

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Murder Most Famous

I was delighted to be asked to take part (albeit briefly on the last day of filming), along with Macmillan editrix supreme, Maria Rejt, in *Murder Most Famous* which was shown on BBC2 in the week of World Book Day as part of BBC Learning's RAW (Reading and Writing) campaign aimed at adults with literacy problems.



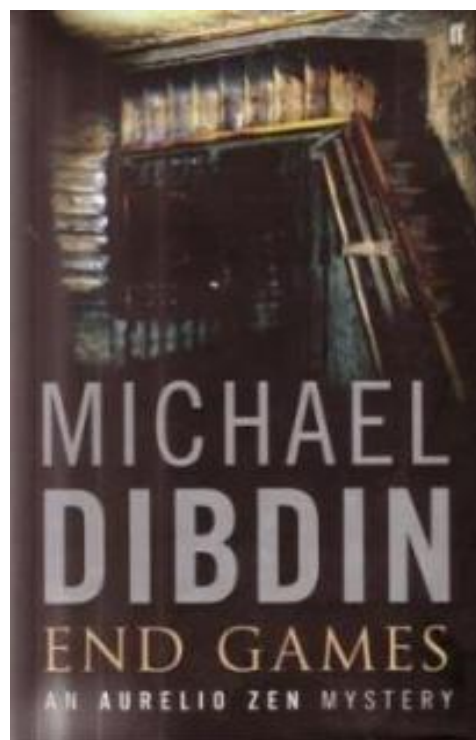
The series took the popular format of the celebrity knock-out reality show, but with added violence under the ruthless direction of crime writer Minette Walters at her very, very strictest. Based on the premise "I'm A Celebrity, Write Me Out Of Here", six 'celebs' (all virgins when it came to creative writing) took over a classic country house in darkest Surrey for a crash course in police work, forensics and crime writing, the six suspects being whittled down (and quite brutally despatched by Mrs Walters) until only one aspiring writer was left and that winner will now write a *Quickread* novel to be published for World Book Day 2009.

It was refreshing indeed to see the *process* of writing on the small screen for once and especially presented in such an entertaining way (some of the ‘celebs’ being really put through it!). Oddly, considering the amount of murder and mayhem discussed, this was a quite charmingly unthreatening way to engage its target audience.

Doing his bit for the RAW initiative with BBC Radio Scotland last month, was the talented Christopher Brookmyre who, on a school visit gave the following advice to would-be writers on what constituted the ideal crime novel: “Intrigue, mystery, usually some kind of suspense, violence and, in my case, usually something totally inappropriate.” You said it, Chris.

Posthumous

I am informed that my late friend Michael Dibdin’s last book, the poignantly titled *End Games* (Faber) is in contention for a Hammett Award from the North American branch of the International Association of Crime Writers at the Bloody Words conference to be held in Toronto in June.



Sadly, *End Games* will be the only Dibdin novel in my library not to be signed by the author. My most treasured inscription (which I shall not explain), dating back to 1991 in *Dirt Tricks*, reads: *To Mike, the real*

Sybilla. From one bullshitter to another with love, Michael Dibdin (Stale Blood).

Should he win, it will be a fine coda to the career of Inspector Aurelio Zen who is, like Michael, sorely missed.

Happy New Year

With immaculate timing I was preparing to travel many miles to the east (Ipswich) in order to celebrate the New Year with some Chinese friends, when the postman delivered a very pleasing present from those perky publishers at Picador.

I humbly admit to being disgracefully ignorant of the fact that there is now a fictional female private eye (the first ever?) operating in modern Beijing, the creation of Diane Wei Ling, who was born in Beijing but now lives in London.



The detective in question is Mei Wang and her first case *The Eye of Jade* comes out in paperback this month, followed in May by a new novel, *Paper Butterfly*.

The accompanying publicity material assures me that someone called “the BBC’s” Mark Coles has compared Diane Wei Liang’s series with Alexander McCall Smith’s No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency; but if I were Ms Liang, I would try not to worry about that.

