

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



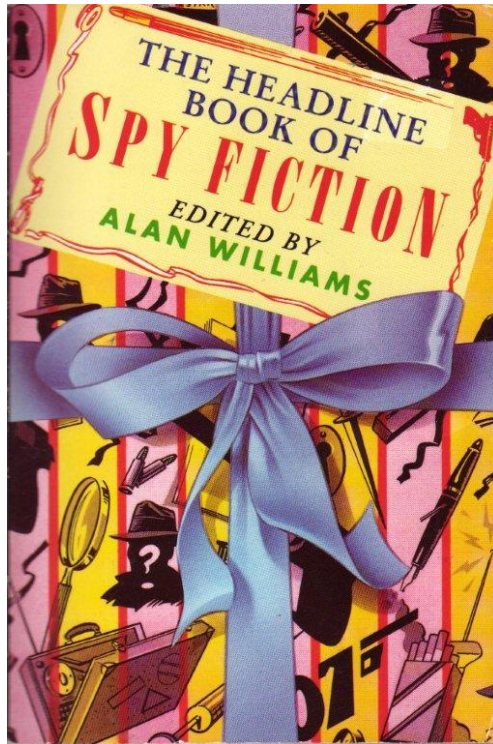
Table Talk

I recently enjoyed a thoroughly entertaining luncheon with veteran journalist and thriller writer Alan Williams who proved to be not only a generous host but a positive fund of stories about his Fleet Street days as a foreign correspondent. I particularly enjoyed his description of trying to play poker with fellow journalist (and fellow thriller writer) Gerald Seymour whilst under mortar fire in south-east Asia and his recounting of what it was like to be in the Old Bailey when the Kray twins came to trial.



Unusually for a novelist of some repute, he talked little about his own work but he did mention, in passing, that he had once edited an anthology of spy fiction which I had to admit (to myself, not to him) that I had not heard of before.

As soon as I was able (it was a very good lunch), I tracked down a copy of *The Headline Book of Spy Fiction* edited by Alan in 1992 and what a gem it is!



The *Book of Spy Fiction* is a truly great sampler, a brilliant beginner's guide to the rich tapestry that it is spy fiction which has contributed so much to the crime/mystery/thriller genre. All the usual suspects are there in cleverly-chosen extracts, from the founding fathers William Le Queux, Conan Doyle, Kipling and Childers, to Buchan, Sapper, Maugham, Greene and Ambler, and into the modern era of the Cold War with Fleming, Deighton, Le Carre, Ted Allbeury and Desmond Bagley.

What you might not have expected (I did not) were the cunning selections, all illustrating a particular piece of spy craft, from the writings of Irwin Shaw, Nancy Mitford, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh and Michael Gilbert, not to mention J.B. "Beachcomber" Morton and that almost forgotten but memorably named crime writer the late Kyril Bonfiglioli, author of the equally memorable *Don't Point that Thing At Me*.



Nice one, Kyril.

There is even the official obituary of Commander Wilfred 'Biffy' Dunderdale from the *Daily Telegraph* and if you have to ask who that was, then just imagine a devilishly handsome man in a tuxedo lighting a cigarette and saying: "The name's Dunderdale; Biffy Dunderdale".....

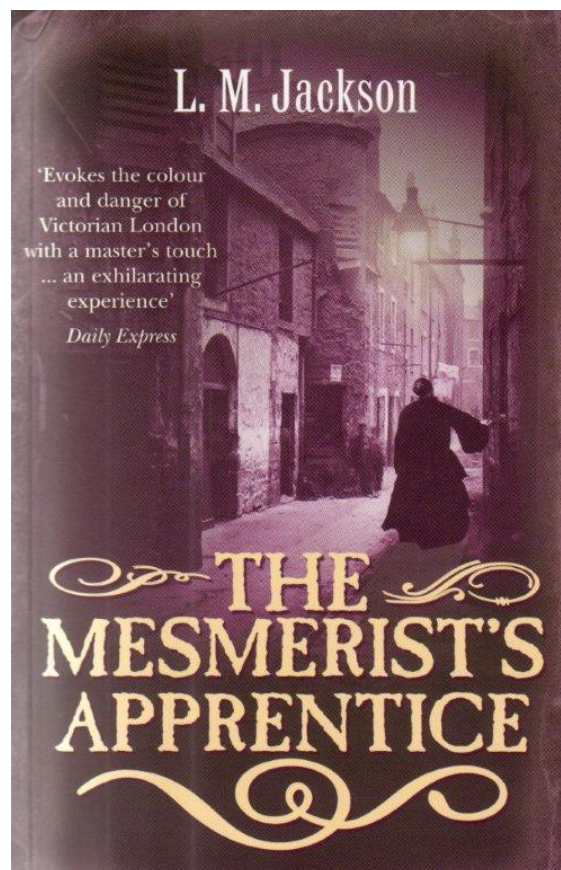
But possibly the jewel in the crown of this anthology is the Introduction by Williams himself where he recounts, with a wonderful air of feigned indignation, how he must have been the only Cambridge undergraduate of his generation *not* to be recruited by the Intelligence Services – either British or Russian!

