

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley

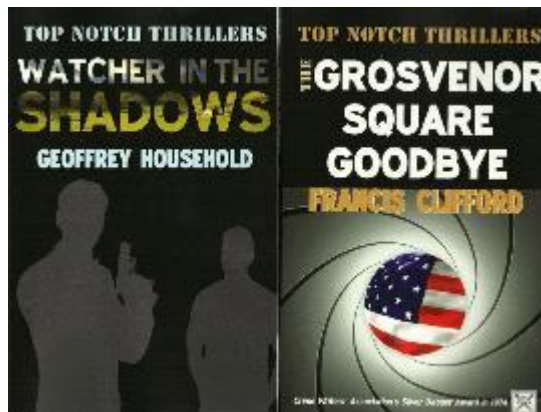


September 2010

Blasts from the Past

As my memory is not what it was, I may already have mentioned in passing that I am proud to be the series editor of *Top Notch Thrillers*, the new imprint of Ostara Publishing, the highly-regarded print-on-demand specialists. It is barely a year that the idea to revive Great British thrillers before they are forgotten was conceived (over a very fine claret I recall) and the *TNT* list now has 12 titles, with four more scheduled between now and February 2011.

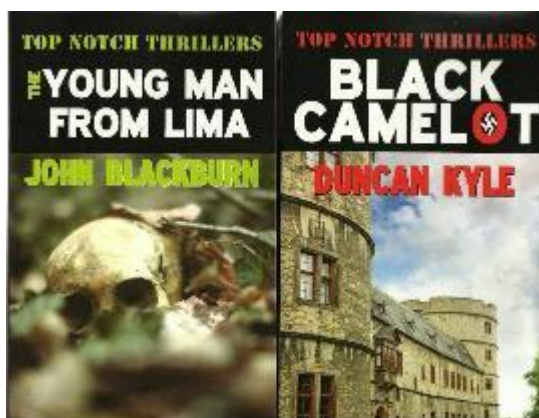
New titles this summer include *Watcher in the Shadows*, the 1960 man-hunt thriller set in the heart of the peaceful English countryside, by Geoffrey Household, author of the legendary *Rogue Male* and often regarded as the natural successor to John Buchan. The book is famous for its long dual between the two protagonists, which has been described as “Gunfight at the OK Corral transposed to St Mary Mead.”



The Grosvenor Square Goodbye, one of Francis Clifford’s last thrillers before his untimely death in 1975, starts with random sniper fire just before dawn in full view of the American Embassy in London. A siege develops and a deranged gunman demands the US Ambassador as a hostage. With consummate skill, Clifford winds up his plot (with a wonderful kick in the tail) in less than 17 hours of action and the book caused quite a stir on publication in 1974, being serialised in a national newspaper and winning the CWA’s Silver Dagger

John Blackburn was a unique, but now sadly neglected, figure in British crime writing, being one of the few authors to mix detective story, spy story and gothic horror story. Much admired by fans of supernatural horror and science fiction, Blackburn was seen as the literary link between Dennis Wheatley and James Herbert. *The Young Man from Lima* shows what he brought to the thriller: pace. This is a book written with a furious sense of pace, involving a mad Catholic priest bent on exterminating humanity, a biological weapon which just might

have come from outer space and been refined by a Nazi scientist, Cold War politics in a South American banana republic and a journey up an isolated jungle river in true “Heart of Darkness” style.



Duncan Kyle, a former Chairman of the Crime Writers Association, shot straight into the Alistair Maclean/Jack Higgins/Desmond Bagley class with his first thriller. By the time *Black Camelot* was published in 1978, he had cemented his reputation for mixing solid, detailed research with believable characters and thumping action scenes. Set in the dog days of WW2, he uses a fantastic conspiracy-theory plot and has the nerve to create two unsympathetic protagonists: a dodgy Irish journalist and a bitter renegade officer in the Waffen SS! The title comes from the site of the climactic shoot-out at Wewelsburg Castle which was designed to be a shrine to Heinrich Himmler’s SS based on King Arthur’s Camelot.

These excellent titles should be available, with persistence, at any decent bookshop on ‘online’ (as the modern jargon goes) or why not simply consult the publisher’s website www.ostarapublishing.co.uk.

Finger on the pulse?

It gives me no pleasure to discover (oh yes it does) that when it comes to awards for crime fiction, there is a worst tipster than I, but it seems that readers of the website *Eurocrime*, who are devotees of crime fiction in translation and especially Scandinavian crime, are just as rubbish as I am in predicting the results of the distinguished judging panels who make the awards.

This year’s International Dagger (i.e. Dagger in Translation), if anyone was paying attention, went to the Swedish ghost story *The Darkest Room* by Johan Theorin, yet in its annual poll only 7% of *Eurocrime* readers thought that book would win. The large majority (69%) plumping, unsurprisingly, for something by Steig Larsson.

In the same poll last year, the favourite was – you’ve guessed it – Steig Larsson and only 4% of *Eurocrime* readers voted for the actual winner, Fred Vargas. Still, that was an improvement on the 2008 poll, when the winner, Dominique Manotti, did not garner a single vote.

It seems odd that the devoted readers of the *Eurocrime* site, who I am sure, are dedicated and knowledgeable when it comes to crime fiction in translation, seem so out of touch with the thinking of the distinguished judging panel which, coincidentally, includes within its ranks the founder of site.

Still, what do I know? Apart that is from the fact that by mentioning to anyone who would listen that I thought that Deon Meyer’s *13 Hours* was one of the best crime novels, thrillers and books in or out of translation (from the Afrikaans) I have read this year, has consequently consigned it to being overlooked by the wielders of the various Dagger awards. Once again the Curse of the Ripster has struck home and all I can say to Mr Meyer is that I am truly sorry, for his book deserved far better treatment.

Call of Duty

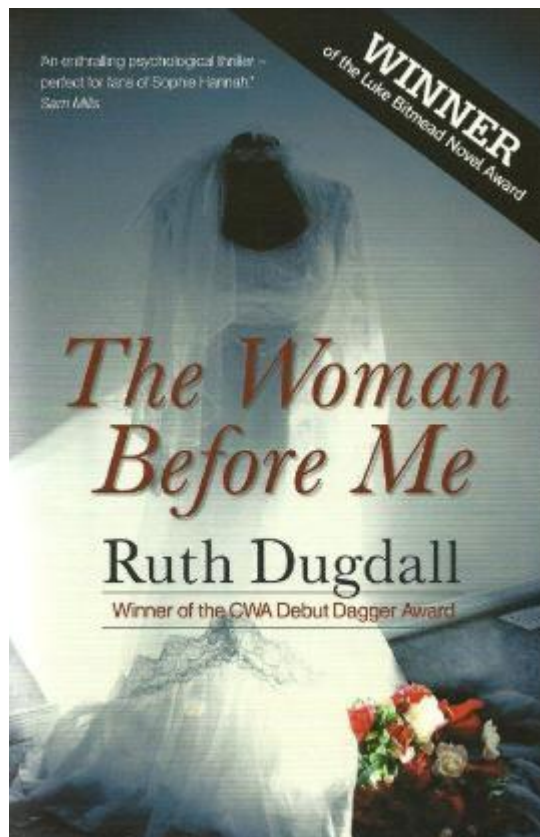
The crime fiction social season seems to start earlier every year and this year has led to some unfortunate diary clashes.



As is customary in the summer months, I turn over the East Wing of Ripster Hall to the students attending my Creative (Crime) Writing course – part of the continuing education programme of St Heffers College. And indeed this year, the guest lecturers on the course include Fenland bestseller Jim Kelly and the Master of St Heffers himself, Professor Richard Reynolds.

Sadly, because of my dedication to my students, I have had to miss the two opening parties of the social calendar.

I had been looking forward to attending the sumptuous bash at the Phoenix Artists Club in London's theatreland to welcome the new crime novel by Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me* published by Legend Press.

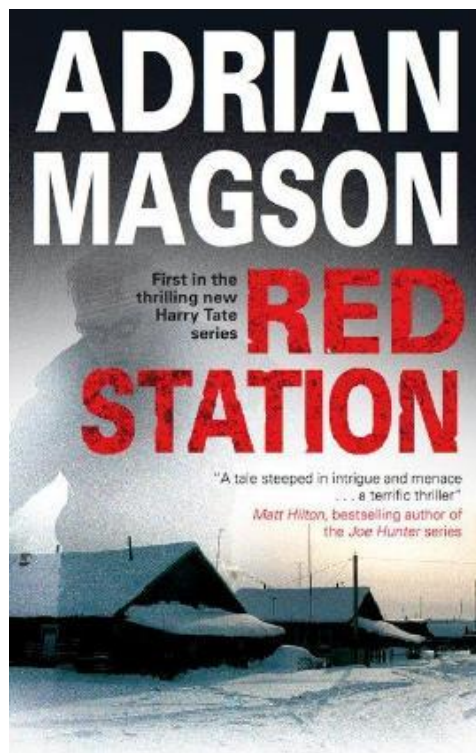


A while ago, Ruth Dugdall won a Crime Writers' Debut Dagger award and her new novel justifies the promise spotted by the judging panel. It is an intriguing, rather bleak tale of two women – one in prison accused of child murder, one on the other side of the system working as a Probation and Parole officer. In fact it is a book all about mothers and the mothering urge (or lack of it) and absolutely none of the male characters come out of it with any shred of decency. It is dark – as bleak as the Suffolk coast in winter - suspenseful and harrowingly poignant in turn, and really rather well done.

I had also ordered my trench coat dry-cleaned (those Blood and Milk Stain Devils simply don't do the job) in anticipation of the West End launch party being thrown for Adrian Magson.

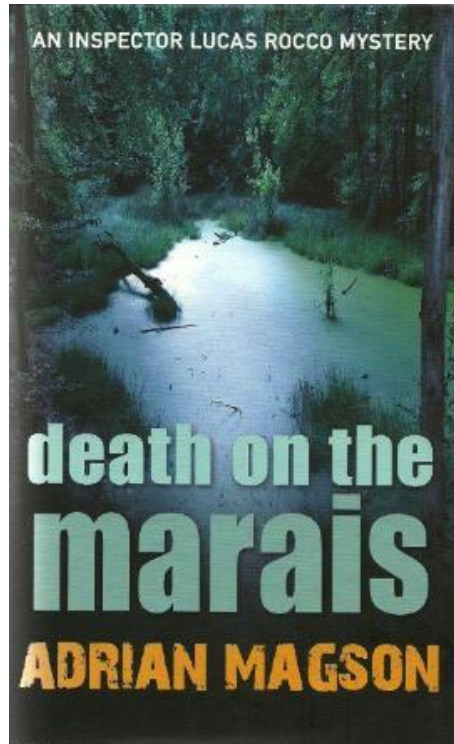


Adrian, seen here at the annual feast of St Heffers, has temporarily switched from crime to spy fiction in his new book *Red Station* from Severn House, which introduces a new series hero, MI5 agent Harry Tate.



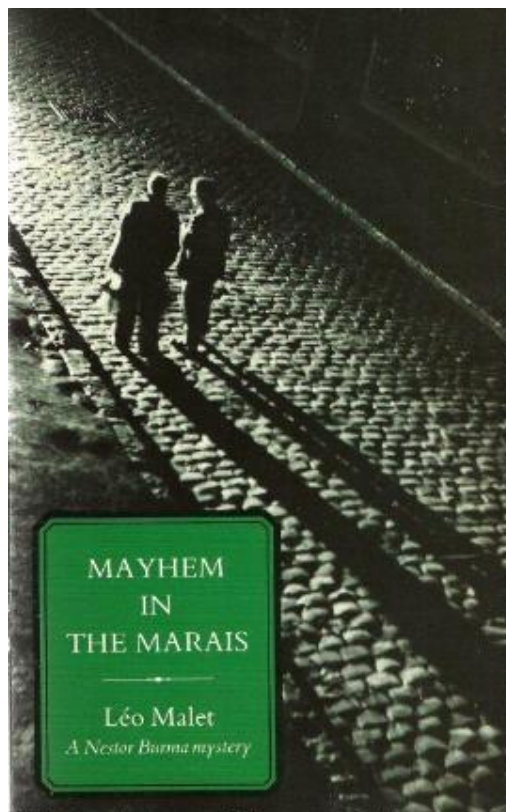
Hence the need for a trench coat in order to blend in with all the currently active agents who would certainly be attending the party, just to make sure Adrian has not blown his cover or given away too many trade secrets. It is not usually difficult to spot agents of the security services at publishing parties, for they usually introduce themselves as being “in publicity” or, even more outlandishly, “in marketing”.

Adrian will hardly have recovered from that launch party before being whisked off to partake of another, thanks to the legendary *largesse* of publishers Allison & Busby, to launch another new series of crime novels.

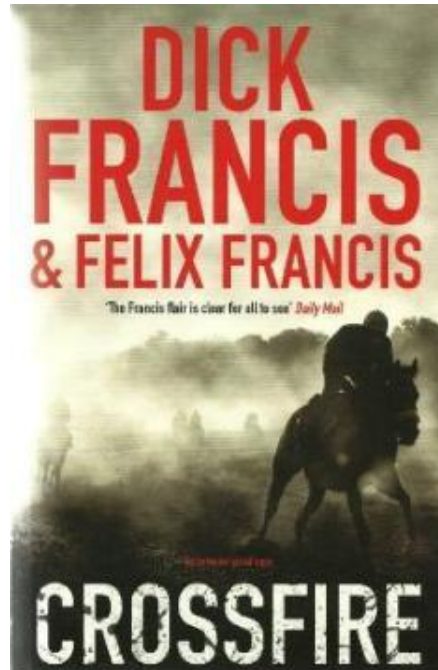


Death on the Marais sees the debut case for Inspector Lucas Rocco, a Paris cop in 1963, on secondment in rural Picardie in the village of Poissons-Les-Marais, where (inevitably) a body has turned up in completely the wrong place at definitely the wrong time.

I am sure both new series will do well. As Adrian is an instructor in a well-known Korean martial art, I cannot really say otherwise, but I do hope *Death on the Marais* is not confused with dear old Leo Malet's private eye classic *Mayhem in the Marais* from 1958 which takes place in the better-known Marais area – the 4th *arrondissement* of Paris known in modern parlance as the Hôtel de Ville.



I do not, however, intend to miss the saddest party of the year, which will be the launch of *Crossfire* by the legendary Dick Francis and his son Felix.



For about a quarter of a century, the annual launch party for the latest Dick Francis novel have been famed throughout the crime writing world. In recent years they have been jointly hosted by Dick and his co-author Felix.

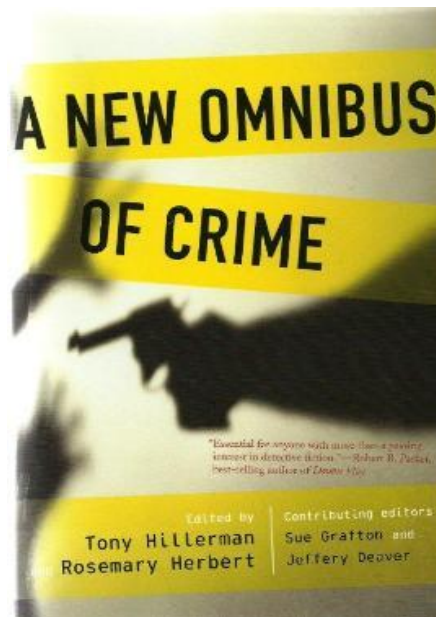


Sadly, *Crossfire* – with its fascinating hero in the form of an army officer who has lost a foot to an IED in Afghanistan – was the last novel to be completed by the father-and-son team before Dick's death earlier this year.

Season of the Short

As the days begin to shorten and the nights draw in, we enter the traditional season of the crime short story to greet a whole new swathe of anthologies.

