-sellers.

Using satellite tracking devices, he located the helpless Ms Walters in rural Sussex and ruthlessly chased her across field and through hedge in his specially-equipped armoured Humvee (cunningly disguised as a Volvo). Tired, thirsty and exhausted, the poor author had to submit to Spurrier’s demands to sign first editions of her new book, whereupon he produced several crates of the book in question and a variety of multi-coloured pens.



My photograph, taken secretly, shows The Postmortem Man in action, refusing to allow Minette Walters out of his Humvee until writer's cramp claimed her.

Further exploits of The Postmortem Man can be found on his scurrilous website www.postmortembooks.com .

In Like Flint

I realise that I may have put the legendary Curse of the Ripsters (commonly known as the Dead Award Walking) on my good friend Ariana Franklin by telling anyone who would stop and listen (as well as some passers-by who had to be forcibly restrained) the her marvellous medieval Cambridge mystery *Mistress of the Art of Death* was surely the hot favourite for the Ellis Peters Award in November.

My factotum Waldo has reminded me (yet again) that as one of the few writers to be actually disqualified from this Award, I have no qualifications whatsoever to gauge what will or will not win. And Waldo also reminds me that with literary awards, as with horse races, I could not tip more rubbish with a JCB.

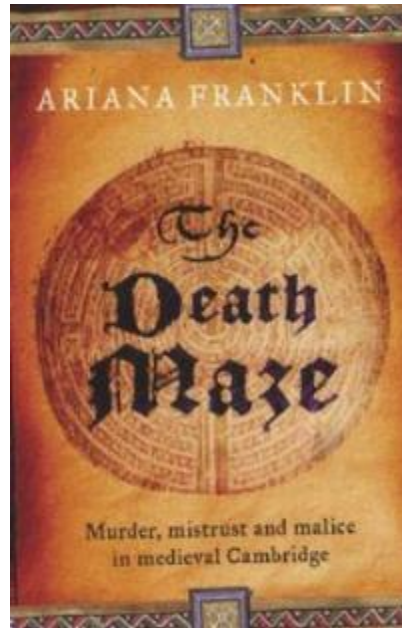


So I am delighted to say that Ariana has *already* won a major award for her splendid historical novel. She is pictured above hearing the news that she has won the coveted Flint Axe Award from a very distinguished group of Swedish connoisseurs of historical mysteries, whose actual name escapes me for the moment.

I am still looking forward to the Ellis Peters Award ceremony, one of the highlights of the crime fiction social calendar, and should the *Curse of the Ripsters* come true (again) and Ariana does not win, I would remind the judges that in her handbag she is carrying a Swedish Flint Axe.

Ariana has a particular claim to fame in crime writing in that as a *very* young cub reporter (having lied about her age and bunked off school to get the job), she was one of the last British journalists to interview Raymond Chandler on what turned out to be his farewell visit to London in 1959. Sadly, as the interview took place in a bar, much of the substance is lost to posterity.

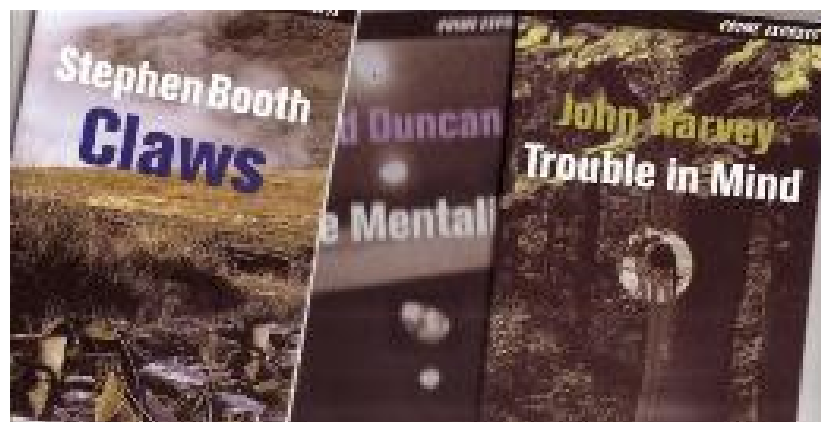
Fortunately, her next novel, *The Death Maze*, is not and will be superbly published by those graceful people at Bantam in May 2008.



