

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



### The White South

Of all the publishers in all the world, nothing I have ever written has ever appeared under the Penguin imprint and this, I suppose, is the nearest I will ever get to that noble distinction.



One of my more dedicated fans took her well-thumbed copy of *Angel Underground* on an expedition to Antarctica last month and photographed it, being sniffed appreciatively by penguins, on the Danger Islands which, as most of my readers will know, are located at 63° 25" S, 54° 40" W.

This well-travelled volume is now en route, believe it or not, to Alaska where it will be photographed again before being released into the wild. Sadly, come the hunting season, it will probably become fair game for Sarah Palin.

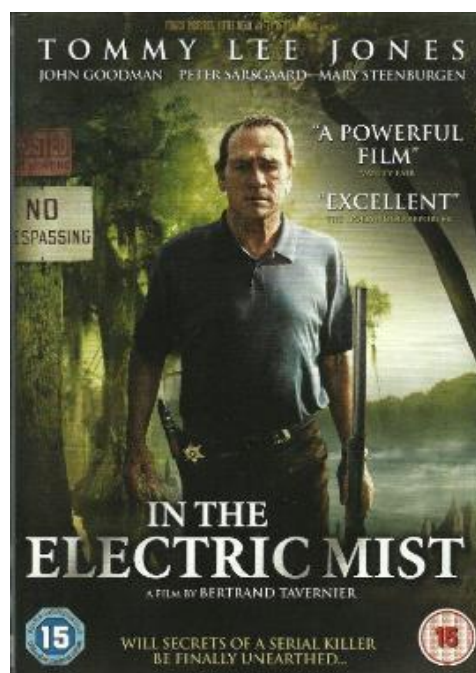
But speaking of things Antarctic, I was recently treated to a viewing of the new DVD *Whiteout* based on the graphic novel by US thriller writer Greg Rucka and it is not a bad little film, reminding me somewhat of the trend in my youth for icy-settings in the thrillers of Alistair Maclean, Hammond Innes, Geoffrey Jenkins and Duncan Kyle, who actually used that very title.



The film stars the ever-reliable Tom Skerrit and the pneumatic Kate Beckinsale, who spends much of the movie swaddled in thick cold-weather clothing. Teenage boys should not despair, however, as there is a totally gratuitous shower scene quite early on, which can easily be paused and replayed (so I'm told).

**Coming to a Blockbuster Near You**

And speaking of (straight to) DVD releases, Bertrand Tavernier's film of James Lee Burke's *In the Electric Mist* (with *Confederate Dead*) is now out having failed to find a cinema screening except in France.



It is by no means a great adaptation (of a wonderful book) but anything with Tommy Lee Jones is worth a look and there is some wonderful Cajun and Zydeco music on the soundtrack, especially from that old maestro Clifton Chenier. It also must be one of the few films to list, in its lengthy credits, the position of “Crab Wrangler”.

### Satanic Sing-Along

I had no idea that Dennis Wheatley’s 1930’s occult classic *The Devil Rides Out* had been turned into a *musical* in the early 1990s. If anyone had suggested the idea to me I would have immediately called on those fresh-faced youthful pop stars who play in that modern skiffle combo known as *Spinal Tap* to provide the score.

Yet a score already exists and has indeed been performed (starring one of those talented Nolan sisters) and full details can be found on the jolly old interweb at [www.thedevilridesoutmusical.com](http://www.thedevilridesoutmusical.com). In fact, or so I am told, clips from the original cast performance can be found on the You Book or Face Tube sites – I forget which.

### In Town Tonight

My old chum and one-time sailing instructor Justin Scott paid a flying visit to London recently with his charming wife Amber, though he hardly had time to promote the new thriller he has co-authored with Clive Cussler, *The Wrecker* (Michael Joseph), in between his hectic schedule of restaurant and theatre reviewing.