The Party Scene Undercover

As I was not invited to the glamorous and sumptuous Orion Authors party this year, I was forced to attend disguised as a member of the catering staff. It is not difficult to infiltrate the casually-employed army of waiters and waitress used by publishers, for they are recruited en masse using nets and white Transit vans from under the Victorian archways of High Holborn.

Sadly my subterfuge did not go unnoticed for long. I did manage to use my hidden camera to snap a quick shot of our esteemed editor Mike “Tombstone” Stotter, looking very smart in the formal, pinstripe dress uniform of crime fiction editors.



But I did not have time to photograph any other guests, the dancing girls, the tumblers and acrobats, nor the groaning tables of lobster, oysters, pates and tropical fruits, nor the waterfalls of champagne, for almost immediately I was approached and recognised by that jovial socialite Prince Ali Karim and his fellow millionaire Duncan Bannatine.



My cover blown, as they say in crime writing circles, I had to beat a hasty retreat and so never managed to meet those Orion star authors such as Ian Rankin, James Lee Burke and his daughter Alafair, who were undoubtedly there somewhere among the throng.

Micro Genre

And speaking of the noble Prince Ali Karim, one of his more recent monographs (for he is an enthusiastic and prolific essayist) makes a cogent argument for the acceptance, within the crime/mystery/thriller field, of what he calls the *micro genre* of “Supernatural Nazi-Bashing Adventure Stories.”

It surely cannot be long before SNBAs are accepted into the critical framework of the genre overall; in fact I fully expect the subject to be discussed at length in the forthcoming magnum opus, Harcourt’s Encyclopaedia of British Crime Writing edited by Professor Barry Forshaw.

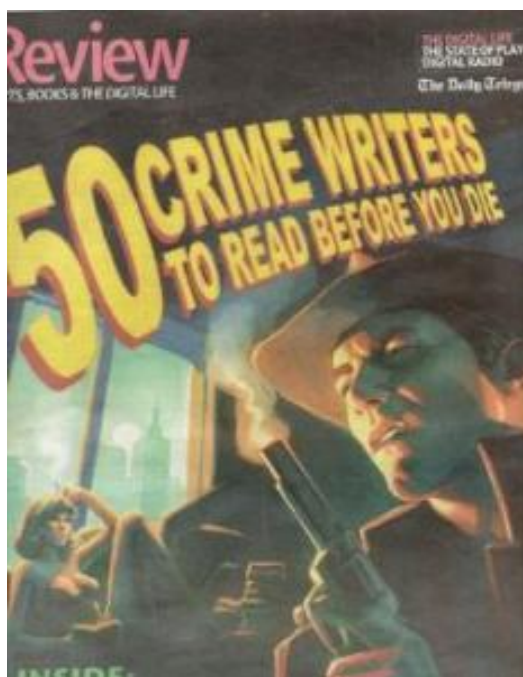
But for the moment, Prince Ali can suggest only two entrants to his new micro genre, both Americans: Robert R. McCammon’s *The Wolf’s Hour* and F. Paul Smith’s *The Keep* (which is indeed a splendidly creepy read and far superior to the disappointing film version). If I may make so bold, I would add a third name to his burgeoning list: Dennis Wheatley, that literary giant whose unforgettable tales of something or other, featuring what-was-his-name and his gang of chums – oh, you know who I mean – were really quite popular once upon a time.

Any other suggestions should be forwarded to Prince Ali direct (c/o Coult's Bank) rather than to myself.

Fifty Ways to Leave Your...

In February the *Daily Telegraph*, that once-great flagship of Her Majesty's Press, had a feature entitled "50 Crime Writers to Read Before You Die" which is described within the article as "our list of the 50 great crime writers of all time".

This in itself was enough to raise my blood pressure into Lottery Number territory and by the time I was halfway through the list, I was reaching for the absinthe. As to be expected from a list compiled by the Telegraph's "literary staff" (who read "proper" novels, not "genre" fiction), there are the usual suspect, but fashionable, names there, though I doubt very much if "Dan Kavanagh" (Julian Barnes) or "Benjamin Black" (John Banville) will be, or would want to be, remembered for their modest contributions to crime fiction.



