

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



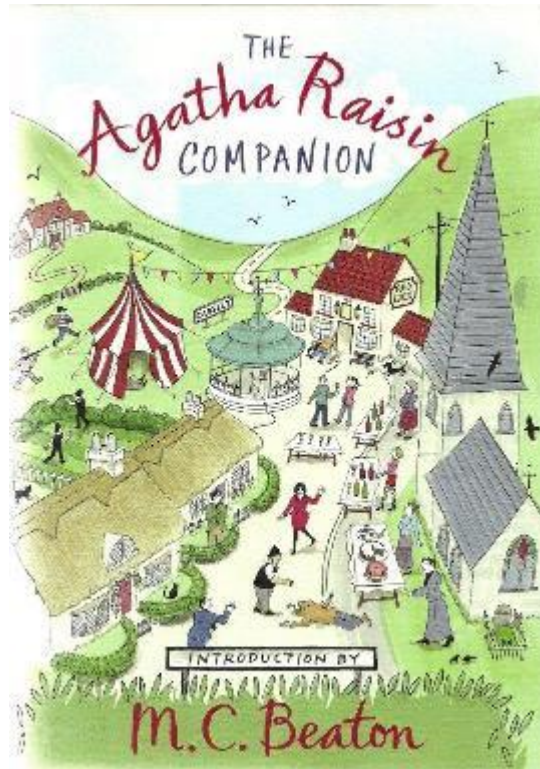
October 2010

Not in Reading Gaol

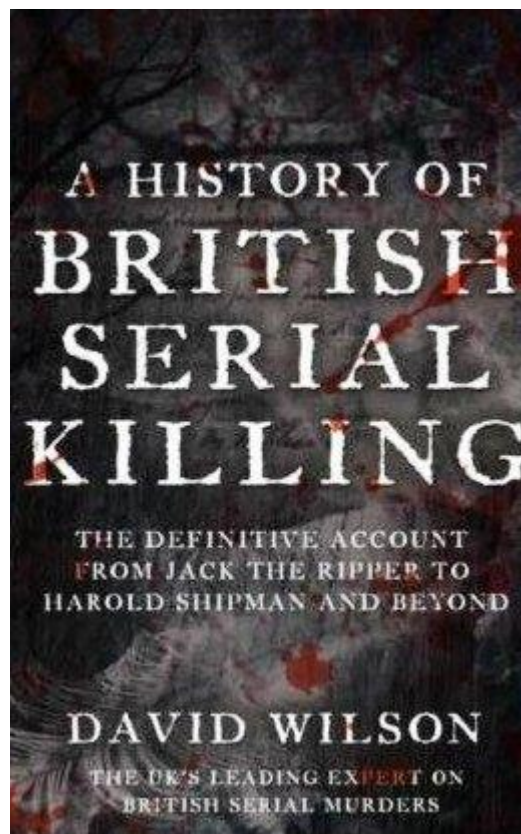
I was an honoured guest of the third Reading Festival of Crime Writing last month, held in the splendidly Gothic Town Hall there rather than the Gaol. This is a festival which is expanding by leaps and bounds, not only in quantity but also quality, attracting the superstars of the genre such as Val McDermid, Lindsey Davies, Christopher Brookmyre, Paul Doherty and Nicci French.



I was taking part in a panel on comedy crime, *Dead Funny*, chaired by the elegant Peter Guttridge, and managed to pick up lots of tips from being in the company that Welsh wizard Malcolm Pryce and the frighteningly talented Christopher Fowler, but it was a real pleasure to meet the delightful Marion ('M.C.') Beaton, who modestly refrained from mentioning that she had a new novel about to be published (*Agatha Raisin and the Busy Body*) and that to complement the 21-book series, *The Agatha Raisin Companion* will appear next month.

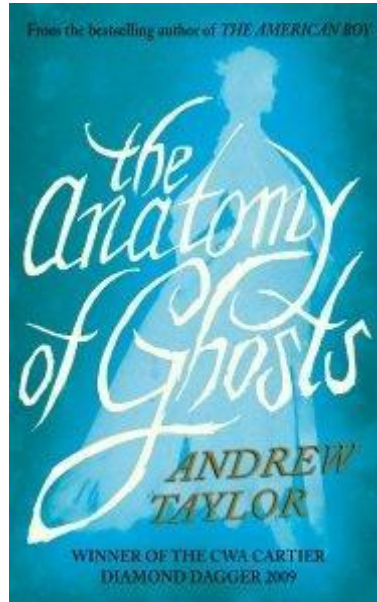


The four-day festival, however, was not confined to crime fiction, but also included talks and seminars on modern police work, the history of Reading Gaol, Charles Dickens and his interest in Victorian forensics, the role of Magistrates and a fascinating (and sell-out) lecture on the history of British Serial Killing by Professor David Wilson, author of the recent book of the same title.



Memories of Academia

It was remiss of me to feature a photograph of that prolific author Andrew Taylor in last month's column, without mentioning Andrew's new novel. I have been suitably chided, nay positively chastised by those perky publishing people at Penguin for not informing my readers that the wonderfully atmospheric *The Anatomy of Ghosts* is now out and no doubt flying off the shelves of bookshops across the land.



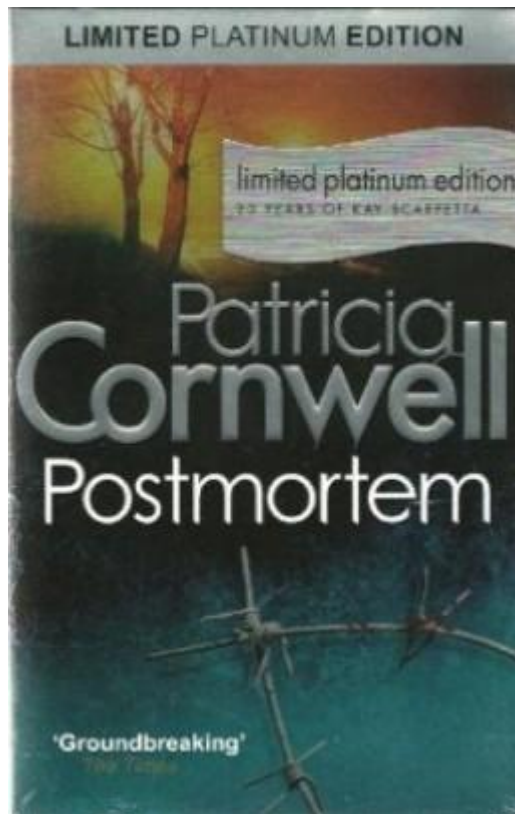
By no means a conventional crime novel, *The Anatomy of Ghosts* is set in the Cambridge of the 1780s but opens with that perennial problem of where to find a sacrificial virgin in Cambridge. Most of the action is set in the haunting –and haunted – precincts of Jerusalem College, which for those unfortunates who do not know Cambridge, is situated between Fisher College and St Heffers.



To launch the book in Cambridge, though, Cartier Dagger winner (and Richard & Judy favourite) Andrew chose as a venue the lesser-known Emmanuel College for reasons which I can only guess at. Perhaps his choice had something to do with Jerusalem College's reputation not only for ghosts but also the sinister Holy Ghost Club which features in his excellent novel. In my day, of course, Jerusalem College was best known for the ranks of raincoat-wearing KGB recruiters who used to loiter outside the Porter's Lodge on a summer's evening. The undergraduates were not fooled, however, as they clearly came from an Eastern Europe which in those days was starved of decent clothing, as few if any had buttons on their raincoats.

Platinum Edition

Those callous publishers at Sphere have cruelly reminded me that it is now twenty years since I met Patricia Cornwell in London as she launched her debut novel, by producing a 'Platinum Edition' of the trail-blazing *Postmortem*.

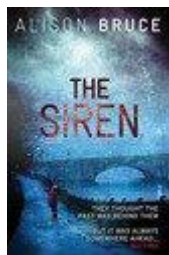


It is certainly a book which deserves to be commemorated for it was the Pandora's Box which introduced the sub-genre of the 'forensic thriller' and any number of pale imitators. Such was the impact of the 29-year-old unknown American's book – which introduced Dr Kay Scarpetta and won a slew of awards – that British reviewers, myself included, struggled to find the words to describe something that was so clearly *new* in crime fiction.

In the *Daily Telegraph* on 23rd September 1990 I recommended it as “a slick medico-thriller...an excellent chiller with pace and tension” and had no hesitation, ten years later, in placing it firmly in the Top 100 Crime Novels of the 20th Century list compiled for *The Times*.

A Writer's Life

The rarely-photographed Alison Bruce has had a punishing schedule this summer on tour to promote her second Cambridge-set crime novel *The Siren*, which for legal reasons I still have not read.



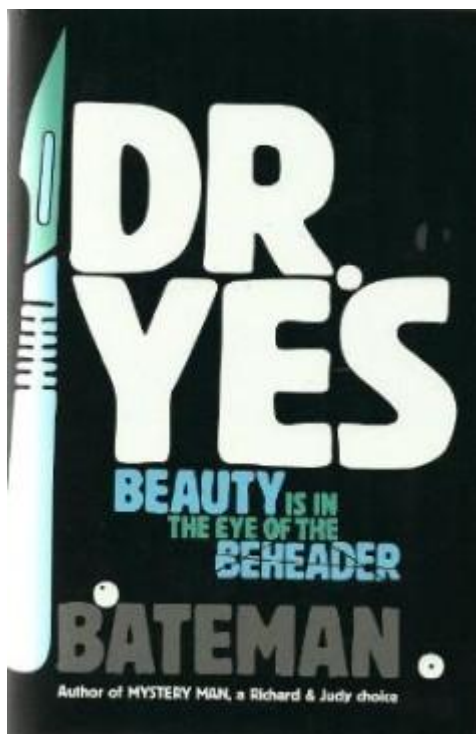
Her promotional tour included talks in libraries as far apart as Downham Market and Cromer in Norfolk in July and ended in September with an address to the Hawaii Chapter of *Sisters In Crime* at the Makiki Community Library in Honolulu.

Who said a writer's life was easy?

Front-runner

There may be a distressingly small number of shopping days left before Christmas, but it is still too early to consider prestigious annual *Shots* awards which are handed out at the end of the Michaelmas Term.

One book, though, has established itself as the clear front-runner for the Comic Shot of the Year Award and that is *Dr Yes* (from Headline) by previous winner, the Ulster imp Colin Bateman, who writes as 'Bateman' but is known as 'Bate' to his friends.



The eye-wateringly funny *Dr Yes* is the third Bateman book to feature the neurotic, anally-retentive and highly unpleasant 'Mystery Man' who runs a crime fiction bookshop called No Alibis in downtown Belfast, which may or may not actually exist (the bookshop, that is, not Belfast). On the side, the anonymous Mystery Man is a reluctant and not very competent private detective. In fact he's a reluctant and fairly incompetent human being, but as a comic creation he is quite hilarious and never more so than when musing on the subject of crime fiction.

One character is majestically dismissed as irrelevant as they are "still reading Patterson" and then Mystery Man begins to day-dream on his favourite subject:

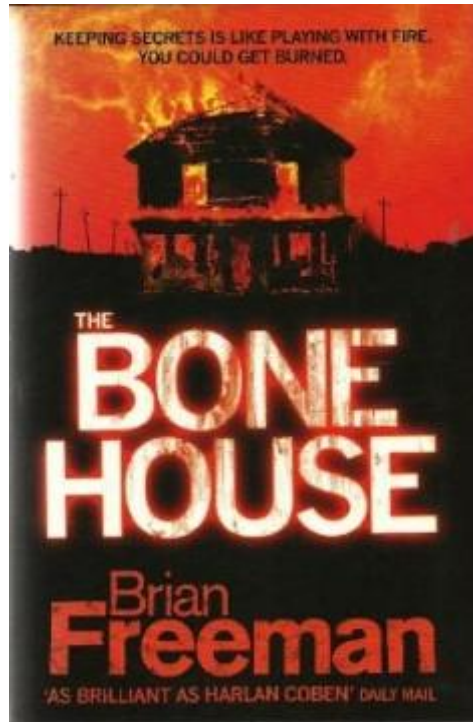
I..sat back, like the satisfied, successful champion of crime fiction that I was, and waxed lyrical to an imaginary audience about the greats of the genre, Americans mostly, with a sprinkling of English and French, no mention at all for the Scandinavians, obviously.....

He also, in his musings, makes the stone cold accurate observation that there *is no sustainable market for crime fiction with a sense of humour* and also describes, wonderfully, the concept of 'Belfast justice': *shoot first and ask questions thirty years later at a public enquiry.*

The real mystery, though, is the egotistical, alcoholic, rude, obscure, self-published almost cult-status Irish crime writer Augustine Wogan, whose "suicide" sparks off our misanthropic detective's latest case. Now where did Bateman get the inspiration for such a bizarre character? I think we should be told.

Off the Beaten Track

I have thoroughly enjoyed the latest offering from Headline author Brian Freeman, *The Bone House*, and not simply because he has promised me one of his custom-made t-shirts advertising his debut thriller *Immoral*, which for some peculiar reason he thought would suit me.



Freeman is one of the most readable of the younger generation of American thriller writers with the added incentive in that he sets his books in places which are not that familiar to British readers as they are off the well-beaten crime fiction tracks and he is best known for icy chillers set in Minnesota.

True, *The Bone House* begins in Florida (and has an oddball Florida detective character with a very dodgy past) but the action soon moves to rural Wisconsin. Now I have to admit that my knowledge of Wisconsin is limited to what made Milwaukee famous – and, incidentally, a loser out of me – and I had to consult my Rand McNally map of America to discover where exactly the Green Bay area as described in the book actually was. (For those without a school atlas to hand, it's the top left-hand corner of Lake Michigan, up near Canada and, curiously, on roughly the same Latitude as the vineyards of Bordeaux.)

But *The Bone House* is not a travelogue, it's a suspenseful thriller about a teacher accused of having an affair with one student and the prime suspect in the murder of another, but everyone involved has far more secrets than is healthy. Well-plotted, with totally believable (though not necessarily pleasant) characters and a red-hot (literally) finale, this is just the sort of book Hitchcock, in his prime, would have snapped up.

The t-shirt, I presume, is in the post.

Legally Speaking

For legal reasons I have to limit my social interaction with lawyers (those Restraining Orders seem to get stricter every year), so it was a great pleasure to be introduced to a very pleasant American one recently.



Jed Rubinfeld was in London at a Mayfair penthouse party hosted by his publisher Headline to launch his second novel *The Death Instinct*. It is three years since Rubinfeld hit the headlines with his million-selling, award-winning debut *The Interpretation of Murder* where one of the central characters was Dr Sigmund Freud no less.

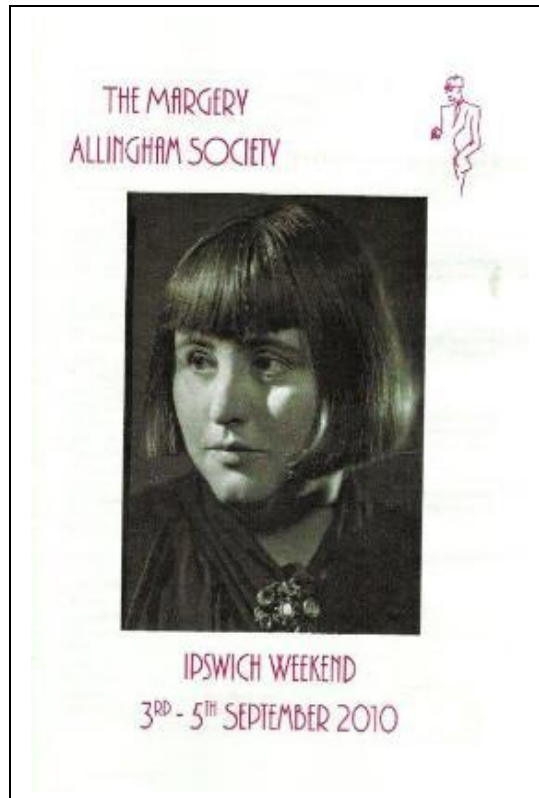
Freud appears again in *Death Instinct* in (among other things) a fascinating discussion on how his theories of psychoanalysis fail to explain or cure the terrible WWI legacy of “shell shock”, which I never knew before. I was also unaware until I read this powerful historical thriller that terrorists (who were never caught) actually exploded a quarter-ton bomb on New York’s Wall Street at High Noon on 16th September 1920 – a date which for some reason has not gone down in history as “9/16”.

I took some comfort from Jed admitting to me that it was not until he was doing some academic research into the rather more infamous “9/11” that he too learned of the 1920 bombers for the first time. The result was the elegantly written *Death Instinct*.

Who says crime fiction isn’t educational?

Essex Girl

The two most famous Essex girls (though neither were actually born there) in the world of crime fiction are, without doubt, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. Both have active societies of fans and supporters dedicated to keeping their crime fiction legacies alive and, where possible, in print (www.sayers.org.uk and www.margeryallingham.org.uk).



In the past I have lectured at meetings of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society on numerous occasions, but last month, for the first time, I had the honour to be a guest speaker at the Margery Allingham Society’s Suffolk Convention. I was in very distinguished company, as the other speakers included Society chairman and all-round expert on ‘Golden Age’ crime fiction Barry Pike, Allingham’s biographer Julia Jones and Dr Jennifer Palmer, who gave a fascinating lecture on how ‘Golden Age’ writers treated mental and physical disabilities in their characters.

It was also a pleasure to meet up again with Caroline Caughey, an acknowledged expert on sub-Roman Britain and well-known editor and publisher, whom I first met, coincidentally, at an Allingham Society event more than twenty years ago but who has always had the fortitude and good sense to resist publishing anything of mine.



Cover Story
By
Len Deighton

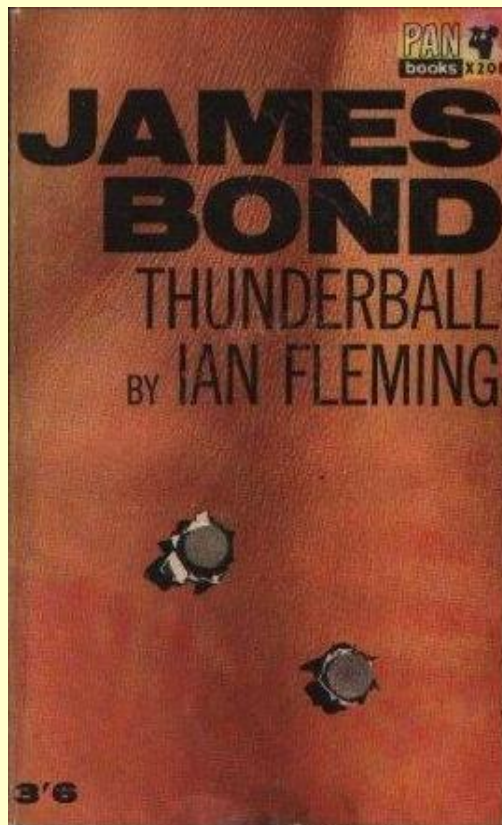
Designer Raymond Hawkey, who died in late August, was a major innovator in the covers and presentation of thrillers and crime fiction in the 1960s and indeed his influence is still evident today. He was best known for his work with Len Deighton and the paperback editions of Ian Fleming's James Bond books.

{insert JPEG: Len}

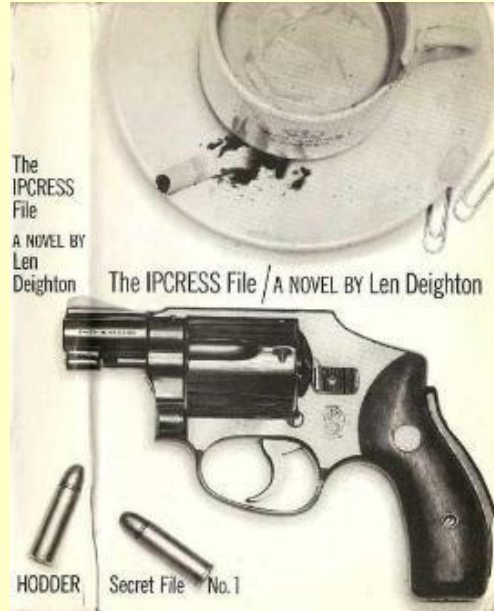
To add to the recent tributes to

Hawkey, Len Deighton kindly agreed to give this column a personal reminiscence of working with the designer on some of his famous titles.

Wouldn't it be a delight to have all Ray Hawkey's covers available on the internet? There was such amazing variety; from a Botticelli painting to widely remembered James Bond covers such as *Thunderball*. It was typical of Ray's restraint and skill that the bullet holes on this one were drawn to show they were made through paper rather than human flesh.

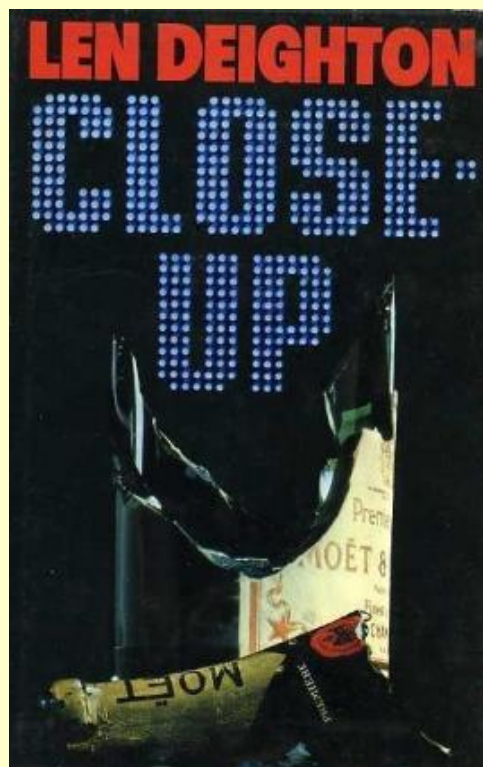


The cover for *Ipcress File* is probably the one best regarded by designers. The publishers were horrified and set against it. They said the 'trade' hated white covers but their dislike was centred upon the need for clear plastic coating which added to the expense. When *Ipcress* sold out in the first 24 hours – due largely to the serialization – the publishers panicked and pushed out copies with covers that lacked the plastic coating. They were inclined to turn yellow. Now it was Ray's turn to be horrified.



Ray's ideas often brought him into conflict with publishers who hated his revolutionary ideas such as cut-outs and piercing. Reluctantly Penguin agreed to the cut-out keyhole through which a life size Twiggy peeped for *London Dossier*. In this case Penguin had a point, for many of the covers were torn after a few days on the shelves.

One of my favourite covers is the hardback of *Close-up* which depicted a broken bottle of Moët champagne.

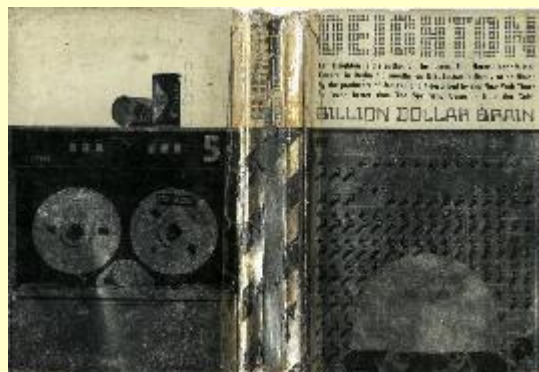


Ray thought Moët might object but when he told them about it they sent crates and crates of tiny bottles of champagne. Ray reacted immediately and designed a red and black tissue paper wrapper for each bottle which was then sent to book-sellers as a promotion. For people who collect such things, the small bottle of champagne and its Hawkey-designed wrapper have become a sought after item. Even rarer is the large spiral-bound edition of *Only When I Larf*. Ray used a Bank of England ‘fiver’ as the cover. Only 150 of these copies were produced; published to establish copyright.



As well as jackets, Ray produced some remarkable enclosures for the Jonathan Cape hardbacks. A beautiful replica of one of my notebooks was used for the promotion of *The Billion Dollar Brain* and there was a book of British postage stamps with Hitler's head to go with every copy of *SS-GB*.

One of the most daring design ventures was the metal foil jacket for *Billion Dollar Brain*. The silver foil was mounted upon stout paper but even so it was relatively fragile because the foil surface was so easily nicked or marked. I doubt if many of these wrappers have survived.



Ray did many wonderful end-papers too. For the *Billion Dollar Brain* endpapers he used a computer print-out of considerable complexity. We were being entertained by Honeywell computers who showed us around their amazing computers, answered question and were cooperative in every way. Ray constantly sought appropriate

graphic images and when he plucked an ‘automath statement’ from a waste bin they agreed he should take it, and much other printed material, away with him.



It was a week or two afterwards, when Cape had an urgent phone call from Honeywell asking if they could have the ‘statement’ back. ‘It should have been destroyed in our shredder’ they explained. When Tony Colwell at Cape offered to destroy it, they said no and insisted upon sending a messenger with a substitute sheet of figures. Ray had of course with unerring precision plucked from the waste a sheet of vitally important secrets.

Sad Event

As I predicted, the launch party for *Crossfire*, the new thriller by Dick and Felix Francis, was a subdued affair, but a suitably fitting tribute to the late Dick Francis, one of crime writing’s legends and true gentlemen.



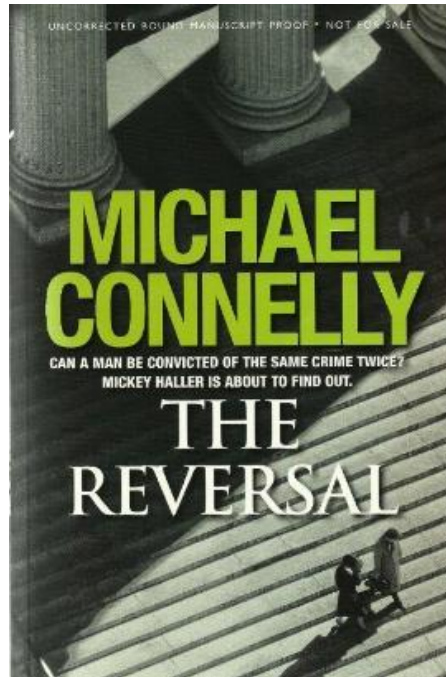
Many distinguished guests were present to pay their respects and wish the new book well, including former Prime Minister John Major, the glamorous crime writer and critic Jessica Mann and veteran journalist Katherine Whitehorn, with whom I shared many happy memories of her late husband Gavin Lyall.

Two Slices of American Pie

I have thoroughly enjoyed two contrasting, but very American takes on the crime novel recently; one writer needs no introduction, one might – though his cast of characters certainly doesn’t.

Michael Connelly’s new novel; from Orion this month, *The Reversal*, celebrates that classic American sub-genre, the legal thriller, by setting up a wonderfully convoluted case for Mickey Haller – Connelly’s outstanding

creation usually known as ‘the Lincoln Lawyer’ as he works out of the back of his Lincoln car, and invariably works for the defence. Except now, for in *The Reversal*, Haller is co-opted (made an offer he cannot refuse) to act for the prosecution for the very first time.

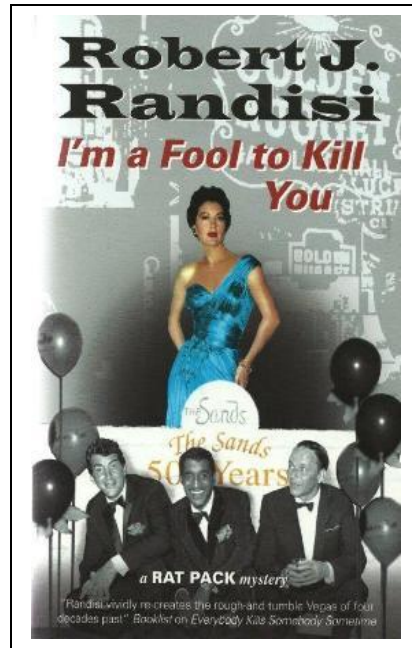


The legal case is, of course, far from straight-forward and Haller needs all the help he can get from his lawyer ex-wife and a certain police detective called....Harry Bosch.

This is virtuoso plotting from a master of the craft, writing at the top of his form and with the confidence to cheekily subvert a classic movie scene (from *Godfather II*). Surely this must be one of the best crime novels of 2010.

If the name Robert J. Randisi is unfamiliar to you, then shame on you, for Rob is the very prolific author of more than 50 novels, goodness knows how many short stories and the founder, thirty years ago, of the Private Eye Writers of America organisation which presents the prestigious Shamus Award. (I once thought I had a shot at a Shamus Award until someone discovered the minor technicality that to qualify, I had to be published in America.)

Randisi's new novel *I'm A Fool To Kill You* (from those non-urban but very urbane publishers Severn House) is the latest in his 'Rat Pack' series.



And if you haven't heard of Robert Randisi, you'll certainly have heard of his main characters: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr, Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop...yes, it's *that* Rat Pack and with the setting being Las Vegas and Los Angeles in 1962, there's a major role for Ava Gardner (a former Mrs Sinatra) and walk-on cameos for Jack Benny, Johnny Carson and a host of Hollywood A-listers.

Most of the detective work is actually done by Vegas casino pit-boss Eddie Gianelli, a great character who was close to Marilyn Monroe and even closer to Ava Gardner! With a cast and a setting such as this, Randisi cannot fail to entertain – and has great fun doing so.

Happy New Year

My 'to be read' table for 2011 is already groaning under the weight of many a tempting title in early proof form.



I am particularly looking forward to two books which will be subject to the infamous “second novel hurdle” which a writer either falls at, or clears with flying colours. (Or so the Reviewers’ Book of Clichés would have it.)

I much enjoyed Sam Eastland’s debut earlier this year which introduced his battered Russian detective Pekkala surviving (just) the transition from Tsarist to Bolshevik rule in the 1920s. In *The Red Coffin* (Faber), he brings Pekkala’s story up to 1939, with Russia under the twin threats of both Hitler and Stalin.

And I am keen to start on the much-praised Belinda Bauer’s new novel *Dark Side* (Bantam) which I notice employs a ‘countdown’ system rather than Chapters, ticking off the number of days remaining to the climax, a very effective technique of increasing suspense and controlling pace and similar to the legal, court-room pronouncements famously used by Horace McCoy in the classic *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* back in 1935.

One book I am certainly looking forward to – but have seen neither hide nor hair of – is the new Arkady Renko mystery *Three Stations* by Martin Cruz Smith. Scheduled for publication in January, *Three Stations* is gathering excellent reviews from the USA, Australia and Ireland, where I believe it is already available. British fans will just have to wait, although anyone taking a holiday may well be able to buy one at an airport.

This seems to be a particular problem with Martin Cruz Smith's excellent thrillers. I remember, many years ago, trying to get hold of an advance proof of his *Havana Bay* with absolutely no success. I found I was able to buy one on a Brittany Ferries ship steaming from Poole to St Malo some six months before I received a review copy. It did seem rather odd that the book was available in the Duty Free kiosk of a ship in Poole harbour but not in a bookshop in Poole and seems even odder that a new copy of the US edition of *Three Stations* can be bought over the interweb *from a British dealer* four months before UK publication and cheaper than the recommended UK price, even including postage.....

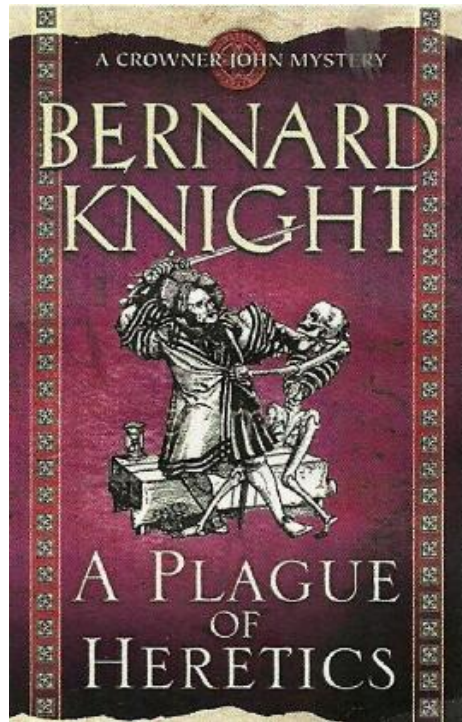
Awards Predictions (Look Away Now)

The Curse of the Ripsters has already struck when it comes to predicting the winners of this year's crime fiction awards when, for some bizarre reason, Deon Meyer's superb *13 Hours* failed to win the "Dagger-m-translation" Dagger (or whatever it's called nowadays).

Then, just before the winner of the inaugural Ngaio Marsh Award for New Zealand crime writing (for which I was one of the international judges) was about to be announced, an earthquake struck Christchurch, where the ceremony was to take place. The giving of the award was therefore postponed for reasons beyond anyone's control (even mine), but I can at least reveal what the outstanding Ngaio Award actually looks like.

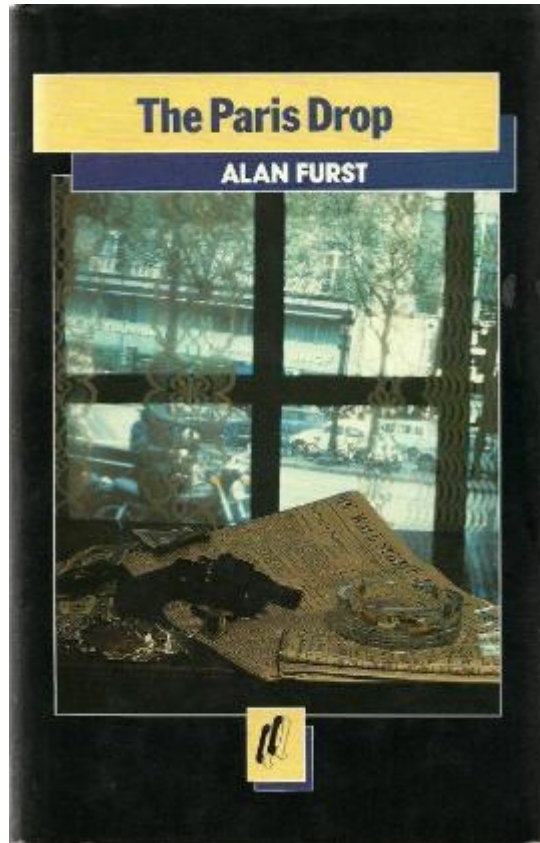


Next up on the social calendar will be the Ellis Peters Award for historical crime fiction and the accompanying sumptuous party is, I am told, to be held in the luxury offices of a well-known publisher, which hopefully has earthquake insurance. The official short-list has not yet been released (at least not to me) but I promise to be appalled and outraged if it does not include Alan Furst's *Spies of the Balkans*, David Downing's *Potsdam Station*, Roger (R.N.) Morris' *A Razor Wrapped in Silk* and Bernard Knight's *A Plague of Heretics*, which was published rather quietly by Simon & Schuster earlier this year and has just appeared in paperback.



By merely mentioning them in the same breath, I suspect the Curse of the Ripsters will kick in and none of these excellent books will have a chance at the Ellis Peters, so I offer my apologies to Alan, David, Roger and Bernard and insist that they blame me.

Speaking of American Alan Furst, I recently acquired a rare copy of his second thriller, *The Paris Drop*, published in 1980.



I had so wanted to own the 'First Furst' as it were (a 1976 thriller with the intriguing title *Your Day in the Barrel*) but *The Paris Drop* is a jolly, fast-moving thriller set in contemporary Paris featuring a wide-boy American Jewish playboy hero (and retired marihuana dealer) Roger Levin, who may be out of his comfort zone and unable to speak a word of French, but is rarely out of his depth.

Life in the East

Here in the Eastern Marches, the literary life maintains its hurly-burly pace throughout the Autumn, long after the London publishing scene has gone into hibernation or commenced the traditional month-long feast of Saturnalia.



I will be joining my old *contubernalis* Colin Dexter at a dinner to be held in the historic Swan Inn at Lavenham in Suffolk, where we will be discussing his legendary creation Inspector Morse and, hopefully, raising the profile of the 2011 Lavenham Literary Festival.

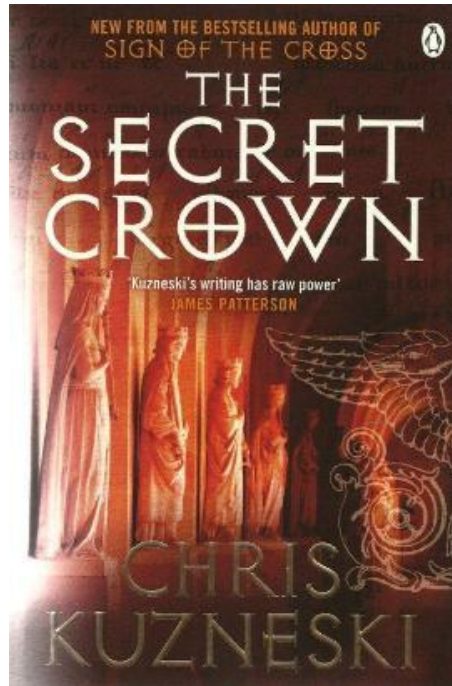
I will also be appearing at another, even younger, literary festival, that of Lode in Cambridgeshire. Lode (Pop.1280 – or so I'm told) is a small village on the edge of the Fens with an amazing number of book clubs and readers' groups. It is also a neighbour of Reach and Burwell, villages which feature in the 11th century legend of Hereward the Wake, or at least they do in my version, *The Legend of Hereward* (Severn House, 2007) which is why, I suspect, I might have been invited to speak there.

The Quest Thriller

I have been toying of late with the idea of introducing a new piece of nomenclature to that very useful generic term 'the thriller'. Whilst everyone, I think, is familiar with the 'sub-genres' of : *legal thriller*, *forensic thriller*, *serial killer thriller*, *adventure thriller*, *supernatural thriller*, *historical thriller*, and so on.

But what can adequately describe the growing number of thrillers which involve a piece of ancient history or myth or religious belief or artefact or treasure but are set very much in the present? (Yes, I'm talking about Dan Brown's *Lost Da Vinci Secret*).

How about the *Quest Thriller*? I offer this merely as a suggestion, in the hope of stimulating some serious academic debate, but this 'tag' (as I believe the young people call them) seems to me to perfectly fits the growing number of best-selling books with the word Atlantis, Legacy, Code, Prophecy, Templar or Commandment in the title. You know the sort of the thing I mean.



My persistently perky friends at publishers Penguin inform me that one of the rising stars in this sub-genre is American Chris Kuzneski, whose new novel *The Secret Crown* they have just published (and where the plot's 'McGuffin' revolves around 'Mad' King Ludwig of Bavaria).

The new novel comes with ringing endorsements from such luminaries in the world of thriller writing as Lee Child, Clive Cussler and James Patterson, along with a hearty recommendation from that arbiter of literary worth, the *Sunday Sport*.

I am more than willing to believe the endorsements for they are from people I have heard of, whereas I have never heard of any of the people who have logged negative – not to say vitriolic – reviews about Mr Kuzneski's previous novels on Amazon....

Hard Times for The Stig

Not surprisingly, The Stig has been much in the news lately (he always is). Not only was he the subject of a learned biography penned by Professor Barry Forshaw, but I hear has been having contractual trouble with the BBC who employ his skills as a Formula 1 racing driver in a well-known television programme.



Oddly, this was one aspect of Stig's life which Professor Forshaw was criticised for 'skipping over'.

But if that wasn't enough to test anyone, The Stig's second film seems to have been less-than-enthusiastically received by some of the critics.



*Pip! Pip!
The Ripster*