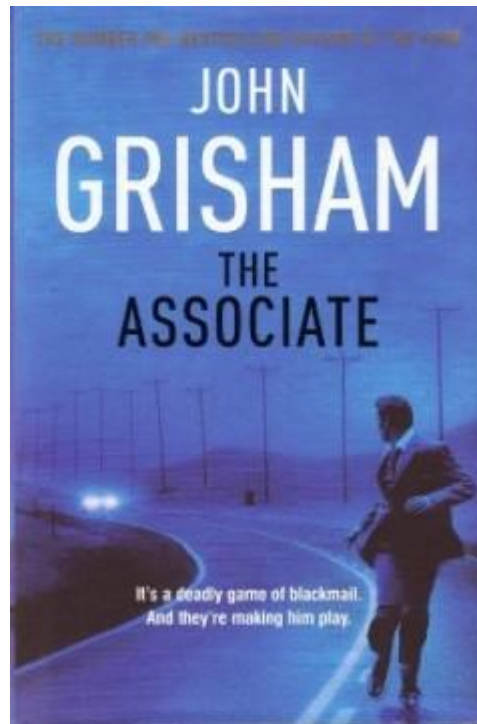


Murder (G)One

By the time you read this, the new John Grisham legal thriller, *The Associate* (from that cornerstone of crime publishing, Century), will be the number one bestseller, yet my copy only arrived the day I heard that Murder One on the Charing Cross Road was admitting it was a fair cop, society was probably to blame, and that it would cease trading.



It was an odd juxtaposition of emotions, for, ironically, Murder One was one of the few (if not the only) venues in the UK where John Grisham used to sign copies of his books and I immediately called to mind the visiting crime writers I have met there in the past, including James Ellroy, Robert B. Parker and Ed McBain.

Those were just some of the big name Americans who appeared at Murder One. To run into a British crime writer there was not so much an event as a virtually unavoidable daily occurrence as Murder One was not just a bookshop but a meeting place. Not only did countless authors hold book launches there, but many an author-event took place, such as the announcement of the *Sherlock* Awards in their early days as pictured here with (among other luminaries): Peter Lovesey, legendary crime editor Hilary Hale, Lindsey Davis and Colin Dexter.



For over twenty years, Murder One was an institution, a Mecca for mystery readers from all over the world and a headquarters for British writers finding themselves anywhere near Tottenham Court Road tube station, where it was extremely convenient for those on urgent business trips to either Gerry's Club,

The Coach and Horses or *The Spice of Life*.

Murder One saw off several imitators (at one point there were three crime specialist shops in London) but eventually fell foul of the deepening economic gloom. Strangely enough, specialist mystery books shops – *Krimibuchhandlung* – seem to be flourishing in Germany, notably in Berlin, Stuttgart and Cologne.

One wonders if the recession, which is bound to see a tightening of belts in 2009, will boost the use of public libraries, where crime fiction is the most popular of genres borrowed. It is a thought close to the hearts of many a writer this month as the Public Lending Right makes its annual payments.

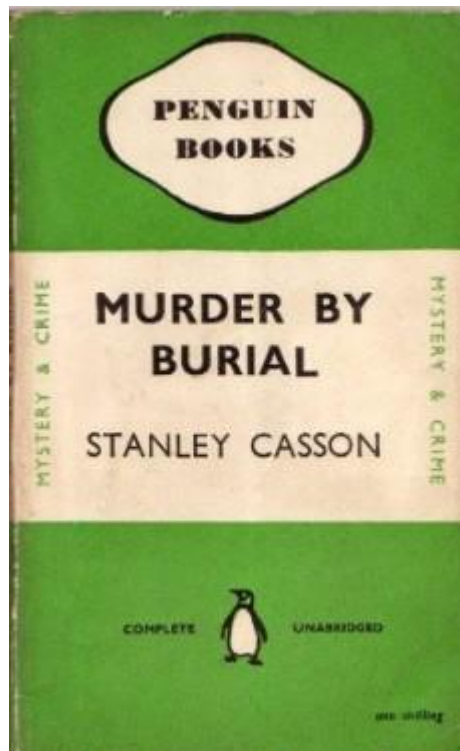
The PLR performs a vital service to British writers, many of whom rely on library borrowings to provide the core of their income and almost 36,000 authors (in all fields) are registered. It should be remembered, though, that less than 6,000 of these authors receive more than £100 and over 12,000 get nothing at all, as their books, though registered, are never borrowed.

Digging up a good read

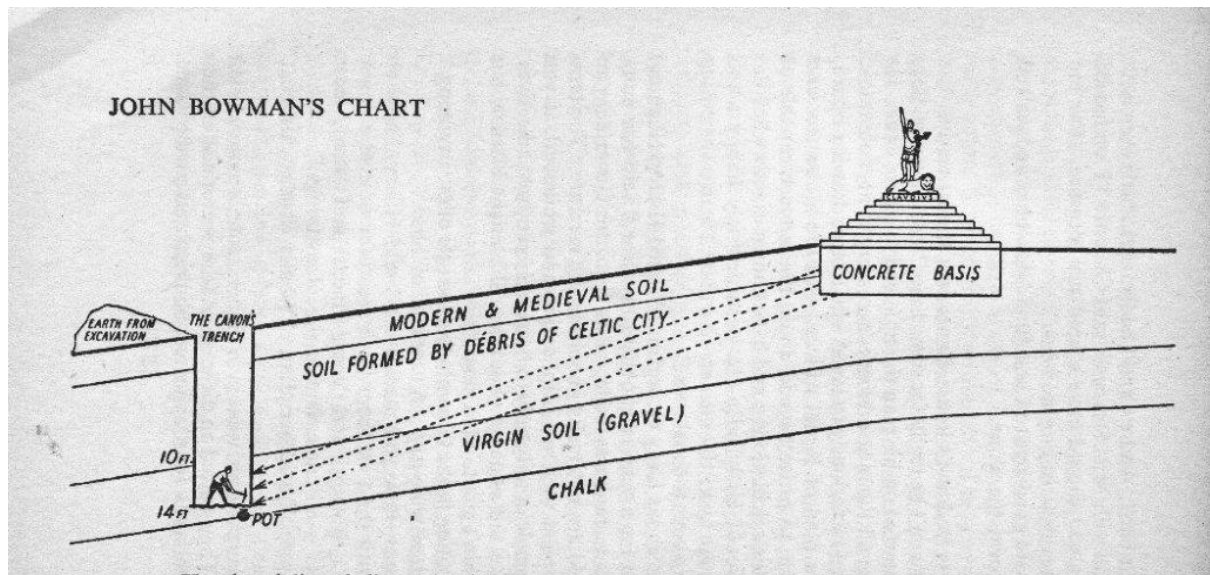
I am indebted to that most elegant of crime writers and astute critic (of the *Literary Review*) Jessica Mann, for putting me on the trail of a 70-year-old archaeological thriller which I had no idea existed.

Jessica's husband, archaeologist Charles Thomas, in a recent paper for the *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall* discussed the role, back in the 1930s, played by one Stanley Casson in the excavation and interpretation of the famous Tintagel Island site – variously claimed as the castle/birthplace/holiday home of 'King Arthur'.

Casson, an archaeologist and pottery expert, had also been present at an excavation in Colchester run by Professor Christopher Hawkes in 1931, when a large trench had collapsed in on itself, burying (temporarily) several archaeologists. Stanley Casson remembered the incident and used it in the plot of his one and only detective novel *Murder By Burial*, published in 1938.



Urged on by Jessica's recommendation, I tracked down the book, which proved to be an absolute delight. Set in the mythical town of 'Kynchester' (near Colchester), local rivalries and snobberies over archaeology and politics culminate in a murder disguised as an accident when an excavation trench collapses on the unsuspecting victim. The author kindly provides a cross-section drawing to show how it was done.



Murder By Burial is far from a Golden Age classic in terms of plot or detection (the ‘detective’ doesn’t turn up until quite late in the day), but it is clever, informative if you have an interest in archaeology (and an attention span longer than Time Team’s regulation “only three days...”), very well written and, in parts, extremely funny.

Stanley Casson could certainly turn a waspish phrase when it came to describing the bluff and bluster of the country town middle classes, especially when one faction establishes a proto-Fascist “Roman Guard” to defend the propertied elite against Bolsheviks, anarchists and the great unwashed. (The book was written in 1936/37 against a backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism).

Ironically, the murderer in the story dies in an air crash whilst escaping to Spain, a cruel prophesy of the author’s own death in an air crash in Greece in 1944 whilst working for British Intelligence.

Apart from being a distinguished soldier (in both World Wars), an expert archaeologist and a gifted writer, Stanley Casson had one other great claim to fame.



In his student days at Oxford in the 1920s, the Dean of New College was the legendary, but absent-minded, Dr William Spooner – he of ‘Spoonerism’ fame, no less. On one occasion Dr Spooner asked Casson to come to tea that day “to meet the new archaeology Fellow.”

“But Dean,” said Casson, “I *am* the new archaeology Fellow.”

“Never mind,” replied Spooner, “come all the same.”

What's in a title?

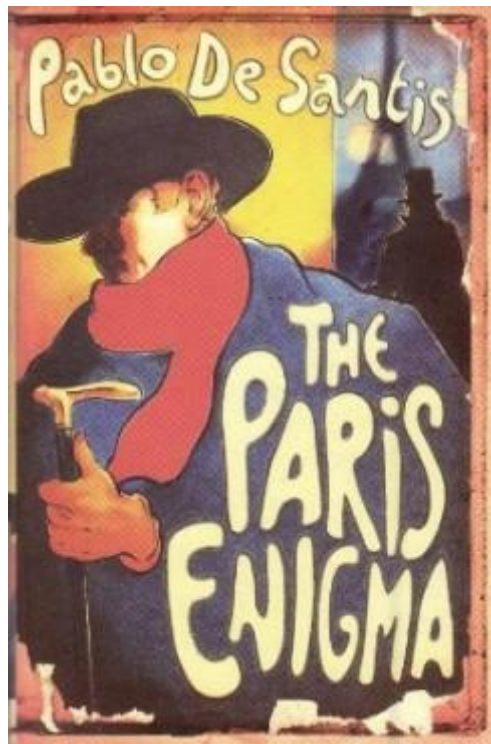
I did not know until recently that the title of Tom Cain's second thriller *The Survivor* had been re-titled for American publication as *No Survivors*.

So, no confusion there, then.

South of the Border

Crime novels from South America are relatively rare, at least translated into English and published in the UK (compared to, say, those coming from Sweden and Norway where the combined population is probably less than that of the Rio de Janeiro).

Having said that, I have already anticipated Sergio Bizzio's *Rage*, to be published later this year by Bitter Lemon, and the late Roberto Bolano's *2666*, the Chilean surrealist's posthumous masterpiece, published by Picador.

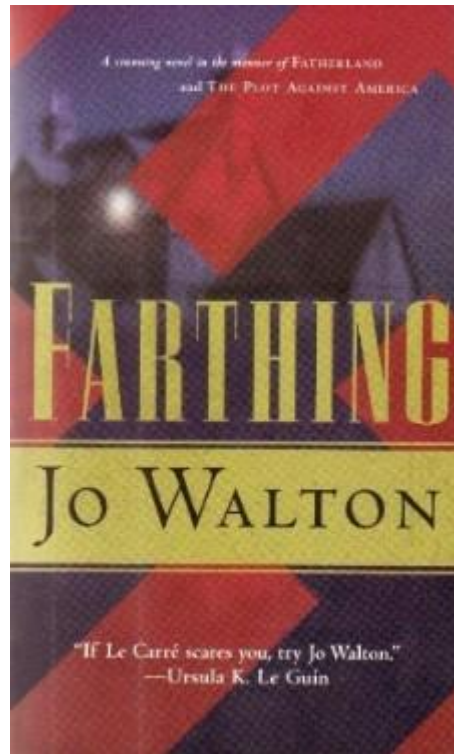


Now I hear of another “literary thriller” from Argentine writer Pablo De Santis, *The Paris Enigma*, set in and around the Great Exhibition in Paris in 1889, which was published here last month.

Not A Farthing Less or More

A farthing was a small copper coin worth one quarter of an (old) penny in the days before Britain's coinage went decimal and long before anyone dreamed up the Euro. There were 960 farthings to the pound and despite bearing the famous image of a wren (not a robin) it was pretty much a useless coin, good only for loading into a sock when a cosh was called for. The last ones in circulation were minted in 1956.

Such fond memories have been provoked by reading *Farthing*, a crime novel by Jo Walton (published by Tor Books in America in 2006), which revolves around a classic English country house murder in 1949. The Farthing of the title though is the name of the house and also synonymous with the “Farthing Set” of aristocratic politicians *who negotiated a peace treaty with Hitler in 1941*. And immediately we realise we are not exactly in Miss Marple territory.

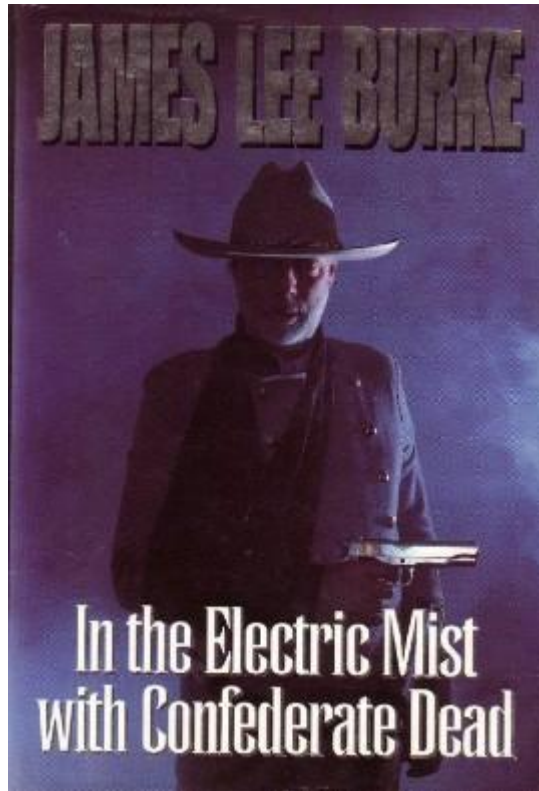


Despite the intriguing alternative version of world history (Hitler is still at war with Russia and Charles Lindbergh is President of the United States), *Farthing* is a solid English detective story and a fascinating piece of historical reconstruction. I have only two quibbles – an Englishman in 1949 would have said ‘estate car’ or ‘shooting brake’ rather than “station wagon” and the detective hero would not have gone for a pint in “a Bass tied house” as Bass, like Guinness, were famously ‘free-trade’ brewers and owned no pubs until the 1960s – but they are minor ones indeed and did not spoil the flow of a cracking story, intelligently told with some telling reflections on the British class system and its sexual morals, or lack of them.

I understand that Jo Walton is a lady with Welsh origins (and I apologise profusely if I have mistakenly slandered her) who now lives in Canada and is well-regarded in the fields of science-fiction and fantasy. I admit I had not come across her work until I stumbled upon a reference to *Farthing* on the jolly old interweb. It seems that there are also follow up novels in the same series called *Ha’penny* and *Half A Crown*, which I shall now seek out as these are excellent mysteries only surpassed by the mystery of why they have not been picked up by a UK publisher.

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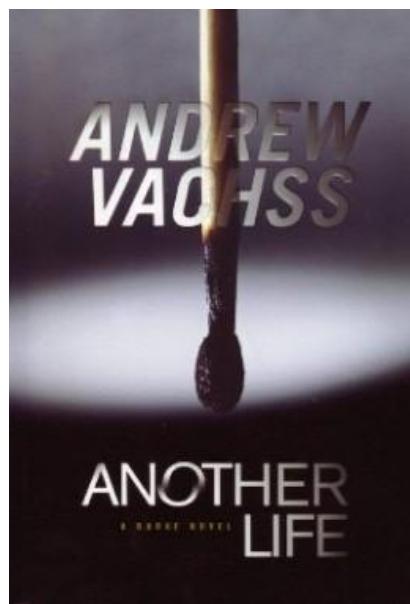
It appears you might have to be French to see the film adaptation of James Lee Burke’s wonderfully atmospheric novel *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*, at least at a cinema.



Sadly, the much anticipated movie version of the 1993 novel, starring Tommy Lee Jones as Dave Robicheaux and directed by Bertrand Taverner, seems destined to go straight to DVD with the shortened title *In the Electric Mist*. I am told that eager fans should make sure their Blockbuster membership cards are valid round about April.

Beyond the hard-boiled

From America I have been sent, through various cut-outs and dead-letter-boxes, the new Andrew Vachss novel *Another Life* and whilst honoured to be one of the first to read it on this side of the Atlantic, it is also rather a sad experience for I hear that this will be the 18th and last “Burke” novel.

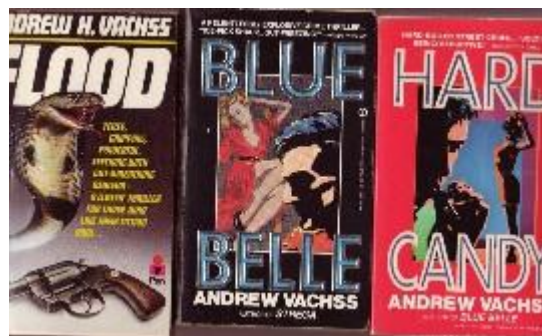


Anyone who has not come across the work of Andrew Vachss (with whom I have had the honour to correspond over the years) and particularly the “Burke” series, which began with *Flood* in 1985, has a serious gap in his or her crime fiction education and is quite possibly beyond redemption. To say that Vachss’ writing is “hard boiled” is a bit like saying that Raymond Chandler once made a wisecrack or that Volkswagen once made small family cars.



Not only does he have a writing ‘voice’ as distinctive as Chandler or Ellroy, but in the Burke books he has created an entire underground universe in which his ensemble cast (Burke’s extended, and criminal, family) inhabit a New York where life is hard but death, perversion and corruption ridiculously easy. Burke’s home turf is drained of colour and devoid of any texture except asphalt and though technically an outlaw, Burke is its resident mercenary dark knight and often the only source of justice for city’s countless victims.

For almost 25 years, Burke has fought tooth and nail (and I do mean that) to protect victims of pornography and sex abuse, especially where it concerns children (Vachss is a lawyer specialising in such cases), though is also more than willing to take on white supremacists and ‘Aryan Nation’ Nazis should the need arise – which it usually does.



Vachss does not provide easy, comforting reads and his aim is to promote anger at the atrocities he sees on a daily basis. Yet there is no denying him a place at the top table of innovative and utterly distinctive mystery writers, which makes the rumour that *Another Life* could be Burke’s swansong all the more depressing.

The new novel (which I do not think is published in the UK) contains all Vachss’ trademark – and disturbing – insights into the underworld of exploitation and cruelty but also many reflective references by his narrator hero on his past life and career, which is often a sign of an author winding up a character. There are particularly noteworthy scenes, almost philosophical discussions, in the book dealing with sexual domination and the rituals of a dominatrix and her loving slave, but the best is with an obsessive collector of paperback books who lectures

Burke on the subsets and genres of crime fiction including the category of “Worm Noir”. When Burke queries the designation Worm Noir as compared to “Noir” or “Hard-Boiled”, the obsessive doesn’t mince his words:

‘To qualify, ‘worm noir’ must be part of the pantheon of the certifiably untalented. It has certain fraudulence about it, a distinctive odour. And all its authors seem to have followed the same path to publication.....How could a sheep walk the mean streets alone? What their herd produces is nothing but recycling.’

Another Life also fills in some of the blanks in Burke’s personal history and there are some surprises, not the least being that he did not know what Steak Tartare was. I would have thought, with his fondness for large and aggressive dogs that he, of all people, would have appreciated raw meat.

Ripsterpedia

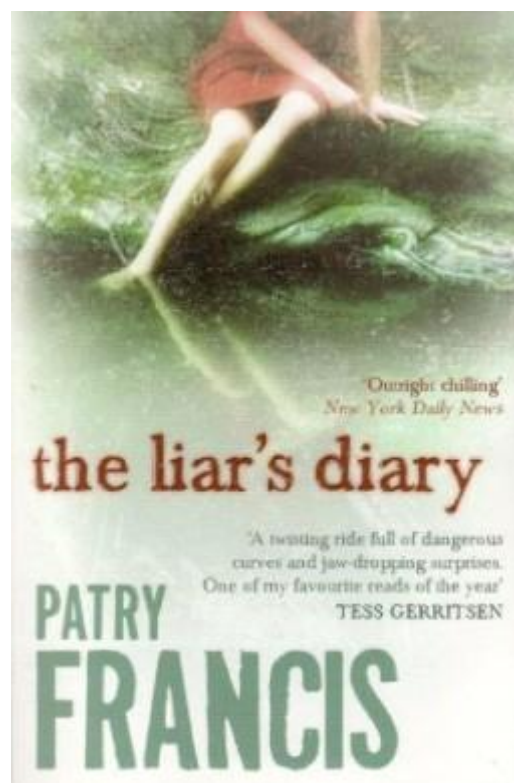
Curious Crime Fiction Fact #1: *Why was 1993 a busy year for Australian actor Bryan Brown?*

Because – and there’s not many people know this – he starred in both the film version of Reginald Hill’s thriller **The Long Kill** (though the setting was changed to the US and the title to *The Last Hit*) **and** he starred as Marcus Didius Falco in a TV movie of Lindsey Davis’ **The Silver Pigs**, re-titled *The Age of Treason*.

Slow Burner

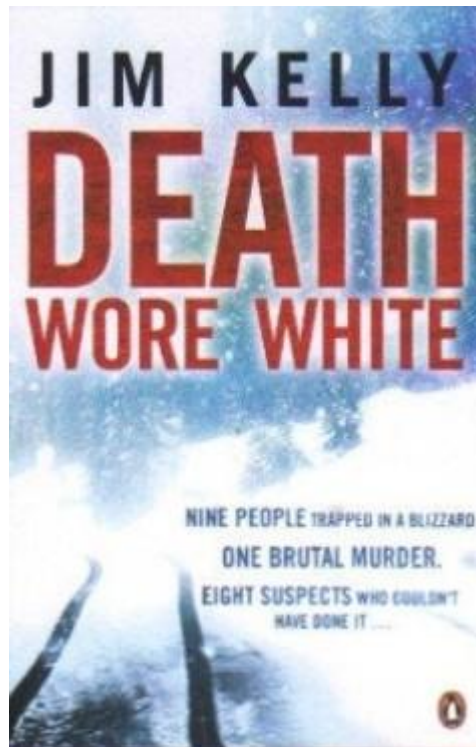
I first came across the name Patry Francis as one of the contributors to the **Killer Year** anthology edited by Lee Child. It is not a name you can easily forget, as it is not ‘Patsy’ yet not quite ‘Patricia’ and more people will have to learn to avoid such mistakes over here now as Patry’s first novel, **The Liar’s Diary** is published in the UK this month by that most impressive, relatively new despite its name, outfit Old Street Publishing.

The Liar’s Diary (it’s not giving too much away to tell readers to keep the title in mind) is an atmospheric, closely-controlled psychological thriller set in small town America and the inevitably fatal clash between two female personalities. It is a tautly written, slow-burning and acutely observant debut and I am convinced you will see the name Patry Francis in the future, albeit mis-spelled!



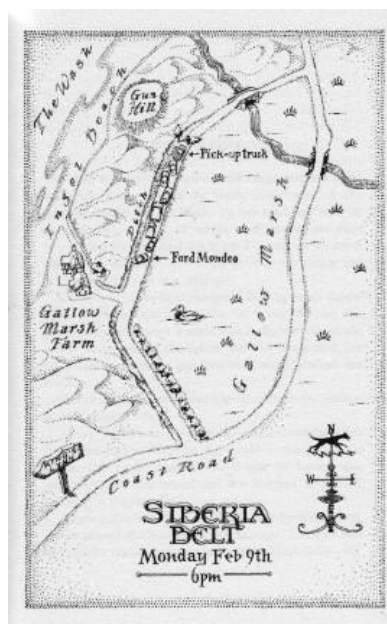
Eastern Approaches

I am grateful to crime writer Jim Kelly for the way he brilliantly depicts the harsh winters experienced by those of us living in East Anglia in his new novel *Death Wore White* (from those perky publishers at Penguin).



The book also marks the debut of detective duo Inspector Shaw and Sergeant Valentine of the West Norfolk Constabulary and the opening action (involving two *very* unnatural deaths) takes place on the snowbound, storm-lashed Norfolk coast. It is described so well, you feel like you need to wear mittens to hold the book.

Death Wore White is a determinedly old-fashioned type of detective story and comes complete with a map of “Siberia Belt” (the local name for the coast road where the nastiness happens) which would not be out of place in a green-jacketed Golden Age Penguin.



Frequent Flyers

It seems that winning the Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement has done nothing to slow the activities of crime-writing maestro John Harvey who, in 2009, is making a serious challenge for the record number of appearances at crime writing and literary festivals. (The 2008 title was won effortlessly by the ubiquitous Laura Wilson.)

Should you miss John at the Scarborough Literary Festival in April, you can catch him at Crimefest in Bristol in May, the Harrogate festival in July, or the Reading Crime Festival and the *Crime Fictions, Crime Histories, Crime Films* convention at the University of Nottingham, both in September.

If you fail to make any of the gigs on the Harvey 09 World Tour (well, England anyway), you can always watch his 2008 Bouchercon interview with Otto Penzler on YouTube or catch a repeat of his TV show explaining “Who Is Kurt Wallender”. And to while away his spare moments, John has started a “Blog” (mellotone70up.wordpress.com) which lists books he has read, films he has seen and tunes he has i-podded recently.

Or you could just wait for his new novel *Far Cry* which is expected in June.

Diamonds Are For Andrew

And speaking of Cartier Diamond Dagger winners, I am delighted that the 2009 “super-sleuth” award will go to that serial prize-winner Andrew Taylor.

Andrew’s achievements in crime-writing are legion, from one of his novels being made a *Richard & Judy* choice to winning the Ellis Peters award not once, but twice (and being nominated umpteen times). In addition he has not only had the foolhardy bravado to appear in public with me but even subjected himself to being a contestant on a crime fiction quiz show I once chaired (on which he proved to be so knowledgeable, he was never asked back).

So the Cartier Dagger for lifetime achievement is well deserved, not the least for his wonderful series of *Bergerac* novels in the 1980s under the pen-name Andrew Saville.

New Critic on the Block

I have to welcome a new member of the crime reviewing fraternity in the saddest of circumstances in the shape of Julia Handford on the *Sunday Telegraph*, as a replacement for Susannah Yager, who died just before Christmas.

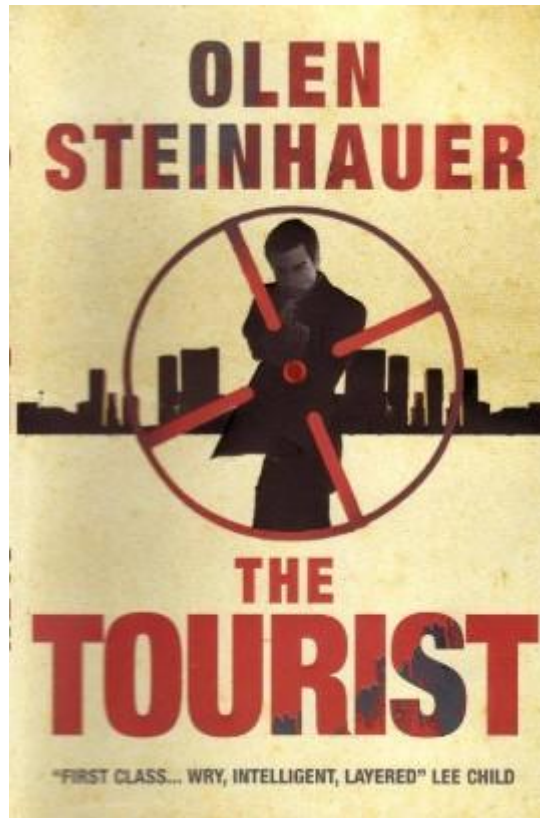
Susannah took over from me as crime reviewer for the *Sunday* when I moved from there to the *Daily Telegraph* in 1991 and she remained a safe pair of hands for 17 years, latterly contributing an impressive two reviews *per week* in the magazine section *Seven*.

Julia Handford’s first column appeared in January and I do hope she quickly finds some crime writers more to her taste than the two she chose to review on her debut: Jeffery Deaver (“...the punch-drunk reader ploughs on and on...”) and Linwood Barclay (“the mechanical plot is not redeemed by the prose which is entirely without style”).

I spy

I have mentioned before, and will again, the fantastic quality of spy fiction currently being written and have flagged up Alan Furst, David Downing, Charles Cumming and Aly Monroe as especially noteworthy.

And now I have discovered (a little late in the day, I admit), Olen Steinhauer, whose confident, complex new novel *The Tourist* is said to be destined for great things when published in March.



The advance hype talks of a 100,000 copy first print run and a pending film deal involving George Clooney. Could life get any better? Well I suppose it could if the book received rave reviews and I am totally confident it will do that (for publishers' print-run claims and Mr Clooney I cannot speak) as it is a very good book indeed.

A good spy story is plot-driven, an excellent one is plot *and* character-driven. Steinhauer holds the reins on both elements and he shows he has a pretty firm grip.



Raised in Texas, Olen now lives in Budapest and is said to have been inspired to write about spies and Eastern Europe whilst on a Fulbright Scholarship in Romania.

The Raymond Chandler/Fulbright scholarships were a wonderful institution and possibly still are, though their profile has dropped somewhat in recent years. In the 1990s, British crime writers Ian Rankin and Denise Danks were granted scholarships from the British end to go and live and write in America, and I remember having lunch with American thriller Ridley Pearson (a great fan of John D. Macdonald and therefore an all-round good guy) on the 'return leg' of a scholarship.

But all that was well over a decade ago and I am heartened to discover that the Fulbrights are still doing the job they were designed to do: encouraging and enabling young writers to travel – and above all, granting them the time to do so.

Edgar's roll call

News reaches me from the colonies that short-lists for the prestigious 2009 Edgar awards (named after E.A. Poe, Esq.) have been announced. Many of the names are unfamiliar to me, belonging to authors whose work has not yet crossed the Atlantic.