But with every list, it is not who's on it where the most fun lies, but who has been excluded and this aspect generated some 300 or more complaints on the *Telegraph* website (www.telegraph.co.uk/haveyoursay), many, interestingly enough, from American crime fans and writers, who surprised me by being *Telegraph* readers. They were obviously as incensed as I was at the disgraceful

omission of Ross Macdonald, Rex Stout and John D. MacDonald. I was also sad not to see Francis Iles mentioned if only for his ground-breaking *Malice Aforethought* and *Before the Fact* as well as his books under his own name – and he was the *Telegraph's* crime reviewer for many years.

Yet I must be careful when carping about this particular newspaper for I was myself their crime reviewer for ten years before being ignominiously discharged. I have been reproached (anonymously) on that esteemed electronic organ *The Rap Sheet* for being churlish about this in the past, but I wish to make it clear that I was not “churlish” at the time, I was bloody furious!

I can confidently say, however, that the following would not have happened in my time. In the “list”, when talking of Dorothy L. Sayers, the text reads – and I quote (my italics):

Sayers was responsible, with Agatha Christie, for fixing in the public mind the idea (**demonstrably false**) that women are particularly good at crime writing.

Now that's either a misprint, bad journalism or really rather rude.

Bleedin' Hell

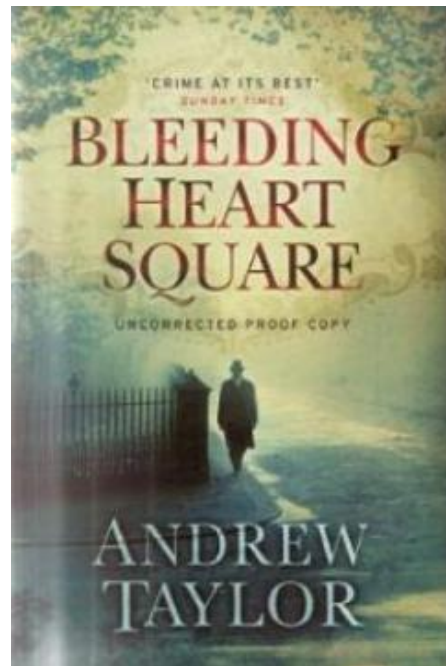
Here in the East of England, the job of postman is an hereditary one, usually passed down from father to suitable son, on completion of ten or more years of indentured service. I myself, for example, have inherited the postman who faithfully served Baroness Ruth Rendell for many years when she had a country house in Suffolk.

I fear for my postman's health these days, for sprightly though he is, he will not see ninety again and the physical burden of delivering daily several hundred review copies and proofs of new crime novels up the long driveway to Ripster Hall is taking its toll. Sudden shocks are therefore to be avoided and I was just in time to resuscitate him the other day when I found him collapsed near the front doors.

He had, as usual, been opening the many parcels I receive from publishers (for he knows I fear paper cuts) and the sight of one in

particular caused him to reel with shock muttering: “Bleedin’ hell, your Lordship, they’ve re-issued *The Exorcist!*”