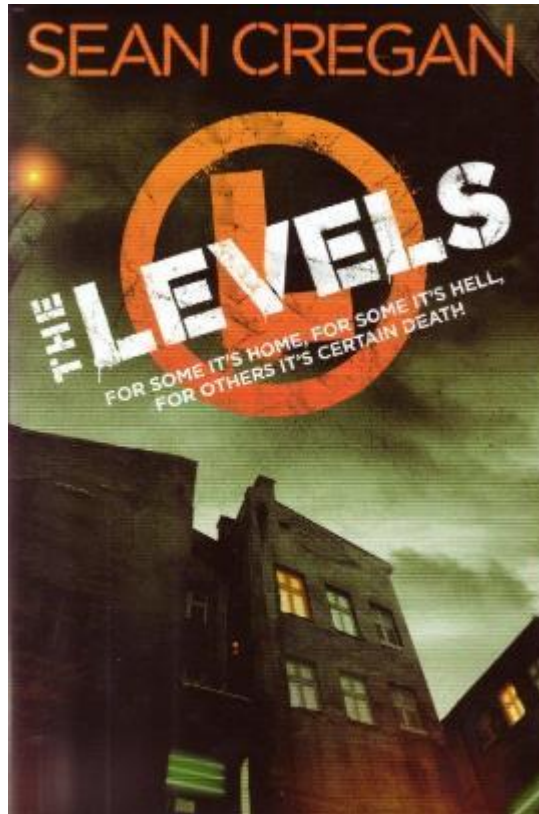
From his intimate knowledge of the alleys and byways of Covent Garden, I began to suspect that Justin was researching a book set there, but he tells me his next novel will be another co-operation with Clive Cussler, set safely in America in 1908.

## Level Playing Field

When I read the dust-jacket blurb on the new novel by Sean Cregan, *The Levels*, published this month by Headline, I immediately knew where I was:

*It is Newport's dirty secret – a failed urban housing development, standing in the shadows of the city, left to ruin by the authorities decades before.*

At last, I thought to myself, a crime novel which will examine the tough underbelly of Newport, once famed for its jazz festival, but which has for so long suffered in the shadow of its glittering, media-friendly neighbour Cardiff.



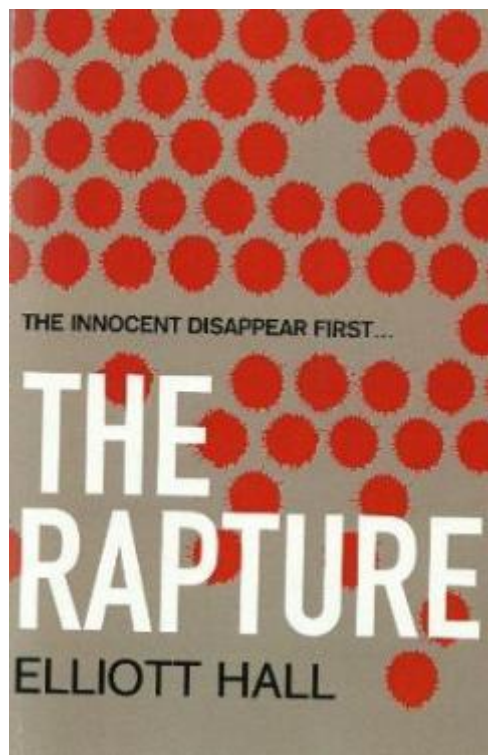
To my amazement the books seems to have nothing to do with Wales and apparently there is somewhere called Newport in the United States....

## A Rapturous Welcome

In my dim and distant youth back in the last century, all debut novelists were advised by editors and critics alike that the *second* novel is always the difficult one. Indeed it was probably exactly the advice I passed on to that disgracefully talented and disgustingly young writer Elliott Hall when I discussed his debut *The First Stone* on publication last year. (Along with tips on dress sense, how to eat an orange in polite society and how Aston Villa would be a good long-odds bet for the Carling Cup.)



He must have taken my advice to heart for his second novel, *The Rapture*, is due in April from JMJM - the Jolly Magnificent John Murray imprint and is a fabulous second outing for ex-soldier Felix Strange who now plies his trade as a private eye in a dystopian America ruled by the religious thought police.



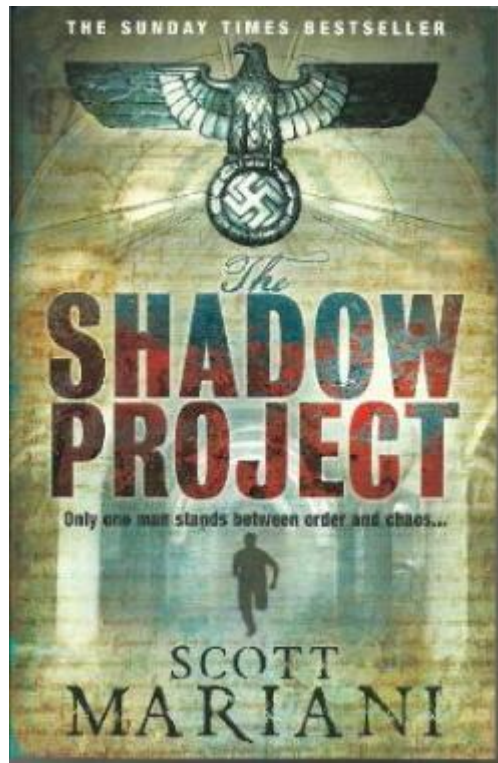
Hopefully, Elliott's imaginative, classic *noir* take on things pictures an America in the (very) far-distant future, otherwise we could all be in trouble.

**Covering All the Bases**

At first sight, the cover of *The Shadow Project* by Scott Mariani (a Scot who lives in Wales) seems to suffer from the current trend of “disappearing silhouette running man” syndrome which seems to afflict most thrillers these days.



But on closer inspection, the book (from Avon) has a cover which is very clever.



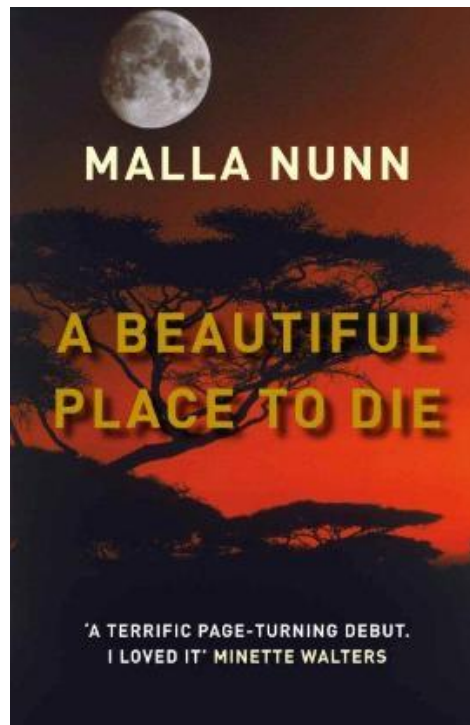
Not only does it have the ubiquitous running man, but it also has a Nazi eagle complete with swastika, surely another guaranteed reader-winning piece of design. If only there was a vampire in there somewhere, all the popular bases would be covered.

But wait: there will be; for the book announces Mr Mariani's next best-selling project coming this summer – a new series entitled *The Vampire Federation*.

#### It's Edgartime

I must congratulate the British authors nominated for this year's Edgars - the prestigious awards made by the Mystery Writers' of America. Sadly, it won't take long.

However, well done to Malla Nunn as her debut novel *A Beautiful Place to Die* is shortlisted for Best Novel.



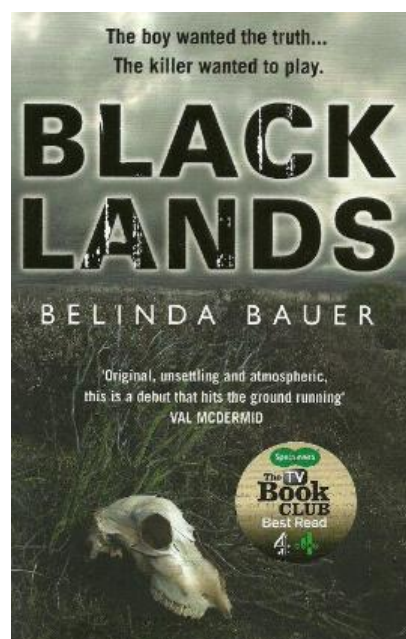
Although South African, I believe the book was first published in the UK and an attractive paperback edition from Picador is arriving in bookshops as I speak, so I will be cheering it on.

I will also have my fingers crossed for Len Tyler's *The Herring-Seller's Apprentice* which is nominated in the Best Paperback Original category.

#### Serial Killers – Everywhere

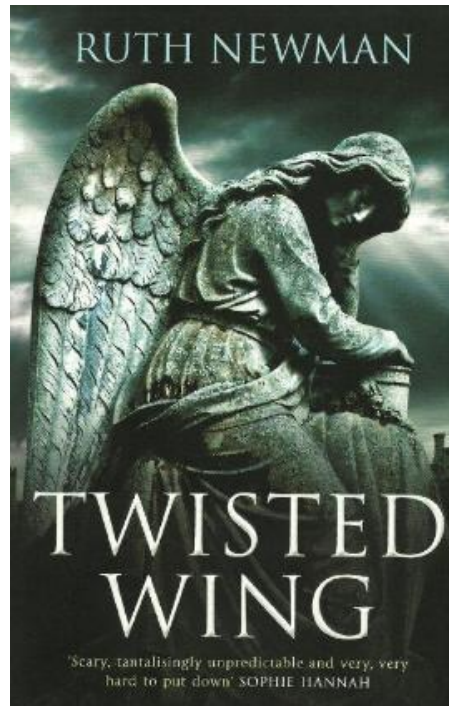
Who said the serial killer thriller was dead? Well I admit I may have, in a fit of mild depression, but what do I know. There is certainly an unhealthy crop of them descending or about to descend on a bookshop near you.

One which comes with advance praise from Val McDermid and has already been selected as a 'Best Read' by the TV Book Club on Channel 4 is *Blacklands* by debut novelist Belinda Bauer (published by Corgi).



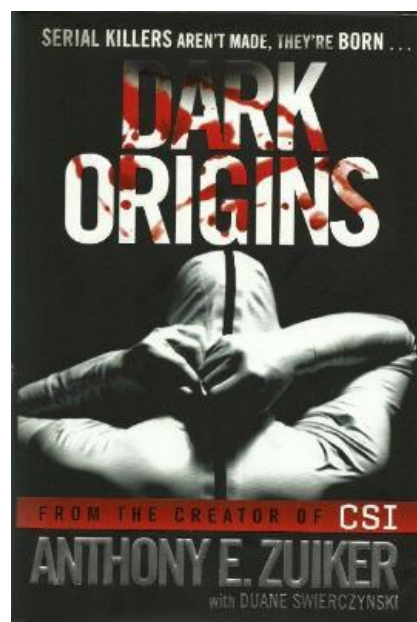
The premise is certainly original and disturbing, as a 12-year-old boy begins writing to a notorious serial killer in prison.

I missed the debut novel of Ruth Newman when it was first published in 2008 by Long Barn Books, but now *Twisted Wing* has been taken up by Simon & Schuster, with a new edition – praised by Sophie Hannah – later this month.



Here we have a serial killer on the loose in Cambridge, being tracked by forensic psychiatrist Matthew Denison. As Ruth Newman studied psychology and criminology at King's College in that fair city, I am sure she knows of what she writes. (Though not the serial-killing bit.)

However, the most hype will probably be directed at a serial-killer called 'Sqweegel' who is, I am assured, no relation to Gollum and who features in the first of a 'three-part-series' (a trilogy?) by the creator of the CSI franchise, Anthony E. Zuiker with a little help from American mystery writer Duane Swierczynski.



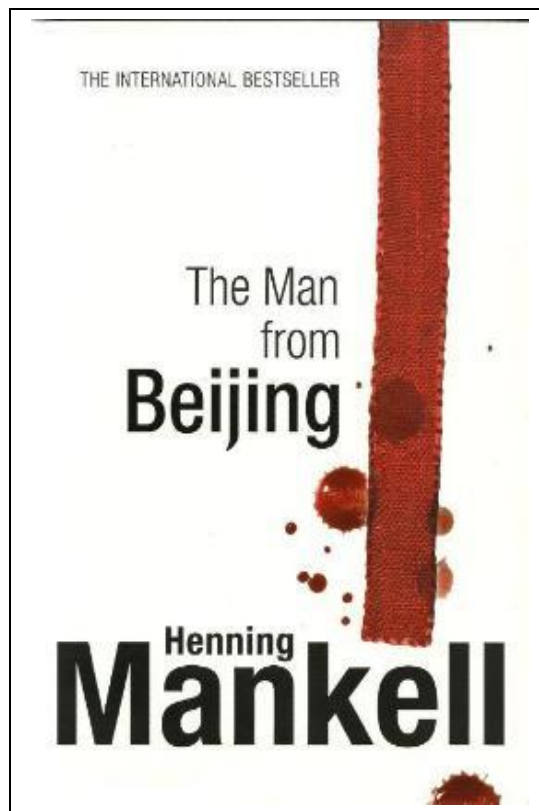


*Dark Origins*, published here by Penguin, is, I am told, the world's first "Digi-Novel" which is "complemented by a comprehensive online and digital component featuring exclusive cinematic content on a dedicated and fully interactive website".

As an unashamed Luddite, I will stick to the novel but the more adventurous can try the website [www.level26.com](http://www.level26.com).

#### Swedish Take-Away

I mentioned last time that the new Henning Mankell novel, *The Man From Beijing* (Harvill Secker) might disappoint some readers because it doesn't feature Kurt Wallender. The main character here is Swedish judge Birgitta Roslin, who was something of a radical Maoist in her student days back in the Sixties.



Now I do not wish to sound unkind, but Birgitta Roslin makes Kurt Wallender look like an unrestrained party animal, and the sleepy characterisation is not helped by references to her going to bed or getting out of bed virtually every time she is mentioned along with a rather vague, almost half-hearted, sub-text of problems in her marriage. Then there's the professional side to her, which strains credulity, for a judge in any country ought to know better than to interfere (in a rather cack-handed way) in a police investigation, especially when it is an investigation into the second-biggest mass murder in Swedish criminal history. (I wonder what the biggest was?) She is also meekly bullied by a preposterous journalist character, which any British judge would have banged up in the Tower of London before breakfast.

I gripe about this because Mankell gives us a fantastic heroine in the form of red-haired policewoman Vivi Sundberg, who conducts the initial murder enquiry but then sadly disappears for most of the book. And this is a book where you really do need a good detective. There are at least 25 murders in Sweden, America, Africa and London (and I've probably missed some) as well as a fair amount of cruelty and suffering in a flashback to 1863 and the use of Chinese (near slave) labour on the building of the US trans-continental railroads, in a book with, if anything, too many themes ranging from personal issues of self-confidence and domestic unhappiness to paranoid obsessions with family history to corruption in modern China and a new wave of colonialism threatening Africa.

Not to mention the small matter of the initial, very bloody murder of 19 inhabitants of a small Swedish village. As in much recent Scandinavian crime fiction, the cops don't come off too well, arresting an innocent man (who later commits suicide) on the most spurious of grounds. There is also the worrying question of how Homeland Security in the US and all the security services in Europe could have missed a Chinese assassin travelling by air carrying a Japanese samurai sword, not to mention the fact that the rather wimpish lady judge manages to get a photograph of him remarkably easily. But then perhaps sword-wielding Chinamen are a common sight in north Sweden, just as a rifle-carrying Chinaman can walk up and down the Tottenham Court Road, then shoot someone through a hotel window without anyone apparently noticing.

Certainly ambitious, *The Man From Beijing* has, for my liking, too many thematic diversions and a plot which seems somewhat diluted by the changes of setting – north and south Sweden, Denmark, 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Beijing, Zimbabwe (with a cameo role for Robert Mugabe), Mozambique and London. To cover that much ground and take on a villain as powerful and as loony as the one here, you need a Jason Bourne or a Jack Reacher, not a softie like Birgitta Roslin.

I wouldn't mind seeing more of Vivi Sundberg, though. She's a tough cookie; that one.

### The Man Who Left

My old and distinguished friend Professor Barry Forshaw is neglecting his academic studies of crime fiction for a foray into the cut-throat world of biography and his subject is none other than that posthumous phenomenon, Stieg Larsson.



Barry's biography, entitled *The Man Who Left Too Soon*, is expected in April but at least two others by Swedish biographers Jan Erik Pettersen and Kurdo Baksi are scheduled to follow soon. There is also rumour of a no-holds-barred version by Eva Gabrielsson, a key figure in the Larsson legend.

Last month the Mail On Sunday newspaper (therefore it must be true) highlighted the position of Ms Gabrielsson [<http://www.fmwf.com>] who was the partner of Larsson for 32 years up to his untimely death aged 50 in 2004. Her story has, I am told, gripped the Scandinavian media ever since for when Larsson's posthumously-published 'Millenium' trilogy began to break bestseller records, it emerged that because they were not legally married, Stieg's partner inherited none of the rights and royalties (valued at more than £20 million *so far*) and not even Stieg's half of their shared flat!

Cynics have already suggested that for Barry's biography, which I am sure will not gloss over the on-going disputes over Larsson's literary estate, a better title might have been *The Man Who Left Nothing - To His Partner*.

## Murder (G)One

Almost exactly a year to the day since it closed its doors, I found myself on the Charing Cross Road in London across the street from Murder One, which for almost 21 years was a Mecca for fans and writers of crime and thriller fiction.



Much as I miss the gaiety and social ambience of the place, not to mention its 24-hour free bar and its excellent canapés, I take comfort in the fact that the mail order side of the business still exists and can be found at: *Murder One UK, Office 004, King's Cross Business Centre, 180-186 King's Cross Road, London WC1X 9DE* (Tel. 0207 520 2642). The online address is [www.murderone.co.uk](http://www.murderone.co.uk).

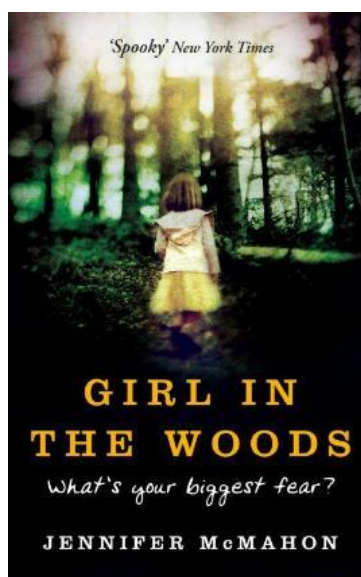
## Thrillerfest V

Only a minor misunderstanding with Homeland Security prevents me from attending the fifth *Thrillerfest* convention to be held 7-10 July at the Grand Hyatt hotel in New York. I am assured, though, that American writers Harlan Coben and Lisa Scottoline, along with veteran British thrill-meister Ken Follett, will be there, so I will hardly be missed at all.

## Title Changes

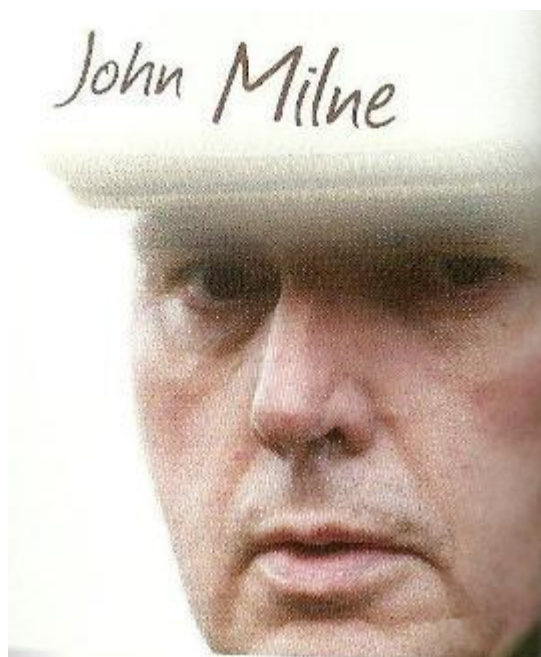
Among all the many mysteries I am looking forward to this year, some may seem unfamiliar to my readers in the North American colonies.

I keenly await the latest medieval mystery from Ariana Franklin in August which I will know as *A Cavalcade of Death* (from Transworld) although in America I think it will be known as *A Murderous Procession*. I have also been told to watch out for *Girl In the Wood* by Vermont writer Jennifer McMahon, from Little Brown which Americans already know under the title *Dismantled*.



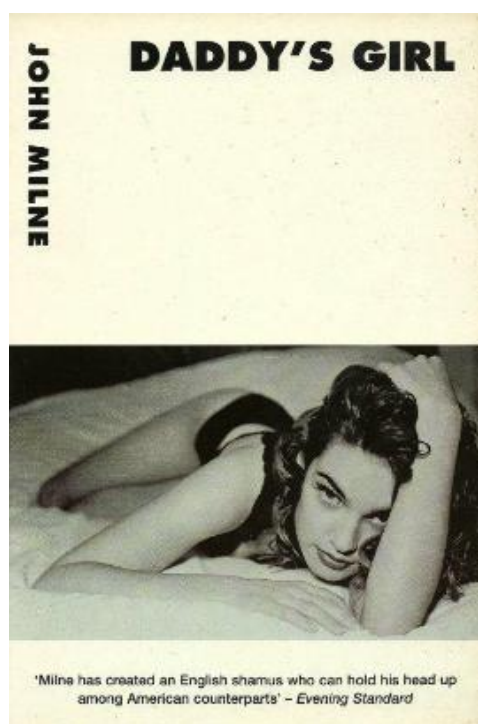
## Eastern Attractions

There is always something exciting going on in the world of letters here in the Eastern counties. In March, for example, my old friend John Milne goes to prison.



Which is actually to say that John will be *visiting* HMP Bullwood Hall in Essex to give a talk about his life of crime – crime-writing that is? Nowadays John is best known for his television scripts, having written for *Lovejoy*, *Taggart*, *Waking the Dead* and *The Bill*.

Many of us, however, fondly remember the short series of British private eye novels featuring his disabled shamus Jimmy Jenner from the 1980s which blazed quite a trail in their day, with such titles as *Dead Birds* and *Daddy's Girl*.



After an all-too-brief return in 1998, Jenner seemed to shuffle off centre stage, but his place in crime writing history is secured as one of the most original fictional private detectives – and British to boot.

Also in March, and this time slightly more accessible, the Margery Allingham Society have arranged a private viewing of the author's literary archive housed in the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex.



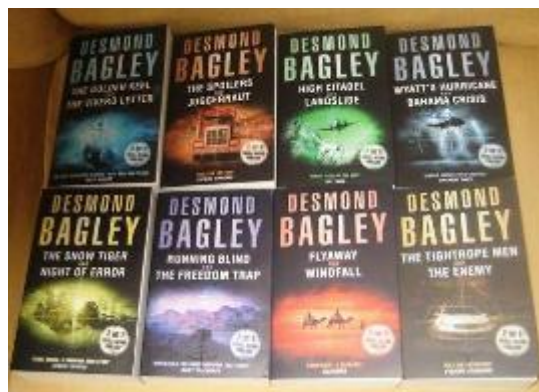
This viewing will be followed by an event in the nearby Lakeside Theatre at the University where Francis Wheen and Julia Jones, a pair of authors turned publishers, will discuss why they have republished the “hilarious minor classic” memoir *Cheapjack* by Phil Allingham, Margery's brother, from 1934.

Details of the book – and Julia Jones' biography of Allingham – can be found on [www.golden-duck.co.uk](http://www.golden-duck.co.uk).

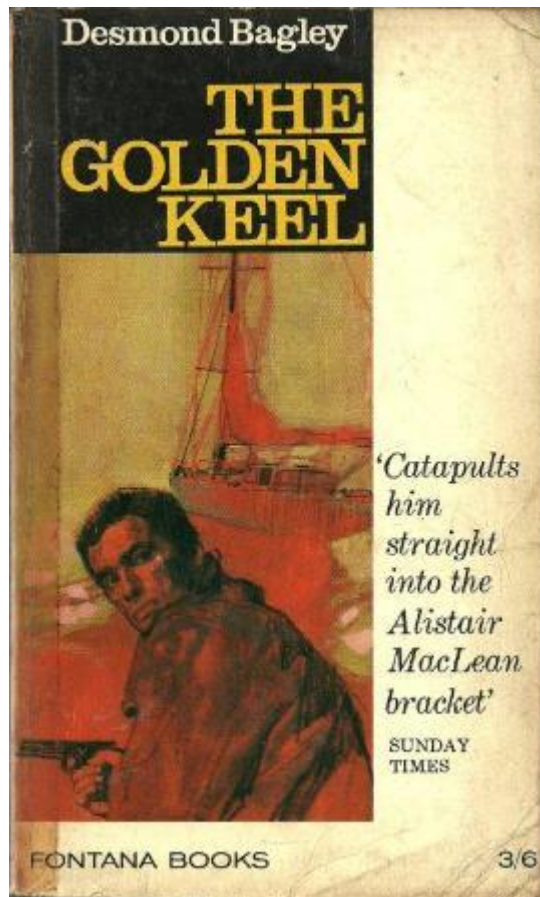
### Fondly Remembered

One of the most fondly remembered British writers of action/adventure thrillers – a writer about whom *no one* has a bad word to say (and I've asked around) – was Desmond Bagley, who died in 1983.

I am indebted to veteran Swedish commentator on crime fiction Iwan Morelius (now retired and living in Spain) for pointing out to me – even though the British publishers did not – that Desmond Bagley's backlist has recently been reissued in double-volume paperbacks.



I first discovered Bagley in 1965 when his debut thriller *The Golden Keel* came out in paperback and it still remains one of my favourites among his adventures which covered many parts of the globe. (*High Citadel* set in the Andes was another favourite.)



Although I never got to meet Desmond (who preferred to be called 'Simon'), my Swedish advisor Iwan, who is better known in Swedish publishing circles as Iwan Hedman, certainly did. Back in 1972, Desmond and Joan Bagley visited Sweden and stayed with Iwan at his home in Strangnas near Stockholm. Whilst there (and I am grateful to Iwan for opening up his photographic archive to me), Iwan showed off his personal Husqvarna M40 Lahti 9mm pistol.



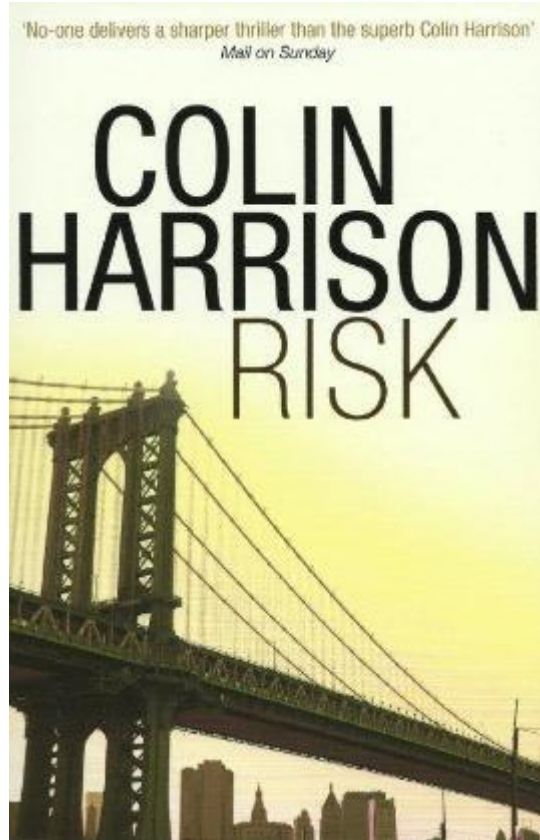
Iwan was able to show Desmond a peculiarity of firing the M40 (or not firing it) which I suspect was something to do with that model not having a bolt accelerator, but I am no expert. I am however not at all surprised that the weapon and its individual flaw – or advantage, depending on who was holding it – found its way into one of Desmond's thrillers.

#### The Bloomsbury Set

Those of you still wading through the last 'Harry Potter' may have overlooked the fact that publishers Bloomsbury are developing a very interesting crime fiction list. {I hope this is not in anticipation of J.K.

Rowling turning to the crime novel now her Hogwarts series is complete. That just wouldn't be fair on the rest of us.}

I am already enjoying Colin Harrison's *Risk*, a short (skilfully and blissfully short) sharp New York tale featuring a world-weary insurance lawyer investigating a fatal accident.



Then, looking forward to the summer, the (Ancient) Greek detective Hermes Diaktoros returns in June in a fourth novel by Anne Zouroudi, *The Lady of Sorrows*. This is a series upon which much praise has been heaped though I am ashamed to say I have not had the chance to read one yet.

In July, travel writer Jason Elliot turns to espionage fiction with *The Network*, set in the world of MI6 training; and then August sees the debut novel *The Dogs of Rome* by Conor Fitzgerald, which could just match the high standard of *policiers* set in Italy but written by foreigners such as the late Michael Dibdin and the current *maestro* David Hewson.

In addition, that publishing publicity guru Henry Jeffreys has tipped me off that Bloomsbury's April title is a "ferocious" new thriller, *The Third Rail* by Michael Harvey, which features a sniper preying on the Chicago public transportation system and Irish ex-cop turned Private Investigator Michael Kelly.

I look forward to them all and am determined to make time for some dedicated and concentrated reading, just as soon as the Quidditch season is over.

***Toodles!***

***The Ripster***