

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

FALL 2018

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BRENDAN DENEEN

When Your Writing
Doesn't Love You Back
DENNIS PALUMBO

In Memoriam:
Anthony Bourdain, Friendships
& the Final Project with
JOEL ROSE

*The Fall of
Frightening Fiction*

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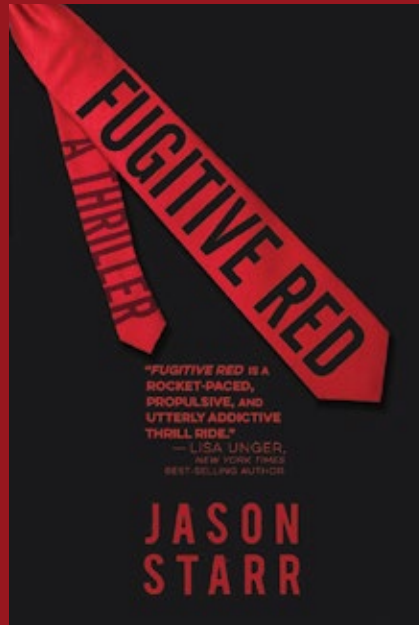
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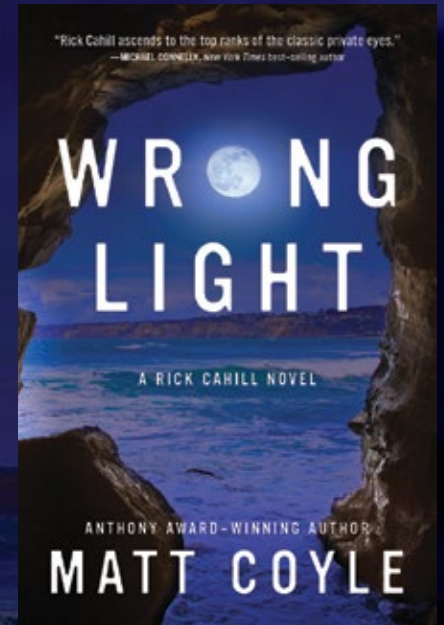
ON SALE NOVEMBER 6

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ON SALE DECEMBER 4

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If you have followed *Suspense Magazine* for all these years, you know that I love to do a couple of lists on an annual basis. I decided that this issue would be a good one for, yes, one of those lists. I love to go to the movies but was pretty disappointed with the line-up this year. Hollywood is rehashing way too many of the older movies and bringing them back out in a way that, unfortunately, does not live up to the original.

Hopefully, like me, all book readers are outraged that the characters and stories that would make great movies keep getting overlooked. I could list those fantastic books out there, but I think that limits the character to just that storyline. Instead, I'm going to list characters that I think would be great to see on the big screen.

I'm not going to put them in any particular order, however; *that* just gets me into trouble!

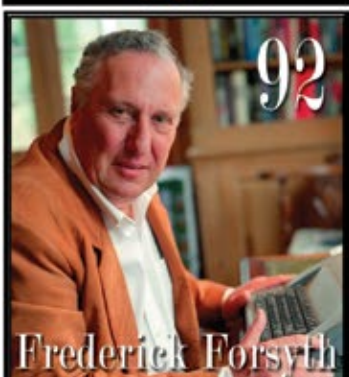
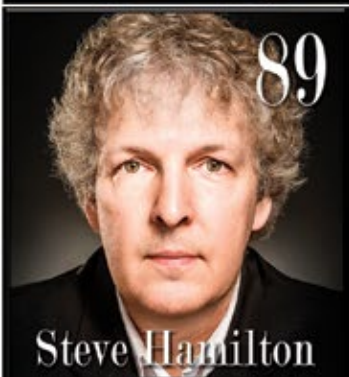
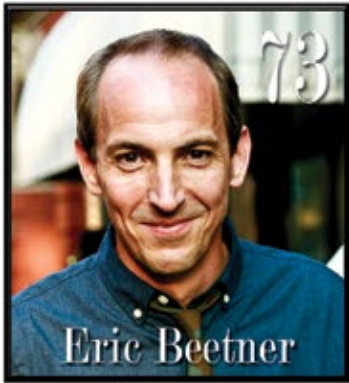
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6. Kay Scarpetta – Patricia Cornwell, author
7. John Wells – Alex Berenson, author
8. Lucy Kincaid – Allison Brennan, author
9. Lady Emily – Tasha Alexander, author
10. Jane Whitefield – Thomas Perry, author

Now, again, this is *my* list, I'm sure *you* have some of these great characters (and others) on your list. If you would like to let me know who *you* would like to see, drop me an email at editor@suspensemagazine.com. I think it's highly important to continue to support all authors, in order to keep their awesome characters and stories alive.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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WHEN YOUR WRITING DOESN'T LOVE YOU BACK



By Dennis Palumbo

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Years ago, I worked with a novelist patient who regularly claimed to have two great loves: her teenage daughter Susie, and writing. I remember vividly her struggles during a particularly turbulent period in her life. Her last two books hadn't done that well, and a current manuscript had been returned by her editor, demanding a significant re-write.

On the home front, there were daily battles with her increasingly rebellious daughter. Finally, during one of our sessions, my patient came to a painful realization.

"Lately," she said haltingly, as though baffled by the idea, "I don't think I like the things I love."

On the evidence, it was easy to see her dilemma. A single mother in her 40's, she'd worked hard to carve out a writing career. There'd been considerable success at first, with the accompanying money.

One of her early novels had even been optioned by a major film studio. Her agent always returned her phone calls. But more important than any of these, she'd always loved to write...

But in recent years, things had slowly unraveled. Whether due to shifting trends or a changing publishing industry, her career had stalled. Maybe her own creative energies had flagged: divorce and a new life as a single parent can do that to you. For whatever reason, her writing pace slowed and her work was received with less and less enthusiasm. Until she sank into that state so tellingly phrased by Sartre: that of incomprehension and rage.

Her daughter Susie, now sixteen, was an equally infuriating challenge. Her rebellion—what therapists often refer to as "age-appropriate differentiation"—was taking the usual form: sex, drugs, and an almost pathological inability to agree with her mother about literally *anything*.

As my patient and I worked together during this period, I kept her words in my mind. *Lately, I don't think I like the things I love.*

On the surface, the meaning was clear: she loved her daughter, and she loved writing, but at the moment both seemed to offer nothing but grief, rejection, and humiliation.

But beyond the obvious, what was my patient saying to me? That she could only love something as long as she *liked* it, in the sense of receiving appropriate personal and professional rewards from it? Hardly. Raising her daughter had always been a struggle, as it is for most parents, yet her love for Susie only grew with the years. Likewise, her writing career—marked by the same triumphs and failures as most writers experience. Yet she'd always approached every new novel with the breathless excitement of an astronaut setting foot on a new planet.

So what was I missing? I found out soon enough, during a session, when I reminded her of what she'd said about not liking the things she loved. Apparently, she'd forgotten she'd even said it. She was even embarrassed by it now.

"I said I didn't like Susie? Or writing?"

"Not that anyone would blame you. Remember what's been going on with your daughter? As of last week, you two weren't even speaking."

"That's right. I got tired of being told to go fuck myself every two minutes."

"As for your career," I continued, "doesn't your editor want a total re-write of your new novel?"

"Yeah, and thanks for reminding me. I'd almost succeeded in blocking out her passive-aggressive email."

When we love something—whether our work, a mate or a child—we better assume we’re going to disappoint it once in a while. . . and learn to endure the times when it disappoints us.



“Look,” I said, “you’re getting hammered by the two things you love most. Your daughter and your work. How could you be okay with that?”

“But it *has* to be okay,” she replied. “Or else...”

Her words trailed off. I took a guess.

“Or else it means you don’t *really* love your daughter, and you don’t *really* love writing. There’s no room in your conception of loving these two things for you to be disappointed. For either of them to occasionally break your heart.”

She nodded. “I’m only allowed to be disappointed in myself...for failing *them*.”

I chose my next words carefully. “When we love something—whether our work, a mate or a child—we better assume we’re going to disappoint it once in a while...and learn to endure the times when it disappoints us. If we’re not vulnerable to that, I don’t think we have a right to even call it love.”

She looked up sharply. Pointed a painted nail in my direction. “Now *you’re* starting to piss me off...”

“Of course I am. *We’re* in a relationship, too. A micro-version of the one you have with your daughter, or even with your work. We’re bound to piss each other off sometimes.”

She sat back in her chair, digesting this. “So I just get through all this...this anger at everything, until—?”

“Until you’re okay with it. And then it’s just another feeling, more—”

“I know. More grist for the mill. Christ, you’ve said *that* enough times. But the way I’ve been feeling lately, it just sucks.”

“Sounds like it.”

She looked off, up at the sky outside my picture window. “Getting through this. That could take some time, right?”

“Probably. Your relationship to Susie, and to your writing, might go through a lot of changes. But I’m betting you’ll come to some sort of peace with both of them.”

Her eyes narrowed. “A *long* time...”

I shrugged. “You going anywhere?”

She hesitated only a moment, then almost smiled. Then shook her head. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in “From Crime to Crime” (Tallfellow Press). His series of mystery thrillers (the latest is “Head Wounds,” from Poisoned Pen Press), feature Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist who consults with the Pittsburgh Police.

For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com.

CRIME *and* SCIENCE. RADIO

WITH AWARD WINNING AUTHORS
D.P. LYLE, M.D. & JAN BURKE

Personal Violence: Sex and Domestic Crimes

An Interview with Former Federal Prosecutor and Author

ALLISON LEOTTA

Interview by D.P. Lyle, MD and Jan Burke
Press Photo Credit: Johnathon Mullen



While working as a federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C. for twelve years, Allison Leotta specialized in sex crimes, domestic violence, and crimes against children. Utilizing this tremendous amount of experience, Allison now writes legal thrillers. Having been dubbed, “The female John Grisham,” her goal is for Grisham to be dubbed, “The male Allison Leotta.” Considering her amazing work, that goal is most definitely not out of the realm of possibility.

Her debut novel, “Law of Attraction,” turned her fictional prosecutor, Anna Curtis, into an immediate “must-read.” These standalone thrillers continued with Anna Curtis starring in “Discretion,” “Speak of the Devil,” “A Good Killing,” and, most recently, “The Last Good Girl.” Allison is also the founder of the popular, award-winning blog, *The Prime-Time Crime Review*.

Taking a break from her busy schedule, Allison sat down with Doug Lyle and Jan Burke for this “Crime and Science Radio” podcast.

Doug Lyle (D.L.): Welcome everyone to “Crime and Science Radio.” We have a great guest today, novelist Allison Leotta. My dear friend for a long time, she is funny, witty, charming, filled with energy and has accomplished a great deal in her young life. A graduate of Michigan State, she received her law degree from Harvard. For twelve years she worked as a federal prosecutor in D.C., specializing in sex crimes, domestic violence and crimes against children. As if that weren’t enough, she’s also a wonderful novelist who writes the outstanding *Anna Curtis* series. Her latest, “The Last Good Girl” received rave reviews, including one from Oprah who stated it was one of the best of the year. She is also a contributor for *The Huffington Post* where she “reality checks” TV crime dramas, such as *Law & Order*, and hosts a blog that was listed as one of the best legal blogs in the U.S. by the American Bar Association. We are excited to have her here today. Welcome Allison.



Allison Leotta (A.L.): *Wow. Thank you, Doug, for that intro. I feel like I should leave right now because it won't get any better than that.*

Jan Burke (J.B.): *Welcome Allison. We love to talk to our guests about how they ended up in their professions. Could you tell our listeners about your journey into law?*

A.L.: *Hello, Jan. When it comes to law...it was always an idea kind of there on the side. I had thoughts of being a vet, a firefighter, and then...law school. Partly the decision came because my dad was a federal prosecutor and just loved it. He would come home with these crazy stories and we'd ask him at the dinner table every night what happened that day. It was always fascinating. He was always proud of what he was doing—which I think is a luxury for prosecutors. He always stated that he loved fighting for the right cause. He "felt like the eagle was on his shoulder."*

When it came my turn, I gravitated to that. I went to Michigan State. I come from a long line of Spartans: Go Green! Everybody in my family went to MSU. After that, I went to Harvard Law, clerked a year for a judge, then went to the Department of Justice in D.C.

J.B.: *That's pretty amazing. Some people say that getting into Harvard is not exactly easy.*

A.L.: *This is true. (LOL) Some say the only thing harder than getting in, however, is getting out. Which is also true because I guess I never did really. Here I am, still talking about the law.*

D.L.: *What led you into federal law? In particular, the area of sex crimes, domestic violence, etc.*

A.L.: *It was actually a path I was really interested in. I wanted to see and be a part of the law that helped the most vulnerable in our society. In particular, women, children, and people who don't have a voice.*

When I went to the U.S. Attorney's Office in D.C. there were two tracks. Every young prosecutor would come, these big classes, and they would funnel you into one of the two tracks. There were the general crimes, misdemeanors, and then the degrees would rise, such as drugs and gun crimes, which would then follow along into homicide. The other track I would call crimes against "specialized victims." In my office it was actually named the Sex Crimes & Domestic Violence Unit. You would request which of these tracks you wanted, and it was kind of an interesting breakdown. Can you guess? Most women would request the direction of domestic violence and sex crimes, whereas most of the men wanted to pursue the homicide track.

J.B.: *You mentioned various degrees of crimes; can you*

elaborate on what the degrees entail?

A.L.: *Well, you have misdemeanors which, in D.C., come along with less than six months of jail time or no jail time at all. There are some that get tried as misdemeanors but the crime was a little more on the harsh side. In D.C., for example, one of the big problems came from out-of-state school groups coming to D.C. and getting groped by men at tourist sites and monuments.*

Then comes the more serious crimes; felony sex crimes that come along with a year or more of imprisonment if you're convicted. These crimes are more serious when utilizing violence, there is a threat of violence, if done with the use of a weapon, or if it occurs during the course of another crime. If you break in to someone's home, say, and then commit a sex crime as well, it becomes very serious.

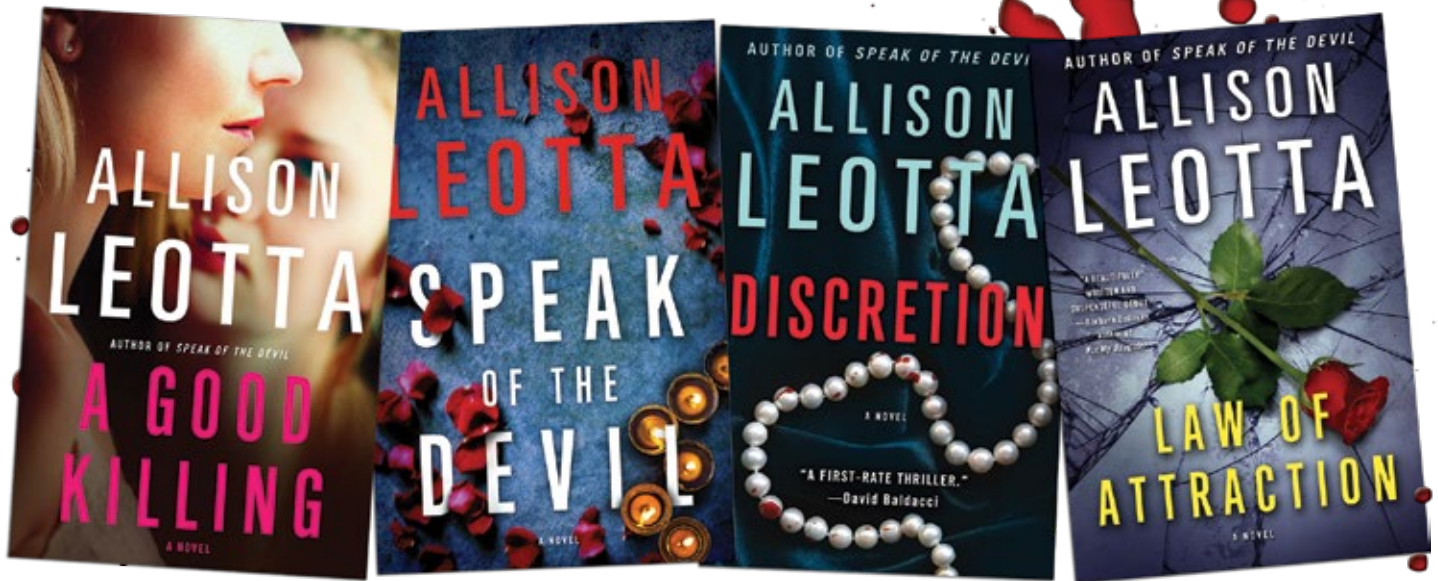
J.B.: *Some people don't quite understand D.C. and their systems; some see it as a legal phenomenon because it is so different from the states. Can you clarify?*

A.L.: *That's a very good question, actually. We are sort of the "redheaded stepchild" of the federal system. D.C. is a federal city and there is no DA's office like in other states. States will have offices that handle local crimes, like murders and rapes. In D.C., the U.S. Attorney's Office must handle all cases. Murders, rapes, and all federal crimes like, bank robberies or political corruption. This wide variety actually makes it a really fascinating place to work; every possible crime you can imagine was coming through our office and provided amazing fodder for what we would talk about at the "water cooler" each day.*

D.L.: *You are a regular contributor for The Huffington Post and on your blog you make sure to reality check TV crime dramas which is, unfortunately, where most people get educated on crime, evidence collection, forensic science, etc. Why, exactly, did you end up doing that, and what are some of the most egregious errors you've seen on TV and in the news?*

A.L.: *I have to say, Doug, I learned some of the most interesting forensics from your blog. I had no idea that I could kill someone with octopus ink, for example; being a federal prosecutor for 12 years didn't even teach me that. (LOL)*

There is a true phenomenon of people learning their crime facts and what goes on in courtrooms from TV shows. Of course, it is important to always remember that TV dramatizes these issues and doesn't even show the boring stuff. In fact, a lot of those shows look more science fiction to me. In shows there is DNA evidence and fingerprints all over everything at the scene of the crime. In the real world, I most often have to call in an expert to explain to jurors why, exactly, there is a lack of evidence. They need to teach jurors about things



like manufacturers making guns out of stipple, bumpy metal material that actually does not hold fingerprints. In addition, it is quite easy for a criminal to simply wipe a gun clean. But you have to bring in that expert to tell jurors about this because of what they learned on TV and in various novels.

My more personal pet peeve comes from being a sex crimes prosecutor. Although this is not “Thanksgiving table conversation,” my personal pet peeve is when you watch things like SVU and the woman “cannot be believed” because she has no vaginal injuries after claiming she was raped. The truth is that more than 50% percent of the time, even in violent sexual assaults, there are no vaginal injuries. After all, we are talking about “material” that was made to expand and not get torn, considering it must be able to fit a baby. But when the jury sees that there are no injuries they begin to believe that the woman must have consented. They feel that if the action was terrible and brutal, like rape, there would be injuries. That is not the fact, and it is a very dangerous way to evaluate a sex crimes case. As a prosecutor I was always trying to educate the jury and take away those preconceived notions they learned from television.

D.L.: Isn't the trauma most likely elsewhere, anyway?

A.L.: It depends on the crime. For example, on college campuses, most likely you will not see injuries because the victim is usually intoxicated or incapacitated by a date rape drug. When this occurs, she does not have the ability to consent. The evidence would be more along the lines of a frat party or a big bar tab. In cases where more force or violence is used then, yes, there are all sorts of injuries found on the body, where they were tied up, etc.

One of the hardest cases I worked was in regards to a nice, hardworking single mom. She was up at five a.m. to bring her kids to her mom's place and worked very hard. Her rapist was a neighbor; a terrible guy who'd gotten out of jail after

being convicted of raping another woman. He fixated on her, stalked her and one day jumped in her car, put a knife to her throat, and told her to put her kids in the trunk. She refused, and the kids managed to get out, run away, and go for help. Meanwhile, he took her to an area, assaulted her, and beat her to within an inch of her life. He thought he'd left her for dead. Somehow she managed to survive, crawled away through the woods, and made it. She sustained extensive injuries, her skull was fractured and she had to stay in the hospital for months, but there were no vaginal injuries. Juries have to be aware of these factors.

J.B.: In your career, what were the most common crimes committed?

A.L.: That actually depended on the section. You had a lot of the misdemeanors; the ridiculous, petty crimes, such as boob or butt grabs out in public places. Then you had the most heartbreaking of crimes which were the child crimes. People ask me if there is anything I couldn't write about. I couldn't write about the kid cases; they were heartbreaking. They completely changed me as a mom. I have two children and, after working in this field for so long, I have become paranoid and suspicious over time. From coaches to babysitters...it's those people you “welcome” into your life and people you trust that, more often than not, are the worst ones. There are many where it is mom's new boyfriend. After working in this field, if I ever got a divorce, I would never date again; I'd just get 12 cats, or something.

The “type” that preys on kids is rarely the “stranger” who tries to pick them up from school or offers them candy if they get in his car. Although these are good conversations to have with your kids, in my experience, I never had one case where that was what had happened. The predators were people you could trust, which is a lot more frightening.

D.L.: When it comes to sex crimes and domestic violence,

what are the numbers; or, perhaps I should say, the scope of the problem?

A.L.: *It's hard to say, Doug, because sex crimes are the most under-reported crimes in the U.S., especially when men are the victims. One of the most frightening numbers that played into one of my books, however, are the number of girls who are sexually assaulted at college. One in five, and that is shocking. Hard to imagine that 20% who head off to college will be sexually assaulted, which should give you pause. I'm not surprised by the numbers, as a prosecutor. But when I go around and talk to people as a writer, I am amazed when people thank me for writing about this subject because it happened to them. There are so many out there who never reported it. You can blame this on the culture of 'victim blaming' and the times where victims blame themselves. There is a stigma and it affects more people than you think.*

J.B.: What about a topic that has received a lot of press, such as sex trafficking? Can you discuss this topic and if you handled any of these cases?

A.L.: *We did handle those in D.C., and these are not always what people believe them to be. These are rarely sex slaves that are brought into our country. These are girls ages 13 to 16 who fall in love with pimps and let their new "boyfriends" bring them from state to state. These pimps are super slick and have amazing internal radar for finding those with low self-esteem. They can pick them out just by walking down the street, or at the mall. They say the right things, take the girl home with them, and mention how happy they would be if the girl would have sex with their friend, Joe. The word gets out and they begin doing it whenever this boyfriend of theirs asks them to. Soon these guys build their own stable of girls, add them to internet sites and start bringing in the money.*

J.B.: You mentioned low self-esteem as being a trait of these girls. Are there any other characteristics common to these victims?

A.L.: *They are usually runaways, or girls without supportive families. Some even have families fighting over them because of a divorce and they get so emotionally upset that they run away. Trafficking takes the most vulnerable, even those from other countries who do not speak the language well. This crime is all about control and power, and if you don't speak the language, you become vulnerable to the guy who does.*

J.B.: What are the major reasons why these crimes are under-reported, when it comes to domestic violence, etc.?

A.L.: *For domestic violence, it's a crime that for a long time was not even considered a crime. Police officers were trained*

in a certain way many years ago. You would get a call and go to a house where a wife sat with a black eye and a husband was literally out of control. You would basically ask how you could make it a peaceful night and calm everyone down. Then, they'd simply leave. This goes back to the day when husbands were considered to own their wives, and it couldn't be a crime to beat up a possession.

I think we're certainly moving in the right direction, thankfully. It is no longer easy to say that some woman simply, "had it coming." Police procedures and training have changed. If they go to a scene and have probable cause that domestic violence has happened, they must now make an arrest. It is taken seriously today; the legal status of whether it's a crime or not is over.

J.B.: There was a time, especially when the news came out about rape kits being backlogged, when I thought that the law was only focused on bringing what they knew would be successful prosecutions into the courtroom; like it was a waste of time to try to prosecute if the victim had, say, arrests or were on drugs, etc.

A.L.: *That is one of the most ridiculous scandals in the criminal justice system right now; the rape kit backlog. Your listeners most likely know about the kit that is a collection of evidence immediately taken in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Swabs and hair are taken, fingernail scrapings—all of this evidence is put into a box. In an ideal world it is then sent out and tested. This is the best evidence possible when it comes to finding out exactly who was there at the scene and who committed the crime.*

Unfortunately, the testing is horrible. It is estimated that there are 400,000 of these little white boxes sitting in police stations and warehouses across the country. You feel angry for the victim. After all, they took the time to report the crime, go through this fairly invasive examination after going through such trauma, and then it's not even tested. These victims have strong backbones and a great deal of grit and courage to go through this process (kudos to all of them) but then their kits are not tested for a variety of reasons. This is appalling.

Worst part is that these kits prove a number of the predators are serial rapists and could've been stopped if the tests had been done. In Detroit, for example, 10,000 rape kits that'd been sitting there for goodness knows how long were finally tested. In the first 1000 tests, they found serial rapists who could have been locked up with crime number one and never had the ability to create even more victims.

D.L.: These serial predators are some "special group" committed to what they do from some deep psychological need. And most interface with people who are just going through life.

A.L.: *Exactly. When they started to expand the databases, even non-violent, they found people who were arrested on burglary but had also raped or murdered. So, there are those times to think about where someone is breaking into a home, but the police are called before they can succeed. It's possible that the predator was there to commit other crimes but didn't get a chance to act on them because a boyfriend or a gun was there that the predator didn't know about.*

One case I had was where this woman worked at a hospital. She would give her key to the valet every day to park her car. This valet grew obsessed with her and one day took her whole keychain and made copies of the keys to her house. He stalked her for a while and then went into her house one day, with rope, duct tape, etc., set up a miniature camera on her desk to tape the act, and then hid under her bed and waited for her to come home. Luckily, her boyfriend was with her and they climbed into bed and went to sleep, completely oblivious to the fact that this man was underneath them. They heard something in the middle of the night and the boyfriend took a flashlight and found the man; he then beat this stalker to within an inch of his life and it was all captured on the video that the criminal had set-up. Poetic justice, if you ask me. Ever since, I have made sure to keep my house key on a separate keychain from my car keys.

D.L.: I do that as well. Say everything with a case turns out absolutely right. The victim reports, the evidence collection, the prosecutor goes ahead with the trial, etc. What hurdles do you have to still jump in order to get a conviction?

A.L.: *Oh, goodness, there are so many. There is jury selection, at first. You want to find jurors that will be fair, open-minded and willing to believe the victim even if they do have a dark past. You want jurors with life experience who understand the gritty side of things; maybe someone who even lives in the victim's neighborhood and knows how things go.*

CSI we've already talked about; getting everyone to understand reality. Then comes the hurdle of the person's testimony. You are already asking someone who has had the hardest and worst night of their entire lives to walk into a fluorescent lit courtroom, hold it together as strangers turn in their seats while they walk down the aisle and sit on that witness stand. Then the person has to stare at a strange judge, and tell jurors all about the nightmare while the guy who did it is actually sitting across from them at a table, smiling. This takes unbelievable courage, to lift their hand up and point a finger at their assailant. They put trust in the system that this horrible person will not get out of jail after that. It's even worse with a child victim or a young teenager; some haven't even seen a courtroom. You go through the act of taking them there and showing them where they'll sit, where the judge is, etc., in order to make them feel comfortable.

Then you have the legal hurdles; getting the DNA processed

on time and hollering and screaming so that yours does not get backlogged. The fights you have to take on in order to be able to keep the evidence in, and training the police officers on how to take the evidence constitutionally so it doesn't get thrown out.

That just scratches the surface; there are so many hurdles.

D.L.: Were there any cases where unexpected issues came up for you; things that were problematic that you didn't see coming?

A.L.: *Actually, every single one was like that. In some ways it was like living a thriller every day by working in D.C. prosecuting sex crimes. I would be walking to work, heading to the subway, and wondering what would happen that day. Running a trial is a logistical feat, balancing witness evidence, the timing, the judge, the jury...it's crazy. I'm a Type A personality, so I would have it all ready to go, with binders of exhibits marked, spreadsheets done, and would know exactly how I was going to present the case. And I can say, I don't think it ever happened the way I had planned. Something would come up, from a police officer who got shot on the way to the courthouse; to a witness who said right before getting on the stand that there was some 'important' detail they'd forgotten to tell me. But I loved it; some people really hate that environment, but I loved it. It was a good match.*

J.B.: You talked about becoming paranoid because of some of the cases you worked on, but besides that, does the handling of those cases take a personal toll on you?

A.L.: *Yes. They definitely did. It's like being in the Army: "The toughest job you'll ever love." Being a sex crimes prosecutor was like that. Seeing the worst things that humanity could do to each other was difficult but super-rewarding at the same time, because I was fighting for something. It was nice to fight and make things a little more right, even if I couldn't solve everything. Everyone I knew had something different that they took on to try to help the personal toll. We had marathon runners, marathon shoppers in the unit, and I decided to write novels. I thought of different angles and characters in the courthouse, so I think I processed any trauma or toll through books.*

J.B.: So that's what led to writing fiction.

A.L.: *Without a doubt.*

D.L.: Well, you definitely constructed a wonderful character with Anna Curtis. How did you create her and how much of you is in that character?

A.L.: *Anna is a sex crimes prosecutor in D.C. (surprise, surprise), but I think readers automatically believe she and*

I are the same person. We're definitely not. She is a lot more interesting than I am; she can go to the edge of everything. As a normal person doing the job by the book, I would not be able to do that.

When I first started constructing Anna, I thought she would be from my husband's side of the family. He comes from an enormous Sicilian family where every kitchen has a grandma standing over a giant pot of red sauce that smells absolutely amazing. All you want to do is tear off a piece of garlic bread and dip it into that sauce. So at the beginning, I wrote from that angle. With the first novel you don't really know what you're doing quite yet; you're still figuring out how all of it works. It took a while for me to learn that Anna did not have a big, supportive family with the red sauce. She had a dark background, which made her understand her victims more and take her job more seriously. Her childhood was a troubled one.

I have to say, I feel really bad for my amazing father. He is the sweet, kind, gentle prosecutor, yet people think he's the horrible monster of a dad that Anna has. I didn't realize that people would think she was me and her family was my family. So for anyone out there, my dad is really nice and would not hurt a fly. I definitely "constructed" this character.

D.L.: So tell us about the 5th in this series, "The Last Good Girl."

A.L.: *It is the 5th, but they are all standalones, and I want every reader to pick up any one of them and, if they like it, I hope they read them all. In this, Anna is called to a university because a young woman has disappeared from the campus. She starts to investigate and discovers that this woman accused a very popular frat boy of assaulting her right before she disappeared. The investigation continues and Anna finds that there is a lot more than meets the eye about the college, and the system they have set up to handle reports like these.*

D.L.: And it's great. I have to say to all, read it and give it "5 stars" on Amazon. Everyone should read your other books, as well. Should I assume Anna gets involved in situations that echo things you were doing, or is this all fiction?

A.L.: *I try to use my experience but I have never written about one particular case. I take all the interesting details and real moments in life and incorporate them into the stories. The most delicious, interesting, and sometimes most heartbreaking details from all my cases get sewn into the books.*

D.L.: Any final thoughts about your area of expertise that you wish to impart to the people out there?

A.L.: *I will say this. When I ask police officers what the number one thing is to keep a woman home alone at night safe, they*

say: "Have a dog." No one wants to break in to a house with a dog. I have one from the Fairfax County animal shelter. I'm not sure they would scare anyone away, but officers say the dog doesn't have to be vicious; just noisy.

J.B.: I think mine would go after someone. I think all dogs would, actually. They're very territorial. Even the nicest are highly protective and wouldn't let strangers inside.

D.L.: Mine wouldn't deter a criminal, but he would delay them by leading them to the kitchen. After all, the stranger has thumbs and the dog would want to show him something. (LOL) Allison, this has been outstanding. We really appreciate you sharing your font of knowledge with our listeners.

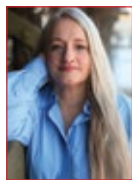
A.L.: *It was an honor to be here. Thank you for having me.*

We'd like to thank Allison for joining "Crime and Science Radio." To learn more about this incredible award-winning talent, check out her website at: <http://allisonleotta.com>. ■

Originally aired on Crime & Science Radio; March 2016.



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A nationally recognized advocate for the improvement of forensic science, she has led efforts that resulted in new laws to aid in identifying remains and better funding for labs. She has spoken before the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Crime Lab Directors, and other organizations. She is a member of the advisory board of the California Forensic Science Institute. She has coordinated forensic science programming at several mystery conventions. She co-hosted the podcast Crime and Science Radio with Doug Lyle. Jan has taught at the UCLA Extension, Book Passage, and at numerous conferences and conventions. For more information, check out her website at www.janburke.com.

The Bible Belt Buckle KILLER

By Kaye George

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



ISABEL MUSIK DROPPED HER BLOODY MARY WHEN SHE HEARD THE SCREAM.

Dolf raised his bushy eyebrows when he saw it hit the redwood deck. “Really? You’re drinking tomato juice?”

“It has vodka in it,” she said. “It’s not just tomato juice.” She had carried an assortment of drinks outside. Now she would have to make herself another one.

She scanned the night for the source of the noise and saw an owl swoop out of the woods behind her house, carrying a squirming rabbit in its cruel beak. Full darkness had fallen half an hour ago and the hot summer air was cooling rapidly. It was a fine evening in the little south Texas town of Katydid.

The scream had sounded almost human. Isabel ran inside her condo to get some towels to sop up the red mess before it stained her deck. When she came back out, Dolf was on all fours licking it up.

“It’s not blood, Dolf.”

His fangs were visible when he smiled up at her. “I can dream, can’t I?” Dolf was a werewolf, but his full moon urges were controlled. He stuck to small animals mostly. Occasionally a larger one, but hadn’t chewed on a human for more than ten years. Werewolves don’t drain blood from humans, but they do like to eat the meat and they eat it raw and bloody.

She poured herself a beer. Seeing Dolf lap up her Bloody Mary had taken away her desire for one. Now she took a long pull. “Dolf, just finish the steaks, okay?”

She’d been seeing Dolf casually, but he was beginning to grow on her. She got so lonely. Humans weren’t good partners for her. She wasn’t fully werewolf anymore, since she’d been through retransformation, but she didn’t think of herself as a human either.

“Did you hear about those crazy murders?” he asked.

“Where the victims have a belt buckle stuck into their mouths?” she said. “I wonder what that’s about.”

Dolf looked away. “Someone doesn’t like overly religious people, I think.”

Isabel had read that the victims were found shot and gagged with buckles that had the word “bible” etched into them. “Maybe that’s it.” At least, werewolves weren’t involved, as far as she could tell.

“Mine’s done,” he said, taking the mostly raw T-bone off the grill. “I’ll leave yours on a few minutes more.”

“I don’t think the coals got hot yet, did they?” The salad and asparagus were on the table. “You know what? Go ahead and take mine off, too. Let’s eat now.”

Dolf’s grin was toothy and feral. That kind of good looks still appealed to her. When she’d been an actual werewolf, several years ago, nothing had turned her on like a hairy ravening beast. The more brutal, the better. She’d been overly brutal, too, which is why she had to be retransformed.

The animal attraction frightened her. After they ate, she told Dolf she had a headache and he would have to leave.

“Aw, I thought I was spending the night,” he crooned. “Look at that moon. We could do it outside.”

“Another time, okay? I need to lie down and get rid of this awful migraine.”

He gave her a dark, exciting look, but left. She leaned her back against the closed door, relieved he was gone. The headache was real, but not that severe. She knew she should search for a guy without long incisors and a lust for nighttime raw meat.

The next day Isabel had a long-standing regular shopping date with her fellow Retransformer, Loveta Bleddyn. They had

been out-of-control werewolves at the same time, ravaging the slums of Chicago, and had been captured and altered together. This was accomplished by being bitten, this time by a retransformed werewolf, a reverse process, followed by group meetings for as long as the mental adjustment took. They had bonded during their rehab and liked to keep in touch by buying shoes once a month.

They stopped at their favorite discount store, Shoe Souls, to begin their retail therapy. Isabel's eye was caught by a revolving rack of leather belts. She liked shoes, but also anything leather. She fingered one with tooled openwork over a turquoise background.

"Look at this," she said to Loveta, who was almost to the sandal aisle.

Loveta turned back and felt the handiwork. "It's gorgeous. That's a huge buckle, though. Do you want to wear something that heavy?"

"Maybe not." Isabel dropped it onto the rack.

"Hey, did you hear about that buckle killer here in Katydid?" Loveta said.

"I did," Isabel said. "I think there's a Bible Belt Buckle Killer on the loose."

Loveta laughed. "That's exactly what it was called on the morning news. I was assigned to investigate the murders to see if a wolf might be involved, but I don't see any signs of that."

Isabel dismissed the news from her mind after she chuckled over the moniker and proceeded to buy three pairs of sandals, all on sale. It was a heady feeling to score like that. A crazy killer had nothing to do with her. This time.

The next night was her turn to supervise a group of rehabbing former wolves at the local WA meeting, the Werewolves Anonymous chapter of WWF, the Worldwide Wolf Federation, better known as The Organization among their kind.

The newest rescued member stood to introduce himself.

"Hello Pack," he said.

"Hello," everyone answered in unison.

"My name is Raulf and I'm a werewolf."

They would all be werewolves, basically, for the rest of their lives, but the retransformation process removed their urges to devour human flesh. These, the most violent ones, had also been deprived of the ability to transform into wolves at full moons, or more often for the extremely hard cases. This was accomplished with a bite by a reformed wolf, such as Isabel or Loveta. Some of the converted made it their mission to be available to retransform rogue wolves, while most of them went about rebuilding their lives.

These weekly meetings for the recently retransformed helped them adjust to their new lives and learn to eat vegetables. Some of them would probably bond, as the two females had done all those years ago.

Isabel eyed Raulf carefully for signs that the

retransformation was working properly. He was one that she had bitten, so she felt responsible. Sometimes, the process didn't work properly. It was rare, but Retransformers were always on the lookout for any reformed wolves in danger of un-retransforming. He stood awkwardly, his shoulders hunched and his head drawn in, his discomfort typical for a new member. His shaggy brown hair hung in his face, almost obscuring one bright green eye.

He told part of his story to the group. "So, I got kinda outta control. My brother married a Normal woman and I was attracted to her. She, uh, cheated on him with me a coupla times. So then, we, uh...did it outside one night. It was a full moon and I turned and I...bit her."

There were sympathetic murmurs from the group. They all tried to avoid being outside during full moons now. Even with their transforming abilities solidly blunted, it was painful for them, experiencing their bodies at war with themselves.

"Go on," Isabel encouraged him, wondering if he'd tell the rest of the story. One slip, they all knew, was no reason for him to get into trouble with WWF.

"Yeah, so, she totally freaked out and I...started eating her. Hey dude, it upset me." He raised his eyes to the group defiantly, then lowered his head. "So that's it. I got outta control."

He hadn't mentioned that he'd gone on to also eat his brother and a cousin. That would probably eventually come out. Most of those in the circle had killed more than one human before they were detected and caught. From their session last week, she knew he still harbored a lot of anger. His father had disowned him publicly when he first became a werewolf and they'd had raging arguments ever since. She was concerned that the two had kept in contact because Raulf had so many unresolved, conflicting feelings about his father.

As Raulf sat to murmurs of "Thanks for sharing," and head nods of encouragement, Isabel thought she detected a slight smirk. Was she going to have trouble with him? If a wolf hadn't seen the error of his ravaging ways and wasn't committed to change, he could sometimes slip back to eating live meat. She didn't see any remorse in this one. To him, the woman freaking out was responsible for getting herself eaten.

Raulf sat next to Morrigan Faol, a red headed female that most of the guys considered hot. Isabel couldn't figure out Morrigan. She seemed cheerful and bright one moment, sullen and brooding the next. It probably wasn't good they sat next to each other.

Isabel suppressed a sigh. Being a werewolf was so difficult. Why had she ever wanted Sirhan to bite her all those years ago? He had been so darkly exciting, romantic. She got a thrill from touching his furry body when he burst out of his clothing on the beach, in the full moon, that night outside Port Aransas. His growl almost made her faint. She had thrown her head back and exposed her neck, momentarily confusing vampires with werewolves. Sirhan chose a less

conspicuous spot, inside her left breast, and that had done it.

Varul, one of her most enthusiastic subjects, rose and told about how he'd had such a good time on a date two days ago, eating sushi for an early dinner. He said the woman never suspected a thing and that's how he wanted to keep it. Sometimes she wondered if he was for real, or if he was putting on a good act.

After the meeting, she thanked Varul for sharing. "You're doing really well, for being so new at this."

"I don't want to mess anything up. I don't ever want to go back to the way I was. Yeah, it was thrilling, but when I think of what I did, all the people I hurt; I don't ever want to be that way again."

Isabel gave him a pat on the shoulder. He was two weeks away from getting his six month medallion. She hoped his clean conversion wasn't too good to be true.

That night, in her apartment, she went over Raulf's case notes to see if there was anything she could be doing. She decided to call him in soon for a one-on-one session, to make sure he was still making progress with his attitude.

Her phone woke her up half an hour before her alarm would have gone off the next morning. She muttered a sleepy "Hello" without checking the caller ID.

"Musik? There's been an incident."

She sat straight up in bed. It was the president of WWF. This could only be bad news. "What happened?" She knew it meant there'd been an attack. She needed to know where the body was and if a particular werewolf was on the radar for the crime, or whether she'd have to figure out who the rogue wolf was.

"Are you sitting down?"

The hairs on her nape stood up. "I am."

"It's Bleddyn."

"Loveta? She's bitten someone?" How could that be? She had been recovered for as long as Isabel had.

"No, Isabel. Loveta Bleddyn's body was discovered early this morning. She's been shot and killed."

Isabel let out a soft whoosh and slumped onto the pillows, unable to speak. Loveta was dead. How could that be?

"Are you still there? Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm here. I'm not okay. She was a good friend." She swallowed her sobs.

"Yes, I know. That's why I wanted to call you personally."

She grabbed the pad and pencil she kept on her nightstand. "Give me the details. I can get to work in half an hour."

"No, Isabel, I'm not assigning this to you. You were too close to her. I wanted to let you know before you heard it anywhere else."

"Can you tell me anything about it at all?"

"I had better not. Look, Isabel, I have some more calls to make. Go ahead and take the day off if you need to. We're not officially involved, but I've assigned another Retransformer

to her case. I'll update you with any information we get."

She thanked him and broke the connection, too wired to relax. Take the day off? Hell no. She was going to find out who killed her friend. If she wasn't assigned to the case, she'd have to get information unofficially, but she would get it. She was pretty sure she wouldn't be updated as the case unfolded. They knew she would step in if she learned anything. This was personal. She would step in anyway.

It was still early when she showed up for work at the local WWF office. The door to the conference room was closed and she heard voices behind it. Her hearing, as that of all wolves, converted or not, was excellent. She stood inches from the wooden door and could clearly hear the conversation inside the room.

"Did Loveta give you her findings?" That was Kenneally, one of the older investigators, a male.

"Yes, but she found nothing to connect the Bible Belt Buckle Killer to one of us." That was Phelan's voice, a younger female who worked in the office.

"Do you think she discovered anything that she hadn't turned in yet?" Kenneally asked.

"I don't think so. She reported to me yesterday and said she was going to move on to something else, that she was done with that case."

"And yet she was found shot, with the Bible Belt Buckle in her mouth," he said, "just like the others."

Isabel felt her blood run cold, then hot. Loveta hadn't thought a wolf was involved. Isabel's mind raced as she hurried down the hall to her own office. Had Loveta found something that implicated someone, without knowing she'd found it? Isabel was determined to track that son of a bitch down and get justice for Loveta, whether wolves were involved or not.

After the offices closed that night, Isabel returned to the building. She parked in the back and waited until she saw the cleaning crew pull up. When the last one was going through the door, she rushed over.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, feigning breathlessness. "I ran off this afternoon and left my laptop on my desk. My key card, too."

The woman gave Isabel a doubtful look.

"I'm Isabel Musik? I work at WWF. My office is the second one on the left, with a toy stuffed owl on my desk?"

The cleaning woman nodded and let Isabel go ahead of her.

Isabel made her way to Loveta's office, the one with a stuffed owl on the desk. Loveta's laptop also sat there. She opened it and typed in the ID and password. They had traded each other's log-on information for a case once. She easily found the file for the case, labeled BBBK, with a list of people her friend had investigated. Even though Loveta hadn't suspected it, the killer must have thought she was onto him. She took a phone picture of the screen with the list of

names, closed the computer, and stuck it into a drawer so the cleaning crew would think she took it with her.

The rest of the night was spent at home going over the list of names and the small amount of information that had been included with each one. She was surprised to see the names of some werewolves included. Eventually, she realized that they were the names of those Loveta had recently converted. Maybe, Isabel thought, she suspected one of them might resent what she'd done and seek revenge for interrupting the cycle of mayhem and carnage that some wolves found so fulfilling. That was farfetched, Isabel knew, but she would keep that thought in the back of her mind. No one suspected a werewolf, but it could have been, Isabel thought.

First, she would check out the names of the Normals.

A week went by with Isabel working a lot of hours, doing her own work plus trying to check out the names on Loveta's list. The WWF had gotten the autopsy done by the one doc in town who knew all about the wolves. There weren't any differences after death unless the deceased died while partially or wholly in wolf mode, but it was safer to use this doctor. The pack preferred to maintain obscurity. Public sentiment sometimes ran against them.

Every Normal on the list had a solid alibi for the night Loveta was murdered. The gun hadn't been found, that Isabel knew of. The police, of course, could be keeping back that information.

Isabel had to admit, it was time to start looking at her fellow lupins.

"DOLF," SHE SAID, SITTING IN HER CAR READY TO go into the WA meeting a week after their aborted date at her place, "I'm not sure yet. I need to think about this, about us."

"Why, Izzy?" His deep wolf's voice thrilled her, even over the phone.

"I'm deep into something at work. I'll call you as soon as I can, I promise."

"It's those buckle murders, isn't it?" His voice sounded hostile. Could he be the BBB killer? She dismissed that thought.

When she walked into the meeting, everyone else was already there. Varul smiled and nodded. Several others did also. Raulf glanced up at her from under his bushy eyebrows, but didn't crack a smile. He sat beside Morrigan again.

She concentrated on the group, finding out how everyone's week had gone. She paid special attention to Varul and Morrigan, both of whom had been turned by Loveta.

An unfamiliar male came up to her and said he was new, so she got the meeting started and introduced him. He was very young, barely twenty. She mentally shook her head. The rogues were going wild at younger and younger ages. She had been in her thirties before her blood lust had gotten out of hand.

The others welcomed the new guy and listened to his

story. He had been converted by a colleague, Lycan.

During the break, everyone separated into clumps to stand and drink the juice and nibble the cookies. Raulf and Morrigan stood apart from everyone else. Isabel chatted with the new guy for a couple of minutes, then headed toward Raulf to try to make small talk, but was waylaid by Varul.

"Ms. Musik." He laid a hand on her arm. "I don't think I've ever told you what a great job you do running these meetings."

"Thank you, Varul." He was such a goody-goody. She continued toward the pair in the corner.

"Do you think you could do me a favor?"

She turned and forced herself to smile at him. Raulf and Morrigan weren't going anywhere. "What is it, Varul?"

"I'm the editor of a new online newsletter for our community. It's called *Barks and Bays*."

He waited for her to appreciate...the title? His self-appointed job? She nodded. Every three or four months someone started a newsletter "for our community," but there wasn't a lot of material any of them were interested in. You couldn't incorporate smell into an online newsletter.

"Anyway, it would be so great if you'd do an article for us," he continued.

"I'm awfully busy lately—"

"Something short. Maybe a little bit about your job and why it's so important."

"I...suppose I could do that."

"Awesome! Could you have it for the next meeting? It can go out in the second issue."

How was she going to do that? And her regular job. And find Loveta's killer. "I'll try, but I can't promise I can do it that soon."

"Yeah, okay." He went to refill his cup.

She finally got to the couple. They stood with their foreheads touching, his brown hair mingling with her red locks.

"You look good enough to eat." Raulf bared his teeth with his smile. Morrigan returned the flirt, gazing down and sideways at him.

"Hi, you two," said Isabel. They hadn't noticed she was there. "How's everything going?"

Isabel had to admit that Raulf looked better with a smile, even a lecherous one. A nice change from his sullen pout.

"Really good," Morrigan said. "I love being with my own kind. Even after my conversion, it's comforting to know we're all still here."

"Defanged and declawed," Raulf said, some of his gray moodiness returning.

"It's the only way you can go on," Isabel said. "I know how hard it is, but none of us could have continued as we were. Someone would eventually have put silver bullets through us."

"That's true." Morrigan nodded. "I'd much rather be

alive.”

Raulf didn't answer.

Isabel turned away, but heard him resume talking to Morrigan as she left. “You don't really think that, do you?” She didn't hear her reply.

Raulf would require extra attention for another few weeks. At least. Maybe Morrigan, too. She had been turned by Loveta and could resent her for that.

When a wolf became crazed, thinking of nothing but bloodlust, they couldn't reason enough to know that, if they kept killing, they would be caught. A ravening werewolf was a powerful, hot-tempered, blind, stupid being. She remembered what it had been like. As more and more time passed, she remembered it less and less fondly, but no less vividly.

As soon as Isabel got into her car to go home, a text popped up on her phone.

dont piss off the wrong wolf. u could end up like loveta.

A shiver crawled up her nape. Someone had sent the text the moment she was alone in her car. Was she being watched? She left with more haste than necessary, squealing her tires on the asphalt parking lot.

She scanned behind her all the way home, but didn't see anyone following her.

That evening, at home, she pondered what to do. If the texter had killed Loveta, she had to figure out how to track him. But why text *her*? Had Loveta been killed to threaten Isabel?

She had to appear that she wasn't looking into Loveta's case. Should she show this text to the wolf who was assigned to it? She started to forward it, then stopped. She couldn't do it. Okay, so she wanted the glory for herself, she admitted that. She was one of the best Retransformers in the WWF. She was also the best equipped to find out who killed Loveta. This text meant that a wolf might be responsible. No one else thought so.

She pondered through that. Why would a person kill a few Normals, then a werewolf? The belt buckle had to mean something. But what? The word “BIBLE” etched into the metal of each one made for a catchy serial killer name, but what other purpose did it serve?

They lived in the Bible Belt, but what else?

She researched the first three victims online. After two hours, she found that they all had strong Baptist church ties. That was the most conservative of the mainstream Protestant churches, the one most opposed to alternate lifestyles. They would certainly consider werewolves deviant. That gave a werewolf, a rogue one, a good reason to go after them.

Were those first three collateral damage? Were those killings a smokescreen, with Loveta as the actual target?

There was a burial for Loveta in two days. Maybe her killer would show up there.

A summer gully washer let go with its brief fury in the

morning, but by the time of the service, blue sky and heat were back. Isabel sloshed through the tallish wet grass to the graveside for Loveta's service.

Most of Loveta's family had abandoned her after she became a werewolf in her teens, but one sister, Molly, had kept in touch and was the only family present for the service. Molly sniffled into a series of soggy tissues, sitting on a folding chair in the front row, next to the casket.

Isabel noticed the police presence. They dotted the perimeter of the gathering. Others stood near them. Isabel recognized them as enforcers for WWF. She knew they were all on the lookout for the killer since they often showed up at memorial services. She sniffed for scent and eyed all the Normals, making note of one whose jeans were held up by a belt with a large silver buckle. It was similar to the engraved ones that had been stuffed into the mouths of the victims, but not an exact match. Two of the police officers stayed near him as he paced back and forth behind the four rows of chairs.

Isabel turned her attention to the wolves who were there. She was prepared to bite and thus retransform the offender if she detected him or her, but she was also armed with a pistol that held silver bullets, just in case. She found a seat in the next to the last row so she could keep an eye on everyone but the Normal pacer with the belt buckle. The cops were doing a good job of that.

The pastor, an elderly man who did a lot of pet funerals and most of the services for the wolves, extolled Loveta's life of loving and giving after her reform, without being specific. The werewolves in attendance, though they were normally a stoic bunch, shed a few tears. The reformed wolf had been well liked and her death had been too soon and too violent. The Normals she had come into contact with in her daily life had liked her, too, and they sniffled and blinked back their tears also.

Isabel didn't cry. She had to keep her nose open to smell anything ‘off’ about any of the mourners. There were several from the WA group that she and Loveta had run together. Now she would need a new partner. Varul sat behind the two family members, bolt upright and dry-eyed. Raulf and Morrigan showed up together, late, and sat in the third row.

The pastor called everyone to bow their heads to say a prayer for Loveta's soul. He got out the words, “Dear Lord,” before the pacing Normal in the back let loose with a string of curses.

“Damn her soul to hell. I ain't praying for her. I hope she rots in hell. It's her kind that bit my son and he's lost to me.” He ran toward the casket, pulling a pistol out. He turned and waved it at Raulf, who hit the ground. “I should just kill you,” he said, then started shooting the coffin full of holes. The two officers tackled him after four or five shots and placed him in handcuffs.

“We'll take care of this,” one of the officers said. “Please continue.” They dragged the struggling, still screaming man

to the back of a squad car in the parking lot.

Raulf got up slowly and perched on his chair again. Had they caught the killer? Everyone seemed to think so.

The mood was solemn as the pastor finished the prayer and everyone started to disperse. When half the people were gone, Molly, tears streaming, asked the pastor to lower the casket. The tractor with the winch drove up and started to set it in the yawning trench.

Varul, Phelan, Kenneally, and most of the other wolves had left, but Raulf stayed on his metal folding chair, his shoulders slumped. Morrigan implored him to leave, but he stared first at the departing police car, then at the coffin, ignoring her. Isabel stood and moved closer to him, standing at the end of the row where he sat. As the coffin disappeared from sight, Raulf rose, gave a loud roar, ran to the hole, and jumped in. He stood on top of it, stomping and denting it.

"Stop it!" yelled Isabel. "Get out of there. What do you think you're doing?"

"I killed her! I want to make sure she stays dead." He leapt out of the hole and thrust his face forward, an inch from Isabel's. "You! You hate me. You took everything from me so I took her. You're all alike. First one of you bites me into a werewolf, then you try to make me into a Normal."

"Raulf," she said, as calmly as she could, "that's not true. Loveta and I were helping you and the other—"

He pushed her to the ground and whirled, grabbing the pastor, trapping him against his strong body with his powerful arm, his mouth an inch from the terrified man's neck.

"Everyone stay back or I'll bite him." Raulf sounded eerily calm now. "I'll bite everyone here if *anyone* comes near me."

Isabel lay behind him where she'd fallen when he pushed her. She took a split second to decide. Should she bite him and retransform him? Again? It hadn't worked well the last time she'd done it.

She drew her small pistol from her pocket, silently rose, pressed the muzzle against the side of his head from behind, and shot a silver bullet into his warped and troubled brain. She had created this mess by somehow not properly retransforming him, and she had to clean it up.

It was a surprise to everyone when the police announced, a week later, that all the BBBK victims had been killed with silver bullets and that the murder weapon had been found at Raulf's place. The press posited that Raulf's target, all along, was Loveta and that the other deaths were smokescreens to throw off the authorities in the hope that he wouldn't be suspected. The press came out with that theory, but Isabel Musik had come up with it. The Bible Belt reference, it was thought, had been used because Raulf's father was told to disown him by his church. Isabel remembered the buckle he'd worn at the service. It finally made a sort

of twisted sense.

Isabel finished reading the article, most of which she had dictated to the reporter on condition that he wouldn't use her name, and entered the meeting room. Her one consolation was that Raulf hadn't eaten any of the victims. At least that part of his retransformation had worked.

She smiled at Varul, her new partner. He'd been delighted with the article she'd given him on how she'd subdued Raulf, the Bible Belt Killer. She also outlined proceedings now underway by the WWF to review the retransformation process in an effort to prevent any more tragedies.

She stood to greet the WA group. There were two new members. One had been retransformed by Varul, his first. The other had been Loveta's last contribution. Isabel couldn't think about that right now. There was work to be done. ■

Kaye George is a short story writer and novelist. She is the author of four (soon to be five) mystery series, the Imogene Duckworthy humorous Texas series, the Cressa Carraway musical mystery series (Barking Rain Press), the Neanderthal People of the Wind series (Untreed Reads), and writing as Janet Cantrell, the Fat Cat cozy series (Berkley Prime Crime).

She reviews for Suspense Magazine and other articles occasionally appear in newsletters and booklets. Look for her workshops on short story writing, mystery writing, and other topics.

Visit her webpages, KayeGeorge.com and JanetCantrell.com for more information. Or catch her at one of her blogs: TravelsWithKaye.blogspot.com and JanetCantrell.blogspot.com, her solo blogs. She also joins other writers at KillerCharacters.com and the Nose For Trouble Facebook group as Janet Cantrell.



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With the Haunting Tale of "The Winters"
LISA GABRIELE
Talks About Her Many Hats

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Vanessa Heins



Lisa Gabriele wears many hats. Not only is she an extremely popular novelist, she also works as a TV producer, director and journalist. Hailing from Toronto, Canada, Lisa has garnered many awards for the accomplishments she has under her belt, and with her newest release, "The Winters," it will be no surprise to see even more coming her way.

Using the classic "Rebecca" by Daphne du Maurier, Lisa threw herself into creating this beautifully crafted thriller that is truly haunting and has caused reviewers, peers and fans alike to state how it "defies expectations at every turn," causing it to join the list of absolute "must reads" for 2018.

Recently, Lisa was kind enough to take a break from her busy schedule to talk to *Suspense Magazine* about how "The Winters" first came together, her passion for writing under pseudonyms, at times, and what, exactly, is coming up next that will cause readers to sit on the edge of their seats until the tale comes to yet another jaw-dropping conclusion.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): You have such an enormous background in the creative/arts industry. Can you tell readers if there is one area you like the best (if you had to choose) between producing, directing, or writing?

And what about this choice makes it the most fun?

Lisa Gabriele (L.G.): *Luckily, I don't have to choose. But if I did, I'd always pick writing, whether it be novels or for television. Though both are collaborative in different ways, I like the part where, for a while, it's just you and a screen or a blank piece of paper. Directing and producing can be exciting, propulsive work, but I always see them as a nice break from the internal world of writing. A balance of all three has been what's kept me most happy over the years.*

S. MAG.: Your writing has appeared in several anthologies. Do anthologies appeal to you in a specific way?

L.G.: *It depends on the anthology. If it's a theme I'm quite interested in (i.e., John Hughes movies, love, sex, money, nostalgia) then, yes, it's fun to come up with my own personal angle on an editor's idea. To have a particular piece you've already written and published included in an anthology is doubly nice because you feel like you've won something.*

S. MAG.: Now, let us talk about your INCREDIBLE book, "The Winters." Can you speak a bit about how that project came to

mind? And perhaps give readers a “sneak peek” that they could not find on the back of the book cover, so to speak?

L.G.: *Thank you so much. It was the fall of 2016. I had ended a long TV contract, so I decided it was time to write another novel. Unfortunately it was the apex of the U.S. election and I was distracted by day-to-day news. I had to shutter cable and Twitter just to quiet the internal screaming. I began watching movies, old DVDs, including my favorite, Rebecca. Then I reread the book to remind myself that Rebecca didn't die accidentally, as she does in Hitchcock's movie. In Daphne du Maurier's book, Rebecca is killed for the crime of being a sexually rebellious woman. Rebecca suddenly seemed to me to be a woman ahead of her time, and what her husband Maxim de Winter did to her made me furious. (If you haven't read that book yet, you should!) I used my anger as inspiration to write my novel, recasting the characters to see how much women have changed, and how men, especially rich, powerful ones, have not. I often think of the Maya Angelou quote: “Write the book you want to read.” And I did just that. I wanted to read “The Winters,” so I wrote it.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, where do the ideas for your stories usually come from? Are you one of those writers where it just “pops” into mind and you must sit down and type immediately; or, do you have a specific time each day set aside to sit down and tackle the keyboard?

L.G.: *I sit and write every day, even if it's just 500 words. If you wait for inspiration, you'll never get the job done. For me the genesis of a book usually begins less with an idea than with answering a question, a ‘what if’ kind of question: ‘What if the sins of her mother cause a devout Catholic girl to lose her faith?’ This is a question I tried to answer in my first novel, “Tempting Faith Di Napoli.” ‘What if the sister you love commits the ultimate betrayal?’ This question underpinned my second one, “The Almost Archer Sisters.” For this current one, ‘What if a young woman today was plunked into similar circumstances as the original unnamed narrator of Rebecca? And what if, instead of a housekeeper, she faces off against an angry teenaged girl still obsessed with her dead mother?’ But it's not enough to ask the question. The characters have to want to answer it. That's how things come alive on the page. Your characters become as intrigued as the writer. The characters start making moves. You follow them around, tossing more obstacles and dilemmas in their path to see who they really are, what they're made of. After a while, you have a novel. This is what makes the process so enticing in the face of so much rejection and failure.*

S. MAG.: Is there a particular genre you have yet to tackle that is definitely on your future “must try” list?

L.G.: *I would love to write a big, sprawling, world-building series like Game of Thrones or the Harry Potter books, both of which I loved. One day. I have some ideas percolating, but they don't feel urgent yet. When they do, I'll sit.*

S. MAG.: Tell us a little about your area/home base in Toronto, Canada. Is this a locale that truly feeds the creative mind?

L.G.: *I've lived in Toronto for more than thirty years, in between work stints in Washington D.C., New York and Buenos Aires. But I always come back to Canada. I love it more than ever, and will never take it for granted again. I have a lovely view of the city, which is far more complex than people realize. Canada isn't perfect, but we do a lot of things right, and at least strive, I think, towards an ideal that feels inclusive and progressive. I hope that doesn't change. I will do my part to ensure it doesn't.*



*“If you wait for inspiration,
you'll never get the job
done.”*

S. MAG.: Ghost writing? Your pseudonym being unveiled? What were those moments like for you? And, if I may ask, is it somehow a bit easier writing under a “cloak,” so to speak? Less pressure?

L.G.: *Yes! I love ghost writing and writing under a pseudonym, two things I will continue to do, even while I write novels under my own name. There's so much freedom in writing without expectation of promotion, when the work is just the work and it speaks for itself. My least favorite part of the writing process is the public part, though I am excited about putting “The Winters” out there. There's so much to talk about. And I can't wait to meet other fans of Rebecca and share notes.*

S. MAG.: Is there one writer you wish to meet? As well as, perhaps, one that may have (has) been a muse to you when it came to your writing?

L.G.: *Naturally, I love Daphne du Maurier and have read most of her work. Beyond “Rebecca,” I love her short stories, “Don't Look Now,” in particular. (Keen readers will spot my little reference to that story.) She was terribly shy but I would have liked to have met her. But the one writer who I always think about when I'm planning out a new book is Joy Fielding. She's been writing taut, excellent thrillers for as long as I can remember, but she is also such a kind, generous person, giving lie to the notion that successful writers are jerks. While writing this book I read a lot of my favorite modern thriller/crime writers, like Megan Abbott and Gillian Flynn. And I just started reading Patricia Highsmith. Where has she been all my life?*

S. MAG.: What is your biggest fear that you wish to avoid when it comes to the writing landscape? On the opposite end of the spectrum: What is your biggest success that you would love to have happen again and again?

L.G.: *I think I'm like a lot of writers who just want their work to reach its readers. No one wants to labor over a book, a work of passion, sometimes for years, only to have it gently slide into obscurity. That's happened to me along with unimaginable success. The latter is preferable. It's too soon to tell how “The Winters” will do, but I only hope that it finds its readers. That's all any writer can hope for.*

S. MAG.: Please tell readers what is up next and what they should be on the lookout for?

L.G.: *I'm working on a new novel that's about a woman in recovery who is trying to grapple with her dark past, while also helping a much younger woman who might not be who she says she is. It deals with murky memories and revenge... something like that. It's very embryonic but I'm already quite excited about it.*

And her fans are equally excited to read it. With “The Winters,” Lisa Gabriele has not only (once again) hit a high note in the world of suspense, but she has also hit it out of the park. The stories, the characters...it is easy to state that if the amazing Daphne du Maurier was still with us, she would be among the millions who give a standing ovation to this incredible work.

To keep up with her upcoming events, newest releases and projects, check out www.lisagabriele.com. ■

THE WINTERS

By Lisa Gabriele

The winter months are fierce in New England, which is exactly how you describe the Winters' family who live among the wealthy of Long Island.

A young lady—an orphan who lost her mother to cancer and her father to a heart attack—works for a belligerent woman named Lauren who rents boats to tourists when they visit the Caribbean. One day, Max Winters enters and a whirlwind romance begins. He's a rich state senator who lost his wife, Rebekah, in an accident two years ago and is struggling to raise a defiant, spoiled daughter named Dani.

She falls hard for Max and finds herself (in less than a month) staring up at the huge Winters' estate: Asherley. This is the most amazing location this poor woman has ever seen, and she finds it hard to believe that she will soon be the new Mrs. Winters and Asherley will be her home.

This girl believes she's not the “glamorous type” men like Max clamor for. Looking at pictures of Rebekah everywhere, attempting to become friends with Dani who wants no part of her and only speaks about her dead mother, and creeping up to the turret that used to be the bedroom Max and Rebekah shared, she finds herself becoming more obsessed and jealous of the first wife, even though she longer exists.

As the wedding draws closer, she uncovers secrets about the night of the accident that took Rebekah's life. She begins to unravel the mystery of why Max doesn't want the greenhouse at Asherley to ever be opened again. And...she finds out things about her future stepdaughter that proves Dani is not at fault for *all* the evil within Asherley's walls.

There's so much to say about this plot, these characters, and the twists readers will not see coming, but all that *can* be said is: “Read. This.” The author is superb and the chill you get will take a long time to fade. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of Suspense Magazine ■

THE FIGHT CORPS

By J.B. Toner

AS THE CHUNKS OF TAYLOR'S BRAINSTEM SLID PINKLY DOWN THE WALL AND plopped to the floor behind his chair, I stuck the burning cigarette back in his bullet-catcher and put a glass of bourbon in his slowly cooling hand. No reason not to be civil.

"I trust I now have your full attention." I resumed my seat. "As I was saying, Mr. Taylor, fight choreography is a cutthroat industry. Or hey, let's coin a phrase: How about 'a shootface industry'? Huh?" He didn't seem amused. "Well. Anyways." I finished my drink. "I'm glad we had a chance to clear the air. Good luck in your next endeavor."

Then I doused the table and the body, and tossed in my cigarette: a solid *whump* of flames. 'Nother day at the office.

My name's Domingo Jack, and I work in the toughest city in the world. Not Detroit, not Sarajevo: Hollywood. If you knew half the shit that goes on behind the scenes.

A beautiful sunny day, just for a change of pace. God, I miss Donegal sometimes. (Yes, I'm from Ireland. My mama's Mexican. Just—don't ask.) I sped through the lush, palm-lined avenues built on blood and bone, past fifty-dollar coffee shops teeming with neglected Fausts desperate to sell their souls, till I came to the old decrepit warehouse where we ply our trade.

As I walked in, Sing Ka was throwing a spectacular flying back spin kick at Joey Damascus. Joey ducked, and Ka's heel damn near shattered my jaw. 'Sokay, though. You know how you're a kid and you dream of one day working in a place where you can walk into a secret room full of people sparring and shooting flamethrowers? Welcome to the Fight Corps.

"Goodness!" Ka exclaimed. "Dreadfully sorry, old boy."

"No worries."

Ka was five and a half feet of Thai fighter, born to jump off elephants and kick his enemies in the throat. He also boxed at Oxford and held a Master's in Aristotelian Philosophy. Damascus was six and a half feet of bad motherfucker from Cleveland. He didn't have any advanced degrees, but he once broke a man's knees with the man's own forehead.

"How'd it go with Taylor?" he asked.

"His company has withdrawn its bid for the *Unmentionables* contract."

"Awright! Now we just gotta edge out the Seven Deadly Finns."

Ka grimaced. "Easily said, I fear."

"Sall right, I got a plan. Hey Ma! Quit screwin' around with that flamethrower and gimme a hand, wouldja?"

Ma Jack came pacing toward me. "Taylor?"

"Taken care of, Ma."

"Finns?"

"Got a plan."

She nodded. "Good plan?"

"Better'n no plan."

"Interview is today, 3 o'clock."

"...Say *what*?"

Damascus nodded. "Call came in about an hour ago."

"But we already scheduled. We were supposed to have three more days!"

"I gather Mr. Fenton likes to test his prospective servitors for their ability to improvise," said Ka.

"Dude, servitors? Really?"

He shrugged.

"Well, this tanks my plan. I was working on a nice unobtrusive electrical fire, but I don't think we can pull that off in the next two hours. Not subtle-like, anyhow."

"New plan?" said Ma.

I sighed. "Gonna have to play it straight for the time being. Lucky for me, we are in fact the best fight choreographers in the business."

"Damn straight," said Damascus.

"Yo, Waits!" I called.

"Whattaya want?"

"Would you just come over here and take part in the confabulation, please?"

Tom Waits wandered over, grumbling in his scraggly beard. He wasn't Tom Waits the singer, obviously, but I've always suspected him of harboring a pseudonym. What I can tell you for sure is that he was the best and most clinically insane stunt driver in Hollywood.

"I wanna show up to the interview in style," I said. "Is the Ferrari working yet?"

"I mean, it's got legs." He produced an acetylene torch and lit a cigarette. "Somethin' wrong with the brakes, but I can't run a test on 'em until I fuckin' feel like it."

"Well, don't stress yourself out. Where's the keys?"

I CAME GLIDING INTO FENTON'S STUDIO PARKING LOT AT 2:56, CAREFULLY downshifting and plucking the e-brake like the lyre of a Neapolitan bard. As I entered the lobby and nodded to the secretary, I saw my old foe Tal Vipuri standing in the corner. Before I could catch myself, my teeth and my sidearm came out. Vipuri had the same reaction, sadly a tiny bit quicker, and crescent-kicked the nine-millimeter out of my hand. Then we were grappling on the plush mauve carpet—him struggling to lock in a rear naked choke, me battling to reach the .22 in my ankle holster.

"Gentlemen!"

We paused. Roger Fenton, executive producer, was standing in the door of his office with a stern but unsurprised expression.

"This is not how I settle contract negotiations. Please, come in. Both of you."

"Sir," I said as we eased into the peacock-themed upholstery and accepted Glenfiddich from hovering personal aides, "your representative promised me a one-on-one interview. On Friday."

"Yes, and also is same for me as well." Vipuri and his six fire-croched brothers ran the second-best fight corps in town. Bastards.

"I'm aware of that," Fenton said. He was a tall thin white guy in Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a tasteful grey tie. I disliked him instantly. "But I like to keep my colleagues on their toes. For example, I believe I had discussed the possibility of an exclusive contract with both of you. However, I'm now leaning toward hiring both of your agencies to work together."

Silence.

"You see—"

"Fenton, this is unacceptable!"

"Not is acceptable at all!"

He pounded his tiny fist on his big oak desk like a man used to having people pretend to be afraid of him. "I'll decide what's acceptable! Now, compose yourselves." He straightened his ludicrous tie. "*The Unmentionables* is to be a film about conflict. Tension. Dynamism! What we need is a sense of that tension, pulsing, *throbbing*, beneath the surface of every

action sequence. And believe me, gentlemen, every scene in this movie will be an action sequence.”

“So you want to smash together two feuding choreographers and hope the resulting shit-storm will feel like authentic drama?”

“Precisely! Now, either one of you can walk away right now. But unless *you*, Mr. Jack, or *you*, Mr. Vipuri, are prepared to choose pride over the biggest martial arts extravaganza of the year—nay, the *decade*—then you’ll just both have to sign right here and now.” He pushed two contracts across his desk.

Vipuri and I looked at each other. A stray gnat flew between us and fell down stunned. “I am kill you,” he whispered.

“Likewise, you red-haired fuck.”

We both signed.

DAY 24. IDIOT FINN WANTED TO BLOCK A SCENE IN WHICH CHASE HARDROCK, hunky male lead, unloaded twin .45s into a ski-masked goon and then used the empty pistols as melee weapons against faceless goon #2.

“Is Filipino Eskrima,” he insisted. “Hold gun by barrel, use like sticks. Very, very cool!”

“I’m not arguing with the Eskrima part,” I snarled. “But you can’t use two-gun mojo anymore, this ain’t the ’90s. John Woo’s not the gold standard nowadays. Look at Keanu in *John Wick*, he never once fires two weapons at the same time. Because he’s a real gunman, not some ballet dancer from the Laplands.”

Niles Rupert, the director, heaved another deep sigh. “Guys, if we could just—”

“Could have knife.”

“I mean, yeah, I guess. He could use Espada y Daga.” (Sword and dagger, kind of a spin-off style from Eskrima.)

“Is good. He block overhand strike with gun-butt—”

“And then he draws and cuts across the midsection—”

“Draw, cut, same movement.”

“Like *batto-jutsu*.”

“Yes, like. Very cool!”

Rupert scratched his head. “Did you guys just agree on something?”

“Not on purpose.”

DAY 39. DUMBASS FINN WANTED ADRIANA KINGSFORD, FETCHING astrophysicist, to axe-kick a guy with her stiletto heels.

“Leave cut straight down face. Like Bond villain, is iconic.”

“Why in the hell would an astrophysicist be wearing stilettos?”

“Is stylish lady! Can be smart and sexy, same time.”

“See, this is your problem, you don’t see character. Look at the blocking of the scene. She’s too smart to risk brawling with a guy when her car’s right over there with the engine running.”

Rupert ruminated. “What if she—”

“Is pretty woman in man’s job. Has chip on shoulder.”

“S’pose that could explain why she practices MMA in the first place.”

“There, you see? Can be good fight and also ‘develop character’ to satisfy dweeby little Irish Mexican college English major.”

“I’m develop my fist up your ass.”

“Is no sense. Would poop all on hand.”

“That’s a really good plot point about Adriana,” said Rupert. “You guys are knockin’ this outta the park.”

“I’m knock his tiny sunburned dick outta the park.”

“What park? Is movie studio!”

DAY 60. STUPID SCANDINAVIAN HAD A HALFWAY DECENT IDEA FOR ONCE IN his stupid Scandinavian life. The climactic fight sequence started in a C-130 cargo plane, continued through freefall as Chase Hardrock and Darkson Kilmore tackled each other through the bay doors at 30,000 feet, and concluded with a

Harrier jet swooping down to match Hardrock's velocity and catch him just before impact, leaving Kilmore to splatter himself all over the Mongolian countryside. Pretty standard stuff. But as Vipuri pointed out, no one in cinema had yet dealt with the problem of practicing Brazilian Jiu-jitsu in freefall.

"There was that zero-gravity hallway fight in *Inception*," I pointed out.

"Yes, yes, but still was walls and ceilings for them to use as leverage. BJJ, you need ground, need things to push off. Need base. Grapple in midair, is whole new movie thing."

"Hot diggity damn, you Finnish fuck, I think you're onto something. Rupert, we need one a' them, whattayacallit, Vomit Comet planes they use to train astronauts. Stat! We got research to do."

"Well, uh—that sounds a little pricey—"

"Call Fenton then, he'll greenlight it. Tell him Vipuri and I just agreed on something. When has that ever happened? This is the make-or-break scene for this movie, we gotta pull out all the stops."

"Well, er—yes, I suppose." He pulled out his phone. Haggled with a secretary. Bantered with a personal aide. Finally: "Mr. Fenton! Niles. We've, ah—got a request."

Then things got dark.

Rupert explained about the grappling and the zero-G training our stuntmen would need. Explained about the uncharacteristic accord between myself and Vipuri. A pause ensued. Then a flurry of, "What? No! Sir, we can't—that's simply not—but Mr. Fenton—I—yes. Yes, sir. I understand." He hung up and raised his eyes to ours like a man under sentence. "He greenlit the plane."

"Okay? That sounds like good news."

"And he's—bringing in a third choreographer."

"Is do what?"

"He said if you two are on the same page now, then we need more dynamic tension behind the scenes."

"Are you insane? I don't give a rat's plague-bearing fuck-hole about dynamic tension!"

"Fellas!" He raised his hands. "Fellas, I feel the same way, but there's nothing to be done. He's already put up the cash, and he's got this crazy contract that basically gives him unlimited power."

A beat went by.

"Already put up the cash, you say."

"...I do things. Western medicine never understand cause of death."

"Oh God." Rupert clapped his hands over his ears. "Oh God, oh God, I can't hear this. I didn't hear anything." He scuttled away.

"You busy tonight?" I asked.

"Busy with brutal murder, yes."

"That's funny, me too."

GETTING PAST THE SECURITY GATE WASN'T A PROBLEM. YOU LEARN THINGS.

Fenton was sitting by his pool, sipping Scotch beneath the starlit smog.

Now I've got to tell you, folks, before that night I was highly skeptical of Dim-Mak, the art of "death touch" from the grim shadows of the Orient. Not anymore.

As we stepped into the dim Citronella glow, Vipuri went from a leopard's stalk to a cheetah's sprint. Fenton jumped to his feet, shouting, "What do you think—" and Vipuri hit him three times, so quick I couldn't even spot the targets. There was a loud flat *crack*, and Vipuri took a step backwards. Turned towards me with smoke rising from his solar plexus. Wobbled, and fell into the pool.

Fenton advanced, aiming the derringer he must've had tucked in the sleeve of his pink silk robe. Paranoid sumbitch.

"So," he snarled. "Thought you could take my money and cut me out. Just like everyone else."

I eased back the hammer of my Glock. "Now hold on, it's not what you think."

"Brilliant idea 'bout the plane. Brilliant! Too bad you won't be—" He twitched. "Won't be around to—" Blood started running from his nose. "To—" The gun clattered on the tiles. Fenton wandered in my direction, scratched idly at his head, and lay down. Exhaled.

Hell of a turn to things. I was just starting to like that red-haired pain in the ass. But, what can you do? I took a seat in Fenton's deck chair and sampled his Scotch.

Damn good stuff. ■

Tail of the Dragon

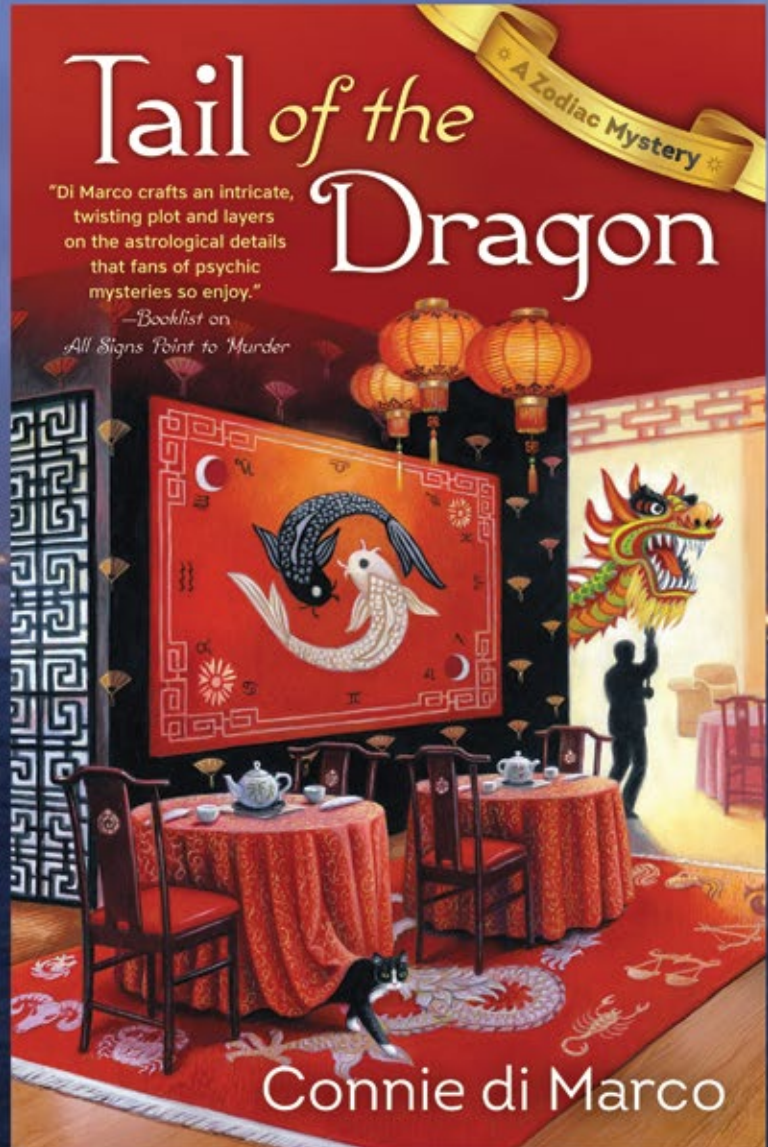
A Zodiac Mystery

by Connie di Marco

"A great read is in the stars! With the Zodiac Mysteries, Connie di Marco gives us a bright and interesting heroine and a mystery with plenty of twists and turns. Lots of action and well-written suspense equal good fortune for readers."
— Casey Daniels, author of
The Pepper Martin Mysteries

"di Marco crafts an intricate, twisting plot and layers on the astrological details that fans of psychic mysteries so enjoy."
— Booklist

ISBN: 978-0-7387-5106-1
Paperback Original
Midnight Ink
Available through your favorite bookseller.
Request a copy through your local public library!



San Francisco astrologer Julia Bonatti never thought murder would be part of her practice, but when her former boss and current client asks for help she agrees to go undercover at his law firm.

Three people have received death threats and the only common denominator between them is a case long settled — the infamous Bank of San Francisco fire. Julia's astrological expertise provides clues but no one wants to listen.

Before she can solve the mystery, two people are dead and her own life is in danger. Julia must unmask the killer before he, or she, takes another life.

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

SHATTERED AT SEA

By Cheryl Hollon

This is the fifth book in the *Webb's Glass Shop Mystery* series and "star," Savannah Webb, takes this time to switch gears and bring her skills and talents out on the water.

There are a couple of reasons why Savannah, glass shop owner, decides to accept the offer to perform on a Mediterranean cruise that will give her the chance to show the passengers her expertise in the field of glass blowing. Not only will she get her name out and perhaps bring more advertising to her own shop, but she'll also be able to use the time to catch up with her boyfriend's family.

Edward is the man she loves and his cousin, Ian, will be hopping aboard to share time with both of them. The immediate future looks sunny, but even Savannah can't be surprised when darkness eventually finds her at sea.

Ian vanishes at the very beginning of the cruise, which frightens and confuses both she and Edward. When it comes to the law aboard ship, they believe at first that Ian has taken his own life, but as the story progresses and viewpoints change, Edward becomes the prime suspect in what is now believed to be a case of murder.

Savannah not only is concentrating on her work for the cruise, but she is also having issues with other glass artists who are there to show their skills. But nothing can stop her from saving Edward's life, proving what really happened to Ian and bringing the villain to light.

These books are great mysteries that keep the reader involved, but the added extra of being able to learn more about the fine art of glassblowing makes it all the more interesting.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



#FASHION VICTIM

By Amina Akhtar

This author is writing straight from the gut... but, hopefully, not from real-life considering her background. You see, Amina Akhtar is a former fashion writer and editor, and this extremely dark tale of the fashion world is her very first novel.

Readers are introduced to fashion editor, Anya St. Clair. She is one of those "it" women who have everything going for them. Her social media is awesome and introduces the world to this literal fashion plate on a daily basis. The clothes filling her closets would have every woman drooling, and she deserves it. In a way... You see, Anya did not get all this without stepping on others in order to reach various rungs on the fashion ladder. And she has no remorse when it comes to how she attained it all.

Sarah Taft, on the other hand, was born to be the best. A fashion icon, Sarah is beautiful, beyond wealthy, and has style: three gifts that make her Anya's obsession. Anya wants nothing more than for Sarah to be her "best friend," and has to deal with these feelings every day in the workplace where Sarah sits just one desk away.

One day, however, Anya goes a little bazooka when it is Sarah who becomes her one and only competition for a killer promotion. In order to beat Sarah to the proverbial finish line, Anya will have to forget friendship and find a way to eliminate the competition instead. But when Anya talks about elimination... she's *dead* serious.

As I read this book, the characters reminded me a great deal of the dark movie, *Heathers*. Each twist and turn, watching one girl try to leave others ("popular" others) in the dust with some pretty diabolical planning, was a whole lot of sick fun. As stated in the beginning, all I can hope is that the author was not speaking from reality... and that another book will be written very, very soon.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE LIBRARIANS AND THE POT OF GOLD

By Greg Cox

The television series, *The Librarians*, lasted four years on the TNT cable network and, personally, was one of my favorite shows. I miss it, and thankfully Greg Cox gets one last opportunity to tell a story featuring this wonderful cast of characters. The series mixed myths and legends with magic and intrigue, and was always a constant surprise in terms of storylines.

Cox takes a segment from Ireland in the 5th Century and a diabolical organization called the Serpent Brotherhood, combining them into an entertaining reading experience. Cox even throws in the Phantom of the Opera for added fun.

Those who enjoyed the TV show must pick up this book, yet those unfamiliar with the franchise will find enjoyment as well. While no new episodes are planned, it is nice to have this book serve as the equivalent of a two-hour adventure. One can only hope that Cox has more stories featuring these librarians in the pipeline. Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, a professional librarian, book reviewer, and panel master and the author of several books, the most recent being the YA mystery "The Fourth Lion" (with Kevin Lauderdale) for *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE BLUE KINGFISHER

By Erica Wright

This is the third book featuring the sassy P.I. by the name of Kat Stone who first appeared in "The Red Chameleon." Readers fell for Stone quickly, which is not a shock, considering the smart mouth, quick wit and endless wigs she owns. But this time around, this well-intentioned P.I. may have to shed her disguises, which could lead her into far more harrowing positions.

Kat is already spending life looking over her shoulder. With a past of violence that she's tried to get away from, Kat knows that the time she has left on this planet may just come to an end quicker than she wants. But being a P.I. is something she's extremely good at, and she soon finds herself buried in a case that may bring her face to face with yet another cold-blooded killer.

Walking in Fort Washington Park, Kat stumbles across a familiar corpse. It is the body of her maintenance man that works in the building where she resides. It seems that the man took a leap off the bridge and ended up smashing down on top of a lighthouse. Although the police dismiss it quickly as just another suicide, Kat smells something fishy and begins to dig deeper. She soon finds out that the man was locating employment for immigrants, which can turn into a dangerous sideline if you step on any of the wrong toes.

With her investigation in high gear, the wigs come back out as Kat goes undercover, working at a deep-sea fishing company in an attempt to find out who murdered the maintenance man.

Wright offers up a cast of unforgettable characters (including jellyfish, of all things), and creates a page turner. The clock is truly ticking as readers "run" along beside Kat to see if she can solve this investigation... or if her own past will resurface to take her down before justice can be done.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



OUR HOUSE

By Louise Candlish

There have been many books written about husbands versus wives. But *this* one goes beyond all of that and gives readers a real jolt of excitement, fear, and will cause mouths to hang open in shock when they read the final outcome.

Fiona Lawson is telling her story on a site that allows “victims” of crimes to share what has happened to them. She begins by speaking about the day she came home early from a trip to find another couple moving into her house. They are not criminals. They bought the house, fair and square, even though Fiona had no idea the house was even for sale.

Enter, Bram Lawson, who is far away from the UK where all of this is taking place. He is writing a letter—stating that it is a suicide note—and will explain throughout the book why, exactly, he and Fiona are separated yet still live together in this house; a crime he committed while sitting behind a steering wheel, when he was actually banned from driving; an affair that screwed up his entire life... and so much more. (This is one of those where I want to tell all, but, alas, cannot.)

One of the grandest character’s in this story is a house. A gorgeous house that is the one Fiona Lawson believed she would pass on to the next generation. A house that’s her savior, at times, and the one thing that causes her anguish, at other times. There are many lessons this incredible author taps: Be careful what you wish for; money doesn’t buy happiness; you don’t know what you got until it’s gone—they’re all there. But the way this author writes, the format of the book that allows both sides of the story to be given from two *completely* different points of view will cause you to stay up late and read every *single* word. This is one that suspense readers have been dying for!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE DAUGHTER OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

By Leonard Goldberg

Yes, readers, a new game is afoot! At 221b Baker Street, Dr. Watson resides. Older now, he misses his friend and partner, Holmes, who recently passed away while tending bees on Sussex Downs.

This is a story told by Watson’s son, Dr. John Watson, Jr., M.D., who happens to be an assistant professor in the pathology department at Saint Bartholomew’s in London. He comes to visit Dad, and not long after a woman arrives named Mary Harrelston. She needs Watson’s help to clear her family name by proving her brother did not commit suicide. Her brother was a rabid gambler and had just lost a hand to a close friend he was already in debt to, but she says he would never have taken his own life. There were two witnesses to what she believes was his murder, yet Scotland Yard has deemed it a suicide and closed the case.

Watson wants to guide her, of course, but he’s not willing to actually investigate without Holmes. *Until* he is told the names of the witnesses. When he hears that one is a young boy whose mother is Joanna Blalock, both Watson’s rush off to interview her.

This beautiful woman who is now a widower raising her son alone, has an outstanding mind. Returning to the crime scene with the doctors, Joanna becomes the “star” of this show. Her talent for deduction is outstanding, and how they solve this crime is a whole lot of fun to watch.

The author has done a superb job with Blalock. She certainly sounds a great deal like a character we all love. And it was a thrill to see Watson and his son, as well as Miss Hudson, the housekeeper, and the dim-witted Lestrade once again. The story is well thought out and the mystery keeps you reading. But, yes... there will be times you do miss the mighty Sherlock. After all, he *is* one of a kind.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



STRANGER DIARIES

By Elly Griffiths



In a break from her *Ruth Galloway* series, Griffiths gives us a standalone that is both cerebral and down-to-earth at the same time. Her characters—the aloof English literature teacher, her modern teenage daughter, and the local female police officer—all address the same scenario from their own female point of view, as in Doug Liman’s 1999 hit, “Go!”

The writer, R.M. Holland, author of the Gothic horror story “The Stranger,” lived in a building that is part of the school campus, and his office has been preserved as a sort of museum. The teacher, Clare Cassidy, specializes in Holland’s work; however, when bodies start to appear with quotes from “The Stranger,” her personal life and her work are melded in a way she could never have imagined. As a person of interest in the case, the police are concerned that she unwittingly holds the keys to clues to break the case.

Clare finds written notes in her personal diary that appear to be from the killer. In an attempt to keep Clare and her daughter safe, the police help get them out of town only for their plans to have been anticipated by the killer.

I was truly spooked over this book. It had me crawling in my own skin trying to figure out the villain (and I did not; it was a complete surprise). This Brit import is ready to take the American reader by storm.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of “Kettle of Vultures” ■

CHERRY PIES & DEADLY LIES

By Darci Hannah

In this first book of a brand new series, readers meet Whitney Bloom. A girl from a small town in Wisconsin by the name of Cherry Cove, she now lives in Chicago and supports herself by running an online bakery called Bloom ‘n’ Cherries.

When Whitney first left the lakeside village of her youth, she’d thrust herself into the world of advertising. But when she created a horrible Super Bowl ad that cost the firm a great deal of money, and was fired on the spot, it was her friend, Giff, who talked her into setting up a mobile version of her company. Her plan was to park right outside her old office and wait for her boss to come running for a warm, tasty treat and then beg him to give her job back; a plan that did not work.

Now, she has an even bigger problem on her hands. A ringing phone with her emotional mother on the other end of the line, draws Whitney back home. It seems that the man who ran her family’s cherry orchard has been found murdered and all evidence leads to Whitney’s own father being the murderer. When she races home and finds herself knee-deep in the annual Cherry Blossom Festival, she also finds herself face-to-face with someone she absolutely despised in high school. His name is Jack MacLaren and, unfortunately, has grown up to become the town’s only police officer. Not only must Whitney set aside her new goal of “baking her way into the hearts of all Chicago citizens” for a while, she also has to solve a crime before her childhood nemesis locks her father up and throws away the key.

This is great fun and extremely well-written. The crime, the characters—everything comes together as this author (one who has written historical fiction thus far) delves into the world of cozy mysteries and produces an extremely “tasty” story you will definitely devour in one sitting.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





FOUR FUNERALS AND MAYBE A WEDDING

By Rhys Bowen

There are many who await that next delightful *Royal Spyness Mystery*, and now that it has arrived, no one will be disappointed. This is not only a new book in the series, mind you, but it is a huge step for the lead, Lady Georgiana Rannoch, better known to us all as Georgie.

Georgie's life is a bit chaotic lately. After all, the days are counting down to that huge event, her wedding day. She is not only going to become the wife of handsome, Darcy O'Mara, but Georgie also has to plan a wedding that has become huge. The queen is coming. Readers will remember that Georgie withdrew her name from the royal line of succession and thought she would have a very simple ceremony when it came to say, "I do." But now she's looking at walking down the aisle before queen and country, and she still has to find a house for her and her husband to move into.

With Darcy away, Georgie's mother and granddad are there to help, but it's soon seen that house hunting is not for her. The gods intervene (well...godfather, anyway) and he gifts Georgie and Darcy his completely staffed estate. Not only will Georgie be a wife now, but she will also be the Mistress of Eynsleigh. Turns out, the staff is made up of people who seem to know little about their jobs, the grounds are a complete mess and are certainly not something the queen should see, and a strange gas leak in her bedroom causes Georgie and others to believe that someone is trying to take the mistress out before she sets up house.

The characters are charming, the mystery is captivating, and the memorable book titles just keep on coming from Bowen. Georgie is still one of the best of the best in fiction and, hopefully, she will continue for years to come.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

GLITTER BOMB

By Laura Childs

It's par-tee time in New Orleans. That's right—Mardi Gras! Carmella Bertrand, owner of Memory Mine, a scrapbooking shop in the Big Easy, and her bestie Ava, are front and center for one of the first parades. They can't wait for the crazy fun that's synonymous with Mardi Gras to begin. Carmella's not too thrilled to see her ex-husband, Shamus, in a prominent position on the King Neptune float, but she's determined not to let his appearance spoil her evening. The revelry turns to disaster in an instant when the float Shamus is on explodes right in front of the two women.

When the smoke clears, the CEO of a local hedge fund, Hughes Wilder, is found dead. As the investigation begins, the first thing the police discover is that a lot of prominent New Orleans folks have lost a ton of money in Wilder's hedge fund. Tops on the list is Shamus, who lost millions of dollars which he "borrowed" from the Crescent City Bank his family owns. He immediately becomes a prime suspect in the murder and turns to Carmella to help him. Carmella's in a tricky position, because her current fiancée, Edgar Babcock, is the detective in charge of investigating the murder and has told Carmella in no uncertain terms not to get involved.

Carmella resists Shamus's plea for help as long as she can. But eventually her curiosity gets the best of her and she starts asking questions, hoping her sweetie, Detective Babcock, doesn't find out what she's up to.

The more Carmella, with the able assistance of femme fatale Ava, noses around, the more suspects she comes up with who had a desire to murder Wilder, including Wilder's non-grieving widow, who was having a hot and heavy affair that she made no effort to hide.

"Glitter Bomb" is another satisfying entry in Laura Child's long-running *New Orleans Scrapbooking Mystery* series. An explosive and fun visit to New Orleans that doesn't disappoint.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



DESERT

By Jack Dolan

With one eye on saving the hostage locked in Egypt's Western Desert and the other eye focused on apparent gun dealers that have a run in with the alleged terrorists, Roan Mercer and his band of assassins for hire, soon find themselves caught up in an archeological dig with dire consequences.

A British archeologist is leading a dig to find the ancient Persian warlord Memnon, whose army was swallowed by a haboob centuries ago; instead, what's discovered are the remnants of an old English ambulance dating back to World War II—and all in the middle of the gunfight Mercer is caught up in.

When it is discovered that the bodies found with the ambulance were of German descent, and research into the lost vehicle shows the cargo was mustard gas, which is now missing, it is left up to Mercer and his soldiers to discover the target that the terrorists are ready to attack and to thwart it before thousands of innocent lives are snuffed out.

In an exciting rampage on a mission that could be compared with one that Kurt Austin from Clive Cussler's *NUMA Files* would be proud to undertake, Dolan's first novel is a great stand and deliver thriller that leaves no stone, or dune, unturned. Mercer's next adventure will be one to tag along on.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■

SHADOW DANCING

By Julie Mulhern

This is number seven in *The Country Club Murders* and, like the ones that came before, is fast, fun, and fresh.

Ellison Russell, a woman who seems to stumble over a dead body constantly, is sitting with her friend Libba at a psychic's home. Not wanting to be there, Ellison isn't happy when the odd ball with the crystal ball talks about her dead husband Harry, and how *he* wants Ellison to know that she'll be coming across a new dead body very soon.

Leaving Madame Reyna's behind, Ellison hops in her car to go home only to "thump" into a pedestrian who suddenly walks out into the road. It is a fifteen-year-old girl who, thankfully, has not been hurt but also does not want Ellison to call the cops, an ambulance, or even take her home. What she does do is give the kid her coat because it's cold and provides her with her name and address. When a police officer shows up on Ellison's doorstep the very next day and tells her that her coat was found wrapped around a dead girl, it seems Harry's words have come true.

Ellison cares deeply for Detective Anarchy Jones but has broken up with him. But with this dead body (and more coming) she and Anarchy are thrust back into each other's lives. Add to this a stripper by the name of Starry; a next door neighbor who wants to strangle Ellison for letting her dog destroy her home; and Ellison's own mother who has found a dead body in her hall closet and doesn't know who it is or where they came from, and you have a mystery that will have your heart pounding and bring a smile to your face throughout.

These characters are a whole lot of fun to be around; the banter, the wit, that wonderful dog—they all come together to make this one of the most enjoyable series being written today.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

GOLD DUST

By Reavis Z. Wortham

This is the 7th installment in the *Red River Mystery* series, and the most frightening thing about it is that although it's classified as fiction, parts of the story are quite true.

Readers are taken to a very rural part of the Lone Star State. Think wide open spaces and a whole lot of dust. It is the very end of the 1960s, an era that certainly had a bunch of things occur, both good and bad. Here, in a place called Cedar Springs, two men stand out like sore thumbs against the dusty backdrop. Walking around in their government-looking suits and dark sunglasses, their story is that they have come to this area in order to test weather patterns. What they're really doing here, however, is far different. They have a delivery termed "Gold Dust" and their appearance in town comes hand-in-hand with a local discovery.

Teenager, Pepper Parker, has found an ancient treasure of sorts; a gold coin that her dad just happens to have. Problem is, Pepper has what all teens have—the ability and need to laugh at adults. But when she takes what should be a silly trick too far, she brings on a gold rush in Texas where greed is the name of the game.

Cedar Springs must deal with everything from cattle rustlers to a biological agent that the CIA said was safe, but were wrong, and a real fight between the government and those who actually know what the term "gunslinger" means.

Murder is everywhere and readers will never forget this *Poisoned Gift* once they see it in action. Wortham has created yet another *Red River Mystery* that hits home in a big way, making it all the more terrifying.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

MARDI GRAS MURDER

By Ellen Byron

It's Mardi Gras time and the planning for another fun celebration is in full gear in the bayou town of Pelican, Louisiana. Pelican residents are buzzing about the addition of a new event this year—a controversial exhibit about the little-known Orphan Train, which transported children from the North to Louisiana to be adopted by local families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then a flood hits, and the body of a stranger is found behind the Crozet B & B. The police determine that the man was murdered. Fearing the effects of such a grisly discovery at her family's business, Maggie Crozet is determined to find out who the stranger is and why he met such a violent end.

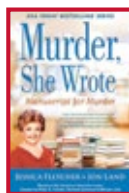
Life is busy for Maggie. Her primary gig is working as a docent at a local plantation. Plus, she's agreed to step in to replace her grandmother as a judge for the annual Miss Pelican Mardi Gras Gumbo contest, which locals take very seriously. Head judge is St. Pierre Parish Historical Society president Gerard Damboise.

At her first meeting of the judges, Maggie sees why her grandmother has described Gerard as a "pompous old poop." He insists on observing the archaic rules to the letter. Furthermore, he decrees that the Orphan Train exhibit is inappropriate and has canceled it.

Faster than anyone can cook up a pot of gumbo, Maggie finds Gerard dying in his car. With his last breath, Maggie hears him say, "Lies. Secrets." As she begins to delve into the history of her town, attempting to solve the murders, she discovers that the mysterious stranger was one of the children on an orphan train. And she realizes that there must be a link between his death, Gerard's, and the past. The trick is to find it before she becomes murder victim number three.

This is a welcome addition to Byron's *Cajun Country* series, with its fast-moving plot and likeable characters. Lots of fun and delicious recipes, too!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



MANUSCRIPT FOR MURDER

By Jessica Fletcher and Jon Land

"Manuscript for Murder" is the next installment in the *Murder, She Wrote* book series. Veteran thriller writer, Jon Land, is back as the author, hoping to repeat the success he had with the last title, "A Date with Murder."

In "Manuscript for Murder," things get personal for Jessica when her long-time publisher, Lane Barfield, turns up dead. The one thing Jessica didn't see coming was an FBI investigation into Lane's business finances. But, Jessica is convinced that the real answer to the mystery of her death lies in a secret manuscript that Lane was set to publish. A manuscript that has now vanished. Jessica believes this book is much more than just a simple bestseller and her search leads her on a trail that puts her very own life in danger.

Land takes the action and suspense to a new level, one not found in previous installments in the series. While I thought it was going to be a difficult task for Land to equal the success he had in "A Date With Murder," he not only did that, readers may agree he surpassed it. This is more than just another whodunit, it's an action book that brings Jessica's character into a whole new light.

Reviewed by John Raab ■

DROP DEAD ORNAMENTS

By Lois Winston

Things might finally be looking up for Jersey girl Anastasia Pollack. Deeply in debt thanks to her deceased louse of a spouse, Anastasia decided to rent out the apartment over her garage for extra income, and ended up with the current love of her life—the hunky and mysterious Zack Barnes (he cooks, too!)—as her tenant. Her other tenants aren't so loveable—her Communist mother-in-law, Lucille, and Lucille's "Devil Dog," Mephisto. Lucille hated Anastasia even before the ink was dry on the marriage license, so life with her in residence is hell on earth for the rest of the family.

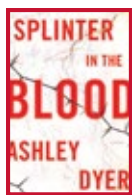
Anastasia and Zack arrive home from the hospital after her encounter with a crazed killer to find that Lucille is gone. She stormed out of the house earlier that evening, angry because her teenage grandson, Alex, had invited some friends over for a pizza party, including his cute new girlfriend, Sophie Lambert. Since Anastasia is the crafts editor of *American Woman* magazine, she was happy to help Alex and his friends design crafty Christmas tree ornaments to sell to raise money for the local foodbank.

The next morning, there's still no sign of Lucille, and thinking positive thoughts, Anastasia hurries off to help at the fundraiser. There she meets Sophie's father, Shane, and gets the immediate impression that he's hiding something. During the course of the day, she can't help but notice a mysterious blonde woman constantly eavesdropping on their conversations. Later that evening when the woman is found dead and an eyewitness identifies Shane as being at the scene of the crime, poor Shane is arrested for her murder.

Things look even worse for Shane when the dead woman is identified as his ex-wife, unrecognizable after a huge amount of plastic surgery. Alex and Sophie beg Anastasia to find the real killer, leading to a surprising conclusion. And does Lucille ever come back? I'll never tell.

"Drop Dead Ornaments" is a delightful addition to the *Anastasia Pollack Crafting Mystery* series. More, please! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





SPLINTER IN THE BLOOD

By Ashley Dyer

In the UK, the headlines are all the same: police are looking for someone dubbed “The Thorn Killer” by the press. And for two police officers in the midst of the investigation, this is one killer that is extremely good at playing the police like a violin.

Ruth Lake is one of these people looking for justice. At the very beginning of the book, Ruth’s partner, Detective Greg Carver, is found shot through the heart. Ruth has her own assumptions about what happened in his home, just by the clues left behind, and because of this decides to go against police protocol.

Carver is alive, thankfully, but when he comes around he can barely remember what happened before the fatal shot took place. Ruth continues the search for the Thorn Killer, going back over interviews and clues while working for a new person in charge who doesn’t much trust Ruth when it comes to what she says or does. Which makes sense, considering Ruth has a very powerful secret that she cannot reveal. The killer had Carver in their sites, but now that Carver is waylaid in the hospital attempting to recover his memory, Ruth becomes a target for this odd mind who likes to kill victims and tattoo strange designs into their skin, then “pose” them in unique places for the police to find.

This is the ultimate cat-and-mouse game between police and a psycho...but it has so much more. The need to delve into this book and reveal the secrets is difficult to avoid; therefore, I will stop now. Just know that whatever you think you know in part one...you will be wrong. This also goes for the rest of the book. The ending is as big of a surprise as the beginning, and you will love finding out exactly how the mystery all comes together and who the “bad guy” really is.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

MIDNIGHT SNACKS ARE MURDER

By Libby Klein

Recent widow Poppy McAllister just can’t catch a break. She’s way behind in the renovations for Butterfly House, the quaint Queen Anne Victorian home she and her Aunt Ginny plan to open as a bed and breakfast in Cape May, New Jersey. To earn extra cash, Poppy starts a gluten-free baking business—a good idea, with one major hitch. The stove for her not-quite-finished professional kitchen has yet to be delivered, so she’s using a stove at La Dolce Vita, the delicious coffee bar and restaurant run by the equally delicious Giampaolo.

Gia definitely has the hots for Poppy and doesn’t mind showing it. Why is this a problem? Because of Gia’s mama, the one with the beady eyes who runs Gia’s kitchen (and his life as much as possible) with an iron fist. And the stove that Poppy has to use is, of course, in Mama’s kitchen.

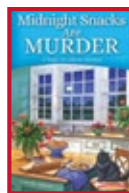
Things go from bad to worse when the number one nemesis of Poppy’s life, her mother-in-law, Georgina, shows up unexpectedly and moves into the house to “supervise” the renovations, because, as everyone knows, Poppy never was good at managing money. Of course, it’s hate at first sight between the free-wheeling Aunt Ginny and the overbearing Georgina.

The ongoing stress begins to take its toll on Aunt Ginny, who’s having trouble sleeping and has a nasty fall. Her doctor gives her two prescriptions, one to calm her nerves and the other to help her sleep. Poppy breathes a sigh of relief. It looks like this problem, at least, is under control.

Except...Aunt Ginny has an adverse reaction to the two prescriptions and ends up sleepwalking around the neighborhood, letting herself into her neighbor’s kitchens, and swiping anything that strikes her fancy. When a neighbor is found murdered one night, I’ll give you three guesses who the number one suspect is.

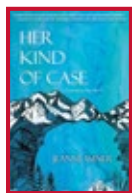
“Midnight Snacks Are Murder” is the second in Libby Klein’s cozy mystery series. It’s laugh-out-loud funny!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



HER KIND OF CASE

By Jeanne Winer



Defense attorney Lee Isaacs recently lost a murder case. As she contemplates her life and possible retirement, she receives an offer to handle yet another case. A young boy has confessed to assisting in a horrible hate crime, and as she tries to discover the truth, Isaacs begins to doubt the boy’s guilt. The course of the investigation also leads her to the realization that she truly loves her job and what she does.

Winer’s writing talent elevates this story above a lot of other legal thrillers by not only exploring a complicated and potentially touchy subject, but also taking the time to show to readers the *true* process of how the legal system works. Her background as a criminal defense attorney for 35 years provides the expertise, and her experience with the human elements of the criminal justice system assist in her crafting of compelling characters. Hopefully another case with Lee Isaacs is forthcoming.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, a professional librarian, book reviewer, and panel master and the author of several books, the most recent being the YA mystery “The Fourth Lion” (with Kevin Lauderdale) for *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE BOOK OF MIRRORS

By E.O. Chirovici

Peter Katz is a literary agent who is about to have his life turned upside down. Receiving a partial manuscript from a stranger by the name of Richard Flynn, Katz reads this memoir pertaining to a professor at Princeton University named Joseph Weider; a professor who ended up being a murder victim twenty years ago.

This was a case that had yet to be solved, but at the time of the murder rumors were flying that Weider was actually involved in a secret project being run by the government; a project that had to do with the human memory. Apparently Weider had been preparing a manuscript of his own studies on what he had done, witnessed, and participated in right before he was killed. A manuscript that disappeared after his death and was never seen again.

Intrigued by the tale, Katz decides to hire John Keller, a freelance journalist, to go back in time and track down more information on the people who were involved in Weider’s world. Discovering that the writer who sent Katz the manuscript in the first place has died of lung cancer, Keller starts to discover even more odd facts surrounding the professor. One oddity focused on a handyman who killed his wife but suffered a memory blackout afterwards. This man spent time in a psychiatric hospital being overseen by Weider, and the information that passed between them could ultimately lead to more clues.

When the detective who originally investigated the case, Roy Freeman, is found, Keller asks him for help. Coming out of retirement, Roy ends up going back over the case trying to find new data that could lead to justice finally being served.

Truly powerful, Chirovici has done a superb job writing a mystery that makes the pulse race. A look into the human mind is always a bit frightening, but this is one author who has taken that scare even further.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

PARADOX

By Catherine Coulter

You can hear the fans cheering now. Why is that? Because one of the most beloved teams in the world of FBI thrillers has returned: Savich and Sherlock are back, and this story yet again proves that Coulter knows her characters inside and out.

Sherlock is instantly awake inside her home listening to the alarm system go off. Shaking Dillon awake, they search the house and stumble upon a horrific sight. A stranger has broken in and is holding a gun on their young son Sean. Escaping out the window as quickly as he can, the family is left shaken but not hurt. With the data they collect, however, they know in their hearts this person had attempted to kidnap their boy, and he will not stop until he's successful.

Police Chief Ty Christie wakes to have a cup of coffee out on her deck and look out over Lake Massey, which is a popular vacation destination in Maryland. Instead of seeing beauty, she finds herself staring at a small rowboat with two people going in and out of the fog. In the blink of an eye, one stands, raises an oar and brings it down on the other's head, then tosses the body overboard. Calling in the Lake Rescue Team, not only is a dead body found but also a skull. Just what the chief needs, considering that this small town of Willicott is being bombarded by strangers who are attending their annual book festival.

Getting an assignment from his boss at the FBI, Dillon heads to Willicott to help out Ty, and the entire family finds themselves in a place where a failed kidnapper, a dead body, a skull, a killer and secrets galore come together to create one of the best suspense thrillers this year.

Coulter hits it out of the ballpark once again. This plot is so interesting, fun and fast-paced, you'll find yourself dying to read it again and again.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

PURLS AND POISON

By Anne Canadeo

Suzanne Cavanaugh is racing from her office through the streets of Plum Harbor in order to not be late for the weekly get together of knitters being held at the Black Sheep & Company shop. She's angry and has had a heck of a day, but when she pulls up in front of that old Victorian house, she instantly starts to feel herself calm.

The house was saved by a woman named Maggie. Once the art teacher at the local high school, Maggie purchased the home with her retirement savings and turned it into a cozy knitting shop that allows all those who come there to feel like they're safe and having fun among friends.

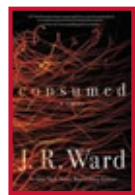
Suzanne tells the ladies all about her trials and tribulations with her rival at Prestige Properties, a woman by the name of Liza Devereaux. Liza is one of those hard-core salespeople who will do anything to claim the title of the best and get the fat commissions. She even goes so far as to show up at one of Suzanne's open houses in order to steal potential buyers.

In the office, many overhear a fight go down between the two women, and when Liza is found dead soon after, and the police uncover that there was poison placed in her diet shake, Suzanne becomes the prime suspect.

Maggie and the rest of the Black Sheep Knitters, knowing Suzanne's background with this woman, believe that she has been framed. When they delve into Liza's life, it comes to their attention that the dead woman made enemies out of a great many people in Plum Harbor. In fact, she kept some nasty secrets about all of them... enough for blackmail schemes in the future. With all these potential murderers, the women have their work cut out for them.

This is the second great title in this series, and fans will get to learn more about the wonderful characters who make Plum Harbor a whole lot of fun.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



CONSUMED

By J.R. Ward

J.R. Ward's latest thriller takes the reader deep inside the world and minds of firefighters. Anne Ashburn is a second-generation firefighter and one of the best in the department. Tragedy strikes when her unit responds to a warehouse fire. Trapped under a steel girder with no chance of escape, Anne realizes the end is near. As the building begins to implode, a fellow firefighter—her best friend and one-time lover, Danny Maguire—rushes to help her. In order to save her life, he must do the unthinkable... cut off her hand.

This life-altering act changes the lives of both characters. One must fight to regain a sense of normalcy, while the other desperately tries to chase away the guilt he feels through a bottle. No longer able to do the job she was born to do, Anne reinvents herself as a fire investigator. While investigating another warehouse inferno, she stumbles upon a link between the two. In order to pursue the investigation further, she must come face-to-face with a ruthless businessman, her past, her family, and Danny.

Ward has written a thriller that will not just throw the reader into the world of those who save lives by risking their own on a daily basis, but she also peels back the façade of what it is like to be a real hero. With characters that are raw and a plot that is fierce, I cannot think of a better title for this novel.

From page one of this juggernaut, you will be consumed!

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of *The Kiche Chronicles* ■

SERPENTINE

By Laurell K. Hamilton

It's wedding season! And U.S. Marshal Anita Blake is doing her damndest to get through it with a smile—even if it's not 100% real. Anita is always there for her friends, especially Edward (aka: U.S. Marshal Ted Forrester), her longtime bestie and one of the deadly Four Horsemen. Edward is finally tying the knot with his girlfriend, Donna, who has had issues with her fiancé's choice of best "man" and work partner. For now, she's buried the hatchet, and wedding bells are in the very near future.

Anita has promised two of her own fiancés—Nathaniel and Micah—that she'll do her best to get a little R&R while on the trip. Micah has also been working more than normal and is dealing with a sensitive local case for the Coalition for Better Understanding Between Human and Lycanthrope Communities: a family battling what they believe is a centuries old curse. And when others see the family secret, calling it a curse doesn't seem like such a stretch.

No wedding is without its hiccups and the Forrester event is not spared. When a young woman disappears from the hotel after being seen in the company of several of Anita's men as well as Anita herself, the cops come knocking. But that's simply the first of many strange occurrences as Donna overshadows her laundry-list of insecurities about Anita and Edward to Dixie, her oldest friend and confidante. Did I mention she's *unhinged*? When more women disappear, including a member of the wedding party, Anita and Edward pull the other U.S. Marshal's into the search—even while the detective in charge is working hard to pin blame on the wedding guests.

I love when an installment in the *Anita Blake* series arrives! Vivid characters, memorable monsters, crackling sexual tension, and a satisfying conclusion every time. Hamilton gives her readers the kind of tale that makes you want to shut out the world and enjoy. The only downside is that it takes far too long to receive the next one.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■





ALL THESE BEAUTIFUL STRANGERS

By Elizabeth Klehfoth

We begin at Knollwood. This is one of those prep schools located in New England where the children of the rich reside; a place where you can almost smell that acrid odor of snobbery as it oozes out of every gilded doorway. Charlie Calloway is a student at Knollwood and has already had a disturbing life. Her mother, Grace, disappeared from the family's lake house one summer when Charlie was only seven, leaving no trace behind as to what occurred. Langelly Lake had been searched by divers in an attempt to find the body, but the real horror came when Charlie's father, a billionaire real estate mogul, hired a P.I. and ended up with security footage showing Grace withdrawing hundreds of thousands of dollars the day before her disappearance. Hence, the gossip ensued and Charlie's life became miserable.

Attempting to get away from those whispers and pain, Charlie decided to make Knollwood Prep her life, so to speak. Unfortunately, what she also decided to do was become a part of the "it" girls; the popular group who owned the halls simply because of their big names and family fortunes. They call themselves the "A's" and in order for Charlie to become one of them she must play a game that lasts for a full semester—a game that is basically one of the meanest scavenger hunts known to mankind that will put barriers between her and her real friends, not to mention cause her further emotional damage.

Going back and forth between 2007 and 2017, when Charlie returns to find out answers to her many questions, the author has put in twists and turns that you *never* see coming. Everything from what really happened to Charlie's mother to the strange and frightening happenings at the prep school converge into one, and readers are left breathless. With this debut, the author has earned her own A+.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

PROBABLE CLAWS

By Rita Mae Brown and Sneaky Pie Brown

It's almost New Year's and the usually frugal Mary Minor "Harry" Haristeen has decided to indulge herself for once in her life in "Probable Claws," number 28 in the *Mrs. Murphy Mystery* series by Rita Mae Brown and her feline co-author, Sneaky Pie Brown. Harry has hired respected local architect Gary Gardner to design and build a new work shed for her. Then Gary is killed in broad daylight by a masked assassin on a speeding motorcycle right in front of Harry and her friend, Detective Cynthia "Coop" Cooper.

Shocked to witness such a brazen act and determined to find out who's responsible for the murder, Harry begins to read Gary's journals, which document the projects he'd been involved with over the years. She begins to suspect that she's stumbled on a pattern of greed that goes far back in Virginia's history. While Harry's in the midst of her research, the killer strikes again, this time using a method that at first looks like a death by natural causes.

Despite Coop's insistence that her friend not involve herself, Harry follows a trail of clues to a construction site in Richmond, where the discovery of mysterious human remains has temporarily halted work. Aided, as usual, by her crime-solving cats—Mrs. Murphy and Pewter—and Tucker, her Corgi, Harry continues to search for a link between the decades-old dead, the recently deceased, and secrets that go back to the early 1800s when The Articles of Confederation were written. The animals can sense danger much more than their human, so it's a good thing that Harry takes them everywhere she goes!

"Probable Claws," despite the light-hearted title, is a serious read, especially for history buffs like me. What makes Rita Mae Brown's mystery series really stand out in a sea of cozies is the seamless way she weaves the past and present together in each book. Mystery writing at its finest. Check it out.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



NOVEMBER ROAD

By Lou Berney

Two people from different backgrounds running from their former lives meet up and end up assisting each other in Lou Berney's engaging novel.

Frank Guidry has been a loyal enforcer for a New Orleans mob boss, but when President John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, associates close to his employer are also murdered. He realizes he's a target for knowing too much, so he flees toward Las Vegas to find a man who can help him establish a new identity.

Charlotte has made the bold decision to leave her life and husband behind to get a fresh start. One night when her husband heads to the bar, she takes the two kids, along with the dog, and packs everything they can carry before driving away. When the car breaks down, she's lucky enough to meet a man who offers to help them if she accompanies him to Las Vegas. Guidry and Charlotte can help each other, but what they don't know is that a top-notch assassin is hot on Guidry's trail, and has orders to leave no witnesses.

Berney has crafted a poetic narrative that will transport readers back to an uncertain time in our nation's history. Part thriller, part literary, this tale is all good.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers, a professional librarian, book reviewer, and panel master and the author of several books, the most recent being the YA mystery "The Fourth Lion" (with Kevin Lauderdale) for *Suspense Magazine* ■



DEAD IF YOU DON'T

By Peter James

Peter James once again allows us the honor to ride along with Detective Superintendent Roy Grace as he tries to piece together a puzzle formed from the underbelly of society. In "Dead If You Don't," Roy is up against the clock as well as against some of the worst types of criminals—ones with no moral backbone.

Roy Grace is looking forward to a father-son day at the first Premier League soccer game at Amex stadium in the city of Brighton and Hove, but being a detective superintendent is not what he does, it's who he is. So when Grace sees a suspicious looking man a few rows in front of him, his curiosity is piqued. When that man suddenly steps out of the stadium but leaves behind an expensive camera, Roy's years of training race into action as he grabs the camera, spots the LCD screen counting down, and knows he has a bomb on his hands.

If a bomb threat isn't bad enough, the crimes begin to pile up. A day of bonding soon becomes a nightmarish hell for Grace as he leads an investigation into the bomb threat at the Amex, the kidnapping of the son of a prominent businessman, six suspicious deaths including that of a drug mule, body parts found at a construction site, and possible involvement of the Albanian mafia.

The pace and tension of "Dead If You Don't" are enough to keep you up at night, but James doesn't stop there. The emotions of the characters in this thriller will pull you into their story like no other.

With "Dead If You Don't," Peter James has written a crime thriller with so many psychological twists that you may need therapy by the time you've turned the last page and unveiled the final twist.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of *The Kiche Chronicles* for *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE DAY OF THE DEAD

By Nicci French

It is hard to believe, and difficult to accept that this incredible series is coming to an end.

Psychologist Frieda Klein has been living a true nightmare for ten years. Her days have been filled with Dean Reeve, the serial killer who is obsessed with Frieda and possesses abilities that go well beyond what any killer can claim. This is a person who has been able to disappear on a whim, leaving no trace of himself behind. He has even disappeared so well that others simply do not believe it when Frieda states that Reeve is most certainly not dead. Now, of course, the London police have to believe her. A series of murders begins, alerting the world to the fact that Dean Reeve has returned in all his glory. These bloody crimes have Frieda coming out of her isolation in order to find her long-time nemesis and stop him once and for all.

Frieda, however, has another problem. A student of criminology, Lola Hayes, is working on her dissertation, but is having a problem coming up with a topic. Her teacher, Simon Tearle, suggests writing about Frieda. After all, this woman was involved in a ton of cases, from the infamous Hannah Doherty case to the copycat cases in Silvertown. Lola decides that's exactly the subject she wants and tracks her down. When Lola refuses to go away, even when Frieda explains to her that she's putting herself in grave danger, the stakes rise and these two females find themselves searching all of London in order to locate a killer before anyone else has to lose their life.

All of these books have been building to this ultimate cat-and-mouse game, where heroine and villain come face-to-face in an all-out psychological war. The husband and wife team making up "Nicci French" have done a brilliant job with these characters and this grand finale will *absolutely* leave you speechless!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

BE OUR GHOST

By Kate Kingsbury

The charming cast of *The Merry Ghost Inn Mysteries* is back, and as cool as ever.

Liza Harris, the vivacious grandmother of Melanie West, definitely has a crush on Doug Griffith, the man who owns the combination bar/hardware store in Sully's Landing, Oregon. The quick-witted man was the first friend these women made when they arrived here and opened up their bed and breakfast that also plays home to a ghost named Orville and a sheepdog/wolfhound mix named Max.

Doug lets the ladies know a rude real estate developer, Jason Northwood, has gotten the townspeople all upset. He wants to build an arcade that will tout everything from a full-service bar to a rock band karaoke, completely destroying the peace and quiet the citizens of this small town love. There are a couple of people on the Planning Commission who will make money if Northwood gets his way, and this evening the developer is holding a meeting in his room at the local Inn for those who will be casting their vote, even those who want nothing more than for the man to disappear... permanently.

The next day, when the local news reporter stops by the B&B to chow down on the scrumptious breakfast, he tells the women that Northwood's dead body was found on the floor of his suite after the meeting had adjourned. With so many who hated the guy, there are a list of worthy suspects. But when Doug becomes the primary one, because of a link in the past, Liza and Melanie delve into the crime in order to clear his name.

As odd clues come from Orville, the ghost, and an accident almost takes the lives of the two women, they work harder to stay alive, while also searching for Melanie's mom who went missing years ago. Storylines abound in this exciting plot that will leave you yearning to return to *The Merry Ghost Inn*, ASAP.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



GIVE ME YOUR HAND

By Megan Abbott

"You don't have a self until you have a secret," Diane whispered to Kit on the night of their sleepover, right after telling a tale so incredulous that Kit could barely breathe. Two girls competing for an academic scholarship; Diane is the outsider and Kit is the hometown nerd wanting to escape her small town life. Can they both succeed in the dog-eat-dog competition life has thrown at them?

A decade later, handpicked by Dr. Severin, the only girl on the team of lab tekkies to study premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), Kit has reached the pinnacle in her career. When the NIH grant is successfully awarded to take the study to the next level, only two of the team will be allowed to continue with the groundbreaking new research. When Dr. Severin announces she is bringing in an outsider as one of the two, Kip feels the opportunity slipping through her hands. When the 'ringer' turns out to be her high school nemesis, Diane, Kip knows she has to take the remaining spot, no matter the cost.

Abbott includes the reader so deeply in her intensely well-written novel of competition, purpose-driven goals, and a past that peeks out whether she wants it to or not, so that along with Kit I feel a sense of guilt at holding on to the secret as long as I have. The only way to resolve it is to share that secret with you so get out there and help me redeem my life back by reading this unstoppable, power thriller. This is an absolute don't-miss tale of suspense that will keep you riveted to the chair. In other words, get comfortable; you're not going anywhere until this is finished.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■

DEATH IS NOT ENOUGH

By Karen Rose

With this, book six, the *Baltimore* series goes back in time to address a murder from long ago, making the star of this series more thrilling than ever before.

Back in the limelight is Thomas Thorne, the high-profile defense attorney that has made his name in Baltimore in a big way, achieving a stellar reputation. Unlike the normal "scum" that defense attorney's seem to ooze when taking on clients that are more than guilty, Thorne has always helped young people who find themselves in trouble. He does this in tribute; a way to thank the person who stepped up a long time ago and helped him when he was young and in trouble.

Still a bachelor, Thorne does have a love that he keeps secret, seeing as that the emotions he feels are for his best friend and business partner, Gwyn Weaver. For the last four years, Gwyn has been going through her own personal turmoil, but now that she seems to be shedding her demons for good, Thorne does start to believe that the time to tell her how he really feels has come. Unfortunately, before he can do just that, Thorne wakes up in bed beside a woman and has no memory of who she is or how he got in this position in the first place. Worse than that... the woman is a corpse, and her blood is on Thorne's hands.

Thorne most dive back into his own past, a world where nineteen years ago he ended up being accused and arrested for murdering a bully. With the help of family and friends, he tries to figure out what really occurred that night. He needs to unearth the person who, apparently, will stop at nothing to ruin his life and take away all that he has worked so hard to attain.

This series is unbelievably amazing and Thomas Thorne continues to be one defense attorney that all readers will root for.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





HIDDEN PERIL

By Irene Hannon

Hannon is known for conceiving amazing suspense series. This is the second book in her *Code of Honor* series and is an absolute page turner right from the start.

Readers begin in a monastery located in the mountains of Syria. Inside its walls, a slightly ailing monk by the name of Brother Michael Bennett is checking his home for the evening when he spots a light at the end of a vaulted passageway. Heading down to see what's going on, he stumbles upon Khalil, a refugee who came to the monastery over two years ago. Working in the shop at this late hour, Khalil tells Brother Michael to go off to bed.

Six weeks later, in her home in St. Louis, Kristin Dane receives a package from this particular monastery. She's been a customer, supporting their causes by purchasing pillar candles to sell in her own fair trade shop named WorldCraft. With the candles, however, comes a letter stating that poor Brother Michael has passed away. Unfortunately, this will not be the last person with a connection to her that will soon show up dead.

In comes Detective Luke Carter. He's new to the police force in St. Louis and is trying his best to find out what is happening surrounding this woman. But when the FBI suddenly appear in the mix, the cop is pushed aside and Kristin is suddenly stuck in the depths of some true 'international intrigue.' There is a scheme being played out that involves a killer with a cause, a cause that will have Kristin wondering if she'll be alive when this sordid game comes to an end.

Irene Hannon has been called the "queen of inspirational romantic suspense" and it is easy to see why that is. This book has one of the most amazing endings out there, and the thrills and chills readers get to experience while getting to that ending are completely unforgettable.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

RUFF JUSTICE

By Laurien Berenson

Melanie Travis has a very busy life. Not only is she a tutor at a private school in Greenwich CT, she's mom to thirteen-year-old Davey and four-year-old Kevin, wife of Sam, and, oh yes, proud owner of five Standard Poodles—all of whom are show dogs. Plus a rescue dog named Bud, who enjoys nothing more than getting into trouble.

Davey has been given the responsibility of caring for and showing Augie, the youngest of the Poodles, in dog shows that will earn the dog his championship status. Not such an easy task, as the dog shows are unbelievably competitive and some of the handlers play dirty, as Davey finds out first-hand. But Melanie and the rest of the family, including the opinionated Aunt Peg, who's been showing championship Poodles for years, are determined that this spring is Davey's time to finally win the points needed for Augie's championship.

Aunt Peg also has a new pup to show, and has contracted with Jasmine Crane, a talented portrait artist, to design and produce a handmade leash that will make her puppy shine. But when Aunt Peg goes to pick up the leash the morning of a show, she finds Jasmine dead, strangled with one of her own leashes.

The intrigue around Jasmine's death continues to grow when Amanda Burke, Aunt Peg's long-time, trusted dog sitter, who was renting an apartment on Jasmine's property, vanishes the same day. Amanda's twin sister, Abby, is convinced that something has happened to her sister and begs Aunt Peg and Melanie to help find her, since the police refuse to get involved. Melanie is convinced the two events are connected, and begins to ask some questions about both Jasmine and Amanda, with very surprising results.

"Ruff Justice" is another satisfying title in Laurien Berenson's *Melanie Travis Canine Mystery* series. And it's an even better read with a dog or two snuggled on your lap. Boomer, Lilly, and I loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



MISS KOPP JUST WON'T QUIT

By Amy Stewart

Stewart has built a series with the legacy of Constance Kopp. In this, the fourth novel starring America's first female deputy sheriff, Stewart continues to build on the legacy carved from a few known facts of the life of the real Miss Kopp.

In this, the most fluid and comfortable read of the books, you can feel Stewart relax and go with the paths her characters have decided to take. This is the year of the elections and the sheriff has to move on; a seat in Washington as local representative awaits him, but what of the matron turned deputy? Neither of the men running for the office seems willing to consider keeping her employed at the jail, feeling that it is a man's work.

With news of the war escalating in Europe, America is training its young men in case they are needed to help the war effort as Germany rears its ugly head for the first time. Fleurette, the youngest Kopp sister, is helping with entertaining at the exploratory camps the Army is hosting for those interested in fighting the Kaiser. Meanwhile Norma, the oldest sister, is intending to pitch her mobile pigeon coops idea to the closest Army general in her effort to help communications in the trenches.

Constance continues to build a probation program for the wayward lassies that have passed through her care, and going against her bosses' wishes, involves herself with a pending divorce case to help bring justice to all the women in town until the day of the election. Will she have a job to go back to or will she have to move on with her life? Either way we are ensured that whatever path she is presented with, she will not quit.

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Kettle of Vultures" ■



THE CHAOS OF NOW

By Erin Jade Lange

Technology, emotion, and pure YA suspense, this author has put together the hot topics of today in order to create another great book.

Readers are introduced to a young man named Eli. This is a fantastically intelligent boy who is mostly bored by high school; he coasts through and spends his time in the more technical world of writing code.

Although this is a lackadaisical existence, to say the least, Eli's life is turned upside down when he receives a mysterious cryptic message in binary code. This message is actually a path that will lead him directly to a duo (Seth and Mouse) who are looking for a third member for their group. They're going to be a part of a hacking competition. This is highly prestigious and only for the smartest of the smart. But their third member, Jordan, committed suicide and they offer Eli the challenge of taking the dead boy's place.

Looks can be deceiving, and as Eli spends more time with these two it becomes apparent that Seth and Mouse want to do more than win a competition. They wish to get revenge on those who abused Jordan and led him to take his own life. Eli knows he's in a bad place with these two, but he has to play it carefully. After all, he has his own dark secret.

Much like the world of the 80's when it comes to "niches" in high school and whether the geeks outrank the popular people, this book shows a world full of emotion and intrigue that has the online rulers stealing power away from those who rule the school. Lange shows a whole new side to bullies versus their victims, and creates a coming-of-age story that is sure to be a winner with the YA realm.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

HER FEAR

By Shelley Shepard Gray

This author has created series after series of exciting books. This is the newest in *The Amish of Hart County* series and retains that amazing mixture of mystery, suspense, and emotion.

This time around, readers form a bond with Sadie Detweiler. Sadie has had a rough past that has caused her to lose her place in the Amish community. Being forced to move to Kentucky, Sadie was banished by her family because she got pregnant out of wedlock. Her parents did not forgive Sadie for the “sin” she’d committed, so now she must live with relatives she barely knows who are angrier and more secretive than anything else.

Almost immediately after her arrival Verba Stauffer, the matriarch of the family, contracts an illness, which leads to Sadie meeting an Amish man by the name of Noah Freeman. He is an EMT, and doesn’t quite understand why such a nice woman like Sadie is bunking on a cot in the Stauffer’s kitchen. As if drawn to her, wanting to help her smile for once, Noah becomes her friend and soon a relationship is on the horizon. The problem is, Sadie believes that once her secret is told to Noah, then the warm, kind man who sees her as a “good” woman now will turn against her like the rest of the Amish community has done.

But coming clean with Noah is the least of her problems when Verba ends up dying at the hospital, followed by two more deaths, back-to-back. A mystery commences that no one can seem to explain. Noah is asked by his boss to check for clues and see if he can find some connection that will stop more people from becoming victims.

Readers will have a thrilling ride getting to know these characters as they unveil the truth behind the lies. This author, as always, has captured the emotions of her cast and created yet another A+ romantic suspense.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE WITCH ELM

By Tana French

His name is Toby. And this is one character, I can promise, readers will never forget.

Toby has had a bit of bad luck at work recently, but he was able to dodge the problem and not have to face any backlash from it. It is on this day that he is as happy and free-spirited as ever and decides to celebrate his victory with his friends.

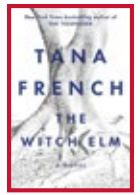
Having a truly good time, Toby heads home and, unfortunately, surprises a pair of burglars who are not the type to simply push you aside and run like heck out the back door. Instead, they turn incredibly violent and beat Toby within an inch of his life.

Toby faces an uphill battle when it comes to recovery. His injuries are horrendous, the depression is sinking in, and soon the “happy-go-lucky” part of him seems to completely disappear. When the reality hits that he may never fully recover and be the man he was before this brutal crime took place, he finds himself heading back to his ancestral home.

It is here that Toby will take care of Hugo, his dying uncle, but what he finds awaiting him is far more than what he was expecting. He is now in a home and on land that has a past, and part of that past remains. In the trunk of an elm tree that resides in the garden, a skull is found and a tale of suspense and evil comes to light. With detectives in his rearview mirror, Toby must deal with a past that he had no idea about, uncovering secrets that may just have him becoming yet another victim.

Tana French has always created the most spellbinding tales, garnering her a legion of fans. And although “The Witch Elm” moves slowly at first, it builds to a monumental plot and ending that is sure to land Ms. French even more awards.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE LINE THAT HELD US

By David Joy

David Joy’s excellent new novel, “The Line That Held Us,” pulls the reader into the rugged world of Appalachia so thoroughly you can feel the bite of the outdoor air and smell the deep aroma of the earth. It also puts you inside the minds of the characters, bound inextricably to this world for generation after generation.

Darl Moody goes hunting for the massive deer to feed his extended family through the winter. That it’s not deer season or that he’s trespassing on another man’s ginseng patch doesn’t matter. When the alternative’s empty stomachs, you do what you must do. He can’t find the deer, but he thinks he sees a wild boar and takes his shot—and sets in motion a terrible series of events.

It’s not a boar but a simple soul known as Sissy Brewer, helping himself to some of the ginseng while the owner’s away. Devastated but desperate not to go to jail, Darl calls his best friend, Calvin Hooper, for help. Against his better judgment, Calvin agrees.

But Sissy has a mountain of a brother who’s as tough as Sissy was gentle. Dwayne Brewer has always protected his brother, first from their abusive father and then from the hard society around them. When he realizes that Sissy has gone missing, he sets out first to find him and then to exact revenge on not just those who hurt his brother but on their loved ones as well, soaking the land with more blood and ripping the world apart.

Joy’s tale of family and friendship is a backwoods version of Shakespearean tragedy and revenge, strung together with prose that is evocative and pungent. He deftly draws the characters so each is understandable and relatable, even as their foibles lead to further pain. Carve out some time when you open this book, since you won’t want to put it down until you read the last word on the last page.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

THE DREAM DAUGHTER

By Diane Chamberlain

It is in the year 1970, when Caroline Sears learns that the baby she’s carrying is in dire straits. She is told by the doctor that the child has a fatal heart problem and has no chance of survival. Caroline is beyond devastated, especially since she just recently lost her beloved husband in Vietnam. Now, with this news, she knows that everything she’s ever cared about will be lost forever.

Caroline believes that she has only two horrendous choices: go through with the pregnancy just to watch her baby die, or terminate her pregnancy now. However, her brother-in-law Hunter has another suggestion. Being a physicist with a somewhat mysterious past, he lets Caroline in on a way that she could, perhaps, save the child, even though what he suggests will change Caroline’s life and have her questioning her morals and values.

We are talking about an extreme leap of faith that sets Caroline on a path that will twist and turn everyone’s mind, even the readers. For those mothers out there who will stop at nothing to protect their children, they will understand Caroline and the lengths she goes to in order to find a way to keep the only piece of her husband she has left.

This acclaimed author, Diane Chamberlain, who has written many bestsellers makes her mark once again. Here, she has created a rich novel of suspense that at times is beautiful and at times is absolutely frightening. In this reviewer’s mind, it truly makes you think about that line between science and religion and why it should never be crossed.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





AS THE CHRISTMAS COOKIE CRUMBLES

By Leslie Budewitz

"As the Christmas Cookie Crumbles" is the fifth in the *Food Lovers' Village* mysteries by Agatha Award-winning author Leslie Budewitz, and like the first four in the series, is set in Jewel Bay, Montana. Jewel Bay is known for promoting homegrown and homemade local fare, and the series centers around Erin Murphy, the manager of her family business, Murphy's Mercantile, a.k.a. the Merc, which has been a staple in town for over 100 years.

Christmas is fast approaching and the village is prepared to celebrate. Each shopkeeper is decorating their store—both inside and out—with festive displays of twinkling lights, Christmas trees, Santas and more, all designed to lure customers in for a mega shopping spree. At the Merc, Erin is ringing in the holidays with even more joy this year. She and her fiancée, Adam Zimmerman, are getting married on Christmas Eve.

But not everyone in Jewel Bay is filled with holiday cheer, notably Walt and Taya Thornton, local antique dealers who are usually obsessed with the holiday. Their long-estranged daughter, Merrily, has come back to town after being away for years. Merrily has a troubled past, including serving a stretch behind bars for embezzlement. And she announces to her parents that she has a college-age daughter that the family never knew about, and refuses to name the father. Taya has a screaming match with Merrily in front of most of the town residents and publicly disowns her, and Walt doesn't make the situation better.

When a theft is discovered at the local hardware store where Merrily is working, it looks like Merrily is up to her old tricks. But Erin isn't so sure that Merrily's guilty. Could someone be trying to set her up? Then Merrily is found dead, a string of Christmas lights around her neck. Determined to clear Merrily's name, Erin adds sleuthing to her holiday and wedding prep lists in this delightful mystery from a master storyteller.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

PIECES OF HER

By Karin Slaughter

I began this book with a bit of trepidation because some of Slaughter's previous work has been vividly gory, but this wasn't like those. It's a compelling story that swept me along, unable to resist and unable to stop reading.

The poignant mother-daughter relationship, so typical and yet not typical at all, drew me in from the first page. The two meet for lunch at a mall to celebrate Andrea Oliver's thirty-first birthday. Andy's mother, Laura, is an accomplished woman who intimidates her shrinking violet daughter. Laura, Dr. Oliver, is a speech pathologist who contracted breast cancer three years ago. That was Andy's excuse to give up her pitiful existence in New York and move back home to help her mother through the crisis. Laura thinks Andy liked living in New York and Andy, reticent almost to the point of being mute, especially in her mother's presence, doesn't ever correct her.

When a man rampages through the mall, shooting people, Laura reacts in a way that startles not only Andy, but the world. Someone shoots a video of her confronting the shooter, convincing him that he is out of bullets, letting him drive a knife through her hand, then killing him with it backhanded, the blade still sticking through her palm. In the ensuing frenzy, the media broadcasts, and the police questioning, Andy realizes her mother is not at all who she thought she was. Andy discovers a strength in herself when she's forced to flee the mysterious forces from her mother's past that are trying to harm both of them.

Block out some time for this. It's a long book and hard to put down.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Editor of "Day of the Dark: Eclipse Stories" ■

HOLY GHOST

By John Sandford

The great Virgil Flowers, an agent of the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension is back...and assigned to a case he's never seen the likes of before. Leaving his (pregnant) true love at home, Virgil goes to Wheatfield, Minnesota in order to solve a shooting. Wheatfield is one of those small American towns with a Main Street consisting of boarded up windows and "out of business" signs. At its height during WWII the town only spoke of 1,500 citizens, and over the years more than half of those walked away. They do have a sense of humor, however, considering they elected a mayor, Wardell Holland, whose only talent seems to be shooting flies in his mobile home. This man, working with a teenage boy by the name of Skinner, sets a plan in place that will bring people to Wheatfield in droves, basically bringing the town back to life.

Headlines hit! The Virgin Mary appears at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Wheatfield. This "Marian apparition" was caught on tape by a lot of cell phones, and she keeps "visiting" as more and more people drive into town. Holland and Skinner open their own store, and the streets crawl with wannabe citizens. Trouble arrives when two shootings occur. No one is killed, but after Virgil comes to town, a man is found dead in his house, and the local woman who's funding the town's resurgence loses her life to this mysterious sniper.

Clues crop up everywhere, only to disappear. A man who's involved in a robbery; a hairdresser running the local town blog; two wannabe Nazi's...you name it, a gang of suspects is here. But as Virgil and his crew continue their search, a scheme is revealed that forces the killer out of the shadows and into Virgil's focus.

As always with Sandford and his beloved characters, this is suspense that will keep you riveted wondering who will die next...and why.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE MASTERPIECE

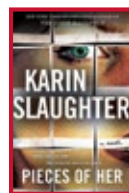
By Fiona Davis

Fiona Davis became a bestseller for her absolute intricate detail and her ability to bring a reader from their own living room into a world filled with color, drama, mystery and emotion. Now, she has done it yet again and Jackie Kennedy would be proud. You'll soon see why.

We take a journey with two women, fifty years apart: Clara Darden and Virginia Clay. Clara is twenty-five years of age and living in 1928. She's an illustrator teaching at the well-renowned Grand Central School of Art, and her dream is to illustrate cover art for the upscale magazine, *Vogue*. During this age, female artists are frowned upon, but Clara isn't about to play a role that men want her to play. Brilliant and determined to succeed in a man's world, Clara is keeping her eye on what she wants. What's not expected is the negative power that the Great Depression will unleash very soon.

Virginia Clay is struggling in 1974. Divorced, attempting to help her daughter, she works in the information booth at the terminal. What was once a "grand" Grand Central, is now a disgusting place that's home to people who like to deal drugs and commit crime. There is a battle happening between those who wish to knock down the place and those who wish to work their tails off to restore it. Luck (or, perhaps, a Divine power) intervenes when Virginia finds an abandoned art school inside the building and realizes there is true beauty underneath those dirty walls. Her journey is all about unearthing the past now which will involve finding a woman by the name of Clara who hasn't been seen for decades.

Fiona Davis, this is one reader who bows down to you. An incredible story. Historically stunning, with characters that you will never forget. Those that have been touted as "must reads," this one outshines many of them. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





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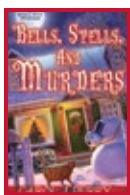
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BELLS, SPELLS, AND MURDERS

By Carol J. Perry

The city of Salem is located on the north coast of Massachusetts, and is famous for its seventeenth century witchcraft trials. It's also the setting for the popular mystery series penned by Carol J. Perry, who herself is a native of Salem and was actually born on Halloween Eve. Fans know each title is bound to have a touch of the supernatural thrown into each plot, and the newest one, "Bells, Spells, and Murders" adds a large dose of holiday tradition to the mix as well.

Lee Barrett, the protagonist of the series, has finally landed her dream job—she's the new field reporter for Salem's WICH-TV, which means that, rather than sitting behind a desk, she'll be able to cover events as they are happening. Celebrating the holidays is a big deal in Salem, and Lee looks forward to finding out more about the local traditions. One of her assignments on her very first day in her new job is an interview with Albert Eldridge, a local philanthropist and the chairman of a popular walking tour through Salem's historic district which raises money for many of the city's charities. When Lee and her mobile unit cameraperson/driver, Francine, arrive for the interview, they find Eldridge dead. Instead of doing a "feel-good" holiday interview, suddenly Lee is now an on-the-spot crime reporter because, as soon as the police arrive, they determine Eldridge has been murdered.

Lee's in a position to get inside information because her sweetie is a detective. Oh, and there's one more thing that gives Lee a unique advantage—she's a scryer, a person who has the ability to see things in reflective surfaces that others can't. Just as Lee begins to figure out whodunnit, there's another murder, and Salem is threatened with a monster blizzard.

"Bells, Spells, and Murders," the seventh in Perry's *Witch City Mystery* series, is a fast-paced cozy that entertains from start to finish. A great read!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE OTHER WOMAN

Sandie Jones

It must be said: This is one of the best psychological thrillers I've read in quite a while; it actually made me a little uncomfortable. I was stuck to the edge of my seat while reading chapter after chapter. And when I thought I had it all figured out, I didn't. In fact, I wasn't even close.

Emily Havistock is attending a work conference when, at the bar, she meets a man who jumps the queue to be served. After getting to know him, Emily begins to wonder if she has finally met the perfect man. Adam is caring, attentive and loving, and their relationship quickly develops. They are soon planning their future together, which includes getting married.

Before long, Adam brings Emily home to meet his mother. He introduces Emily to Pammie, who seems to be a nice woman but also a little domineering when it comes to motherhood. And that, my friends, is only the beginning. Pammie has other ideas about her son's future; she wants Emily gone and is willing to lie, scheme, and manipulate to get what she wants. Adam is oblivious to his mother's antics. He defends his mother and often blames Emily for the rift and distance between the two women.

Jones has set up the character of Pammie so wickedly that you will wince every time she enters the room. When it comes to the full cast of characters, you will love some and hate some as the situations progress. Not wanting to give too much away, however, it is best just to say that the book operates at a pace that will keep even the most curious reader happy. "The Other Woman" is the kind of read that offers escapism. It's a fun book that will keep you turning pages until the end.

Reviewed by Lauren Brabrook (LaurenReads1) ■

THE QUESTION OF THE DEAD MISTRESS

By E.J. Copperman & Jeff Cohen

The *Asperger Mystery* series has been a real delight. Now that we've gotten to this, book number five, it thrills me to say that this was just as fun and unpredictable as all the previous ones.

Samuel Hoenig is the proprietor of one of the most unique agencies running. It's called Questions Answered, and when new "clients" come through the doors, some of the questions they ask are out of this world.

Samuel must deal with this newest inquiry: "Is my husband having an affair with a dead woman?" Ginny Fontaine is the woman asking, but for Samuel it feels like this may be too easy of an answer. After all, ghosts haven't been proven to exist in the world, so it would be impossible for Ginny's husband to be having an affair with one.

But Samuel is right; the question was too easy. His partner in the agency, Janet Washburn, is not convinced that the easy answer is the right one in this case, so she decides to throw more time and research into Ginny's question. Unfortunately, when the investigation begins in earnest, Mr. Fontaine turns up dead as a doornail, leaving behind a wealth of lies, secrets, deception, and even more questions that Samuel and Janet will have to answer before all is put to rest.

These books absolutely never fail to delight. Writing as E.J. Copperman, Jeff Cohen is the author of the *Haunted Guesthouse* series as well, and continues to provide readers with characters that are always a thrill to catch up with. If you have yet to read this particular series, after enjoying this book you will definitely want to head back to "The Question of the Felonious Friend," and be entertained from the very beginning.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

SCORPION STRIKE

By John Gilstrap

Special Forces veteran Jonathan Grave (Codename: Scorpion) is back in this thriller that will have you riveted to your chair until the last page has been read.

Set to follow the events that occurred in 2017's "Final Target," Grave is off on a much-needed and well-deserved vacation with his lady love and fellow operator, Gail Bonneville. Heading directly for the Crystal Sands Resort, they immediately begin to enjoy the secluded bungalow that awaits them on the beautiful island. Unlike most people, however, this couple is doomed when it comes to actual R&R, and in the middle of the night automatic gunfire slices through the peace and quiet of it all. With the gunshots drawing closer, guests staying at the five-star resort are gathered up and taken hostage by the pure evil that's suddenly appeared.

When they run into Grave's bungalow, however, two shooters go down and Grave, Bonneville and another couple they rescued head into the jungle in order to disappear from the rest of the attackers.

A secret plot is being played out. By unleashing these dangerous killers and taking over an island, the minds behind the scheme wish to push the superpowers into starting up the biggest war the world has ever seen.

Add in a rich, spoiled kid by the name of Tyler Stratton, whose stepfather owns the resort, and you have a cast of characters that drive Scorpion to his breaking point at times. Not to mention, he's also without his best friend, Boxers, who happens to be hours away from their dangerous location. Scorpion and Bonneville must use their well-honed skills in order to stop the kidnappers and rescue the hostages before things go too far and WWII begins.

Gilstrap continues to deliver the "best of the best" when it comes to thrillers. His mind creates characters to be loved and hated, and offers yet another plot that will have you reading this book again and again to get the adrenaline flowing.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

SOLEMN GRAVES

By James R. Benn

James Benn once again brings back the vibrant Billy Boyle in yet another World War II mystery, as the U.S. Army Detective is called to investigate a murder in Normandy that could turn the war in Hitler's favor and bring the Allies to their knees.

It is July, 1944. Thirty days have passed since the brutality of D-Day, and Billy, along with his fellow comrades Kaz and Big Mike, begin their investigation. An American Army officer has been found dead in a manor house that's currently serving as an advance headquarters. The victim's name is Major Jerome, but the story of how he came to be there is foggy. Far away from his own unit, he arrived completely out of the blue, only to be murdered in the middle of the night.

Keeping the investigation under wraps, all news of the murder has to be kept silent, considering the fact that the American unit headquartered nearby, the Ghost Army, must have eyes diverted away from them at all times. This unit has an odd mission; they're there to throw the enemy off-guard by using everything from radio traffic to sound effects to convince the enemy that they're facing far more men than they actually are. But considering there are spies and German informants lurking around every corner, Billy and his crew must work quietly to solve the murder and find the criminal without blowing the Ghost Army's position. After all, if the enemy finds that they are being deceived, the tides of WWII will turn and Hitler will have the opportunity to win it all.

The *Billy Boyle World War II Mysteries* have garnered many awards in the suspense realm and they are worthy of all of them. The stories are riveting, the cast of characters is incredible, and historical accuracy can be found on every page. You don't want to miss out on one of them!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



SILVER ANNIVERSARY MURDER

By Leslie Meier

Sylvia and Warren Bickford, nicknamed privately by the residents of Tinker's Cove, Maine as The Bickersons, are the least likely couple to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. But Sylvia, the owner of the local bridal salon, sees her wedding anniversary as a way to promote her business, and browbeats the town Chamber of Commerce and the *Pennysaver*, the local newspaper, to sponsor a Silver Wedding Anniversary Weekend to celebrate her milestone marriage.

Lucy Stone, reporter-in-chief for the newspaper and the delightful protagonist of Leslie Meier's long-running series, is assigned to cover the big event, which starts her reminiscing about her own wedding many years ago. On impulse, she decides to call her maid of honor, Beth Gerard, after not being in touch with her for a long time. She's shocked when Beth's son, Dante, answers the phone and, when he hears Lucy's voice, says that his mother has just committed suicide. Beth was in the process of finalizing her fourth divorce when she jumped off her penthouse terrace to her death. This divorce was a particularly acrimonious one, with Beth threatening to spill the beans on her wealthy husband for all sorts of financial misdeeds.

The more Lucy stewes about Beth's death, the more she questions whether it was a tragic accident or cold-blooded murder. Convinced that one of Beth's former husbands is responsible, Lucy decides to go to New York City and find out for herself.

Beth's choice of husbands was not the greatest. Each one is slimier than the previous one, from the charismatic preacher who is really a con artist, to the painter who likes to include body parts in his paintings, to the creepy chiropractor and the powerful and scary financier. And one of them is a murderer.

Leslie Meier's "Silver Anniversary Murder" is a real page-turner, mixing believable characters, a fast-moving plot, and current events into one *helluva* story. Cozy writing at its best.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE DARKNESS

By Ragnar Jónasson

This is an exciting crime story that's dark, moody and realistic in both setting and characters. The story unveils itself in Iceland, which is a character in itself: freezing, inhospitable and beautiful, the setting serves as a fantastic backdrop for this well-written mystery/thriller.

Detective Inspector Hulda Hermannsdóttir is the protagonist and is beyond smart. She comes across as brash and uncaring of what others think of her now that she's close to retirement. Hulda was vulgarly told to leave her job and take early retirement to make way for a fresher, younger replacement. Told to pick a case to investigate for her remaining two weeks in the office, Hulda knows just which one she wants.

Taking it on, the cold case involves a young woman whose body was found in the local sea caves. All the clues and information point to a suicide, but Hulda is not convinced. She becomes even more determined to prove the girl was murdered after assessing the original file and finding lazy, shoddy work due to the lack of police care and attention. It was so badly investigated that Hulda finds more details on the case within the first 24 hours of taking it on. Step by step she gets closer to the truth, walking down the path of a Russian girl and asylum seeker.

This is the first book I have read by Ragnar Jónasson and I was gripped by the descriptions of Iceland in mid-winter and how claustrophobic it made the characters (and readers) feel. Ragnar manages to artfully weave multiple storylines and timelines together to present background that ensures your full understanding when it reaches its unexpected and unforgettable climax.

Reviewed by Lauren Brabrook (LaurenReads1) ■



SHELVED UNDER MURDER

By Victoria Gilbert

It's October in Taylorsville, Virginia, a small town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. And that means it's time for the Heritage Festival, an annual celebration of local history, arts and crafts. Library director Amy Weber has mixed feelings about the upcoming weekend. She's proud to have the library involved, but she dreads spending so much time preparing all the items that have been donated for the library's yard sale. She'd much rather spend extra time on her already packed schedule with her handsome boyfriend, Richard Muir.

Richard agrees to accompany Amy and her assistant, Sunny, to the studio of Rachel LeBlanc, a successful local artist, to pick up a donated painting. But they don't expect to find the murdered body of the artist in her studio, stabbed with her own palette knife. Rachel's husband, Reese, also an artist but not as successful as his wife, is nowhere to be found, and their teenage daughter, Lila, is in the house and stoned on drugs.

A search of the studio by the police uncovers a cache of forged paintings, and when the sheriff's chief deputy, Brad Tucker, realizes that Amy is skilled in art history research, he recruits her. The state's art expert is also called, and he unfortunately uncovers a link between Amy's beloved late uncle, Andrew, forged paintings, and the murder case. Amy's Aunt Lydia doesn't believe that her husband was involved in any criminal activities, and begs her niece to clear his name.

Then another murder rocks the small town, and Amy begins to realize that she's unwittingly stumbled upon a major international art forgery ring that's been operating for years, and will stop at nothing to protect its interests.

"Shelved Under Murder" is the second installment in the *Blue Ridge Mountain Mystery* series penned by Victoria Gilbert. It's a real page turner peppered with a host of interesting behind-the-scenes glimpses of the high stakes world of fine art. Check it out.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



CROSS HER HEART

By Sarah Pinborough

This is a dark British tale of family relationships.

It's Ava's sixteenth birthday, but a school day. Her mother, Lisa, contemplates the time Ava will fly from the nest, and it will be too soon for her. The first hint of shadows as they're getting ready for the day is Lisa's alarm—almost panic—at an unfamiliar car coming up the street. She has to tell herself that she and Ava are safe to calm her racing heart. At work, her unease continues as she gears up for a presentation for a potential client, Simon Manning. She feels an attraction developing between them that she doesn't know how to deal with.

Ava is involved with a good swim team consisting of three other girls she has known for only ten months, but has bonded with. She feels closest to Jodie, who is much older but likes swimming with them. They compare their weird mothers. Ava's hovers and is overprotective, Jodie's is mostly absent. Lisa and Ava alternate telling the story as it deepens and darkens. Ava has started getting involved with an exciting romance online. She knows about the dangers, but she's smart and aware, right? Nothing bad will happen. She has to keep this secret from her mother, though, because she would flip.

Meanwhile, Lisa is struggling to keep her sanity as mysterious signs start popping up, reminding her of a life she thought she shed, and making her physically sick to her stomach. The worst thing that could happen would be for the people from her past to find her and Ava. Even Lisa's best friend, sunny and outgoing Marilyn, has her own dark secrets.

Mother and daughter, separately and together, head toward disaster, both of them trusting the wrong people as the reader cringes for what could be coming; not knowing what it is, but knowing it will be disastrous.

The past and the present speed to converge on an awful event bringing about the startling, defining moment in their lives.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Editor of "Day of the Dark: Eclipse Stories" ■

BUTTON MAN

By Andrew Gross

Andrew Gross has created an excellent historical novel that paints a picture of immigrant life in 1920's-1930's New York, focusing on the garment industry in the Lower East Side, and the mob's control over unions. Gross doesn't sensationalize or romanticize the mobsters; they are presented as humans with feelings who often make some seriously bad choices.

Many immigrants during this time period lived in ramshackle dwellings, and various gangs of thugs bullied the "newest" immigrants to arrive. Manhattan's Lower East Side is home to the Rabishevsky family, Jewish immigrants who came to America from Minsk. This story follows the three Rabishevsky brothers—Morris, Sol and Harry. Learning a new trade to help support the rest of the family after their father dies, Morris becomes an apprentice in the garment industry at just 12 years old. Being a quick learner, he doesn't back down to anyone. His keen observation skills enable him to gain a promotion that sets him up to own his own business in the future.

Navigating the Lower East Side back then wasn't an "easy walk home," as they say, having to negotiate with young wanna-be gangsters who made you fight in order to hold onto your hard-earned money. From youth to adulthood, these brothers have to get through problems caused by union bosses and mobs controlling every inch of the garment industry, as they force people to pay high union fees and only allow them to buy their materials from certain vendors. Add to this the corrupt police department, and you have a plot that moves quickly.

Andrew Gross's characterization is one of the strongest elements of the novel. He made me feel as if I was walking beside this family as their lives unfolded and I loved being drawn into the story. There is a bit of violence, but it's not over-the-top. I would highly recommend it to those who like to read about New York and the Italian mob.

Reviewed by Lauren Brabrook (LaurenReads1) ■

SPYMASTER: A THRILLER

By Brad Thor

This is the latest in the *Scot Harvath* series, and brings about a mission that is packed with action!

It is modern day, yet there is a place in the world that harkens back to the 1970's, when the Red Army was operating. At this moment, a secret organization has formed with members from all across Europe. Their mission is to attack and bring down high-level diplomats. They are seen as more faceless, nameless terrorists just striving to take over the world, yet as all thriller readers know, looks can be deceiving.

There are always shadows and secrets when it comes to government movements. Believing there is a next world war on the horizon, an intelligence agency seen to be the most deadly with their own set of deep, dark secrets has taken on the role of preparing the world for battle. They will do anything and everything to crush the enemy, and to do that they must create chaos and destruction so that eyes can be diverted away from their ultimate master plan.

What these people did not expect was Scot Harvath and his team to be dispatched to Europe in order to stop them in their tracks. These heroes are assigned to do whatever they can to stop a war from happening. Harvath must pull from his bag of tricks, using his skills and talents in order to be more cunning and deceptive than the scum he's fighting to take down. And with his own mentor unable to be a part of the events that will occur, Harvath must take on extra roles in order to win.

Brad Thor has never failed when it comes to providing those heart-stopping thrillers where good and bad must face each other in order to secure the ultimate power. And with this new book, he does it yet again!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

LAST SEEN ALIVE

By Claire Douglas

Jamie and Libby Hall are a happy couple who've gone through quite a bit during the short time they've been married. Libby is a heroic teacher; she saved students from a fire recently, breaking her arm in the process and, worst of all, suffering a miscarriage.

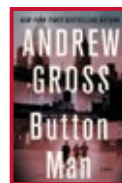
This duo needs a break, and deserves one. So it comes as a welcome event when a stranger by the name of Philip Heywood leaves a note asking to do a house swap. He and his wife need to be in the city for a week while their daughter has emergency surgery. In exchange, the Halls can use their house. Taking the man up on his offer, Jamie and Libby, with their dog, Ziggy, head out to the countryside and find themselves at the most stunning, out-of-the-way mansion that provides breathtaking views of the seaside, and will allow them to get some rest and regroup.

It doesn't take long, however, before things turn strange. The front door of the home is found open, even though Libby knows it was locked; security lights on the grounds come alive, even though there's nothing out there. Although these issues are harmless, Libby's mind is already on edge and these easily explainable things are making her even more frightened.

A man who says he keeps watch over the house appears now and then, revealing secrets about the owners and scaring Libby even more; Jamie becomes sick and is rushed to the hospital; and the couple even finds a surgical room hidden in the basement. Paranoia takes over and Libby finds herself questioning her own husband and his relationship with his ex, as well as questioning her own past and wondering if this house swap is actually some kind of set-up.

Readers will be riveted. Every scene has something new and frightening, to the point where you will never want to leave the house again, let alone stay in someone else's abode.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE REAL LOLITA

By Sarah Weinman

Considering this non-fiction book is about one of the most disturbing subjects I can imagine, I thought it would be difficult to read. However, Weinman's concentration on linking Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" to the real-life story of Sally Horner had me quickly involved.

Nabokov was always determined to hide the origins of his works. His attitude was that true art must stand on its own; it owes nothing to pedestrian realities and events. Today, the opposite is true. Writers readily reveal their inspirations, and readers are delighted to find out what's behind the stories they love and how they relate to actual events.

Nabokov went to great pains to destroy his sources. He even wrote in longhand, had his wife type up his notes, and then burned the original papers. He took notes on index cards when not actively writing and destroyed most of those, too...but some have survived. One, a big clue for Weinman, detailed the story of Sally Horner. Indications show that Nabokov originally wanted his character, Humbert Humbert, to come across an account of Sally's kidnapping, but instead decided to use her story to flesh out the novel that'd been rattling around in his own brain for many years—"Lolita."

The first half of this book is devoted to Sally Horner's truly tragic story. Frank La Salle, a mechanic with a history of being attracted to prepubescent girls, saw Sally shoplift when she was only 11. He eventually made her believe that he was an FBI agent and she would go to prison or reform school if she didn't go into hiding with him. Abusing her as they moved cross country for 21 months, Sally finally made a phone call after being encouraged to do so by a kind woman in a trailer park where they were staying.

I could go on forever about this book, but it's better to give my advice: Pick up a copy! Reviewed by Kaye George, "Fat Cat Takes the Cake" (written as Janet Cantrell) ■

VENDETTA

By Iris Johansen

Just by seeing the Iris Johansen name on a book cover, you know that what's inside will be an explosive, unforgettable story. And this new tale gives readers just that, and a whole lot more.

In this latest thriller, readers watch the head of the CIA task force on terrorism, Carl Venable, take his last breath. Jude Brandon is the man who receives Venable's last instruction: He must take care of Rachel Venable, Carl's daughter, no matter what happens. She has to remain safe in a world where terrorist ringleader Max Huber is operating.

Rachel is dealing with her own pain and problems when it comes to Huber. After all, he is not only behind her beloved father's murder, but Huber also kept her captive and imprisoned for months. Her own past was filled with twisted torment, and when an attack falls upon her medical clinic located in Guyana, Huber is automatically back in her life.

Huber organized the attack, and Rachel once again finds herself in the evil man's line of sight. With Jude Brandon looking out for her, joined by Rachel's longtime friend, ally, and protector, Catherine Ling, the determination to follow Carl Venable's last order to the letter is immense. But even with all the talents and fierceness they possess, keeping Rachel off Huber's radar will be next to impossible.

Huber is working on destroying far more than just a clinic, however. He is orchestrating a disaster of monumental proportions that will destroy at least half of the country. The vendettas' are numerous among these players, and Rachel and Brandon, while falling for one another, must race against the clock to stop Huber once and for all.

As a fan of the *Eve Duncan* series, it was a shame to say goodbye to a friend who's been a part of things for so long. But the new face and the new thrill ride definitely made up for it. It will be exciting to see what happens next. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



THE PRESIDENT IS MISSING

By Bill Clinton and James Patterson

The reader will be able to detect both personalities in this novel. I believe it should be classified as a techno-thriller. There aren't any standard thriller passages, except for a brief shooting scene, and most of the tense action consists of meetings between high-level global powers, and frantic computer coding taking place in a secret room.

The story is told in first person, present tense, mostly by President Duncan. It's not as edgy as most books written that way. That said, however, it's a great glimpse into what it's like to work in the White House; surrounded by so many people, it's hard to keep track of them all at first. The president is spinning a lot of plates. His wife recently died of cancer, he is being afflicted by a rare disease that flares up under stress, and he doesn't trust his Vice President or the Speaker of the House—both of whom want him gone. Plus, he recently committed a public blunder that may force him out of office.

Outside enemies, forcing the crisis, are unknown expert computer hackers, a mysterious hired assassin, a mole living somewhere among his six most trusted advisors, and the overall threat of "Dark Ages." That's the code name for what will happen if the computer virus isn't stopped. The result will be the failure of every system connected to a computer: water, power, defense, transportation, hospitals, etc., resulting in a return to primitive living, and likely, humans turning to bloody competition in order to attain basic needs.

Once the threat has been issued and the clock begins ticking, President Duncan thinks it best that he comply with the orders from the unknown terrorists, and meet them alone. Hence, he dismisses his bodyguards and goes "missing" without informing anyone but his most trusted and loyal assistants. Or...so he thinks. A long read, but it's also a fun one.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Editor of "Day of the Dark: Eclipse Stories" ■

READ AND GONE

By Allison Brook

Carrie Singleton is settling into her new life at the Clover Leaf Library and loving the fact that she's reconnected with her Uncle Bosco, Aunt Harriett, and assorted cousins. Her life also includes an element that's been missing for a long time—love—in the person of her handsome landlord, Dylan. She's thrilled to celebrate her birthday with all the folks she holds dear, and is looking forward to the upcoming Christmas holidays.

Then her long-absent father, Jim Singleton, shows up. Jim makes his "living" as a thief, and he's come to town to see his daughter and settle a score with slimy local jeweler Benton Parr. Jim and Parr were involved in a jewel heist worth more than seven million dollars. Jim wants his share and tries to talk Carrie into helping him. In a millisecond Carrie's life is turned upside down.

Things go from bad to worse when Jim goes to Parr's shop and finds the jeweler dead of a stab wound. Before anyone discovers the body, Jim tries to get into the safe, leaving his fingerprints. Naturally, when the police finally show up, Jim is thrown in jail.

Carrie's happy life continues to implode when she discovers that Dylan, an insurance investigator, has been hired to track down the same jewels. Did Dylan only pretend to love her just to get to her father? Several other people are also after the jewels, including another accomplice in the robbery, Parr's wife, his daughter, his girlfriend, and his shop assistant. Determined to find the jewels and clear her father of murder, Carrie starts examining every facet of Parr's life, with the help of the library's resident ghost, Evelyn Havers—a former library aide who died six years ago.

"Read and Gone" is the second in the *Haunted Library Mystery* series by Marilyn Levinson, writing under the pen name of Allison Brook. It's a real page turner. I can't wait for number three!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE HOLLOW OF FEAR

By Sherry Thomas

This spell-binding tale is the third in the *Lady Sherlock Historical Mysteries* and is even better (if possible) than the last. For those who have yet to experience this new “take” on the beloved Sherlock Holmes and the Victorian realm that never disappoints, this is a series you must start reading right now!

To catch you up, Charlotte Holmes (AKA: Lady Sherlock) is a woman who was not exactly comfortable being the “demure lady” in Victorian society. She is a woman who wants to use her mind and utilize her excellent sleuthing skills, yet because of that choice she did become somewhat of an outcast, walking the streets of London instead of trading gossip at a variety of boring tea parties.

This time around, Charlotte—still working under the assumed name of “Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective” in order to avoid having to deal with the patriarchal society—takes on a new challenge that will push her to her very limits. When Charlotte’s half-brother disappears, followed by the wife of Charlotte’s close friend Lord Ingram, turning up dead as a doornail on their estate, Charlotte must gear up in order to figure out exactly what’s going on.

Lord Ingram is the prime suspect when it comes to his wife’s death, but Charlotte believes that there is no way he could have committed such a dreadful crime. Working against time, as Scotland Yard draws closer with each new day, Charlotte takes on her usual guise and starts her investigation. With the help of Mrs. Watson, clues are uncovered that lead Charlotte into a world of pure evil, where villains await that wish to put her in the ground before the killer can be found.

Sherry Thomas has once again created a thrilling mystery that has one heck of an unforgettable heroine at its very core. Here’s to hoping this particular Sherlock “path” will continue with *many* more books to come. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE GOLD PAWN

By L.A. Chandlar

At the beginning of this great book, it feels almost like *The Ripper*, himself, has returned. But this art deco mystery actually has its own cloaked figure, walking the dark streets of Manhattan and firing a silver gun in the silence. Walking up to the victim, the figure places a gold pawn on the corpse’s chest before slinking away.

We find ourselves in the year 1936. The mayor of NYC sees his political future falling apart under the weight of crime and a missing person’s case that has happened in his own backyard. But he is not alone. At the same time, on the outskirts of Detroit, secrets are being brought to light that could just be connected to the peril happening in the Big Apple.

Lane Sanders is a woman working at City Hall. She has had a rough past, so to speak. When she was a child, someone brutally murdered her parents, leaving her with only one memory of a gold pawn that was left with their remains.

It seems the past is now working in the present. This unknown assailant is somehow back and a new scheme is in motion. The financial industry in NYC is threatened and the reputation of Lane’s own boss is on the line.

Readers walk beside Lane as she receives overseas telegrams from the man she loves, and finds herself walking directly into the darkness that threatens to destroy her. This is all about the high-end movers and shakers who worked to bring in the New Age, and a darker belief held by particular people who wished to upend the world and take it for themselves.

From the colorful and well-researched backdrops that make you feel as if you are definitely part of the 1936 realm; to the vibrant characters who must fight both good and evil in themselves to see justice done, Chandlar has done a fantastic job creating a suspense that you’ll wish to read again. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

CHARMED BONES

By Carolyn Haines

The wind howls outside Dahlia House as a fierce winter deep freeze takes over the town of Zinnia, Mississippi. Inside, P.I. Sarah Booth Delaney snuggles up between her hound, Sweetie Pie, and her black cat, Pluto, as she tries to watch *The Wizard of Oz*. Unfortunately, Sarah must deal with Jitty—the resident ghost who dwells on her family’s plantation—as she keeps interrupting by “popping” in and pretending to be the Wicked Witch of the West.

Sarah wishes that her boyfriend, Coleman Peters, was beside her right now, but he was called away to investigate a convenience store robbery, so Sarah is left with the ghost, the pets, and a ringing phone. On the line is Tinkie, her partner, who’s demanding that Sarah come out in the cold and head down to the old World War II brick building in town. There, a school board meeting is about to be held and a riot will perhaps ensue.

It seems a group has moved into town and wish to start up a school. Doesn’t sound upsetting, however, this group is made up of three sisters who’ve rented a manor house from a reclusive artist in town by the name of Trevor Musgrove. This is where the school will be placed, but when it’s revealed that the three sisters are witches and the school will teach only the Wiccan “ways,” things go from strange to awful.

Sarah and Tinkie are hired to dig up the bad stuff on these women in order to get them to leave Zinnia and take their evil ways with them. But when Trevor is found murdered and the evidence points to the sisters, the P.I. must work fast to uncover the truth before others meet the same fate.

This series, even after all this time, continues to be one of the best. Carolyn Haines is a fantastic writer, and it will be a blast to see what Sarah’s next case will be.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Double-Edged Sword” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THREAD HERRINGS

By Lea Wait

Angie Curtis has returned to her hometown of Haven Harbor, Maine to take over the family business, Mainely Needlepoint, which does commissioned needlework for decorators and other high-end clients. Her old job, assistant to a private investigator in Arizona, was exciting, but her new life is much more satisfying. Not only is she living near her beloved grandmother, but she’s made many friends, and found love with Patrick West, the handsome son of movie idol Skye West, who lives in a carriage house on the grounds of his mother’s estate.

When Sarah Byrne, local antiques dealer and Angie’s best friend, suggests they go to an upscale estate sale, Angie eagerly agrees. She’s immediately drawn to a tattered piece of embroidery featuring a coat of arms, and when no one else bids, decides to buy it and see if she can restore it. Imagine her surprise when she takes the embroidery out of its frame and discovers a hidden document from 1757. The paper is a form for a male child named Charles from a London foundling hospital.

There are few things Angie enjoys more than a mystery, and she decides to find out who the mysterious Charles was and how he was connected to Maine. She accepts an invitation from her high school friend Clem Walker, now a reporter for a Maine television station, to appear on the news and make an appeal for anyone with information about the embroidery. Within moments of the program’s airing, the station receives a threatening phone call. And Angie receives a threatening email. The next day Clem is shot to death in her car on her way to lunch with Angie, and Angie’s own life is threatened.

“Thread Herrings” is the seventh in Maine author Lea Wait’s *Mainely Needlepoint Mystery* series. Like all of Wait’s previous mysteries, it offers a wonderful sense of place and characters and a fast-moving plot right from the very first page. Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE CORPSE AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE

By Carola Dunn

The amazing Daisy Dalrymple is back in this new mystery, and her vibrancy and wit is sure to make you smile.

It is 1928, and Daisy Dalrymple Fletcher is receiving a visit from her young cousins. In London there is so much to see and do. But when Daisy discovers that the nanny of her own three-year-old twins, Nanny Gilpin, has never seen the Crystal Palace before, she decides to get everyone together for an outing. Collecting her visiting cousins, the twins, her step-daughter Belinda, the nursery maid, and Nanny Gilpin, they head out for a day of fun.

When Nanny Gilpin excuses herself to go to the ladies' room and then doesn't return, Daisy goes off to look for her. Unfortunately, instead of the nanny she finds another woman wearing the uniform of a nanny lying dead as a doornail. While Daisy is discovering this corpse, Belinda and the others actually view Mrs. Gilpin chasing after yet another woman dressed in nanny garb. The kids follow them through the humungous Crystal Palace and into the park, losing them only for a moment. But when they rediscover Mrs. Gilpin, she is lying unconscious in a small lake, surrounded by dinosaurs made of concrete. And the other woman has mysteriously disappeared.

When Mrs. Gilpin finally awakens, she can't seem to remember anything that happened, bringing Daisy's husband, Detective Chief Inspector Alec Fletcher of Scotland Yard onto the scene.

With one murdered nanny, one injured one, and a third that has up and disappeared who is now seen as the prime suspect in both cases, Alec has his work cut out for him. Daisy focuses her own determination on discovering why on earth Nanny Gilpin would desert her children to take off after the now missing suspect, and she will not rest until the crime is solved.

After all this time, Daisy still remains that fantastic best friend who is so wonderful to catch up with!

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

THE FORBIDDEN DOOR

By Dean Koontz

A loving couple, Ancel and Clare Hawk, sit on their lawn chairs under the massive oak in their backyard and watch the late-afternoon light fade in the Texas sky. Yet even though this sounds like the picture of serenity, it's actually the product of a nightmare that has been going on for some time.

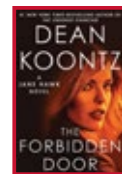
The couple sits outside because they fear their house is being bugged. Their hearts are filled with rage and concern for what's being done to their beloved daughter. Tonight a show will air on TV called *Sunday Magazine*. This show will be focusing its full hour on only one person: an ex-FBI agent who is believed to be a vicious murderess by the name of Jane Hawk.

The horror began a few years ago when Jane's husband up and killed himself... followed by others doing the same. By uncovering the truth and learning that these people were actually brain-altered victims, driven violently insane by powerful people with their own goals, Jane has been digging up evidence and putting herself in the line of fire ever since to see justice served.

She's been on the run (through three *outstanding* books, thus far) uncovering conspiracies and becoming a true nuisance to the ones in charge. And although this TV show is a pack of lies created by these villains in order to put more pressure on Jane, the only thing she ever worries about is the welfare of her son. Which is now exactly the path these men are about to take. As Jane continues to keep a step ahead of the best operatives in the country, they decide to use her son as bait to draw Jane out in order to end her once and for all.

The war continues behind "The Forbidden Door" in this, the fourth book of this absolutely *brilliant* series that has made Jane Hawk an A+ character in the suspense realm. Dean Koontz continues to be a master storyteller!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



TO CATCH A WITCH

By Heather Blake

Always a joy, this incredible author returns with her eighth installment of the *Wishcraft Mysteries*, which has everyone's favorite witch, Darcy Merriweather, back in the limelight.

It's impossible not to like Darcy Merriweather. After all, she is not only a witch, but her extra "talents" allow her to grant wishes to others. Unfortunately, what her powers do not allow her to do is stop a killer in their tracks.

Abby Stillwell is an elite runner who has just hired Darcy's company to be the brains behind the upcoming race, the Wicked Mad Dash. Abby is not only a customer of Darcy's, but she is also her friend, and knows that if anyone can organize this run that will take place in the Enchanted Village, it's Darcy.

Excited to take on the task, everything seems to be going just fine until Mother Nature decides to join the party. A blizzard rages and basically turns the run into a skiing event. Not only does the weather dampen the gig, but Abby suddenly vanishes, only to be found dead and buried in the snow.

Darcy begins to investigate immediately; she misses her friend and wants nothing more than to stop this killer and make things right. But the more she delves into Abby's life, the more Darcy finds that she really did not know Abby at all. In fact, while she questions everyone from a fiancé Abby kept secret to her roommate and her co-workers, more and more secrets begin to reveal themselves. Darcy has to wonder that if she keeps shoveling through this pile of lies, if she, too, will end up dead.

This plot involves everything from embezzlement to burglary, and watching Darcy use her magic, skill and savvy mind is a true thrill ride for the reader. If there was such a thing, Darcy Merriweather has definitely solidified her place in the Witch Hall of Fame.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



THE SAINT OF WOLVES AND BUTCHERS

By Alex Grecian

A recent survey found 41% of Americans lack a basic knowledge of the Holocaust. Fiction has always been effective in sneaking a bit of understanding of history into people's consciousness. Alex Grecian's new novel takes the evil of the Third Reich and plants it in the fertile soil of Western Kansas.

After World War II, Rudolph Bormann bribes his way to South America, then heads north to a small outpost of Nazi sympathizers in rural Kansas. Bormann was only in his twenties when he'd been the assistant commandant of a concentration camp, though the incompetence of the commandant effectively put him in control. He'd used a basic knowledge of medicine to indulge his interest in experimentation on the inmates. Now in the US and rechristened Rudy Goodman, he continues his "work," until a chance meeting with a former inmate.

Kansas State Trooper and single mom Skottie Foster is building a new life for herself and her daughter back in Kansas after transferring from Chicago—and leaving behind her abusive policeman husband. While checking a rest area off I-70 she meets a man named Travis Roan and his traveling companion, a huge dog called Bear. Roan works for a foundation based in Los Angeles that tracks down Nazis, among other work. He's following a lead the foundation received on Bormann, and looking for the first investigator the foundation sent to check the lead who hasn't been heard from in weeks.

Foster finds herself drawn into a conflict between Roan and a local sheriff who runs his town by his own code. They also must deal with the Purity First Church in the town and its adherents who don't take kindly to outsiders asking questions. Each step closer to Bormann/Goodman leads them to greater peril.

Grecian has crafted a fast-paced thriller that peels back years of horrific evil hidden beneath the Kansas soil. It builds to a violent climax when Roan and Foster come face to face with the Saint of Wolves and Butchers. Reviewed by David Ingram ■

TOUCAN KEEP A SECRET

By Donna Andrews

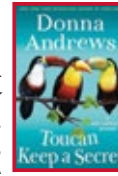
No good deed ever goes unpunished. Just ask Meg Langslow, the protagonist of Donna Andrews' long-running mystery series. Case in point: Reverend Robyn Smith, the pastor of Trinity Episcopal Church in Caerphilly, VA, is placed on bed rest while she awaits the birth of her child. She asks Meg to be in charge of checking the church buildings and locking up for the night. Oh, and also to "babysit" Admiral Nimitz, a three-year-old toucan that Robyn is caring for while one of her other parishioners is on active duty in the Navy. Toucans are often mistaken for parrots, but there's one big difference between the two species—toucans can't talk, and parrots can. Most people don't know that, as readers find out in the twenty-third installment of this hilarious series.

When Meg is at Trinity securing the church buildings late one night, she's startled to hear the sound of hammering in the columbarium (the underground crypt where cremated remains are buried). When she investigates, she finds the murdered body of Junius Hagley, an elderly parishioner. Also, several of the niches have been chiseled open, urns have been knocked out, and amid the ashes is a gold ring with a large red stone. One of the urns belongs to Hagley's late wife.

It becomes Meg's job to find family members whose loved ones have had their final resting place disturbed to see what they want done about re-burial. In the course of her search, Meg discovers juicy details about a jewel robbery that took place at Mrs. Van der Lynden's estate during a New Year's Eve party years ago. Although the thieves were arrested, none of the jewelry was found. Is it possible that the ring found among the ashes is part of that heist? With the help of her usual cast of wacky family members, Meg is determined to find out.

Check out "Toucan Keep A Secret" for yourself. Lots of fun!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



BIMINI TWIST

By Linda Greenlaw

Jane Bunker is currently juggling her professional life as the Hancock County, Maine, Deputy Sheriff, headquartered in the seaside town of Green Haven, and that of an insurance investigator. Lately she's been waging a successful one-woman war on drugs. In fact, as the Fourth of July approaches, the town fathers are worried that Jane's many drug busts are sending a negative message that the area isn't safe, which may impact summer tourism. Jane has been asked to "cool it," and told to concentrate on solving low-profile, missing persons' cases.

Her first assignment is to find Bianca Chiriac, a young woman who is working at the Bar Harbor Inn. The Inn employs foreign exchange students during the busy summer season, and the missing Bianca is one of them. Although initial evidence suggests that Bianca is partying with some of the locals and will eventually show up, it occurs to Jane after nosing around that the girl may not just be sleeping off a late-night party somewhere.

Just when Jane is starting to make some progress on the case, she's assigned to investigate the sudden disappearance of a cadet from the nearby Dirigo Maritime Academy after a stint at sea aboard a commercial ship. His parents demand the local authorities find him, and quickly.

Two young people missing at the same time seem to add up to a secret lovers' tryst aboard *The Princess of the Sea*, the cruise ship where the cadet was assigned. The parents are satisfied with that explanation when they receive a text, sent from their son's phone, saying that all is well and he will see them that weekend. Jane tries to question the crew about the missing cadet, but is not allowed to board, raising her suspicions that something nasty could be going on. And what she uncovers is worse than she ever imagined.

"Bimini Twist" is a tautly plotted mystery with a cast of believable characters I want to know better. Highly recommended!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

WALKING SHADOWS

By Faye Kellerman

Detective Peter Decker and wife, Rina Lazarus, are back and the risks they take this time around seem to be even more frightening (if that's even possible) than they ever have before.

In one of those small suburban towns located in New York state, a crime has been committed that sets this peaceful community on edge. The body of a young man is found in the woods abutting a vacation home that is currently empty; the boy was brutally beaten to death.

His name was Brady Neil and he was a resident of a neighboring town. Attending community college, this was your token clean-cut kid who worked full-time and had never had any run-ins with the law. The only shadowy part of this young man's world came in the form of his father, who Detective Peter Decker soon learns all about.

Brandon Gratz, Brady's dad, was convicted of robbing a local jewelry store. But he was also convicted of murdering the shop's owners, Glen and Lydia Levine. At the time, Gratz and his partner did come clean by admitting to the robbery but always maintained that when they left the jewelry store that day the owners had been left alive.

As Decker digs deeper into the case, clues start to emerge that may tie Brady's death to his father's crimes. As he's working to put the case together, one friend of Brady's turns up missing. The name of this young man is Joseph Boch (AKA: "Boxer"), but when Decker heads to the Boch's household to get more information, what he finds is an absolute massacre.

With two young men dead, Decker works with his fellow detectives and Rina to solve this puzzle before more blood is spilled.

Addictive from the very first page, Faye Kellerman continues to create one riveting thriller after another. Decker and Lazarus are still one of the top power couples when it comes to suspense fiction.

Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of The Write Companion ■

THE MYSTERY OF THREE QUARTERS

By Sophie Hannah

Hercule Poirot fans, rejoice! The fastidious Belgian detective with the amazing little gray cells and equally amazing moustache is back after a *looong* absence. And lest devotees of Poirot's creator, the revered Agatha Christie, have a meltdown over someone having the nerve to use her beloved detective's name, be assured that the books (there are actually three in the new series so far) are being written with the blessing of the estate of the late author.

"The Mystery of Three Quarters" opens with Poirot being accosted in front of his home in Whitehaven Mansions by a very angry woman he has never seen before. The woman says Poirot has sent her a signed letter in which he accuses her of the murder of Barnabas Pandey. Poirot denies sending such a letter, but she doesn't believe him. He then asks to see the actual letter, and the woman says she burned it immediately after reading it, and if he ever contacts her again with such a monstrous accusation, she will report him to Scotland Yard. She then storms off.

Poirot, most perplexed by the entire scene, retreats to the sanctity of his flat, where his valet, Georges, informs him that he has a young man waiting to see him named John McCrodden. McCrodden has also received a letter, supposedly from Poirot, accusing him of the murder of Barnabas Pandey. Once again, Poirot denies sending any such letter and demands to see it, but McCrodden has torn it up.

Poirot discovers, as the plot continues, that four people, who seem to have no connection to each other, have received similar letters, and is determined to discover who is behind the letters, who is Barnabas Pandey, and is he really dead?

I had forgotten how enjoyable, and intricate, the plotting of a *Poirot* mystery is. My own little gray cells were stretched to their limit, trying to figure out who the villain was. I loved it!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE SECRET POISON GARDEN

By Maureen Klovers

There's not a lot that goes on in the small town of Acorn Hollow that Rita Calabrese doesn't know about. Born and raised in the village, she's a master cook and gardener, and treats her family to a home-cooked meal every night. But the sixty-something Rita finally realizes that she can no longer control the lives of her three adult children when her number one son, Marco, announces that he and his fiancée will not be married in the Catholic church. Rita decides that this development is a sign that a new chapter is beginning, and she better get used to it. So she decides to trade in her apron for the career she's always wanted—an investigative journalist.

In no time at all, Rita has updated her resume to show off her creative writing skills to maximum effect, because most of it is a lie. Oh, well. She charms the new editor of the local paper, who assigns her to write an article about Miss Elizabeth Van Der Hooven, Rita's high school science teacher, who was a finalist for the teacher slot on the Challenger shuttle. Miss Van Der Hooven has never gotten over the fact she wasn't chosen, despite the fact that the Challenger exploded, killing everyone on board. Rekindling a relationship with Miss Van Der Hooven, who was Rita's personal nemesis, is the first of many challenges. Add to that her worries about her children, especially her younger son, Vinnie, who may be implicated in the murder of the high school football coach.

"The Secret Poison Garden" is the start to what I hope will be a long-running series by Maureen Klovers. I loved everything about Rita, and the plot moves along in a timely manner with twists and turns on every page. But one word of warning: Do not, under any circumstances, read this book if you're hungry. Rita is often cooking, and her recipes are to die for!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

YULE LOG MURDER

By Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis and Barbara Ross

Looking for a fun way to get into the holiday spirit early? No, not a midnight madness sale. I'm talking about a trilogy of novellas by best-selling mystery authors Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis, and Barbara Ross published in a single book with a single theme—Yule logs!

In *Yule Log Murder*, by Leslie Meier, Lucy Stone is sad about not having her son Toby, and his family, home to celebrate. Then Toby, wife Molly, and grandson Patrick arrive as a surprise, delighting Lucy, except for all the extra work involved. If that's not complicated enough, Lucy's also agreed to help feed the crew of a movie that's being shot in town. Trouble really starts when she finds one of the kitchen workers stabbed and lying face down in a smashed Yule log cake; it's up to Lucy to solve the murder.

In *Death by Yule Log*, by Lee Hollis, Maine food columnist Haley Powell is glad to celebrate the holidays with her daughter Gemma, who's bringing home a serious boyfriend, Conner. Haley doesn't trust the good-looking actor (an actor!), although she tries not to show it. Conner gets into a public fistfight with one of Gemma's other suitors, who is later found dead after eating a Yule log cake. Conner is the top suspect when the police decide it's murder.

In *Logged On*, Julia Snowden, the likeable protagonist of Barbara Ross's *Maine Clambake* series, is determined to make a traditional Yule log cake for Christmas, and enlists her elderly neighbor, Odile St. Onge, to teach her how. Odile's not the easiest person to get along with, but Julia learns that an authentic Yule log cake takes several days to prep. During the lessons, Julia discovers that the home health aide assigned to Odile has disappeared. When Julia discovers the aide's car hidden in Odile's garage, she worries that something sinister is going on.

This trio of novellas is a perfect holiday read.

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



ASK ME NO QUESTIONS

By Shelley Noble

The amazing, spunky, Lady Dunbridge is invading the scene with this new mystery from Shelley Noble. And, just to let you know, it seems as if this character will find herself among the other spirited female detectives who readers will want to see more of... immediately.

Readers are taken into that awe-inspiring "gilded" world of Manhattan high-society in the early 1900's. Aristocracy was "in" and the slightly boring world of tea parties and "noses in the air" begins to sparkle when this amateur sleuth, as well as an aristocratic woman herself, arrives in their circle and begins to solve the mysteries that cross her path.

Her full name (plus title, of course) is Countess, Lady Philomena Dunbridge. The story begins with her father calling into question her errors, shall we say, in London society. Not only has she had various flings, which can be understood seeing as that her husband dropped dead of a heart attack, but she has also garnered a headline about how she discovered a murder suspect, solved a crime and, basically, embarrassed the police. Her father gives her some choices, being the 'dowager' she is now—a title which she absolutely resents. What Lady Phil chooses is to head to America, and readers will not believe the scandals she'll create once there.

Ballroom dances, horse racing at Belmont... the cast of characters—from good guys to bad—are unique. I can't wait to see what Lady Phil does next!

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Charlatan's Crown" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

WIDOW'S WREATH

By Cynthia Riggs

No good deed ever goes unpunished. At least, that's how it seems to Victoria Trumbull, the feisty 92-year-old protagonist of Cynthia Riggs' *Martha's Vineyard* mysteries. When her distant cousin Penny asks Victoria if her wedding reception can be held at Victoria's home, how can she refuse? But Victoria is anticipating a simple reception with a small number of guests, not the multi-tented extravaganza the bride has in mind. Penny has an ulterior motive for putting on such an extravagant show—she's penniless and has maxed out every credit card she has in order to pay for the wedding. But she's sure she's snagged a rich husband who'll be able to afford her lifestyle and pay her bills. Unfortunately, the person she's marrying, Rocco Bufano, has been disinherited by his wealthy father and is as broke as she is. He's marrying Penny only because he thinks she's rich. What a mess.

Things go from bad to worse when the electrician hired to set up extra circuits to accommodate the demands of the upcoming nuptials discovers a body hanging in Victoria's basement. And, curiously still, the dead man bears an uncanny resemblance to Rocco.

It's too bad that Penny didn't check out Rocco's past before she agreed to the marriage. Not only is he penniless, but each of the small number of guests invited to sit on the groom's side has a motive to kill him, and plan to carry out the deed while on Martha's Vineyard. And one of the people who's arrived with revenge on her mind is Rocco's original fiancée, Bianca, who only learned that Rocco had ditched her for Penny after she'd ordered the invitations for their wedding. Yep, Rocco is a real charmer. When Rocco is asked to identify the dead man, he realizes instantly that it was a case of mistaken identity, and he's the real target.

"Widow's Wreath" is the fourteenth in Cynthia Riggs' charming *Martha's Vineyard* mystery series. Absolutely delightful!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■





OVERKILT

By Kaitlyn Dunnett

Liss MacCrimmon Ruskin and her husband, Dan, are celebrating her birthday with dinner at The Spruces—a hotel owned and operated by Dan's father, Joe. While waiting for Dan to arrive, Liss can't help overhearing a heated conversation between her easygoing father-in-law and an oddly dressed, bearded man. Even stranger, the man is accompanied by two women dressed from head to toe in lavender who stand silently behind him, eyes downcast, with their hands clasped together, reminding Liss of pictures she's seen of Amish women. But, there are no Amish in this part of rural Maine.

As Liss soon finds out, the man is Hadley Spinner, the self-proclaimed leader of a small religious organization called The New Age Pilgrims, which raises money by sending the “lavender ladies” out to clean houses. Spinner wants Joe to hire them to do the cleaning at the hotel and Joe refuses. End of conversation. Or, is it?

The upcoming holidays are always good for retail businesses like Liss's Scottish Emporium, but not so good for The Spruces. So Joe hits upon a brilliant marketing idea to lure in paying guests—a promotion aimed at enticing childless couples or singles desperate to celebrate a holiday away from family. The idea is a hit and The Spruces is booked solid for Thanksgiving. Until Spinner, still stewing after Joe's refusal, begins a scathing social media campaign aimed at persuading tourists to boycott the hotel for affronting family values. Suddenly, all the guests cancel their reservations, angry protesters fill the streets, and the troublemaker who started it all turns up dead—a knife protruding from his back.

The police first zero in on Joe, but then turn their sights onto Liss's Aunt Margaret, who had a history with the unpleasant Spinner. Things get even worse for Margaret when it's determined that the murder weapon is a knife from her own kitchen. “Overkilt” is another terrific mystery in this always enjoyable series, and I just loved the surprise at the end. Wow!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

ITALIAN ICED

By Kylie Logan

Laurel Inwood has left what many people would consider a dream job—personal chef to Hollywood superstar Meghan Cohan—to use her considerable culinary skills at the Terminal on the Tracks, a restaurant in the small town of Hubbard, Ohio. Hubbard is as different from the bright lights of Hollywood as anyone could imagine, which is just the way Laurel likes it. Not only is she doing what she loves, but she's found true love, and handsome Declan Fury is determined to marry her.

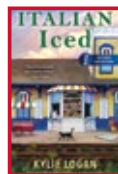
Truth to tell, Laurel didn't leave her former job under the best of circumstances. She was fired by Meghan after the superstar accused her (wrongly) of leaking a story about her son being a druggie to the tabloids. Although Laurel doesn't bear Meghan any ill will, she hopes their paths never cross again. Imagine her shock when she arrives at the restaurant early one morning to get ready for customers and finds her kitchen there has been trashed, immediately after a mysterious intruder has done exactly the same thing at her own home. But the surprises don't stop there—Laurel then discovers Meghan dead in the Terminal freezer.

Although Laurel's relationship with Meghan is well known, the police quickly dismiss her as a suspect. Still, Laurel feels some responsibility to solve the murder and wonders why the heck Meghan was in Hubbard in the first place. Who trashed both her kitchens, and why? Laurel also remembers that Meghan was a master of disguise, and wonders if she was the mysterious patron, disguised as a homeless man, that she gave a free meal to the night before.

The press, of course, get wind of Meghan's demise and descend on Hubbard like jackals. As do members of Meghan's personal entourage, including her assistant, her housekeeper, her sullen teenage son, and one of her several ex-husbands.

“Italian Iced” is the third in Kylie Logan's *Ethnic Eats* mystery series. A fun read from start to finish!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “In-Laws Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



DEATH FROM A TOP HAT

By Clayton Rawson

Magic is the perfect subject for a murder mystery. The reissue of Clayton Rawson's 1938 stupefyingly original locked-room, fair-play novel, “Death From A Top Hat,” takes advantage of elements from both fields.

Murder mysteries rely on a detective, a murder device, clues (sometimes red herrings), alibis, and surprise solutions. In magic, magicians manipulate perceptions with distraction and deception. They depend on misdirections and illusions. They make the improbable possible, the impossible probable. A detective must “puncture the impossibility,” disassemble and figure out the tricks of the crime trade where murder is the nearly perfect trick. The writer of the mystery story must make it all believable.

Rawson practiced metafiction before the term was coined. In “Death From A Top Hat,” he references classic magic and detective treatises, comments on the ongoing structure of the novel within the text, and guides the reader to the only solution.

He does this by choosing a reliable first person narrator, journalist Ross Harte, who accompanies the very efficient professional detective, Inspector Homer Gavigan of the Manhattan police force, and the accomplished magician, the Great Merlini, as they collaborate to solve not one but two locked-room murders.

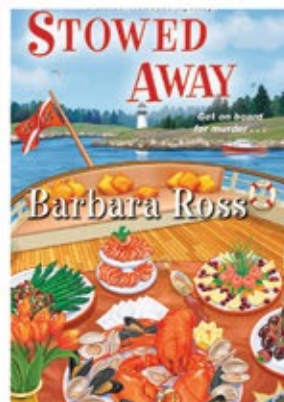
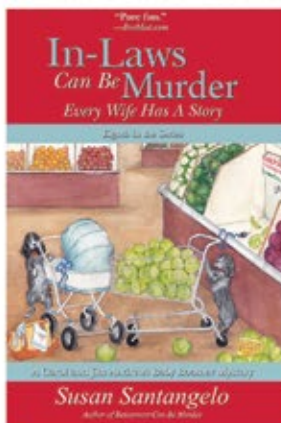
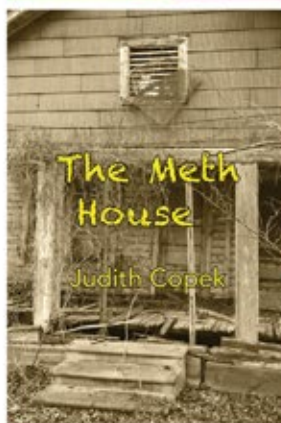
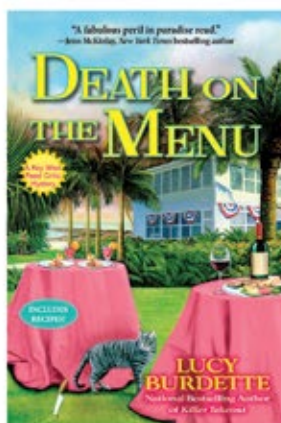
The first victim, Dr. Cesare Sabbat, a professor of anthropology with a specialization in primitive magic and religions, lives across the hall from Harte. One night, when Harte hears unfamiliar voices in the hall, he discovers three magicians—Herbert Waitrous, the “foremost psychical scientist” in the US; Eugene Tarot, The Card King; and Madame Eve Rappourt, a medium—waiting for Sabbat to open his door. With no response, they break in and find the professor sprawled spread-eagled on the floor in the middle of a star shape in the center of a chalked circle. Scribbled words invoke someone named Surgat.

Waitrous, Tarot, and Rappourt are Gavigan's initial suspects. Other culprits accumulate quickly. Rumors of affairs and nefarious bank transactions add to the shenanigans. When a second murder occurs in another locked apartment motives become muddled and seemingly unsolvable.

A gathering at the Society of American Magicians creates a staged scenario for an exhilarating conclusion. But Rawson has one more trick up his sleeve, a punch line ending that swirls towards another mystery.

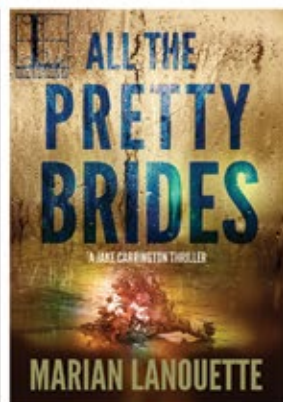
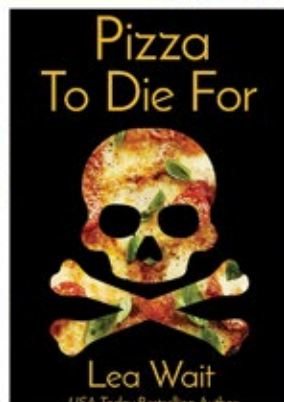
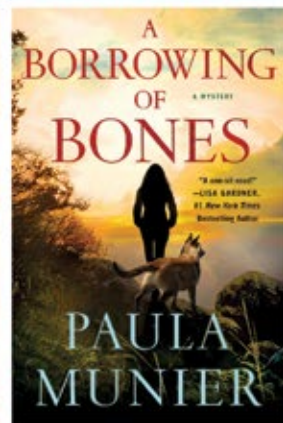
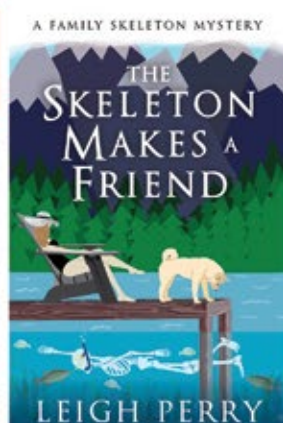
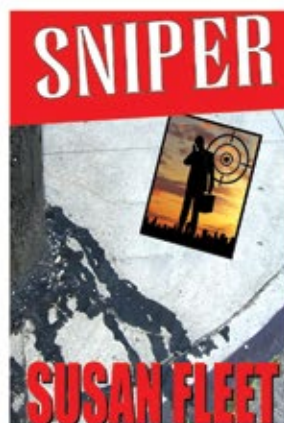
“Death From A Top Hat” is one of the first six titles in the welcome series of *American Classic Mysteries* from Otto Penzler Publishing. The intention is to re-release the best of the crime novels from the Golden Age of detection—starting in the fall of 2018 with works by Ellery Queen, Dorothy B. Hughes, Craig Rice, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and Stuart Palmer. Rawson's is beyond clever. The solution is ingenious. It proves that magic and murder don't age.

Reviewed by Robert Allen Papinchak ■



2018 Books by Sisters in Crime

New England



Featured Artist

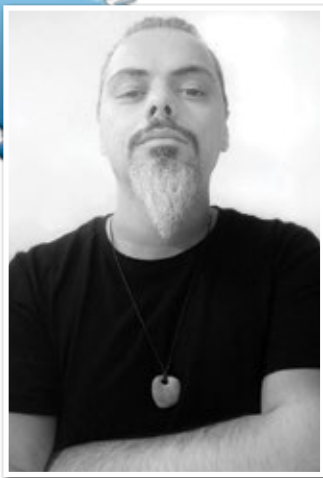
Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*



Interviewing the Digital
Artistic Magician

GAETANO PEZZILLO

DARK THOUGHTS



The world is a grand place, as we all know. Existing upon it there are those who imagine, as they look out their windows or take a walk in the park, fantastical creatures and locations that they wish to create. Such as, a writer who sees in their mind's eye a character coming to life. Or, in this case, an artist who drinks in both atmosphere and emotion as he strives to blend color, light and creativity to design the perfect work of art.

His name is Gaetano Pezzillo, and *his* works of art shine, illuminating both the dark and light side of life. His works are varied and many, and are able to extract the deepest of human emotions from viewers.

Recently, *Suspense Magazine* was able to “catch up with” and speak with Gaetano; a second “sitting” with one of the artistic souls whose work resonated with many readers the first time around. He spoke about his life, his background, and various other services he offers, from photomanipulation to custom designs of both book and album covers. He talks about being born in Naples, Italy, and how the city has helped him hone his craft; the dark-fantasy style he has chosen to bring his surreal images to life; creating his work without the benefits of the latest technology, and so much more.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): When it comes to creative individuals like artists, writers, etc., they always state how their location helps in their creative process. Being born in Naples, and enjoying the beauty that Italy has to offer, can you speak a bit about how this atmosphere has benefited or added to your amazing works of art?

Gaetano Pezzillo (G.P.): *When it comes to inspiration, I really think Naples has just so much to offer to any kind of artist: the city was built in the course of millennia, layer after layer, by a number of different cultures, so it has quite a history unto itself. The same goes for many other cities in the nearby area. The amount of historical buildings, monuments and art we have here goes beyond the imagination of most people, and that is simply wonderful if you're an artist who's looking for inspiration. Along with that, Naples also happens to offer some of the most breathtaking panoramas on the whole planet, which also is a great source of ideas or just an effective tool to free your mind from everyday stuff and let it fly towards dreams and fantasies. And, very immodestly, I have to say... we have the best food and coffee in the world. I can assure you good food and beverages are vital if you want to function as an artist without hurting yourself. That said, it's fair to mention that Naples has many problems as well, but I think those also*

can function as a tool to reflect on human nature, on our fears and desires, which is often what I try to depict in my works.

S. MAG.: You mention that you have a variety of interests: From movies to literature to video games. If someone were to ask you what your absolute favorites are in these categories, what would you say were your top picks? In addition, is there a video game you wish you had done the artwork for?

G.P.: *It's very difficult to pick favourites for me, because every time I enjoy something it becomes my favourite in that particular moment. I suppose my mind works mainly in the present rather than the past or the future. However, if I had to choose a book that changed my life, for better or worse, it would be "The Mists of Avalon" by Marion Zimmer Bradley. I loved it and read it countless times, despite the issues I have with the author's personal life. The movie that I never got tired of is Bram Stoker's Dracula by Francis Ford Coppola (I should have mentioned the book, actually)! It's just mesmerizing, and I love how the Italian dubbing added depth to both the movie and the actors. If I were to choose another movie, it would be Mommie Dearest. It's so over the top that I could watch it multiple times a day. Oddly enough, when it comes to video games, I have no doubt: My absolute favourite is the "Legacy of Kain" saga. This is a true masterpiece of storytelling and atmosphere.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, when it comes to your interest in folklore, could you name a couple of “tales” that have affected you over the years, or “appeared” in your artwork at some point in time?

G.P.: *The fairytales of Snow White and The Sleeping Beauty are the two main stories that accompanied my growth. I've always been fascinated by the whole “comatose maiden” theme; I think it's a powerful image because it shows a human soul in a moment of total despair, when everything seems lost and there's not a single ray of hope in sight. That is something I believe resonates with our current moment in history. I always hope things will get better, and those stories help me keep that hope alive. For that reason, I explored this theme in many of my works in different periods.*

S. MAG.: What appeals most to you about the area of “dark-fantasy” that's the core of your work?

G.P.: *I'm a firm believer that every one of us has a so-called “shadow self,” which is a well-known concept if you're into Jungian psychology. The shadow-self is that part of us that, during childhood, is repressed by our family and/or cultural context and put away in a place inside us where, instead of growing, it festers and can lead to serious issues when we reach adulthood. My life-long goal in shadow work, as we call it, is to learn to accept that part of me instead of ignoring or demonizing it; delving into dark or fantasy atmospheres and*



DAWN OF MAGIC



SORGE L'IRATO NEMBO



BLOOD GODDESS

themes is one of the many ways I've experienced to do that. Sometimes it's a very hard process, but it's also a very healing one, on many levels.

S. MAG.: If you had a few particular pieces you created that you simply cannot forget, what would they be and why?

G.P.: I'm going to mention only one and that is "The Dark Messenger." It's one of my simplest works, but something in it just speaks to me and I know it does the same for many other people. I think it's because it depicts exactly what I try to do: a black bird delivers a message by talking to a cloaked lady, just as I try to get in touch with the darkness, where the bad but also the good stuff resides.

S. MAG.: Can you tell our readers how one piece comes alive in your mind, and walk us through the process of how you transfer that "dream" to something concrete?

G.P.: The process can be very different from case to case. Sometimes inspiration just comes to me and then I decide that I need a particular stock image to depict that concept in a satisfying and believable way. These are the most difficult pieces for me, because it's very hard to create something on the screen that matches what is in my mind, but it's also challenging and fascinating to see the concept evolve during the work. Sometimes I have no choice but to go through this kind of process, because I want to tell a particular story or express a very clear message. Other times, stock artists simply provide stunning photos that beg to be used because they already have a great appeal and are fit to tell a story by just working a little digital magic on them.

S. MAG.: Do you feel the digital art world has taken leaps and bounds when it comes to bringing about other paths and new technology? Is there a particular interest you have or favorite device/system that helped boost your ideas even more over the past few years?

G.P.: I think I'm the least technologic digital artist on the planet. After years and years, I still work using only Photoshop and a mouse, not even a graphic tablet or anything like that. Is it hard compared to newer tools? Of course it is. But I just love it, and I still believe that ideas can be brought to life in excellent ways with any kind of tool. And sometimes, being a little outdated can add to the allure of the work as time goes by. But it's just my opinion and I deeply admire every innovation in the world of art.

S. MAG.: From photomanipulation to book and album covers, you offer a great deal of services. How exciting is it to work with a writer and/or singing group/singer and mesh their ideas with yours to bring about a final work of art?

G.P.: It is really a wonderful thing. I experience a great joy when I get to share my concepts and inspiration with other artists, and it's even greater when they share their ideas, because they always give me so much to build the work on. There's always a beautiful exchange between me and them, and that is the key to provide something they can be happy about without straying too far away from my own style. I'm also very grateful to my lucky star because I've always met beautiful people with great talent and great respect for my work.

S. MAG.: You mention photo retouch in your biography. Can you explain the process? How you first began to help others eliminate blemishes on photos, and how you enhance the atmosphere of the photo by adding details to it?

G.P.: I'm not sure I remember how it began for me. Perhaps at some point I realized I was not too happy about my looks and photo retouch came to my mind as a tool to look better in photos. Thankfully, with the years, I worked on my insecurity and started doing experiments on other people's photos, mostly friends and family. Today, I still like the work itself and I understand that sometimes it is needed, but I also think we all should embrace our own true image as much as we can without faking it. The process in and of itself is quite basic and easy; I mostly work in Photoshop using the healing brush and the patch tools, along with some painting and/or Liquify filter if needed. Usually I'm not asked to add many details or additional elements, but that is surely something I'm used to doing when it comes to my personal work. So I suppose it's often a matter, for the client, of wanting something as realistic as possible.

S. MAG.: What are you looking to do next? Are there projects in the works you'd like to tell readers about?

G.P.: At the moment I don't have the freedom to talk in detail about any of the latest projects I've been working on, but I can tell you there are a couple of beautiful albums coming from two very different artists. One is very classical and an operatic album by a lovely soprano, while the other is an extremely dark album by a gothic-metal band. I also created covers for a few novels coming from different authors in the next few months, and I'm going to share everything on my social media pages as soon as they come out. And, of course, I'm always looking forward to working with any other artist out there who's looking for a cover or simply an image to go with their own piece of art.

And just like that, like all "master craftsmen," Gaetano leaves us with an air of mystery, allowing our minds to wonder exactly what he has in store for the world that will, most definitely, shine. If you wish to learn more about Gaetano and his work visit, <http://corvinerium.altervista.org/en/>. ■



ESCAPE REALITY



FIRE MAGIC

THE DARK MESSENGER

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: FALLOUT 2018

Genre – Action/Adventure (PG-13)

Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and his “Impossible Missions Force” are recruited to intervene in the sale of plutonium cores for nefarious purposes. They are able to slip in and replace the original buyers, but when the operation goes bad, Hunt is forced to choose between the mission and one of his team. Now the cores are in play and he and his team are forced to work with a CIA agent named August Walker (Henry Cavill) to make things right. The action and stunt work remains jaw-dropping, and savvy viewers paying attention are treated to some cool rewards. “Fallout” is a direct sequel to “Rogue Nation,” and also does a nice job of wrapping up the entire franchise as a whole. That being said, it would *still* be awesome to get this cast together again for another impossible mission. ■



THE MEG 2018

Genre – Thriller/Fantasy (PG-13)



A team of scientists are working in the Marianas Trench; the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean. They believe that the sandy bottom is merely a layer that hides another world below. They successfully break through, but a massive sea creature attacks the submersible, trapping the crew. The only man who can save them is Jonas Taylor (the always kick-ass Jason Statham), and he’s reluctantly recruited to lead the rescue. He had a nervous breakdown after encountering a mysterious creature on a previous mission, and was considered washed up. Now that his experience is proven real, he suddenly becomes the ‘expert’ on what scientists soon realize is a giant shark, long thought extinct. The megalodon now has access to the entire ocean, and there is nothing that can stop it from causing chaos and feasting on anything it finds. This eating machine does not realize it has met its match in Jonas Taylor. Those who set aside logic and ignore some major plot holes should just sit back and enjoy the ride. Statham, by himself, is worth the price of admission, and adding in a gigantic CGI shark makes this even more fun than expected. ■

Jeff Ayers co-hosts *Beyond the Cover* with John Raab, and is a freelance reviewer for the *Associated Press*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. He is the author of several books in the worlds of both fiction and non-fiction, including “*Voyages of Imagination: The Star Trek Fiction Companion*” and the thriller “*Long Overdue*.”

HALLOWEEN 2018

Genre – Horror/Thriller (R)

For people that who followed the *Halloween* movies, from the original 1978 version, through the Rob Zombie remakes to the final *Halloween: Resurrection*, good news, you can forget them all but the first. The newest *Halloween* 2018, throws the other movies out the window and is set exactly 40 years from that fateful night in Haddonfield, IL. Remembering the first movie, we saw Michael Myers get shot and fall out of the window, only to disappear. What you didn’t see was Michael being captured that night and placed in Smith’s Grove Sanitarium, where he has sat for the past forty years not saying one word.

Flash forward forty years and we find a very different Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) than the shy little high school girl we met that night. Laurie is damaged. She has been divorced twice and lost custody of her daughter in her early teens. Laurie has obsessed over Michael ever since, focusing her entire life on one thought: trap him and kill him.

The movie is exactly what you would expect from a *Halloween* movie, plenty of scares and death. Will you finally understand why Michael is after Laurie? Is this the end of Michael Myers for good? I won’t tell you if those and other questions are answered in the film, but I will say you need to see it. If you are a *Halloween* fan, this film is pretty close to the original as far as quality goes. For the casual fan, it’s a great horror movie to sink your teeth into, without really needing to know the back story. Either way, *Halloween* 2018 is rock solid and definitely worth seeing, leaving you humming that famous theme music as you leave the theater.

Reviewed by John Raab ■





JOE CLIFFORD

Offers a Candid Interview About a Life Turned 360 Degrees

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Joe Clifford has a “voice” that speaks about both the positive and negative aspects of the world around him. Although spending the 1990s as a homeless heroin addict on the streets of San Francisco, Joe was able to begin a new path after reading a book titled, “Permanent Midnight” by Jerry Stahl.

Life turned from night to day for Joe as he cleaned up, left the streets, and earned his MFA from Florida International University. Heading back to the Bay Area and forming a wonderful family of his own, Joe put out his own autobiographical novel, “Junkie Love,”

chronicling his war with drugs. Now, his resume includes successful novels, working as Acquisitions Editor for a publishing house, teaching classes on writing, and so much more. His work crosses genres and his newest novel, “The One That Got Away” is set to release December 3.

Joe was kind enough to take some time and talk to *Suspense Magazine* about not only his *Porter* tales and upcoming works, but also open “doors” to his past by examining the pain of drug abuse, the loss of his beloved brother, and how tragedy can actually help when help is needed most.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): We have a lot to get to, but let’s start with “The One That Got Away.” Can you tell readers about this latest creation—what it’s about and how the idea came to be?

Joe Clifford (J.C.): *In a lot of ways, this novel is my first real foray into psychological domestic thriller territory, which is where I feel myself being drawn to these days. It’s all I read: Wendy Walker, Jennifer Hillier, Mary Kubica, Emily Carpenter, Riley Sanger, Shannon Kirk—so it makes sense that it’s what I’d want to write. The story itself centers around a young woman who survived an abduction, earning small-town notoriety, only to see that star fade when another girl gets taken. The book starts many years later when the woman, Alex, comes back to the town for a newspaper interview. In a nutshell. Of course, there is more to it than that.*

What drew me to write this book, though due less to subject matter than setting, was, firstly, my mother’s upbringing. My mom grew up in a small, dismal town in Upstate New York. Although that is rather redundant, isn’t it? Aren’t all towns in Upstate New York “dismal”? I spent a lot of time up there as a kid; Schenectady, Troy, Rensselaer. These were the early, formative years, when my parents were at each other’s throat. But the actual story is drawn from, of all things, a Glamour article. (When I was in grad school, one of my buddies thought it would be funny to sign me up for a free year’s subscription of the magazine.) Anyway, there was a story in there that was one of the most horrific I’d ever read. For years I’ve been trying to think of how to tell this story, fictionalized, without sensationalizing what the victim went through. Took me ten years to figure out how. I think I succeeded.

S. MAG.: Is it correct that this is the first in a three-book deal you made with Down & Out Books? Do you already have the others planned out and/or written; if so, can you tell us a little bit about those and whether or not we are talking standalones or an up-and-coming new series in the works?

J.C.: Yes, *"The One That Got Away"* is the first of a three-book deal I signed with Down & Out. I've long been a fan of what Eric and Lance are doing down there, and am thrilled they took me on. After TOTGA, Down & Out will release *"Skunk Train,"* a coming-of-age YA thriller/love story about two teens on the run in California with stolen drugs; then it's *"Occam's Razor,"* which has me returning to the swamps of Florida (where I earned my grad degree). It's something of a southern gothic mystery. Or rather, what I imagine "southern gothic" to be, which is probably pretty far off from the actual definition! But it was fun to write, a more straight-ahead detective novel in the mold of Charles Willeford, and Michael Connelly. But still with my bent worldview. All standalones. Thank God! I say this with all due respect to the art of writing a series—and to all the amazing authors who manage to pull it off successfully year after year—but I don't see myself writing a series ever again. I am very proud of the work I've done with Jay Porter. I stuck to my guns, told the story I wanted to tell, even if, at times, my career might've been better served being less gritty and bleak. But I also learned something important. The stories I am interested in telling, those areas I want to explore, the narratives that mine the deeper, fractured parts of ourselves, are better explored in standalones. For me, at least.

S. MAG.: Your autobiographical novel, *"Junkie Love"* was a tremendous achievement. There are many in this world that are stuck in their own battle with drugs, and many who aren't able to get out of it. When did writing become a passion for you? Was it a craft that helped you get through your trials?

J.C.: Thank you. There's that line from *Magnolia*, something like, "we may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us." Last November, I lost my brother Josh to alcoholism and addiction. He was forty-three. I think part of what helped me get out of that life—a large part—was something my brother didn't have: a passion for art and education, which carried me in the darkest hours. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't easy. But the entire time I was putting myself back together, I was going to school, learning to write; and there was this tiny light on the horizon. I knew if I followed it—art, college, making myself better—I had a way out of that mess. I've always been, for lack of a better term, an artist. I played music, drew, painted. Done it my whole life. But when I was leaving behind a life of homelessness and drugs, I leaned harder than ever on creativity.

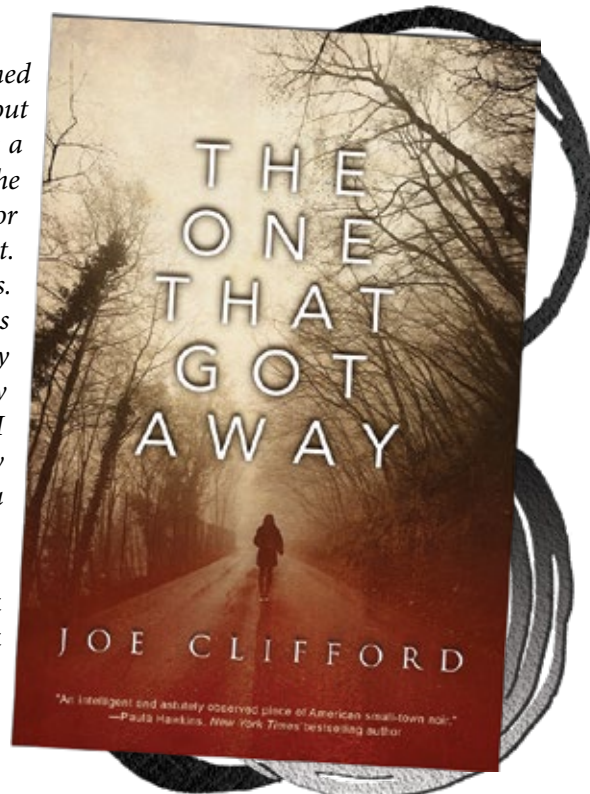
Back when I was using in San Francisco, I found Jerry Stahl's *"Permanent Midnight"* on the street. Strung out, dirty, hungry, homeless. And I remember reading that book—and for me it's still the best junkie memoir out there. But I finished reading it, and I remember thinking, "Man, I can do this. If I can get off junk, I can write a book. I can be more than what I am right now." It was an eye-opening moment, a real epiphany. And now Jerry Stahl has written the Foreword to the 2nd Ed. of *"Junkie Love."* It's mind-bogglingly cool. But, yeah, tough to reconcile those two worlds, y'know?

S. MAG.: Being Acquisitions Editor for a publisher means you get to witness a great deal of titles coming from new authors, I would assume. Can you speak a bit about the changes—positive and negative—when it comes to manuscripts? Are you discovering more "up and comers" and debut novels than before?

J.C.: In a way. Gutter Books is a small press. And in the beginning, when I joined (I think it was back in 2014), I had big expectations. My first year I think I put out four books, all by first time authors. And to help writers achieve that dream is a wonderful thing. And I am really proud to have been a part of that process. But the amount of time one puts in to the arts is seldom commensurate with payoff. For author or editor/publisher. And that is unfortunate, to put a dollar amount on art. But that is the society we live in. So, yeah, I've tapered off acquiring new books. Gutter put on the brakes too. Most of what I do now involves picking musicians for our rock and crime anthologies. My first two efforts (Springsteen and Johnny Cash) have garnered Anthony nominations, so that's been great. I'm currently working on getting permission from Taylor Swift's lawyers for our next entry. I am a big fan of Taylor Swift, and I think her songs would translate wonderfully into a powerful, passionate collection. The titles! I mean: "22"; "I Knew You Were Trouble"; "Red." Interest in contributing has been strong.

S. MAG.: Tell us a bit about your bestselling thriller series, Jay Porter, and what comes next for him. In addition, when you create a series, is it something that you know from the beginning, when and how it will end?

J.C.: Man...Jay has been such a staple in my life for so long. A steady friend,





"I remember thinking, 'Man, I can do this. If I can get off junk, I can write a book. I can be more than what I am right now.'"

companion. But like any troubled friend, he's worn me down. So much of this series has been about my brother (Josh) and his sickness—he'd been in bad shape for a while—so while I was writing about Jay and Chris Porter, I was really writing about Josh and me, saying all the things I wished I could say in real life. Life imitating art and all that. Just like (the villainous) Lombardi Brothers are really the Manafort Brothers (yes, those Manaforts) and how they sent my father to die in toxic pits (which is the plot of the 4th book, "Broken Ground"). For a writer, mining that sort of personal loss and tragedy is commonplace. But even in the context of trying to present an entertaining mystery, it exacts a toll. It's not a spoiler to say Chris Porter dies in the first book. Or maybe it's a spoiler, but the book came out in 2013, so I'm not that worried about it. And, moreover, the loss of Chris is what drives Jay, haunts him, distorts his worldview, because even before he dies, Chris had been lost to the drugs and alcohol. Which is weird when I consider that my brother died in 2017. So the entire time I'm writing the Porter books, I'm writing about an inevitable future, both consciously and subconsciously, and the pain I know I have yet to experience. And then when the moment hits, there's no forgiveness, no debt relief. You don't get to draw on previous suffering, like credit stored in a bank. No. Someone you love, someone with as conflicted a relationship as Josh and I had, dies; you have to grieve, do your time. And, like kicking drugs, there's no shortcut. You pay what you owe.

I know this is a pretty longwinded answer. It's just that Jay Porter and these books have come to encapsulate something even I wasn't aware of when I started writing the series. I do know the series will end with the fifth book ("Rag and Bone," Oceanview, 2019). Or, at least the narrative arc of those first five books will end. Never say never though, right? I always think how well this series would translate to TV, a nice 12-episode Netflix series. (Of course, what writer doesn't think that?) If there's a demand, I could keep going. But for now, yeah, it feels like the end. I've already written Jay's last line. In fact, I had that last line written since the second book.

S. MAG.: Working as an editor on books, as well, can you give writers out there advice on what to do and what not to do when working on that final draft before they turn it in to publishers?

J.C.: The longer I work in this industry, the harder it gets not to roll eyes when someone says they have a book they are trying to publish. Which is a terrible, terrible thing to admit. And I have to fight that cynicism all the time. Because, after getting off heroin, one of the things I promised myself was that I was going to pay it back. Pay it forward. Whatever. I mean, when I started having some success with writing, after years of feeling like I was screaming into the void, desperate to be heard, banging on walls, pleas falling on deaf ears—I was going to help others avoid feeling despondent and helpless when it came to getting their art out there. But I get why agents, editors, publishers grow weary. It's weird, right? We enter this profession because we love writing, but as you go on, you encounter so much middle-of-the-road writing you grow jaded. And this isn't "bad" writing; it's the sheer volume, the nature of having so much to read, all the time, you lose perspective. I think of Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," and the critic in the bank whose life has become so absurd, everything a trope, a hall of mirrors cast back on itself; he can't recognize the threat of death without deconstructing it. Which I guess is a long way of saying: read, study, read, write, edit, rewrite, and be sure what you are turning in sparkles. You have to turn in your very best book. Because people are looking to say no.

S. MAG.: Do you provide online writing classes? If so, what made you start down that path? And can you tell writers out there where to go to find out more about the services and support you provide?

J.C.: I do teach online; LitReactor, mostly. Couple times a year. I love it...teaching. Despite how numbed you can get, how heartbreaking this business can be, I do know some things and I want to help. I've learned, I guess you'd call them tricks. The sad

truth of writing books is that the “writing” doesn’t matter all that much. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not advocating ditching craft. Writers live for that pretty turn of phrase. But it isn’t always why readers read. Most readers, not all but most, read for story. There are a lot of bestselling books with fairly dreadful syntax. All those “pretty sentences” we writers fall in love with don’t add up to much without the story. And then there’s the dreaded “author brand,” which makes most of us shudder and recoil, but it’s still a real thing. And how do you avoid the pitfalls, get past that first line of agent/editor defense, the disgruntled, overworked, snarky MFA student? I’ve learned some shortcuts. I like to teach courses to pass this information along. I also just give it away for free when people write me. Truth is, I am a lousy businessman.

S. MAG.: As an author, do you have a favorite location when it comes to the setting/backdrop for your stories? Are you partial to the big, gritty cityscape; or those small towns that have secrets buried under just about everything?

J.C.: *Setting is paramount. I wanted to call the Porter books “The Lamentation” series because that (Lamentation) mountain and the bitter, brutal winters of northern New Hampshire are as much characters as Jay or Chris or Jenny or Turley or any of them. I’ve written books both in and out of the city, but I think I am more comfortable (better?) in those deceptively safe confines of small town USA, specifically the East Coast, where I grew up.*

S. MAG.: Give us a look at “A Day in the Life of Joe Clifford, Author.” Such as, when it comes to writing, do you have a certain time set aside for typing; a time for social media; a certain room in the house you work in, etc.?

J.C.: *These days? Ha! A lot of childcare and golf. I’ve been writing two books a year for the past five years. Start one in January, the other in August. I finished “Rag and Bone” (Porter 5) in June, and I promised myself I was not starting another book till next January. I’m forcing myself to take a break. A lot of that has to do with dealing with the loss of my brother. I also want to be sure the next book I write is . . . the one. And it’s weird, the way the brain works. Because as soon as August started to roll around, my subconscious started churning out ideas. The joy of restless, sleepless nights . . . Anyway, because of that output, I have three books coming out this year. Two the next, one more in 2020. Everything I’ve written has been taken. Now is the time to take a step back, recharge, and plan. I want that next stratosphere. I want the must-read. “Gone Girl,” “Girl on the Train.” And, yeah, that’s a lot of pressure. But it’s also liberating in a way. I mean, fifteen years ago I was eating garbage off the ground and sleeping in alleys; a hobo. I know Internet memes probably aren’t where one should get inspiration, but I saw one recently that really resonated, and in a good way. I forget where I saw it, but it was like, “I didn’t come this far to only come this far.” The last couple years, losing my brother, some crushing rejections, have been among the roughest of my life—and that includes those strung-out, homeless years. I feel like I am just now coming out of it, this fog, like I am waking back up. If that makes sense.*

S. MAG.: What is next for you? What would you like your fans to be on the lookout for?

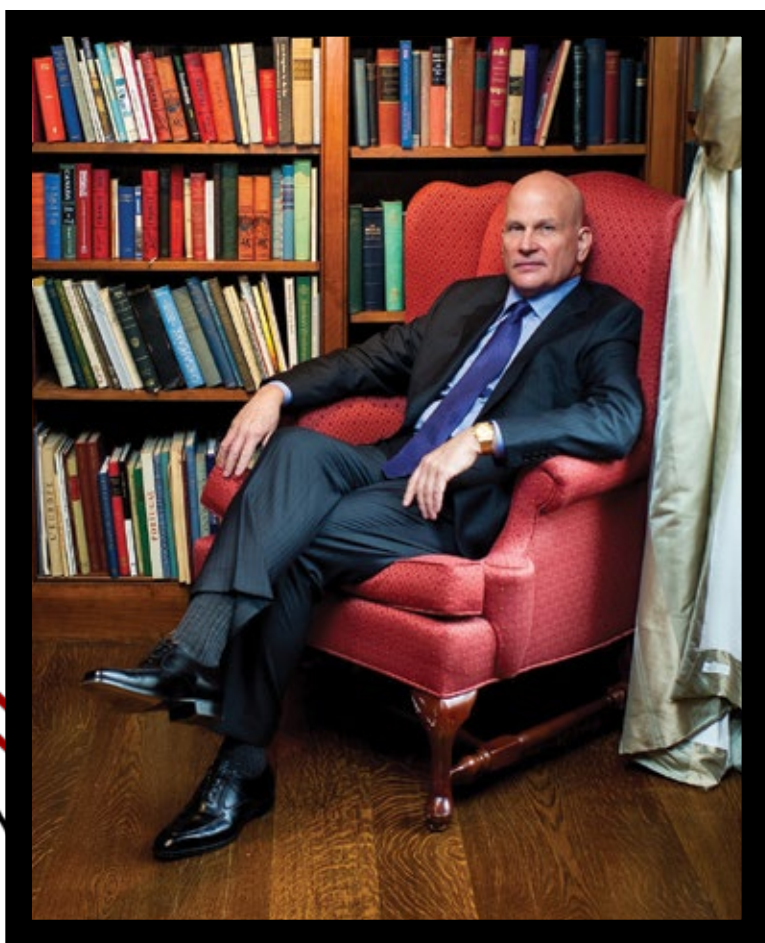
J.C.: *Well, I’ll be writing books. I won’t ever stop writing books. And I feel like domestic psychological thrillers is where I want to be. I feel like this next one—and the ideas are unrelenting—is going to take me to that next level. I hope. But how those books are going to get out there? I have no idea. I left my agency a couple years ago when all this stuff with my brother started getting bad. Nothing against the agency or my agent (who I love). I just felt like I needed a fresh start, a clean break, no obligation. But I also painted myself into a corner. Because I realized I can’t go back to submitting my work. I need a new agent, and would love to crack the Big Five. But I am done with the whole “please submit a brief synopsis and the first 30 pages.” I know that’s how the game works. But I don’t have the stomach for it anymore. When my current contract is up with Down & Out (a contract I brokered myself), I’ll have close to a dozen novels published. If an agent or editor or publisher wants to work with me, I’d love that. If someone wants to see what I can do, I am more than happy to send out any one of those dozen novels. My voice is my voice, my milieu my milieu. Whatever I write next, regardless of the subject matter, will sound like me. Why would I want it to sound unlike me? Readers of my work, fans of what I do, expect me to sound like me. So, yeah, not sure how I reconcile that approach with the reality of how the industry functions. I can promise you this: I will write the fuck out of that next book, bleed and leave everything on the page because that’s all I know how to do. To paraphrase Jerry Stahl: after heroin everything else is health food. Maybe that’s too obscure a way to end this interview? No, I think most will get that.*

And the fans of this amazing author most certainly do. The voice of Joe Clifford is not only his “own,” but it is a unique, remarkable voice that resonates with readers and brings out a litany of human emotions. Thankfully, there are books here and forthcoming that will allow even more of Clifford’s words to “shine.” To follow Joe and his upcoming work visit, <http://joeclifford.com/>. ■

DAVID CORBETT

Blends Mystery, History & Action to Bring Doc Holliday to Life

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Steven Saldana, Studio Saldana



It adds a little extra “mystery” to any tale when the author who tells it is a soul who worked fifteen years in the field of private investigation. David Corbett is the author we speak of here, and his name may seem quite familiar to many. Not only has he created books that have won accolades and pulled readers to his side, but he also played a significant part in a number of high-profile criminal and civil litigations. In other words, when it comes to suspense, this is one man who knows of what he speaks.

David’s resume is a long one. Not only has his fiction received widespread praise, but he has also delved into the non-fiction arena. With his most recent release, however, “The Long-Lost Letters of Doc Holliday,” David has stepped into a classic, frightful realm in a whole new colorful way. This is the tale of gunslingers, and offers a fresh view on everything from the amazing man Holliday was to the unforgettable gunfight at that infamous O.K. Corral.

With this tour de force, readers are there when some of the most notorious love letters in American history, supposedly destroyed a century ago, mysteriously reappear. A fierce battle ensues for possession of these letters and brings back to life the lawless roads Holliday once walked. Historical romance, courtroom drama and

action thriller, this author has woven the perfect quilt that will cause fans’ jaws to drop.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): We begin with a question that people very rarely get to ask in a writer’s interview: What is it like to be a real P.I.? Can you speak a little about one case you were involved in that you will never forget?

David Corbett (D.C.): *In response to the first question, I’ll provide the answer I usually offer when people ask which fictional*



“The most important thing not to do is get too caught up in the success or failure of others.”

representation of PIs I find closest to my own real-life experience: Paul Drake from the Perry Mason TV show. I went out and collected documentary evidence and witness testimony on behalf of attorneys who hired me. But despite trying as hard as I could, I never looked quite as good as Paul Drake in a sport coat and slacks.

Some of the cases I worked on were pretty high-end: the civil suit against Michael Jackson for sexual assault of a minor, the Lincoln Savings & Loan Scandal, the Cotton Club Murder Case (and a spin-off wrongful dismissal suit against Larry Flynt), the People's Temple Trial, plus a number of major civil and criminal litigations, including a series of marijuana smuggling cases involving a group of Navy brats and Vietnam vets known as the Coronado Company, which provided inspiration for my first novel, *“The Devil's Redhead.”*

Now, given all those headline cases, it's actually something relatively “minor” that I find the most memorable. I had to transport a young, rich, transvestite heroin addict from San Francisco to Beaumont, Texas. He was entering a month-long rehab program at the command of his mother who threatened to cut off his money if he refused. (He'd already squandered \$2 million in eighteen months.) I had to accompany him via a common carrier airline, and then on a van the rehab center provided from Houston airport to the clinic.

To be brief, it was a long trip. At every step of the journey, I had absolutely no idea what my “package” would do (and he was a real firecracker). Once we landed in Texas, for example, and reality truly set in, he tried to buy my return ticket from me so he could use it to escape, and threw a hurricane-grade tantrum in a crowded restaurant when I refused.

But my favorite anecdote from the experience remains this one: His mother graciously provided first-class fare for the flight from San Francisco to Houston. Once we were in our seats my companion looked around, took in those around us, and promptly announced in a voice I'm sure could be heard at the back of the plane: “Boy, if it weren't for me, you'd be the weirdest looking guy in first class!”

S. MAG.: Are some of your other books, characters and/or plots, loosely based on cases you have worked on?

D.C.: My second novel, *“Done for a Dime,”* was partially based on a case my late wife and I worked on as part of her probate litigation practice, but also involved knowledge my nephew provided based on cases he had worked on as an arson investigator. After that, I left much of my specific PI caseload behind (except in snatches) and relied instead on new situations that aroused my interest—political corruption and rampant violence in Central America (*“Blood of Paradise”*) and immigrant smuggling (*“Do They Know I'm Running?”*). That said, the research and interviewing skills I developed as a PI served me well in my research for those two books.

For my fifth novel, *“The Mercy of the Night,”* for the first time I created a PI-type character. He's a lawyer who basically serves as “the justice system's St. Jude,” dedicating himself to helping people whom others refuse to help, or who seek to turn their lives around. Again, however, it wasn't a case I worked on that inspired the story. Rather, it was a case that haunted my hometown of Vallejo, California, in which a child predator over the span of just a few weeks abducted two very similar six-year-old girls. The second girl managed to escape after three days. But by her teenage years, her life was falling apart. I wanted to tell the story of what she was going through, the horror of personal over-exposure on the one hand and gross misunderstanding of her and what she was dealing with on the other. Phelan Tierney, my quasi-PI protagonist, tries to help her, and realizes she has been “helped” far too often by far too many people who “only had her best interest at heart.” That, too, resonated with my own PI experience, in which I met many young people, especially those working the streets, who had been used so savagely by so many predators of every stripe—including their own family members—that the whole concept of trusting someone had become unfathomable.

The subsequent novella, *“The Devil Prayed and Darkness Fell,”* is a follow-up to *“The Mercy of the Night,”* in which Tierney is asked by the sister of a cop-killer to help her tell the world that her brother, who came back from a combat tour in Iraq a changed and badly damaged man, is not a monster. This again drew on my experience of interviewing (“unpacking”) witnesses, securing their testimony (“locking them in”), and dealing with highly charged, public cases where many people had already formed hard and fast opinions as to someone's guilt or innocence based on imperfect, incomplete, or even faulty information.

S. MAG.: This new book, *“The Long Lost Letters of Doc Holliday,”* is an extremely interesting topic. Can you talk about the research and the time that went into this in order to gather information on the era, the location, the high-profile people, etc.? Is research something you have a passion for?

D.C.: Yes, I love research, though I also realize that this love, if taken to excess, becomes merely a distraction—or a form of writer's block. Sooner or later, you have to stop researching and write, even if there is still more to learn. So at some point, even if I feel I need to know more, I begin writing and continuing my research as I go.

I have been interested in Doc Holliday and his correspondence with his cousin Mattie (who would become a Sister of Mercy) ever since my college days. The gunman and the nun—what's not to love? And Doc Holliday is America's most iconic antihero. I even considered writing a book comprised of nothing but the letters. I wasn't sure I could pull that off, though, and then PI work intervened, and the writing of my first five novels. By that point I felt I possessed the skills necessary to do the thing well, with one major change: I would not write just the letters, but use them as a MacGuffin in a crime-action drama that echoed the events portrayed in that correspondence.

One of the problems of researching Doc is trying to separate fact from fiction. Fortunately historian Gary Roberts only a few years ago came out with a definitive and superb biography that takes great pains to challenge or confirm many of the myths surrounding Doc. That served as my primary source, but I also read Paula Marks' history of the Gunfight at the OK Corral, "And Die in the West," which provided a much more sharply critical view of the Earp faction and especially Doc, whom one source described as "the touchiest drunk in the West." I took both sides to heart in fashioning my idea of who Doc was. I also tracked down a small family memoir written by Mattie herself, and researched both the local vigilante tradition and the Apaches, whose final chapters as a free people parallel the Tombstone heyday.

Finally, I traveled to the area and interviewed both Marge Elliott, proprietor of the Tombstone Western Heritage Museum, and Timothy Fattig, biographer of Wyatt Earp and the man responsible for bringing Doc to life in the reenactments of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral conducted daily in Tombstone. That provided prelude to an extensive solo tour of the Dragoon Mountains, which form the most imposing geological structure in the region and the backdrop for much of the action in the novel.

S. MAG: Can you tell us a little about the book; perhaps "gift" readers with something they won't be able to find in any synopsis?

D.C.: This is a book that has posed a considerable challenge from a marketing standpoint, since it's nearly impossible to neatly pigeonhole; it's part epistolary novel, part historical romance, part legal drama, and part action thriller.

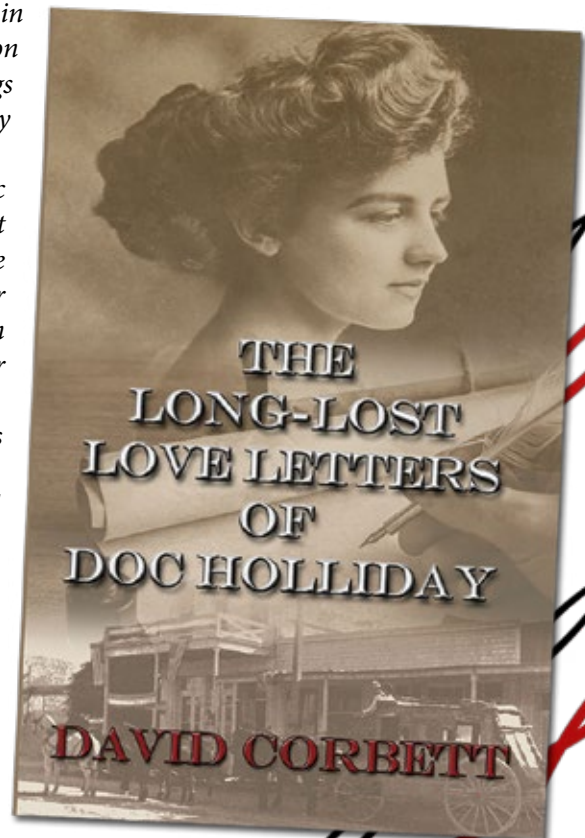
The greatest challenge of the book was the letters themselves, and the most gratifying compliment I've received so far is having someone ask: "Where did you find them?" (To which I replied: "I wrote them.")

The letters provide thematic subtext to the present-day story line, but not in any programmatic way (i.e., Doc is not represented by one particular person in the present, Mattie another, and so on). Rather, the conflicts and longings expressed in the letters get lived out again by the characters in the main story in various, often surprising ways.

But the most daunting challenge was imagining not just what a romantic correspondence between Doc and his cousin Mattie would be like, but what trajectory it would take, such as, how did this long-distance romance through letters evolve and change? I knew the letters had to provide their own narrative arc; I knew that arc had to mirror what was happening in the present; and I knew that had to happen without being too obvious or distorting either level of action. That, as they say, took some fancy figuring.

No one really knows what went on between Doc and Mattie—the letters have been destroyed, and the family denies any romantic connection existed. So I had to create the entirety of their love affair from the known facts and then proceed into the unknown, guided largely by my imagination. But I was also dedicated to having what I invented ring true to those who know the history well. The result, I believe, will reward readers with a side of Doc they have never seen before, but which also does no violence to what is genuinely known about him.

S. MAG.: As "The Book Doctor," you offer manuscript services to other writers. Can you tell us a bit about why/what led you to do this and what type of services an author can receive from you?



D.C.: I wrote *"The Art of Character"* shortly after I began teaching, and soon after the book came out I began receiving requests, not just from students but also agents and editors I knew, to provide more extensive manuscript services. I have been really gratified by the success some of my charges have enjoyed. Not only have a number gone on to be published but have done so to considerable acclaim. (For some testimonials in that regard, anyone who is interested can visit the page on my website devoted to editing services: <http://www.davidcorbett.com/editing-services.php>)

S. MAG.: This book specifically focused on the craft of writing. If you could give advice on the most important thing for an author to do in this industry, as well as the most important thing they should avoid, what would that advice be?

D.C.: Well, the first thing to do is not conflate the craft of writing with the "industry" of writing. Down that road lies madness. I'd say the most important thing to do is to honor what you believe you can write about honestly and insightfully, and then do so with a sincere respect for readers.

The most important thing not to do is get too caught up in the success or failure of others.

Neither of those things has much to do with the craft of writing, however. If I were to advise on that front, it would be simply: Character!

S. MAG.: This is a world of self-branding and marketing. Can you speak about your personal views of social media (good and/or bad) and how much time you feel a writer needs to spend focusing on that niche in order to further their career?

D.C.: This was discussed at a dinner I had during Thrillerfest with Donald Maass, Bob Dugoni, and Steven James. Don pointed out that direct social media efforts actually have very limited impact on sales. The most important elements are still the quality of the work, publisher support, and word of mouth. A writer can control only one of those, and that's where their primary focus should lie.

I have also found that those who crow the loudest about themselves on social media seldom gain any real traction with readers. It pays to be gracious, not self-serving. Support your fellow writers. If you're good at Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and enjoy those platforms, by all means proceed. If not, return to your manuscript and get cracking.

S. MAG.: Like you are for so many others, do you have your own favorite, so to speak, when it comes to a writer who, when their next book comes out, you just *have* to read it ASAP?

D.C.: I have a bit of a writer crush on Julian Barnes. Ditto Richard Price. And in the crime genre, I'm always looking to see what Rachel Howzell Hall and Adrian McKinty are up to. Also: As my wife and I have been doing a good bit of long-distance driving the past few years, we've fallen in love with Neil Gaiman (especially "Norse Mythology" and "Good Omens," which he co-authored with Terry Pratchett); the new series of Ian Fleming novels narrated by some of the greatest British actors working today; and the Nero Wolfe novels read by Michael Prichard, whose voice is the living embodiment of Archie Goodwin.

S. MAG.: Is there a particular genre you have never written in that you wish to tackle one day; and if so, why?

D.C.: Dystopian fiction, because at the pace of current events it seems like the best way to tackle history—get there before it happens.

S. MAG.: Readers want to know what to be on the lookout for, so what projects are you working on now? Will there be another historical figure in your future?

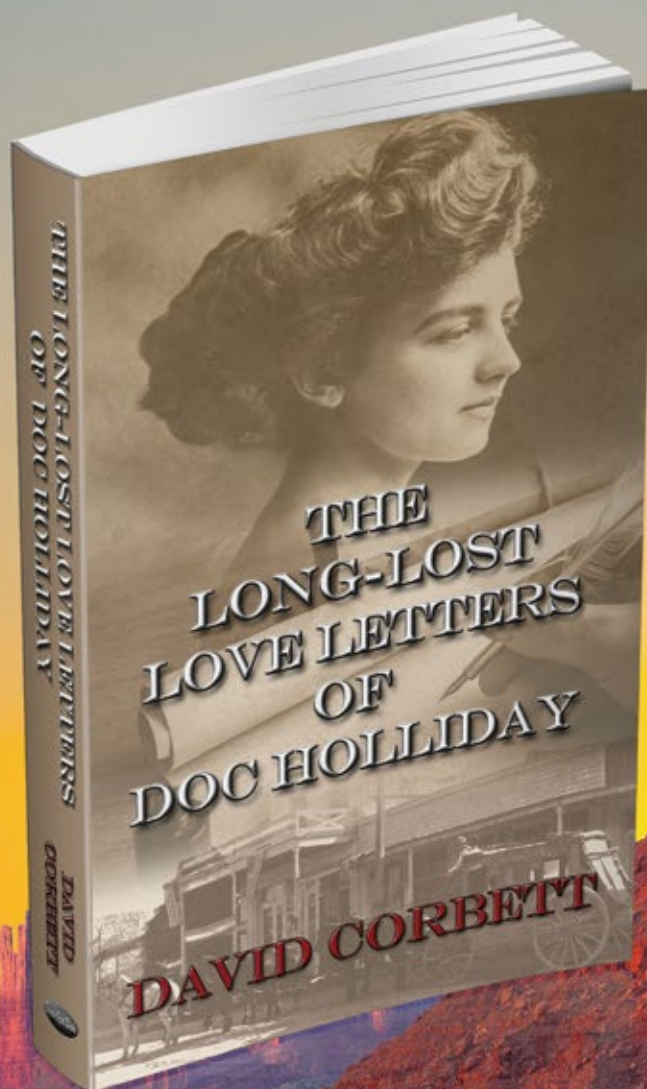
D.C.: There will be, but I hate to discuss works in progress because I think it's bad luck. I'll say merely that this time I've turned to Celtic folklore, and in particular the warrior-hunter clans known as the Fianna.

I would say leaving it at that is unbearably cruel, especially for those, like myself, who love the world of Celtic folklore. But, alas, it is what it is and we'll all have to wait. In the meantime, however, Doc Holliday and his world is a fantastic way to spend time while waiting for the next incredible work by David Corbett.

To learn more about past books, and to keep up with the new events and projects in the works, head to <http://davidcorbett.com/> and enjoy. ■

The Long-Lost Love Letters of Doc Holliday

by David Corbett



"Corbett's character-driven legal thriller is full of suspense and hard-charging gunslinging action from the Old West to a modern-day shoot-out."

— US Review of Books

"David Corbett's latest, *The Long-Lost Love Letters of Doc Holliday*, is just terrific. The correspondence between Doc and his cousin sings with truth and passion, and the greater story of the letters' provenance provides thrills enough for several novels. Highly recommended."

— John Lescroart, *New York Times*
best-selling author of *Poison* and *Fatal*

"Brimming with intrigue and suspense, this multifaceted thriller features a contemporary shoot-'em-up not portrayed since the final scene of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*."

— Bookreporter

The most notorious love letters in American history—supposedly destroyed a century ago—mysteriously reappear, and become the coveted prize in a fierce battle for possession that brings back to life the lawless world evoked in the letters themselves.

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Daughter of the Popular P.J. Tracy 'Team'

Talks About the Next Step in the *Monkeewrench* Series

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Mother-daughter writing team, P.J. Tracy, enhanced the world of fiction time and time again by creating amazing stories that lived within the minds of P.J. and Traci Lambrecht.

When it comes to Traci, her childhood passion was focused on riding and showing horses. Upon graduating from college, and dealing with the knowledge that since the Cold War had come to an end she would no longer be able to apply for the job of “spy,” she turned to writing. Not only was her mother extremely excited to see that this was her daughter’s true calling, but their readers will always be grateful for the long, prolific career mother and daughter shared as they released unforgettable books in multiple genres.

Regretfully, P.J. passed in 2016, leaving fans to grieve and wonder what would happen next with the thrilling and award-winning *Monkeewrench* series that the women had brought to life.

Now...the time has come. “The Guilty Dead” which is the latest in the series is one of the most highly anticipated thrillers of the year, and the first solo novel to come from Traci.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Can you tell readers a bit about the *Monkeewrench* series and how it first came about?

P.J. Tracy (P.J.T.): “*Monkeewrench*” is the collective name of



an eccentric group of computer geniuses and cybercrime experts led by the beautiful, enigmatic, Grace MacBride. An insular, unbreakable family bonded by past horrors and their devotion to justice, they gradually open their oddball world to veteran Minneapolis homicide detectives Leo Magozzi and Gino Rolseth.

It began at a time where P.J. and I had been making a good living writing romance, but the limitations on what we could do with the plots and the characters was terribly frustrating. We were desperate for the freedom to create multi-dimensional characters and intricate plots, and also to explore more realism. Darkness and tragedy are prevalent features of being human, but you can't go there in romance novels, and we began to resent them. And when you start resenting your work, it's time to move on.

We loved mysteries and thrillers, so we took a leap of faith and decided to write one. One year and two dented savings accounts later, *Monkeewrench* was finished. We'd never had so much fun writing, and the grand bonus was the book took off, hitting the New York Times and international bestseller lists, and winning several awards including the Anthony. It was a dream come true, and almost nine books later, the series is still going strong.

S. MAG.: Being the ninth installment of the series, can you offer readers a “sneak peek” of “The Guilty Dead” that they won't find in a synopsis?

P.J.T.: With all the synopses floating around, I probably couldn't tell you much more without giving away the whole farm, but I can let you in on the thought process behind the plot.

Secrets are the cornerstone of any mystery. I believe everybody has them, and my desire to explore that was the foundation of “*The Guilty Dead*.” This is a book about a family dynasty and the secrets they keep—secrets so terrible, even I was shocked at the end! It's also a book about illusion and deception; the idea that everyone is wearing a mask to one degree or another has always fascinated me.

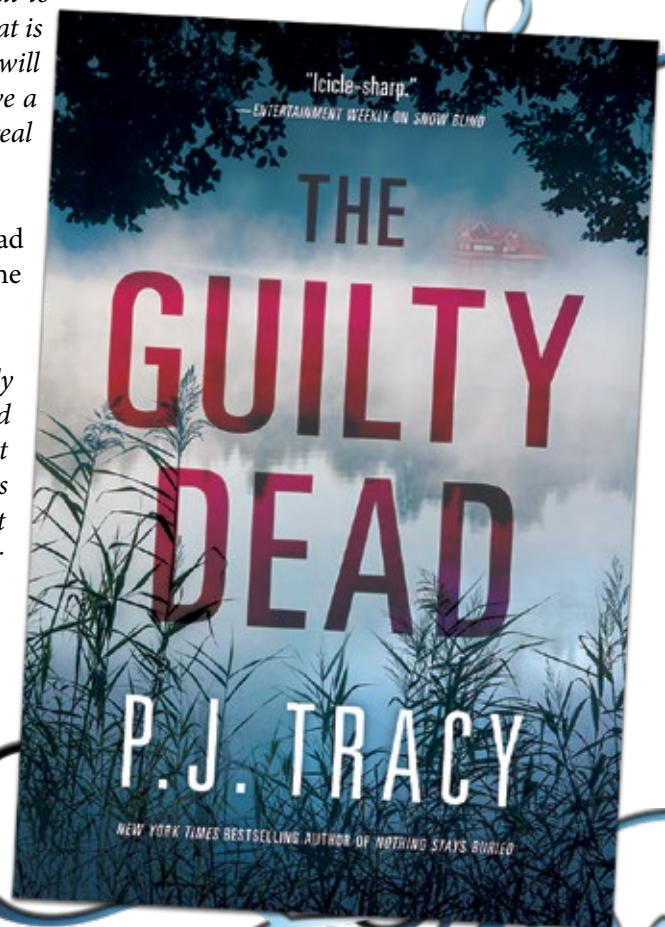
S. MAG.: Do you know when a series is coming to an end, or do you play it by ear? Is there difficulty in saying ‘so long’ to characters that you've spent so much time with?

P.J.T.: A series is coming to an end when your characters no longer have anything to say and you're not enjoying the writing, but I'm definitely not at that point with *Monkeewrench*. It's difficult to conceive of life without the gang after all these years, and a part of that is they will forever be a profound connection to P.J. But I do feel that we will be taking a break from each other at some point in the future. I have a relationship with them, and all the same rules apply as if they were real people in my life. But we'll never break up!

S. MAG.: Is there one character in fiction that you wish you had created? And if so, why? Do you relate to that character (or the creator) in some way?

P.J.T.: Holden Caulfield. He is so contradictory, complex, yet wildly naïve. Since I read “*Catcher in the Rye*” as a young teen, I appreciated his cynicism and rebellious streak; as an adult, I admire the fact that he was redeemed at the end by thinking of his family when he was contemplating his own death. I wasn't at all like him, nor did I want to be, but the theme of teen angst is timeless and, of course, never underestimate the allure of Schadenfreude.

“No work is ever finished or perfect, but that must always be your goal.”



S. MAG.: Being a writing duo with your amazing mom for so many years, can you explain the most difficult/challenging part of going from a “duo” to a “single” writer?

P.J.T.: *Not being able to sit across the desk from her, lobbing ideas back and forth and laughing constantly. We were always very serious and focused when we wrote, but hardly ever serious when we were in the dynamic process of plotting. But she was such a larger-than-life character, so vibrant and witty, her spirit is still very much with me, and it's never as present as it is when I'm writing.*

S. MAG.: Rural Minnesota brings to mind (especially in this rural New Englander's mind) the look and feel of cold and snow. (LOL) Is there a part of Minnesota that inspires that “lone, dark, suspenseful” tale to come to life?



P.J.T.: *Everything about Minnesota is lone, dark, and suspenseful in the winter! I could think of a few other adjectives, too, but I'm trying to keep this PG-13. But truly, if you allow yourself to go to the dark side, there is such desolation that it becomes a character and therefore a potent inspiration. If I lived in Fiji, I would probably be writing about unicorns and rainbows. There are good things about winter in Minnesota, too, I just can't come up with any off the top of my head.*

S. MAG.: Your bio speaks about your love of travel. Is there a certain locale you have visited that you wish to one day set a story in? And is there one locale you have not been but have a desire to see one of these days?

P.J.T.: *I've been to so many amazing places in my life, but none inspired me to write as much as Ireland. It's such a vivid, richly textured country, filled with poets and poetry and shadows of the past. It's no surprise that such a small nation has produced so many literary stars.*

S. MAG.: Genre-wise, is there a category of fiction you wish to write in that you have not yet taken on? If so, what would that be and why do you wish to dive into it?

P.J.T.: *Humorous hardship (I just made that up). We wrote a Christmas novel a few years ago along those lines, called “Return of the Magi,” which is available as an eBook. It's dark and light, funny and tragic, but filled with redemption and heart and I think it would be fun to take that style one step further. P.J. always joked that life is one long continuum of misery punctuated by fleeting moments of joy. It's a melodramatic, humorous statement, she meant it to be, but it really holds some universal truth—she knew it, and so did I. In fact, one of the standalones I've been toying with is titled “Fleeting Moments of Joy.”*

S. MAG.: What is one piece of writing advice that was given to you that stands above all the rest? Advice you “live by,” so to speak?

P.J.T.: *No work is ever finished or perfect, but that must always be your goal.*

S. MAG.: So...share! What's up next that fans should be on the lookout for?

P.J.T.: *I'm finishing the tenth Monkeewrench novel, “The Dead City,” which will be released in 2019. When I put that to bed, I might take that little break I was mentioning earlier to work on one of my standalone ideas. They've been clamoring in my head for a while, threatening me: LET ME OUT OR I'LL DRIVE YOU INSANE. Maybe it will be “Fleeting Moments of Joy,” or maybe something entirely different. One of the best things about writing is you never really know what comes next.*

How true! And now fans can take a moment to issue that sigh of relief, knowing that *Monkeewrench* will grace 2019, as well. As Traci sets off on a new path, it is easy to say after reading “The Guilty Dead,” that she will not only continue to do stellar work, but she will also continuously make her mother proud with the work she does.

To learn more about Traci and her upcoming events, go to <https://pjtracy.com>. ■

SPECIAL PREVIEW FROM **BRENDAN DENEEN**

THE CHRYSALIS

By Brendan Deneen

Press Photo Credit: Mark Manne



The smell of stale cat urine assaulted them even though all the house's windows were cracked open.

"The layout is supremely functional, it has great feng shui," Chelsea was saying. It had taken very little time to walk through all the rooms; the ground floor wasn't all that much bigger than their apartment, and the upstairs was even smaller. "There's a jitney stop a couple of blocks over, and the shuttle drops you off right in back of the train station. Which is terribly convenient!

"Now, let me show you the backyard. It's actually much bigger than it looks at first glance."

"Um . . . Chelsea?" Jenny interrupted.

"Hm, yes, Jenny?"

"Isn't there a . . . bit of a problem here?"

Chelsea stared at her with a blankness that Tom found kind of impressive.

"Problem? No . . . no, not that I can

think of . . ."

"The smell, Chelsea," Tom said after a moment of awkward silence. "I think my wife is talking about the fact that this entire house reeks of cat pee. Not exactly the kind of smell that goes away . . . you know . . . ever."


"Oh," Chelsea answered, seemingly shocked by the idea that one of the houses she was showing could be considered somehow less than perfect. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yeah, okay, but we noticed," Tom continued, his bullshit meter going off. "I think—"

"We realize our price range isn't the most competitive," Jenny interrupted, stepping closer to Chelsea, "but the apartments and houses we've seen so far haven't really been . . . our style. I mean, we really appreciate your time—Victoria said you squeezed us in at the last minute. Which is so nice of you. But is there anything else you have . . . maybe something affordable but with a bit more . . . personality?"

Chelsea's face went slack and Jenny could see her nostrils flare ever so slightly. Then the Realtor blinked several times, as if she were rebooting, and





the mask went back up.

"Personality . . . personality . . . hmm. Actually, now that I think about it, I do know about one house that you might *adore*. It isn't *officially* listed yet, but trust me, it has a *lot* of personality."

Tom's left hand was raised in a futile attempt to block the sunlight from his eyes, the late-day clouds having parted and then vanished during the drive over. Jenny stood next to him in the reverse pose, her right hand shielding her eyes as the two of them stared at the large, 112-year-old house.

"Sorry I'm late!" Chelsea nearly shouted from close behind them, making them both jump. "My husband called, there was some kind of emergency with my youngest. . . . Isn't there always? Apparently, multiple adhesive bandages were required!" She laughed.

Jenny wondered what was so amusing about one of Chelsea's kids getting hurt. A parent's prerogative, she decided.

"*This* house is almost in our price range?" Jenny asked, focusing on the large structure in front of them and shaking her head in disbelief. "It's gorgeous."

The house at 79 Waldrop Street, in Springdale, New Jersey, one of several homes in a rounded cul-de-sac, was a big Victorian with large bay windows, a slate roof, and a huge porch with iron railings and wide front steps. The third floor boasted a single small, stained-glass window. On the porch, a wooden swing rocked gently in the breeze. The yard was overgrown but clearly had a lot of potential.

"Shall we?" Chelsea intoned, smiling at them like a cat staring at a couple of mice. She led them up the steps, unlocked the door, and ushered them inside.

Jenny was sure they were in the wrong house. There was no way they could afford a place like this. On top of that, the place was a mess, practically overflowing with stuff—all of it tacky as hell, in her opinion. A thin layer of dust covered everything.

The entry opened directly into a dining room. An enormous wooden table with lion's-paw feet filled most of the floor; a lighter-colored wooden china cabinet stood along the closest wall. Another wooden china area, this one built into the wall to their left, was closed off by small glass doors. An antique-looking wooden display table squatted in the far corner, covered in random bric-a-brac.

Another doorway across the room and to the left opened into a small bathroom. A doorway directly in front of them led into the kitchen, and a small door with a brass knob stood to the left of that, between the other two doors, oddly placed in the far wall, cut into the painfully bright wallpaper.

"Whoa," Jenny said quietly.

"Is this . . . does someone live here?" Tom asked, confused.

"Not anymore," Chelsea answered, walking around the table and spreading her arms out with a bizarre amount of pride, as if she had decorated this disaster herself. "The house is what we call 'as is.' A friend of a friend of a friend who lives in Europe inherited it like this. I don't know *all* the details but he is *very* eager to get it off his hands, so it's less expensive than it might otherwise be . . . *much* less expensive. On the condition, of course, that whoever buys it will have to deal with all of the stuff left behind."

Jenny and Tom followed Chelsea around the giant wooden table and into a room through yet another doorway directly to the left. This space was clearly intended to be the living room, judging by the matching floral-pattern upholstered couch and love seat, both shrouded in yellowing plastic. An ancient rocking chair sat by itself against the far wall. An awful red-and-black rug covered the floor, and above the furniture hung an ugly, angular chandelier that was too low—it would be hard to walk straight across the room without having to duck, or risk having your eyes gouged out. An old-school stereo system hunkered in the far corner, complete with a turntable, double cassette player, and an eight-track.

"When you consider the . . . extremely cluttered nature of the house, you begin to understand why it's so affordable. The rooms don't have to stay as is, of course. Who wants to walk straight into a dining room from the outside?" Chelsea said with an offended laugh.

"You can make the place your own! How much fun would *that* be!" She lowered her voice slightly. "Of course, the house does need some work, some overall upkeep, another aspect that may have turned off some buyers, though the foundation is more than solid. Are you handy, Tom?"

"We both are, actually," Jenny said, put off by Chelsea's casual sexism, though she wasn't exactly proficient with tools.

"Well, good," Chelsea said with a smile that seemed to be calling Jenny a liar. "This might be perfect for you, then, if you're up for a project. And who knows what kind of cool things you'll find hidden here!"

"Where does that door go?" Tom asked as they walked back into the dining room, pointing to the small one with the brass handle.

"Ah yes," Chelsea responded. "That goes upstairs. I love this little door. These Victorians have all kinds of cute touches."

A tiny door! So quaint." She opened it and walked quickly up the carpeted stairs. The carpet was a pretty awful dark pink.

Tom half expected the stairs to creak and groan as Chelsea walked up, but her ascent was silent. *Maybe she's right*, he thought, *maybe this house really does have a solid foundation*.

He grabbed Jenny's hand before she went up. "Well?"

"I . . . I kind of frickin' love it, Tom."

He laughed and put his arm around his wife, kissing her cheek gently. "Let's see the rest of this haunted house before we jump into the deep end."

"Of course," she whispered as they walked up the steps. "But I know you like it, too. I can see it in your eyes."

Tom didn't answer, but he didn't have to. She was right. He kind of frickin' loved it, too.

The second floor was fairly unremarkable, the three bedrooms and bathroom all large and cluttered, but Tom and Jenny loved the small, winding staircase at the end of the hallway that led to the compact third floor, which had only one room, as the house narrowed. When Chelsea opened the small door, Jenny marveled at the sunlight pulsing in, multicolored, through the stained glass. Surprisingly, unlike the rest of the house, this small room was empty of furniture. The walls were decorated with a half dozen large, framed black-and-white photographs of desert settings, including two that featured the gaping maw of a dark cave. The photos themselves were a little hard to see, since someone had taken a red marker to the glass, covering each image with illegible scrawls, what looked like crude maps, and somewhat disturbing drawings of monstrous faces.

"Whoa . . .," Tom muttered, "postmodern."

"This room gets beautiful light, as you can see," Chelsea said cheerily, ignoring the pictures. "Might be nice for an office . . . or a nursery?"

Jenny felt blood immediately rush to her face and could sense Tom tensing next to her. This was a conversation they'd had many times, and it never ended well. Tom was open to the idea of having kids but it was something that made him extremely nervous. He thought his parents had been emotionally abusive, to him and to each other, and he didn't want to make the same mistakes they had. And honestly, Jenny didn't feel ready for kids either, but lately, when she saw cherubic little faces in strollers or a toddler asleep on a parent's shoulder, she'd started feeling those "biological clock" pangs she had always dismissed.

A long moment of uncomfortable silence stretched out until Tom clapped his hands together, a little too loud for the small space.

"So . . . is that it up here?"

"I'm glad you asked!" Chelsea said, her eyes lighting up. She headed toward the far wall, to the right of the window. Jenny looked at Tom quizzically and he shrugged in reply. "Like I said," the real estate agent continued, "these old houses are full of all kinds of cute touches." Tom cringed at her repeated use of the phrase, as though she were reading out of a brochure permanently etched in front of her eyes. "Check this out."

Chelsea pushed her fingers against the wall. Tom noticed the thin, tall, rectangular outline in the wall just as the hidden door swung open.

"Okay, you got me," he admitted, laughing. "That is cool."

Jenny and Tom stepped forward and peered down into the darkness of the open doorway as Chelsea moved aside. "A . . . secret staircase?"

"Exactly! I'm thinking a servant used to live up here, back when the house was first constructed."

"What makes you think that?" Jenny asked.

"Come on down and I'll show you," Chelsea said, and whisked past them, walking daintily down the steep and rickety wooden stairs.

"This is pretty sweet," Tom said to Jenny, smiling.

"You always did love the Gothic stuff," she responded, pushing him into the stairwell ahead of her.

As they walked slowly down the stairs, Jenny wondered how many people had used them in the last hundred-plus years and felt goose bumps race across her flesh. Something about this gloomy staircase and the stale smell of the air made her feel light-headed. Chelsea had already opened the door at the bottom, flooding the space with light from below. She stared up at them with an anticipatory smile on her face, as if she'd sneaked them dessert before dinner.

When Tom reached the bottom, his face contorted in surprise. "What's down there?" Jenny called out, unable to see past either of them.

The kitchen looked like the 1970s had thrown up in it. Repeatedly. Polished bronze and white lacquer were everywhere. The stained wooden cabinets, which Tom and Jenny glanced through, were still full of supplies, including half-full spice



containers, plates and bowls, dust-covered glassware, and knives and other utensils. On the far side of the kitchen, Tom saw a well-stocked pantry through an open doorway that was right next to a closed door.

"Wow," Jenny said, taking in the room.

"It's got a lot of personality, that's for sure," Chelsea agreed.

"Where does that go?" Tom asked, pointing at the closed door.

"Ah yes, that's the basement," Chelsea said through her unnaturally white teeth. "A great space, but it needs some work. Maybe a man's touch." Something in her tone drew Tom's attention; she wasn't as ebullient or friendly as she'd been earlier. He noticed how tired she looked and that her smile was starting to really look forced. He felt bad for how unenthusiastic he'd been all day.

Maybe she's not as bad as she seems, he thought.

"Why don't you and I check out the backyard while Tom looks at the basement?" Chelsea said to Jenny.

"I could use some fresh air," Jenny admitted.

"Sounds good to me," Tom said, absentmindedly pulling an elastic band off his wrist and pulling his hair back into a ponytail. It was warm in the kitchen and he was starting to sweat a little.

As the two women went outside, Tom moved toward the basement, then stopped, noticing a large, somewhat faint stain on the linoleum floor. He'd never seen that particular shade of gray before. Some sort of horrible pasta accident, he thought with a chuckle as he walked over to the closed door.

The metal doorknob was cold and his entire body shivered when he touched it.

Turning the knob, he pushed the door open and was greeted by a dank, moist odor, like upturned earth after a particularly bad storm. Images of his parents' funerals flashed through his mind . . . how they had died so close to each other, how Tom had been forced to go through the process twice in the same year when he was in his early twenties . . . but he forced them away. Spotting a light switch to his left, he flipped it; a dirty, naked bulb sputtered on overhead, accompanied by an intermittent ticking noise that seemed to emanate from the bulb itself. The wooden stairs that led down to a cracked, gray concrete floor were old, worn, and not altogether safe-looking. Tom felt dizzy—a familiar sensation he often experienced when entering a new place, somewhere potentially exciting or terrifying.

He walked down the stairs slowly, the wood creaking and even buckling slightly in places. At the bottom, he found and flicked another light switch. Fluorescent ceiling lights hummed to life, crisscrossing the low-hanging drop ceiling. There were a few scattered windows down here, but, Tom saw, they had been painted over. He stared at the contents of the basement for a few seconds in slack-jawed wonder.

Every inch of the enormous space was packed with stuff . . . boxes, black garbage bags filled to near explosion, stacks of books, sports equipment, what must have been hundreds of gardening tools, bags of seed and dirt, camping equipment, at least a dozen old television sets, and who knew what else.

His eyes started to water from all the dust as he surveyed the space. The piles stretched off into the darkness, a lunatic maze of seemingly infinite proportions. Tom took a deep, panicked breath, as if he'd been drowning and surfaced at the last possible moment, then laughed at himself.

"Fucking hoarders," he said out loud. Jenny would probably love going through all this. She was obsessed with crappy little flea markets and secondhand shops.

He turned to go back upstairs, but a strange noise from the distant shadows stopped him.

"The hell?" he murmured, turning to once again peer into the darkness. After a few seconds, he heard it again. God damn if it didn't sound like breathing. Watery breathing, as if a sick animal were hidden down here.

Plumbing problems? Tom wondered as he cautiously moved toward the sound, wary of the precarious towers of junk. It got darker the farther he walked, as though the basement were somehow absorbing the fluorescent light, but he was able to discern a kind of path through the piles, like someone had walked this route before. Looking ahead, he squinted at something large and shadowy against the far wall. His breath hitched in his throat, his steps faltering.

A person, huge and hunched, stood facing him.

No, that was ridiculous. What would someone be doing down here, waiting in the dark? Fighting the urge to turn and run, Tom reached shaking, sweaty fingers into his beat-up jeans and withdrew his phone, which he immediately dropped. It landed with a hollow thud. Hoping the screen wasn't broken, he bent down to pick it up. A huge millipede-type insect ran out of a nearby pile of junk and skittered across his fingers—Tom flinched, yelled, and fell back onto his ass. Terrified, feeling like an infant, and hating himself for his reaction, he hit the button on the side of the phone and it blazed with light. He held it up, aiming it toward the person or whatever the hell it was in the corner.

The horrifying "person" was actually an old refrigerator. A very old refrigerator. It had probably been white once, but now it was mostly brown and yellow. A rusty metal handle dangled off the door.

"Get a grip," Tom mumbled. At that instant, the light went out and his stomach dropped. He quickly hit the button

a second time.

Moving closer to the fridge, he noticed markings on the floor in front of it, scrapes in the concrete and shifted dust. He shook his head, intrigued even though a knot was forming in his gut. *Someone moved this refrigerator back and forth*, he thought, cocking his head as he studied the ground. *A lot.*

Tom shoved the phone back into his pocket, plunging the corner back into darkness, and took hold of the fridge. Slick with sweat, his fingers slipped. He quickly wiped them on his shirt and grabbed the antique appliance again.

It was heavy. Really heavy. He smiled at the challenge, then tightened his grip and pulled with all his strength.

The refrigerator inched forward, then seemed to find its path, swinging to one side as if it were the door to yet another hidden passageway, opening into darkness like a toothless grin.

Panting slightly from the exertion, Tom squinted into the shadows.

Stuck to the wall, previously hidden by the refrigerator, was a dark pulsating mass about the size of a baby.

"Jesus . . ." Tom whispered. It resembled an oversized chrysalis, reminding him of days spent in the woods when he was a kid. Back when he had parents, had a family. But he'd never seen anything quite like this—the size, the color, everything about it seemed somehow *wrong*.

Despite the fear nestling in his stomach, he leaned closer, his eyes having adjusted to the darkness. Black and dark-purple veins covered the object, and he realized that the slow, rhythmic breathing noise he'd heard earlier was coming from the chrysalis. So was a rancid smell, like days-old garbage or the scent of a body after it gave up the ghost. The thing was covered in a thick, shiny mucus that caught what little light reached back here.

Disgusted, Tom looked around for something he could use to get rid of whatever this was, the same way he handled cockroaches or spiders or even mice in their apartment. If they ended up buying this house, he didn't want Jenny to inadvertently come across whatever this thing was. His gaze came to rest on a short-toothed metal rake. The teeth were incredibly sharp looking, making the tool resemble a medieval torture device more than a suburban gardening implement. He picked it up and tapped it against the floor a couple of times, liking that the bars of the rake were stiff, unbending. Strong enough to be used the way he intended. The splintered wooden handle felt comfortable against his palms, reminding him of working in the backyard with his dad when he was a kid. Some of the only good memories he had of the man. Maybe Tom could get used to living in the suburbs again.

Turning back toward the chrysalis, he raised the rake, ready to destroy this bizarre object stuck to the wall. Just before he swung, he paused. Had the "breathing" increased, or was that his imagination? The veins also seemed to be pulsating. Tom stared at it, makeshift weapon still raised. *What is this thing?*

He dropped the rake, which clattered onto the floor, and stepped forward. He could feel something intangible radiating off the chrysalis. Blood pounded in his ears, and a wave of excitement swept through him as he reached out. Before he could even question his actions, Tom carefully placed his hand on the dark mass. It was warmer than he expected, soft and spongelike. It pulsed, shrinking away and then expanding back into his grasp, as if frightened and then accepting, pulsating into his palm over and over and over again.

After a long moment, Tom pulled his hand away. Mucus stretched between his fingers and the still-throbbing chrysalis, arcing through the air, connecting them.

He stared at his glistening fingers. They seemed very far away, as if they were falling to the floor while the rest of him stayed in the same place. The entire basement brightened, went black, then lit up again, darkness and light oscillating in a regular rhythm. The chrysalis grew larger, its shape morphing, human hands and faces reaching out toward Tom from beneath its surface, beckoning him closer.

Voices whispered his name. His skin seemed to slough off in the same instant that his blood was absorbed by his bones, which turned to dust. He blew away in a sudden gust of wind, only to reform in the same spot, the lights above him flickering, his eyes opening and closing even though, he knew, his lids were completely gone. He disintegrated and reappeared once, then multiple times. Time stood still.

Holy fucking shit. ■

Brendan Deneen is the author of the graphic novels "Flash Gordon: The Mercy Wars," "The Island of Misfit Toys" and "Phoenix" (co-written with Jim Krueger), among others, as well as the novels "The Chrysalis" and "The Ninth Circle" and the upcoming novels "Ant-Man: Beginnings" and "Underhill." By day, he runs the film/TV division at Macmillan Publishers, with projects set up at MGM (with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson attached to star), Warner Brothers (with Bradley Cooper attached to star), Legendary Pictures, CBS Television, The Weinstein Company, and many more. Deneen is also the editor of *The Walking Dead* prose novels and the upcoming book "The Fifty Year Mission: The Complete Uncensored, Unauthorized Oral History of Star Trek."

Reading Between the Lies:

HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN

on “Trust Me”

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Steve Bucci



Ten books. Five Agathas. Two Anthonys. Two Macavities. The Daphne. A Mary Higgins Clark Award. The numbers (and names) speak for themselves, and Hank Phillippi Ryan's legacy is only destined to grow with the publication of her first standalone novel of suspense, “Trust Me” (Forge). It's an impressive list of accolades, and one that's further bolstered by the author's longstanding role as an on-air investigative reporter for Boston's WHDH-TV, which has garnered her 34 EMMYs, 14 Edward R. Murrow Awards, and dozens of other recognitions for her groundbreaking journalism.

Despite the enormity of her literary achievements, fiction came as a second act career for Ryan, who continues to work in the pursuit of facts by day. She published her first novel, “Prime Time,” in 2007. That title won an Agatha Award and introduced protagonist

Charlotte (“Charlie”) McNally, a scrappy Boston television reporter of a certain age, who would be featured in three subsequent books: “Face Time,” “Air Time,” and “Drive Time”—all available in new editions. Then, embattled journalist Jane Ryland stepped into the spotlight with “The Other Woman,” which won the prestigious Mary Higgins Clark Award and was the year's only release to be nominated for the Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, Shamus and Daphne awards for Best Novel of 2012; “The Wrong Girl,” “Truth Be Told,” “What You See,” and “Say No More” followed.

This year, Hank Phillippi Ryan charts a bold new course with the highly anticipated publication of “Trust Me”—a taut, cat-and-mouse thriller that unites a grieving journalist and an accused murderer in their elusive search for truth. Booklist awarded the title a starred review, noting: “It's a knockout...First-rate psychological suspense.” Further, *New York Times* bestselling author Mary Kubica enthused, “The tension mounts at a blistering pace, while Ryan dazzles on the page, weaving a sinister story that readers won't be able to put down. A must read!”

“Trust Me” has already been named a *New York Post* Best Thriller of the Summer, a BookBub Top Summer Thriller of 2018, a POPSUGAR Top Summer Thriller, and a CrimeReads Most Anticipated Thriller of 2018.

Now, Hank Phillippi Ryan dares you to read between the lies ...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “Trust Me” is your first standalone novel. What inspired you to step outside series fiction, and how did you find the process to differ from your previous experiences?

Hank Phillippi Ryan (H.P.R.): *Writing a standalone is so astonishingly different! The idea for “Trust Me” came when the stories of two murder trials I had covered seemed to converge and intertwine and become a story on their own linked together. I knew*

it was not a Jane Ryland series book.

I knew a standalone, to me at least, meant the story of the most incredibly, profoundly, important event that had ever happened to the main character. It would be a one-time only story, uniquely structured, and where absolutely anything could happen. In a standalone, I knew there was no holding back, it all went on the table, and frankly anyone could die or be guilty. And when I started writing, I had no idea who that would be. I was surprised on every page. It was incredibly exciting.

J.B.V.: The story features an unlikely alliance between two characters: an accused killer and a bereaved journalist. In what ways is this dynamic mutually beneficial—and how does it also serve to heighten the stakes?

H.P.R.: Janet Malcolm had the greatest quote. She said, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.” Is that true? I’ve wondered about that so often as a journalist, the lengths we’ll go to get the story, and what we’ll say. Always true, as far as I’m concerned, but to what end?

So in “Trust Me,” the journalist, Mercer Hennessey, is absolutely convinced that murder defendant, Ashland Bryant, is guilty. And sets out to use all of her reporter tricks to get Ashlyn to confess. Will Ashlyn fall for that? Or is Ashlyn manipulating that reporter’s need for the big scoop to gain her own advantage?

And underlying it all, what if Mercer is wrong and Ashland actually is innocent? Or...what if she isn’t?

J.B.V.: One of the book’s underlying themes is the subjectivity of truth. In what ways does psychological suspense differ from tension that is of a more visceral, or physiological nature—and how does this influence your approach to unreliable narration?

H.P.R.: Oh, yes, this was the most incredibly interesting and fun part to write. In a psychological suspense novel, it’s all about manipulation and deception, right? We watch Charles Boyer fiddle with the gaslight to drive Ingrid Bergman crazy. We wonder if the milk that Cary Grant is bringing to Joan Fontaine in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* is really poisoned, the way she fears it is, or maybe...it isn’t?

This ‘twisty-turny’ examination of how far somebody would go to get what they want by simply destabilizing what the other person believes, is just as terrifying as any ‘bang-bang’ car chase. And as for unreliable narration: Both my narrators are completely and totally reliable. Just ask them. I mean, seriously, they are! Because one of the profound ideas I’m playing with in this book is—is it the truth if you believe it? What does “the truth” even mean? And I realize there are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth. And in “Trust Me,” I dare you to find the liar.

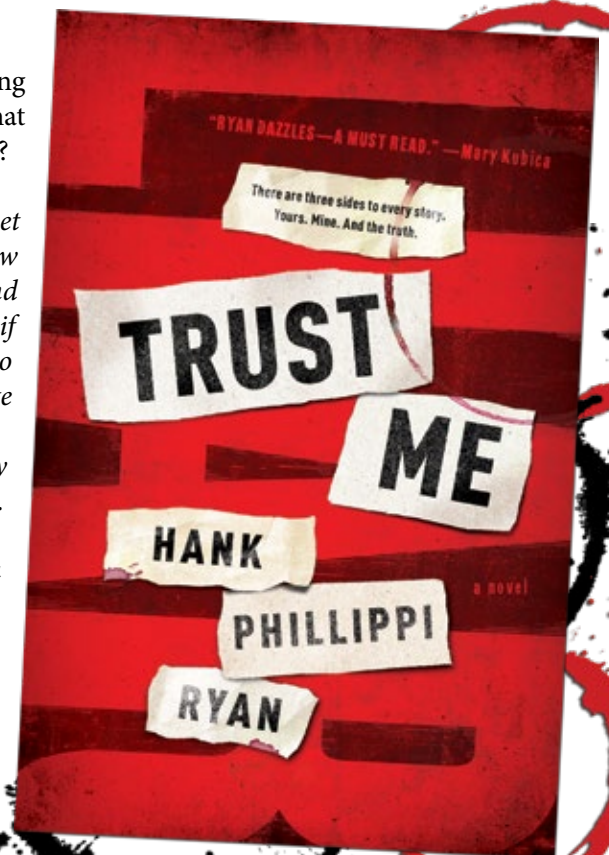
J.B.V.: Plot twists inevitably abound. Do you pre-plan these game-changing moments or do they develop more organically? And, in your opinion, what is the key(s) to achieving an ending that is both satisfying and surprising?

H.P.R.: I preplanned it. Ha! Wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew from the outset I wanted to illustrate that no matter what a reporter does, no matter how honorable they are, it is incredibly difficult to keep our own emotions and beliefs out of a story. Good journalists are vigilant about that, but what if an indelible emotion, like grief, or guilt, is stronger than we are? I have to confess, in “Trust Me,” I had no idea what was going to happen until I wrote the next line and the next paragraph.

This book surprised me constantly, as did the actions of both of my main characters. And, in fact, a couple of the supporting characters as well. Breathtakingly so.

The pitfall in writing that way is that at some point there needs to be a blockbuster ending, one that’s surprising and yet ties up every single loose end. And in every book I write, that is my challenge.

When I figured out the ending of “Trust Me,” I was alone in my study, and I stood up and applauded myself. Embarrassing, yes, but it suddenly occurred to me—and I do mean suddenly, because 30 seconds earlier I hadn’t figured it out—what had happened. And there it was. It almost brought tears to my eyes.



J.B.V.: Boston is a familiar backdrop in your books. How do you view setting as enhancing a story—and in what ways do you attempt to capture the essence of the city on the page and bring it to life for readers?

H.P.R.: *I am so lucky to work in Boston, in the big and bustling metropolis, but live just outside the city in a little town. Boston is endlessly intriguing, with history around every corner and all kinds of secrets, and different ways of life in every neighborhood. My town is small, and people know each other, and you can walk to the drug store and pizza place and the movies.*

One of the things I love about “Trust Me” is that it takes place not only in a historic Boston courthouse, and a little (fictional) suburban town, but is also almost a locked room mystery—these two strong women play a cat-and-mouse game but, of necessity, unable to leave the house—one because she does not want to face her neighbors, and the other does not want to be recognized. So they stay holed up inside, creating a true crime novel, one writing, one revealing, facing off to prove their truth. It’s suffocating and suspenseful and dangerous, and that makes it all the more disturbing.

J.B.V.: Crime fiction is meant to entertain, but there are elements that ground these types of books in reality. What topical issues do you endeavor to explore through the creative lens—and what is the balance between entertainment and enlightenment?

H.P.R.: *Oh, you are so right! My first job as a crime fiction author is to entertain. I want you to miss your stop on the subway because you are so riveted by “Trust Me.” I want you to stay up late at night reading it, and even be sad when the pilot announces you are coming in for landing, because you want to read just more chapter.*

But this book started when I heard my defense attorney husband practicing his closing arguments in a notorious murder case. I was completely convinced the story he was telling was true, and utterly persuaded the jury could only find his client not guilty.

But then I imagined the wife of the prosecutor, practicing his closing argument in the same case, and his wife believing what he was saying—the exact opposite of what my husband was saying—was true.

And I thought...How could two smart people take exactly the same evidence and create two exactly opposite stories? And that’s exactly what I do in “Trust Me.”

When they close the last page, I hope readers will understand that the truth has many forms: just because someone says something over and over doesn’t mean it’s true. Just because someone believes something doesn’t make it true. And as Mercer Hennessey, my journalist, wonders: How can you write a true story if there’s no way to know what’s true?

J.B.V.: You are a decorated investigative reporter. In what ways does this background inform your career in fiction, both in terms of discipline and how you conceptualize and frame a story?

H.P.R.: *Thank you, yes! And when I have a bad writing day, I look at all those Emmys and Agatha teapots, and remember—hey. There was a time I could do it, so maybe I could do it again. On the days when I begin to fear I cannot write anymore, I say wait, I was good once, maybe I can be good again. Crazy, huh?*

I’ve been a television reporter for 40 years, isn’t that amazing? I have wired myself with hidden cameras, confronted corrupt politicians, chased down criminals, gone undercover and in disguise. But, most important to my fiction career, I have essentially written a story every day. With a beginning, middle and end, with characters you care about, and an important problem that needs to be solved. I want the good guys to win, and the bad guys to get what’s coming to them. And in the end, I want to change the world and get some justice. And that is exactly what I do in my novels! Turns out, I’ve been learning to write them for forty years. And the result is “Trust Me.” (Which the Booklist starred review calls “a knockout.”)

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

H.P.R.: *What’s next? Oh, my goodness, in the run-up to book tour, every day is crazy! “Trust Me” is a Best of Summer for the New York Post, and Crime Reads, and POPSUGAR, and BookBub. Hooray! I’m about to leave on a fabulous cross-country book tour, and I hope you all will come say hello. I am looking forward to it like crazy...I drag my little rolling suitcase through airport corridors, humming Magical Mystery Tour.*

And I am happily writing the next book, which comes out, if all goes as planned, next year. It’s called “The Murder List.” Another psychological standalone—crossing fingers!

For more information on Hank’s upcoming tour and release, head to www.hankphillippiryan.com. ■



ERIC BEETNER & FRIENDS: *Crime Writers Without Guns Unload a Sequel*

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Mark Krajnak

Both readers and peers have become entranced with the works created by this writer of ultimate “hardboiled crime fiction,” Eric Beetner. Nominated for two Anthony Awards, an ITW award and a Derringer, his work has even brought home the “gold,” so to speak.

With his brand new release, “Unloaded 2: More Crime Writers Writing Without Guns,” Eric brings forth another great book that makes a true and honest statement. In a world where, now more than ever, we need to take on gun violence with sense and a healthy dialogue, authors

came together and combined their wealth of skills with Eric’s to create the next book in the *Unloaded* series; a series where all profits made on the books are sent to gun control non-profits!

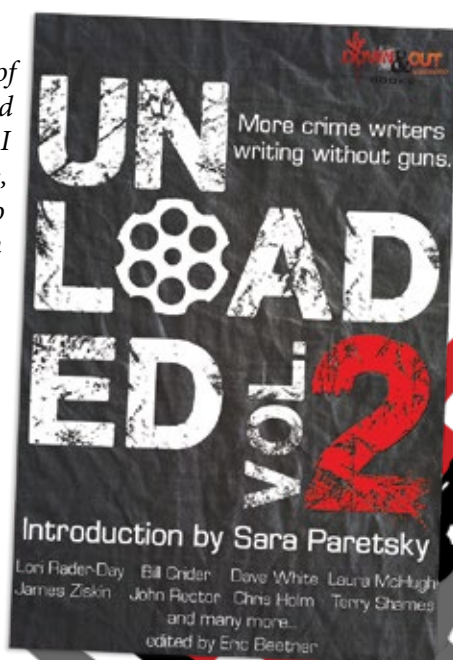
From standalone novels to novellas, short stories to anthologies, Eric Beetner continues to walk that hardboiled path when it comes to writing. However, his days have also included touring as a musician, painting, acting in short films, traveling, designing book covers, and more. Recently, Eric sat down with *Suspense Magazine* to speak about this life-well-lived.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Let us begin by focusing on the new title “Unloaded 2.” Can you tell us a bit about the authors involved and how the stories came together once again?

Eric Beetner (E.B.): *After the first volume of Unloaded came out, I had a number of authors reach out and ask to be involved should I do another one. They really loved the cause of putting our voices out there to stand for reasonable gun laws in America. I had no shortage of writers to choose from, so when we decided to do a second volume, the problem was whittling down a list rather than scrounging to find writers willing to contribute. Now I already have more writers asking if there will be a Volume 3, which is still undecided.*

S. MAG.: You have a passion for taking a stance in regard to gun control. What would you like everyone out there to know, specifically, that perhaps can stop the violence? Along those same lines, can you speak about the profits for the book going to gun control non-profits?

E.B.: *Yes, all profits from the books go to non-profit organizations working on a state by state basis to push for sensible gun laws. That doesn’t mean a repeal of the second amendment; that doesn’t mean the government coming to take your guns away. It means setting limitations and regulations that the overwhelming majority of Americans support and want for the safety of our children, our families, and our right to do simple*



things, like gather in a public place—attend school or a concert—without the fear of a gunman with a military grade automatic weapon shooting up the place.

There is no one step solution to the epidemic, and really the biggest change would come not from legislation but from a cultural change. I'm hopeful about the younger generation right now who is fed up and making a strong change in the acceptance of our current gun culture. That's really what the books set out to do; give a glimpse into a world where guns aren't so prevalent and showing that everything doesn't all fall apart, like some would tell you. A generational change is needed. The antiquated notion of gun ownership has been hijacked by special interests like the NRA—who, let's be frank, is a business lobby whose only interest is in selling guns and profiting—who have turned the notion of being an American into a gun ownership issue. And they've turned the idea of owning an arsenal of weapons into a patriotic act, which is not only dangerous but has nothing to do with the second amendment. Responsible gun ownership is the goal, not the abolition of guns.

S. MAG.: Your *Bricks and Cam* trilogy is fantastic. The ending is going to arrive in August with "The Getaway List," is that correct? How does it feel when you have to say goodbye to characters you've worked with for a lengthy period of time?

E.B.: *These books were so much fun to write. We'd discussed whether or not to go forward but three always seems like a good number to me. We wanted them to have a good send off, and I think I managed to even give Cam a happy ending, which kind of felt weird to be honest. I've really abused him in these books. These two were thrust together in book one and have never been a perfect pair, but they made it work and each saved the other's life along the way. So we wanted the end to be a little bittersweet as well. But we did leave the door open. You never know...*

S. MAG.: You co-wrote that particular series with Frank Zafiro, as well as worked with many authors on books and projects. What's it like to be able to collaborate with others when it comes to developing a story and characters?

E.B.: *The first time I collaborated I was terrified. I like to be in control of my stories. But my day job working as a television editor is very collaborative, so I leaned on those skills. And of course once you get pages from your co-author and they're great, all fear goes out the window.*

Frank and I both outlined in similar ways, giving the story enough flex so we could easily adjust as the pages started coming in. We honestly never hit a snag we couldn't overcome in one or two emails. Maybe that's the other reason to stop at three: don't risk screwing up a great thing!

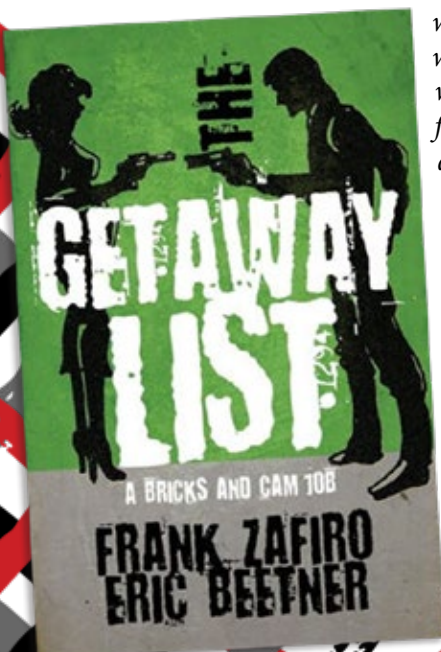
S. MAG.: Along those same lines, do you have specific "jobs" to do that are set ahead of time before you sit down to write? Is there some kind of blueprint on who writes a specific character, or do you delve right into it?

E.B.: *For the List series, I wrote Cam and Frank wrote Bricks. We'd outline together, via emails, and kick ideas back and forth so we both knew where the story was headed before we began. I think that is key. When what you write affects someone else, you don't want to paint them into a corner. But once we start, we trade chapters and build it up. That way you can see what the other character was up to and work off that. As we got more comfortable, the characters came together for more scenes. In "The Backlist" they almost never cross paths. In "The Short List" they did a little more, and now in "The Getaway List" Bricks and Cam spend a lot of time together.*

S. MAG.: Is there a particular author out there who you would love to have a chance to work with; and, if so, who would that be and why?

E.B.: *I wrote a thing once with Allan Guthrie that ultimately didn't sell to the outlet we were pitching to, but that was an absolute dream. Al is one of my favorite authors, and for him to trust me to collaborate with was enormously flattering. I'm sad the story never came out.*

But if they're reading, I'd drop everything in a second to work with John Rector or Ken Bruen. I think it would be really fun to write something with Steve Hockensmith. I bet I could find another dozen writers to work with if I weren't too intimidated that I might screw it up and either write something bad or screw up a friendship.



S. MAG.: From standalone crime fiction to novellas, anthologies, etc., is there a specific one you have the most passion for?

E.B.: *Probably standalone novels, but I do love a good novella. I tend to write shorter novels anyway, but I think a tight 25 thousand words can communicate as much as a 100K book in many cases. Readers often want more for their investment, which I get. But I'd say my ideal is around a 65 thousand word novel. Meaty enough, but doesn't hang around too long and wear out its welcome.*

S. MAG.: You have a slew of artistic "paths" other than writing. Where did all this creativity come from? And when, round about, did writing come into play as being a craft you wished to tackle?

E.B.: *I've always been someone who isn't satisfied to just be a fan of something. If I have a passion for it, I want to be involved. It increases my passion for the art form, whether it's music or writing. I'll also try anteing. That's how I started painting. I said to myself, "I want a painting on that wall." And I figured: Why not make one then? What's stopping me?*

I went to film school and started writing screenplays way back in high school. I wrote my first feature in college and ended up writing seventeen feature length scripts, of which I sold three and got paid to write another from an existing outline. None of them made it to the screen, sadly. Around 2008, when we knew we'd be bringing home our daughter through adoption about a year later, I decided to try to write my first novel, thinking I wouldn't have time once a child came into our lives. I finished it, shelved it where it stays, and decided "that wasn't so hard." So I kept at it. It felt good to write things that could actually come out and be available for an audience, unlike the scripts that still languish on my shelf.

So I've always written. I've even found some very old stories from grade school. But I didn't get serious about novels until then.

S. MAG.: Can you tell readers a bit about your podcast "Writer Types," as well as your reading series, "Noir at the Bar?" How did they come to fruition?

E.B.: *Writer Types is a crime and mystery fiction podcast co-created and co-hosted by fellow author S.W. Lauden. He and I are friends here in L.A. and we wanted to produce a show a little differently from other book podcasts out there, so we do more of a variety show. We feature several author interviews, different segments; we edit heavily and do music transitions, special features, remote recordings, game shows. With my experience making TV and Steve's marketing experience, we make a great team, and try to have fun with the authors and make it very reader-friendly. We don't often talk about process or writerly stuff like that. We've been told one of the listener favorites is how often we make each other laugh.*

Noir at the Bar is something I've hosted in L.A. for over seven years now. It started in Philadelphia where a version ran for a short time, then Scott Phillips and Jed Ayres in St. Louis picked up the baton and ran with it. I asked them if I could basically franchise it out to L.A. and they gave their blessing. Since I started my chapter, it's gone all over the country and now the world. It's a casual night of mixing and mingling and readings. I see it as much as a social event as a book or book selling event. It's about creating a community much like an underground music scene, and people keep showing up until the bar is standing room only... so we must be doing something right. We just announced an event at Bouchercon in Florida this year that has the most amazing lineup. I'm honored to be a host, and definitely treat it with reverence. It's built into a real network of support for writers and readers far and wide.

S. MAG: Goodness knows you have a lot on your plate, but can you give us a "sneak peek" into what you're working on?

E.B.: *I have several novels completed and out being shopped by my agent. My next solo novel will be out next January called "All The Way Down." It's a go-for-broke thriller that I'm really excited for people to read. I'll also have a pair of novellas out next year packaged in one volume which will be released in winter.*

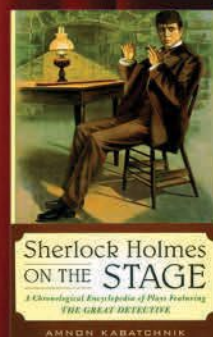
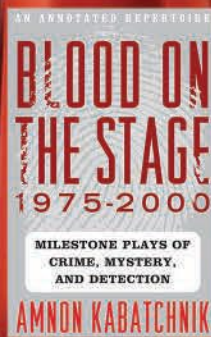
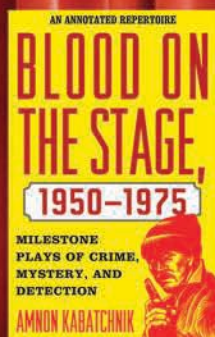
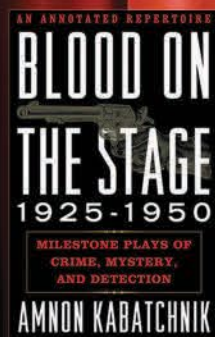
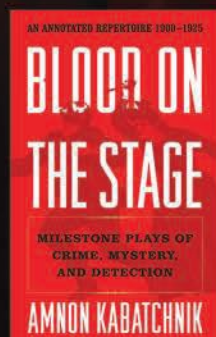
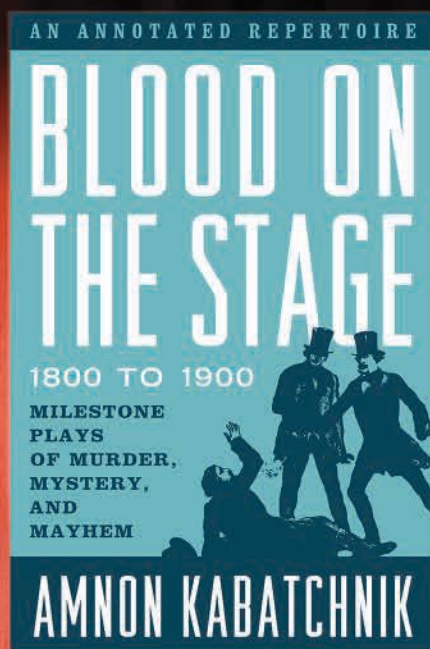
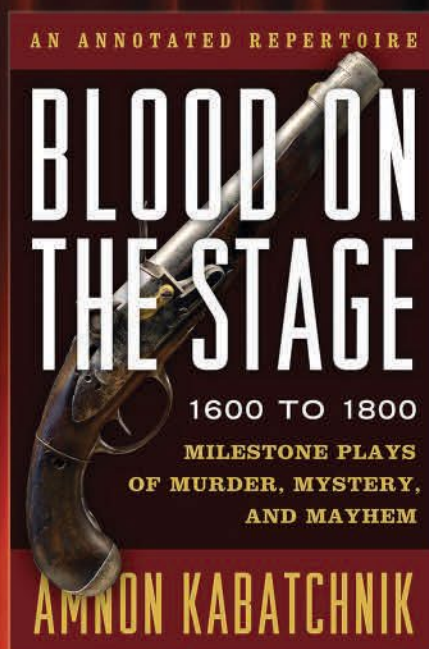
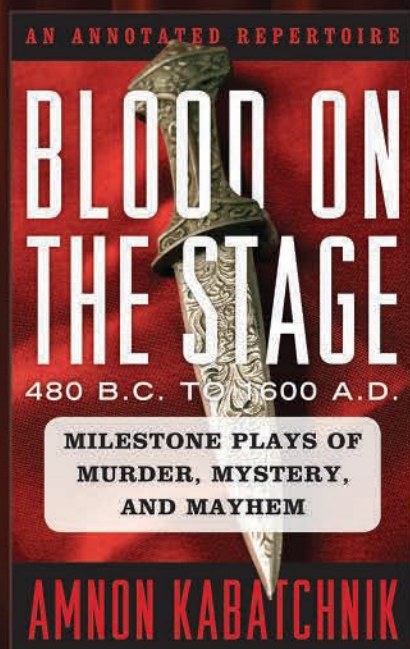
Then, hopefully, the other novels will sell as well as the two TV pilots I wrote this past year. Then maybe I'll finish this new novel I just started, and that's not to mention the short stories I have coming out in three different anthologies and the two more I still need to write that are due soon. Whew! This has been fun but I have to get back to work!

That's an understatement, considering the amount of work there seems to be in a normal "Eric Beetner" day. This is one author who's "loaded." The indelible passion he owns for his craft, his views, and his myriad of skills for various venues is quite easy to see.

To learn all about Eric's books, news about upcoming events and appearances, interviews, and to check out his amazing cover designs, head to www.ericbeetner.com. ■

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MR. BONES



By Phillip Frey

I WORK SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. My job is to look after graves and mourn for the dead on behalf of the bereaved. Every morning I start out at daybreak. Always in suit and tie, carrying a folding chair and a custom-made briefcase that holds what I need to maintain a presentable gravesite.

While visiting the dead I always have something to read. Some of my clients prefer I spend time quietly with their buried. Others hand me prayers and personal messages to recite; and most of them tell me what kind of flowers to buy.

Saturdays and Sundays are my busiest, from sunup to sundown. Done at noon on weekdays I go to the Toluca Tavern, where I have lunch with Joey. He is of good character, with a childlike sense of wonder. Many years ago he had taken a spill on his motorcycle. The brain injury had left him “not quite right.” He works at an office building as a go-fer. He is unhappy with it, but knows it is about the best he can get.

During lunch we talk of simple things, all of which helps to pass the time in a congenial way. He is the only person I don’t mind seeing so often. When done, Joey goes back to work, and I go to the bar. It quiets down after lunch. No drunks around to bend my ear.

As for me, I’m a slow drinker; I never drink too much. I need to keep a clear head for the dead.

If I had not taken my work so seriously, the unearthly events that took hold might never have happened.

It began nearly six months ago, on a Sunday, during my last visit at Hillsdale. I was graveside in my chair and could not take my eyes off the headstone, mesmerized by the chiseled letters of the decedent’s name: Barry Martin Burke.

It had been a long day and I was tired. Leaning back, my eyes fell shut and the name stayed in my thoughts. For some reason, I don’t know why, I pictured the chiseled letters one at a time while repeating the full name to myself. When done I heard: “Feet...gangrene...”

I told myself I had fallen asleep and dreamed the voice. I tried it again and heard, “Damn tubes—get ‘em out!”

With this second try I knew I hadn’t dreamed it; the sound of the voice unfamiliar, very different from my inner voice.

I decided to check on Barry Burke’s last days. He had

died a week earlier, his brother Samuel a new client.

That same evening I was with Samuel Burke on his porch. He said his brother had been a diabetic who did not heed the advice of his doctor, refusing to change his diet and all. The result was deterioration of the heart and kidneys, along with gangrene of the feet, which had to be amputated.

“Awful,” he said, “seeing Barry in his last hours, bunch of tubes stuck in him.”

Since then I have called on more of the dead. Some have a word, a phrase, a sentence or two. Three of them speak what amounts to full pages.

Echoes of their last thoughts, the last desperate push of the brain; the electricity, the transmission of sound waves that linger in the air. I had somehow become their receiver. I don’t think about how or why anymore. I am willing to accept my ignorance of such things.

One afternoon, at my usual seat at the bar, I was entertaining myself with the paper’s crossword. I glanced up to see Nick restocking the shelves for the night crowd, and there she was, at the other end of the bar.

I had seen her here before, once or twice a week, late-afternoons, coming in as I was leaving; always dressed fashionably, midnight black hair and blue eyes making her all the more attractive.

She caught my stare, returned it with a smile and came down to my end of the bar. Her hand reached for the stool next to me.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I said.

Nick set her drink down in front of her. “You two deserve a formal introduction.” Then said, “Mary Miller, I’d like you to meet Mister Bones.”

“You’re kidding,” she laughed.

“Kind of,” Nick said with his boyish smile. “That’s what I call him, because of his occupation.” Nick turned to me. “Last time Mary was here I told her what you do, but didn’t mention your name. So let me start over,” he said. “Mary Miller, like you to meet Jack Turner,” and Nick went back to restocking the shelves.

“Mister Bones,” she snickered as she offered her hand.

I took hold of it. When we broke the handshake, I was left wanting more of her.

"Yesterday," Mary began, "Nick asked why I was crying in my drink. I told him, and he thought we ought to meet."

"That's why you're here earlier than usual?"

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said. "You've noticed me coming in while you're leaving."

"And a compliment for me, you remembering our paths crossing."

Mary gazed at her vodka tonic and took a sip. Good sign, I thought. If she were a hard drinker, she would have been nearly done with it by now.

Setting her glass down, she telegraphed a touch of sadness. I said, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Karen, my sister..." Mary took a deep breath. "Karen died young, from respiratory failure," she told me. "I don't visit her grave anymore because..." Unable to go on, she turned to me with moist eyes.

"I understand," I said.

Mary smiled a little. "I thought maybe if you had the time to care for her. Sundays, if possible? You don't have to decide now," she added as she wrote her number down.

Another good sign; considerate people are hard to find these days.

Soon as I got home, I went over my books and rearranged things. It wasn't easy fitting her sister in on Sundays. When finished I called Mary. She asked if we could meet for lunch tomorrow and go over the details.

I hesitated. It would be a weekday and wouldn't be fair to Joey, cancelling our usual lunch.

"You still there?" Mary asked.

"Sorry—yes," and went on to tell her about Joey's condition. How disappointed he would be if I cancelled. "Why not dinner instead?"

"No, I think I'd like to meet this friend of yours. Let's make it a threesome."

Yet another good sign of character.

After we disconnected I called Joey and explained what had happened. He was happy to hear we would be a threesome.

The next day I was at the Toluca Tavern a little before noon. Mary arrived soon after. We waited for Joey before ordering. I took the opportunity to tell Mary my going rate for representing the bereaved.

"Sounds reasonable," she said.

It was an unusual response coming from a prospective client. Not a single question about what she was going to get for her money. I then proceeded to give her the details. During this, I became aware of the other men in the room, their glances and stares. Being with such an attractive woman lifted my spirits.

Joey appeared. He stood by his chair and gazed down at Mary with his childlike smile. I introduced them. Joey gave

her a bow, and then sat. During our meal, Mary chatted with him, seemingly not bothered by his pauses as he searched for the right words. Overall, we had a nice time.

Afterward the three of us stood outside the restaurant. Mary and I said goodbye to Joey, and he again gave her a smile and bow. Then he walked off toward the building he worked at.

"Nice man," Mary said. "Such a shame...those little bows were kind of cute."

I walked her to her car. The Bentley convertible and her clothes reflected rich but she herself didn't. Maybe it is just me, but I have learned that people with a lot of money are more trouble than they're worth.

The next morning we woke at my place in bed together. For me, it had been one of the best nights ever. Maybe for her too, possibly.

I cooked breakfast for us. While eating we agreed to take both cars. That way Mary could show me her sister's grave, then leave me to go about my regular visits.

The sky over Woodgate was clear. Mary's midnight hair glittered in the sunlight. She carried the flowers she had bought on the way. The sheen of their crimson petals turned her blue eyes into the color of daybreak.

She took my hand in hers. We walked up the hillside and came to Karen's grave. Mary placed the flowers against the headstone; the chiseled dates telling me Karen had died at twenty-two.

"Almost a year," Mary sighed. "The stone has lost its shine, and the grass looks terrible. Woodgate," she sneered. "Must be cutting back to please their parent company's stockholders."

Her comment surprised me, coming from someone with money. Not in the mood to discuss the rights and wrongs of big business I said, "No problem for me to get the stone like new. And fixing up the grass wouldn't be any trouble." Then asked Mary if there was anything she would like me to say during my visits, something on her behalf.

"No, I don't think so," she answered despondently, grieving eyes on the headstone. "It's more important that you care for the grave...take the time to sit with Karen."

It was then I wanted to tell her about the voices. That if I felt like it, right here and now, I could call on Karen and hear her last thoughts. Last thoughts that would return to replay in my mind from time to time.

She would not have believed it, so I let it go. No one would have believed it.

Mary never demanded too much of my time. I was free to listen to the voices when they came. If they came while with Mary or Joey, neither of them seemed to mind my distraction. They accepted what they believed to be my quiet nature.

Mary again joined Joey and me for lunch. During the meal, the moisture in Joey's eyes became apparent.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked him.

He choked up and said, "I been, been laid off."

Mary placed a comforting hand over his.

That was when I came up with something.

"Joey, you know I like my weekday afternoons off. I could teach you what I do, get some new clients and let you handle weekday afternoons." Then added, "I'll take a twenty percent commission and we'll both be happy."

"Com...mission?" Joey muttered.

"In other words, you'll get most of the money the client pays me."

I had never seen him so elated.

Mary sent me a warm smile.

Teaching him at first was a struggle, but then with patience on my part he became more proficient. Joey took pride in the custom-made briefcase I had purchased for him. When I presented him with a folding chair he laughed and said, "Take bus, always have seat."

I put flowers down on Karen's grave every Sunday, and told Mary I had gotten the headstone as good as new, and had turned the soil and planted grass seed that was coming up a solid green.

I had never called on her sister. It didn't seem to be the right thing to do. Until last Sunday, when I thought it might bring me closer to Mary. In my chair at Karen's grave, I closed my eyes, the headstone took form and I began.

"Karen Patricia Miller..." repeating it while picturing each letter of her name. Then it happened, the gasps for air between the words and phrases: "Can't breathe—sister—do this—poisoned."

It went on like that for a while. It wasn't too difficult to put together. Mary had killed her sister.

Damn it! It wasn't grief Mary had felt weeks ago when she had shown me Karen's grave. That was why I had been hired, Mary too guilt-ridden to visit Karen on her own.

Confused about what to do I left Woodgate and went to a different bar so I wouldn't run into her. I got drunk for the first time in years.

The next morning I woke in the stench of my vomit. I soaked my clothes in the kitchen sink, and then got into the shower. The warmth and steady sound of the water was a relief.

Then the voice came, gasping same as yesterday, clearer now: "My sister—poisoned me—can't breathe—someone—help me..."

I called Mary and said I missed her, told her I overslept and would take the rest of the morning off if she would come over.

We hugged and kissed, undressed and got into bed. Before getting started, I asked her about Karen, saying that I would like to know more about her. Mary shut her

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Every Wife Has A Story

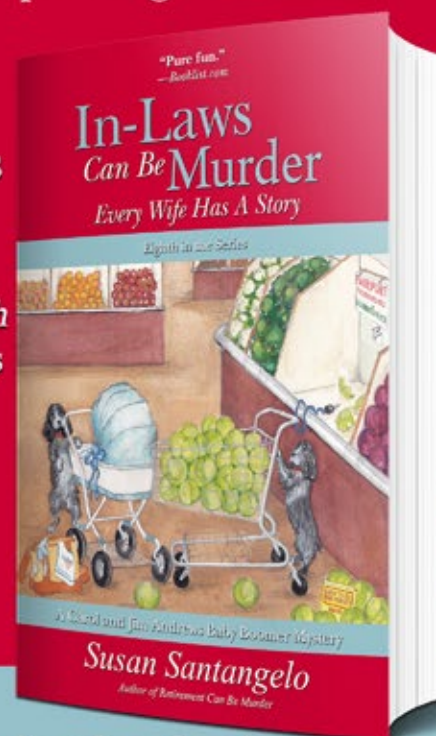
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eyes and lay quietly. I did the same and waited.

"I gave my parents a lot of trouble," she said at last. "It was because of Karen. She always got what she wanted. I hated her for that." Then said, "Our Mom and Dad were a lot older than most parents. They died a year apart and just about everything was left to Karen." Mary rolled over against me and whispered, "When Karen died I got every penny of it, and I don't hate her anymore. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very," was all I could say.

One thing led to another. I spread her legs and drove into her with a hard passion. I was angry about what she had done. It meant that I would lose her.

We lay there afterward, both done-in, and then I couldn't help it: "Your sister was murdered," I said. "Poisoned."

Mary propped herself up. "Why did you say that? Who told you that?"

"There's something you should know," I said. "It'll be the strangest thing you've ever heard, but it's the truth."

I told her all of it. When finished, she denied her guilt and said I either had made the whole thing up or was downright crazy. That didn't surprise me. What did was the way she said it, with a coldness I had never gotten from her before.

I said I could prove my ability to hear the dead. Turning on my computer, I showed her the cemetery list and asked her to choose one for us to visit. Mary thought the trip was going to be a ridiculous waste of time.

We dressed and ate in virtual silence, got into her Bentley and headed out to Fairmount. While driving she had a change of mood, seemingly unconcerned about what I had told her, going on about what a nice day it was, then telling me about a movie she would like us to see.

At the cemetery I had Mary pick two graves, opened my appointment book and showed her they were not under my care.

After calling on each, Mary wrote down what I had heard. It took all day to verify their last thoughts. While driving Mary home she still doubted me, but then answered herself: "No, I was the one who picked the graves."

A moment later she said, "Okay, Jack, let's go on the theory Karen was poisoned but didn't know who did it. Since it was no secret how I felt about her, she would've figured it was me—wouldn't she?"

"Suppose so," I said. The notion of someone else having done it grew more plausible as the seconds ticked by.

"It doesn't matter how I felt about Karen," she said. "I want to get whoever killed her." Parking at Mary's building, she looked me straight in the eye. "You'll help me, won't you?"

I was in love with her. I had to give it a chance.

Soon as we got into her condo, Mary opened the foyer closet and parted the hanging coats. "Karen's old papers," she told me, sliding out two boxes.

We carried them to the kitchen table. Mary pulled the papers from them and made two stacks. "We'll each make

our own list," she said. "Names, addresses, phone numbers of everyone Karen had come in contact with." She then poured us some wine and began to prepare dinner.

Busy at the stove she asked me to get two pads and pens from her office desk: "Right-hand top drawer."

I left the kitchen and returned with pads and pens. I sat at the table and started on my stack of papers. Before I knew it, dinner was ready. We fed ourselves while we each worked on our own list.

When done, Mary put Karen's papers back in the boxes. We moved into the living room and sat on the sofa, where we rewrote our two lists into one, beginning with the people she thought to be likely suspects.

Mary was obviously tired, yawning and soon asleep against me, midnight hair splayed over my shoulder. I stood and gently repositioned her. As I did, I had a flash of dizziness.

Turning off most of the lights, I went to the boxes in the kitchen. Carrying them into the closet, the dizziness hit me again, harder this time. So hard, I lost my balance, dropped the boxes and fell to my knees.

I sat back and had trouble breathing. That was when I saw the vial that had fallen out of one of the boxes. I picked it up and looked at the label. I had seen the name before, and then remembered it from a book I had read.

A no trace poison...had left the kitchen for the pads and pens.

I looked over at the sofa. Mary stood now in the near-darkness, blue eyes on me as if she were standing over my grave.

~~~

I'm a San Quentin prison guard. I felt compelled to write down what you have just read, just as Joey had told it to me, exactly as he hears it in his mind. Seeing him go through the struggle of writing it down himself brought out my better nature, I suppose.

What follows is what Joey would like to add, as written down by me. I tried to clean up the grammar, along with his choice of words.

~~~

I am sorry I do not write and spell. I hear my friend in my mind, saying over and over what you have read.

Mary hired me to take care of his grave, and to take care of her sister's too. I had never heard voices before his. He must have wanted me to know very badly. I went to the police about what Mary did to him and her sister. They laughed at me and told me to go away. I left them and did what I had to do.

I killed Mary at his grave with my gardener's trowel. I stabbed her many times. No one believes why I had to do it. They said the voice I hear is my mind playing tricks, or that I am making it up to avoid execution.

I killed her for him. He was my only friend. ■

LAWRENCE OSBORNE

Brings One of Fiction's Most Enduring Detectives, Philip Marlowe, Back to Life

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Lawrence Osborne



We are very pleased to be able to speak with Lawrence Osborne to talk about his writing of the next *Philip Marlowe* book, “Only to Sleep,” that was released earlier this year.

Lawrence Osborne was born in England but has traveled and lived all over the world. He is the author of the critically acclaimed novels: “The Forgiven,” “The Ballad of a Small Player,” “Hunters in the Dark,” and “Beautiful Animals.” He is the third writer, after John Banville (writing as Benjamin Black) and Robert B. Parker, to be asked by the Raymond Chandler Estate to write a new *Philip Marlowe* novel. In “Only to Sleep,” Osborne draws from his time working as a reporter on the Mexican border in the early 1990s. His non-fiction

includes “Bangkok Days” and “The Wet and the Dry.” His short story *Volcano* was selected for “Best American Short Stories 2012.” He has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Forbes*, *Harper’s*, and other publications. And Lawrence lives in one of our favorite cities—beautiful Bangkok.

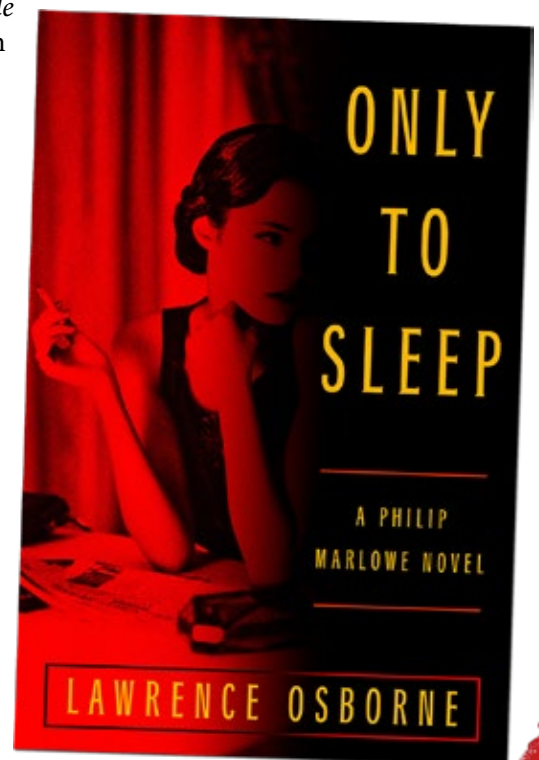
Let’s take a quick look inside the latest book, “Only to Sleep.”

The year is 1988. The place, Baja, California. And Philip Marlowe—now in his seventy-second year—is living out his retirement in the terrace bar of the La Fonda hotel. Sipping margaritas, playing cards, his silver-tipped cane at the ready. When in saunter two men dressed like undertakers, with a case that has his name written all over it.

For Marlowe, this is his last roll of the dice, his swan song. His mission is to investigate the death of Donald Zinn—supposedly drowned off his yacht, and leaving behind a much younger and now very rich wife. But is Zinn actually alive? Are the pair living off the spoils?

Set between the border and badlands of Mexico and California, Lawrence Osborne’s resurrection of the iconic Marlowe is an unforgettable addition to the Raymond Chandler canon.

Suspense Magazine is honored to have this time to speak to Lawrence, and we hope you like learning a little bit more about him as much as we’ve enjoyed bringing it to you.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Being a world traveler, is there a specific locale that “spoke” to you above the rest when it came to inspiring your passion for writing? Along those same lines, is there a certain locale that has not appeared in one of your books that you would love to establish a story around?

Lawrence Osborne (L.O.): *Over the course of a lifetime, I would say Greece and Italy. Later on, Bangkok—for some strange reason which I don't yet quite understand. There are indeed places that I have not set stories in but which have interested me a great deal. Mongolia, for example, and Papua New Guinea.*

S. MAG.: You are the third writer who has taken up the acclaimed character of Philip Marlowe. What was it like when the Raymond Chandler Estate first contacted you in regard to taking on such a mission, so to speak? Were there nerves involved when it came to being part of such a legacy?

L.O.: *Yes, I was very hesitant at first. It's a tough assignment in so many ways, and you are certainly set up to fail! I thought the only way to get it right was to do my own book in my own voice—it might start out in the Chandler genre but it would deepen into something more personal and more based on my own lived experience. As I got further into the book I felt more comfortable, and I made a sort of unconscious decision to just let it flow and enjoy myself. For what else can you do?*

S. MAG.: Were you a fan of Philip Marlowe beforehand?

L.O.: *In every way, and since I was very young, to boot.*

S. MAG.: Can you give our readers a “sneak peek” that cannot be found anywhere else in regard to your new book, “Only to Sleep?”

L.O.: *The book ends in exactly the same place as Atman's film version of The Long Farewell—but this was entirely coincidental! I had lived in Tepoztlan for a few months twenty-five years ago, and so it came effortlessly to mind when I was writing the ending. The carnival at Yautepec is the closing scene, or almost—and how vividly I remembered my time there.*

S. MAG.: From short stories to magazine articles to non-fiction as well as fiction, is there a venue and/or genre of writing you have not yet attempted that you wish to in the future?

L.O.: *I am co-writing the script version of my novel, “Hunters in the Dark,” which will start shooting in Cambodia next year*

“...the only way to get it right was to do my own book in my own voice...”

and have just signed for a TV series set in Bangkok. God help you all.

