

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### Festival Fever

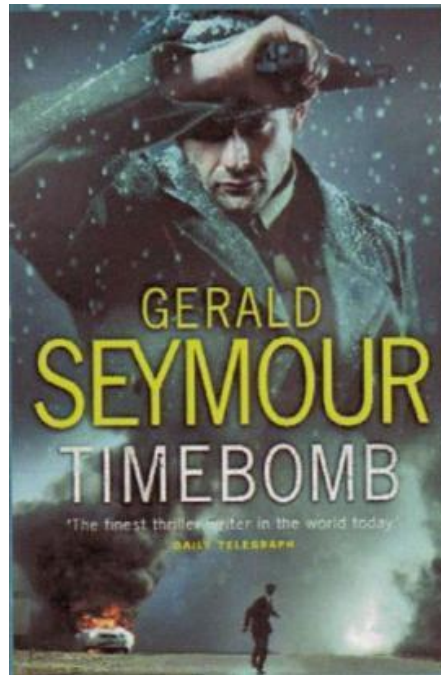
Here in the eastern marches, the summer social scene will revolve around the Latitude Festival, which is rather like the Glastonbury Festival without the mud and better beer. But those who prefer crime fiction to music are also extremely well catered for this summer.

In my youth I was an enthusiastic festival/convention-goer myself, but the years have taken their toll and I find the mandatory excessive drinking, the sexual harassment and the satanic rituals (though none of the accusations were ever proved) beyond me these days. I am consequently incredibly jealous of the energy and vitality of two of the younger generation of thriller writers, Laura Wilson and Meg Gardiner, who have thrown themselves on the convention circuit with the enthusiasm of a Democratic Party candidate seeking votes.

Should you miss their dazzling wit and wisdom at *Crimefest* in Bristol in June, you can catch them at the Harrogate Crime Writing Festival in July or, failing that, the Reading Crime Festival in September. They appear to be taking August off for a well-earned rest, though I would not bet against either of them going for the nap hand of convention appearances this year and they could easily turn out to be on the bills at St Hilda's College Oxford's annual criminal retreat and the newly-announced *Crime Scene 2008* film and literary festival which will be centred on Waterstone's Piccadilly bookshop but launched on 25<sup>th</sup> September at the National Film Theatre..

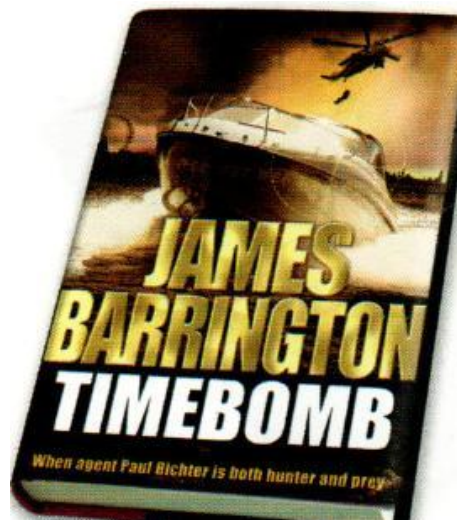
### And on that Timebombshell...

I mentioned last time out that titles were not sacrosanct and cited the case of two books called *Dog Eats Dog* albeit published some years apart. Now comes another example, this time only weeks apart.



First up is legendary newsman and thriller writer Gerald Seymour with *Timebomb* from those bumptious book people at Bantam Press this month. (And I can't resist asking whether it really is 33 years since he wrote his mould-breaking Irish thriller *Harry's Game*? Doesn't time fly?)

But hot on the maestro's heels is James Barrington with his *Timebomb* from those mischievous minxes at Macmillan, on 1<sup>st</sup> August.



An to further confuse readers, the new George Pelecanos (didn't he used to be George P. Pelecanos?) novel, to be published here by Orion in August, is *The Turnaround*, which may sound familiar to British fans of Mark Timlin's 1991 Nick Sharman novel of the same title.