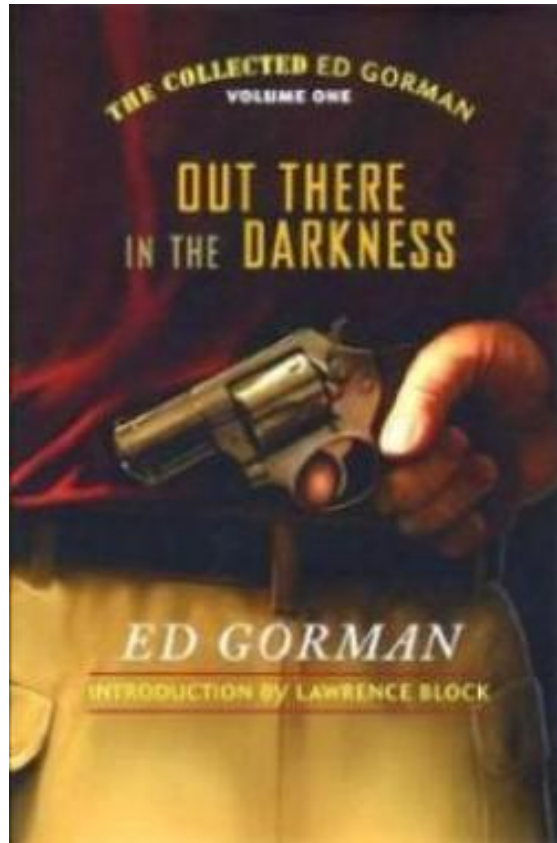
The foolish man had innocently mistaken (at first sight, in the shadow of the Ripster Hall gargoyles) and totally misinterpreted the cover of the latest Andrew Taylor novel *Bleeding Heart Square*, which is published by those gracefully charming people at Penguin in May.



I admit, there is a faint resemblance between the book (a splendidly evocative and sinister mystery set in 1934) and the poster which advertised that famous film, but surely Postie was over-reacting and it took quite a few swigs of brandy (Spanish duty free for him, five star Remy for me) to restore order.

Ed Master

I was delighted to discover that the collected works of that master craftsman and stalwart of the American mystery scene, Ed Gorman, are to be available on this side of the Atlantic where his contribution to the genre is sadly undervalued. But *The Collected Ed Gorman*, volumes 1 (*Out There In The Darkness*) and 2, are now out from PS Publishing, an imprint perhaps better known for science fiction (Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury) and horror (Ramsey Campbell) than for crime.



PS does have more crime on the horizon, though. Not only will 2008 see them publish an Ed Gorman novel, *Cage of Night*, but also *Random Walk* by Lawrence Block and the Stephen Jones biography *Basil Copper: A Life In Books*.

Surfeit of Riches

Is it just me, or has February become the new September when it comes to publishing crime fiction? As a reviewer I always worked on the principle that once publishers and editors had finished their traditional nine-week summer holidays, business resumed with a bang in September with the publication of numerous “big-hitters” getting their books out into trade before the fiction shelves were removed to make way for the annual Delia Smith festival in December,

Nowadays, though, more and more crime fiction seems to be coming out in the first quarter of the year and my bedside table is positively groaning with a backlog of exciting titles waiting to be devoured.

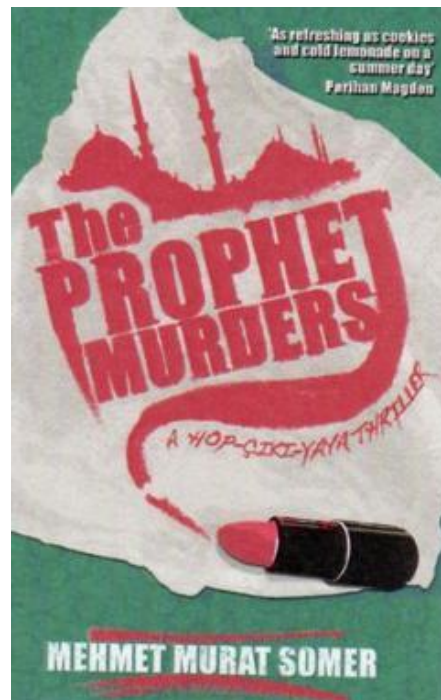
Some have already been greedily consumed: the latest Reginald Hill, the new Robert Barnard, the superb new Bernie Gunther book by Philip Kerr,

the first in an exciting new series from Laura Wilson, the new Clare Francis.

