

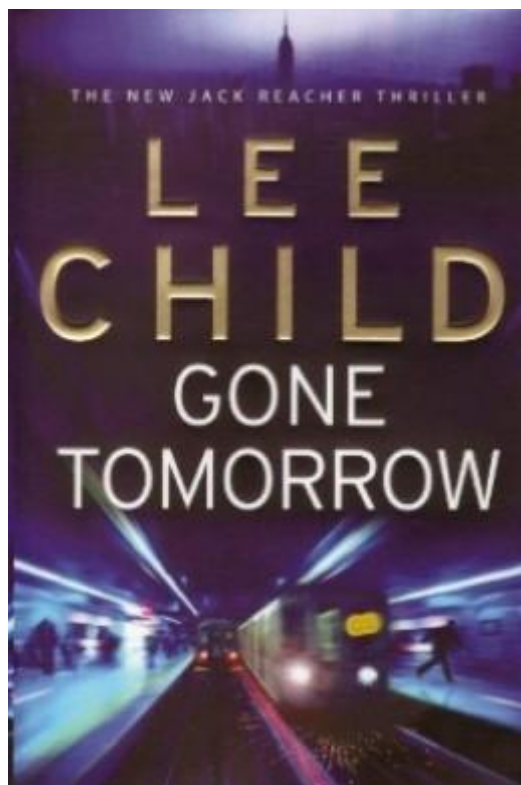
Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



Safe Bet

I am writing this before Easter, but by the time you read it, Lee Child's new Jack Reacher thriller *Gone Tomorrow* (Bantam) will be the No.1 bestseller. I think that's a pretty safe bet, though I hasten to add that I tipped the favourite to win the Grand National, Cambridge to sink Oxford in the Boat Race and Manchester United to beat Aston Villa. (Oh, I did get that last one right. Sorry, Lee.)



Gone Tomorrow is the 13th Reacher novel and like the first (*Killing Floor* back in 1997) is told as a first-person narrative. I remember reviewing that debut novel for the *Daily Telegraph* and commenting that, in terms of pace, 'it belts along' and reviewing *Tripwire* in 1999, for that same once-great newspaper, I noted: '...over three books he (Lee) has lowered the body count and racked up the tension and it is paying off handsomely.'

I have always thought that Jack Reacher reminded me of an archetypal hero from a classic western, no more so than in the excellent *Echo Burning* (in 2001). He is often compared to John Wayne, but I lean towards Shane – though of course Reacher is much taller than Alan Ladd (so am I come to that). That’s meant as a great compliment, for if you’re in trouble, who else would you rather have riding in to town to help you than a noble lone stranger with no personal baggage, a fierce sense of justice and complete confidence in his own violent skills? {Though probably even Shane would have worked out how to use a mobile phone by now.}

Gone Tomorrow is set mostly in New York, mostly in New York’s subway system actually, and this time when Reacher rides to the rescue he’s already too late to save two innocent victims caught up in a conspiracy which has its origins in the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, a Senate election and the world’s most wanted terrorist. Although sucked into this conspiracy by chance – wrong place, wrong time as usual – Reacher feels duty-bound to throw himself into this very urban arena and try and stay one step ahead of the NYPD, Homeland Security and the terrorists who are operating at platoon strength with two very nasty commanders, although some of the sharpest and most barbed asides are reserved for what has become of ‘the land of the free’ since the Patriot Act.

At times, the mechanics of the plot – and Reacher’s almost obsessive/compulsive attention to physical details of ballistics, metal strengths and the workings of the subway – bears comparison to Adam Hall’s thriller *The Berlin Memorandum* where you are never quite sure if his lone hero Quiller is the hunter or being hunted. And that too, in my book, is a great compliment.

Existing fans, the devotees being known as ‘Reacher’s Creatures’, will love *Gone Tomorrow*. New readers will discover they’ve got a cracking backlist to enjoy.

Lee Child now lives in America and France and pays only flying visits to his native Britain these days. This is, I hear, partly due to the warrants out for his arrest by the Smoking Police here in England. I wish I could say that the charge of “smoking in a public place where a non-smoker might at some point walk” was unfounded but here is photographic evidence of Lee and his fellow millionaire playboy friend Prince Ali Karim committing that very act.



In for a Penny

New reaches me across the damp floor of the jolly old interweb that the Crime Writers’ Association has acquired a sponsor for its annual New Blood Award (though I always thought *Fresh Blood* had a better ring to it) in the shapely shape of Louise Penny, the Canadian lumber magnate and distiller of the finest single malt maple syrup south of the Arctic Circle.



The New Blood Award (or Dagger?) was, for over thirty years, the John Creasey Memorial Award, named in honour of the founder of the CWA, a very prolific crime writer who has almost totally dropped from the publishing consciousness, and it honoured first novels in the crime genre. Notable recipients of the award have included: Jonathan Gash (for the first 'Lovejoy'), Andrew Taylor (this year's winner of the Diamond Dagger), Janet Neel, Patricia Cornwell, Walter Mosley and Minette Walters.