Crime Express

Ian Rankin's "farewell" to Inspector Rebus in *Exit Music* from Orion in September, otherwise known as *Rebus: The Last Ten Days*, ends with the retirement of his hero and not a death, despite the deliciously clever irony in the last pages. On finishing this most excellent addition to the Rebus canon, I said to myself that 'we haven't seen the last of that fella.'

I remember saying something similar a few years ago when reading the last Charlie Resnick novel by John Harvey and, lo and behold, Detective Inspector Resnick makes a cameo appearance in John's new novella *Trouble In Mind* published in the new Crime Express series from Five Leaves Publications of Nottingham.



John's novella is the first (and shortest!) of the three titles which launch the imprint, the others being Stephen Booth's *Claws* (featuring Ben Cooper) and Leicester-based Rod Duncan with *The Mentalist*. At £4.99

each, these essentially extended short stories may not give you as many bangs-per-buck as a £6.99 paperback but they may well tap in to the “time poor, quick read” culture and introduce new readers to these authors, all of whom work much better when allowed more room to manoeuvre.

As in, for example, *Cold In Hand*, the next full length novel by John Harvey, to be published by those smashing pumpkins at William Heinemann in February 2008, which happens to feature a cameo appearance by ...er... Detective Inspector Charlie Resnick.

Is it just me?

The latest James Lee Burke novel, *The Tin Roof Blowdown*, from those usually reliable people at Orion, is of course very good and finds that whiskey priest of American crime fiction Dave Robicheaux ruminating on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

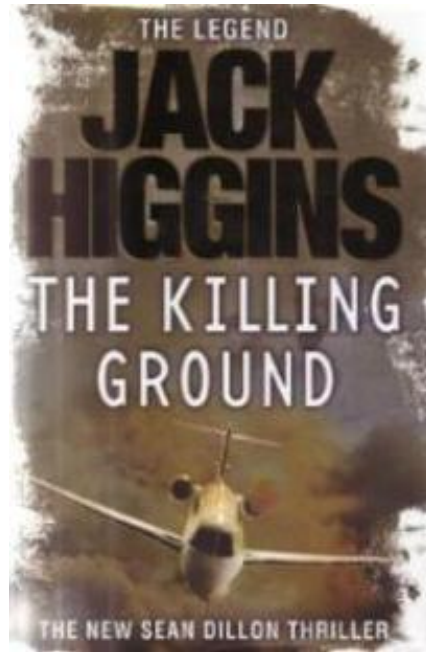
On a couple of occasions he also ruminates on American serial killers, citing the infamous John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy and somebody called simply “BTK”.

Now I know I lead a sheltered existence out here at Ripster Hall, but I have to admit I had never heard of “BTK” and for a while actually thought this a misprint for a type of American sandwich.

I discover that “BTK” stands for Blind, Torture and Kill, which was the *modus operandi* of murderer Dennis Lynn Rader, convicted in 2005 in somewhere called Kansas. I would have thought Lee Burke’s British editor might have questioned this unexplained reference (which occurs more than once) as I do not believe the BTK case to be common currency in the UK. But then, I do not keep up with such things and perhaps it’s just me.

The 65th Novel Has Landed

I was quietly astonished to discover that the new Jack Higgins thriller *The Killing Ground* (from those charming folk at HarperCollins) was his 65th novel in what must be his fifth decade as a best-seller.



Jack Higgins, I believe, began his writing career in 1962 under the pen-name Martin Fallon. He has since used the names Hugh Marlowe and James Graham as well as his real one: Harry Patterson.

Although he is best known for *The Eagle Has Landed* in 1975, I also rank two of his earlier (much under-rated) novels among my favourites: *A Prayer For the Dying* (1973) and (as James Graham in 1970) *A Game For Heroes*, an outstanding wartime adventure set on the invented Channel Island of St Pierre.

Obviously smitten with the Channel Islands (and who wouldn't be?), Jack/Martin/Hugh/James/Harry made his home on Jersey where, or so legend has it, he could be found most evenings in his favourite Italian restaurant writing the next novel in longhand at his table whilst waiting for his pasta. Now is that the ideal life for a thriller writer or what? And I haven't even mentioned the cheap booze and cigarettes, low taxes, the beaches and the climate.

Jealous? Me? You bet.

Advance Apologies

Not long ago I had to apologise unreservedly for woefully *under-*estimating the amount of novels produced in 2007 by that American fiction factory, James Patterson.