He goes on to admit that he had his fill of real life spies and secret policemen in his career as a foreign correspondent in numerous hot-spots, including Hungary, Algeria and Vietnam. He also notes a casual meeting in 1962 in a bar in Beirut with a man named Harold Adrian Russell Philby – better known as ‘Kim’.

Victorian Values

I cannot claim to be a great fan of mysteries set in the Victorian period, usually preferring the authentically Victorian practitioners of the art (Dickens, Collins, Hume, Doyle & Co take some beating) although I make notable exceptions in the case of such fine writers as Peter Lovesey with his wonderful Sgt Cribb novels and Tony Pollard’s *Minutes of the Lazarus Club* was one of the most enjoyable reads of 2008.

A certain debut novel in 2003, however, did make me sit up and take notice and that was the atmospheric *London Dust* by Lee Jackson. More recently, under the name ‘L. M. Jackson’ Lee, who is an authority on Victorian London, launched what seemed to be a series featuring amateur sleuth Sarah Tanner in *A Most Dangerous Woman* and then the excellent follow-up *The Mesmerist’s Apprentice*.



So it was with much anticipation that I heard that I heard that Lee’s seventh novel was due and would take an even more innovative turn, a murder mystery formed around a set of Victorian diaries and called, aptly enough, *Diary of a Murder*. However, Lee’s new book will not be found in any bookshop; indeed it will not exist at all in printed form – but fans of his work will be able to read it *free* on the jolly old interweb at www.victorianlondon.org/diary/index.htm.

In a way it is a most appropriate medium for this book. As Lee points out, diaries and ‘common place’ books were the Victorian equivalents of the modern ‘blog’ and, like modern bloggers, entries can be lively, tedious, comical and self-obsessed. The only difference really being that Victorian diarists wrote for posterity whereas bloggers – or so I am told – write for the *now*. (I am tempted to suggest that ‘twitterers’ – if that’s the right word – write not so much for the *now* as the *who-the-hell-cares?*)

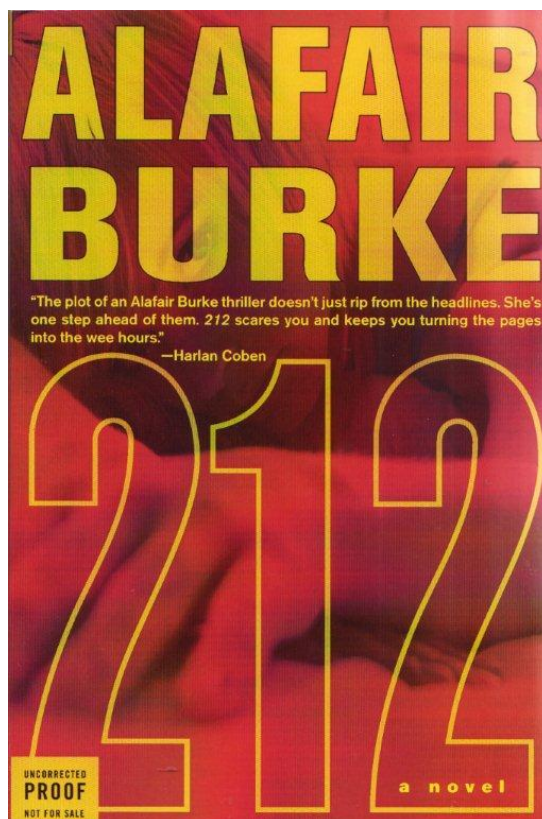
The underlying reason why *Diary of a Murder* is not appearing in printed book form, however, is because Lee has not found a publisher for it in this country (although it will appear in France) and he is remarkably honest in his reaction to this state of affairs.