In the 1990s, the Creasey Award became notorious when, in 1993, the judges publicly announced a short-list of first novelists and *then* decided that none of them were "good enough" and refused to give an award that year. When, in 1996, the judges threatened to withhold the award again because there were no debutants "good enough" (though this time without naming and publicly humiliating half-a-dozen of them), the crime critics of the main newspapers and magazines which reviewed mysteries got together, devised a short-list and presented the first (and so far only) First *Blood* Award all within two weeks. The winner was a young Scottish person called Christopher Brookmyre. I wonder whatever became of him?

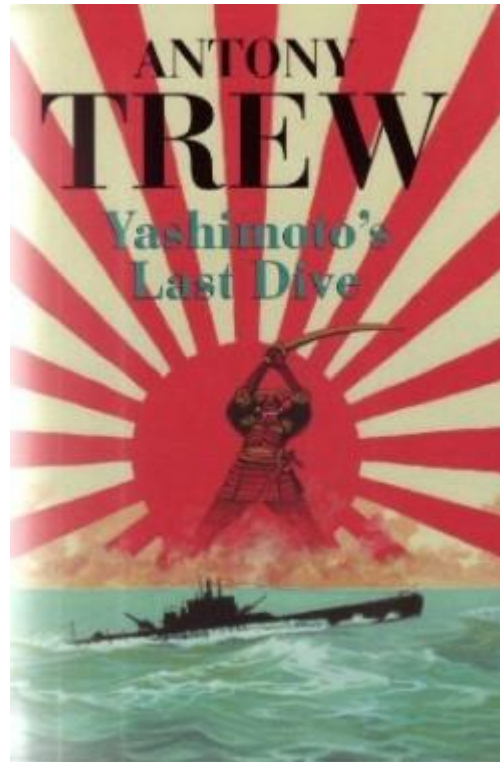
Since then, the 'John Creasey' became the 'New Blood' but its profile has slipped somewhat in recent years, being overshadowed by big money prizes for best novel and best thriller plus a plethora of other awards for best first chapter, best in translation and no doubt others which have passed me by (in all senses). This is slightly sad, in that the honour of winning a 'Creasey' (I don't think any money was ever involved) was certainly a boost to a fledgling career and an indicator of the health of the genre as a whole.

So I am delighted that Louise Penny is supporting the award, for apart from being a skilled lumberjack and professional blender of single varietal maple liquors, she also happens to be a very talented crime writer and herself a winner of a New Blood (as well as many others) Award. I do hope I will be invited to the first awards ceremony (just how long do Restraining Orders remain in force?) as I would dearly like to see the expression on this year's winner's face as he or she carries off a case of Penny's Finest Old Montreal and as much timber as they can chop before sundown.

Too Good To Be Trew?

In Britain in the 1960s and '70s, a group of writers in the 'adventure-thriller' school, many of them published by Collins, dominated the best-seller lists. Probably the most famous names were Alistair MacLean, Hammond Innes, Desmond Bagley, Geoffrey Jenkins and Duncan Kyle. Many of their books were set on the high seas and a fair proportion of them *under* the sea in submarines, nuclear or otherwise (they were all pretty much 'boys' books').

One of the most overlooked of this group of writers was South African Antony Trew who died in 1996, but thanks to reissues by that stalwart but unassuming publisher Robert Hale, he is not forgotten.



Yashimoto's Last Dive is one of Trew's later thrillers, first published in 1986 in the author's 80th year, and is highly regarded for its tense cat-and-mouse chase involving a Japanese submarine and a Royal Navy destroyer off the west coast of Africa during WWII.

Legend has it that Antony Trew was "a pleasure to publish" being that rare thing: an author who was always polite and charming who delivered immaculate manuscripts always on time. (I did say it was a legend.)

When it came to wartime sea stories, he certainly knew his stuff. During WWII he commanded first a South African whaler running supplies into the besieged port of Tobruk and later the destroyer *HMS Walker* serving on convoy duty in the Arctic, gaining a DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) in 1945. He returned to his native South Africa after the war, later moving to England after only starting to write when nearing retirement. His eldest son, also Antony, was an anti-Apartheid activist in South Africa and later joined the political staff of Nelson Mandela.

Trew was an interesting and, reportedly, delightful man whose well-crafted, solid thrillers deserve to be remembered.

Last Laugh on Me

As the date was April 1st, I was naturally suspicious for this, according to the newspapers, was the day when Ireland switched its clocks on to decimal time, authors' royalty statements were to be issued in Braille for easier understanding and Alan Shearer was appointed manager of Newcastle United. But apparently it is TRUE! My novel *Angels Unaware* has been shortlisted for the highly lucrative Last Laugh Award, which will be decided by popular vote or referendum or some such arcane procedure at *Crimefest* in Bristol this month.

And I was informed of this momentous achievement by a rival publisher! Those charming and generous people at Faber (who publish another short-listed author, Gilbert Adair) sent me a delightful message to wish me good luck, along with the traditional magnum of champagne which usually accompanies such messages (although *that* seems to have been "delayed" in the post).

The icing on the cake, however, is that for the first and last time, I will share short-listing honours with the great but sadly late Donald Westlake, whose novel *Don't Ask* is one of the six titles in competition. That is, indeed, good company to be in.