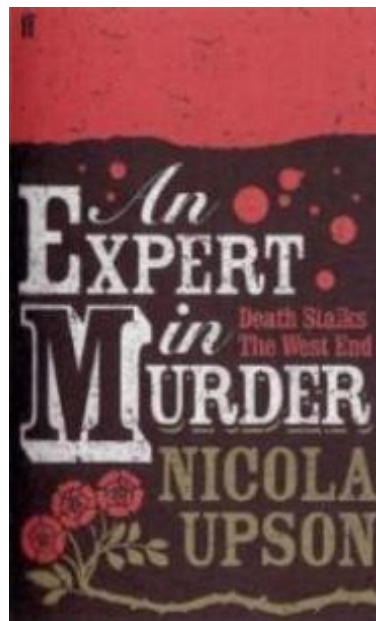
I will therefore get my apologies in first to his new UK publisher Century who have announced five new Patterson titles for the period February to July 2008. They are: *7th Heaven* (a thriller), *The Final Warning* (young adult adventure), *Sundays At Tiffany's* (romance), *Jack X* (new series with superpower hero and aliens) and *Sail* with Howard Roughan (described as a “sensational summer thriller”).

I am certain this list will have to be updated any day now. (And I haven't even mentioned the forthcoming *Alex Cross Omnibus* being published by Patterson's former UK publisher Headline in March.) So, sorry about that.

The Tey Franchise

More talent from the wilds of East Anglia comes in the shape of Nicola Upson who will be making, I predict, quite a splash in 2008 with the publication, from those clever people at Faber & Faber of *An Expert In Murder*, which I believe to be a debut novel.

Not only does Ms Upson have impeccable regional connections, being born in Suffolk and educated in Cambridge, but she has hit on the wizard wheeze of using one of the best-loved British writers of crime fiction, Josephine Tey, as a detective.



Josephine Tey was one of the pseudonyms used by playwright and novelist Elizabeth Mackintosh (another was Gordon Daviot), and is best

remembered for *The Franchise Affair* of 1948 and *The Daughter of Time* (1951) which regularly features on everyone's "Top Ten" list.

Fittingly, *An Expert In Murder* is set in 1934 as Tey is celebrating the success of her West End theatrical hit *Richard of Bordeaux*. Might we see a murder in the queue for tickets? I await publication (March 2008) with interest.

The Good Old Days

Those terribly modest people at Robert Hale published in September what I believe is a first crime novel, *Death and Deception* by 77-year-old Ray Alan. The Autumn Hale catalogue reveals that Ray Alan "holds the record for the greatest number of appearances of any guest artistes on BBC TV's *The Good Old Days*". For the younger reader I should explain that this was once a popular television programme in the 'light entertainment' tradition and, cynics would say, absolute proof of why 'Variety' and the Music Hall finally died.

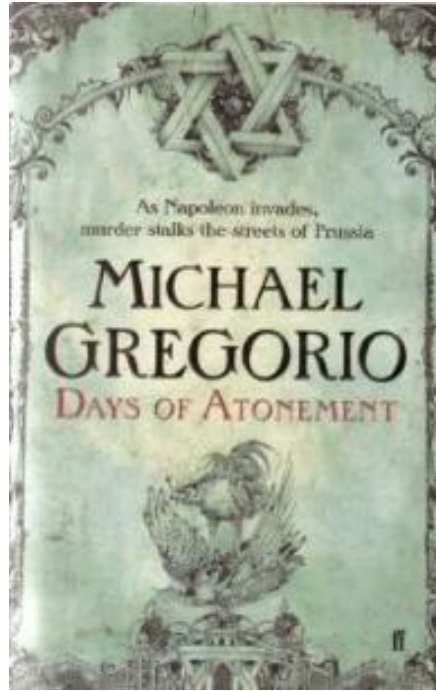
Could this be the same Ray Alan who, as a ventriloquist with his sly alter ego Lord Charles, was just about the only thing worth watching on the show back in those rose-tinted days? I think we should be told so we can open a gottle of geer in celebration.

A Big War Made to Order

The British have always been fascinated by the Napoleonic Wars, from Hornblower to Sharpe to Sir Winston Churchill's instructions that his funeral cortege should depart from Waterloo Station just to annoy the French!

There have been numerous crime novels/thrillers set in the period and today it seems to be more popular than ever.

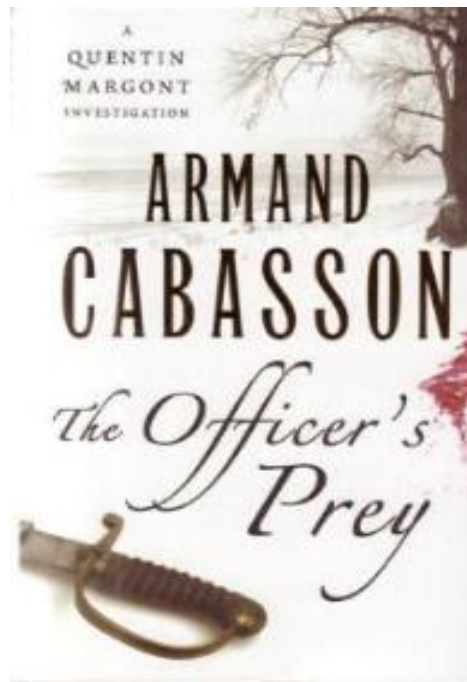
Most notable is Michael Gregorio's *Days of Atonement* from those frightfully clever people at Faber, which is the follow-up to his best-selling *Critique of Criminal Reason*. Or should I say "their" best-seller because the author is in fact the husband and wife writing team of Michael Jacob and Daniela De Gregorio, who cannot possibly be accused of "dumbing down" in any shape or form as the book seems immaculately researched.



The setting is French-occupied East Prussia and the detective hero, magistrate Hanno Stiffeniis, is a devoted student of the philosopher Immanuel Kant (familiar to many, sadly, only as one of the list of drunken philosophers in the famous Monty Python song.)

Whilst Napoleon's occupation of East Prussia may be unfamiliar territory to British readers, his invasion of Russia and the retreat from Moscow in 1812 is well-known.

The attack on Russia by the Grande Armee is the setting chosen for *The Officer's Prey* by French author and psychiatrist (and member of the Napoleonic Society), Armand Cabasson, whose novel is brought to the UK by those *jolie* people at Gallic Books.



As the French army gears up for its invasion, someone is savagely murdering civilian women and that someone is almost certainly a high-ranking French officer. Another officer, Captain Quentin Margont, is detailed to investigate and follow the trail of murders at the way to Moscow – and back. There are shades of *Night of the Generals* here and whilst not quite in the same league as a thriller, there's more than enough action to satisfy the hungriest military history buff.

Schedule Wars

Owing to a clash of scheduling, I was unable to catch the ITV adaptation of that splendid, Silver Dagger winning novel *Half Broken Things* written by the vivacious and highly talented Morag Joss in 2003.

The film starred Penelope Wilton, who by one of those twists of pub trivia, was given her television “break” back in 1972 in a one-off drama titled *An Affair of Honour* written by none other than Reginald Hill. I am told by those who saw it that it was very good – certainly the book was excellent and I believe that Morag has a new novel coming out in February 2008 called *The Night Following* although sadly I have no further details.

The reason I missed the film was due to the fact that its broadcast not only clashed with Michael Palin's *New Europe* series (and Waldo insists on watching that in case he spots a distant relative in the background), but also with a Johnny Depp film (which many of the understairs servants

clamoured to see) *and* the final episode of *The Sopranos*, which is Lady Ripster's favourite television programme EVER.

If only there was some sort of machine which could somehow record such televisual delights and then allow one to watch them at one's leisure.

By nature, of course, I am a wireless man and am delighted to report that Simon Brett's Charles Paris stories are currently gracing the airwaves of the BBC, with Bill Nighy ideally cast in the main role.

Robert of Arabia

It was back in the last century (1999 to be precise) that tousle-headed Scouser Rob Ryan burst on the scene with a series of hard-boiled, semi-surreal crime novels such as *Underdogs*, *Trans Am* and *Nine Mil*, all set in America.

In recent years, he has turned from the dark side and into the sunlit uplands of historical thrillers, many set during the Second World War. This has, naturally, resulted in his having to dispense with the rather laddish "Rob Ryan" and adopt the more formal name of Robert Ryan. Whether he was named in honour of that famous actor (never better than when playing the 'heavy' and quite superb in *Bad Day At Black Rock*), I do not know but it cannot be coincidence that a blatant reference to the film *The Professionals* (Lee Marvin, Burt Lancaster, Woody Strode and, of course, Robert Ryan) occurs in his forthcoming novel *Empire Of Sand* brought to us in January from those thrill-seekers at Headline Review.

