

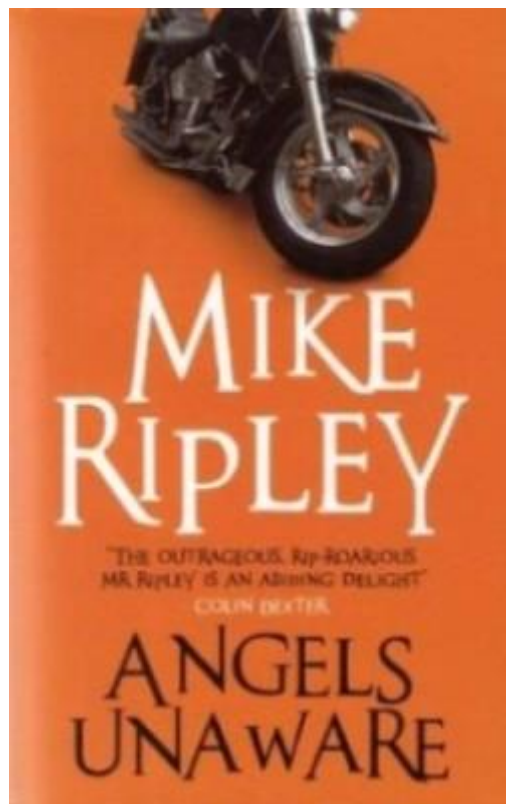
Getting Away With Murder Mike Ripley



Childlike Disappointment

My admiration for the reading capacity of Lee Child and his generosity when it comes to other authors' books is well-known.

I had hope to climax my own meagre crime-writing career with a cover-quote from Lee on the paperback of my last novel *Angels Unaware* and indeed, Lee had already provided me with a "blurb" which said: *The best book I have ever read – Lee Child.*



To be scrupulously accurate, Lee's quote was "*The best book I have ever read. This year. Written by Mike Ripley*". But I am sure he would forgive my shortening it, purely for environmental reasons, as one should never waste ink.

Sadly, after obtaining my first Lee Child endorsement in 18 novels, my publishers inform me that they have cancelled the paperback edition scheduled for September, so now no one will ever see Lee's glowing endorsement.

Naturally I am distraught and must now find a way to replace not only the substantial income which crime writing provides, but all its attendant and generous expenses and allowances. This will not be easy in the current economic climate and it seems that my only option will be to become a Member of Parliament.

In Town Tonight

It was a pleasure to suffer the long and uncomfortable journey up to London (now that the railway seems to have abolished the refreshment cars which used to make travel tolerable), to meet author Tom Macauley, whose excellent thriller *The Warning Bell* I mentioned last time.



At a private lunch organised by his publisher Orion for important critics and reviewers, and Barry Forshaw, I was fascinated to learn from Tom (real name Tim) that the plot of *Warning Bell* with its back-story of the wartime exploits of RAF launches running secret agents into occupied France, was not only factually based but had, for Tom, a close family connection. Not to give too much away, the plot revolves around an old RAF launch surfacing (not literally) in Brittany fifty years after the war. Unless I misheard (it was a very good lunch), Tom drew inspiration from his own father's wartime career and in the course of writing the book actually found his father's own launch now land-locked in a field in southern Spain!

I have already warmly recommended this very well-written thriller once and I do so again, to all and sundry (especially sundry) including my fellow critics, as it harks back to a gentler, more human – dare one say “gentlemanly” these days? – school of quintessentially British thriller writing.

Over luncheon, Professor Forshaw, the editor of a well-known encyclopaedia (and *not* “an encyclopaedia salesman” as I have seen him described), regaled us with amusing tales of the recent *Crimefest* convention in Bristol which, for legal reasons, I was unable to attend. It appears that Barry was called upon to accept an award on behalf of Christopher Fowler at the convention's lavish banquet and he graciously took the time to explain to me that this was in fact the Last Laugh Award for humorous crime writing.



This particular award seems to be a fascinating and worthy institution and I cannot think why it sounded faintly familiar.

Less than 48 hours later – with hardly enough time to supervise the annual moat cleaning at Ripster Hall – it was back to old London town where, on the edge of rolling savannahs of Regent’s Park, that jolly magnificent publisher John Murray were hosting the party of the year.

The sad part of the evening was a farewell to JM press supremo Lucy Dixon who is to pursue her second career as a white hunter, on safari in South Africa. But no sooner had the assembled company (almost all the great and good of the crime fiction scene) said *Veilig ry!* to Lucy (which is “Toodles” in Afrikaans) that it was a big Hello to Anna Kenny-Ginard who is to step into Lucy’s designer heels.