But the problem is then where to start on the yet-to-read pile? Perhaps I should turn to the recommendations of others which are kindly supplied by the publishers. There is, for example, the much praised *Calumet City* by Charles Newton from Transworld, which is “the best cop noir for years”, or so claims thriller-maestro Lee Child. Then, from Headline, comes *Power Play* by Joseph Finder, which offers “terrific writing, brilliant plotting, and suspense at its finest” according to...er...Lee Child. Perhaps I should turn to Lisa Unger’s *Beautiful Lies*, published by Arrow, which is “suspenseful, sensitive, sexy, subtle... the best nail-biter I have read for ages” – or so says Lee Child. Alternatively I could catch up on a title I missed last year which has just appeared as an attractive Hodder paperback, Dreda Say Mitchell’s *Killer Tune*, for this book is “As good as it gets. Mitchell is English fiction’s brightest new voice”, according to – who else? – Lee Child, or go for the new Barry Eisler thriller *Requiem for an Assassin* (from Penguin) because this comes “Highly recommended. Eisler is exactly my kind of writer”; or so Lee Child proclaims.

<p>He’d really like to thank...</p>
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I have been known in the past to take authors to task for the over-elaborate “Acknowledgements” sections of their books, yet it is impossible to criticise an author who enters into the spirit of such a self-indulgent process with as much enthusiasm as Turkish crime writer Mehmet Murat Somer.



Mr Somer writes a series of successful mysteries with, as his hero/heroine, a transvestite nightclub owner and the first to appear in English is *The Prophet Murders*, coming from Serpent's Tail in May.

The author devotes six pages to his “thank you” list, which he openly declares was inspired by over-long Oscar-acceptance speeches and which is as funny and life-enhancing as the actual novel.

After acknowledging his family (as far back as great-grandmother, which is charmingly translated as ‘grand-grandmother’) and friends, his Feng Shui master and hypnotherapist, various workmates and editors, Mehmet then moves on to writers who have inspired him: a list which includes Patricia Highsmith, Truman Capote, Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal and the Marquis de Sade.

Then come a variety of artists, musicians and performers, including Barbara Streisand (“back before she transformed every three-minute song into a five-curtain opera”) and Madonna (“whose songs I’m not wild about, but whose presence seems to me to be a good thing”). And finally he gives two pages of credits to inspirational figures from the film industry, including: Billy Wilder, Lilian Gish, Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn (“of course”), Faye Dunaway (“before she became a caricature of herself”), Dirk Bogarde, Terence Stamp, Franco Nero (“for whose sake I sat through dozens of rotten movies”), Steve Martin and Dennis Hopper, not to forget Mae West and Tallulah Bankhead.

Tough Choice

I understand that two of my favourite ladies who both, for their own safety, live on the other side of the Atlantic from me, are in contention for the prestigious Agatha Award at this year's Malice Domestic convention in April.

Canadian Louise Penny, who combines her writing with a busy career as a lunberjill and distiller of spirits from maple syrup, is short-listed for her novel *A Fatal Grace*. She will be in contention with my favourite American first lady of mystery, Margaret Maron (who also farms pink flamingos on the plains outside Raleigh, North Carolina) and her excellent Judge Deborah Knott mystery *Hard Row*.

It will be a tough choice for whoever has to award the Agatha and I will therefore be sending twice the normal amount of bribes to the convention, as I am not, of course, able to attend myself following the ruling of those charming people at Homeland Security.

Mills and Swoon

It is reported that those legendary publishers of romantic fiction, Mills and Boon, are to venture into crime fiction. Why do I get a feeling of *Déjà vu* about this story?

I had always thought that, perhaps mistakenly, that the legendary Keyhole Crime imprint from the 1980s was part of Mills & Boon, and I am indebted to Keyhole paperback editions for introducing me to the works of Simon Brett, Lawrence Sanders, Margaret Millar, Sheila Radley, W.J. Burley, Robert B. Parker and Charlotte Armstrong, among many others.

In more recent times I was under the distinct impression, perhaps wrongly, that MIRA books, who have published some very good thrillers, was also a part of the Mills & Boon empire.

But I am old and confused and cannot pretend to keep up with the razor-sharp minds at the cutting edge of the publishing business and so I will look forward eagerly to the launch of the new imprint, Black Star Crime, which plans to publish five crime titles every two months and is not to be

confused with the Black Lace imprint, whose many volumes grace my bookshelves.