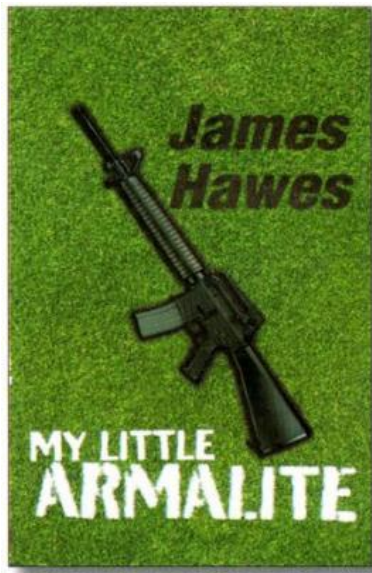
To avoid future confusion, I will now give notice to all publishers that I am planning a triptych of novels with the titles *Are You Coming Quietly*, *Miss Seton?*, *Day of the Gerbil* and *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Cluedo*. So hands off those titles, please.

### Rancid White Armalite With Fins

I really liked James Hawes' debut novel *A White Merc With Fins*, when it appeared in 1996 and featured a wonderful send-up of the *Reservoir Dogs* school of 'gunslinger' writing, as well as showing a genuine gift for a catchy title.

His second novel, *Rancid Aluminium*, gained notoriety thanks to the savaging the film version took at the hands of the critics (and rarely has a British film been so savagely savaged by the British press). The one good thing about the film was that the experience prompted James to write *White Powder*, *Green Light* (see what I mean about titles?) which sent up the whole film-making process and, if memory serves, the Welsh as well. So, double points there.

For a while now, James Hawes has been off the crime scene, concentrating on his day job as a television director working on, among other things, the resurgent *Dr Who* franchise. But he might be back on thriller territory this August with a new novel, *My Little Armalite*, from Cape.



I have no real idea what the book is about, but the title seems reminiscent of a ditty popular with the Provisional IRA some years ago and I await publication with interest.

### Just the Fax

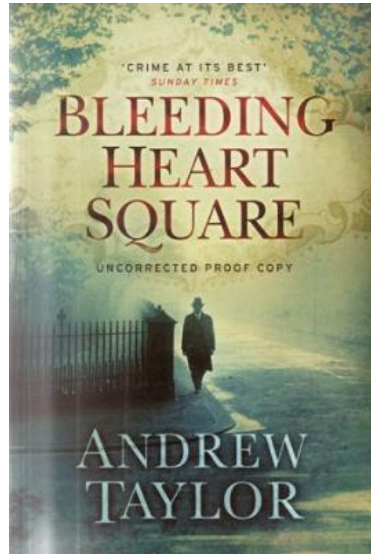
In my appreciation of the late Rodney Wingfield for this esteemed electronic organ, I mentioned a short (very short) story which we wrote together which was snapped up by Japanese publisher Hayakawa. I now learn that the story was recommended to Hayakawa by none other than mystery guru Jiro Kimura, who has run, for over ten years now, the most excellent Gumshoe Site ([www.nsknet.or.jp](http://www.nsknet.or.jp)) which is a vital resource for crime fiction buffs wanting the latest international mystery news.

I have long admired Jiro's site and marvelled at the speed and accuracy which he reports things. I understand that he is also an acquaintance and admirer of my old and distinguished friend Walter Satterthwait, which shows him to be a man of taste as well.

{Is that okay, Walter?}

### Bleedin' scary

I have mentioned before how much the cover of the new Andrew Taylor novel *Bleeding Heart Square* reminds me of the poster of that seminal horror movie *The Exorcist*.



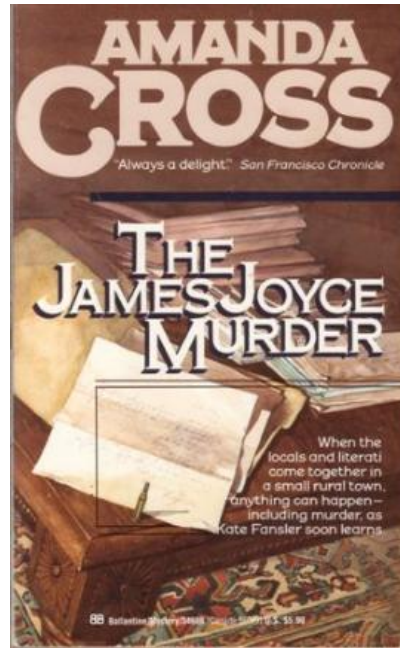
Well now there is an atmospheric little promotional movie, which I believe to be all Andrew's own work, to go with the book and it can be found on [www.youtube.com/lydmouth](http://www.youtube.com/lydmouth)

Sadly it comes without a musical soundtrack so for best results I suggest that while watching it you play suitable music on your gramophone. Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* concerto fits oddly well.