My picture cannot do justice to the scale of the festivities but gathered in just one of the many pavilions specially erected for the event were (left to right): Andrew Williams (author of that splendid wartime thriller *The Interrogator*), Mike ‘Tombstone’ Stotter, Ann Featherstone (debut author in September of the Victorian mystery *Walking In Pimlico*), Anna Kenny-Ginard, Mike Carlson and, of course, Professor Barry Forshaw.

Criticwatch

The announcement of the new Dan Brown novel *The Lost Symbol* (published in the UK by Transworld in September and already available for pre-order at 50% discount on Amazon) has certainly ignited the opprobrium of the chattering or twittering classes.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Liz Hunt (no, I've never heard of her either) reports: *The author apparently relied on gravity boots to relieve his writer's block: hanging upside down, he says, lets him view his plots from a different perspective. Given how utterly one-dimensional they are, I don't see why it was necessary.*

Over the next three months, expect many other critics to be sharpening their claws in anticipation of *Da Vinci Code 2* but they should really spare a thought for all the poor authors who have books coming out in September. Fortunately, I no longer feature among their ranks.

One reviewer already has sharp claws and used them to scratch (I am sure ineffectively) at Val McDermid. Reviewing the paperback edition of her excellent *A Darker Domain*, Brandon Robshaw – whom I believe is an occasional lecturer in “creative writing” for something called the Open University – starts off by saying the book is quite good...so good in his world that it is “*ideal for the beach or hotel balcony*”.

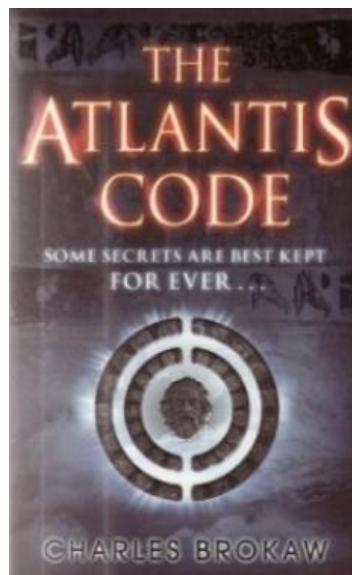
But then, at the end of his review in the *Independent On Sunday* (which used to have decent crime reviewers I seem to recall) he cannot resist a final swipe: *The only drawback is that McDermid likes her heroine a bit too much. Dumpy an unglamorous on the outside but sexy and with a razor-sharp mind, DI Pirie is very much a creature of wish fulfilment.*

Now that to me sounds like someone striving to fulfil a wish to be taken seriously as a “literary critic” by being as bitchy as possible.

What Else?

Those perky publishers at Penguin have kindly sent me an advance copy of a new thriller by American Charles Brokaw. The pre-publication hype hails it as “a stunning adventure thriller in the bestselling style of *The Da Vinci Code* and *Atlantis*.”

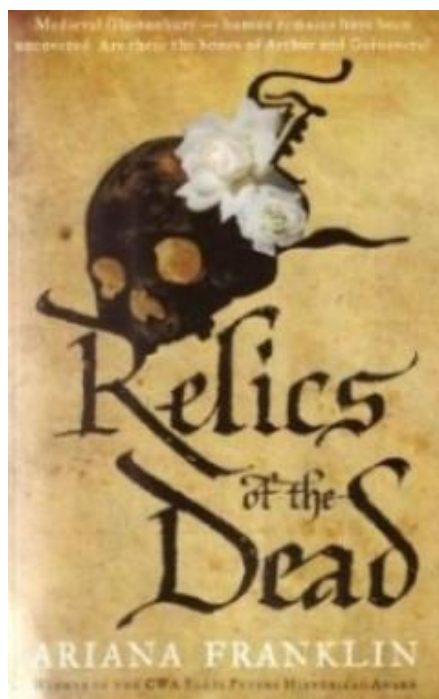
A book which combines all the attributes of *Atlantis* and *The Da Vinci Code*? I wonder what it could possibly be called?



This should not, however, be confused with Thomas Greanias' new thriller *The Atlantis Revelation* published by Pocket Books in October.