In Town Tonight

I was devastated to hear the news that the annual Headline Crime Party has been axed during the current financial maelstrom, for it was the highlight of the mystery scene social calendar.

To restore my spirits I braved the arduous journey to London last month for a delightful lunch with Headline author Brian Freeman, visiting from one of the more northerly states of America (and thus he finds our climate very mild), for the launch of the paperback edition of his thriller *The Watcher*.



I am ashamed to say I only discovered the corkscrew-plotting and fast-paced action of Brian Freeman's thrillers with *Immoral* last year. His favourite setting is small-town Minnesota where some of the crimes facing detective Jonathan Stride suggest that the inhabitants get up to absolutely no good during those long snowy winters.

Thankfully, for me, also attending the luncheon was devilishly handsome Jake Kerridge, the *Daily Telegraph's* crime fiction reviewer, not only a man of impeccable taste in literature but also a caring human being. Without his guidance and protection I doubt I would have been able to navigate the warren-like streets of Soho, where elderly gentlemen such as myself are all too often easy prey for the painted streetwalkers and fleshpots on every corner.

With Jake's help and some brief refreshment at a continental tea room, Jake delivered me to my second social engagement of the day, a meeting with Scottish humourist Douglas Lindsay.



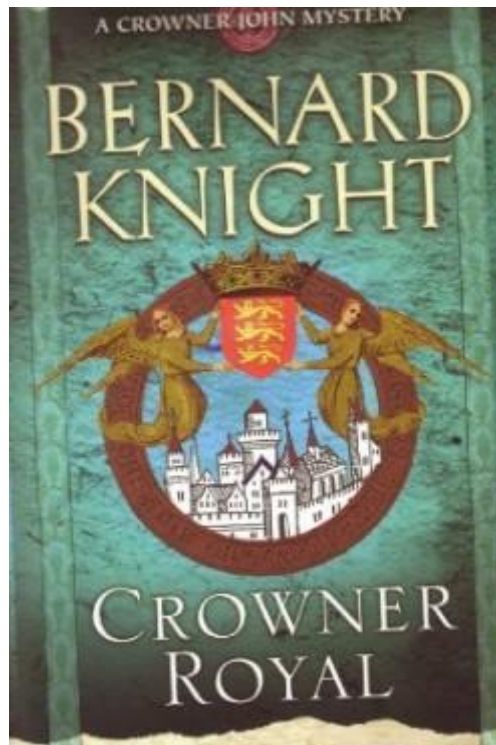
On a flying visit to the London Book Fair (he currently lives in Poland for reasons I cannot divulge), I managed to finally meet the man whose books I have been enjoying for – unbelievably – ten years now since *The Long Midnight of Barney Thomson* appeared, proving that serial killers could be both funny and Scottish.

Spurned by the (English) publishing establishment, Douglas set up his own publishing company – Long Midnight Publishing, based, for security reasons, in Inverness – to insure that fans of his Barney Thomson series (about a Glaswegian demon barber mistaken for a serial killer) here and in Europe (where he enjoyed great popularity in Germany) can continue satisfy their craving for more titles.

And although I do not pretend to understand the workings of the jolly old interweb, I am told Douglas is a dab hand at it and his site www.douglaslindsay.com is worth checking out.

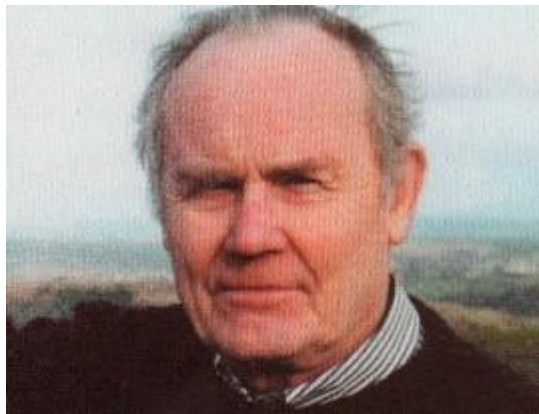
Masters of the Medieval

So a minor government official is stabbed in the back in Westminster and his body floats down the Thames to be washed up around Fleet Street. You'd hardly notice such a thing these days, but thankfully back in 1196 AD the *Crowner Royal*, Sir John de Wolfe, was on hand to witness the dirty deed and investigate.



For this, his 13th appearance, Sir John is unhappily based in London away from his beloved mistress (es) and equally beloved Devon (though safely away from his estranged wife); following orders from the absentee king, Richard the Lionheart.

The 'Crouner John' books (from Simon & Schuster) – a 'crouner' being a prototype coroner – is well established as one of the outstanding medieval mystery series and for generating interest in the West Country should have by now won several awards from English Heritage.



And less you think the idea of a 12th century coroner is a bit far-fetched, you should remember that the author is Professor Bernard Knight, CBE, a former Home Office pathologist (who performed over 25,000 autopsies) and he does his research well.