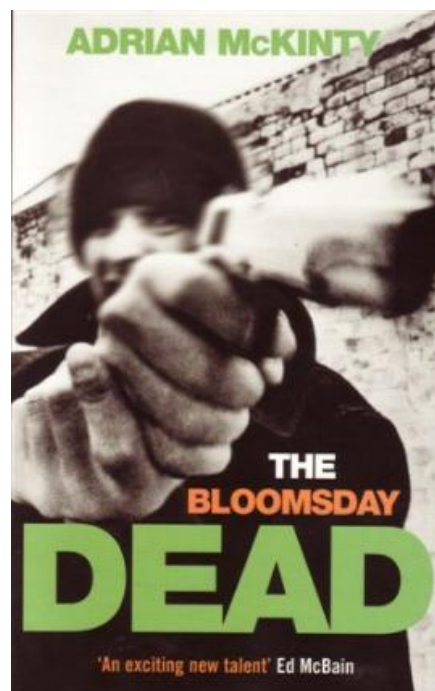
#### Dubliners

Many and long are the winter evenings when I have sat in front of a roaring fire of publishers' proofs thinking *why on Earth doesn't anyone ever write a mystery featuring James Joyce?* And then, suddenly, like Dublin buses, two come along at once.

It was whilst buying Lady Ripster's Christmas presents (I like to do my shopping well in advance and the Oxfam Sales always take place at this time of year) that I came across a copy of *The James Joyce Murder*, written by "Amanda Cross" (Carolyn Heilbrun) in 1967 and featuring that elegant and academic sleuth Kate Fansler. It is a book which begins by referencing James Joyce's famous *Ulysses*, which is set in Dublin in the course of a single day (16<sup>th</sup> June 1904), known to Joycean fans as "Bloomsday".



No sooner was I back in the bosom of Ripster Hall when the postman delivered, courtesy of those serpentine publishers at Serpent's Tail, a "heart-stopping Joycean thriller": *The Bloomsday Dead* by Adrian McKinty, a much travelled Northern Irishman who has lived in America (and now Australia) for many years.



McKinty's book traces the return from Peru (it's a long story) to Dublin and Belfast of his hero Michael Forsyth, paralleling the one day odyssey of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

Having recently reported that crime writing stalwart Martin Edwards had 'fessed up to never having read anything by Ross or John D. MacDonald, I will now declare my public shame that "Ulysses" is still on my to-do pile and is pencilled in for the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2054 (after luncheon).

Scottish Scoop

I am not sure how large the circulation of *The Scotsman* newspaper is in the Americas, though it ought to be recognised and respected for its long tradition of publishing intelligent reviews of crime fiction. I pose the question because I know how sensitive our colonial cousins can be when it comes to their national image abroad, particularly in Europe.

I was, therefore, quite surprised, nay, mildly shocked, at some of the comments of Donna Leon, who famously knocks out a mystery novel whenever she needs to finance her opera habit and, as is well-known, is an American now living in Venice. The comments which caused my eyebrow to twitch, Roger Moore-style, from a wide-ranging interview in *The Scotsman* on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, included the following:

On the craft of writing: *Dickens will teach you plot like nobody in the business.*

On her native America: *I go back as seldom as possible. I haven't lived there for 40 years so why should I? To eat badly? To look at fat people? Why should I want to be there? It's like being with teenagers being with Americans.*

And on the success of her mystery novels (and something I never thought I would hear a writer say): *But what am I going to do with all the money?*

### Chip off the Old Block

I have never subscribed to the theory that crime writing is a genetic trait and unfairly high expectations have often been made of the sons and daughters of successful writers who try their hand at in the same field. Living up to a famous name can be a terrible burden.

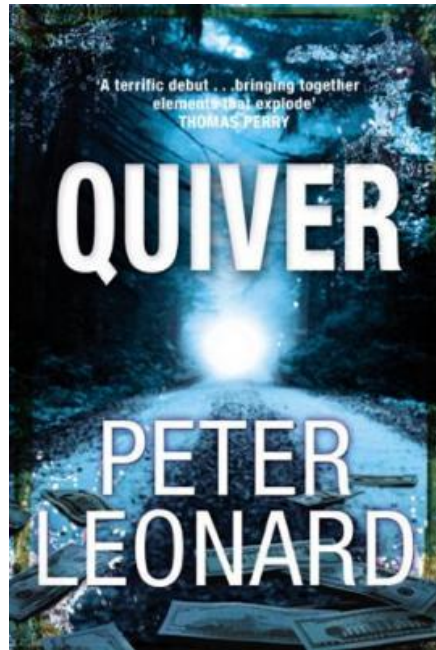
I am determined, therefore, to approach the debut novel of American Peter Leonard with an open mind.



*Quiver*, which is published here in October by those frisky people at Faber & Faber, certainly sounds intriguing and hopefully will be considered on its own merits, not simply because the author is the son



of crime-writing legend Elmore Leonard, one of the major influences on crime fiction (if not *the* major influence) in the last four decades.



Peter's novel comes highly recommended by Michael Connelly, George Pelecanos, Jim Harrison and Ken Bruen, who says, with glorious Irish understatement: "A major new voice has just roared and oh, with such dark ferocity."

So no pressure then; thanks, Ken.

And none should be put on Shona MacLean either, whose debut historical mystery set in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Scotland, *The Redemption of Alexander Seaton*, is published by those hearts of oak at Quercus in July. Ms MacLean is the niece of legendary thriller-writer Alistair MacLean.

#### New China Hand

The Beijing Olympics, which are now almost upon us, have provoked a rash of crime novels with Chinese settings. By far the best, in my opinion, is Charles Cumming's latest, *Typhoon*, just out from those perky people at Penguin.



I have always found the writers of spy fiction to be the most gracious and polite members of the literary community – speaking here from personal acquaintance in the past with such as Anthony Price, Clive Egleton and Gavin Lyall – though oddly, their substantial contribution to the whole mystery/thriller genre tends to get somewhat sidelined. (And surely Len Deighton is long overdue as a nominee for the prestigious Cartier Diamond Dagger.)

With the crumbling of the Berlin Wall it looked as if the genre might be in terminal decline (and Gavin Lyall once started a lobby group called THUG – Thriller writers Hoping to Unseat Gorbachev) but we need not have worried. Spy writers are resourceful, as well as charming, as witness the intelligent and thoughtful output of such as Robert Littell, Alan Furst, David Downing and now Charles Cumming.

For a while now, that “elegant cosmopolitan” (as Andrew Taylor is so fond of calling him) Peter Guttridge has been urging me to read Cumming’s work and I have, finally (three books late) discovered him. And what a treat, though I will remonstrate with Mr Guttridge for not being more forceful in his recommendation.

Spy thrillers can excel at convoluted, nay serpentine, plots; or on blunt-force action, usually spread across several continents; or by setting themselves in an unfamiliar, often exotic, location. Or they can draw their strength simply from the power of the characterisation of the protagonists – if the author is a good enough writer. Charles Cumming is; and does.

### Over the Airwaves

For legal reasons the Lady Ripster is more or less confined to the east wing of Ripster Hall these days, with only a Bakelite wireless set for company.





She seems quite content with her surroundings and only the other day sent me a note via my factotum Waldo to the effect that she had thoroughly enjoyed the month's output of radio drama on the BBC's Home Service, which I believe is now called Radio 4, much of it having a crime fiction flavour.

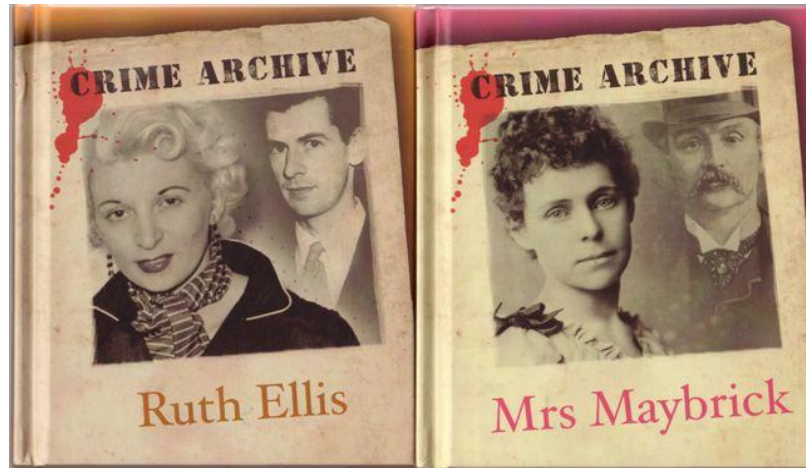
First, she tells me, she enjoyed the *Woman's Hour* serial *Sister Agnes Investigates* adapted by Alison Joseph from her novel *Shadow of Death* (now out in paperback from Allison & Busby) and starring that talented actress Anne Marie Duff, best-known for her television portrayal of a rather gutsy Elizabeth I.

Then, as part of the national festival of rejoicing at the new James Bond novel, David Suchet abandoned Hercule Poirot to play arch villain *Dr No* in a feature-length dramatisation, with Toby Stephens as 007. (I cannot believe that the fastidious Poirot would ever have stood so close to a crane-load of guano....)

And finally, she was looking forward to a new Rumpole drama from John Mortimer, with the claret-swiggling, cheroot-chomping lawyer played by Timothy West.

### True Crime

A new series of small illustrated hardbacks (reasonably priced at £7.99 each) examining famous true crime cases, will be published over the next few weeks by The National Archive at Kew and several well known crime fiction writers have been lured on to the straight and narrow to write them.

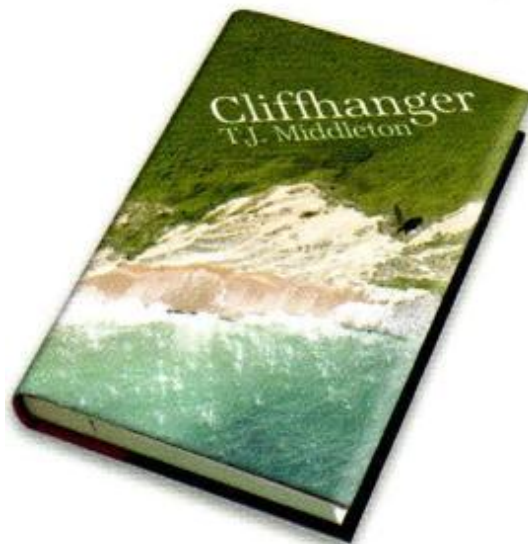


First out are volumes covering the famous late Victorian “Maybrick poisoning” case and the tragic saga of the last woman to be hanged in Britain in 1955. Both *Mrs Maybrick* and *Ruth Ellis* are by Victoria Blake, but forthcoming titles include: *John Christie* by Edward Martson, *Burke and Hare* by Alanna Knight and *The Great Train Robbery* by Peter Guttridge.

#### Going Posh

Crime-writing must have something going for it, given the number of “proper” *literary* novelists having a go at it. Not only do we have a literary giant continuing the James Bond myth in Sebastian Faulks, but a new ‘Benjamin Black’ (actually the novelist John Banville) thriller, *The Lemur* comes out in October. Despite the fact that John Banville’s first novel was published 38 years ago in 1970; his publishers describe him as a “rising star of literary crime.”

Competing for review space in the serious newspapers’ “literary” pages though, will be “a thriller unlike any you will have read before” (so say publisher Macmillan, who also publish Benjamin Black), titled *Cliffhanger* by “T.J. Middleton”



Obviously to avoid the shame of writing a “thriller”, T.J. Middleton is a pen-name adopted by “proper” novelist Tim Binding, the author of several fine works of which *Island Madness* and *A Perfect Execution* are among my favourites.

## Faber Finds

Those frisky people at Faber & Faber are running a competition with that august organ the *Daily Telegraph* to promote their new Faber Finds experiment of printing-on-demand and are asking for readers to vote for favourite titles from a list of 25 sadly forgotten, out of print books.