When the Gloating had to stop

I have been upbraided, nay scolded, by one of our colonial cousins for gloating over the fact that I was able to read a proof copy of Rennie Airth's *Dead of Winter* before the book was made available to the general mass of ordinary humanity. Well, I make no apologies for continuing to gloat over the fact that I am reading – and greatly enjoying – the third “Mistress of the Art of Death” book, *Relics of the Dead* by Ariana Franklin, a good three months before the general public are allowed to purchase a copy.



Ariana Franklin's inspired heroine Adelia Aguilar is a dangerously liberated woman for 12th century England. Not only is she cosmopolitan in her education and upbringing, the former lover of an English bishop and a single mother but also a doctor with a specialist interest in pathology, although in those pre-NHS days 'lady doctors' were quite likely to be burned as witches. As a consequence, Adelia travels in disguise as the translator for an Arab who fronts for her as the 'real' doctor – though travelling in England in the company of a Saracen in the 1170s must have been dangerous enough.

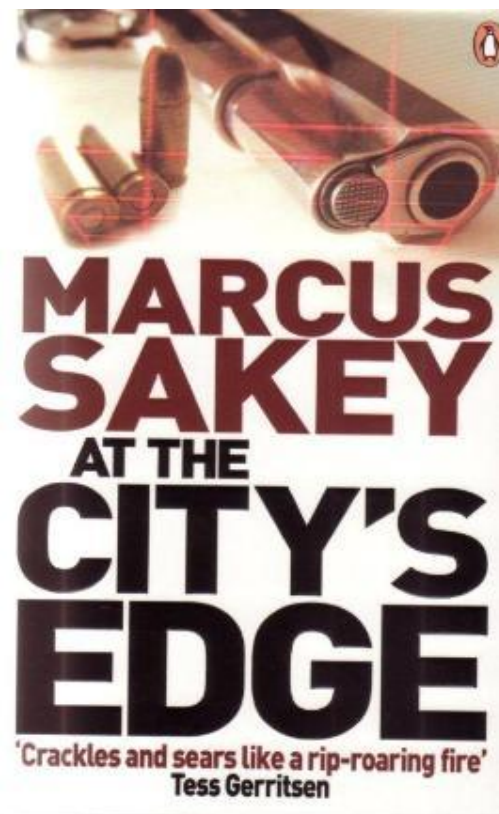
Adelia's special talents (if televised, they really must call it *CSI Medieval*) are recognised by the sharp-witted but tight-fisted Henry II and in *Relics of the Dead* (available to you mere mortals from Bantam Press in August) he orders her and her travelling entourage to investigate two skeletons discovered in the aftermath of an earthquake and fire at the once super-rich monastery of Glastonbury. Is it possible that these are the bodies of the mythical King Arthur and Queen Guinevere? If they are, they could be an inspiration to the rebellious Welsh, but on the other hand, they'd make a brilliant tourist attraction.

Ariana Franklin doesn't mess around with cod Middle Ages dialogue and tells her story (and shows off her considerable knowledge of the period) in a modern, straightforward way. She is also not afraid to poke fun at Welsh stereotypes (who is?) and there is a lovely running gag about a scruffy Welsh troubadour.

I should of course point out that I am enjoying *Relics of the Dead* in my main residence. In my Second Home, I am actually reading the new novel by that charming – but appallingly young and talented – American, Marcus Sakey.



Already published by those perky people at Penguin, *At the City's Edge* is an absorbing, hard-as-nails streetwise thriller set on the gang-infested mean streets of Chicago. I would recommend Marcus Sakey to any palate jaded by serial killers and thrillers which sacrifice character and decent writing in the name of plot twists which are usually implausible if you stop to think. For me, discovering Sakey was akin to reading my first Elmore Leonard back in the last century. Yes, he's that good.

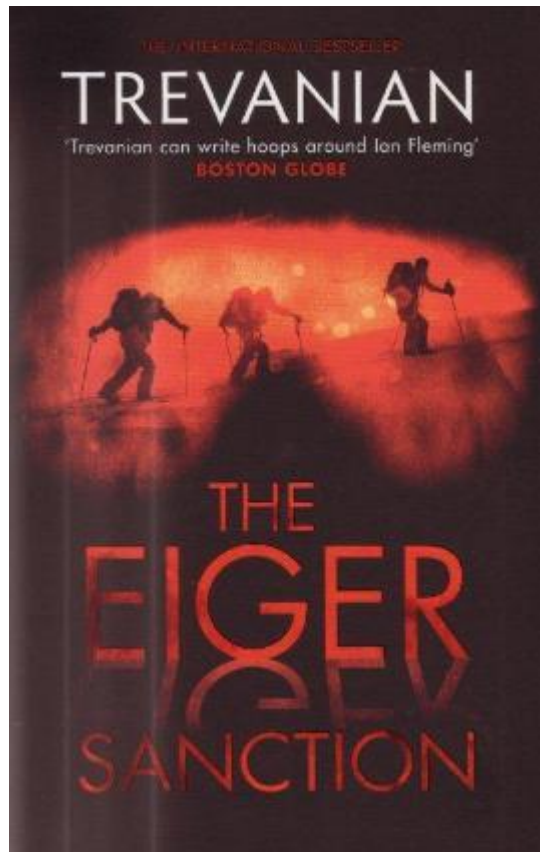


Altered States

In the run up to publication in July, Bantam have announced title changes to Tom Cain's third thriller *The Challenger* which will now be published as *Assassin*, and to Swedish crime writer Johan Theorin's *Snowbound* which will continue the Viking invasion of our bookshops under the title *Where The Dead Lay*.

Notable Reissues

I am constantly being rebuked for over-use of the word ‘legendary’ but one thriller which I think can justifiably claim that epithet is *The Eiger Sanction* by the reclusive and slightly mysterious American scholar and author Rodney Whitaker, better known as ‘Trevanian’. This 1972 thriller (filmed with Clint Eastwood as Dr Jonathan Hemlock, art professor and professional assassin) is beautifully reissued by Old Street Publishing.



Another legendary (there I go again) thriller with a famous film tie-in, also dating from 1972, is John Godey’s *The Taking of Pelham 123*, which is republished for us by Corgi in July, along with American bestseller Tess Gerritsen’s *Girl Missing* from 1994, marking its first publication in the UK. (It originally had the rather catchier title *Peggy Sue Got Murdered*.)

And although it is science rather than crime fiction (but it gives me the chance to use ‘legendary’ again), I am delighted that Gollancz are reissuing Philip K. Dick’s *The Man In The High Castle*. I am also looking forward to the series of notable reissues to mark Weidenfeld & Nicolson’s sixty years of publishing, among them J.G. Farrell’s excellent *The Siege of Krishnapur* which, if memory serves, is a jolly accurate rendition of those heady and really rather exciting days out in India.

Awards Season(1)

The Awards Season is upon us, though one is tempted to ask when *isn’t* there an award for mystery fiction going down? We’ve had the Edgars and the Agatha and the *Spinetingler* Awards and the Diamond Dagger recently, plus nominations announced for the Glass Key, the Anthony and the Macavity Awards. And the closing date for the UK’s own Duncan Lawrie Gold Dagger and the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger has now been and gone so we await the judges’ shortlists with bated breath and heaving bosom.

I was jolly excited to be invited to a press conference at The British Library last year when the shortlists were to be revealed despite severe reservations of a potentially embarrassing situation involving some 30 years’

worth of unpaid library fines. However, I was saved all of that – and an exhausting journey from the provinces – by the consideration of my old friend Natasha Cooper, who revealed the shortlist in the society pages of *The Times* some days before the press conference, thus saving me the journey.

In truth it is many years since anyone sought my opinion on the Daggers, but I shall give them nonetheless and will pick with unerring kiss-of-death accuracy, six titles each for the Gold (Crime) Dagger and the Steel (Thriller) Dagger.

For the Crime Dagger, I would select: *When Will There Be Good News?* by Kate Atkinson (Doubleday); *The Private Patient* by P.D. James (Faber); *The Other Half Lives* by Sophie Hannah (Hodder); *War Damage* by Elizabeth Wilson (Serpent's Tail); *A Darker Domain* by Val McDermid (Harper); and *The Information Officer* by Mark Mills (Harper).

For the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger: *The Interrogator* by Andrew Williams (John Murray) which actually has Ian Fleming as a character!; *Typhoon* by Charles Cumming (Michael Joseph); *October Skies* by Alex Scarrow (Orion); *The Spies of Warsaw* by Alan Furst (Weidenfeld); *The Warning Bell* by Tom Macauley; and *The Tourist* by Olen Steinhauer (Harper).