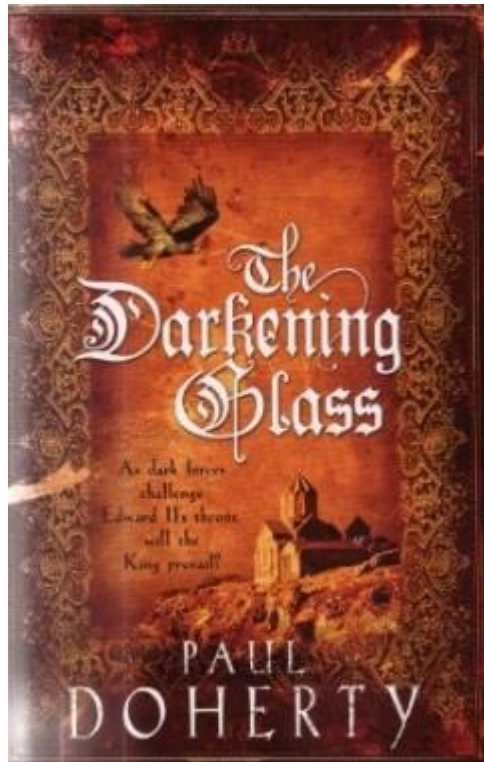
Crouner Royal not only involves a murder investigation but a plot against King Richard and the potential theft of the Crown Jewels (or at least the royal treasury). The description of Norman London is fascinating and neatly illustrated with excellent maps, although Sir John won't have happy memories of it, especially the unwelcome visitor he receives there in his lodgings in Long Ditch Lane, which I reckon to be somewhere under the present-day QEII Conference Centre though, like most archaeologists, I could be wrong.

That other master of the Medieval Mystery (and also the Ancient Egyptian Mystery and the Imperial Rome Mystery) genre is, of course, Paul Doherty.



In fact, I think Paul could turn out a decent Western if he put his mind to it and his 13th and 14th century London often has the whiff of the gunslinger riding into town about it, though his latest – *The Darkening Glass* from those history buffs at Headline – spreads the action northwards to Scotland and, even more dangerously, to Scarborough.

Some of the characters featured or referenced in the book – Kings Edward (I and II), Queen Isabella and Robert the Bruce – will be familiar to fans of that painstakingly accurate film *Braveheart*; but don't let that put you off.



Set in 1312, *The Darkening Glass* depicts England's slide into yet another civil war, mostly instigated by Edward II's favouritism towards Peter (or Piers) Gaveston. Naturally, there are some very personal murders to be solved in the growing chaos and they are recalled by Mathilde of Westminster, Isabella's personal physician and no mean amateur sleuth.

The historical background to all this is somewhat more reliable than the script of *Braveheart* as it is based on contemporary chronicles, in particular the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* or (for the minority of my readers whose Latin had failed them), 'The Life of Edward II'. That Paul Doherty knows these chronicles well, if not backwards, is not in dispute as they were the subject of his doctoral thesis at Oxford some thirty years ago.

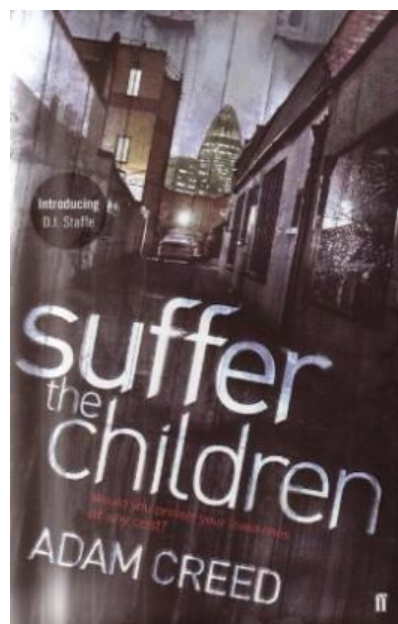
The *Vita*, as everyone knows, was discovered in the Benedictine Abbey at Malmesbury and copied (translated?) by Thomas Herne in 1729. It's original author is unknown, though it is thought to have been written in 1326 by a gentleman of mature years for the text refers, somewhat disparagingly, to "the young men of today". I am sure he must have been talking about his publishers.

One To Watch

A new name to watch out for on the crime scene, courtesy of the blossoming crime list at publishers Faber & Faber, is Adam Creed.



Suffer the Children is a first crime novel, I believe, and the first in a planned series featuring Detective Inspector Will Wagstaffe, better known as 'Staffe', who brings, as is traditional, a tangled emotional personal back-story to this investigation which is sparked by the murder of a known paedophile.

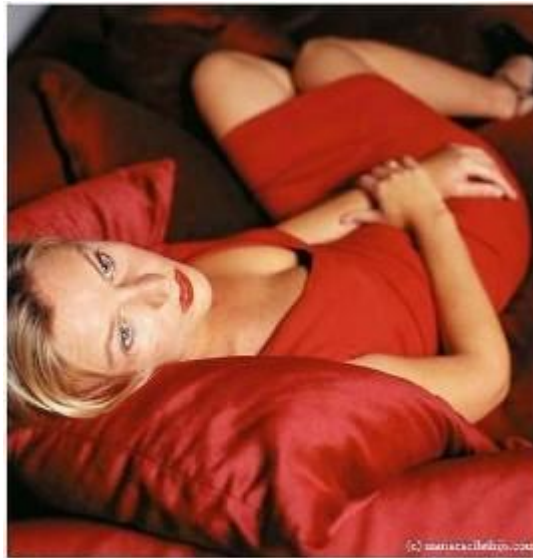


Interestingly and unusually, much of the narrative is told in the present tense and for the technique and pacing of the telling of the story, it is well worth a look.

Adam Creed, I am told, is the 'Head of Writing' at Liverpool John Moores University which I first thought was an excellent move as I firmly believe all students should be taught to write, whatever the cost in chalk and slates. I discover, however, that there actually is a Centre of (Creative) Writing at the university which has attracted such tutors as Barry Unsworth, Mo Hayder and Margaret Murphy. The head of the Centre is given as one Gareth Creer, the author of a novel called *Suffer the Children*. I wonder if this is pure coincidence, or whether Mr Creer and Mr Creed are in fact related? I think we should be told.

Going Dutch (1)

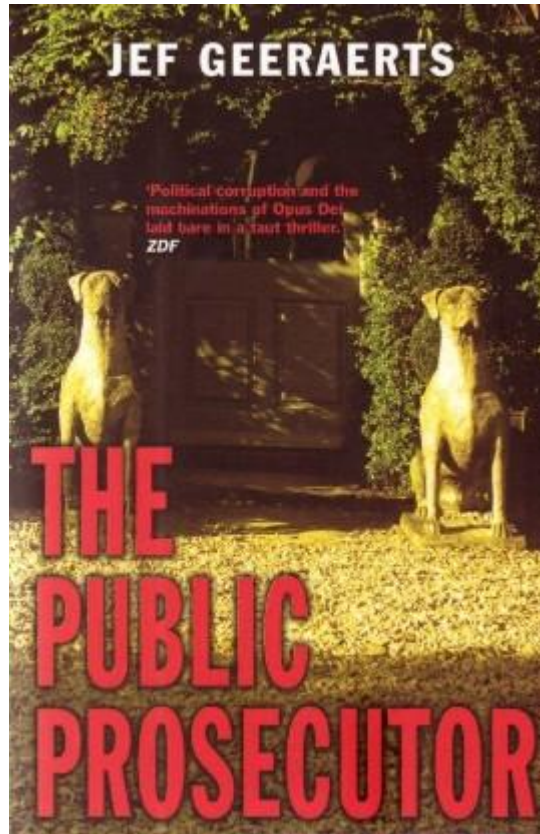
No sooner had I come to terms with the wave of Irish crime novels all seemingly published at the same time, but almost immediately a flood of mysteries all translated from the Dutch begin to appear, almost tumbling over themselves.



Having already chalked up a massive European hit with *The Dinner Club* – published here by those sweeties at Bitter Lemon – Saskia Noort (above) is already a familiar name and was in London last month to launch the English edition of *Back To The Coast*, which was in fact her first novel and launched her career in Holland.

Making their first appearances in English editions, as far as I am aware, are two Dutch compatriots of Ms Noort: Ester Verhoef with *Close Up* and Simone van der Vlugt with *The Reunion*.

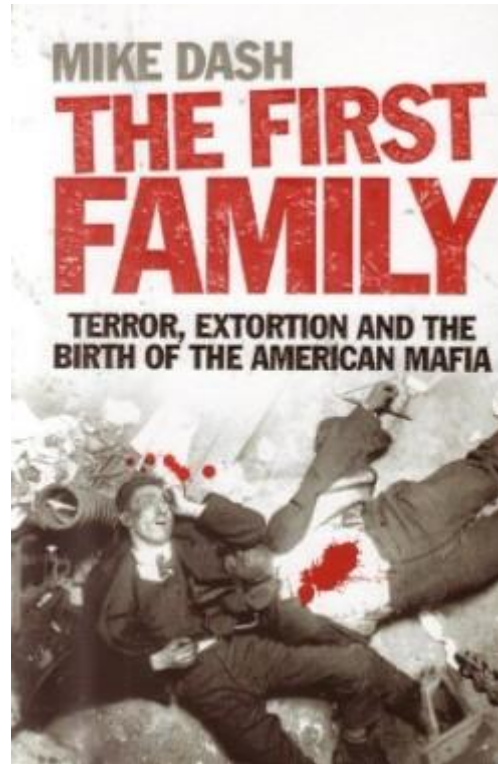
Also translated from the Dutch, although the author is actually Belgian, *The Public Prosecutor* is the first novel in English for Jef Geeraerts, and once again we have Bitter Lemon to thank for helping him hop the Channel.



Possibly the biggest thing in Belgian crime-writing since you-know-who (Simenon, that is; not Poirot, you divs), Jef Geeraerts' Public Prosecutor of the title, Albert Savelkoul, is a fascinating character: vain, unctuous, shameless and 64 years old with buns of steel, as our Colonial Cousins would say, an aristocratic wife and an energetic mistress. *But why-oh-why does he have to be 64?* Surely this cult of youth worship has gone too far and there must be scope in crime fiction for more mature heroes which readers of a certain seniority can identify with...

Keeping it in the Family

Devotees of True Crime, and there are many, will not be able to resist Mike Dash's new book *The First Family* from Simon & Schuster, which is an unofficial history (I accept that an 'official' one is unlikely) of the establishment of the Mafia in America in the early part of the last century.



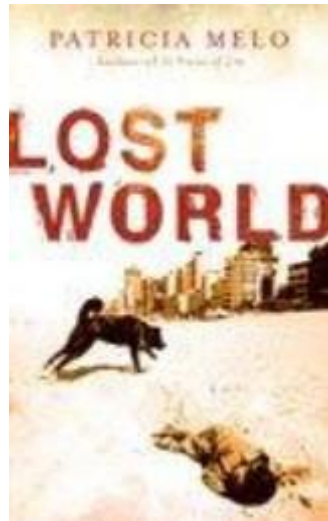
Packed with fascinating and atmospheric descriptions of New York circa 1909, the book comes with a very revealing map of Sicily highlighting the towns and villages from whence the early *Mafiosi* came.



Careful perusal of the map shows, to the south of Palermo, the village of **Corleone**, a name which might just ring a few bells and, a little further south and to the east, another name appears – **Prizzi** – which may be familiar to readers of the honourable works of Richard Condon.

Flying Down To Rio

I have already pointed out the growing interest in crime fiction from Latin America, so just remember you heard it here first, when you start to read rave reviews this Autumn for the new revenge thriller, *Lost World*, from publishers Bloomsbury.

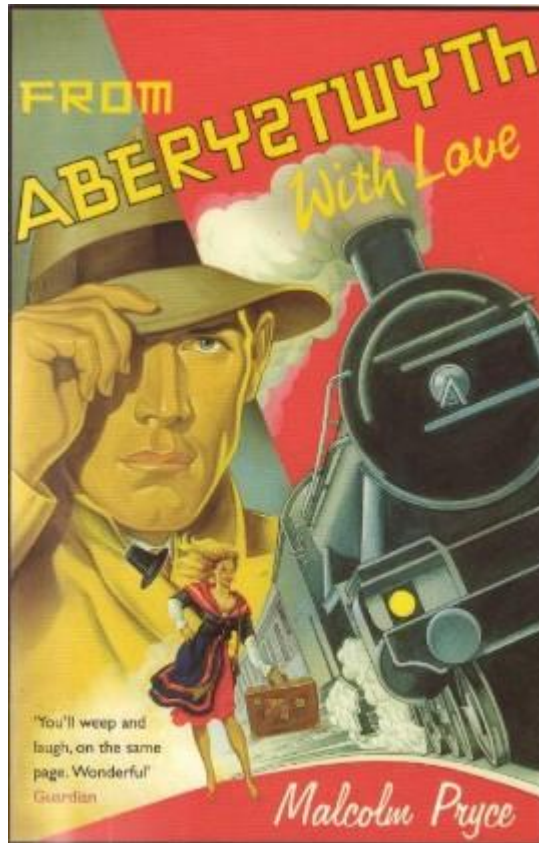


Okay, so the title has been used before (by Conan Doyle and Michael Crichton) and there's a fair bit of jungle (the Amazonia) featured in the book, but I suspect what is behind Patricia Melo's particular title is the lost family world of her central character Maiquel – a former contract killer.

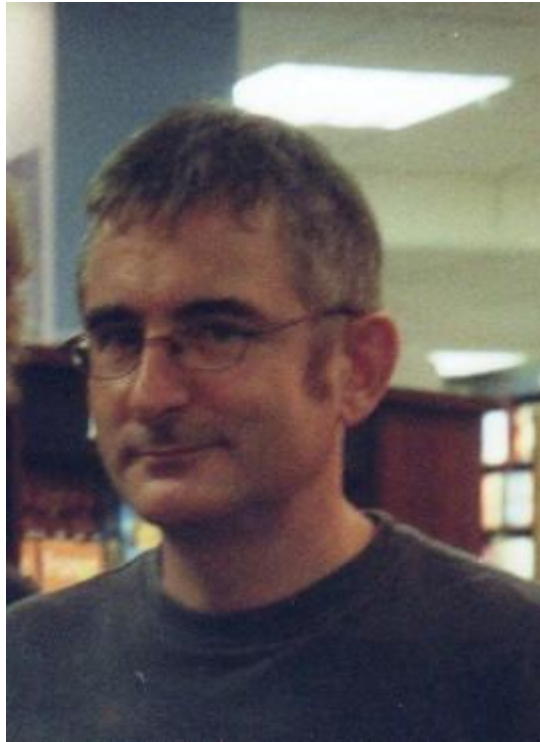


Melo, a playwright and scriptwriter as well as novelist in her native Brazil has already been flagged up as one of the leading lights in Latin American literature and deserves a wider audience in the UK.

And sticking with Bloomsbury and crime novels set in strange, exotic locations, I am greatly enjoying Malcolm Pryce's latest: *From Aberystwyth With Love* – a title I am fairly confident has *not* been used before.



If you haven't encountered the world of Louie Knight, the only private eye in Aberystwyth if not the whole of Wales, then you're in for a big surprise and quite honestly I haven't got time to explain things to you. Suffice it to say, that Louie's latest case starts with the visit of an ancient Russian museum curator (called, naturally, Uncle Vanya) from the legendary town of Hughesovka, an exact replica of Aberystwyth built in the Ukraine in the 19th Century by a crazy Czar and which has occasionally been called Stalino when politics dictated it. Add in the shady underworld scene centred on Aberystwyth Prom, snuff philatelists, a cosmonaut's sock and a renegade spinning-wheel salesman and you get some idea – or maybe none at all – of what to expect.

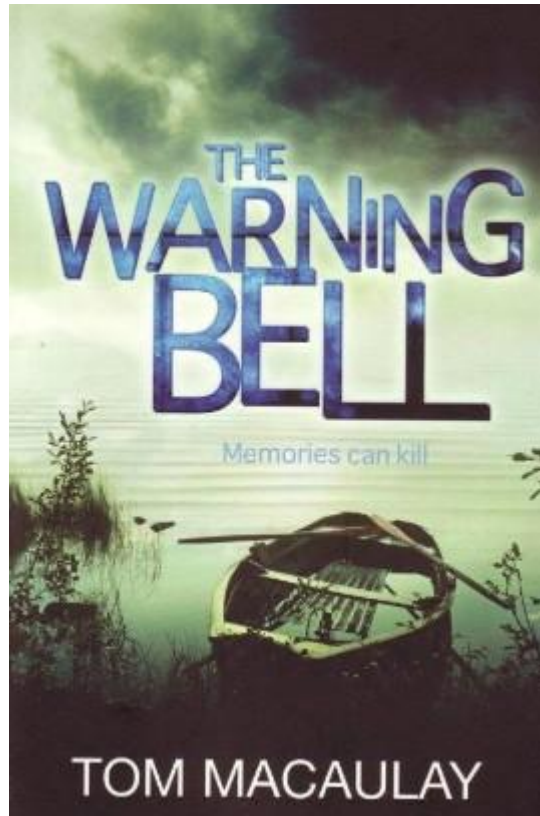


Malcolm Pryce, who lives, possibly wisely, several miles to the east of Aberystwyth, has created a surreal Welsh world (if that's not tautology) which bizarrely seems to make sense. Oh, I can't explain – just go read the damn thing and if you can stop laughing long enough to explain it all, then embroider your answers into a tea-towel and send it to me.

A an afterthought, if Malcolm is experimenting with a new direction in the titles he uses, does anyone know if *Meddyg Dim* really works as a James Bond book in Welsh?

Cool Brittany

Not enough thrillers are set in Brittany, or Armorica as some of us still call it, for it is (nowadays) a spectacularly beautiful region of France with the advantage that most of the local population hardly speak French, but something closer to Cornish or Welsh. It is an area I know well and like a lot, so my eye was drawn (even though the publishers no longer invite me to their parties) to *The Warning Bell* by a certain Tom Macauley, which is in fact a pseudonym for Tim Griggs, who lives near Oxford but clearly has an affinity for the rocky and often treacherous Breton coastline.



This is important for *The Warning Bell* has, at its heart, a boat. The wreck of a high-speed RAF launch from 1944 to be precise and its discovery leads the son of its former skipper to discover what happened on the last wartime assignment in Brittany and why his father has remained silent about it for over fifty years.

It's quite a gentle thriller as thrillers go these days, but that's no bad thing in my opinion and the quality and flavour of the writing reminds me at times of Hammond Innes and Nevil Shute, both master story tellers in their day. The characters are cleverly drawn: the distant father, the obsessive son and all the inhabitants of a small and secretive (for good reason) Breton fishing village.

If I have a carp (and I suppose I have to), this is a Brittany where the hero is told to drink "the local wine" (!) and nobody drinks *cidre* or eats *crepes*. My God, you'll be telling me next they've opened a Starbucks in St Malo. But don't let my nit-picking put you off. Do try this book; it's intelligent, gripping and thoroughly satisfying.

Even Cooler Iceland

I remember being surprised when I heard there was such a thing as an international association of crime writers, though not at all surprised that I had never been asked to join. This body, known as AIEP (please don't ask for a translation), which boasts among its members the distinguished British crime writers Susan Moody and Janet Laurence, is to hold its 2009 annual conference in Iceland. I know this because I have seen top secret, confidential documents which I should not have. In fact now I've reminded myself that I have seen them I shall probably have to kill myself.

The thing which really caught my eye was that, in the programme of the coming conference, the traditional Gala Dinner would be *followed by a romp/pub crawl in downtown Reykjavik* with Janet Laurence.

Now I am well versed in the art and conventions of the noble pub crawl but I am unclear as to what exactly a *romp/pub crawl* could entail. However, I urge caution given the latest crime statistics for Iceland, particularly those related to alcohol and public disorder and I am assured by my extensive contacts in Europol that the police in Reykjavik are always alert and on the look-out for crime writers behaving badly. To help any British crime

writer thinking of attending, I enclose a picture of an officer of the *Ríkislögreglan* special unit known as the Icelandic Romp Squad (nicknamed “The Morning Stars”) on vigilant patrol.



Lord Peter Returns (Again)

For a hero who made his debut on the crime scene almost 90 years ago, Lord Peter Wimsey still has a legion of fans worldwide, though some female fans refuse to acknowledge that part of his (fictional) life “once that bitch Harriet Vane got her claws into him”! Fortunately, the more rational among us mourned the unseemly early end to his career as the best amateur sleuth of the ‘Golden Age’ when his creator Dorothy L. Sayers published the last full-length Wimsey novel in 1937.

However, since 1998, the distinguished author Jill Paton Walsh has twice stepped into the breach to provide further Lord Peter novels in the series – it seems horribly vulgar to call it a “franchise”.

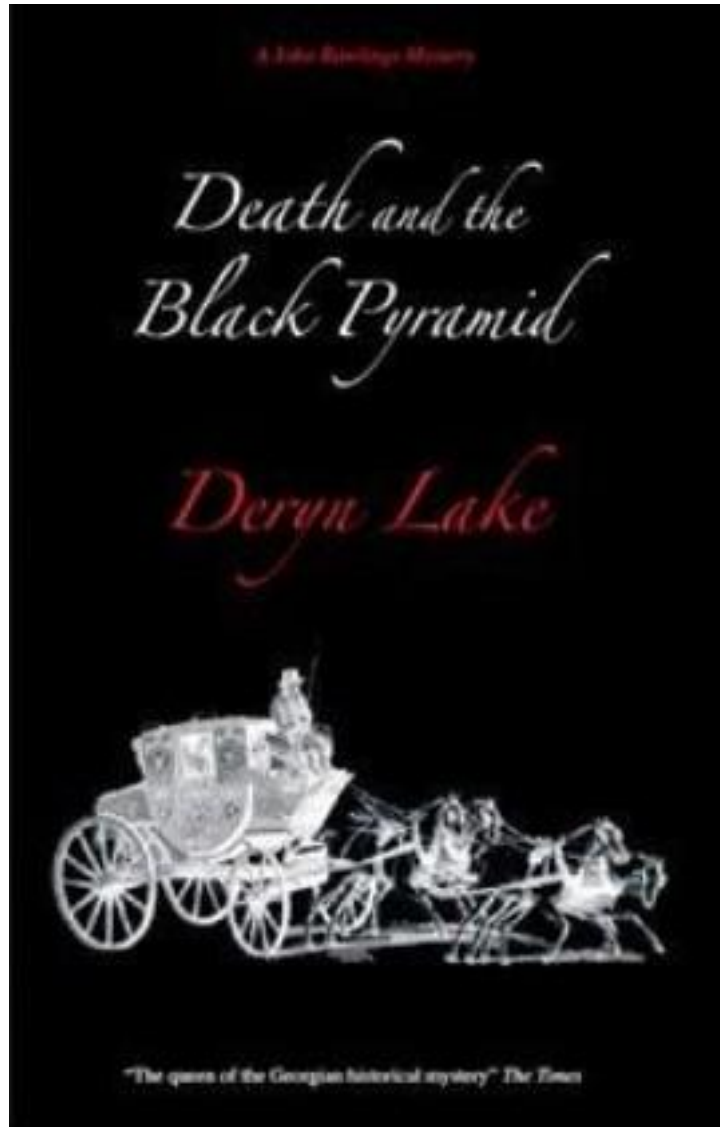


In a deal agreed with Sayers’ former agents and publishers Hodder, Jill is to provide another fix for those fans still suffering withdrawal symptoms and *The Attenbury Emeralds* is to be published in the autumn of 2010.

The new novel will revive (and solve?) one of the oft-referred-to cases which form the Wimsey back story, but which was never explained by Dorothy Sayers in detail. Whether the case of the Attenbury Emeralds turns out to be the Wimsey equivalent of Sherlock Holmes’ “Giant Rat of Sumatra” we shall have to see, but I for one am sure that the world is ready for the story.

Georgian on my mind

I am mightily impressed with the stylish new cover (from new, stylish, publisher Severn House) for the latest John Rawlings mystery *Death and the Black Pyramid* by that Queen of the Georgian mystery, the stylish Deryn Lake.



Deryn's historical mysteries featuring her apothecary detective are great fun and have a devoted following which will need no tempting from me to seek out the latest in the series, which features, I am told, the sport of bare-knuckle fist fighting, something at which Deryn is an expert, at least when it comes to lackadaisical publicity assistants and argumentative reviewers.

Going Dutch(2)

Those distinguished publishers Weidenfeld & Nicolson have sneaked out with little fanfare a splendid, if slim, volume by Elmore 'Dutch' Leonard entitled *Comfort to the Enemy* which contains three stories featuring his most recent lawman hero, US Marshal Carl Webster a.k.a. 'The Hot Kid'.

What especially caught my eye was the blurb on the cover attributed to Ian Rankin: "*Elmore Leonard is the crime-writer's crime-writer*".

Now I have to agree entirely with that sentiment. In fact in a survey of crime writers done by *The Observer* newspaper some twenty years ago in 1989, I nominated Elmore Leonard as exactly that: The Crime-Writers' Crime-Writer.

When *The Guardian* ran exactly the same survey on 3rd August 1998, I once again voted for Elmore Leonard. One of the other crime writers surveyed on that occasion was Ian Rankin. His choice then, for the crime writers' crime writer was... er... James Ellroy.

Toodles!

The Ripster