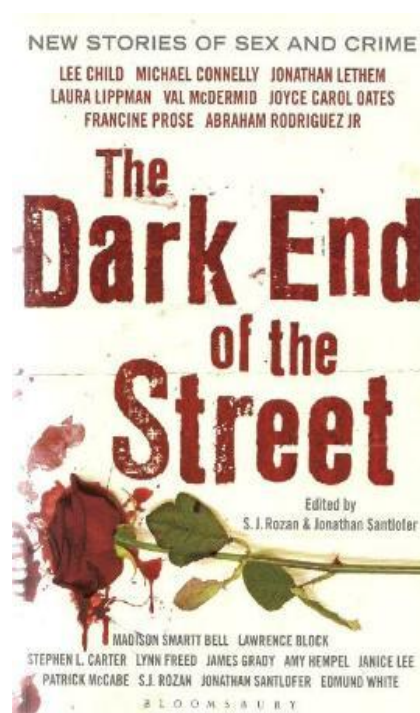
And while one might quibble with the word 'New' in the title of *A New Omnibus of Crime* (Oxford University Press), as this is the paperback of a book which first appeared five years ago (though contains no mention that four of the contributors have died since) and only six of the 26 stories contained were actually written in the present century, one cannot dismiss any anthology which contains stories by Sayers, Highsmith, Rendell, Paretsky, Macdonald (Ross), McBain, Lehane and Crumley to name but a jaw-dropping handful.



There is also a cracking short piece by Elmore Leonard and (cheekily) two stories by editor Tony Hillerman as well as a rare chance these days for UK readers to try a sample of the work of distinguished veterans Frederic Brown and Michael Malone, and that up-and-coming newcomer Alexander McCall Smith....

The annual Crime Writers' Association's anthology this year is edited by Martin Edwards and published by Severn House in November. It will be titled *Original Sins*, and though I cannot say how original the sins are, I can vouch for the fact that the stories are and the contributors include: Simon Brett, Peter Lovesey, Barbara Nadel, Sophie Hannah and Reginald Hill.

And any day now, Bloomsbury launches *The Dark End of the Street* collection, edited by Americans Jonathan Santlofer and R.J. Rozen, which is billed as an 'explosive collection' of 'new stories of sex and crime'.

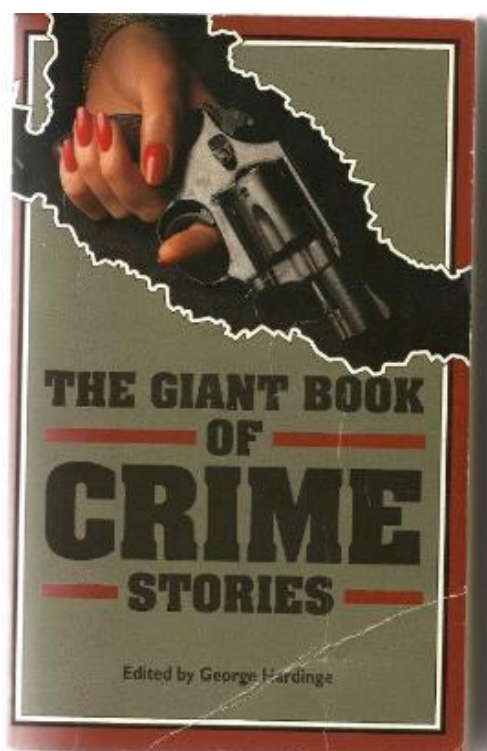


It is actually a very interesting anthology of new stories though it lacks any notes on the authors, which is a pity as many are unfamiliar names on this side of the Atlantic.

Some, of course, are very well-known, including Jonathan Lethem and Joyce Carol Oates. The headliners though are probably Lee Child (with a corker of a contribution titled *Me & Mr Rafferty*), Michael Connelly (with a great piece of legal whimsy starring Mickey Haller) and Val McDermid with a dubious method of murder, but leaving no doubt that hell hath no fury like a lesbian screenwriter scorned.

Crime anthologies always do better in the winter; indeed, one of the most famous series of all was that published by Macmillan for many years under the title *Winter's Crimes*, edited by Lord George Hardinge, Hilary Hale and Maria Rejt. I am not sure how many volumes there were in all, but I was very proud to be asked to contribute a story to *Winter's Crimes 24* in 1992, though I dispute the rumour that my involvement had anything to do with the ultimate demise of the series.

One of my best purchases ever (99p in an Oxfam shop) was the awesome *Giant Book of Crime Stories* published by Magpie Books (?) in 1991. This bumper volume originally appeared in 1987 as *The Mammoth Book of Modern Crime Stories*, published by Robinson (who are famed for their books on mammoths) but a year before that had been published as *The Best of Winter's Crime Volumes 1 and 2* by Macmillan.



The stories in *Giant* were all specially written for *Winter's Crimes* between 1969 and 1985 and the cast-list of authors is simply breath-taking, including: Eric Ambler, John Bingham, Christianna Brand, Agatha Christie, Francis Clifford, Lionel Davidson, Colin Dexter, Dick Francis, Michael Gilbert, Patricia Highsmith, P.M. Hubbard, P.D. James, Harry Keating, James McClure, Ellis Peters, Ruth Rendell, George Sims and Julian Symons.

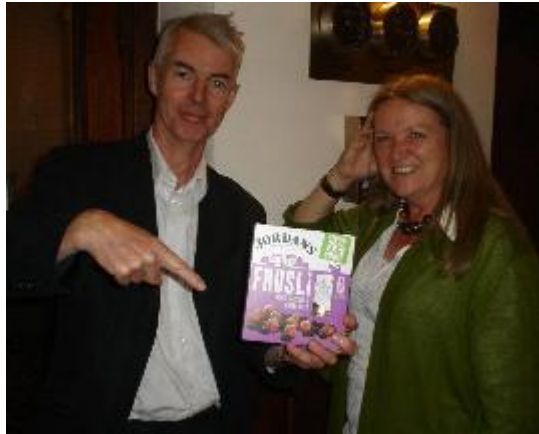
And that's not all....for this collection also contains a rare short story by Anthony Lejeune (the crime fiction critic for *The Tablet* for over 50 years); one featuring almost-forgotten British private eye Hazell (created by writer Gordon Williams and footballer Terry Venables); the brilliant *Boudicca Killing* by Anthony Price set in Roman Britain; and one story which is absolutely required reading for any potential author – *We Know You're Busy Writing, But We Thought You Wouldn't Mind If We Just Dropped in For A Minute* by the wonderful Edmund Crispin.

Beat that, for 99p!

Secret of his success?

For legal reasons I cannot attend the annual crime jamboree in the posh Yorkshire spa town of Harrogate.

It is an occasion where, I am reliably told, that writers let their hair down and reveal the secrets of their trade and actively give out tips to adoring fans. Andrew Taylor, for instance, is happy to share exactly what keeps him regular – regularly producing award-winning crime novels, that is.



Whereas Reg Hill confides that the secret behind his constant stream of best-sellers is the more traditional portable cask of strong ale, which he carries with him at all times.



There are also many announcements of awards for crime-writing: either awards made or shortlists for forthcoming awards, all of which I find very confusing these days. Except that is I was delighted to hear that my old chum Ruth Dudley Edwards had very deservedly scooped the Crime Writers' Gold Dagger for Non-Fiction for *Aftermath: the Omagh Bombing and the Families' Pursuit of Justice*, published by Harvill Secker.



Victoriana

Victorian Values, or more probably the lack of them, have always fascinated crime-writers, some such as Peter Lovesey and Anne Perry penning incredibly successful gas-lit series.

Victoriana seems as popular as ever as two new titles published almost simultaneously this month demonstrate.

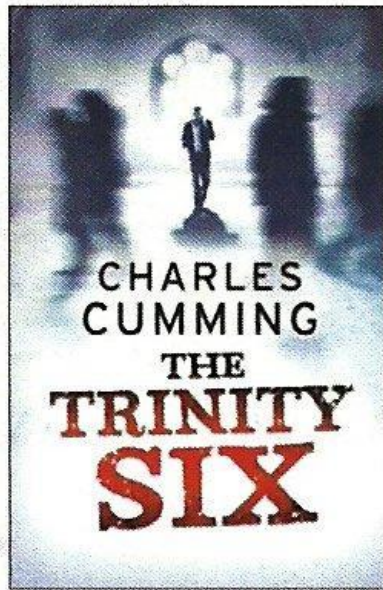


Ann Featherstone's *The Newgate Jig* (John Murray) takes us down among the bohemian underclass, specifically among the band of performing "marvels and misfits" who inhabit the disused London Aquarium on the edge of the legitimate theatrical scene. This is a subject the author knows well as she is something of an authority on the Victorian entertainment industry. She also provides a very useful glossary of contemporary slang, from which I realise that I have been completely mis-using the phrase "*Make a fist of Bordeaux!*" for many years and I feel duly chastened.

Moving on to the later Victorian period, the third Bella Wallis mystery from Brian Thompson is *The Player's Curse* (Chatto and Windus). Bella Wallis, a heroine for whom the word "feisty" seems ridiculously inadequate, moonlights as crime novelist Henry Margan but has trouble plotting out her own romantic life, though she manages to take kidnapping, cross-dressing and cricket in her stride.

The Proof which Came in from the Cold

For legal reasons I was not sent a proof of the long-awaited new Charles Cumming novel *The Trinity Six* which is to be published in February 2011, and I despaired for I have long rated young Charlie as one of the finest of the new generation of very fine writers of spy fiction and the one I would label the best British prospect for the future.



However, I have friends amongst the COBRAS (if you have to ask, you're out in the cold) and so managed to acquire a copy of the highly secret proof and am resisting the urge to review it six months before it is available to mere mortals.



Exactly how I acquired an advance proof is, of course, a matter of national security and as Charles Cummings well knows (for he was approached by a recruiter from SIS in 1995); if I told you how I'd done it I would have to kill you.

News from NZ

Whilst the plethora of crime-writing awards (their timing, their glaring omissions, strange decisions and Byzantine sponsorship arrangements) tend to induce a blinding headache which leaves me grasping for the gin bottle, on the other side of the world, things seem to run far more smoothly.

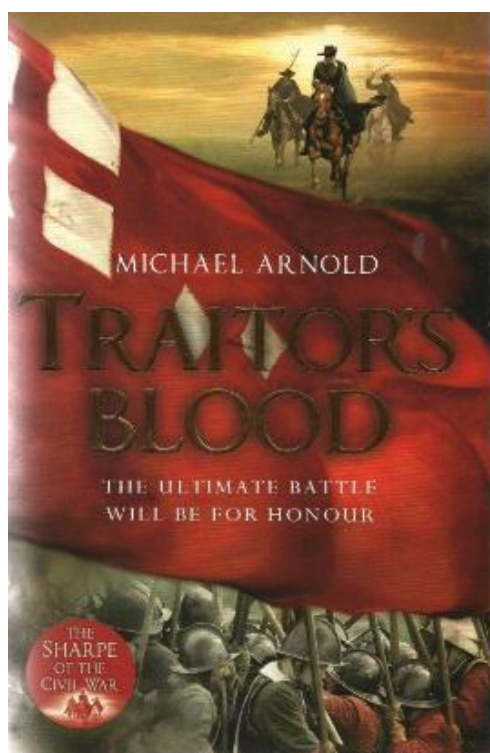
Within a remarkably short space of time, the inaugural Dame Ngaio Marsh award for 'Kiwi Crime' has been conceived, an international jury convened and a short-list announced, and the first winner will receive the award at the prestigious Christchurch Writers Festival later this month. The organisers have even received a message of support from John Dacres-Mannings, the nephew of Dame Ngaio Marsh: *"I am delighted to hear of the progress of the Dame Ngaio Marsh Award, and congratulate the finalists for what sounds to be a very high standard of detective story writing. I know that Dame Ngaio would be so proud of all the entrants, and to know that her name is associated with the award. I hope you will extend my own congratulations to the writers, but also to those who have taken what will have been an enormous amount work, research and thought to create the awards."*

The three crime novels on the short list are: *Containment* by Vanda Symon, *Cut & Run* by Alix Bosco and the only one to have so far been published in the UK, Neil Cross' *Burial*.

I have read all three and have my personal favourite, but as a member of the international jury I must wait until the winner is announced before I will know whether my fellow judges have had the good sense to agree with me.

A Very Uncivil War

Those Jolly Magnificent John Murray publishing people think they've discovered a historical thriller series which will do for the English Civil War what Bernard Cornwall and Richard Sharpe did for tight trousers and even tighter bodices in the Peninsular War with the Duke of Wellington (not that he wore the tight bodice).



Michael Arnold's debut novel *Traitor's Blood* introduces hero Captain Stryker in the year 1642 on the side of the Cavaliers and on the track of a Roundhead spy in the run-up to the battle of Brentford. (Which I have to admit is perhaps not as familiar a battle as Edgehill or Naseby, but then I was never very hot on *modern* history.)

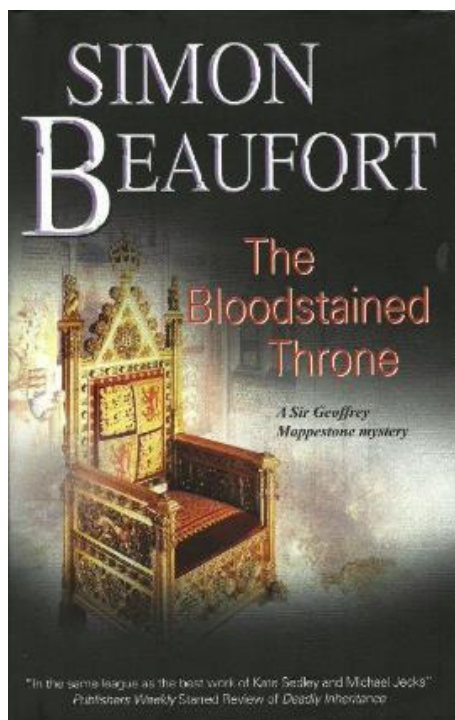
The Civil War period is an under-visited location for thrillers. Does anyone else remember the adventures of Cromwellian spy Nicholas Pym, such as *A Firework for Oliver* by 'John Sanders' (which I think was a pen-name for a well-known crime writer)? They caused quite a stir back in the Swinging Sixties.

I am sure *Traitor's Blood* will do well and will in no way be confused with Reginald Hill's wonderful stand-alone thriller *Traitor's Blood* from 1983, which had nothing to do with civil wars in England – or at least not that one.

Writing in Tandem

Writing a crime novel is a lonely business but at least the solitary author, shivering in an attic or garden shed, only has themselves to argue with during the initial creative process. (The rows with agents and fist fights with publishers come later.) So for many of us ‘singletons’ the fact that some books are written by two authors working in harmonious partnership is a matter of mystery and wonderment in itself. There have, of course, been some very famous writing duos – Ellery Queen and Nicci French to name but four – and being a co-author hasn’t exactly dented the careers of Clive Cussler or James Patterson.

To prove that two authors can write a good book, two well-established writing duos in the historical mystery field have new titles out.

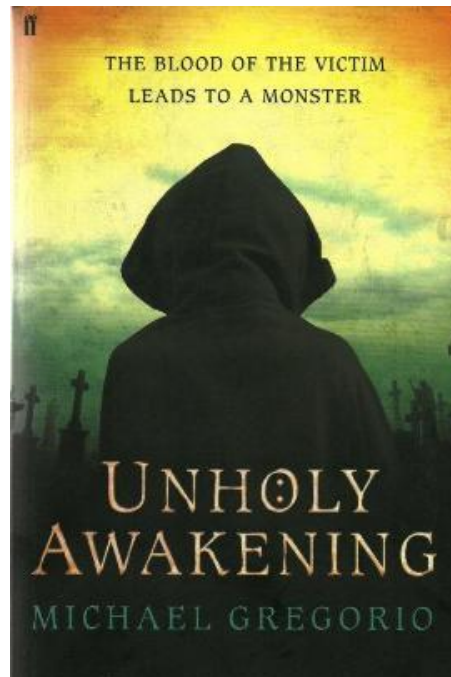


The Bloodstained Throne (Severn House) is the seventh Sir Geoffrey Mappestone adventure set in the early 11th century to be written by ‘Simon Beaufort’, the pen-name used by partners in (historical) crime Susanna Gregory (the pen-name of Elizabeth Cruwys) and Beau Riffenburgh. It was, I believe, a partnership which began over ten years ago when both parties were academics in Cambridge.

And it was in Cambridge at the annual feast of St Heffers College that I met the charming and married partnership of Michael Jacob and Daniela De Gregorio, who write as Michael Gregorio.



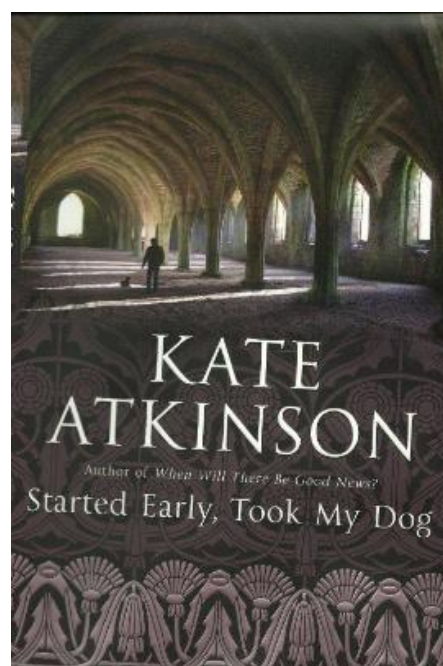
Their new novel, *Unholy Awakening* (Faber) is the fourth in their much-lauded series to feature Prussian magistrate and acolyte of the philosopher Kant, Hanno Stifeniis, although philosophical questions in this one are overshadowed by an outbreak of what appears to be vampirism.



As I am neither pure nor reasonable, I shall not attempt a critique of this novel, which I thoroughly enjoyed. However, I have to point out that authors and publishers have been very brave, for unless you have read the previous titles in the series, the newcomer might be puzzled as to exactly *when* this story is set. It is not until about page 50 that one character mentions that they had lost a son “at (the battle of) Jena four years ago” which, as anyone with a half-decent education, will know sets the book in the year 1810.

In the news

I don't actually know if Kate Atkinson is in the news, but she certainly should be, basking in brilliant reviews for her new Jackson Brodie novel *Started Early, Took My Dog*, which I thoroughly enjoyed recently.



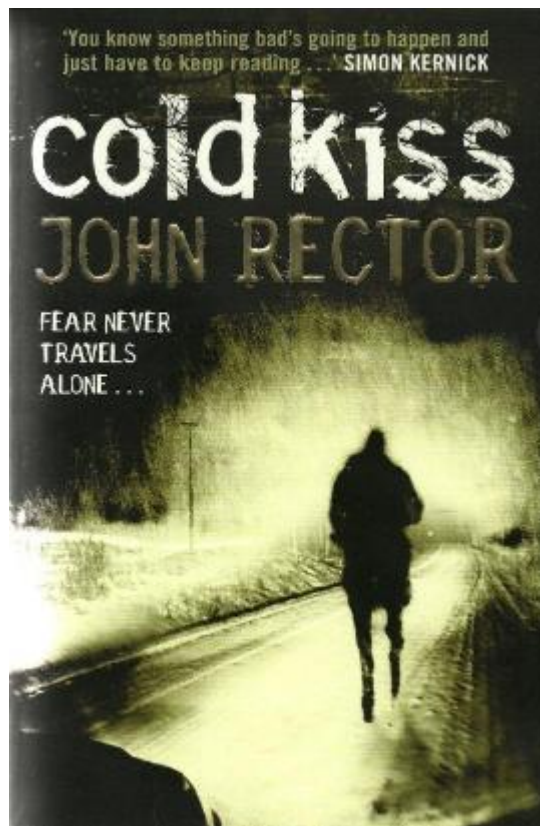
Reading Atkinson's prose is like juggling with diamonds: beautiful and cutting. Especially when describing Yorkshire and its inhabitants, which is most of the time here as reluctant detective Brodie's personal odyssey takes him from a Leeds shopping centre to Whitby via as many ruined abbeys he can fit in to his itinerary. The plot concerns children searching for their past or having their future changed for them and the purist lover of the 'puzzle' novel will no doubt carp and wail that there is too much coincidence and that loose ends are not neatly tied up. But that is the same as complaining that a Miles Davis or a Jimi Hendrix were playing all the right notes though not necessarily in the right order.

Started Early, Took My Dog is great fun; it always is watching a real virtuoso in full flight.

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I have been indulging my passion for American *noir* crime fiction, as I do from time to time and have made a couple of significant discoveries.

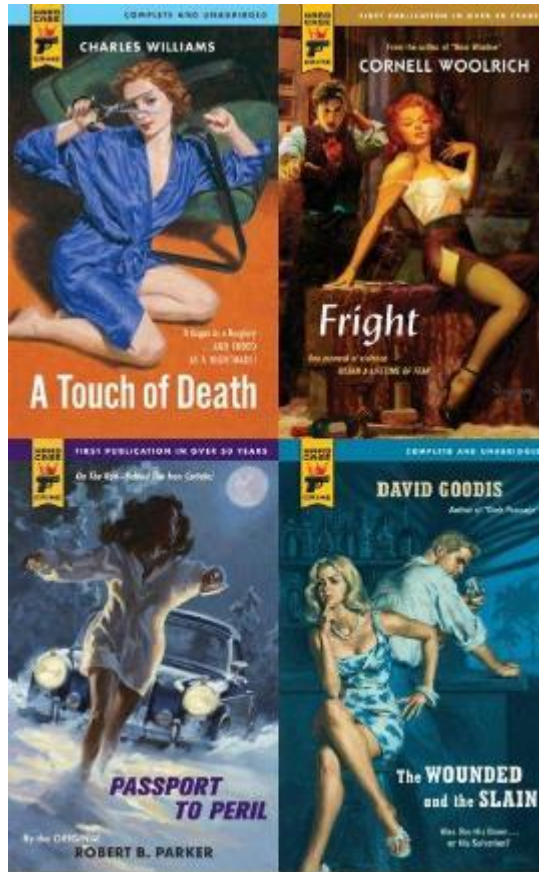
First is the new author (well, new to me) John Rector whose *Cold Kiss* (Pocket Books) is a chilling –literally as it most takes place in a snowstorm – slice of doom concerning a young couple, a hitchhiker, a corpse, a huge wodge of cash and a snowed-in Motel populated by very greedy and rather violent fellow travellers.



Unusually, this noir-ish tale is not completely *noir* in that there is a glimpse of redemption for the protagonists at the end.

For the genuine, nihilistic article you can do no better than to take advantage of my other recent discovery, Hard Case Crime. This is publisher which I have discovered disgracefully late in the day and am awestruck by the range of titles

they publish, from old classics by such as Cornell Woolrich and David Goodis to old favourite authors whose books are difficult to find in the UK, such as Charles Williams and Donald Westlake.



On their excellent website (www.hardcasecrime.com) I even spotted what I thought was a familiar title by a familiar favourite author: *Passport To Peril* by Robert B. Parker. But this was not the *Passport To Peril* Dr Jason Love spy caper by James Leasor that I remembered from 1966; nor indeed was it the Robert B. Parker of Spenser, the Boston P.I. fame.

This Cold War thriller is actually by Robert Bogardus Parker, who died in 1955, and not the Robert Brown Parker who died in January this year.

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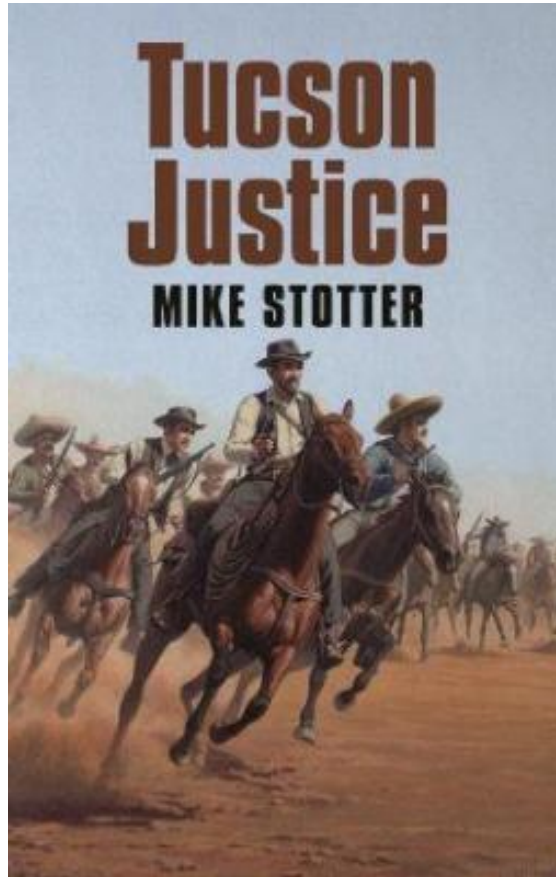
Rumours that the next James Bond film has been delayed due to difficulties at a corporate rather than film-making level, could be just that – rumours – for it is clear that my old chum Ralph “Postmortem Man” Spurrier has recently been auditioning for a role.



As a dedicated book-dealer of noble standing (www.postmortembooks.com) Ralph cannot resist gravitating towards an obviously fake London bookshop facade even when having the run of a massive film set. I am reliably informed that his audition took place in the Casino on board a luxury cruise liner sailing the Baltic. The magic of the movies has never failed to impress.

*

And a new nickname beckons for SHOTS editor Mike ‘Tombstone’ Stotter, who will henceforth be known as Mike ‘Tucson’ Stotter following the recent re-issues of one of his class westerns.



I have already warned Mr Stotter that logically the next in the series – continuing the theme of towns of the Old West – will be set in Tijuana and could lead to him becoming known as Herb Alpert.

Angel Delight

News that two of my early ‘Angel’ novels are to be imminently reissued by those talented people at Telos Books, has led to confusion and numerous rumours, some of which are totally unfounded.

It was, I can see, an easy enough mistake to make when the forthcoming novel by L.A. Weatherly was thought to be the first sign of the books’ new jacket livery.



The strap line blurb does not help matters, for “*The only good Angel is a Dead Angel*” has been said about my own novels many times.

Toodles!
The Ripster

