

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



1st April 2010

The Blood Apple

This is an auspicious day indeed, for I can reveal the first sighting of Scandinavian crime fiction's next big thing, a book whose title will probably be translated as *The Blood Apple* which has taken the publishing world by fire and storm.



Blodäpplet introduces a unique Swedish crime-fighting duo, Inspector Orm Tostesson – a tortured soul who has problems with drug, alcohol and sex addiction – and Sergeant Toke Grey-Gullsson, a cross-dressing transsexual fired with born-again religious fervour.

Although yet to be translated into English, I understand that *Blood Apple* involves multiple murders in a Volvo plant where the management has been infiltrated by a right-wing pagan cult and the search for the missing 'rune stones' first discovered by Olaf Wormius in the 1640s.

Can Orm and Toke solve what appear on the surface to be run-of-the-mill killings by a vampire, crack the ancient code of the runic symbols (the *futhorc*) and discover the identity of the mysterious Rig the Runemaster, whilst solving the mounting problems in their personal lives? And does the conspiracy go all the way to the highest levels of Swedish society?



First time author Nisse Ektorpe, at the age of 23, is already a household name in Sweden, as a super-model, a Michelin-starred chef with her own TV show, a campaigner against Improvised Explosive Devices and as an investigative journalist. She has crossed the (frozen) Gulf of Bothnia by dog-sled, plays bass in a Finnish death-metal band and has her own branded range of lingerie.

I am led to believe that a ruthless bidding war has already broken out among British publishers.

The Spring Season

The Spring social season on the London crime scene got underway with a flourish last month – several flourishes in fact.



Publishers Orion were first off the mark, hosting a luncheon at the famed Soho House (in the private dining quarters of course) for visiting American authors George Pelecanos and Lisa Gardner.

Mr Pelecanos remained polite and charming at all times, despite being surrounded by millionaire playboy Prince Ali Karim and Shots editor Mike Tombstone Stotter. The strain must have eventually told though because George seemed to be under the impression that I was *American*, obviously due to the fact that I was not wearing a tie. (A mistake I will not make again).

The vivacious Lisa Gardner, after revealing some of the very sobering secrets of her research into violent children, found herself in deep discussion with Lady Antonia Fraser – the crime writer, historian and now reviewer of crime fiction for, appropriately, *The Lady*.



Meanwhile Professor Barry Forshaw treated us all, but especially the charming Sophie Mitchell of Orion, to his famous mime of a circus juggler he had once seen.



Sadly, the current financial constraints on publishing began to show and during the main course of the sumptuous feast provide, my fellow *boulevardier* Chris Simmons, of Crime Squad, and I had to be pressed into service as waiters.



There was just time to draw breath, exercise the hounds and beat the boundaries of the Ripster Hall estate, before it was back up to town and to a secluded private members' club deep in the heart of the theatrical West End, to celebrate the Penguin Crime & Thriller Hotlist for 2010.



Those perky party animals at Penguin have something of a reputation for throwing good parties, and a bevy of them immediately swooped on my Shots colleague Ayo Ontade. Such is the pulling power of a Penguin party that even that distinguished critic and creative writing guru Mr Peter Guttridge, was tempted into London from his Sussex vineyards.

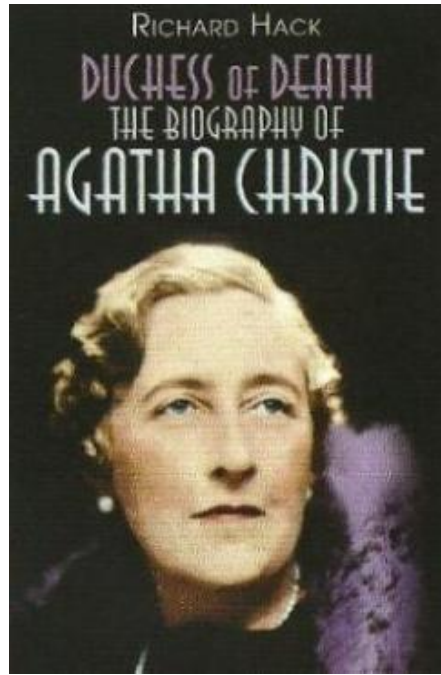
With the Headline Crime Party still to come, I for one was very grateful for a respite in the blissfully quiet surroundings of the book-lined library of The Travellers' Club in Pall Mall where I ran into one of my favourite writers, Len Deighton, on a rare visit to the Metropolis.



The dedicated Deighton fan will of course remember that the Travellers' Club Library featured in his novel *Winter*.

Deadly Dame

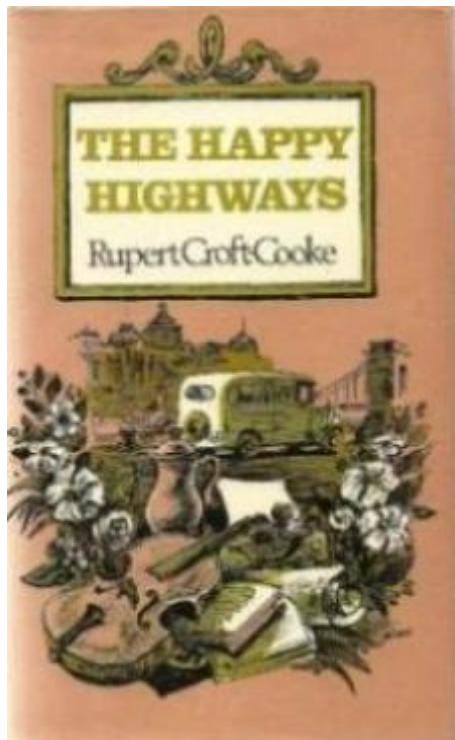
Although referred to as a Duchess in her latest biography, I do not think Agatha Christie actually made it above the rank of Dame; still, *Duchess of Death* is a catchy enough title and the book is said to draw on previously unpublished letters and notes from the Christie estate.



Duchess of Death, to be published by JR Books in June is by “investigative writer” Richard Hack, which you have to admit is a pretty good name (suspiciously good) for a journalist.

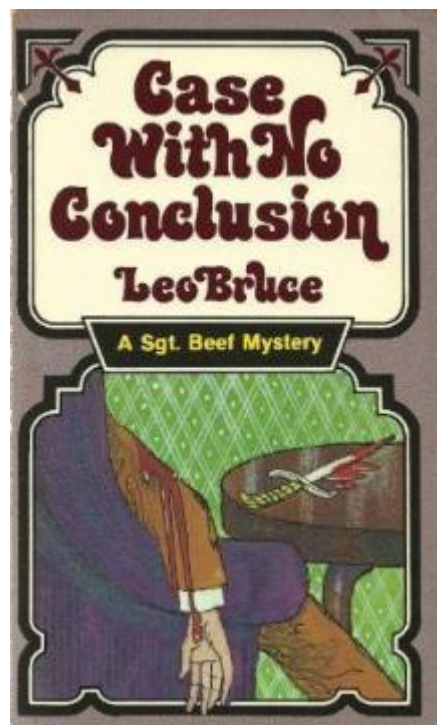
Forgotten Master

Whilst idly perusing the shelves of the library in the East Wing of Ripster Hall the other day, I came across yet another name which seems to have been air-brushed from most modern reference works and “encyclopedias” of crime writing: Rupert Croft-Cooke. Not even his pen-name, Leo Bruce, or either of his fictional detectives – Sergeant Beef and Carolus Deene – seem worthy of mention these days, which really is a crying shame.



A prolific writer, publishing over 50 books of fiction, plays, memoirs and non-fiction, Croft-Cooke (1903-1979) turned to crime in the mid-1930s, but with tongue very firmly in cheek. The exploits of his first series hero, the bluff, slow-moving country police sergeant William Beef poked very gentle fun at his fictional contemporaries and actually featured spoof versions of Lord Peter Wimsey, Hercule Poirot and Father Brown in *Case For Three Detectives*.

The narrator and chronicler of Beef's adventures is the snobbish Lionel Townsend, very much the 'Watson' to Beef's rather lackadaisical 'Holmes'. When Beef retires from the police force and sets himself up as a (highly unlikely) private detective, in *Case With No Conclusion* (1939), he actually complains that he is losing potential clients because of the shoddy way in which Townsend writes up his cases! Why, Beef moans, could he not get the more generous treatment Anthony Gethryn, Albert Campion or Dr Gideon Fell got from their respective authors? (Philip MacDonald, Margery Allingham and John Dickson Carr if you have to ask.)



Croft-Cooke was an intelligent and, as Bruce, a very funny writer. He travelled widely, served in Military Intelligence in India during WWII and his multi-volumed autobiographical memoirs are surely a gift to social historians. In 1953, he and his partner were convicted of acts of gross indecency during one of the most notorious homophobic purges by the British Establishment, and sent to prison for six months. Croft-Cooke described it as "an immensely worthwhile experience" as it taught him the best and worst of human nature. Warned not to write about the circumstances of his arrest as he could risk a further prosecution, Croft-Cooke and his partner decamped for Tangier where he did write an account (*Verdict of You All* – now a very rare book), and returned to England only late in his life.

He did continue to write, however, and produced 29 novels featuring gentleman sleuth (and history teacher at a minor public school) Carolus Deene, up until 1974.

I believe there was a valiant attempt to revive interest in the Deene character about twenty years ago, but the wonderful Sgt. Beef ('his straggling ginger moustache which always looked as though it had been dipped all too recently in beer') seems long forgotten in this country, though his adventures stayed in print in the USA much longer. Which is a pity, as he was one of the great creations of comedy-crime.

Ten Rules

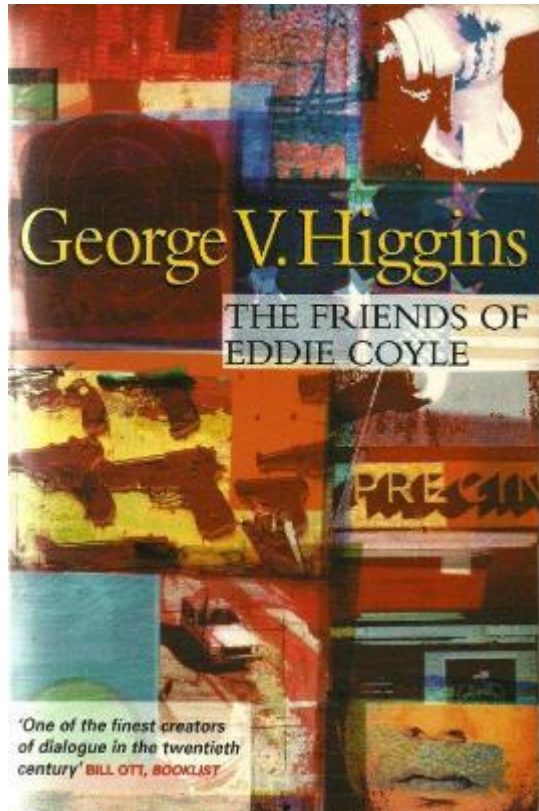
Although they've been around on the jolly old interweb for a few years, it is good to see Elmore Leonards' famous *10 Rules of Writing* in book form, as a small but perfectly formed volume from Weidenfeld & Nicolson, attractively illustrated by Joe Ciardiello.



I was never too sure how seriously Elmore Leonard meant his 'rules' to be followed and certainly the one which most confuses would-be writers anxious for tips from the Old Master is Rule #10: *Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.*

And I always had the sneaking suspicion (though I might be completely wrong) that his Rule #1 – *Never open a book with weather* – was a bit of a dig at the late Ed McBain, who started most (if not all) of his 87th Precinct mysteries with the weather, most famously with: “Winter came in like an anarchist with a bomb.” (*The Pusher*, 1956)

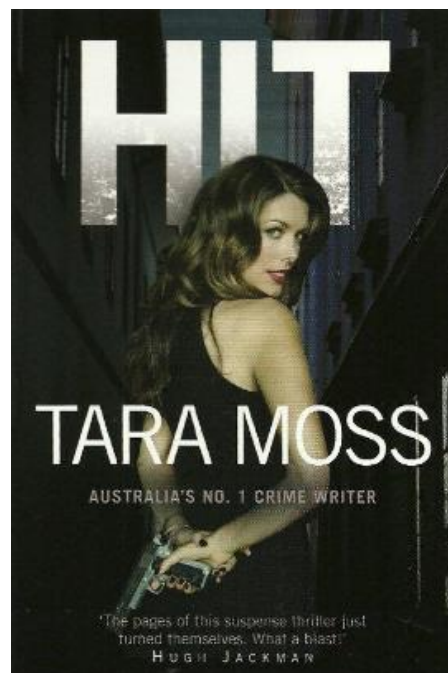
To celebrate the book, the BBC re-ran an interview with Elmore filmed four years ago where he acknowledged his admiration (when he was moving into crime writing) for George V. Higgins' classic *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* from 1970.



I have always felt more comfortable among writers who admire other writers. It's the ones who won't admit anyone can write as well as they can that you have to watch.

To The Max

Murder One may have closed its famous doors, and he may now be a grandfather, but there is no sign that Maxim Jakubowski is retiring from the crime scene just yet. In fact the author once dubbed 'the King of the Erotic Thriller' is now editing his own imprint of crime novels, MaXcrime, for John Blake Publishing Ltd.



The first two MaXcrime titles were launched last month, with relatively little fanfare considering *Hit* is by Tara Moss, the former super model who is now 'Australia's No. 1 Crime Writer' (according to the blurb) and *Watching the Wheels Come Off* is the debut crime novel of Mike Hodges, the director of that classic British gangster movie *Get Carter*.

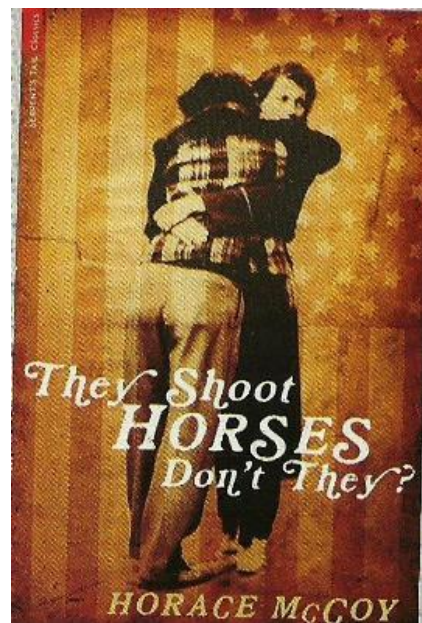
For those bemoaning the recent dearth of Erotic Thrillers, there is the good news that Maxim, acting as his own editor, will be publishing *I Was Waiting For You* as a MaXcrime title in the near future. The book will see the return of his hit woman character Cornelia (named, I suspect, in honour of that dark master Cornell Woolrich) and if you think a certain late Swedish author invented a female character with a striking tattoo, then you've never met Cornelia.

My picture shows Maxim and I on guard duty protecting the valuable second-hand section of the much-missed *Murder One* from prowling crime fiction fans.



Shoot the horses, not the serpents

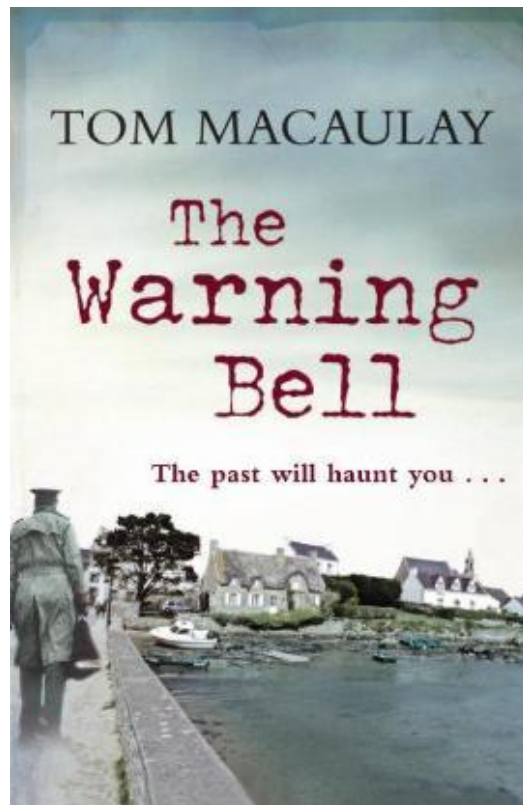
Serpent's Tail, who have introduced us to some innovative crime writers in their time (Mosley, Pelecanos, Peace, Duffy and Blincoe to name but a handful), also have a good track record in re-issuing master-works from the past and this November do exactly that.



First published in 1935, Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Is a genuine, bolt-on, undisputed classic of American *noir* and a copy really should grace the shelves of anyone who even pretends to be well-read in crime fiction.

For Whom the Bell

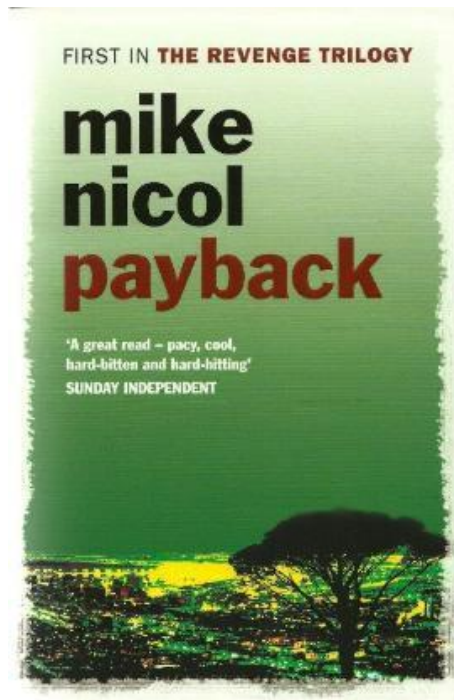
One of the most enjoyable thrillers of last year was Tom Macaulay's *The Warning Bell*, which is now out in paperback from Orion.



This is a wonderfully atmospheric tale – part study of a flawed father/son relationship, part war story in flashback – set mostly in a secretive fishing village in Brittany. The quality of the writing reminded me at times of Hammond Innes, Nevil Shute and Francis Clifford and that's pretty good company to be in.

Southern Hemisphere Noir

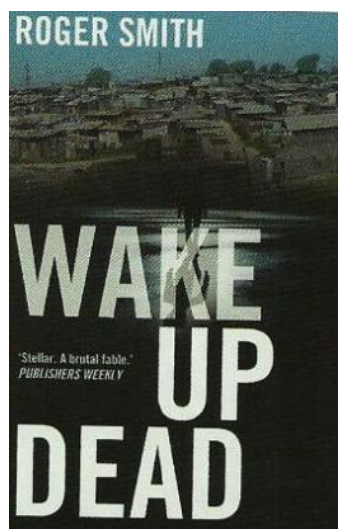
No sooner did I mention a South African thriller writer (Geoffrey Jenkins) last month, than two more cross my groaning reading table and both, I believe, with debut crime novels which both stake a strong claim for Cape Town to be hailed as the crime (fiction) capital of the southern hemisphere.



The first in a trilogy which will appear with staggering speed between now and September, is *Payback* by Mike Nicol, from Old Street Publishing (following titles will be *Killer Country* and *Black Heart*) and I have to say the series is off to a cracking start. *Payback* introduces the heroic tough-guy duo of Mace Bishop and Pylon Buson although these guys are certainly no angels, with a track record of gun-running, too-close-for-comfort contacts in Cape Town's post-Apartheid underworld and some uncompromisingly brutal ways of dealing with people who cross them. Dabbling in the private security business, they get caught up in a narcotics war waged by a charismatic female lawyer with her own agenda and the violence comes fast and furious. What starts as a local problem – almost a turf war – escalates into an international thriller spanning four continents.

This is a very impressive debut indeed, written with pace and starring some flawed but incredibly well-drawn characters. I have no idea how accurate a picture of Cape Town this is, but I get the feeling that in World Cup Year, this will not be a book recommended by the South African Tourist Board. I, however, have no qualms at all about recommending it.

Oddly enough, *Wake Up Dead* by Roger Smith (from Serpent's Tail in August, though I think already available in the US) is also set in Cape Town and has a gun-runner as a central character.

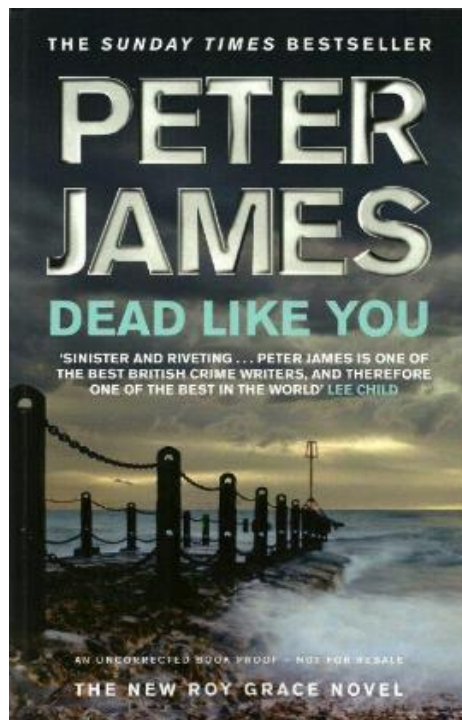


Recession? What recession?

One author cocking a snoot at the current recession is the bestselling Peter James whose hardback sales in 2009, according to his publicity, are up 40% year-on-year.



Well, I'm predicting a further rise this year when his new Detective Superintendent Roy Grace novel, *Dead Like You*, comes out from Macmillan in June.

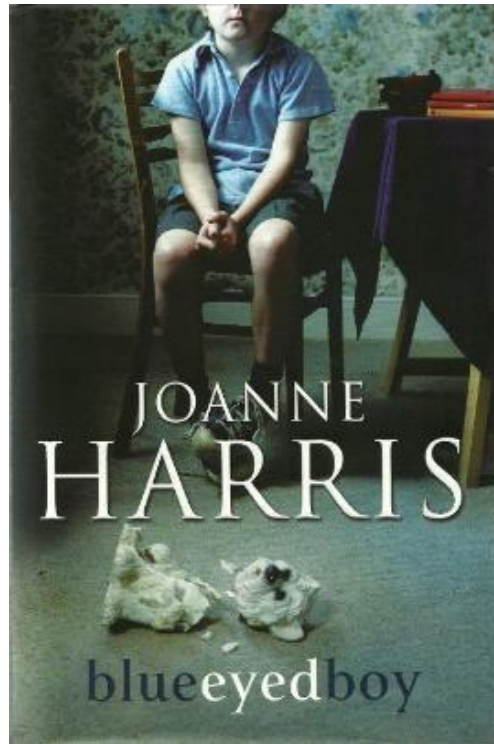


Yet in a year which had seen fiction editors made redundant because of 'increased paper costs', it seems that the more successful crime novels are the longer ones, although some of them may have more pages than their word-counts would normally expect.

Peter James' new novel, for instance, clocks in at just over 550 pages and the paperback of John Harvey's *Far Cry* (now out from Arrow) at just over 560.

Yorkshire Noir?

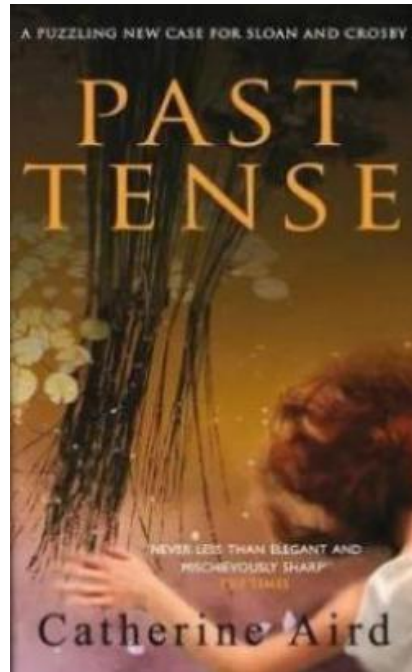
I refuse to suggest there are any marketing possibilities in the totally spurious sub-genre 'Yorkshire Noir' – which I've just made up - but curiously, three female crime writers with strong Yorkshire connections have all got new books out more or less simultaneously. Of course, being from Yorkshire myself, I could say that this is none of your bloody business, but the Editor insists I continue...



Joanne Harris, already an acclaimed novelist, is not only a Yorkshire woman who plays bass guitar in a band and is studying Old Norse (which I believe is still spoken in the North Riding), but has a new psychological thriller, *Blue Eyed Boy*, published by Doubleday.



An acclaimed poet as well as a crime writer, Sophie Hannah may have been born on the wrong side of the Pennines but now lives in Yorkshire. Her new novel from Hodder is the much-anticipated *A Room Swept White*. I also hear that television adaptations of some of her earlier suspenseful thrillers are in the pipeline.

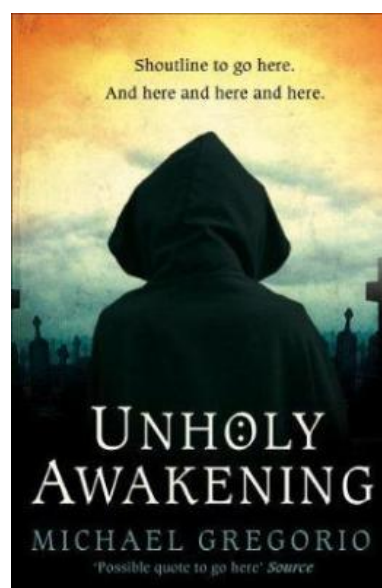


I also discovered, almost by accident, that the venerable Catherine Aird, a former chairman of the Crime Writers' Association, also has a new book out, *Past Tense*, featuring her much loved policeman Inspector Sloane. Catherine of course, famously not only invented a fictional policeman, but an entire fictional English county.

Born in the West Riding ("God's Yorkshire"), Catherine defected to live in soft, southern Kent but never forgot her Yorkshire roots. As a noted student of history and archaeology she will understand when I say that although living among the *Cantii* she will always be of the *Brigantes*.

Bloodsuckers

Michael Gregorio, that husband-and-wife writing team (Michael Jacob and Daniela De Gregorio) based in Italy are ridiculously popular enough you'd have thought, with their series of historical mysteries set in Napoleonic East Prussia.

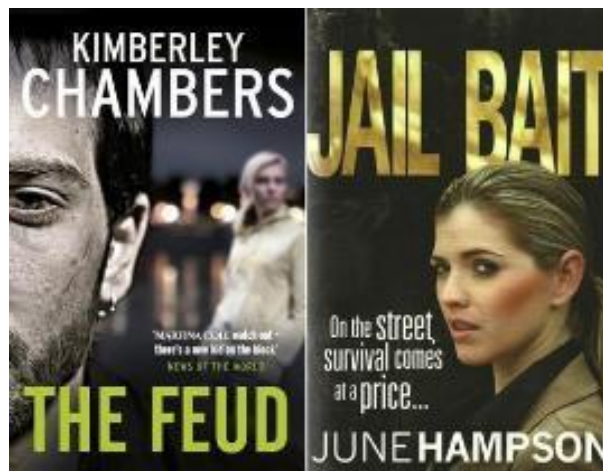


Yet they are set on becoming even more successful when, in August, those Fabulous Faber people publish their new novel, *Unholy Awakening*, with its secret ingredient. Not only does hero town magistrate Hanno Stiffeniis have Napoleon's invading army to deal with but this time the murders which happen on his patch seem only possible to be the work of vampires!

Given the current popularity of our ubiquitous, un-dead friends, I can only assume that in the summer there will be treble Bloody Marys all round in the Gregorio villa.

Coles to Newcastle?

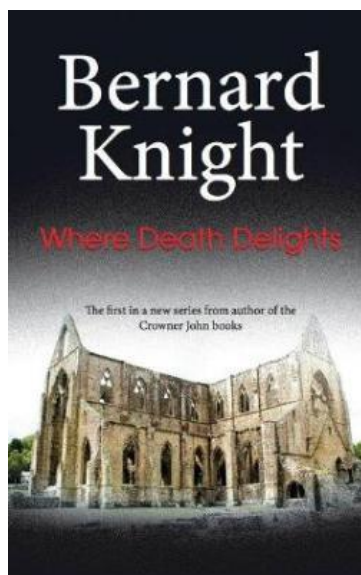
Two more contenders for the crown of that Queen of gritty, urban, family-saga crime, Martina Cole have new books out: Kimberley Chambers with *The Feud*, from publishers Preface, and June Hampson's fifth 'Daisy Lane' novel *Jail Bait* from Orion.



I would be very surprised if there were not more potential usurpers before summer is upon us, but I have seen no sign that Martina is planning to abdicate.

Bang Up To Date

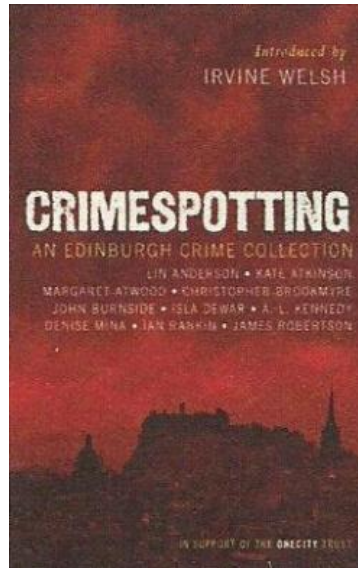
That master of the medieval mystery Professor Bernard Knight comes bang up to date with his new novel *Where Death Delights*, or at least 1955. Why 1955? Well this is a 'blatant piece of nostalgia' on the part of the author as it is the year Bernard Knight became a pathologist.



The new novel, he tells me, is a “retro tale of forensics” set in the wonderful Wye valley and Bernard knows both his forensics and the Wye valley well. I hear that publishers Severn House have persuaded the former Home Office pathologist to write a second in the same series and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if there was a third.

Tales of Auld Reekie

Scottish and proud of it publisher Polygon, famous for a mixture of violent ‘Tartan Noir’ tales and those slightly less noir of Alexander McCall Smith (not to mention some fine reissues of John Buchan thrillers), are producing a tantalising anthology in May, *Crimespotting*.



Published in support of the OneCity Trust, which works for social inclusion in that ‘Athens of the North’ Edinburgh, or ‘Auld Reekie’ as some of us still know it, the brief for the stories included the anthology was that they must be set in Edinburgh and contain a crime. Step forward then a fine platoon of contributors including Kate Atkinson, Ian Rankin, Christopher Brookmyre, Margaret Atwood and Denise Mina among others.

And with a title like *Crimespotting* the anthology just had to have an Introduction by Irvine Welsh.

Green Plaque

The most famous crime-writing son of Edinburgh, of course, was Arthur Conan Doyle who famously agreed to write what was to become *The Sign of Four* at the same publisher’s party that Oscar Wilde agreed to write *Dorian Gray*, his only novel.

One time Tory MPs now turned crime writer Gyles Brandreth, has used the Doyle/Wilde connection in his fiction and fittingly, it was he who unveiled a commemorative Green Plaque to mark that publisher’s party at The Langham Hotel near Broadcasting House.

It was always an ambition of mine to unveil a series of plaques to commemorate all the crime writers over the years who have fallen at (or at least fallen out of) The Groucho Club on London’s Dean Street. I even went so far as to examine the exterior of the club recently in the company of a qualified surveyor who shook his head slowly and told me: ‘You’re going to need a bigger wall.’

Toodles!

The Ripster