One of the most worthy candidates (though there are several) for resurrection must surely be Christianna Brand's delightful wartime detective story *Green For Danger* (wonderfully filmed with Alistair Sim as the detective).

Full details of the Faber POD initiative and how to vote can be found of [www.telegraph.co.uk/faberfinds](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/faberfinds) up to the 20th June.

## Reading List

I constantly receive threatening letters (usually in green crayon) from readers of this column who claim that I am acting irresponsibly in these gloom-filled days of economic downturn, by recommending so many goods books. It is undoubtedly causing some of my loyal readers financial hardship in trying to keep up. Several have had to down-size and will only buy Porsches this year, many have sold their children for medical experiments.

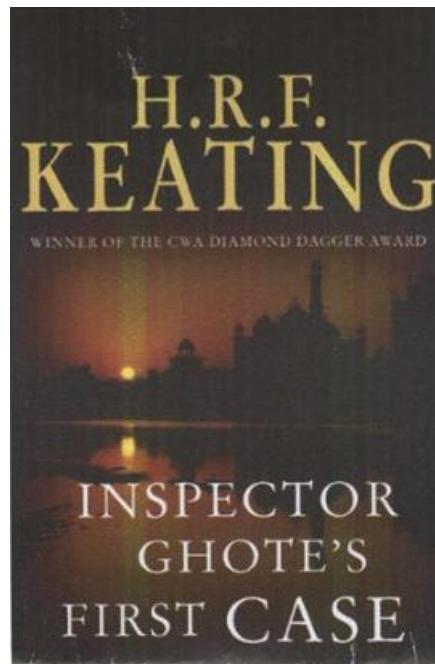
However, I remain undeterred and will now suggest a list of books which all decent, right-thinking individuals should read over the coming summer – and all without fear, favour or sponsorship from any publisher or bookshop chain, other than the usual brown envelopes left behind the pipes, third cubicle along, in the...well, you know where.

Last year, around this time, I recommended Ariana Franklin's *Mistress of the Art of Death*, from Bantam, which went on to win the coveted Ellis Peters Award for historical mysteries. This year I am going to tempt fate by recommending the follow-up, *The Death Maze* (published as *The Serpent's Tale* in America for some reason), which is truly excellent and, I would suggest, is a better book than its predecessor.

Inexplicably I missed *The Blade Itself* by that devilishly handsome young American Marcus Sakey, when it first appeared in this country. But, oh joy, those perky Penguin publishing people have just issued it in paperback. This debut novel is a remarkably assured tale of small-time urban criminals (the setting is Chicago) and explores what happens when crimes – and boyhood friendships – turn very, very sour. The book comes recommended by none other than Lee Child, so my opinion is therefore worthless, but for the record, I would say that *The Blade Itself* is in a long and fine tradition of American crime writing and Sakey has clearly inherited his writing genes from the Elmore Leonard-John D. MacDonald-Charles Williams pool.

For August, I have already ear-marked the latest Alex Scarrow novel *October Lights* (coming from Orion), which is billed as a gruesome thriller with haunting flashbacks to a party of pioneer settlers crossing Wyoming in 1856. And for a complete change of scene I shall turn to modern India as portrayed by Vikas Swarup in *Six Suspects* from Doubleday. Indian diplomat Swarup scored a great success with his debut novel *Q & A* which has the distinction of being turned into both a film and a stage musical under the super title of *Slum Dog Millionaire*.

Should you prefer your Indian tales of detection more whimsical and set when the Raj was a relatively recent memory, then look no further than the delicious *Inspector Ghote's First Case* by H.R. F. Keating, which is already out from Allison & Busby.



I have already taken great delight in welcoming back Inspector Ghote after far too long an absence (in fact about nine years I think) and I was looking forward to the return of that old rogue Lovejoy (missing in action for about five years) in Jonathan Gash's *Faces In the Pool*, also from Allison & Busby, but I understand that publication has been delayed until October.

So I will have to try something completely new: a book which was a surprise bestseller in Germany two years ago, Sebastian Fitzek's *Therapy* appearing in English for the first time thanks to Pan paperback originals.

The "surprise" bit of this book when it first appeared was that it knocked the *Da Vinci Code* off the number one bestseller perch in Germany, which makes it worth a look in my book.

***Pip! Pip!  
The Ripster***