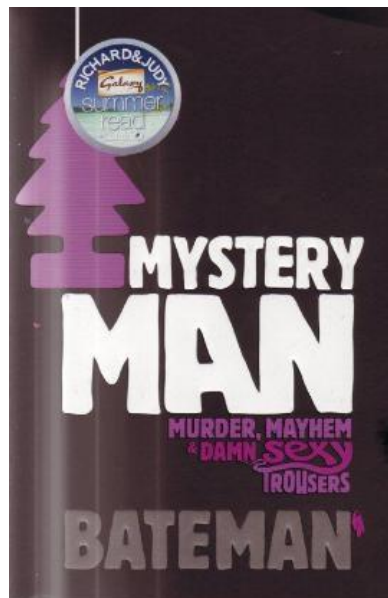
But what do I know?

With apologies to the authors mentioned above for totally scuppering any serious chance they might have had of winning.

No Mystery

Even though the divine Richard & Judy no longer grace our screens, their influence lingers on in the selection of “Richard & Judy Summer Reads”.

This accolade has just fallen on the new ‘Bateman’ (the Northern Irish writer previously known as Colin) novel *Mystery Man* and his happy publishers at Headline have rushed forward the paperback edition of the book to take advantage.



I can think of fewer jollier reads this summer, for it is almost certainly the funniest crime novel of the year, with an un-named hero (a mystery bookshop proprietor) who has a least one PhD in anal retention. There are some excruciatingly embarrassing moments, some over-ripe puns and several wonderful swipes at the crime

writing establishment, but the best gag is the title of a local history book on the building of the *Titanic* in Belfast's famous shipyards: *It Was Fine When It Left Us*.

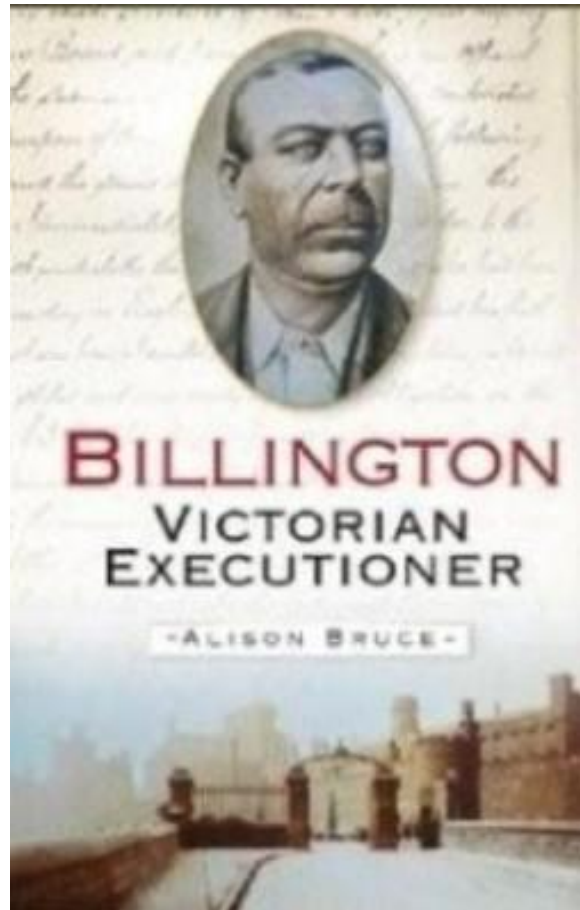
Alumni News

I am *totally* looking forward (as the young people say) to this year's reunion of the St Heffer's College alumni at the annual *Bodies In the Bookshop* event in Cambridge on 21st July.

One of the new alumni is local author Alison Bruce, who burst on to the crime fiction scene late last year with her first novel *Cambridge Blue*.



But before then, Alison will be using the college grounds at St Heffer's (Trinity Street) to launch her latest book on 18th June, only this time it's not fiction, but biography: *Billington: Victorian Executioner*, published by The History Press.



As I now know (because Alison told me), James Billington conducted 151 executions between 1884 and 1901. Three of Billington's sons John, William and Thomas followed in his footsteps and at the turn of the 20th century every execution in Great Britain was carried out by a member of the Billington family. *Billington: Victorian Executioner* tells the stories behind James Billington's executions and introduces the reader to each of the Billingtons, illuminating the dark side and ultimate downfall of a family whose business was dealing with death.

Writing the book, says Alison, gave her “the opportunity to explore the stories behind the murders and the tragic consequences of being Britain's number one hangman.”

Busman's Holiday

I never miss an opportunity to visit that fine Shire of Dorset and when there, as recently, I make a point of visiting Lyme Regis and not only because I have a natural affinity with dinosaurs. The town has a fine literary reputation, most famously in modern times through the novelist John Fowles, but many years ago some of us young bucks used to holiday there, enjoying skittles, ale and crab sandwiches at The Pilot Boat Inn before setting off on a fossil hunt.

In particular I well remember my old tutor in Anglo-Saxon, Reuel Tolkein, after seven or eight pints, making us all laugh with tales of his imaginary friends (I think he called them “hobbits”) and we all agreed he really ought to write them down one day. I wonder if he ever did?

Today Lyme boasts two of my favourite second-hand bookshops. I cannot of course reveal their locations for to do so would be base commercialism, but any book lover can easily sniff them out. On my recent visit I picked up for a song two books by that disgracefully-forgotten crimemeister John Bingham: *The Third Skin* (his second novel, I think, from 1954) and *A Fragment of Fear* from 1965, which interestingly carries a very astute

'blurb' from none other than John le Carré: ...*an example of the classic crime novel; the tension within is expressed by the tension without. In a nightmare world he handles his characters with compassion and sincerity but also alarm.*

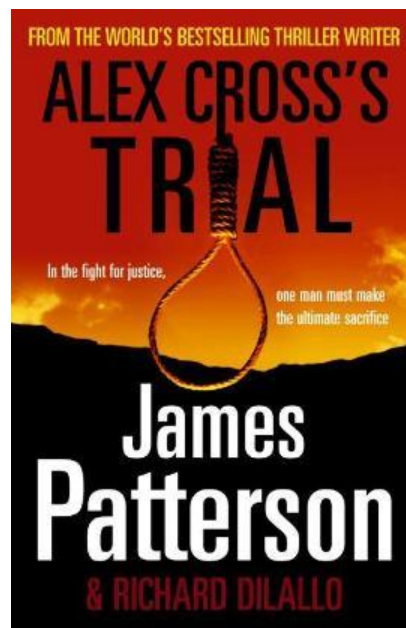


I am sure I do not have to remind the majority of my cultured and highly intelligent readers that John Bingham was the pen-name of Lord Clanmorris, John le Carré's Section Head in MI6 – and said to be the model for George Smiley.

Mention of Smiley reminds me that there is some excellent crime fiction on BBC Radio 4 (or the Home Service as we still call it in East Anglia) at the moment. Not only is the entire Smiley canon being dramatised starring Simon Russell Beale, but Anton Lesser is into a new series of Lindsey Davis' super Falco books and Bill Nighy is doing excellent work as Simon Brett's drunken thespian detective Charles Paris. That cast list alone is worth the price of the Licence Fee.

Hardly a Cross Word

It looks like being James Patterson's year, but then again, when isn't it? In September, Century will publish *Alex Cross's Trial* which actually provides a back-story for Patterson's best known character.



Set in Mississippi at the turn of the century, the central character this time is Abraham Cross, Alex's great-uncle. The man himself resumes centre stage in November with the publication of the modestly titled *I, Alex Cross*.

100 Up

John Harvey, who surely holds the record for the most public appearances at conventions and literary festivals this year, tells me that his new novel *Far Cry* will be his 100th published book, cementing his reputation as one of the hardest working writers in crime fictiondom.

Still something of a callow youth, recently entering only his 70th year, John disguised many of his earlier works under a web of pseudonyms, though his most prolific year was possibly 1976 which alone saw the publication of: *Amphetamines and Pearls*, *Kill Hitler*, *The Geranium Kiss*, *Sonora Slaughter*, *Blood Line*, *White Death* and *River of Blood*.

John has also taken time off from his busy schedule to recommend the Victorian ‘Bella Wallis’ mysteries as penned by his old friend Brian Thompson who, he says, “lays bare the sexual shenanigans and hypocrisy of Victorian England.”

Those inventive people at Random House have had the charming idea of sending reviewers a copy of the first Bella Wallis mystery (Bella herself being a mystery writer in 1875) *The Widow's Secret* (Vintage paperbacks) and the second adventure, *The Captain's Table* (out this month in hardback from Chatto), in an attractive parcel tied neatly with red ribbon.



Top marks to the marketing department for a sensitive, appropriate and effective piece of promotion – and I never thought I’d say that about a publisher.

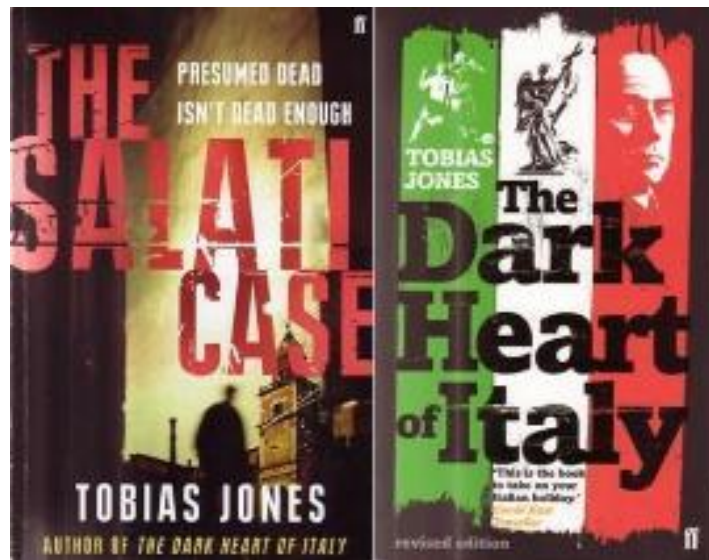
Queen of a Small Island

On a recent edition of *Woman's Hour* (required listening here at Ripster Hall), the Icelandic author of two crime novels, Yrsa Siguroardottir was asked how she enjoyed being labelled the “Queen of Icelandic Crime”.

She admitted that it was an unusual title to bear as she was “the *only* crime writer in Iceland” though I *think* she meant to say the only female one. She also admitted that she never wrote sex scenes as Iceland was a small country (its population is less than that of Coventry) and people would think she was writing about her own sex life.

Italian Jobs

After his non-fictional account of the Italian attitude to crime, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Tobias Jones turns his hand to crime fiction for the first time with *The Salati Case* to be published by those fabulous people at Faber and Faber (so fab, they named it twice) this month.



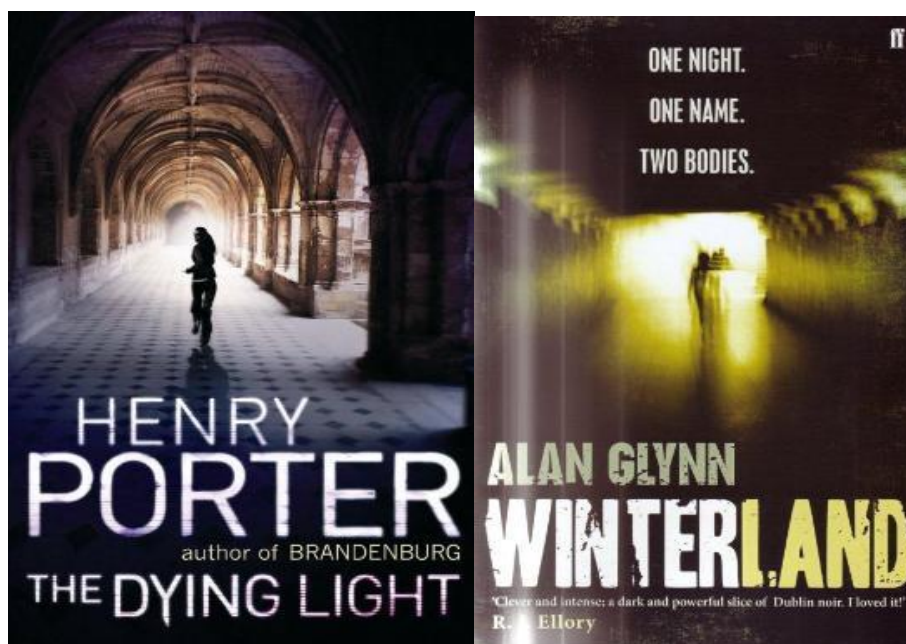
I believe that Tobias Jones emigrated to Parma ten years ago and that Parma could well be “the city” in which *Salati Case* is mainly set, though I do not think it is ever actually stated. There are constant references to “the Padanian fog” which had me confused until I realised it was the name young people give to that area of Northern Italy which is far better known (to anyone with a modicum of education) as *Gallia Cisalpina*.

The Salati Case introduces private eye Castagnetti (known as ‘Casta’), who seems ripe for a series, and is cleverly written as a homage to Raymond Chandler and, more especially (I would say), to Ross Macdonald. Anyone missing Aurelio Zen as created by the late, great Michael Dibdin, could do a lot worse than discover Casta.

Another Bumper Year?

There are already enough *new* mysteries/thrillers scheduled for 2009 to provide the dedicated reader with a brand new title *every single day* and more titles are still to be announced as publishers’ Autumn catalogues begin to appear.

I for one am looking forward to those long, leafy evenings and there are books coming for which I have already reserved space in my To Be Read Tower. In no particular order: Megan Abbott’s *Queenpin* will be published this side of the Atlantic and I keenly await Aly Monroe’s second WWII spy novel *Washington Shadow*, as I will have already devoured the elegant Henry Porter’s new thriller *The Dying Light* in August and then in November, comes the much talked about *Winterland* by Irishman Alan Glynn.



Michael Connelly (who seems to be churning out a bestseller every six months) sends hero Harry Bosch to the Far East in *9 Dragons*; Ian Rankin publishes his second life-after-Rebus novel, as yet untitled; and veterans James Lee Burke and Elmore Leonard return with, respectively, *Rain Gods* and *Road Dogs*.

But I have to admit that the title I am most keenly looking forward to in November is the British publication of *Spade & Archer*, the prequel to Dashiell Hammett's 1930 classic *The Maltese Falcon* by American author Joe Gores, who has not only been a private investigator in San Francisco in real life, but as a writer has actually won the Japanese Maltese Falcon award.

And thinking ahead into the New Year, Weidenfeld will be publishing a new Alan Furst WWII spy novel, as yet untitled, in January 2010, for those of you who put Book Tokens on your Christmas lists.

Not A Thriller More, Not a Thriller Less

Three men, one mission says the press release announcing the formation of something called The Curzon Group, which obviously has no room for girlies among its ranks, with the avowed intention of restoring the reputation of "the Great British thriller".

The Curzon Group's manifesto (it says here) "promises to end the reign of the production-line American thriller writers such as James Patterson, John Grisham and Dan Brown".

Now that would be fighting talk, had it come from a consortium of publishing houses prepared to pool their massive marketing budgets, or indeed a national chain of bookshops announcing an end to renting shelf-space and 90% discounts. But when it comes from three authors – Matt Lynn, Martin Baker and Alan Clements – all, I believe, having published one book each, then one simply has to ask how they think they will achieve this noble aim.

They do, however, have a Patron Saint to inspire them and provide a quote for their manifesto: "The tradition of thriller writing should never be allowed to die, not least because we are better at it than anyone else in the world."

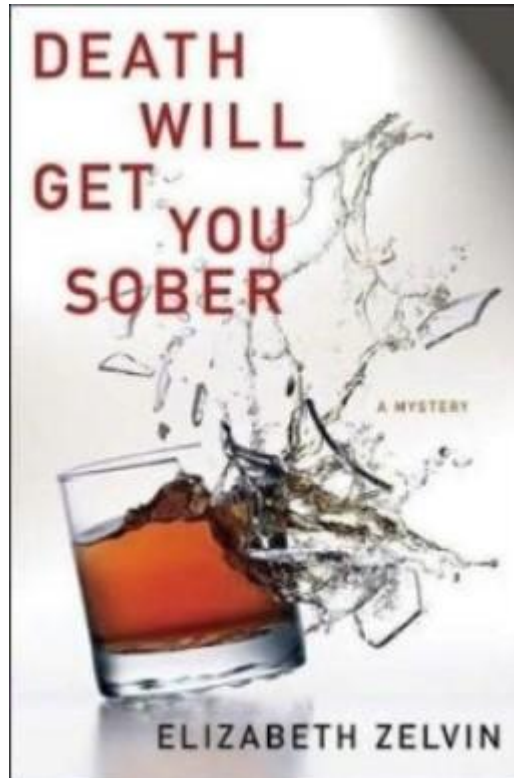
And as their inspirational patron is none other than thrill-*meister* (Lord) Jeffrey Archer, they will surely succeed

Won't they?

Awards Season (2)

At the risk on putting The Black Spot on even more authors, I am unreliably informed that hot favourites for the Anthony Awards (presented at Boucheron in Indianapolis in October) are (Best Novel) *Trigger City* by Sean Chercover and (Best original paperback) *Money Shot* by Christa Faust, though sadly I do not believe either is published yet in the UK.

Certain other items on the Anthony's short-list also caught my eye. Not for the first time, my good friend the millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim is up for a "Special Service" to the genre Award even though I hear he is in the running for a Nobel Prize for services to Swedish literature, and I could not help but notice one of the books listed in the Best Cover Art section.



My first thought on seeing *Death Will Get You Sober* was the response: *No he bloody well won't.*

Toodles!

The Ripster