A Mills & Boon spokesman, quoted on the jolly old interweb, is reported to have said: “The idea is that if people find something they like they can go back and find something similar.” This is a sound principle and one which many of us writers have followed for years.

Under Orion’s Belt

Having been declared *persona non grata* by publishing giant Orion (though for reasons which escape me), it was therefore something of a challenge to attend, again undercover, the launch party for Laura Wilson’s totally splendid new novel *Stratton’s War*, which I had learned was to be held in something called a “Waterstone’s” in London.

As it was a fine February evening, I strolled the length of the famous City Road, taking in its sights and smells, until I found myself in the lush pastures of Islington Green. Various street urchins and bootblacks along the route had urged me, good-naturedly, to take the “Northern Line, Guv”, but I am too long in the tooth to fall for the tricks and japes of wily Cockney scamps. I first heard the urban legends about the mythical, underground “Northern” line back in the 1930s when the rumour was deliberately spread by the government to conceal the fact that what was actually being constructed was a luxury air-raid shelter to be reserved for the exclusive use of writers and artists living in Islington, as the war clouds gathered over Europe.

Arriving fashionably late, I discovered that a “Waterstone’s” is in fact some sort of bookshop, but there was no doubt I was in the right place for there, thronging the spaces between the shelf racks, were the great and good of British crime writing, including *uber*-agent Jane Gregory who greeted me warmly by the throat.



In the heaving crowd I spotted: Professor Barry Forshaw, recently-appointed Literary Fellow Sven Martyn-Waites, and even Mr Peter Guttridge on a rare return to his native land (for he has now retired to his private vineyards in the south of France). All, for once, were behaving impeccably as Ms Wilson treated us to a reading from her new novel.



Such was the convivial mood of the party that I forgot myself for a moment and idled over to a makeshift, but charmingly rustic, bar serving the choicest of wines (though not, I noted, any *Chateau Pierre d'*

Guttridge). I must have let my guard slip for I was immediately challenged by one of the many ruthlessly efficient security guards employed by Orion.



Flashing her credentials (in the disarmingly innocent name of “Martha”) the guard correctly identified me and even showed a working knowledge of some of my early scribblings in the field of fiction. Although polite and charming at all times, I know full well that Orion’s deceptively young and attractive security force is well-trained in the major martial arts and so to prevent any unpleasantness, I made my excuses and left.

New Noir

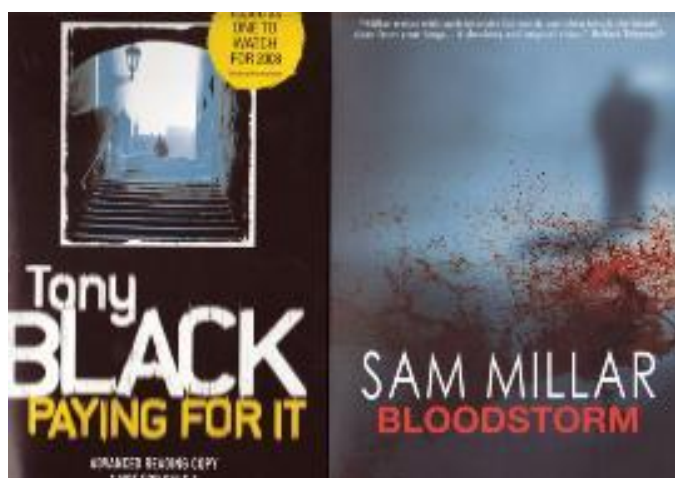
There was a time when London was just about the only setting for British *noir*-flavoured crime fiction, though in recent years the most noirish writing has migrated north to Scotland or west, across the sea to Ireland.

An author new to me who comes highly recommended (though, oddly, not by Lee Child) is Ulsterman Sam Millar, whose new thriller *Bloodstorm*, featuring Belfast private eye Karl Kane is out now from the small, but perfectly formed Irish publisher Brandon. (www.brandonbooks.com)

{I feel I must mention that Brandon will also be publishing, in May, the new novel, *The Dust of Death*, of another Ulsterman, my old mate, and one of the nicest blokes in crime fiction, Paul Charles.}

But it is north of Hadrian’s Wall (surely one of the most prescient pieces of environmental planning ever) where we look for our regular fix of crime *noir* these days. And the new Scottish kid on the block seems to be

Tony Black, a journalist with a first novel, *Paying For It*, to be published in July by new publisher on the block, Preface, which is an offshoot of Random House.



Tony Black’s debut introduces hero Gus Dury, described as “post-Rebus, a tough, washed-up Edinburgh hack with a heart” who is also only one “drink away from Edinburgh’s down-and-outs”.

I bet the Scottish Tourist Board can’t wait.

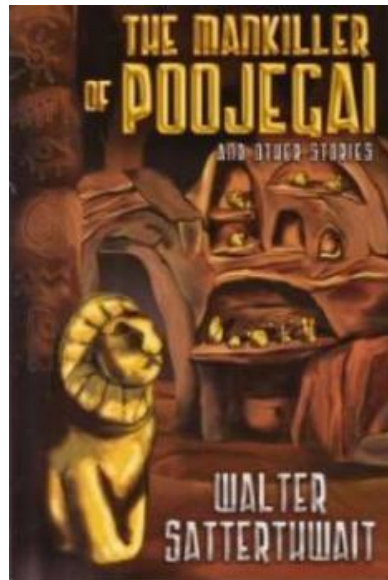
And hot on his heels will come the debut novel of Russel McLean, *The Good Son*, to appear from Nottingham-based publisher Five Leaves this coming winter. Russel McLean’s name should be well-known to anyone who has visited the site Crime Scene Scotland and is known and respected as a fan and reviewer of the genre. His debut novel is a private eye investigation set in contemporary Dundee, which in my day, if memory serves, used to be called Jute City.

Indeed, many years ago there was a BBC thriller series called *Jute City* starring, among others, John Sessions and Douglas Henshall. I remember at the time that I had difficulty following the plot and so to remind myself, I looked up the film on the International Movie Database, only to find the comment: “The plot synopsis section is empty.” I am so relieved. I thought the last of my remaining brain cells had finally jumped ship.

The Satterthwait Collection

I have been inundated with electronic communications from America stating that there is simply not enough about Walter Satterthwait in this

column. Determined not to short-change my old and distinguished friend, I must therefore mention that he has new book out in the USA, a collection of his short stories, *The Mankiller of Poojegai* [Crippen & Landru].



The collection, which is representative of Walter's output of short fiction from 1982 to 2000 shows him to be that rare thing: an American with a passport who is not afraid to use it, for they reflect his globe-trotting experiences in Kenya, Greece, France and England. Indeed it is even said that in some of those countries he is still welcome to this day.

Many of the stories bring back fond, if hazy, memories of deep and meaningful philosophical discussions in London in the 1990s with Walter and the divine Sarah Caudwell, some of which extended long into the afternoon.



Indeed, several of the stories here are dedicated to the memory of Sarah, who was always delighted to discuss and read the works of other writers, my own included, whilst striving to avoid the application of the adjective

“prolific” to her own output of fiction. And the collection also reminds me what an under-appreciated writer Walter Satterthwait is. (Contractual obligations require me to say that.)

As well as creating an excellent series of private eye novels featuring Joshua Croft and Rita Mondragon, Mr Satterthwait has also proved himself a master of pastiche, with historical novels peopled by, among others: Lizzie Borden, Oscar Wilde, Harry Houdini, Conan Doyle, Ernest Hemingway and Adolf Hitler. He was also a pioneer in the creation of an African detective, Andrew Mbutu, back in 1982; was one of the first mystery writers to refer to an internet chat room, back in 1994; and has penned a brace of stories set among a family of Neanderthals!

Such versatility really should be more widely recognised and the fact that Mr Satterthwait is also a professional bartender has nothing whatsoever to do with my judgement.

Is that OK, Walter?

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster