

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley

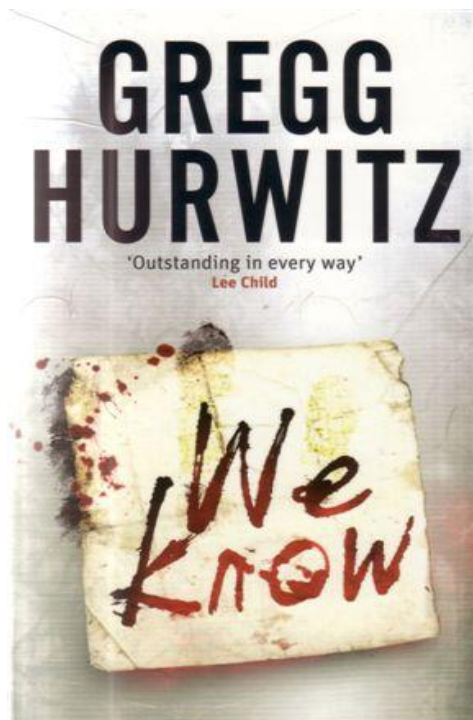


Summer Daze

The crime publishing scene is positively hectic at the moment. I cannot remember a summer (once the traditional down-time when publishers deserted London for the grouse moors) where I have been sent so many books to review and I have by no means been sent *all* the 138 titles scheduled for publication in the UK between July and September. That's roughly one every 16 hours and that is a conservative estimate as some publishers – they know who they are – no longer bother sending out review copies or even press releases.

So where to begin? How do I choose the books to which I will devote my failing eyesight?

Straight to the top of my list, of course, must fly *We Know* by American Gregg Hurwitz which arrives here as a paperback original from Sphere.

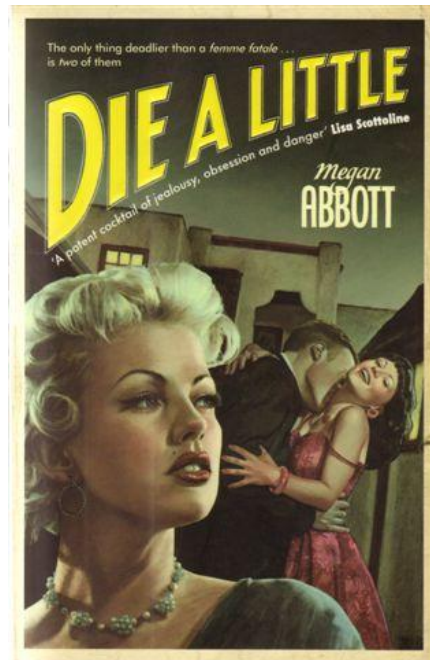


The reason this book takes precedence should be clear, for it comes recommended (“Outstanding in every way”) by none other than Lee Child, which I estimate is the 20th such recommendation by the

frighteningly well-read Lee so far this year and, as Jack Palance might have said, the year ain't over yet.

I have already set aside some quiet time for *Ashes to Ashes* (Headline), the third in Barbara Nadel's most excellent Francis Hancock series set in London's East End during the Blitz. Would it be heresy to admit that I prefer this series featuring the war-damaged undertaker to her Inspector Ikmen series set in Turkey? If it is, I don't care for I rate these books highly.

In August I am spoiled for choice. Not only is there a new Christopher Brookmyre novel, *A Snowball in Hell* (Little Brown), which shows Chris has finally taken my advice to choose titles which are shorter than the space we reviewers are usually allocated for the entire book. I am also anxious to try Megan Abbott's debut *Die A Little* (Simon & Schuster),

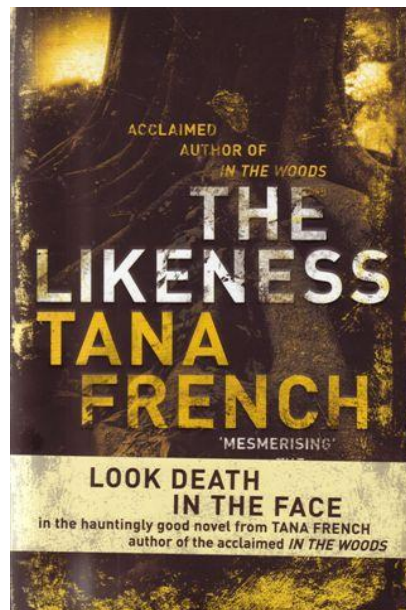


which comes highly recommended from the USA by none other than James Ellroy, and there is the guaranteed summer bestseller from Kathy Reichs in the shape of *Devil Bones* (Heinemann), which comes with a glowing tribute from my old crime-writing and reviewing chum Joan Smith.

Somehow I must find quality time for the third crime novel by Whitbread Book of the Year winner Kate Atkinson, *When Will There Be Good News?* (Doubleday) for her first two came highly praised by just about everyone.



As indeed is the second novel of Tana French, *The Likeness*, which has been somewhat sprung on me at the last moment (as have several titles in the summer frenzy) by publisher Hodder.



Tana French's debut *In the Woods*, was described by that eminent critic Marcel Berlins as "a terrific debut" and went on to take the Edgar Award for best first novel in America.

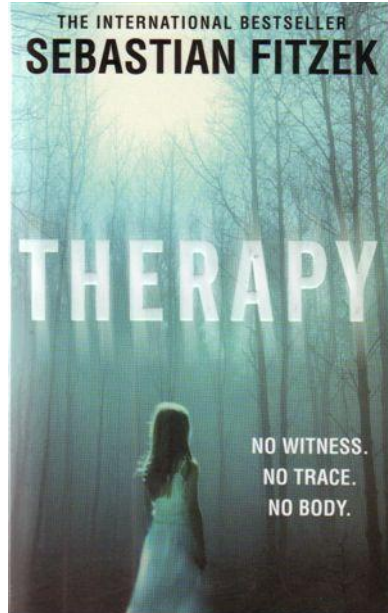
September will, I predict, be dominated by the big names of the profession. Not only are the senses already quivering over the publication of *The Private Patient* (Faber) by P.D. James and James Lee Burke's new novel *Swan Peak* (Orion), but I will also be celebrating the arrival across the finish line of a new horse-racing thriller *Silks* (Penguin) by the father and son team of Dick and Felix Francis.

There is also a new Val McDermid, *A Darker Domain* (HarperCollins) which, I am reliably informed, summons up ghosts from the miners' strike of 1984 and I must make room that month for the latest, and I think his twentieth, from one of Britain's most consistent (and consistently popular) thriller writers, Robert Goddard, with his novel *Found Wanting* (Bantam).



Spannungsliteratur

When Sebastian Fitzek's first novel *Die Therapie* was published in Germany in 2006 it knocked *The Da Vinci Code* from its #1 bestseller perch. For that alone, the author deserves a drink, and now his debut arrives in English as *Therapy*, from those profoundly perky publishers Pan.



Many a crime novel is trumpeted as a 'psychological thriller', but *Therapy* really is a thriller about psychology and a very good one too –the sort of book Alfred Hitchcock, had he been around and working today, would have bitten Herr Fitzek's hand off for the film rights. As with a film like *The Usual Suspects*, the reader knows they are being misdirected from the start, but suspends disbelief totally and goes along with the book just to see up which particular garden path he or she is being led. Interestingly, one path leads to a storm-lashed German holiday island on the North Sea coast which I suspect is in the area of the ancestral home of the Angles (as in Anglo-Saxons) and the first novel I've read set in that region since *Riddle of the Sands*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sebastian Fitzek is enthusiastic about his first book being published in England, or as he puts it: *in dem Mutterland der Spannungsliteratur* – the motherland of suspense fiction. And very politely, at the end of the book, Herr Fitzek thanks the reader thus: "I am honoured to be the recipient of the most valuable gift in the world: your time."

He even supplies an address to his website www.sebastianfitzek.de and perhaps dangerously asks readers to tell him what they thought of the book.

The website, in German, is full of lots of nuggets of information. Sebastian, who bears an uncanny resemblance to a young Mark Lamarr, is 37, a Berliner, has three dogs, two rabbits and a horse, and admits to his earliest reading experience being the works of Enid Blyton, though his favourite author is Michael Crichton. I am not sure what the various psychiatrists in *Therapy* would make of that; probably nothing good.

The Book Itself

Disturbing news reaches me from our colonies across the Atlantic.

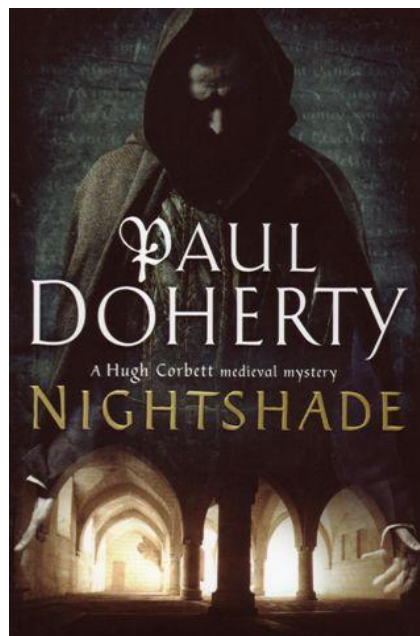
That young and awesomely talented writer Marcus Sakey, who chronicles the mean streets of Chicago, had to make an expedition to New York recently to collect a much deserved award from the critics of *Strand* magazine for his debut novel *The Blade Itself*. Once entrapped in a publisher's cell, Marcus

was forced to sign copies of his new book *Good People* until the poor chap collapsed from lack of alcohol.



The Headmaster's Study

I have had the dubious honour of being summoned in to many a headmaster's study, but in the case of the one occupied by Paul Doherty in leafy Epping Forest, I have emerged not with a thrashing but with an excellent historical mystery.



The prolific Paul – surely the undisputed King's Champion of the medieval whodunit – has just published his (I estimate though I may have failed in my arithmetic) 53rd novel; *Nightshade*, from the irrepressible Headline corporation.

There will be much celebrating in the shires this Michaelmas for in it, Paul returns to the adventures of his most popular series hero (and I think his first series hero), Hugh Corbett, Keeper of the Secret Seal and special emissary of King Edward I.

Ten-Year Stretch

Whilst doing the weekly filing and shredding of the paperwork which mounts up here at Ripster Hall, my factotum Waldo discovered, among some unanswered writs and a few summonses, a copy of the souvenir edition of the 500th anniversary edition of *Red Herrings*, the esteemed organ of the Crime Writers Association. Dated ‘Summer 1998’, the magazine contained a Quiz for which, it seems, I set the questions, though I have no memory of this, just as I have no memory of being a member of the CWA at the time.



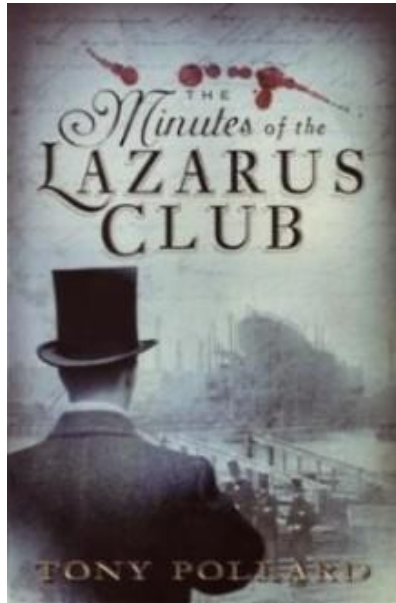
Though I am quite willing to accept I did set the quiz, I have no idea who won the competition or the star prize of “A Summer Hamper of Crime Books”.

Entrants had to submit their answers by 1st September 1998, by post charmingly enough, to: “Public Face, Bank Cottage, Streat, West Sussex” which I suspect is an address of convenience or, as my spy-writing colleagues would say, a dead-letter box.

Perhaps I will drop a postcard to that address to see if that hamper remains unclaimed...

Cast of Thousands

I have looked forward to reading Tony Pollard’s debut historical thriller *The Minutes of the Lazarus Club* since I first saw it listed by those perky publishers at Penguin, for Dr Pollard is a noted archaeologist of international reputation. I was myself merely a humble “digger” but the bond between archaeologists is strong and none have ever been known to say anything unpleasant about a fellow digger’s writing. I am already prepared to say that I feel Tony’s book will be the best fiction written by an archaeologist since Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who once astutely observed: “Archaeology is not a science, it’s a vendetta”.



Lazarus Club did not disappoint. It is a rip-roaring thriller which cuts through the Victorian world of science, technology and medicine (via the odd brothel and opium den) with an impressive cast including Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin, Joseph Bazalgette (sewers), Robert Stephenson (railways), Charles Babbage (computers) and, central to it all, Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

The plot involves mutilated bodies fished out of the Thames, industrial espionage, murder, arson, grave-robbing and treason, with more than a nod to the works of Dickens and Mary Shelley. It ought to be an automatic choice for the Ellis Peters Award shortlist but now I've gone and suggested that, it will probably be disqualified for not having enough 'crime' in it!

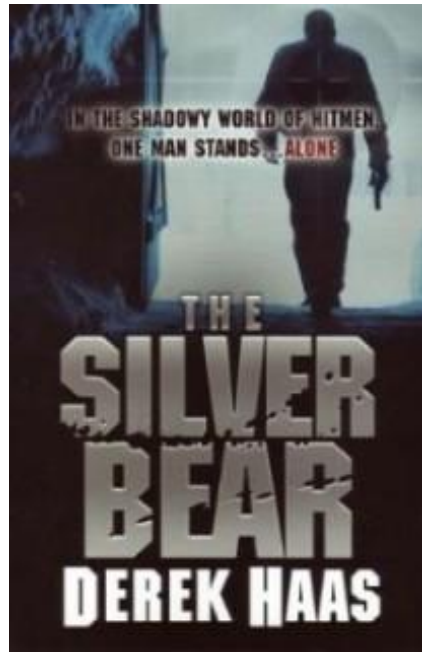
Bad Guys, White Hats

Ever since the Talented Miss Highsmith introduced us to Tom Ripley, both crime writer and reader have had a moral problem when the hero of a book is also a professional criminal, or, in a more recent trend, a professional murderer.

Richard Stark's character Parker (a professional bank robber) is a famous example of a bad man wearing a white hat, but Stark (Donald Westlake) always manages to inject a moral authority into the stories, where conflict is usually with other bad guys (this time clearly wearing black hats) and "civilians" are placed off-limits.

Then of course, Frederick Forsyth brought us *The Jackal*, a professional assassin whom the reader actually starts cheering for as he doggedly attempts to complete a mission we know is going to fail.

Now comes Columbus – no, not Columbo – better known as *The Silver Bear* – no, not *The Silver Bears*, that was the title of the late Paul Erdman's financial thriller back in 1974 – in a debut thriller from Hollywood screenwriter Derek Haas, published here ahead of schedule by those enthusiastic hotshots at Hodder.



Columbus is a professional hit-man (the Russians seemingly call them Sliver Bears) who is hired to take out an American congressman running for President. Naturally there's a huge conspiracy behind it all, to which Columbus adds a lot of (violent) personal baggage. But at the end of the day, he is a cold-blooded murderer, do how much should the reader want him to succeed and survive?

As a character in recent thrillers, he is not alone. Tom Cain's *The Accident Man* is a professional assassin (though one notably lacking the savvy and pure evil ruthlessness of The Jackal) and more recently in *The Deceived*, Brett Battles' hero is a "cleaner" – someone who disposes of the bodies of murder victims (though he's nowhere near as cool as Mr Wolf in *Pulp Fiction*).

For all the moral dilemmas posed by the central character, Derek Haas (who bears an uncanny resemblance to our own *thrillmeister* Nick Stone; or is it just me?) has produced a short, sharp, electric shock of a book.



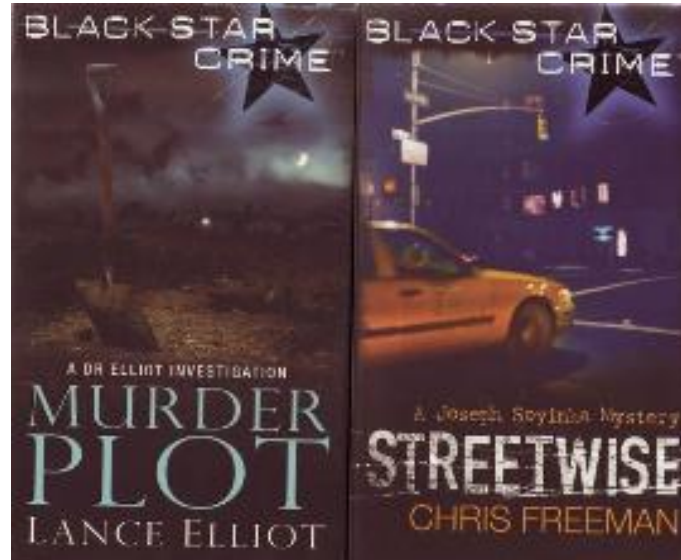
Haas and Stone

It will inevitably be labelled "cinematic" for the simple reason that Haas is a Hollywood scriptwriter, but it should be commended for being *short*. I am not being rude here. I regard it as a great skill that a writer can tell a story without the page-padding modern publishers seem to think they need to justify a cover price of £19.99.

There was a time when writers such as Charles Williams, Dashiell Hammett, Jim Thompson, even Agatha Christie, could turn out cracking thrillers in under 200 pages. I was beginning to fear those days had gone.

But if anything, they may be making a come back, certainly if new imprint Black Star has any say in the matter.