This will be Robert's first novel to be set in the First World War during the 1915 Arab Revolt desert campaign, and I have to report that the author, who normally scrubs up quite well in public, is taking his research seriously and for the publicity tour for the book will adopt full Arab dress of the period, as I can exclusively reveal here:



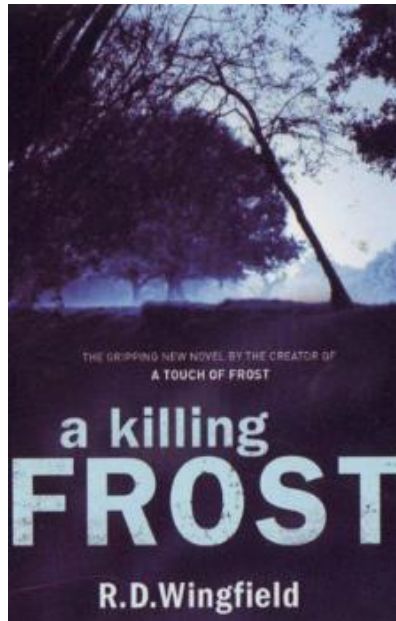
Oh, James...

In one of those ice-cold-back-of-the-neck moments, I was reading that the vivacious and multi-talented Samantha Weinberg, writing under her secret service alias, Kate Westbrook, has produced *Final Fling*, the latest volume in the ‘Miss Money Penny Diaries’, when the mellifluous voice of Roger Moore, a former 007, on the wireless told me that Lois Maxwell, the original celluloid Money Penny, had just died.

Final Fling seems therefore a sadly apt title, and even though the excellent Samantha Bond has reprised the film role in recent years, the Lois Maxwell interpretation still strikes a chord with gentlemen of a certain age who preferred their office environments to be strictly and firmly controlled. The book appears in May 2008 from those utterly super people at John Murray.

A Final Frost

The long-awaited, and sadly posthumous, Inspector Frost novel, *A Killing Frost* is to appear courtesy of Bantam publishers in April, ending a nine-year wait for fans of the detective labelled a cross “between Rumpole and Columbo”.



Inexplicably ignored by the established crime writing awards over the years, I do hope that since the sad death of Rodney Wingfield earlier this year, someone makes a note of the fact that 2008 will be the last year in which amends might be made.

Garden Detectives

My factotum Waldo, who is strangely addicted to something called “Sky Three”, was terribly excited the other day see an advertisement for a thrilling new series entitled *The Great Garden Detectives*.

He was badly disappointed to discover that this was not a tribute to those dynamic detectives Rosemary Boxer and Laura Thyme, who fight crime as well as greenfly in the hit TV show which bears their name.

But Waldo need not fear for *Rosemary and Thyme* will continue to grace the small screen as long as gardens, murder and Felicity Kendal’s bottom all continue to hold a place in English hearts. In the course of several series, the show has made use, on occasion, of the talents of several crime writers including Simon Brett and Rebecca Tope, but there has been an *eminence gris* behind the scenes from the start as Story Consultant: the mild-mannered, multi-award winning Peter Lovesey.

Apologies and Corrections

I have been reminded, in no uncertain terms, that I have failed miserably to mention that my old and distinguished friend Andrew Vachss has a new book out in America, *Terminal* from Pantheon Books, which is no less than the 17th instalment in his ground-breaking series featuring Burke, the ultimate, (very) Dark Knight and supreme urban warrior.



As I would hate to get on the wrong side of Andrew, or any of his pets, I hope I have made amends by mentioning *Terminal* even though I can uncover no plans to publish in this country, which is sad, for *Terminal* will surely be required reading for those of us who had our socks well and truly knocked off when Burke first appeared in *Flood* over here in 1986.

That Andy (or ‘Andrew H. Vachss’ as he was billed then) was a unique voice in crime fiction was obvious from the start and the alternate New York in which Burke, part crook, part private eye, plies his trade is an awesomely raw, depraved creation.

There is simply nothing like the Burke books anywhere else in crime fiction and it amazed me that his contribution to the genre was completely over looked by the recent *Rough Guide to Crime Fiction* (which I had nothing to do with, Andy.)

Hopefully, *Terminal* will encourage old fans like me and vast numbers of the younger generation to get on the jolly old interweb and order the book from the Amazon (which is mostly in Brazil and an odd place, to me, for a bookshop).

Did I mention that Andrew Vachss has a new book out? It’s called *Terminal*.

Ripping Yarns (Again)

I hear that *Knife Point*, a debut novel by one Lyndsay Faye has been bought by Simon & Schuster in America. The plot, it is said, details the hunt by Sherlock Holmes for Jack the Ripper “in London in 1888”. (So it’s good to know it’s *that* Ripper we’re talking about.)

I am curious to see how the book, still some way off publication, matches up to Ellery Queen’s 1966 classic *A Study In Terror*, which is about Sherlock Holmes on the trail of...er...Jack the Ripper. Or indeed that marvellous, and thoroughly disrespectful pastiche of 1978, *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* by Michael Dibdin.

Shopping At Iceland

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that Arnaldur Indridason is the most well-known Icelandic crime-writer south of the Faroe Islands.

His debut (in English) novel, *Jar City*, appeared here in 2004 and the author has not only gone on to be a multiple award-winner but has seen his novel made into a film which will be the official Icelandic entry in the Best Foreign Film category at the 2008 Oscars.

But Arnaldur is now not the only Icelandic crime writer I can name, for Yrsa Sigurdardottir is the other one.



Ms Sigurdardottir is already known in her native land for her children’s books but in January those cheerful people at Hodder and Stoughton publish *Last Ritual*, her debut crime novel.

Big new Macs

Macmillan New Writing is a relatively new venture best described as an electronic slush pile. Unknown or unpublished authors (not necessarily the same thing!) are encouraged to submit full length novels by email, which is exactly the opposite of the way the majority of publishers and agents work.

A successful submission gets no advance but, I am told, “generous” royalties if their book sells. Unlike the hordes of vanity publishers out there, however, the author doesn’t have to pay anything.

The early results of this experiment have now resulted in a brace of thrillers which couldn’t be more different.



Shock and Awe is a gung-ho action thriller (originally listed as *Smite The Waters*) by American energy consultant David Isaak, whereas *The Herring Seller's Apprentice* is a spoof crime novel by L.C. Tyler, the chief executive of the Royal College of Paediatrics in London.

Herring features a disillusioned crime writer, who writes under various pen-names because his name is Ethelred Tressider (well, you would, wouldn't you?), and of course he has to investigate a murder for which he is initially in the frame and of course falls into that slough of despond which is so often “comedy crime”.

Lacking the surreal savagery of a Malcolm Pryce or a Christopher Brookmyer, L.C. Tyler treads a dangerously twee and cosy path, which may well work for many readers. For me, though, the problem is a common one when writers (especially crime writers) write about writing,

in that punches tend to be pulled. Having said that, Tyler's writer hero does have a magnificently awful agent and one has to remember that this is his first novel, though he did win an Ian St James (remember him?) Award for a short story back in 1993.

Round about book number five or six he should have built up a good head of cynicism and the barely contained frustration which are invaluable assets to the comic crime writer.

<p style="text-align: center;">Is there a copy editor in the house?</p>
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When she reviewed detective stories for *The Sunday Times* in the 1930s, Dorothy L. Sayers would pick out, sometimes rather cruelly, examples of "The Week's Worst English" whenever she detected a fall in the standard of grammar. (She also once highlighted "The Week's Worst Latin" but I think she was just showing off.)

Now I don't presume to her high standards and am quite laid back when it comes to attempts at slang, dialect or downright effing and blinding, but some things do jump out and hit me.

In her debut thriller *Lullaby*, published by Avon, Claire Seeber seems to have a peculiar affinity with the word *cos*, which I always thought was a type of crispy lettuce (from the Greek *Kos*). She means, of course, the shortened version of the word *because* which is commonly rendered, at least in English, as 'cos with an all-important apostrophe.

One such slip could be easily forgiven, but Ms Seeber uses her word *cos* at least three times in the first 75 pages, including this piece of dialogue on page 73: "Are you sure? Cos you really need to chill out with that copper."

Perhaps this is an example of what is commonly referred to as *texting* and which is, I am told, strangely popular with young people.

For myself, I prefer to stick to the old maxim: No Text Please, We're British!

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster.