

# Getting Away With Murder

## Mike Ripley



July 2010

Summer Nights

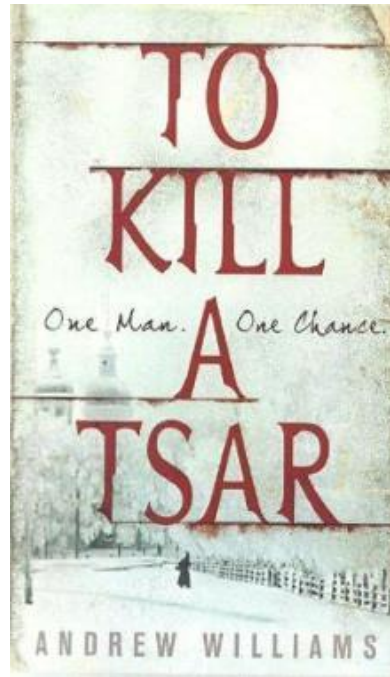
The long, warm evenings are a sure sign that summer is here; but so too is the annual crime fiction party thrown by those Jolly Magnificent publishers at John Murray, with the event this year taking place in an ancient (but fortunately licensed) hunting lodge on the edge of Regent's Park.



When Shots reporter Ayo Ontade and myself were not being mobbed by the friendly John Murray staff, there was a chance for me, on a rare excursion up to town from the country, to rub shoulders with the cream of the crime fiction reviewers including Jane Jakeman, Natasha Cooper, Jake Kerridge, Professor Barry Forshaw and Peter Guttridge, not to mention a host of John Murray authors.

It was a pleasure to meet up again with Andrew Williams, the author of a stunning debut novel, *The Interrogator*, which was short-listed for the Ellis Peters Award last year. I was able to tell Andrew how much I had enjoyed his new historical thriller *To Kill A Tsar* which is out later this month. Set in Russia in 1879-1881, the book (unsurprisingly) tells of attempts to replace – violently – the autocratic rule of Tsar Alexander II with some form of democracy by the revolutionary group *Narodnaya Volya*.

It is an exciting story and Andrew Williams has done his research well and keeps very much to the historical record. He was also able to advise me on the correct pronunciation of *Narodnaya Volya*, for my Russian is not what it was and it is now nearly 40 years since I was taught Russian history by Tom Sharpe in Cambridge, shortly before he gave up teaching to become a best-selling comic novelist.



Just as in *The Interrogator*, he introduced a sly cameo from Ian Fleming, so too in *To Kill A Tsar*, Andrew drops a famous name with ease. As the book centres on St Petersburg, what could be more natural than to have the author of one of the most famous books set there (*Crime and Punishment*, finished in 1866), Fyodor Dostoyevsky, mentioned in passing as he leads guided tours of the Haymarket district for literary tourists as they try to identify Raskolnikov's apartments?

For devotees of the spy story and its history, *To Kill A Tsar* is an important book, for it deals with the activities of the Tsarist secret police force known as The Third Section, whose headquarters were at Fontanka 16, in its day a truly infamous address. Without The Third Section there would have been no Okhrana and, arguably, no Cheka, OGPU, NKVD and KGB, thus starving thriller writers from Dennis Wheatley onwards of a valuable source of fictional enemies.

<b>No, Mr Bond, I expect you to write</b>
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There were many cynical old hacks (like me) who were rather surprised when 'literary novelist' Sebastian Faulkes took on the James Bond novel-writing franchise a couple of years ago. I am sure he did brilliantly well at the job but I have no means of knowing for I was the only critic in the western world not to be sent a review copy of.....(Ed: –fill in title of book).

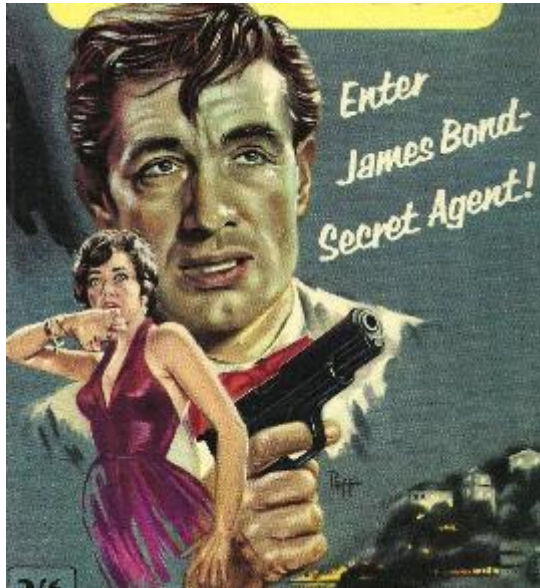
Sales seemed to be healthy enough and I have to admit to more surprise when I heard that the talented Mr Faulkes would be going back to his day job as a proper novelist and the torch (or possibly a smouldering cigarette – a Morland with the triple gold rings of course) had been passed to American mega-selling thriller legend Jeffery Deaver.

Whilst doubting that Deaver actually needs the work, as he seems to have no shortage of ideas for his own plots and characters, it is a shrewd move on the part of the Ian Fleming estate, given that there cannot be that many people on the planet who can read and who are unfamiliar with the names Deaver and Bond.

Perhaps he will write only one Bond book – I don't know – and pass on the franchise to another writer, in which case Bond book authorship could become a sort of rolling honour. In a way I do hope so, for there will then be hours of endless fun among the chattering classes trying to decide or guess who should win that particular prize every two years or so.

There will, of course, be a groundswell of nationalistic fervour which would call for a British author to take on the mantle, though no doubt that will be balanced by the ravings of the lobby favouring Steig Larsson. (Somebody's bound to suggest it.)

I will, of course, hold my counsel close until I am asked for an opinion, but would point out that among the leading candidates would surely be Charlie Higson, with his fine track record in the 'Young James Bond' series, and – to add the necessary Scottish connection – how about Ian Rankin (who has a backlist of spy thrillers writing as Jack Harvey) or Philip Kerr, whose saturnine good looks probably make him the nearest to a look-alike for the Bond pictured on some of the old paperback covers.



Or, to be radical (but still keeping a Scottish flavour), why not a woman? And who better than J.K. Rowling – after all, she’s got time on her hands these days.

### Exaggerate? Moi?

I am outraged at the suggestion that this column, which prides itself on hard news and incorruptible investigative journalism, should be accused of exaggeration but I have been inundated with an email disputing the veracity of my comments last month about the talented Lauren Henderson once appearing as a mystery guest in the panel game *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Cluedo*, in particular in the round called *Feel the Crime Writer*.

I assure you, dear reader(s), that there was nothing but the truth in my reportage. Such a panel game did once exist and for a while toured the music halls and theatre clubs of the North of England, with two teams captained by Minette Walters for the Ladies and Ian Rankin for the Gentlemen. (On a later tour of jumble sales and whist drives in the South of England, the captains' chairs were taken by Ruth Dudley Edwards and Peter Guttridge.)

By far the most popular round in this erudite, sophisticated and quite intellectual panel game was *Feel the Crime Writer* when distinguished panellists had to be blindfolded and then identify a well-known crime writer by touch alone.



Here as proof, if proof has to be produced, is a picture of that popular round, as Nicholas Blincoe and Ian Rankin fumble their way through a forensic identification of that always immaculate crime writer, Denise Danks. The astute observer will notice that Messrs Blincoe and Rankin are securely blindfolded by wearing what I believe are called ‘novelty masks’ purchased on the day from the emporium of a certain Miss Ann Summers, whom I’m told caters for all sorts of party.

### Best of British

I see that John Connolly’s 2009 novel *The Lovers* is short-listed for a 2010 Barry Award in America in the ‘Best British Novel’ category and I have supreme confidence it will win. As for the last two years, the ‘Best British’ Barry has gone to a Swede and an American, why not an Irishman?

### On the Edge

I had not realised until I saw the DVD that both the Mel Gibson movie version and the original, iconic, TV drama *Edge of Darkness* were directed by the same man, Martin Campbell.



The recent film is a good, well-paced thriller with some genuine sharp shocks in the violence department and solid acting performances all round, but I have to say it is not a patch on the BBC TV series of 1987 starring the late Bob Peck and the glorious Joe Don Baker in the role taken by Ray Winstone in the film.

Another piece of valuable trivia for those who like trivia is that *Edge of Darkness* was scripted by the legendary Troy Kennedy Martin, who died last year, and who also wrote the classic film *The Italian Job*. If he did nothing else (and he did), those two achievements make a hell of a C.V.

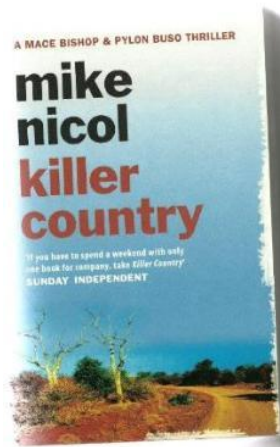
### Southern Stars

It had to happen. Some bright spark – on the BBC World Service I’m told – has coined the phrase *South Africa is the new Sweden for crime writing*.

Discerning readers should not despair, for such remarks are made by poorly-read people with no appreciation of the fine ‘Kramer and Zondi’ novels of the late James McClure or the thrillers of Wessel Ebersohn, author of the stunning *A Lonely Place to Die* which became an international bestseller (and he had a new book out in South Africa only last year).

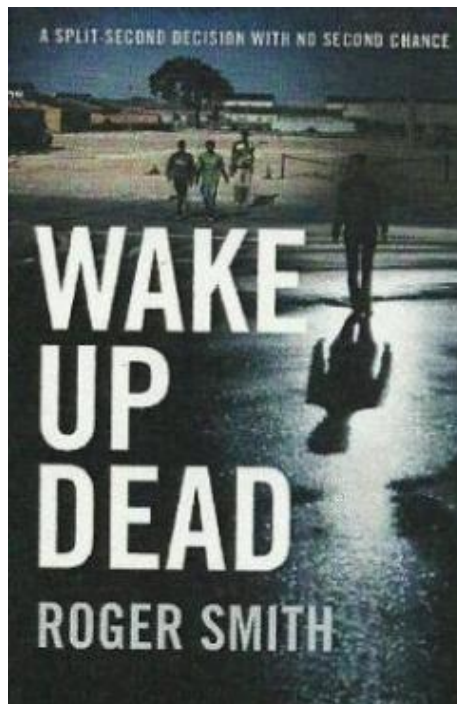
Yet undeniably, there is a surge in crime writing in South Africa and possibly the entire southern hemisphere.

I have already raved about my discovery of the hardboiled crime novels of Mike Nicol, who has a new title out here, *Killer Country*, from those enterprising people at Old Street Publishing.



In May, in this very column, I tipped Deon Meyer's *13 Hours* for a major award or two (thus probably scuppering his chances) and now I have discovered Roger Smith.

Published here next month by Serpent's Tail, *Wake Up Dead* is a slick, very impressive thriller set in the parts of Cape Town which visiting World Cup football fans only saw if they were really unlucky. I believe this is Roger's second novel and that his first, *Mixed Blood*, which has been ecstatically received in the US and in Germany, has yet to appear here



I can hardly wait as *Wake Up Dead* is an absolutely cracking read: tough as a rhino's hide and with dialogue as sharp as a Zulu *ikhwa*.

Having almost certainly cursed Deon Meyer by calling him the Michael Connelly of South Africa, I will further blight Roger Smith's career by calling him the Elmore Leonard of South Africa. (Even though my old friend the ubiquitous Ken Bruen has already likened his books to those of the late, great Charles Willeford.)

But don't take my word (or Ken's) for it. Try one yourself, for Meyer, Smith and Nicol are crime writers with a full grasp of technique. They all feature believable, sympathetic characters, unusual (for us) settings, convoluted but credible plotting, fantastic pace, suspense and, above all, a clear sense of humanity even if it is sometimes a bit twisted.

"The new Sweden" indeed!

Pah!

### Tasty Sampler

I am surprised that more publishers do not produce “sampler” paperbacks as Transworld have just done, containing first chapters or extracts from novels on their crime list (with some useful notes on the authors). As a free promotional item, I would imagine they are very popular, but apart from one from Penguin three (?) years ago, Transworld’s excellent volume *The Serial Thrillers* is the first I have come across in a while.

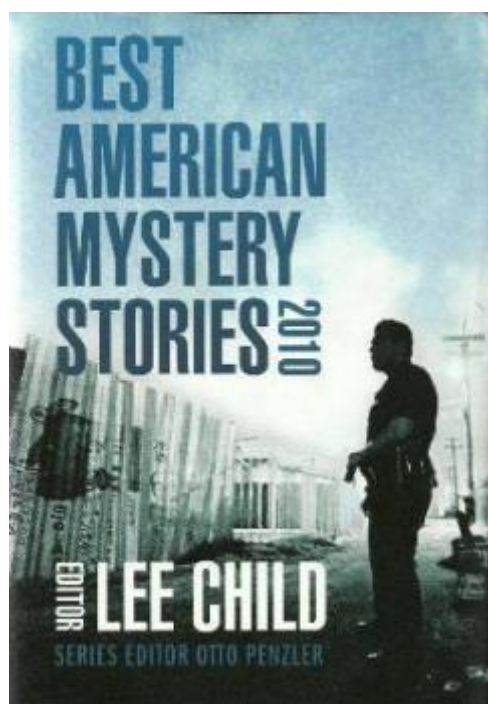


The compendium promotes 14 titles from their list, many of which are already available or have new paperback editions on the way. Oddly enough, Lee Child’s bestselling *61 Hours* (paperback scheduled for September) is there, but there is no mention of the much-anticipated follow-up *Worth Dying For* which is a #1 bestseller-in-waiting for later this year.

### The Spies Have It

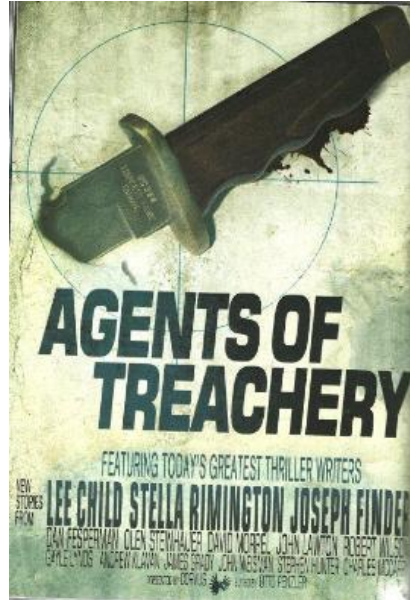
A more traditional way of promoting their books is for publishers to produce twice-yearly catalogues; and some publishers even send me copies.

A very attractive, and readable, one has just reached me from relatively new imprint Corvus, which – as all my readers will know instantly – is the Latin for ‘raven’ although students of the Classics will recognise it as the term for a grappling-hook as used in naval warfare. But I digress, and must concentrate on highlighting just a few of the many treats Corvus are promising in a bumper hamper of crime and thriller titles.



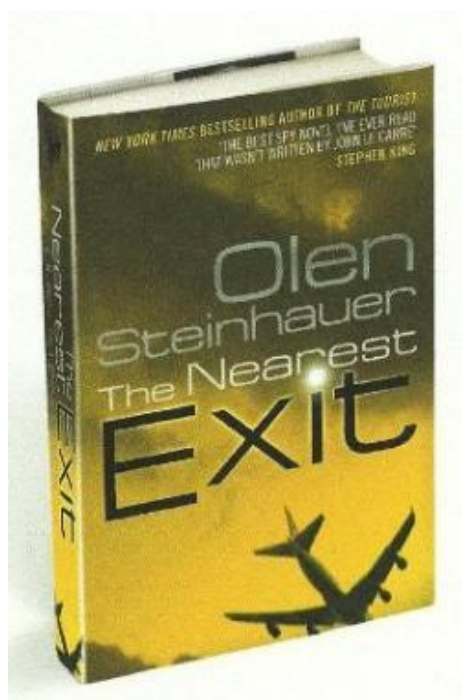
To be published in November and with Lee Child wearing the editor's eye-shade, the anthology *Best American Mystery Stories 2010* looks like a perfect fit for the crime fiction fan's Christmas stocking and even though I am not yet sure which twenty authors and stories have been handpicked by Lee, I am sure this will be a popular collection.

Slightly earlier in October another anthology looks like it will be a 'must-have' in the library of any lover of spy fiction and, as I have said before, there is some seriously good spy-writing around at the moment.



Edited by my old friend and fellow *boulevardier* Otto Penzler, *Agents of Treachery* offers 15 brand new spy stories from the most impressive of cast lists of contributors including: Lee Child (him again), Stella Rimmington, Dan Fesperman, David Morrel, Olen Steinhauer, John (my favourite curmudgeon) Lawton, Stephen Hunter, Robert Wilson, the great Charles McCarry and James ("Six Days of the Condor") Grady. Now that, in anybody's book, is a quality list of authors.

One of those contributors, Olen Steinhauer, is certainly a rising star of American spy fiction and just as I was mightily impressed with his novel *The Tourist*, I now look forward to his latest, *The Nearest Exit*, which Corvus will publish, also in October.



However, I feel I must take exception with the otherwise brilliant Corvus catalogue for its saddles Olen Steinhauer with a ridiculously over-the-top piece of blurbing thus: *Olen Steinhauer. Remember his name. Quite simply the biggest thing to happen to spy fiction since John le Carre.*

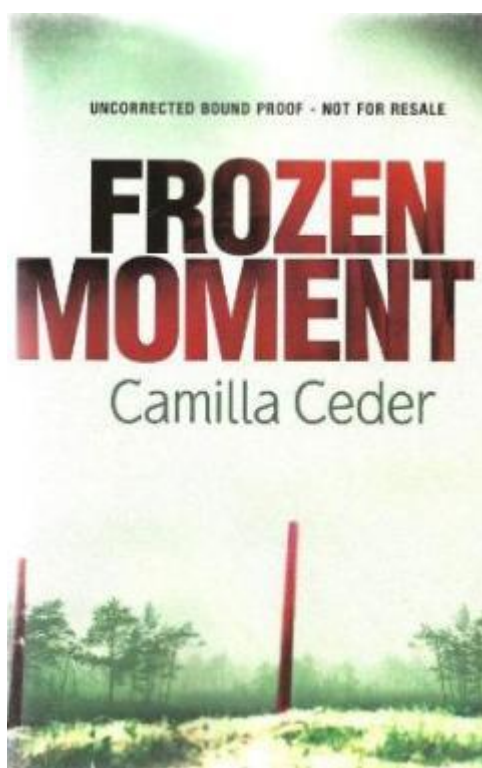
Now I have nothing against Olen Steinhauer, whose books (I repeat) I enjoy, but when I read something like that, which I am sure was not written by him, I immediately start to think to myself: “Oh yeah? What about Len Deighton? John Gardner? Charles McCarry? Robert Littell? Anthony Price? Alan Furst?”

I could go on, and after a few drinks I probably will.

One other Corvus title in particular caught my jaundiced eye, a novel from fantasy-writer Jeff Vander Meer entitled *Finch* which is described by none other than Ken Bruen as: “Think Cormac McCarthy via David Goodis, with an amazing nod to Lovecraft and still that doesn’t capture the spell this novel casts from the off.”

Now that’s what I call a blurb. I don’t understand it, but I’m impressed by it and intrigued enough to keep an eye out for the book, which is published in August.

Another way in which publishers try and attract attention to a book is – according to Mark Sanderson in his ‘Literary Life’ column in the *Sunday Telegraph* – “by means of bribes”. He refers to a parcel delivered to his skyscraper Canary Wharf offices containing a pack of Swedish biscuits and some ground coffee meant to promote the latest Scandinavian bestseller (is there any other sort of Scandinavian book?) *Frozen Moment* by Camilla Ceder.



The only problem, complains Mark, was that the publishers forgot to enclose a proof copy of the book in their goody bag! The next time I meet with Mark over champagne cocktails (of which he is a connoisseur) I will offer him my pristine copy, pointing out that it came in the post in an envelope without any sign of biscuits or coffee or any other sort of “bribe” – which might explain why it remains, as yet, unread.....

### Camera Shy

There are many occasions when a crime writer, especially in the early years of their career, is forced to do the unthinkable and promote themselves, adding to the almost inhuman pressures already placed upon them.

But crime writers are a resourceful breed. Take, for example, rising star Alison Bruce, who is launching her second novel, *The Siren*, in the grounds of St Heffers College, Cambridge on July 14<sup>th</sup> and has even had to resort to a rare picture of herself to promote the event.





I became aware of Alison's new book only because of my honorary position as Chairman of the Victualling Committee of that famous college, not having heard a word about the book from the publisher, who for legal reasons, have not let me see an advance copy.



Thus I cannot actually tell you anything about the book except that it is called *The Siren* and is the follow-up to Alison's debut *Cambridge Blue*, which I wrote about last year and which I said, if I remember correctly, deserved a more interesting cover when the paperback was published.



I do not know if my advice (offered freely without any expectation of reward, credit or even acknowledgement) has been taken up as I have not seen that either.



But I am sure all will be revealed on July 14<sup>th</sup>, or indeed on July 15<sup>th</sup> at the twentieth annual reunion of the alumni of St Heffers (the only Cambridge college to specialise exclusively in crime fiction) which is known to the public as “Bodies in the Bookshop”.



It was at last year's reunion that I first met the charming Alison Bruce, who admitted that she was a sensitive and naturally shy person, which is why she is so rarely photographed.



July is a busy month for St Heffers, for the college will see two other book launches even before the alumni gather for their annual feast.

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, debut novelist Emily Winslow (who comes highly recommended by my good friend Janet Neel) launches *The Whole World* and on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Nicola Upson launches the third of her series featuring crime writer Josephine Tey (as the detective), *Two For Sorrow*.

The aforementioned Bond author in waiting, Jeffrey Deaver, will also call in to the college in July, in a lunchtime signing session for his new book *The Burning Wire* and I believe Peter Robinson is similarly planning a visit.

Full details of college events from Heffers, 20 Trinity Street, Cambridge (01223 568568).

### Survival Tips for Penguins

Announcing the publication of not one, but *three* crime novels by American Mary Burton, which will appear with rapid-fire speed between August this year and April 2011, Penguin publishers claim that “women readers account for almost 60% of the crime genre market.”

This may well be true; I do not know, but I am willing to believe it. What I am not so comfortable with are the reasons Penguin cite to justify the popularity of crime fiction among women.

*Reasons why women are hooked on crime fiction (they write):*

- *Our relationship with the prospect of danger: from a young age women are primed to expect fear*
- *Possibility of learning survival tips to use if we're kidnapped*
- *Escapism; pure enjoyment*
- *Anti romance*

Now this is not the time or place for a philosophical essay on crime fiction – I leave that to others and it would not surprise me if the BBC's *Woman's Hour* took up that particular challenge. But I am troubled by some of the rather fatuous 'reasons' given here.

For starters, I do not think it very polite to cite “Anti romance” as a reason when promoting the work of Mary Burton (who is probably totally unaware of this exercise), for she is the prolific author of many novels in the romantic fiction field, having only relatively recently turned to crime. And do women not read Dorothy L Sayers because of the Lord Peter/Harriet Vane romance strand? I think not.

More importantly, are women really “primed to expect fear” from a young age? If so, that is a terrible indictment and one is tempted to say that one shouldn’t be surprised if one takes a look at the covers Penguin are proposing.



With their images of bloodstained clothing, bloodstained machetes and bloodstained shackles and warning blurbs such as “He’s closer than you think”, I think this is a very good way of priming readers to expect fear.

And do crime novels really offer “survival tips to use if we’re kidnapped”?

From famous “serial killer thrillers” (and I think that’s the sub-genre we’re talking about) I have read, I think I could more easily summarise the *bad* advice often offered:

- Always run through dark woods at night wearing high heels – the chances of tripping and spraining an ankle are remote.
- Never call the police, for they are often busy and not to be trusted.
- Never tell anyone you’re going to go into that haunted house/mortuary/cemetery/deserted shack and make sure you always go alone. You will almost certainly not need a weapon, torch or mobile phone.
- Never bother to make sure your cell phone battery is charged.
- When entering a darkened room, always think of the environment and leave the lights off.

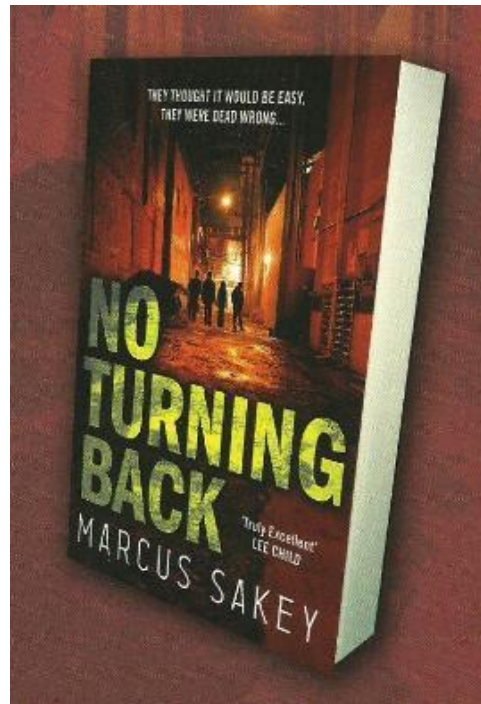
#### Hat-Tip

Lest anyone think I am down on those perky publishers at Penguin, I will always be grateful to them for introducing me to the work of rising, and disgracefully young, American star Marcus Sakey, pictured here with his charming wife at a Penguin party in London some while ago.



To prove I am not the only one impressed, Lee Child – who rarely expresses an opinion on other writers’ work – has confided privately in me that he finds Marcus Sakey’s hard-boiled take on the Chicago crime scene “truly excellent”, though please don’t tell anyone I’ve told you.

I am delighted to say that Marcus has a new novel out in September, from his new publisher Transworld, *No Turning Back*, which I am itching to get at.



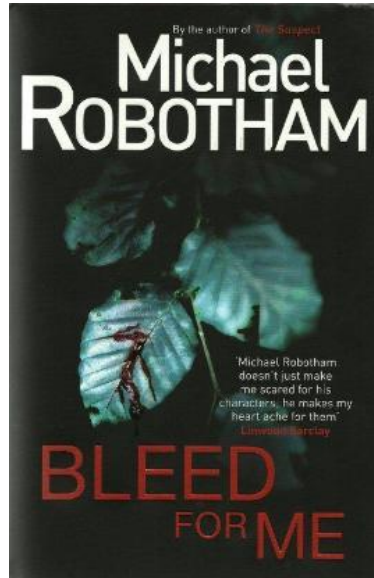
Marcus, however, will have to wait in line for my To-Be-Read table is already groaning from the excellent titles I am currently engrossed in.

There’s the paperback edition of Reggie Nadelson’s *Londongrad*, from Atlantic Books, which I missed when it came out in hardback last year.

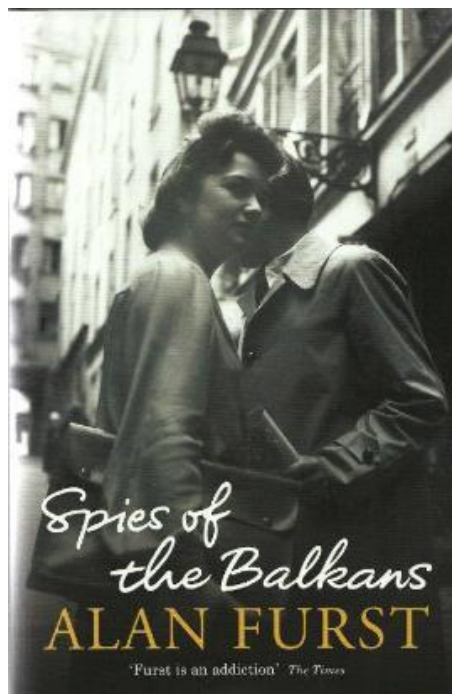


Reggie Nadelson, who divides her time (yes, *her* time) between London and New York is one of the most over-looked writers of interesting and intelligent thrillers, though I cannot for the life of me understand why. I must get a move on and finish the excellent *Londongrad* (a wonderful title for the expanding empire of Russian gangsterdom) for I understand she has a new book featuring her sympathetic detective hero Artie Cohen, *Blood Count*, out in October in the US at least.

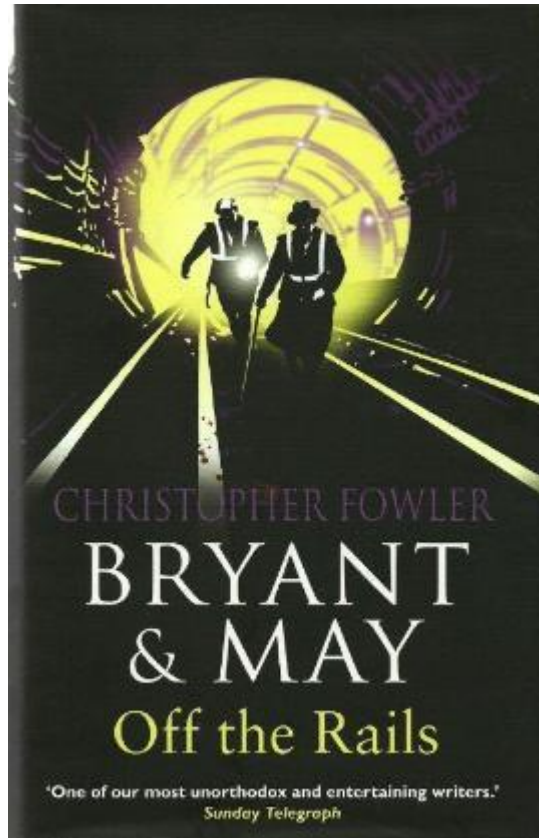
Then I really must get down to the new Michael Robotham thriller *Bleed For Me* from Sphere, whom none other than Peter James declares “deserves to be classed among the very best of British thriller writers.”



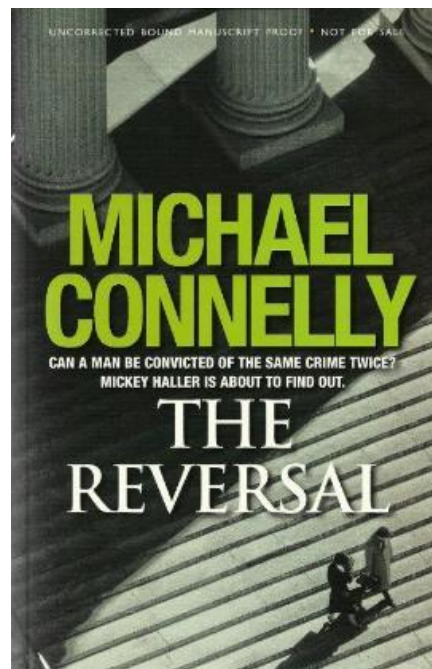
But can I resist the new novel by the brilliant Alan Furst, *Spies of the Balkans*, from Weidenfeld, which I have been chomping at the bit for ever since his last one came out?



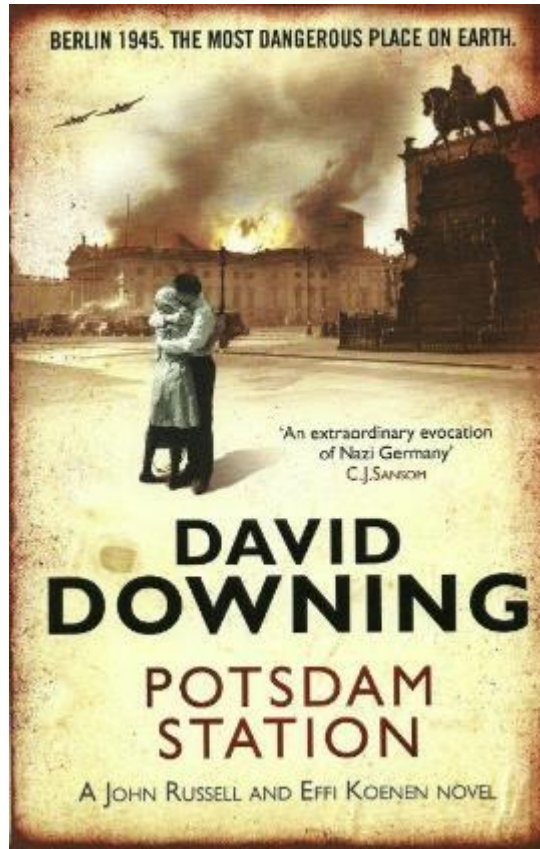
Probably not, for I find Furst’s take on the historical espionage story irresistible, but I must make time for Christopher Fowler’s new ‘Bryant & May’ novel *Off The Rails* from Transworld, for I am appearing at the Reading Festival of Crime Writing with the author in September, where I hope to pick up a few tips about writing comedy crime.



My biggest temptation, however, may well be Michael Connelly's new 'Mickey Haller' thriller *The Reversal*. Although not published here until October, those naughty people at Orion Books have already sent me a proof copy, forcing me to say "Get thee behind me, Connelly" – at least for a couple of days.



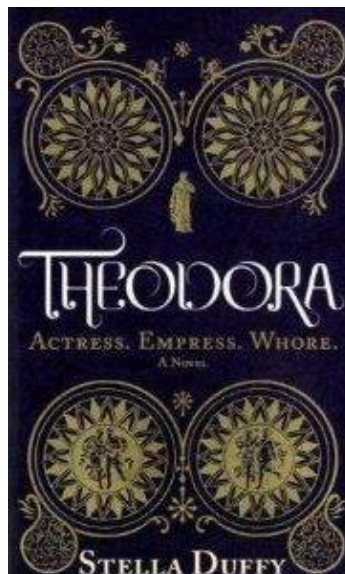
Fortunately, thanks to the good offices of Old Street Publishing, I have already read (and raved about) David Downing's superb *Potsdam Station*, which is now available to mere mortals in a splendid new livery.



### No Mystery, This History

I am delighted, though I have been taken somewhat by surprise, to discover that my old Salsa instructor the effervescent Stella Duffy has, like many of the more intelligent crime writers, turned to writing historical fiction.

It seems like only yesterday, but was in fact 1994, that Stella created Saz Martin, the feisty, kick-ass young heroine of *Calendar Girl* in the first of her far-too-few smart, contemporary crime novels. In fact, her Saz Martin character, along with Denise Danks' Georgina Powers, Sarah Dunant's Hannah Wolfe, Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon and Lauren Henderson's Sam Jones, set a British template for young, feisty females in crime fiction in the early 1990's. It is such a wonderful template that it is bound to be taken up by, say, Scandinavian crime writing any day now.





Turning to historical fiction, however does not mean Stella will lack a resourceful and feisty heroine, for she has chosen wisely and in *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Whore* tells the story of the most powerful and fascinating woman of Byzantium, the Empress Theodora, who died in AD 548.

For legal reasons I have not yet read the book but I certainly intend to, for my knowledge of modern history is sadly lacking and I expect to learn much about the Byzantine Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. That I will be entertained as well as informed by Stella's narrative is not in doubt.

### Kiwi Krime?

I have been busy of late, reading up on crime fiction coming from New Zealand (where, coincidentally, the aforementioned Stella Duffy grew up), learning much about rugby and having to resort to an Atlas in order to familiarise myself with settings I have found myself woefully ignorant of. Along the way, I have discovered some very interesting writers previously unknown to me.



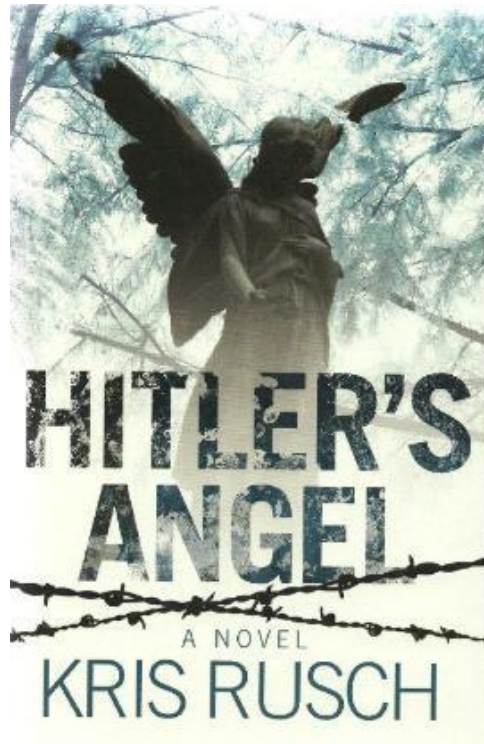
I have undertaken this task not merely to expand my personal pleasure horizons but in response to the great honour of being asked to be the UK representative on an international judging panel which will, in September, make the first ever Kiwi Crime Novel Award.

I am told there is a growing interest in crime fiction in New Zealand and, as the country which produced in Ngaio Marsh one the Queens of the 'golden age' of detective fiction, so there jolly well should be.

### Yet Another Angel

I was looking forward to (and was not disappointed by) a new novel, *Hitler's Angel*, the latest title from the new MaxCrime imprint, even though, to my shame, I had never heard of the author, Kris Rusch.

The book revolves around the famous true incident of the death of Adolf Hitler's "neice" Geli Raubel in 1931, shortly before the Nazis came to power in Germany. It is a well-known story (well-covered in the 2003 film *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* with the excellent Robert Carlyle as you-know-who) but *Hitler's Angel* tells it cleverly by having the investigating Munich policeman interviewed about the case in retirement in 1972.



Intrigued by the book, I looked to the cover blurb to tell me more about the author to discover that this was “*the stunning new novel by the award-winning young American crime writer Kris Rusch.*”

Now I make no comment on the description “young” as, at my advanced age, *all* writers are young, but I still could not recall an *award-winning crime writer* of that name. Could it be that this is the Kris Rusch who has published well over 40 novels and dozens of short stories since 1989 in the science-fiction and fantasy field, not to mention contributing to the series of novelisations of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *X-Men*? And indeed has won and been nominated for many awards in that genre?

And is this the “stunning *new* novel” which was actually first published in the US in 1998?

Good though it is, it deserves better cover copy.

### The Baltic Falcon

In the lands of the north, where the black rocks stand guard against the cold sea, there is a legend of one of the least known prizes in crime fiction.

The Graculus, as it is formally known, is a sculptured statuette so encrusted with rubies and diamonds that for security and insurance reasons it is annually coated with a layer of green lacquer – hence its nickname ‘The Fabulous Green Bird’.



Amazingly this award (presented at the same ceremony as the Nobel Prizes) for outstanding contribution to Comic Scandinavian Crime Writing seems to be little known and I cannot, try though I might, discover the last time it was awarded or to whom.

***Toodles!***  
***The Ripster***