Black Star is looking to provide “short sharp reads” in the crime and thriller sector, just as Mills & Boon do for Romance. Each book is limited to around 65,000 words, five titles will be published every two months and I understand that the emphasis will be on new authors.

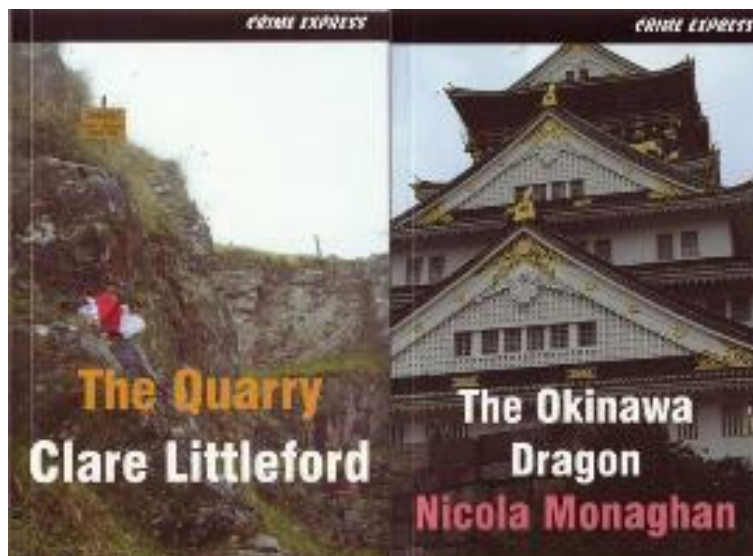


Not all are novices though, by any means. American thriller writer Alex Kava has *A Perfect Evil* and, in October, *Split Second* on the Black Star list and one of the launch titles is Lance Elliot's *Murder Plot* – though 'Lance' is better known as Dr Keith McCarthy, the author of half a dozen thrillers featuring pathologist John Eisenmenger.

The most remarkable thing about the Black Star titles, however, must surely be the price: £3.99 each.

Crime Express

There can be no accusation of padding in the Crime Express series from Five Leaves publishing, for they are designed from the outset to provide *very* short, sharp reads.

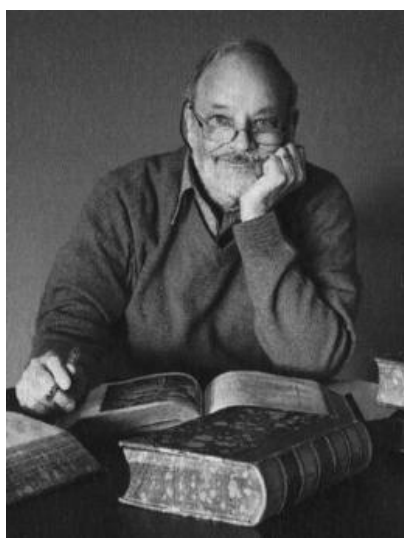


The latest titles (which retail for £4.99) are *The Okinawa Dragon* by Nicola Monaghan and *The Quarry* by Clare Littleford, who are both based in the East Midlands. Forthcoming titles will see the Crime Express brand spreading beyond its native territory of Nottingham.

Authors lined up include Scots hard men Allan Guthrie and Ray Banks and that most prolific of Americans, Lawrence Sanders. Full details at www.fiveleaves.co.uk

Happy New Year

2009 certainly ought to see a happy new year for Canadian Alan Bradley as his debut crime novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* will be published in the UK by those super-efficient people at Orion, who have already sent out proof copies to the great and the good (although I received one too).



The unusual and striking title may ring the odd bell with those who follow the crime scene more closely than I, for Mr Bradley was the winner of the 2007 CWA Debut Dagger Award and the Orion press release which accompanied my advance proof quotes extensively from the Debut Dagger judges. Naturally, for it was the winning entry, all the comments are favourable: *'The most original of the bunch'*; *'Think the Mitfords, as imagined by Dorothy L. Sayers'*; *'Cleverly structured and beautifully written'*; *'...almost reads like an Enid Blyton novel for adults!'*

Now all this is fair enough, but it is unusual to see CWA judging panel deliberations reported in such detail – usually one short, descriptive statement is agreed and issued with each winning title. So Orion have, very decently, listed the comments anonymously, attributing them to three different “Dagger Award Judge(s)”.

Alan Bradley, delightfully, has no such qualms and in the Acknowledgements at the end of his book he goes out of his way to thank ‘the panel of judges who chose the book for the Debut Dagger Award: Philip Gooden, Chair of the CWA, Margaret Murphy, Emma Hargrave, Bill Massey, Sara Mengue, Keshini Naidoo, and Sarah Turner.’

I think CWA judges should stand up and take a bow more often. Some would say they make better targets when standing....

And I confidently predict hearty New Year celebrations at the Headline corporation who welcome back to their publishing fold American superstar Jonathan Kellerman. His first book back in the Headline livery will be *Bones*, and features his popular series hero Alex Delaware.

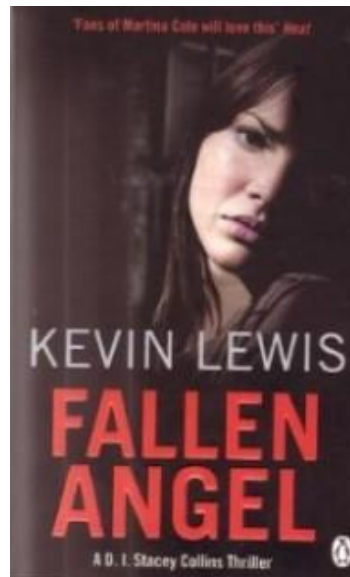
Publication is set for the end of October but I hear that Jonathan Kellerman will be visiting the UK in January 2009, though I do not know whether he will be accompanied by his bestselling author wife

Faye or, indeed, their bestselling son Jesse. In fact as family businesses go, I can think of none as successful as the Kellermans with the possible exception of my old American friends the Corleones.

Angels on High

I am not sure what the collective noun is for angels – a choir? a host? a chorus? a flight? – but they are certainly flocking in increasing numbers in the world of publishing at the moment.

Not only is *Angel Uncovered* by my alter-ego Katie Price riding high in the bestseller lists, but a new police thriller set in the mean streets of Sarf London reaches me in the form of Kevin Lewis' *Fallen Angel*, which promises to be the first in a series starring single-mother Detective Inspector Stacey Collins, from those precocious publishers Penguin.

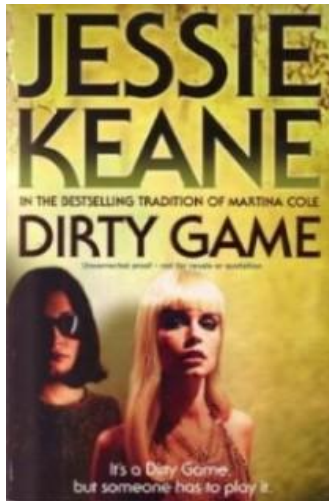


Now I hear that the next Alafair (daughter of James Lee) Burke novel will be titled *Angel's Tip* and I am urged by colonial friends across the Atlantic to watch out for the thriller *Lost Angel* by Mike Doogan, which is set in Anchorage in Alaska, when and if it is published over here in the Motherland.

Accolade

Publishers should hype new authors. Very often they do not and excellent writers slip under the radar, sometimes off the radar, of readers and reviewers. Sometimes, they hype debut authors too much, raising the level of expectation to unrealistic heights.

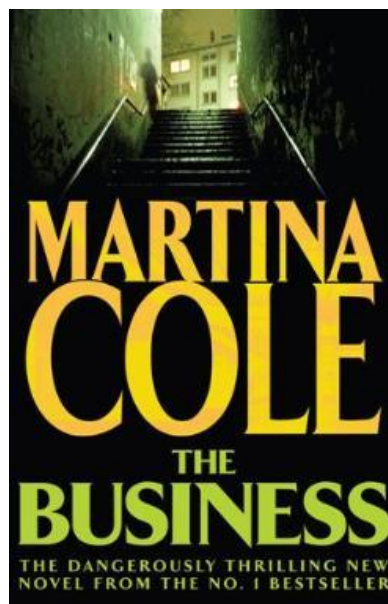
I hope that fate does not befall Jessie Keane, whose debut *Dirty Game* appears in September from those jolly enthusiastic publishers HarperCollins.



The novel is described as “gritty, gripping and set in the heart of London’s East End” and the publishers make no secret of the fact that they see Jessie Keane (in fact they say so on the cover of the proof) as *our very own Martina Cole*.

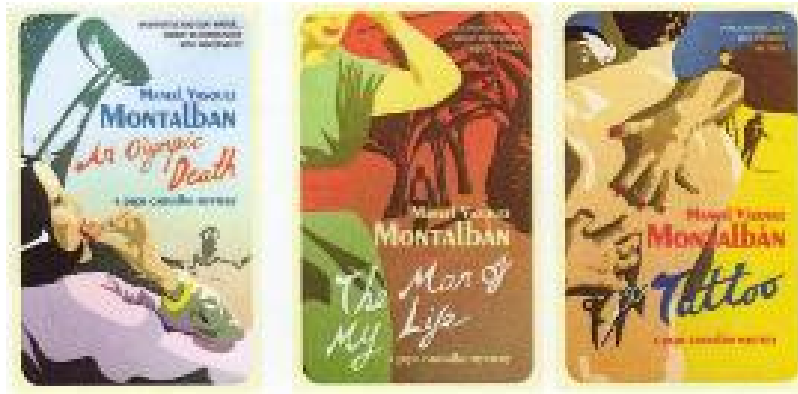
Now Martina Cole is a crime-writing phenomenon who has been hugely successful for many years and there have been several attempts to emulate her magic formula for producing bestseller after bestseller.

No doubt Jessie Keane and HarperCollins would like similar success (some of us would be happy with 1% of it) but their timing may be unfortunate as within eight weeks of *Dirty Game’s* publication, those supremely confident publishing people at Headline will launch *The Business* by *their* very own Martina Cole.



He’s from Barcelona

I had forgotten how much I enjoyed the adventures of Spanish private eye Pepe Carvalho as created by the late Manuel Vazquez Montalban, but those spirited publishers Serpent’s Tail have refreshed my memory (and tickled my tastebuds) by publishing *Tattoo* for the first time in English and reissuing *The Man of My Life* and *An Olympic Death*.



Carvalho was a true one-off. An ex-cop, ex-CIA employee, ex-Marxist and then private eye in Barcelona, Carvalho dedicates himself to chasing women and good food and as something of a gourmet he's more likely to run faster chasing a good meal.

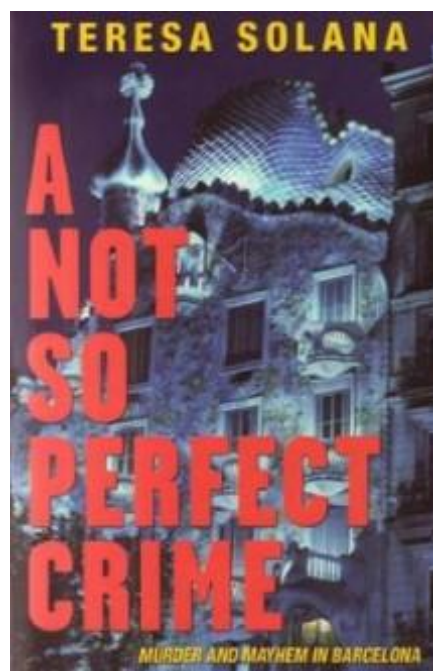
Tattoo, whilst probably not Montalban's best plotted book, is a delight and crammed with the detective's eccentricities such as his craving for a roaring log fire in July (in Barcelona???) which he lights by burning a book every night (starting with *Don Quixote!*), estimating that his library will see him through about ten years' worth of fires.

The novel was published in Spanish in 1976 and although Nick Caistor's translation seems flawless, one of two aspects have not dated well, notably Carvalho's attitude to women, the fact that tattoos are so unusual(!) that it's possible to identify a faceless corpse from one, and the gay abandon with which Carvalho goes through three airports whilst flying to Holland, carrying both a gun and a switchblade.

Nonetheless, this is a meaty, spicy stew of a book which leaves you, like Carvalho always is, hungry for more.

And so is she...

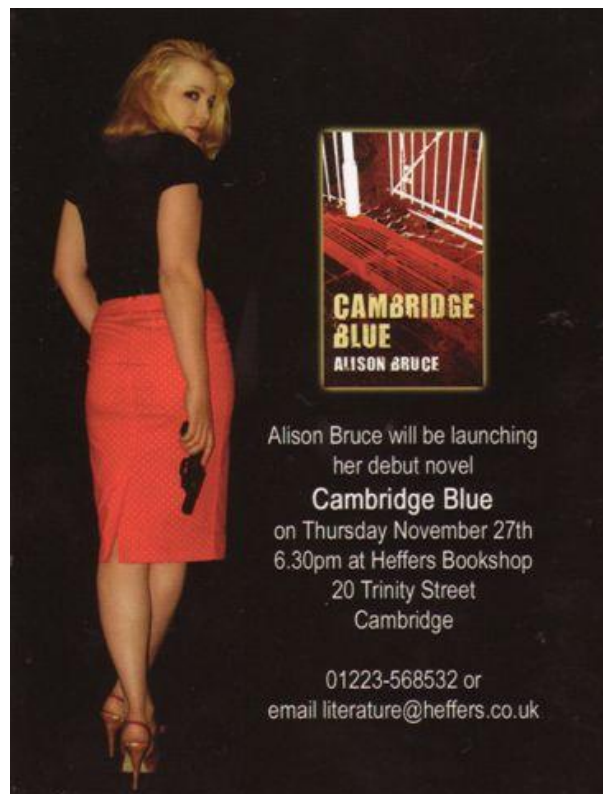
And speaking of Barcelona, I am intrigued by the latest tasty offering from those innovative publishers, Bitter Lemon Press.



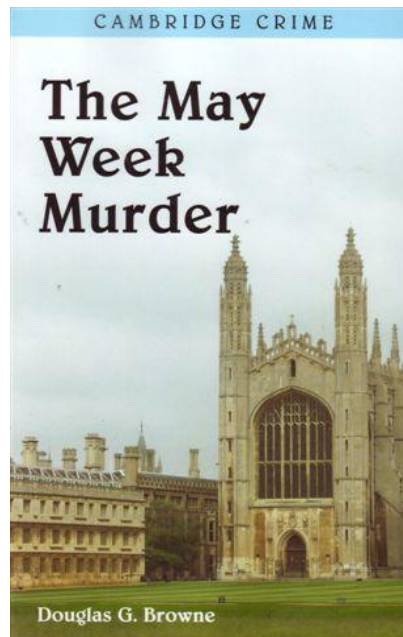
Teresa Solana's prize-winning first novel *Un crim imperfecte* is now published in English as *A Not So Perfect Crime*, proudly translated from the original Catalan by Peter Bush.

Cambridge Blue Murder

I am indebted to the Master of St Heffer's College, Professor Richard Reynolds, for drawing my attention, when the publisher had not, to the launch in November of an exciting debut thriller, *Cambridge Blue* by Alison Bruce.



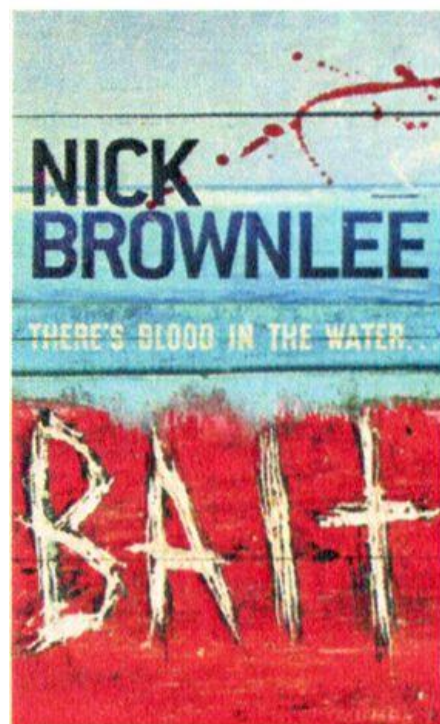
Naturally I warm to the title sight unseen as it is set in Cambridge, which reminds me that I am long overdue in mentioning that excellent series of reprints which go under the imprint of Cambridge Crime, published by Ostara Publishing and which includes the fabulous *May Week Murder* by Douglas G. Browne, first published in 1937.



From the editor's desk

When one gets a letter from a Senior Editor at a publishing house, one really should take notice, for they are busy people and rarely have the time to write to their own authors.

So when I received an epistle from just such a person at publisher Piatkus, I duly sat up and reached for my bifocals. The letter extols the virtues of a debut crime novel set in modern-day Kenya, entitled *Bait* and written by former Fleet Street journalist Nick Brownlee.



The book, which has a cracking opening paragraph, is praised for its characters, its pace and its exotic setting and will appear in the UK in December.

I will await its publication with interest, for I always do what editors tell me.

Highly recommended

Coming in November from those busy people at Headline is an example of what I am told is the “horrific thriller” genre (I think they mean “horror thriller”), *Afraid* by Jack Kilborn.

The novel, which definitely looks quite scary at first glance, comes highly recommended by some very well-known names in the thriller writing world. No, not you-know-who, but the likes of James Rollins, David Morell, that young American firebrand Marcus Sakey, and J. A. Konrath who says specifically: *“The most terrifying debut I’ve ever read. I wish I’d written this.”*

Actually, you did, Mr Konrath, for ‘Jack Kilborn’ is your pen-name. I have to say I haven’t read your book yet, but I like your style.

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster