

Getting Away With Murder

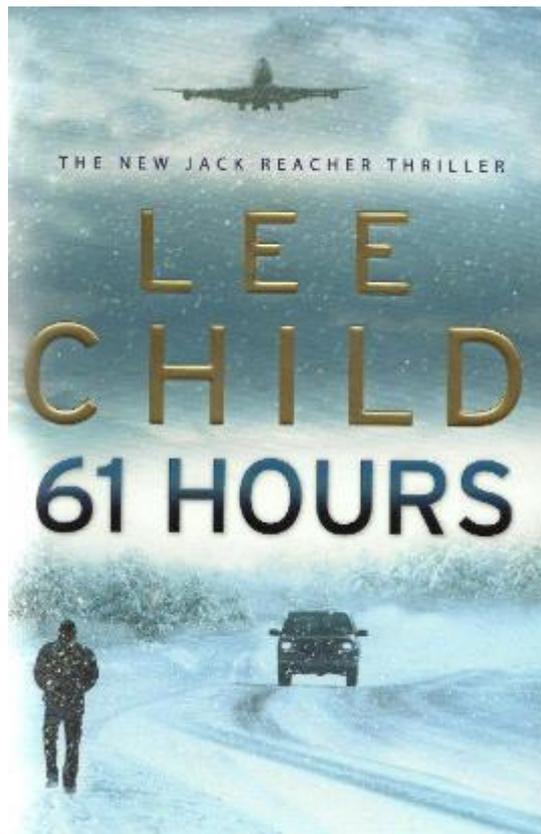
Mike Ripley



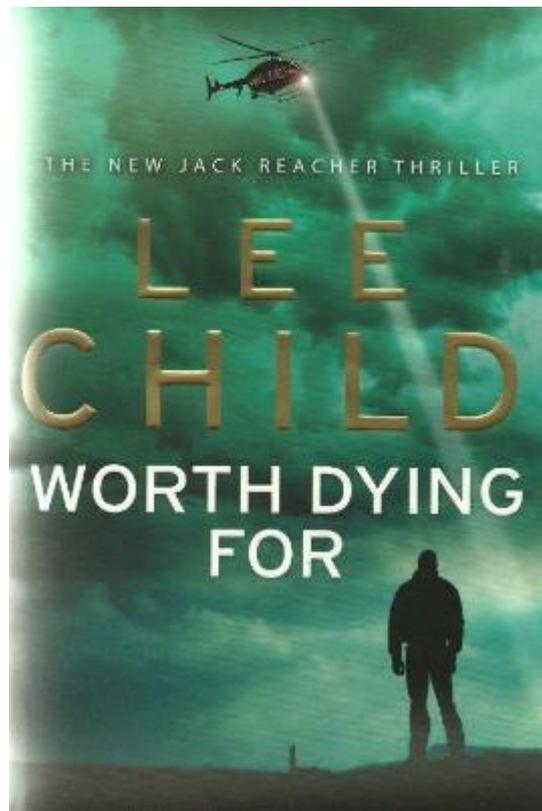
November 2010

Quiz Question

The one burning question in British publishing at the moment is can anything displace Lee Child's *61 Hours*, published in March, from poll position as not only the best-selling thriller of 2010, but the *best-selling novel* of 2010?

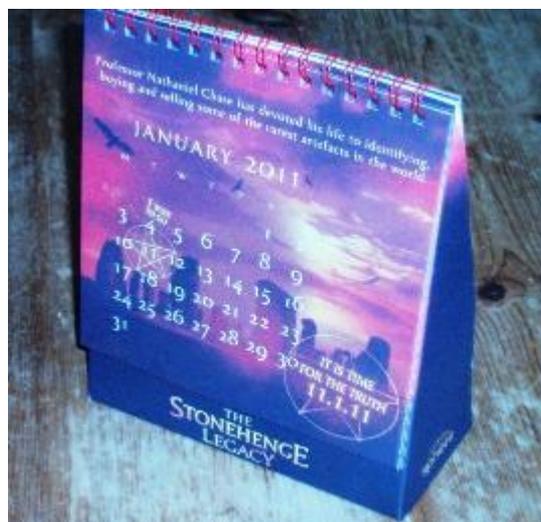


Well I do not claim to understand the Byzantine rules of publishing, but I think I know a book which just might pip that one to the post:



New Year's Resolve

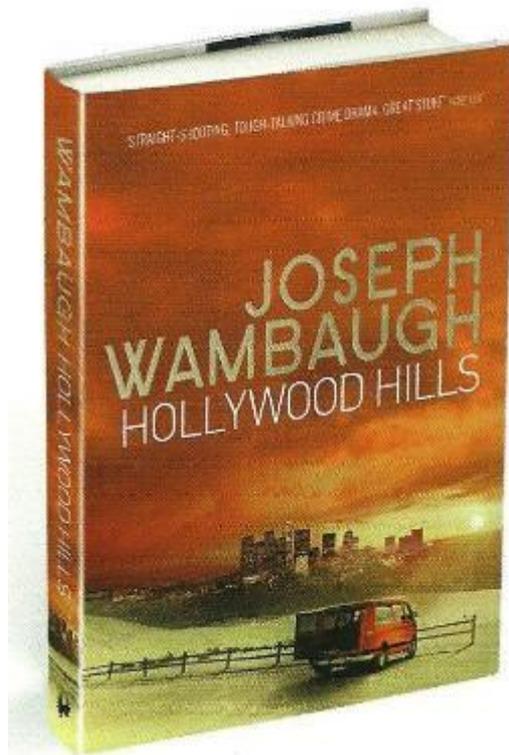
I am already planning my reading diary for 2011 and in that I have been assisted by the gift of a promotional desk calendar celebrating Sphere's forthcoming publication of (it says here) "a thriller 5000 years in the making", told in no less than 191 breathless chapters, *The Stonehenge Legacy* by Sam Christer.



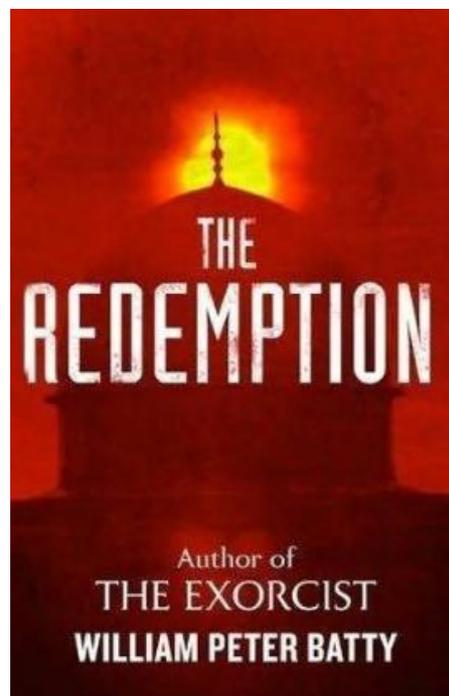
This attractive flip-chart style calendar came flat-packed but was remarkably easy to assemble, taking me only two hours and a bottle of claret, and it helpfully counts down to publication day of 11th January – or 11.1.11, which must have some mystical significance somewhere. As I have yet to receive my usual calendar, which features ladies of the Women's Institute, I shall be using my *Stonehenge Legacy* one to plan my reading for the year in prospect.

Traditionally in January I read nothing more taxing than the instructions on the side of a jumbo pack of paracetamol, but I will make an exception in 2011 to devour Joseph Wambaugh's *Hollywood Hills* (Corvus). I thought his 2007 novel *Hollywood Station* darkly funny and quite brilliant and could not understand why it failed to win any of the major crime writing awards, although I did hear – hush-hush and on the QT– that one distinguished judge took exception (if not umbrage) to the 'racist' nature of some of the jokes about Russian immigrants to the USA, seemingly confusing the attitudes of one of Joseph Wambaugh's characters with the

beliefs of Mr Wambaugh himself. Presumably the very idea that a Los Angeles policeman could hold politically incorrect views on race was inconceivable to the judge.



My reading year begins proper in February and I have already put aside time for Elmore Leonard's *Djibouti* (Weidenfeld) which was delayed from November and the new Louise Penny (my favourite, awards-winning Canadian lumberjill) from her new publisher Sphere, *Bury Your Dead*. I am most curious, however, to try what I believe is the first novel (in this country) for 26 years from William Peter Blatty, *The Redemption* from Piatkus.

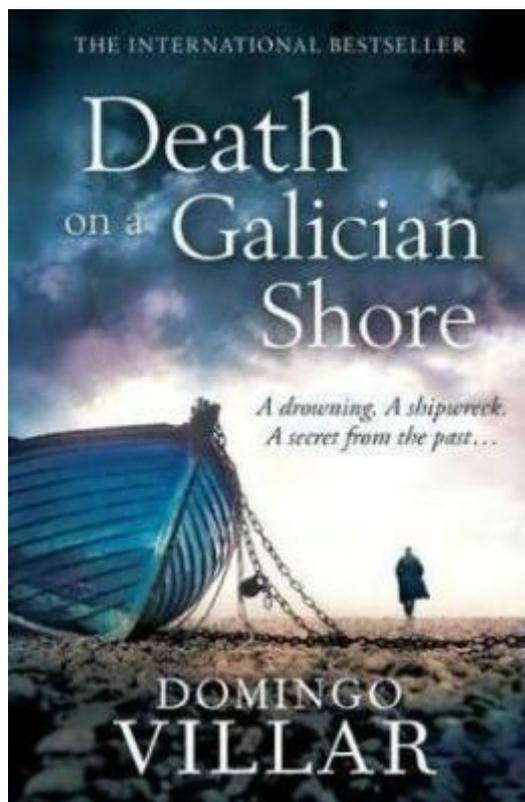


2011 will, I think, see young Mr Blatty's 83rd birthday and though his name will forever be linked with his supreme achievement *The Exorcist* his career as a writer has actually spanned over fifty years, starting, I believe, with some well-received comic novels.

The month of May looks particularly busy as it will see the publication of Michael Ridpath's second Icelandic thriller, *60 North* (Corvus) and Nick Stone's long-awaited third novel *Voodoo Eyes* (from *his* new publisher Sphere). I will also be salivating over the second novel to be published here by Roger Smith, one of the most

blistering talents to emerge from that crime writing volcano that is currently South Africa. In fact, *Mixed Blood* (Serpent's Tail) was actually Roger Smith's first novel, and a best-seller in several countries, but appears here a year after his excellent second, *Wake Up Dead*, which was one of my finds of 2010.

To broaden my horizons I am looking forward to some excellent crime fiction in translation, though not, obviously, as Colin Bateman's 'Mystery Man' would say, from any of the Scandinavian languages.



I have heard good reports of *Death on the Galician Shore* (coming from Little Brown) by the disgracefully young Spaniard Domingo Villar, who was born a year *after* The Beatles split up (though I do not believe the two events were in any way connected). And I am looking forward to another Hitchcockian thriller from the equally youthful German Sebastian Fitzek when his new novel *Splinter* is published here by Corvus.



I was seriously impressed by Herr Fitzek's last translated novel *Therapy* a couple of years ago and astonished that it was not a serious contender for the Dagger in Translation award; but then it's lack of Scandinavian warmth and humour probably weighed against it.

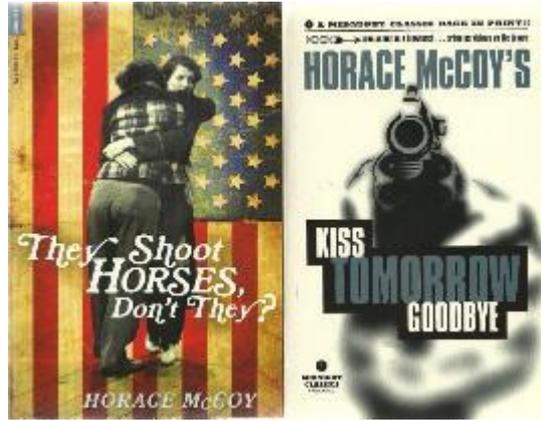
Hat-Tip to the Snake

Crime fiction fans everywhere owe a debt of gratitude to British publisher Serpent's Tail who have, over the years, introduced some fantastic writing to unsuspecting readers, from pens wielded by – among others – Walter Mosley, Stella Duffy, George Pelecanos and David Peace.

But our hats should be tipped to them not only for bringing us new names, but also championing some famous old ones.

The current BBC radio series *A History of the World in 100 Objects* is currently compulsory listening in the UK. When the equivalent *A History of Crime Fiction in 100 Books* is done – which it will be – then one book guaranteed to be on there is the 1935 *noir* classic *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* by Horace McCoy.

Serpent's Tail are to be congratulated for producing a splendid new edition, complete with an Introduction by crime writer John Harvey and a fascinating biographical essay on McCoy by American academic William Marling.

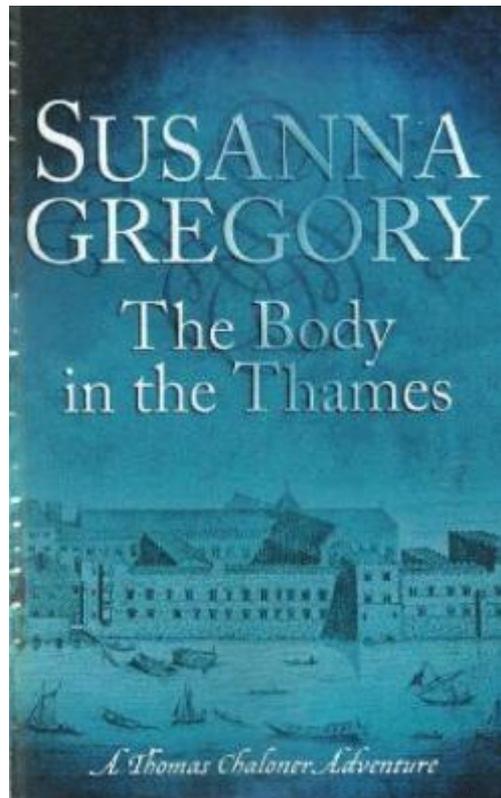


And not sparing their blushes, they should also be thanked for (a few years ago admittedly) rescuing McCoy's 1948 novel *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* from virtual obscurity in this country.

So Much History

I have previously mentioned a forthcoming title by 'Simon Beaufort' – the pen-name of a writing duo one half of which is Cambridge academic Susanna Gregory, although that too is a pen-name.

Anyhoo, the point I'm trying to make is that there is a new Susanna Gregory historical mystery due from Sphere in January, *The Body in the Thames*.



This is the latest in her Thomas Chaloner series set in 1664 as war looms between England and maritime trade rivals, the Dutch.

Toothsome

There seems to be no let up in the flood of 'vampire chick lit' – or *urban fantasy* as I'm supposed to call it – titles greeting (or fleeing from) the dawn of 2011. My favourite title so far for next year, from the Gollancz imprint – once a Charter Mark of quality crime fiction – is: *A Bite To Remember*.

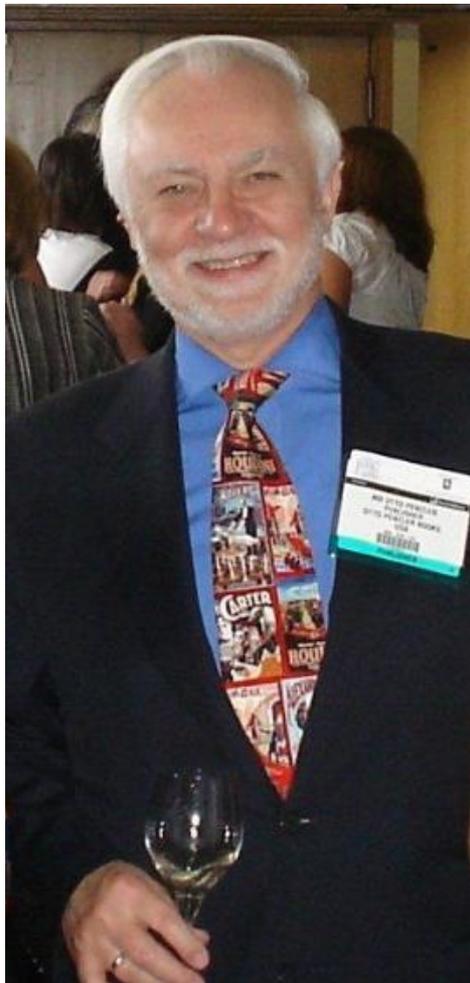
Can nothing stop this craze for the well-fanged (and I am told, well-hung) un-dead? Garlic-impregnated paper perhaps? The obsession of younger, female readers with romantic vampires has never ceased to amaze me. Have they ever thought what it must be like to play tongue tennis with a mouth that only feeds on blood?



On more than one occasion after a late night at the British Legion I have been awoken by one of the many feral cats here at Ripster Hall attempting the feline equivalent of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I can assure you, it is not a pleasant experience, though it does wake one up rather quickly.

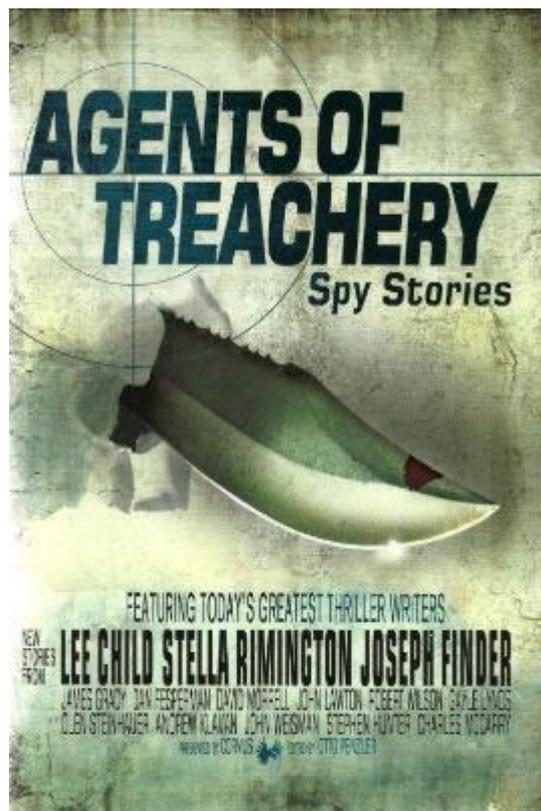
The Spies Have It

In his introduction to *Agents of Treachery*, editor Otto Penzler, an old chum and fellow *boulevardier*, points out the fascinating statistic that for many years, one-in-four novels sold in the USA have belonged to the espionage or international adventure genre.



Now ‘espionage and international adventure’ is a pretty wide category which could, I suppose, cover Nevil Shute’s *An Old Captivity* at one end of the spectrum and Noel Behn’s *The Kremlin Letter* at the other. (These titles chosen completely at random: other examples are available.) As Otto also points out, there has never been an anthology of original short fiction from spy writers (until now), with previous collections – such as those edited by Alan Furst in America and both Graham Greene and Alan Williams in the UK – tending to feature extracts from novels or reportage of real spies rather than fictional ones.

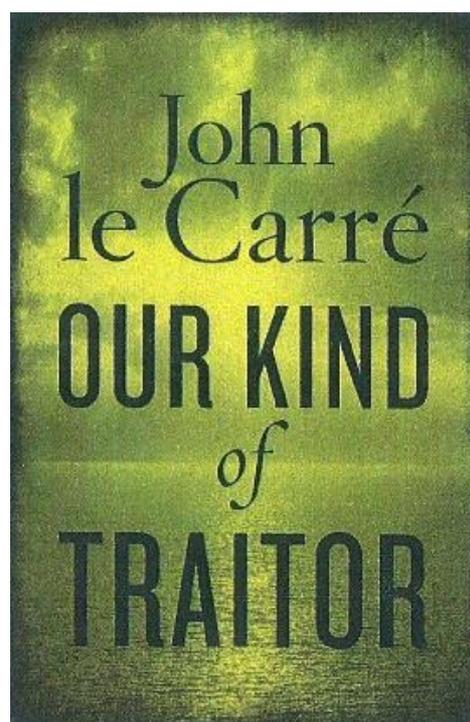
It could be, of course, that spying is not only a ‘Great Game’ but also a long one and fictionally, does not sit well in the short form, needing the length of the novel to fully explore the secret world it aims to create; a world which often does not suit short, sharp, neatly-tied endings or even surprise ones.



Whether or not he proves or disproves this theory, there is no doubt that Otto has assembled a stellar cast of authors in *Agents of Treachery* and although it is probably invidious to pick out favourites, I will.

There's a lovely, post-colonial tale from the elegant Charles McCarry, *The End of the String* which is so British in tone that one has to check that Mr McCarry is actually American. There is no question that John Lawton's excellent *East of Suez, West of Charing Cross Road* is written by a Brit, and like McCarry, sets his story in the 1960s. Bang up to date and possibly the most whimsical, certainly the cheekiest, is the story by Lee Child *Section 7(A)(Operational)* which is a wonderful example of the art of mis-direction.

And I could not let the topic of spies and espionage fiction pass by without mentioning what I consider to be one of the best-written books of the year, *Our Kind of Traitor* (Viking/Penguin) by the Grand Master himself, John Le Carré.



Anyone demanding car chases, gunfights and megalomaniac villains chewing the carpet as they threaten to destroy the world, should look elsewhere. There is violence here, including assault with a lap-top computer, but this is a thriller which deals in suspense, menace, threat and, of course, betrayal. In fact the conclusion is so awfully and inevitably tragic that this almost qualifies as a classic piece of *noir* fiction.

Some reviewers picked on *Our Kind of Traitor* as being 'slow to get going' and it is true that the opening set-up of the plot (a Russian money-laundering book-keeper offers to 'defect' to MI6 and blow the whistle on his crooked oligarch bosses) takes up almost a third of the book, which is by no means a long one. But the character development, the running theme of tennis as a metaphor for the games spies play and Le Carré's pitch-perfect prose are a positive joy and nobody, but nobody, can get under the skin of the quintessentially English schoolboy hero type and show both innocence and nobility in equal, heart-wrenching, measure.

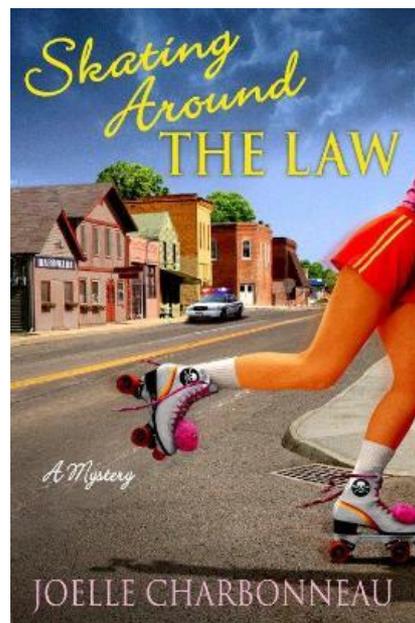
Le Carré's writing is a world, possibly a galaxy, away from much of the ham-fisted, thick-eared prose which seems to be required for many a 'thriller' these days and in *Our Kind of Traitor* the Master is on top form.

Wheels on Fire

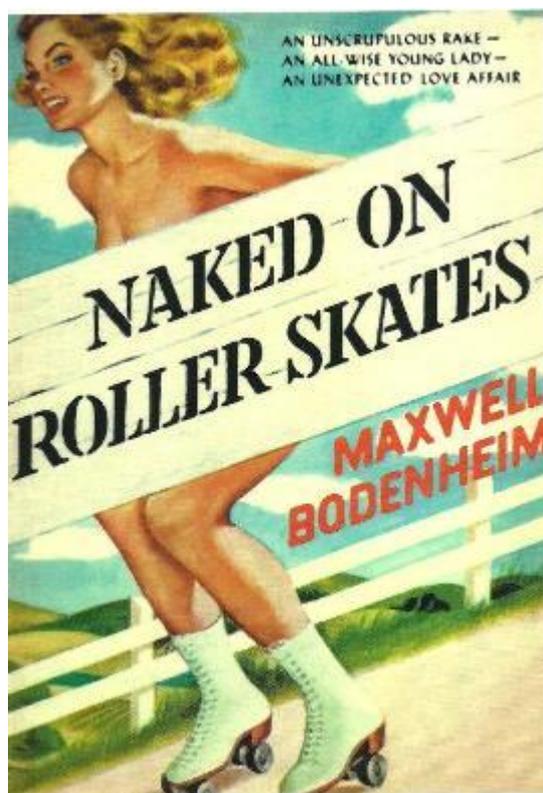
My heart skipped a beat when I read of the American publication of a new mystery by the vivacious Joelle Charbonneau.



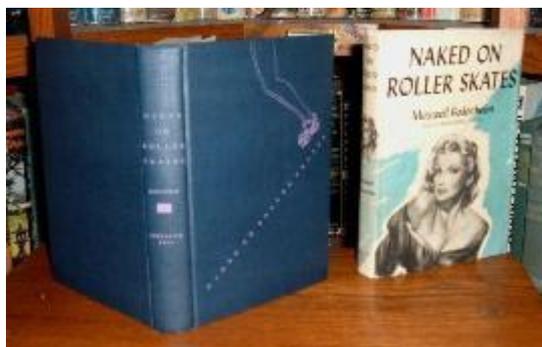
Her debut novel *Skating Around the Law* is, I am assured (for it seems to be only available in the New World), a witty and charming expose of the perils of crime-fighting on roller-skates. Indeed it was the cover, featuring the aforementioned roller-skates which caused the book to leap to my attention.



I have to admit that there was some initial confusion on my part, due no doubt to the failing faculties which are only to be expected at my great age, for at first glance I automatically assumed that some enterprising publisher had reissued that classic novel of the early 1950s, *Naked on Roller Skates* by Maxwell Bodenheim.



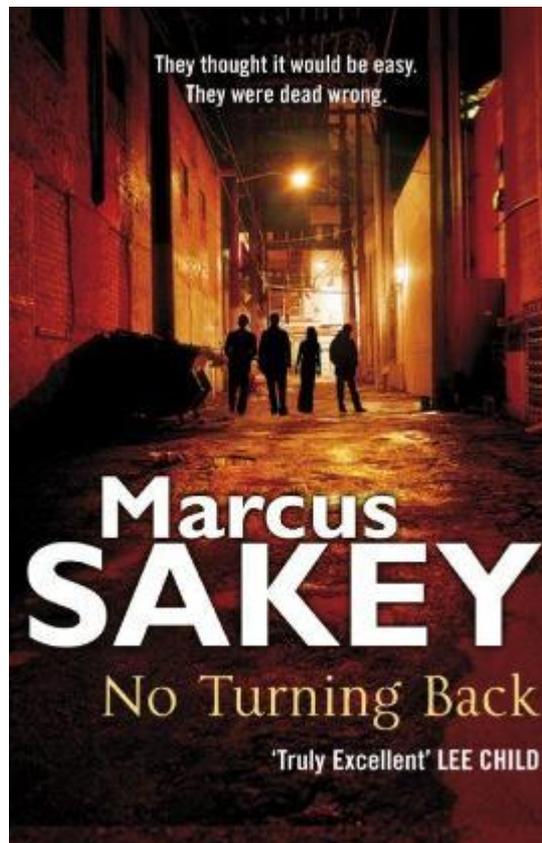
They are, I stress, completely different books and (as far as I know), roller skating whilst naked has never crossed Mrs Charbonneau's mind. Lest it be thought that *Naked on Roller Skates* is a figment of a diseased mind (mine), I offer up a picture of the rare and really quite valuable first edition which graces the shelves of the library here at Ripster Hall.



The Chicago Way

It may be too late already, but before the nation's bookshops are swamped with the celebrity "autobiographies" (yeah, right) and cookery books for the Christmas trade (I have heard the term 'Delia-ised' used in previous years) I want to praise a novel which might be in serious danger of slipping under the radar.

No Turning Back by Chicago-based Marcus Sakey is a fabulous crime thriller from one of the next generation of American crime-writing superstars; and don't just take my word for it, as the normally reticent Lee Child publicly describes his work as "Truly Excellent". {In private, if I am not telling tales out of school, Lee once confided to me that the up-and-coming Sakey "has everything going for him".}



Sakey's new British publisher, Corgi (normally a safe pair of hands) have, for some reason delayed the paperback original publication of *No Turning Back* from early September to later this month and it will be a tragedy if it gets swamped in the Christmas deluge.

It is a tense, *noirish* tale of four young friends all turning thirty and all unsatisfied, or a little bit bored, with their lives. On the surface they seem reasonably content with their individual lots but we learn that not all is sweetness and light and that the friends have not exactly been honest with each other. When the chance of snapping out of their collective rut comes along in the form of a seemingly 'victimless' robbery, they jump at it and rapidly find themselves on a handcart to hell with the wheels coming off.

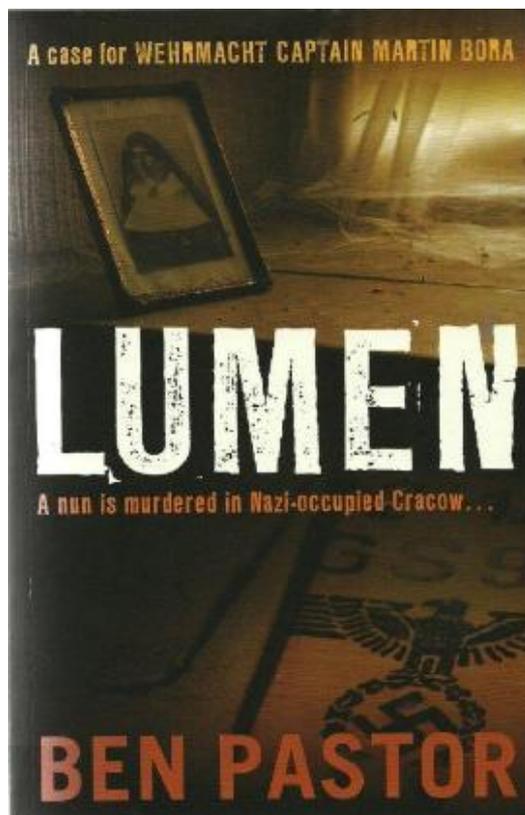
Marcus Sakey and his first novel, *The Blade Itself*, published here about three years ago, were introduced to me by *Shots* editor Mike 'Tombstone' Stotter and I was quickly convinced that here was a major talent in the making.

Better Late (or Bitter Lemon) Than Never

Those small but very enthusiastic publishers at Bitter Lemon Press have built up a fine reputation for introducing into the UK some excellent crime fiction in translation from Europe and Latin America, providing readers of English with many a rare treat.

Their first title of 2011 though does not appear to have needed translating (unless it was done by the author herself) as it was first published in the US back in 1999 and one has to ask why it has taken 12 years to get here.

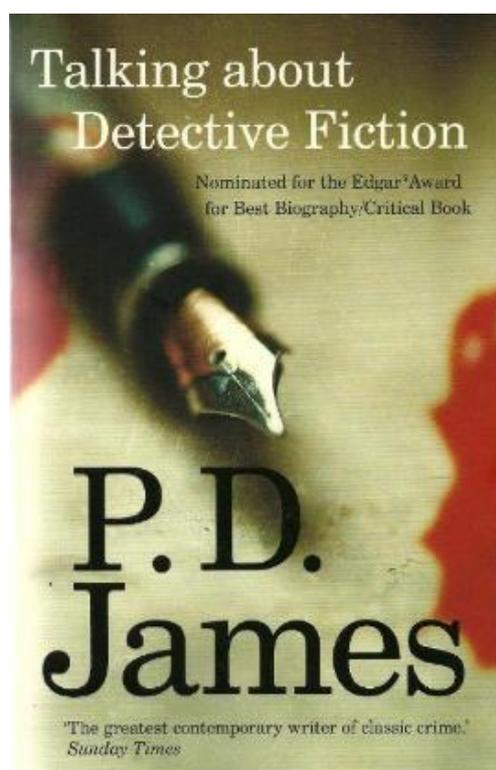
Lumen by Ben Pastor is set in Cracow, Poland in October 1939, a city and a country recently invaded by the Nazis, and centres on the investigation of the killing of "holy abbess" Mother Kazimierza, a revered nun with supposedly psychic powers. The investigation is conducted, intriguingly, by an ill-matched pair of detectives: *Wehrmacht* Captain Martin Bora and an American Catholic priest, Father John Malecki, who has been sent by the Pope to evaluate the claims of the abbess' mystic powers. It looks fascinating.



Author Ben Pastor (the pen name of the Italian academic Maria Verbena Volpi, who now works in the US) is probably better known in America and Europe if not here, for her prize-winning historical novels featuring Aelius Spartianus which are set in the Roman Empire circa 304 AD. I believe that those too have been unpublished in this country, as have her highly regarded Martin Bora novels. Until now, that is, thanks to Bitter Lemon.

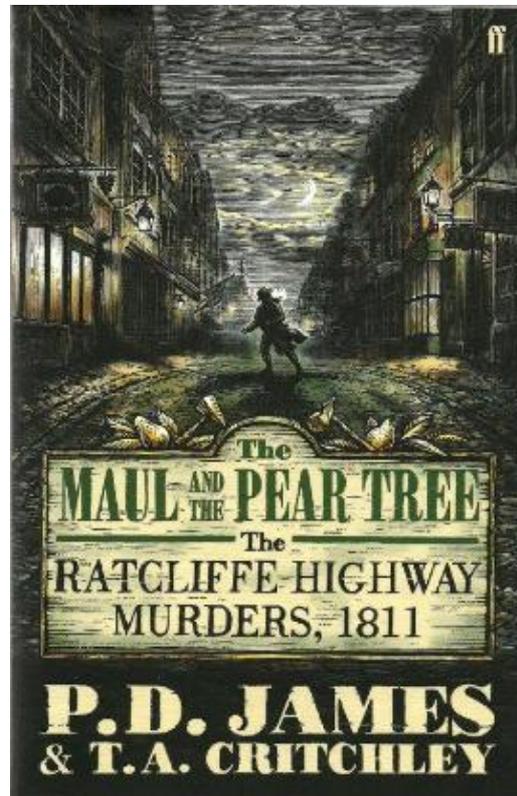
Stocking Fillers

To anyone scratching their heads mystified at what to get as a stocking-filler present for a crime-writing fan this Christmas, fear not for those fabulous funsters at Faber & Faber have got the perfect answer.



Anyone who missed *Talking About Detective Fiction* by P.D. James when it was published last year by the Bodleian Library in Oxford will surely revel in the attractive paperback edition Faber have produced. This really is a superb little book and required reading for all intelligent fans of crime fiction as well as providing many useful pointers (in a chapter titled “Telling the Story”) for would-be writers. If her own novels – and her award-winning stint as a steely but always polite interviewer of the Director General of the BBC on the *Today* programme on Radio 4 – were not enough, this too-slim volume cements Baroness James’ position as a National Treasure.

And if *that* wasn’t enough, Faber have reissued *The Maul and the Pear-Tree* by P.D. James and T.A. Critchley (a Home Office colleague of hers), originally published in 1971.

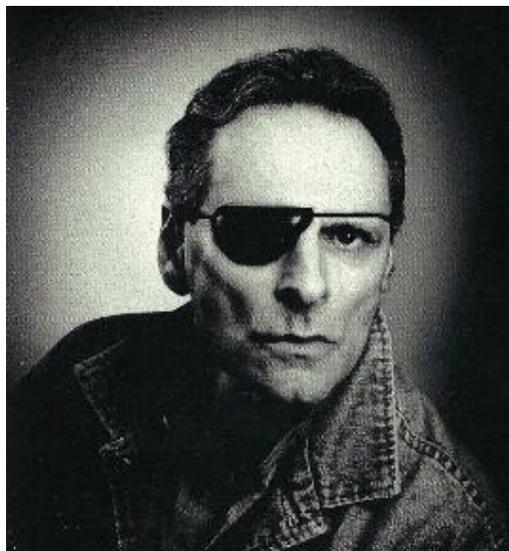


The Maul and the Pear-Tree deals with the infamous true-crime case of the murder spree known as the ‘Ratcliffe Highway Murders’ of 1811 against which, as Thomas De Quincey famously said, “all other murders look pale”.

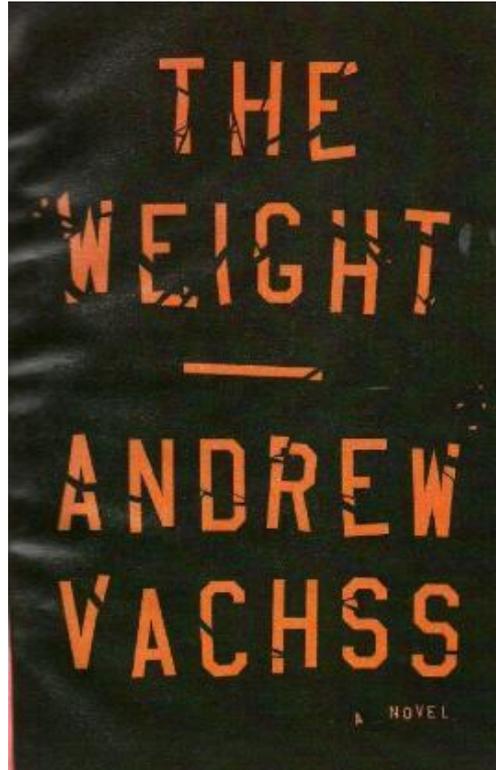
Have a merry, murderous Christmas.

Carrying the Weight

I have long maintained to anyone who will listen – though few do these days – that Andrew Vachss, in his 18-book ‘Burke’ series, has been one of the major stylistic influence on American *noir* fiction in the quarter century.



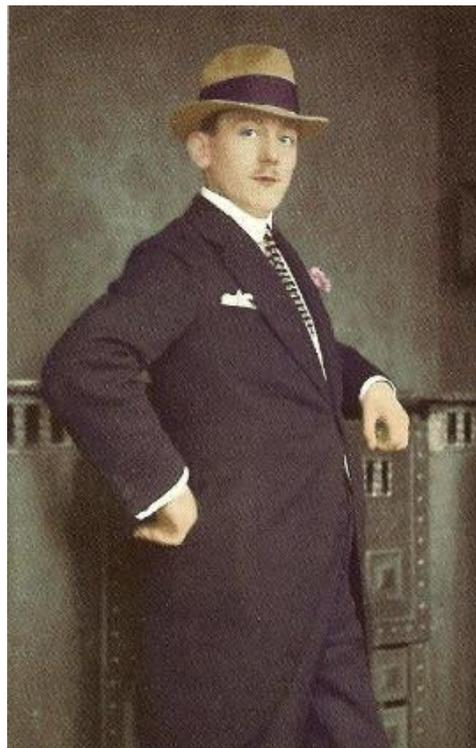
Although he has already announced that the Burke series is concluded, he seems busier than ever, and I don't just mean in his primary career as a campaigning lawyer specialising in juvenile crime and child abuse cases.



Not only does he have a new stand-alone novel *The Weight* out this month (from Pantheon Books in the US) but he has also, in collaboration with Frank Caruso, produced *Heart Transplant*, which is a cross between a graphic novel and a self-help book which tackles the problem of school bullying. As the accompanying publicity points out, this is one book bearing the Vachss tag which will not be found in the 'Crime' section of a bookshop and will instead, at least in America, be located under 'Parenting' or 'Young Adult' for the simple reason that there is no 'Bullying' section.

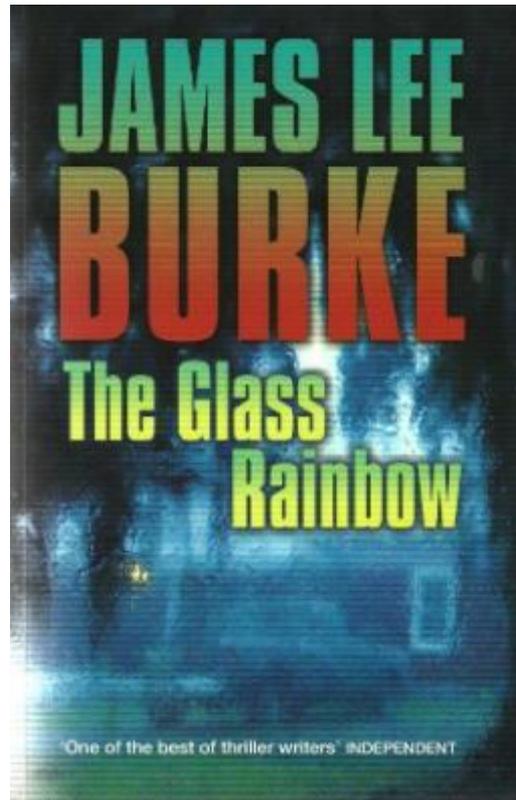
For more information on Andrew Vachss, his legal work and his fiction, you can do no better than consult his official website, known as The Zero, on www.vachss.com.

Arm-wrestling over James Lee Burke



My factotum Waldo has once again challenged me to an arm-wrestling contest in our perennial argument over the question: *who is the most slappable hero in crime fiction?* This totally spurious title was once claimed by Christopher Brookmyre for his own fictional hero Jack Parlabane, but the position has been lying vacant for some years.

Our current dispute centres on whether James Lee Burke's Louisiana policeman detective Dave Robicheaux qualifies for the award. Robicheaux is certainly a character who comes with personal baggage – an alcoholic and long-time AA member, married to a former nun and with an adopted daughter, Alafair, who has a degree in psychology and is about to enter law school (as soon as she's finished the novel she's been writing for three years), whom he treats as if she's a whining teenager. Toss in a huge measure of Catholic guilt, an over-riding belief that he (and only he) can detect when someone is genetically evil and an attitude to detective work which is little short of aggressive bullying at times.



I have, however, always maintained you can forgive a character almost any amount of sanctimonious posturing when his creator can write as elegantly as James Lee Burke, and has done for 45 years now, up to and including his new novel *The Glass Rainbow* from Orion.

But Waldo argues that it is not the Dave Robicheaux character *per se* which makes him a candidate for the 'Most Slappable' award, but rather Robicheaux's friendship with, some might say slavish loyalty to, his "podner" (partner) in many of his investigations, the unpleasant, badly-dressed, overweight, aggressive psychopath that is Clete Purcell.

Robicheaux sees Clete Purcell through distinctly rose-tinted sunglasses, describing him lyrically thus: *Clete was a handsome man, his hair still sandy and cut like a little boy's, his eyes a bright green, his skin free of tattoos and blemishes...* Though no one else seems to notice this natural beauty and fairly early on in *Glass Rainbow*, Clete exhibits outstanding rudeness, provokes a black suspect without any real evidence and then beats him within an inch of his life after the guy reacts by spitting at him, he then avoids arrest and smashes up public property (this is supposed to be a good guy, remember). The next day, Dave cheerfully puts up a \$25,000 bail bond and takes this walking time bomb along with him on what may or may not be an official multiple murder enquiry

(it is sometimes difficult to tell when Robicheaux is actually being a policeman and when he's standing in for some righteous avenging angel.) Purcell immediately repays this trust by viciously assaulting (with Brillo pads in a public toilet!) a former convict who may or may not be 'genetically evil' and needs 'taking off the board'. The concept of redemption and forgiveness seem mighty thinly spread in Louisiana.

Thus, Waldo argues, Dave Robicheaux is a prime candidate in the slappable stakes for being daft enough to have Clete Purcell as a partner to which I have to reply: yes, but consider the fine writing which has gone into creating the character of Robicheaux – complex? yes; slappable? possibly – and which is evident in abundance in *Glass Rainbow*.

My feeling is that on balance, when a book is as well-written as this, you can forgive a lot – although that’s not something Dave and Clete do very often – but Waldo is not convinced, so we’ll have to settle it the old-fashioned way.

Half Century

Assuming I survive the traditional excesses of Saturnalia, the January edition of *Getting Away With Murder* will be my 50th column for this august electronic organ. To celebrate this astonishing achievement, I will be opening up my annual charitable appeal to all my readers out there in interweb land.

Traditionally, January is the time when publishers promote their new catalogues by sending me (and every reviewer) an anonymous-looking brown envelope. Well this year I expect there to be money in them and what is more, I am prepared to accept donations from the reading population, or “civilians” as we call them.

It really couldn’t be easier. Simply make out a generous cheque payable to my favourite charity Caring for Authors Suffering Hardship (just use the initials to save time) and send it to me here at Ripster Hall, East Anglia.

I should say that other deserving charitable appeals are also available, but you know I’d be lying.

Pip! Pip!
The Ripster