“A year ago,” writes Lee, “my last publishing deal with Random House came to an end. Why? It’s all about sales. My books were selling in thousands, and Random House expected tens of thousands. Basically, I’d had my chance (not a bad one, amounting to six books) and they wanted new blood and bestsellers. Fair enough; it’s a tough business, publishing.”

Tough indeed, and I wish Lee every success in his electronic stand against the combined forces of publishing, book selling, capitalism, God and Mammon (okay, so I’m getting carried away now) and would remind any fan of well-written, immaculately-researched Victorian mysteries that *Diary of a Murder* is now available – and *free!*

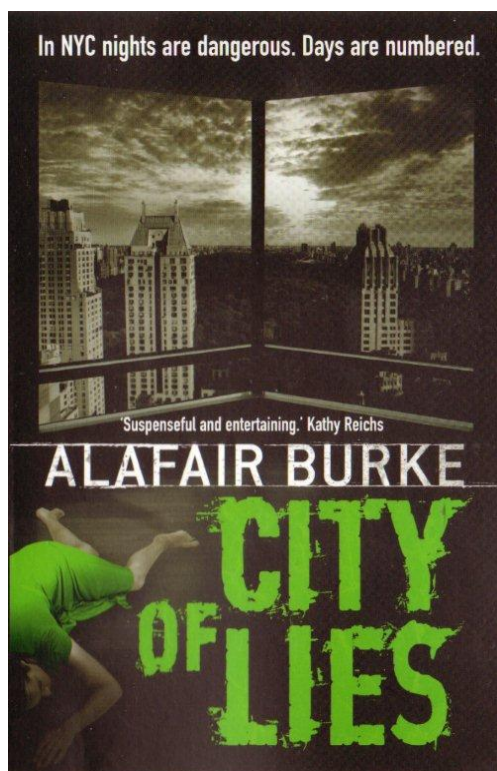
The English Version

Alafair Burke, daughter of the legendary James Lee, has a new novel out in February, featuring New York detective Ellie Hatcher and partner J.J. Rogan investigating the murder of a New York university student and it comes with a stunning endorsement – “keeps you turning the pages into the wee hours” – from no less than Harlan Coben.



This New York set mystery (and the observant reader will have noticed that I have mention New York thrice now) is called, in the US, *212* which, as most cosmopolitan jet-setters will know, is the area telephone code for New York.

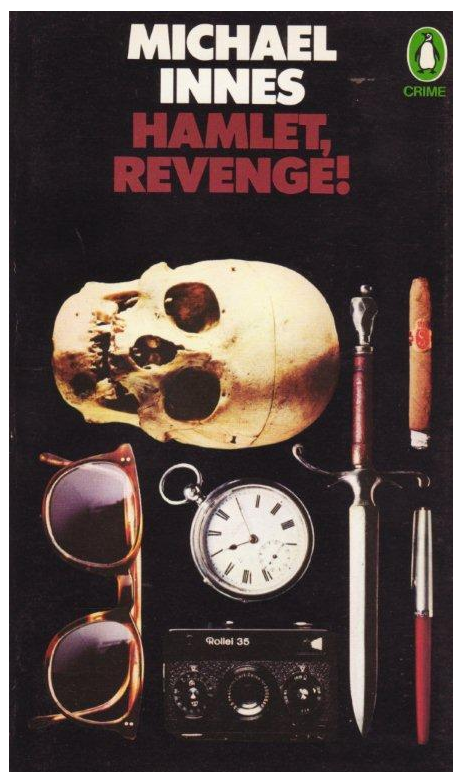
Sadly, because I think *212* has a snap to it as a title (and didn’t Donald Westlake once write a cracking thriller called simply *361?*) it was thought too difficult a concept for the European market and so when the book is published by Avon in the UK it will go under the title *City of Lies*.



Still, *City of Lies* is a good title, as R. J. Ellroy must have thought when he used it for his 2007 thriller, not to mention Peter McCabe, Elaine Gill and C.A.C. Winchester, who did the same before him.

Hamlet who?

I thoroughly enjoyed the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Hamlet* which was filmed by the BBC and shown over Christmas as part of its annual Dr Who/David Tennant festival.



I had almost forgotten how easy William Shakespeare had it when he wrote the play, for all he had to do was string together a couple of hundred well-known phrases and sayings and toss in about fifty titles of crime novels, not forgetting to have everybody die at the end, and he had a palpable hit on his hands.

Mind you, if he'd done it as a novel I bet his publisher would have insisted on it being only the first in a long-running series featuring the gloomy 'Inspector Hamlet'. After all, you know how popular Scandinavian crime fiction is.

Oddly enough, another Dr Who turned up on television at some point between the cold turkey and the third wave of mince pies, none other than Peter Davison in the role of Golden Age sleuth Albert Campion, as created by Margery Allingham.

The two short-lived (and rarely repeated) series of *Campion* made by the BBC in 1989/90 never came close to challenging the popularity of that other period piece *Agatha Christie's Poirot* even though Davison made a decent enough fist of the title role, ably assisted by the glorious Brian Glover as manservant and general factotum, Magersfontein Lugg.

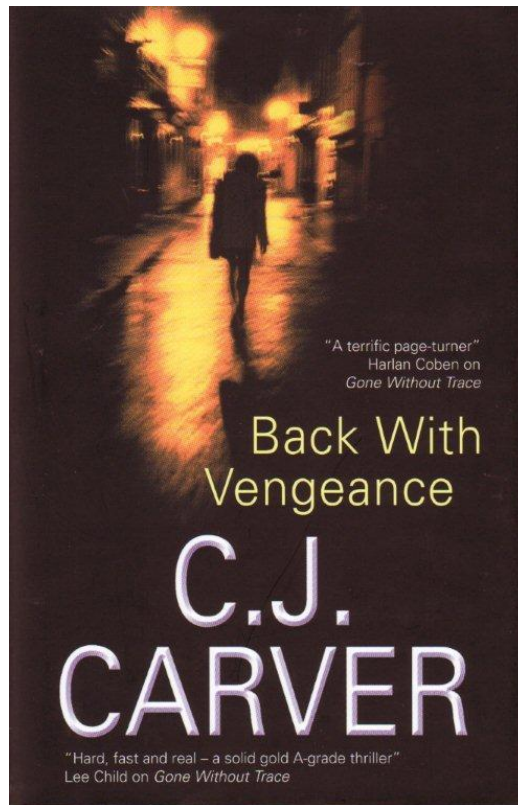


I admit to having a soft spot for the *Campion* series as I was employed as a consultant historical adviser to the design department, particularly for those episodes filmed on location in the Essex and Suffolk countryside. When the BBC needed to know what a Suffolk village pub's saloon bar looked like in 1931, who else were they going to call?

Action Woman

Vigorous, action thrillers written by ladies are (and I know I'll get into trouble for saying this) relatively rare. Thrillers written by half-English, half-New Zealander women are probably even rarer, especially women who have competed in car rallies around South America and from London to Saigon, co-piloted a Cessna over the Grand Canyon and fished for Salmon in Scotland and barracuda off Florida.

Amazingly, C.J. (Caroline) Carver occasionally takes time to draw breath and write (though simply reading of her real-life exploits leaves me exhausted and slumped in an arm-chair, reaching for the Night Nurse) and her new novel, just out from Severn House, is ***Back With Vengeance***.



I have had advance notice that ***Back With Vengeance*** will be reviewed for this esteemed organ by the knowledgeable and highly discerning Fiona Messenger, who I believe rates it very highly. Ms Messenger (perhaps better known by her Turf Account name 'Honest Fi') has impeccable taste in crime writing and is also the long-suffering sub-editor of this column.

Deep and Crisp

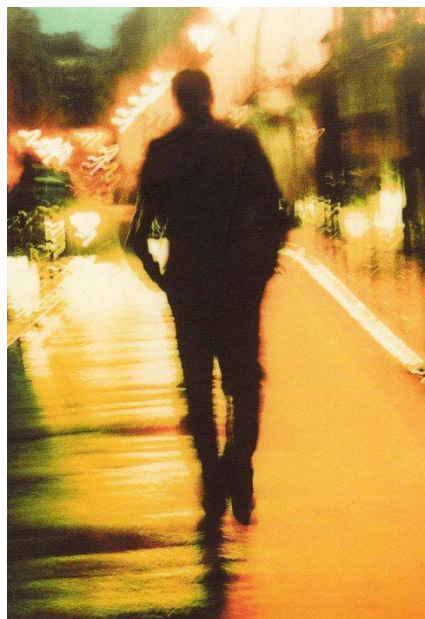
It has been a fairly quiet Christmas here at Ripster Hall mostly due to the snowdrifts making travel almost impossible. Some of the tenants from the estate did however venture out of their hovels to come carol singing at the Hall, even daring to cross the line of coloured lanterns which mark the edge of the minefield.



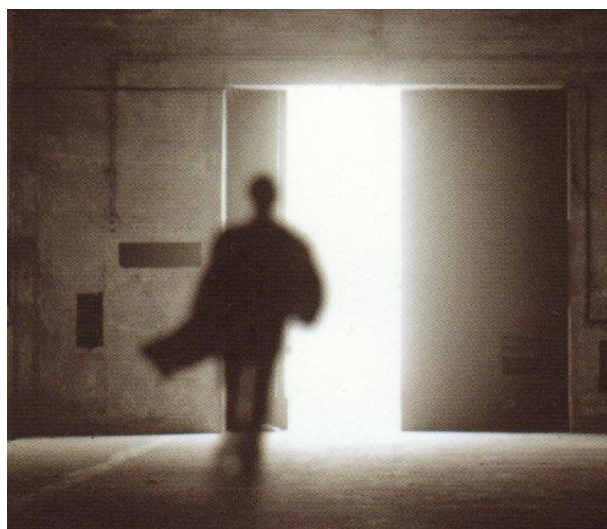
Normally, of course, much of the festive season is taken up reading the hundreds of exquisitely-penned Christmas cards I receive from publishers. This year, however, I did not receive a single one, not even from my own publisher, nor even one of those irritating and highly impersonal “e-cards” from Moonpig or whatever it’s called. Now I know there are certain publishers who have struck me off their Christmas Card list, but I was not aware they all had and I am tempted to regard this as an indicator of the recession in publishing in general rather than a specific conspiracy against me. Although I could be wrong.

In the main, though, it was a time for staying within chestnut-roasting reach of a roaring log fire and occasionally plunging a heated poker into a tankard of the barley wine brewed every year for me by that nice Mr Adnams down the road. These, of course, are the ideal conditions for catching up on one’s reading or perhaps even getting slightly ahead in the crime fiction stakes.

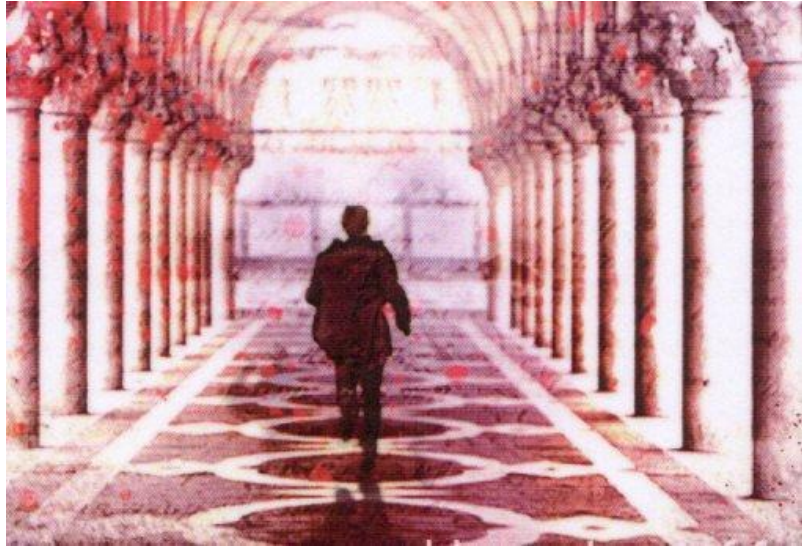
I have particularly enjoyed Robert Goddard’s nicely restrained thriller *Long Time Coming* (Bantam) with its flashbacks to an art scam in 1940 London, despite it suffering from the ubiquitous “silhouetted man” figure which seems to adorn the cover of most thrillers these days.



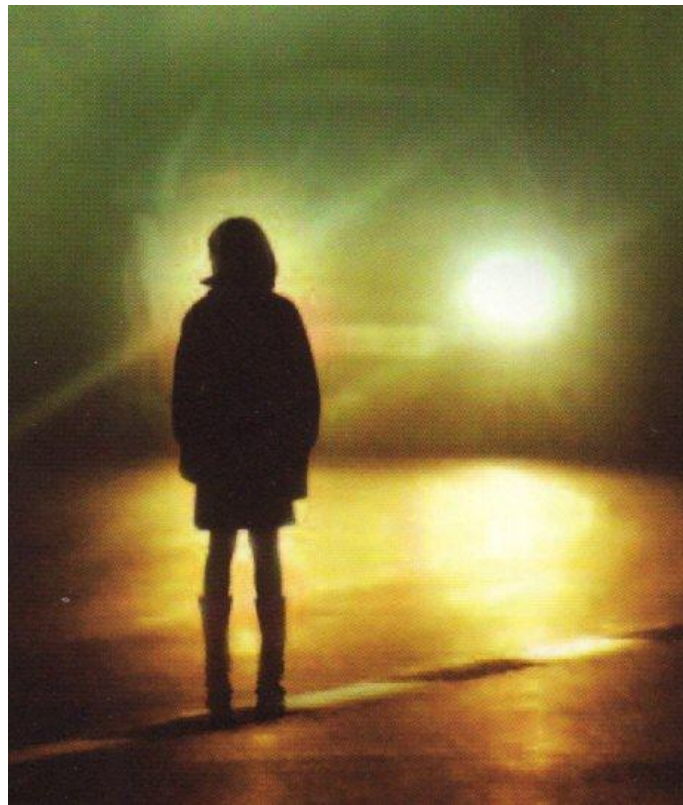
Indeed a very similar lone man figure features on the cover of Tony Black’s new Edinburgh-based Gus Dury adventure *Loss* (from Preface).



Not to mention on Jon Trace's forthcoming *The Venice Conspiracy* (from Sphere).

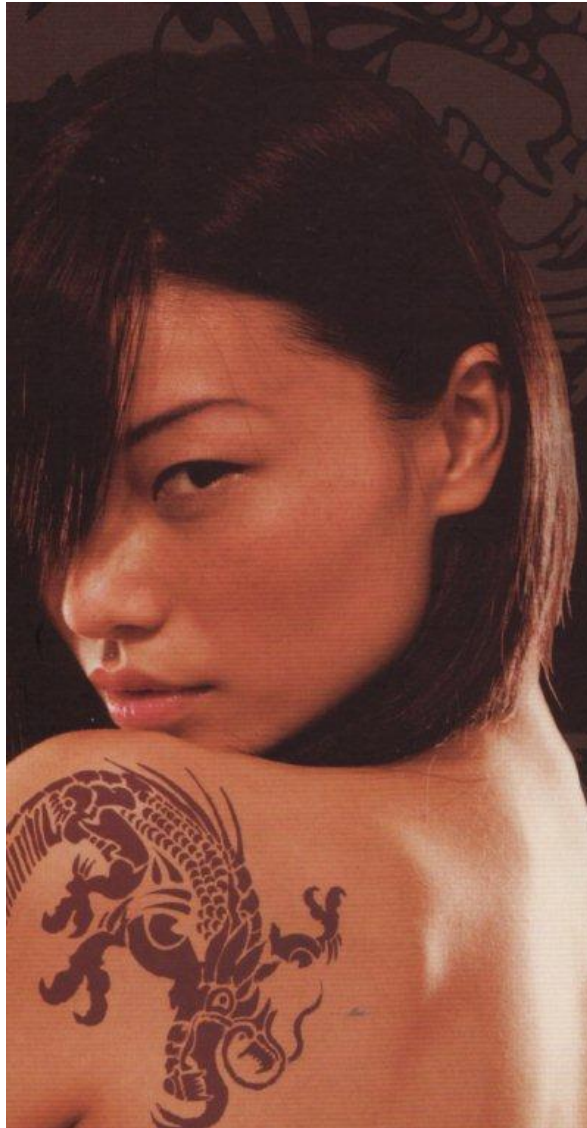


But Mo Hayder's new thriller *Gone* (from Bantam in February) rings the changes by having the silhouette of a young girl on the cover, and she's not even running.



Yet the most eye-catching cover by far is for the new John Burdett novel featuring his Bangkok detective Sonchai Jitleecheep in *The Godfather of Kathmandu* (also from Bantam).

This has an intriguing image of an exotic lady displaying, on her naked shoulder, a tattoo of a mythical beast of some significance in the Orient. As soon as I saw it, I said to myself: "that girl's got a dragon tattoo" and made a note to recommend the book to my friend millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim.



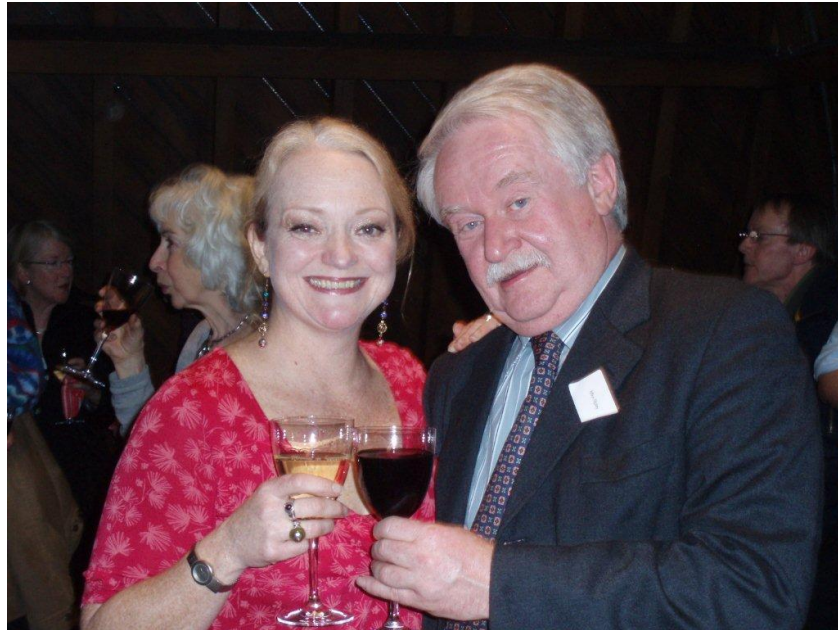
I may even enclose a note to Prince Ali suggesting that “Girl With A Dragon Tattoo” could make a jolly good title for a crime novel. But then; what do I know of such things?

A Reader Writes

I am constantly amazed at the reach of this humble column, which is truly worldwide. I regularly receive messages – by no means all of them threatening and obscene – from readers taking issue with something I have mentioned in these monthly musings.

Of late, the most popular topic has been a general enquiry as to the state of my health, usually couched in the form of a request for advice along the lines of *how do you find the energy to attend so many parties whilst maintaining your writing, reviewing, lecturing, publishing and feudal estate management schedule?*

The answer is simple enough: clean living – and vast amounts of alcohol – though to be honest, since I was forced on medical grounds to give up smoking six years, eleven months, nineteen days, eight hours and forty-three minutes ago (though who’s counting?) I have felt the need to cram as much as possible into life to fill the empty hours. But seriously, it is no hardship at all to attend parties especially when the guest of honour is, as it was recently, the vivacious novelist Stella Duffy holding court at The Writers House.



For those not in the know, The Writers House is the luxurious, high security headquarters of the Authors' Licensing & Collecting Society, a body which does sterling charitable work on behalf of authors cruelly deprived of royalties. It is situated a Roman Wall stone's throw from the Tower of London, surrounded by friendly alehouses, the nearest one of which serves beer from the excellent Harvey's brewery of Lewes in Sussex. Sadly, I cannot remember its name, but I do remember the ale.

Other electronic correspondence of late has included a note from thriller writer Paul Johnston, possibly on a Greek island somewhere, informing me that he has a new book coming out in May called *Maps of Hell*. "Shades of Dennis Wheatley?" he adds mysteriously.

Then from Calgary in Canada I hear from regular reader Steele Curry, who takes me to task – even though I am right – for being too generous and uncritical when reviewing recent crime fiction. I do, however, agree totally with Steele Curry when he bemoans the abandoning of many fine "mid-list" authors as heartless publishers dispose of their mid-lists in search of the instant bestseller.

One of my most distinguished readers, that thrill~~meister~~ supreme, Len Deighton, informs me that the weather in southern California "isn't all it's often cracked up to be". From which, here in the snowbound Eastern Marches, I take some small comfort.

My most interesting correspondence, however, began with a communication from crime writer Adrian Magson commenting on something I had written about Adam Diment, the Swinging Sixties spy writer (*The Dolly, Dolly Spy* etc.) who after four highly successful novels simply disappeared from public sight after 1971.

Adrian urged me to look at a dedicated (to Diment) website (<http://www.nickelinthemachine.com/2009/08/the-disappearance-of-the-author-adam-diment/>) where rumours of his present whereabouts persist showing that he still has many fans of his work. Given that the man himself is a mere chicken in terms of age (no more than 65) he is almost certainly somewhere, though all attempts to trace him seem to have faltered, especially since the death of his legendary agent Desmond Elliott a few years ago.

I decided to take the plunge and registered my interest in contacting the missing author through the website. Amazingly this provoked a rapid response from someone called Hu Chi in, I think, the Far East, who has promised to pass on a message for me, although Mr Diment is – he or she says – not easily contactable. ('Hu Chi' had also indicated earlier that Adam Diment had continued to write well beyond the four spy novels he published in the UK in the late Sixties.)

Should anything come of this, dear reader, you can be assured that you will be the first to know.

More Top Notch

And speaking of thrillers which do not deserve to be forgotten, Top Notch Thrillers, that new and vibrant print-on-demand imprint of Ostara Publishing, (www.ostarapublishing.co.uk) have announced the next four titles they will be publishing in February.

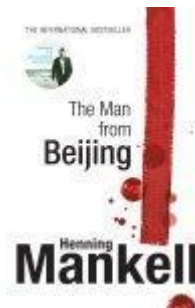
These include the Vietnam War heist thriller *The Tale of the Lazy Dog* by the aforementioned Alan Williams; *Time Is An Ambush*, a beautifully written almost romantic thriller of suspicion and guilt by that much-loved and admired writer Francis Clifford; Brian Callison's classic war-at-sea adventure *A Flock of Ships*, described by Alistair Maclean as "the best war story I have ever read"; and *The Ninth Directive*, sometimes known as *Quiller In Bangkok*, the second mission for the ultra-controlled, super-tough spy created by Adam Hall and the TNT edition will also contain an essay on "growing up with Quiller" by the son of the author, Jean-Pierre Trevor.

End of Year Results

Although I make no claims to complete accuracy, I estimate that some 533 crime novels were published in the UK *for the first time* in 2009. That makes about one every 16 hours and my figures are based on titles not published here before (no reissues, backlists or paperback editions), or at least the ones I have seen or been told about. (Certain publishers – they know who they are – no longer tell me things.)

More Swedes

With a new BBC series of "Wallander" starring Kenneth Branagh (rather than the original and rather good Swedish version) in the offing, fans will be gagging for the new Henning Mankell novel due next month from Harvill Secker, *The Man From Beijing*.



Wallander-fans may be disappointed, though, as I do not think he features (I have not yet seen a copy) in this one. The action, I am told, spans China and America in the 1860s, modern-day Beijing, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (which Mankell knows well) and comes to a climax in London's Chinatown.

Anyone feeling they might be short-changed on their regular fix of Nordic doom and mayhem can rest easy though, for I understand that the book opens with the massacre of an entire Swedish village.

New Year Toodles!

The Ripster