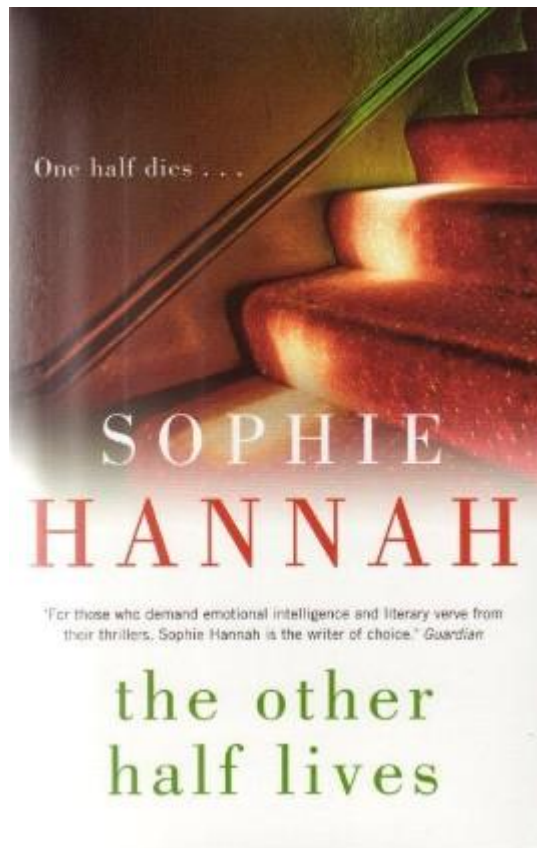
Two names were familiar, however, and caused a *frisson* of surprise here at Ripster Hall. First was that of Meg Gardiner, who is certainly well known in Britain (where she quite sensibly now lives) although she does hail originally from what I believe is called the Oklahoma Territory.

I have no doubt the Ms Gardiner is an entirely worthy contender for an Edgar. What surprised me was that the book nominated in the Best Paperback Original category was *China Lake*, which was published here in the UK *seven years ago* in 2002 when it was extremely well-received I seem to remember. Perhaps this is a case of where Britain leads, America will probably follow.....given time.

My second surprise was to see on the Best Novel short list, *The Night Following* by Morag Joss, a book which I had no idea existed! The reason for my exclamation mark is that I rated very highly Morag Joss' 2005 Silver Dagger winning novel *Half Broken Things* and would certainly have read her new one had I been aware of it. It appears that Morag (a charming and foolishly modest writer) has changed publishers and her novel was published last year in the UK by Duckworths, a publisher I cannot remember ever having offended but obviously I must have for I appear to have been airbrushed from their party invitation, press release and Christmas card lists.

Sophie's Choice

Sophie Hannah is a poet and award-winning short story writer who has also garnered impressive reviews for her three 'psychological suspense novels'. Now comes her latest, *The Other Half Lives* from that noble house of publishing, Hodder & Stoughton.



I have also been pressed by several friends “in the business” to try Sophie Hannah’s novels and the thumbnail comparisons most often used have been the names Barbara Vine and Daphne Du Maurier, and so it was with some trepidation that I started *The Other Half Lives*.

Neither my colleagues nor literary-minded reviewers in the “quality” press however, had prepared me for how *funny* the book would be. It is by no means a comedy – it is a genuinely unsettling emotional and psychological thriller about pretty disturbed people – but it is written with genuine wit and flair, with all the best lines going to women, especially the ones about vibrators!

There’s a troubled female police officer who admits that professionally she tends to “Err on the side of negligence” wherever possible and when a friend describes another woman as “a cockroach”, the wisecracking response is: “More of a slug, I’d say she’s all squish and no crunch”. Fabulous stuff.

After a late arrival at the Hannah party, you might say I’m a convert. My only carp is that this book seems to have been physically expanded in the printing process to occupy over 550 pages and it arrived the week publishers in the UK warned of falling profitability due to rising costs of paper.

Thirsting for knowledge

One is never too old to learn things in this life and I was hoping to acquire a little bit of knowledge about the crime and mystery genre before it was too late, just so that I could bluff my way through the odd cocktail party, should I ever be invited to one.

I thought my chance had come when I was promised copies of two forthcoming and surely seminal works back in October. One was my old friend Russell James’ *Great British Fictional Detectives* and the other was the two-volume *British Crime Writing: An Encyclopaedia* edited by that distinguished man of letters and lunches, Professor Barry Forshaw.

Sadly neither tome appeared before Christmas or indeed since and so I remain in a state of blissful ignorance.

Pip! Pip!

The Ripster