S. MAG.: Writers have various outlooks when it comes to utilizing and speaking about social media. Do you feel that all of these avenues—from Facebook to Twitter, etc.—are beneficial to your career?

L.O.: *No. I increasingly loathe them in every way. As to whether they have helped my career, I am skeptical, but I suppose that is hard to measure.*

S. MAG.: Living in Bangkok, can you explain a bit to readers about the scenery and ambiance, and the positive effects it can have on your writing?

L.O.: *I live in a jungle back street near a large commercial canal, surrounded by huge mango trees and kohl birds, laid back and quite spooky at night, with the grey frogs and the spirit shrines all around me. It's the perfect symphony for a writer, I feel. I write on my balcony with my puppy curled up next to me, and hopefully with one of those eerie tropical skies lending a bit of drama to the mood. What could be better?*

S. MAG.: What is one piece of advice you wish all beginning writers should learn?

L.O.: *Don't become a journalist.*

S. MAG.: What projects do you have coming up?

L.O.: *My next novel, “The Kingdom,” set here in Bangkok, is coming out next year. I am an acting producer on three movie adaptations of my books, which will make for a frantic and neurotic 2019.*

S. MAG.: It would be so interesting to learn the answer to this: If you could sit down with any author, past or present, who would it be and what would be your very first question?

L.O.: *Oscar Wilde. Question: “How does one wear green?”*

To learn more about Lawrence and his work, check out his website at www.lawrenceosborne.net and enjoy the visit. Thank you Lawrence, for speaking with us and sharing a bit of yourself. We appreciate it as much as your fans do. ■

Recipe for Reinvention:

LUCY BURDETTE

on "Death on the Menu"

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST ROBERTA ISLEIB— alias: Lucy Burdette—shuttered the doors of her private practice in 2003 to concentrate on problem solving of a more novel approach. First came a five-book *Golf Lover's* mystery series inspired by her love of the game. Then, a three-book advice column series featuring Dr. Rebecca Butterman that drew on her professional background. Those titles, coupled with Isleib's short stories, earned the author Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity Award nominations.

Looking to write a new chapter, Isleib assumed the nom de plume Lucy Burdette (her grandmother's name) and cooked up the *Key West Food Critic Mysteries* featuring tropical transplant Hayley Snow, which debuted with "An Appetite for Murder" in 2012. Six books followed before a merger between the Penguin Group and Random House resulted in the seeming demise of the nationally bestselling

cozy series (among others). But in a real life plot twist, Crooked Lane Books acquired the series, publishing its eighth entry, "Death on the Menu," in August.

"Death on the Menu" is the author's first hardcover release, and offers the same smorgasbord of salivation and sleuthing that readers have come to know and love. *Kirkus Reviews* noted: "Burdette's loving descriptions of food and the appended recipes are an added fillip for readers who enjoy some history and romance with their mysteries." Further, *Booklist* enthused: "Fascinating details about the Truman Little White House, Cuban American history and relations, Cuban food, and Hemingway's years in Key West are woven through this atmospheric cozy."

Now, the author known as Lucy Burdette reveals her recipe for reinvention...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): "Death on the Menu" is your eighth *Key West Food Critic Mystery* but the first for Crooked Lane Books. How did this change in publishers transpire, and in what ways do you see your 'shared vision' as having invigorated the series' livelihood?

Lucy Burdette (L.B.): *Two things are very new with my new publisher, Crooked Lane Books. "Death on the Menu" is coming out in both hardcover and audiobook (as well as e-book). I am hoping this will help the series reach a wider audience, including libraries. It has been so interesting to have new editors who weren't familiar with the series going in to read this book. They could (and did) point out assumptions that I was making about what readers might know or remember. A fresh set of eyes is always helpful!*

J.B.V.: Your intrepid protagonist, Hayley Snow, has a knack for being drawn into murder and mayhem. Please tell us about her role in the Key West community, and how this lends a sense of legitimacy to her sleuthing?

L.B.: *Hayley has really settled into the community of Key West. She no longer harbors doubts about whether she made the right decision staying here—she loves her life and her friends. On Facebook we were having a discussion about amateur sleuths and their propensity to dive into situations that are over their heads. One of Hayley's fans said, "Remember, she's a people person. She really cares about the people around her and she wants to help. She can't help herself from helping!" As far as the arc of the series, at this point she has gotten a reputation for noticing connections that other people might miss. So friends and relations are coming to her for help. Of course this causes a certain amount of head-butting with her Key West police detective boyfriend.*

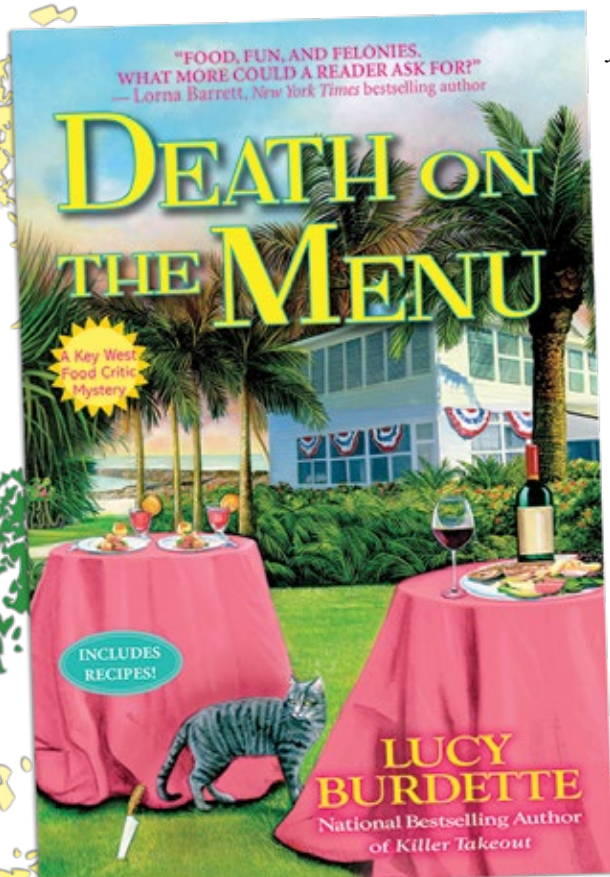
J.B.V.: This book's central crimes play out within the Harry Truman Little White House. What about this locale particularly appealed to you, and how do you feel that its use as a backdrop enhances the story in terms of tone and theme?

L.B.: *Key West is famous for being the home of the Harry S. Truman Little White House, one of my favorite places to visit on the island, along with Hemingway's home. The president spent a lot of working vacations on our island, and this modest place where he worked and relaxed (playing poker with members of his cabinet and members of the press) couldn't be more appealing. It's a beautiful little antique home, very simple and tropical. I have a good friend who is one of the tour guides at the Little White House and he was immensely helpful. Not only did he give me extra private tours of the backstage areas of the building, he was loaded with plot ideas, including suggesting one of the denouements in the story. Now that's a great friend. By the way, Bess Truman did not love Key West, so she often didn't come. And that didn't seem to bother anyone! Can you imagine that happening these days?*

J.B.V.: The narrative also explores Cuban American culture, history, and relations. How did you research these topics, and why is this a particularly timely thread, given the national discourse on immigration issues?

L.B.: *My husband and I were lucky enough to take a trip to Cuba in 2014, right before President Obama opened up relations between the two countries. Since Key West is only ninety miles from Havana, we hear a lot about the island, and many Key*

Westers have an intense curiosity about Cuba and what life might be like for its inhabitants. In fact, frequently we heard news stories about Cubans who attempted to reach the US in a variety of homemade, unseaworthy vessels—even windsurfers—with some disastrous results. I wove some of that backstory and conflict into "Death on the Menu." I had no idea that immigration would become a national hot button issue, but I'm happy to add to that conversation. Whatever a person might think about the special Cuban wet-foot, dry-foot policy that was in place for years (in which Cubans who reached the US were allowed to stay), it's hard not to be moved by the dangerous attempts immigrants made crossing the Straits of Florida. I think we need to remember that the policies the government makes affect real people with heart-breaking lives.



"I try to keep this simple. Each mystery should stand on its own and not leave readers scratching their heads."

J.B.V.: You are a foodie. In what ways do considerations of food/drink influence your conceptualization of story, and how does (or might) the inclusion of recipes amplify the overall reading experience?

L.B.: *At one point, Hayley's boss says about a piece she's writing: "We're eager to see how you'll spin it so it's not just a list of sandwiches and their ingredients."*

And then she thinks: Did that mean he found my last round-up article lacking? This, of course, was the challenge of every food writer—how to write about the food but also make the piece about something bigger.

So that's what I try to do with food, too—make sure it's revealing the psychology and history of the characters who are eating or discussing it. As for the recipes, it seems only fair to provide them after readers have salivated for pages and pages!

J.B.V.: Each new book brings with it the potential for a new readership. How do you endeavor to balance introducing backstory with maintaining narrative urgency, and in what ways does each story work as both a standalone and a continuation of the ongoing series arc?

L.B.: *I try to keep this simple. Each mystery should stand on its own and not leave readers scratching their heads. However, in my mind, the arc of the characters must grow and change over the course of each book, and over the series. I tried to give little summary sentences along the way to remind loyal readers who the people are and to give new readers enough to go on. It's definitely a tricky balance as I get further into the series*

J.B.V.: You are a clinical psychologist by training. In what ways does your background influence character development? Also, do you have a personal litmus test for weighing authenticity against creative license?

L.B.: *I sure hope that my background helps me develop more complex and authentic characters. I can't think of a time when I was willing to sacrifice authenticity for creativity. One thing I can't help doing is to include psychologist characters in all the books. Hayley Snow is not one to want to visit a shrink, but she'll certainly hash out problems with her psychologist friend Eric. And, she treats her Tarot-card-reading friend Lorenzo as a psychological consultant. So I think I'm making good use of my background, in spite of my father's dismay when he heard 15 years ago that I was closing my practice to write full time!*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

L.B.: *Book nine will be published in April 2019, called "A Deadly Feast." Before celebrating Thanksgiving with her family, Hayley Snow is wrapping up her last assignment for Key Zest, a seafood walking tour run by her friend Analise Smith. When one of the customers collapses on the last stop, Analise begs Hayley to investigate before the police destroy her business and shut down the local eateries on her tour. Pressure mounts when Analise calls a second time to request that Hayley meet with Chef Martha Hubbard, who prepared key lime pies for the first stop and is terrified that someone poisoned her pies to ruin her reputation.*

To follow Hayley Snow's continuing exploits, as well as those of her creator, head to www.lucyburdette.com. ■

DEATH ON THE MENU

By Lucy Burdette

Key West, Florida officials are excited to host a historic three-day conference with honored guests from Havana, Cuba, at Harry Truman's Little White House. The organizers hope the event will be the first of many collaborations between the two cities.

Hayley Snow, food critic for *Key Zest* magazine, is not only covering the conference, but has also been drafted to work as an addition to the catering staff—the company owned by her mother.

As guests begin to arrive for the kick-off dinner, it becomes clear that mediating squabbles between the Americans and their guests will be a top priority. Case in point is a heated discussion about Ernest Hemingway, who split his time between Key West and Havana, but who gave the Nobel prize gold medal he was awarded to Havana, where it has been ever since. As a good will gesture, the medal has been loaned to Key West, but when the guests are ushered to the trophy case to view it, the priceless medal is gone.

Security is tight, so the police are sure the theft was an "inside job." Suspicion falls on one of the busboys, who mysteriously disappears right after the theft is discovered. Hayley and the catering staff do their best to keep the party going while the search goes on. But no one is prepared for the grisly discovery of the busboy, who tumbles out of a storeroom, the victim of a stabbing.

"Death on the Menu" is the eighth in the *Key West Food Critic* series written by Roberta Isleib under the pen name of Lucy Burdette. There's a lot to love about this series—deft plotting, likeable characters, and an ending that always satisfies. But one of the things I love the best is how the author transports her readers to Key West with every page, describing real landmarks and restaurants with such realism that I feel I'm actually there. Magical and delicious fun!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "In-Laws Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine*. ■

Get To Know ~

Dru Ann Love of Dru's Book Musings

Interview by Susan Santangelo for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



What is your name?

Dru Ann Love.

How old are you?

A young 60.

What is your profession?

I work at the daytime situation as a research professional.

Do you have any sibling(s)?

I have four sisters.

Cats, dogs or other pets?

I grew up with cats, but now I'm allergic to them, so no to pets.

What town do you live in?

New York City.

House or building complex? Do you rent or own?

I own my place.

What is your favorite spot in your house?

My computer nook.

Favorite meal?

Collard greens, baked macaroni & cheese, rice and roast chicken.

Favorite dessert?

Vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup or regular plain yellow cake with chocolate frosting.

Favorite hobby?

Traveling and quilting.

Favorite vacation spot?

Paris, France.

Favorite color?

Blue.

Favorite author?

Too many to name. I know it's a cop out, but there it is. Okay, J.D. Robb aka Nora Roberts.

Favorite sports team?

New York Yankees.

Movies or Broadway?

Broadway, especially musicals.

Are you a morning or a night person?

I'm definitely a morning person.

In a few sentences, what is a typical day in your life like?

I take a 45-minute subway ride to the office, which is prime for reading. I spend the day doing research, whether it is programming a survey or analyzing data. Then another 45-minutes subway ride home where I'll continue reading. Once home, the TV goes on as I wait for *Jeopardy!* to come on. If an author is in town, I'll have lunch with them, or if they have a book launch, I'll attend that.

Have you always loved mysteries?

Yes. The first book I recall reading was "Encyclopedia Brown" and then I moved on to other mysteries.

What made you decide to start your blog, and when?

My blog started out as a reading journal in 2008, however, the blog that you see today was prompted because I had learned that in order to keep readers coming to your blog, you needed to have fresh content at least 3-5 days a week. One day after I had finished reading and the crime was solved, a thought came into my head. . . What is a typical day for the character when they are not solving a murder? And that is how a "Day In The Life" feature came into being, and the anniversary of that first guest post is August 8, 2011.

You refer to yourself as a "book advocate." Could you explain what you mean by that?

It means I promote authors via my blog feature, via shout-outs on social media. Any place there's a reading audience, I'll let them know about a book or two.

On average, how many books do you read a week?

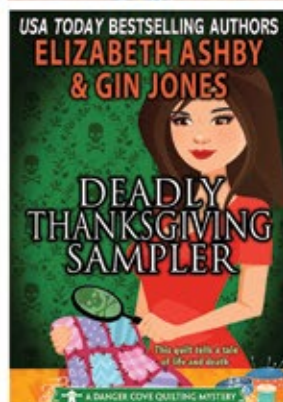
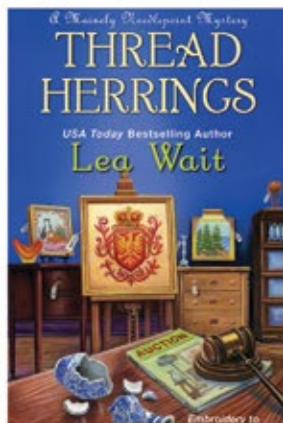
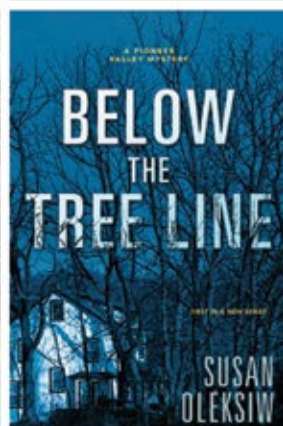
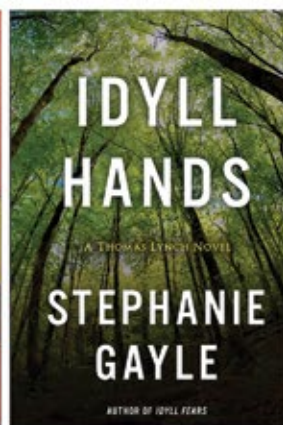
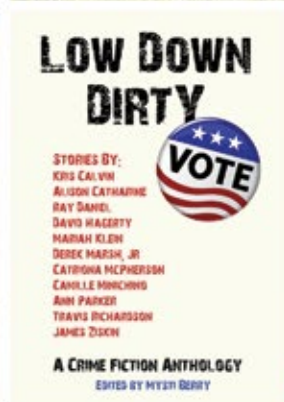
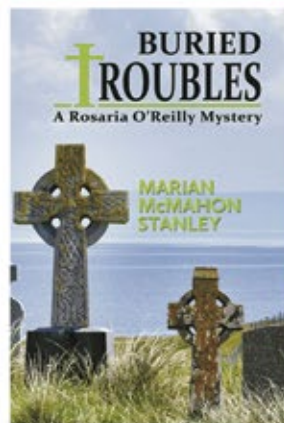
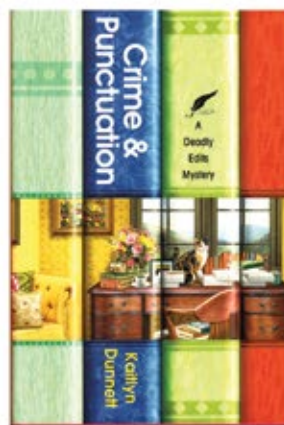
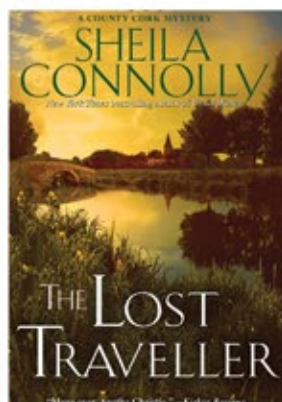
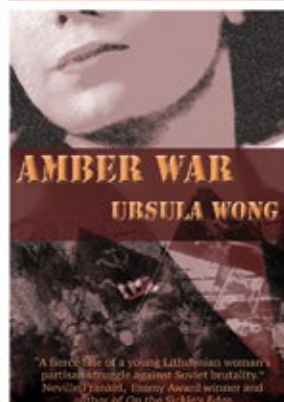
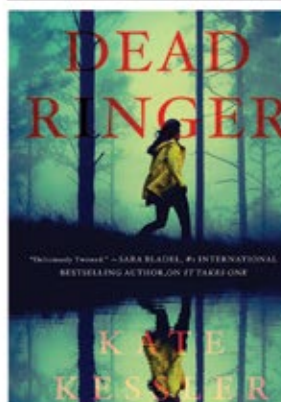
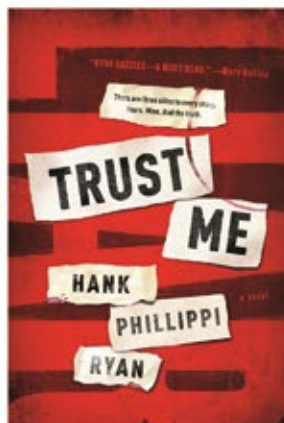
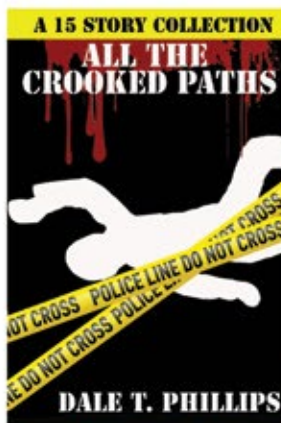
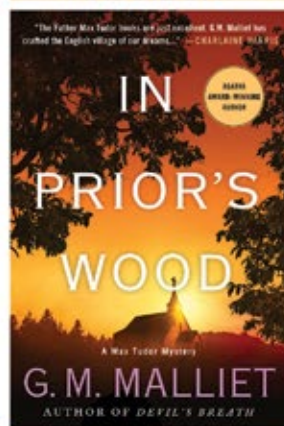
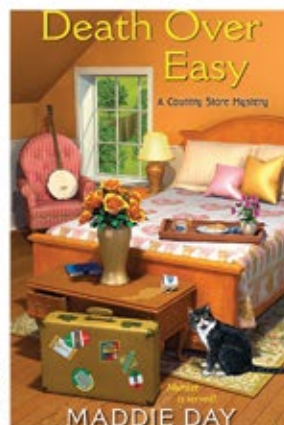
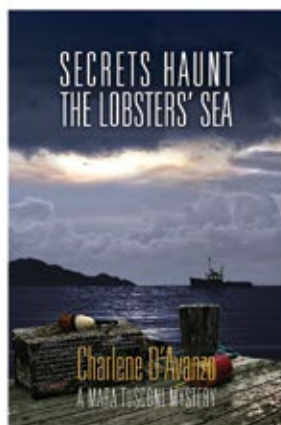
Anywhere between 3 to 4 per week. A few times I've read 5 books, which is rare now.

Besides reading, what other hobbies do you enjoy?

I quilt—although I haven't made a quilting project this year, but plan to fix that. I also like to travel and attending fan conventions allows me to do that, as I dislike traveling alone.

We'd like to thank Dru for allowing us to turn the tables on her. She's been an incredible advocate for authors and readers alike. To follow her blog, Dru's Book Musings, head to <https://drusbookmusing.com>. You'll be glad you did. ■

"I promote authors via my blog feature, via shout-outs on social media. Any place there's a reading audience."



2018 Books by Sisters in Crime New England



STEVE HAMILTON

THRILLS YOU AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Franco Vogt



Two-time Edgar Award winner... *New York Times* bestselling author of fourteen novels... There are many “opening lines” that can be used when describing the prolific author, Steve Hamilton. But all fans need to know is what they already do: Steve Hamilton is one of the best suspense writers in the world.

Right from his debut, “A Cold Day in Paradise,” when P.I. Alex McKnight entered the world and proceeded to become one of the most popular characters in suspense fiction, Steve Hamilton and his ideas were a hit and became “must-haves” on bookshelves everywhere.

Having either won or been nominated for, almost if not all, major crime fiction awards in America and the UK, his titles are now translated into twenty languages. And now, his well-known P.I. has reappeared in “Dead Man Running,” causing everyone to “run” to sellers and snatch it up immediately. Here, *Suspense Magazine* sits down and talks to Steve Hamilton, getting the inside scoop on this incredible character and his other creations from his own point of view.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): There’s only one place to begin. Fans have been waiting five years to see Alex McKnight, your private eye hero return, and in August they waited no longer. Did you always believe that McKnight had more to do and say?

Steve Hamilton (S.H.): Yes, *I always knew I’d come back to Alex McKnight. It’s hard to believe that it’s been twenty years since that first book, “A Cold Day in Paradise.” But he’s the one character who*

has been with me since the beginning. In a way, I owe everything to him, and I can’t imagine ever not wanting to go back to see what kind of trouble can find Alex next—even in a place as remote as Paradise.

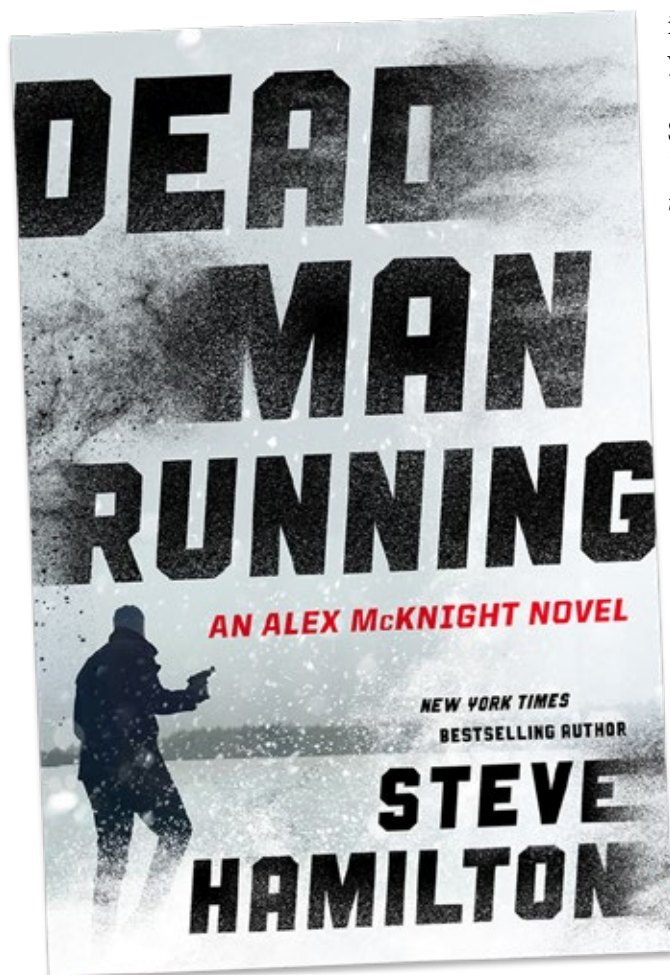
S. MAG.: As a mystery lover, when you’re waiting for “the next one,” it feels like years instead of months for the ultimate fan. Please give us a sneak peek at “Dead Man Running” that readers can find nowhere else.

.....
"ALEX MCKNIGHT IS THE KIND OF MAN
WHO, DESPITE COMPLAINING ABOUT IT, WILL
NEVERTHELESS DO ANYTHING FOR SOMEONE IN
NEED, EVEN A STRANGER."
.....

S.H.: *I'm honored that the reviews have been really great for this book. 'The Real Book Spy' said that "Alex McKnight's been put through the ringer before, but never quite like this...Steve Hamilton rakes his hero over the coals, taking him to hell and back as he faces off with a man so evil that he'd scare the hell out of the devil himself." Which really does capture what Alex has to endure in this book. And as far as giving you something readers can't find anywhere else...let us say that there's a major figure from Alex's past who makes a dramatic reappearance in this book. That's all I can say!*

S. MAG.: Being the author behind two such admired protagonists, McKnight as well as Nick Mason, can you tell us a bit about what qualities you like the best in each of them? And which, if you had to choose, would you most like to work with if they were able to step over the threshold of fiction into reality?

S.H.: *Alex McKnight is the kind of man who, despite complaining about it, will nevertheless do anything for someone in need, even a stranger. Nick Mason is younger, stronger, harder, and he's definitely lived a large part of his life on the other side of the law. But he still loves his friends and especially his family no less than Alex or any other man on the planet. As far as which man I'd want to work with... That's a tough one, but I'd have to say Alex, for the simple reason that he reminds me so much of my late father. (Although if we're talking about taking someone out, it would have to be Nick Mason!)*



S. MAG.: Is there a piece of advice you would like to give to those intrepid writers striving to become published one day? What would you tell them is the biggest pitfall of this industry and what to avoid?

S.H.: *Go read Don Winslow's tweets about the publishing business. You'll learn everything you need to know right there. But to summarize in just a few words, your work has value, and you need to treat it that way. Don't give it away, or take less for it than its true worth, just because you think you have no choice, or that a publisher is doing you a big favor. Don't accept second best for yourself, or for a unique and amazing book that you've worked so hard to create.*

S. MAG.: Has the process to bring your characters to the screen gone forward? If so, can you tell us a bit about when it would appear on film, etc.?

S.H.: *Lionsgate has the option on the Nick Mason series, and that's very much still in the works. Negotiations are ongoing for both the Alex McKnight series and for "The Lock Artist." In both cases, I've said 'no' to every offer that didn't feel right. Now that I have the right representation in Shane Salerno and The Story Factory, I know that anything that happens will be in the right place, with the right people.*

S. MAG.: Is "An Honorable Assassin" (the third in the Nick Mason series) arriving next year? If so, can you give us an inside look at what Mason is up to next?

S.H.: *Yes, Nick Mason is still on track for 2019. There's a big twist*

at the end of the second book, “Exit Strategy,” and it sends Mason to the other side of the world. He’s still in the same horrible vise grip, forced to commit more and more brutal crimes in the service of a criminal empire, but now he’s doing it in a place that is utterly foreign to him.

S. MAG.: Being such an elite author with a slew of awards under your belt, even though you have gone this far and continue to release fantastic books, do you still remember that first win? And is there more pressure felt when it comes to putting together book number two when such awards are won?

S.H.: *I can remember every moment of that first Edgar banquet back in 1999, when “A Cold Day in Paradise” was up for Best First Novel. I was sitting between my wife and Ruth Cavin, the legendary editor who’s sadly no longer with us. This was all still very new to me, and I couldn’t even imagine winning an award named after one of my literary heroes. I hope I’ve lived up to that honor in all of the years and all of the other books that have come since then.*

S. MAG.: In relation to “The Lock Artist,” your standalone that literally made publishing history, what made you most interested in crossing the line into YA fiction at that time? Do you wish to do more in that area?

S.H.: *The funny thing is that I had no idea I was writing a YA book at the time. Somebody had to literally point that out to me after the book came out. It wasn’t just the fact that the protagonist was 18 years old, but that many of the themes in the book—coming of age, first true love, feeling like an alien when you’re just trying to find your place in the world—were all elements of modern YA fiction. When I went to the American Library Association to accept an Alex Award, given to adult books that cross over into the YA market, I got the chance to really feel like a YA author for that weekend. I loved it, and I will absolutely do it again.*

S. MAG.: Do you follow a specific schedule each day, or are you one who writes when the mood hits, so to speak?

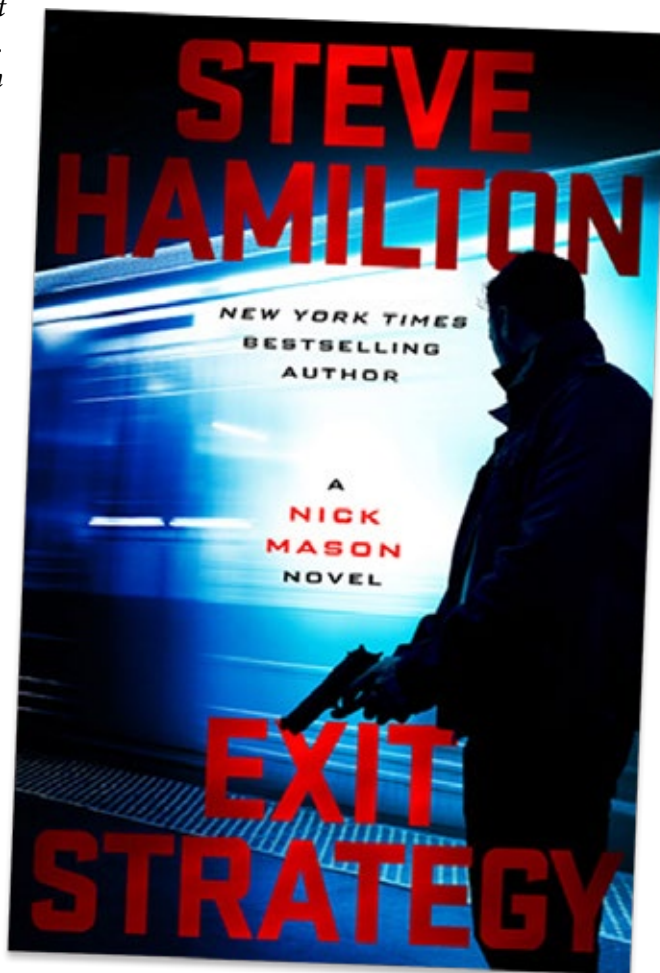
S.H.: *If I wrote only when the mood hit, I’d still be stuck on that first book. Hell, the first chapter. A professional writer writes every day. Maybe some days you need to do some other things first, catch up on emails until it feels like you can sneak up on the work in progress. But I live for those days when you sit down and it just goes. It’s the best feeling in the world.*

S. MAG.: Did you have a specific mentor that helped you when the need to write first began? Is there one piece of advice they gave to you that has stuck with you ever since?

S.H.: *There was a high school English teacher, Anne Nozewski Smith, who was there at just the right time, who let me sit in the department office by myself all day and just write. Later it was a Writer’s Group who’d meet in the basement of a library across the river. They didn’t have to give me any advice at all—they just had to be there every Thursday night, waiting for my next short story or chapter. It kept me accountable to someone other than just myself.*

For fans, that type of dedication is an absolute blessing. Seeing Alex McKnight return in “Dead Man Running” is a joy. There is no wonder how Steve Hamilton rose to the elite in the writing world, seeing as that his characters are absolutely memorable and completely unforgettable. Note to Hollywood: It would be a real thrill to see any of his creations up on the big screen, ASAP.

To keep up with Steve and see what events, titles and projects are in the works, head to www.authorstevehamilton.com. ■



FREDERICK FORSYTH

Brings “The Fox” Out of Hiding

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Gillian Shaw



The one thing that is always tough when you do a magazine like ours is to put your “fan” side on the back burner. But when you get an author like Frederick Forsyth to interview, that “fan” side will not be tamed or quieted in any way. When we received the email that Frederick was bringing out a new book called “The Fox” we jumped at the chance to talk to him. Luckily, he said, yes, and that interview is below.

Frederick Forsyth, CBE is an English author and occasional political commentator. He is best known for thrillers, such as; “The Day of the Jackal,” “The Odessa File,” “The Fourth Protocol,” “The Dogs of War,” “The Devil’s Alternative,” “The Fist of God,” “Icon,” “The Veteran,” “Avenger,” “The Afghan,” and recently, “The Cobra” and “The Kill List.”

Forsyth decided to write a novel using similar research techniques to those used in journalism. His first full-length novel, “The Day of the Jackal,” was published in 1971, and

went on to become an international bestseller and gained its author the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel in 1972. It was later made into a film of the same name.

Let’s take a quick look into his latest novel, “The Fox.”

Former Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, Adrian Weston, is awoken in the middle of the night by a phone call from

the Prime Minister. Her news is shocking: the Pentagon, the NSA, and the CIA have been hacked simultaneously, their seemingly impenetrable firewalls breached by an unknown enemy known only as "The Fox." Even more surprisingly, the culprit is revealed to be a British teenager named Luke Jennings. He has no agenda, no secrets, just a blisteringly brilliant mind. Extradition to the U.S. seems likely, until Weston has another idea: If Luke can do this to us, what can he do to our enemies?

After conferring with both the American President and the Prime Minister, Weston is determined to use "The Fox" and his talents to the advantage of the two nations. But doing so places the boy in a geopolitical minefield. Adrian must stay one step ahead of multiple invisible enemies, all while finding a way to utilize the most powerful—and most unpredictable—weapon of all.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Give us an inside look into your latest book "The Fox."

Frederick Forsyth (F.F.): Basically, just about everything I've written comes down to two unanswered questions: "Would it be possible to...?" and "What would happen if...?"

"The Fox" is very simply, what would happen if a western nation like Britain discovered in its midst what is basically the most dangerous teenager in the world? Would it be possible to expose the secrets of some of the most vicious nations if only we can get into their secret archives?

We have a genius cybercriminal or "cyber freak" as he has no malice. He's just a kid in a candy store who doesn't know what he's doing. However, if you guide and direct him in specific tasks, then he may be able to do things that no other expert can. That's Luke Jennings.

S. MAG.: Do you feel that using cyber technology as the threat instead of bombs and missiles, is truly more terrifying for the reader, since it's the threat you really can't see?

F.F.: Certainly experts writing in the defense field are telling us that more effort is being put into cyber threats over conventional attacks, which is more costly than building bombs.

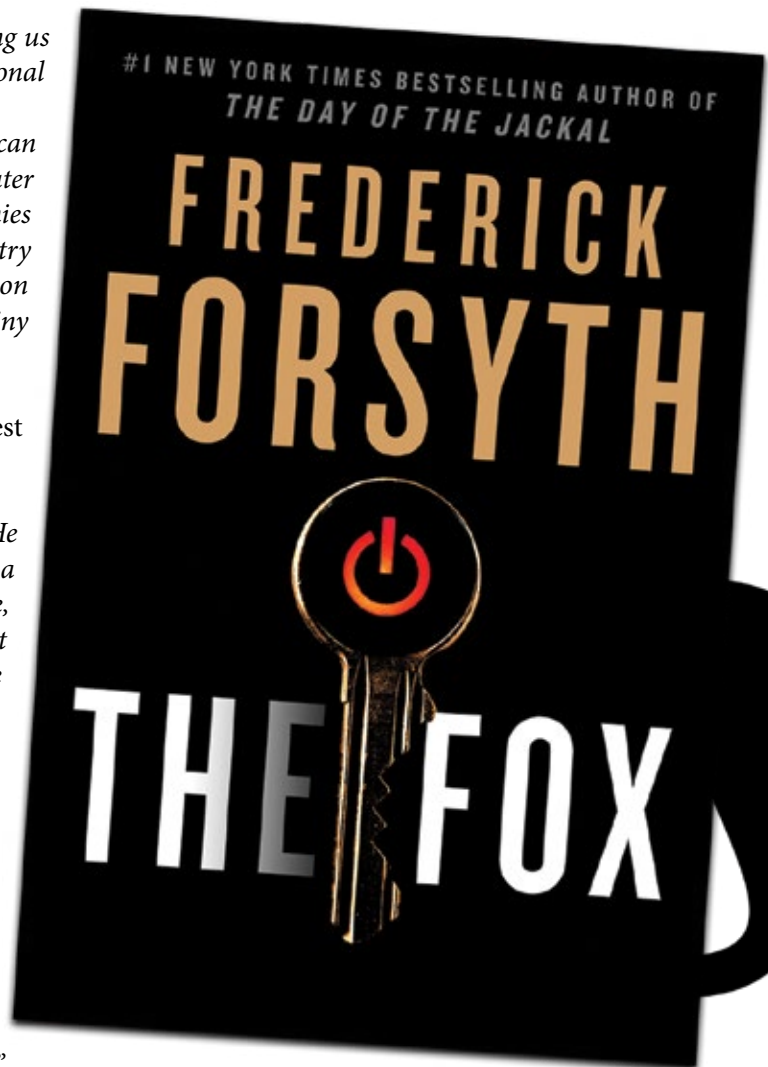
We have all the technology in the world, which can ultimately be reduced to junk because it's all computer governed. If someone can put malware inside the enemies computers, that is like taking out several divisions of infantry without firing a shot. There's a whole invisible war going on out there that we don't realize is going on and that only a tiny portion of people understand.

S. MAG.: Why do you feel that Adrian Weston was the best character to be the lead in the book?

F.F.: He's a formidable character and a 70-year-old hero! He has maturity, smarts, experience and clout. He has been to a good school, he was an army cadet, he was in the Air Force, he saw action against the IRA and then he left and went into secret intelligence where he rose to his ranks to become deputy chief.

He had an enormous contact list and could pick up a phone and ring the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police or the Director of Special Forces and his calls would be taken.

He's also calm and soft-spoken and overtly courteous. Being tough in a quiet way makes him even more dangerous because he doesn't lose his temper, but can give a kill order without batting an eyelid. There's a part in the book when he knows Russian killers are going to attack and he says to Captain William, "Do you remember Loughgall?"



which they know translates to “take no prisoners.”

S. MAG.: When creating a villain, are there certain personality traits you feel are important to get across to the reader?

F.F.: *All good thriller writers must have a hero and a villain. Simply put, you root for the “good guys” who have a task to do or prevent something, and the person behind the bad thing is the villain.*

Villains are people that have an ambition that is deeply hostile to yourself, your own people, your own country or part of the world. Dating back to the middle ages, the guy facing you on the battlefield is the villain so it’s pretty much still the same. When creating a villain, I’m writing about someone in opposition to you and your society.

S. MAG.: Seeing how the world has changed so much in the last twenty years, what’s the hardest part as an author in keeping your books fresh with the most current technologies?

F.F.: *If you’re writing historical like Hilary Mantel than there’s no problem, as you’re writing about Queen Elizabeth the First or Sir Francis Drake. You cannot pretend you’re Sherlock Holmes because he wouldn’t succeed today, so writers have to be aware and make ourselves aware. Once you get up to the modern age, than you have to be on top of the game as things are changing all the time. We all do. Writers like John Grisham and Michael Connelly are all looking at the latest gizmo.*

If you’re writing topical stuff you can’t have the reader thinking your character is doing anything old fashioned. I find that quite a struggle at my age. Now, it’s wondering what the youngsters do, like walking around staring at their tablet or phone and walk straight into a lamppost, which my generation didn’t do because we didn’t have them. So you have to think about what is happening in the modern world and be careful to study it and work out what would and wouldn’t happen.

For the police, they need to use modern technology like solving homicides using DNA. In “The Fox,” the criminals can be traced by the CCTV footage, which has been used for a while now.

S. MAG.: When you look back at your start in 1971, with “The Day of the Jackal,” how has Frederick Forsyth changed as an author?

F.F.: *I don’t think very much. My background was as a foreign correspondent and we had to be accurate and also go right to where the action is even if it’s 1,000 miles away. If you’re covering Syria today, you have to be in Syria reporting.*

Journalists write fast because the editor has a deadline at midnight and then the story has to go into the newspaper. The editor knows there are rival reporters, so they will be on the phone yelling, “Where’s your copy?” I still write the same way I did as a foreign correspondent. I’m fast and the first draft goes into print. “The Day of the Jackal” was the first draft and it’s been like that ever since. I do not do rewrites. You cannot say halfway through the night to your editor you want your copy back to revise anything. It’s already going to press at that point. So you get it right the first time. It’s the only way I can write.

By the same token, I still write on a small portable typewriter with two fingers. I never knew journalists could use ten fingers. They all tend to peck away with those two fingers although now they probably do so on laptops. I did upgrade from a manual to electric typewriter and actually now have an electronic typewriter. I do tell people that at least no one can hack my typewriter so, for me, at least it has a certain security.

S. MAG.: What’s next on the horizon that fans can expect?

F.F.: *It won’t be another novel! Strangely enough I’ve written a poem, which has been made into an anthem called “[Fallen Soldier](#)” which is a lament for soldiers from both our countries who gave their lives over the last 100 years. This is a new departure for me.*

I’m not writing novels, but may do short stories. I’ve done a few including The Shepherd, a collection of ten in a book called “No Comebacks,” and five in “The Veteran.”

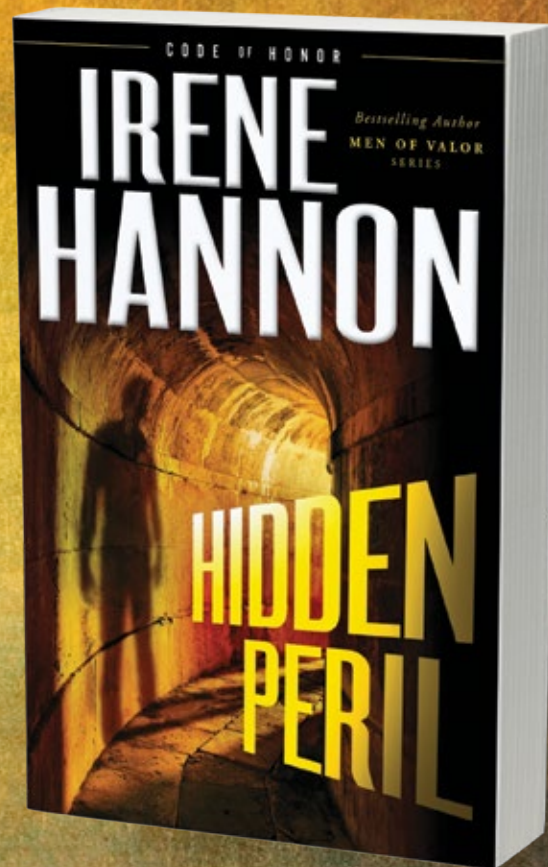
I have a weekly column in the Daily Express in the UK which allows me to sound off on news and current affairs, and who’s doing what to who and what I think about it. It seems to have a following, so I can carry on with that.

The days are not empty. I’d like to give my wife Sandy more of a social life as I’m fairly absent when writing a book as my mind is somewhere else. It isn’t fair, so I’d like to take her to the theater, movies, parties, so I’ll be doing a lot more of that.

We would like to thank Frederick for taking the time to speak with us. Please visit his website for more information:
<https://www.fantasticfiction.com>. ■



THE MOST DANGEROUS ENEMY IS THE ONE WHO HAS NOTHING TO LOSE . . .

Detective Luke Carter, new to the St. Louis PD, wants to know why people are being killed around Kristin's shop. Before he can answer that question, however, the FBI weighs in and Kristin suddenly finds herself in the middle of international intrigue—and in the sights of the ruthless mastermind behind an ingenious and deadly scheme. Can this cold-blooded killer be stopped before more people die . . . including Kristin?



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WELL-PACED ROMANCE—
everything you want in a romantic
suspense—HARRIS DELIVERS!”***



—ELIZABETH GODDARD,
award-winning author of the COLDWATER BAY INTRIGUE series

Psychologist Grace Callahan has no idea
that she has a secret—one worth killing for.

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Saying Goodbye to a True Friend:

Joel Rose Offers Insight into the Mind of Chef Anthony Bourdain & Their Final Project Together



Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Joel Rose Press Photo Credit: Marion Ettlinger
Anthony Bourdain Portrait: Francesco Francavilla

MANY PEOPLE, WHEN THEY HEAR THE NAME ANTHONY BOURDAIN, would think “chef” and of his shows; *Parts Unknown*, *The Layover*, *No Reservations*, and more. What you might not know is that Anthony also loved horror novels, and wrote one with co-writer Joel Rose, called “Hungry Ghosts.”

Of course, the sad news is that Anthony is no longer with us, so this was the last thing he wrote before he passed away. “Hungry Ghosts” is a graphic novel based off old Japanese stories.

We were lucky to be able to interview Joel Rose, Anthony’s very good friend for the past thirty-five years. He talks about not only the graphic novel, but his relationship with Anthony and how he loved this book. Let’s take a little look inside the novel and then read the very emotional interview below. We will also play this interview live on *Suspense Radio* during an upcoming show.

“Hungry Ghosts” is cooked up by the best selling author and veteran chef, Anthony Bourdain (Kitchen Confidential, Emmy-Award winning TV star of *Parts Unknown*), and

acclaimed novelist Joel Rose (“Kill Kill Faster Faster”) back again from their New York Times #1 best seller, “Get Jiro!” Featuring real recipes cooked up by Bourdain himself, this horror anthology is sure to please—and scare!

On a dark, haunted night, a Russian Oligarch dares a circle of international chefs to play the samurai game of 100 Candles—where each storyteller tells a terrifying tale of ghosts, demons and unspeakable beings—and prays to survive the challenge.

Inspired by the Japanese Edo period game of Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai, “Hungry Ghosts” reimagines the classic stories of yokai, yorei, and obake, all tainted with the common thread of food.

Including stellar artists; Sebastian Cabrol, Vanesa Del Rey, Francesco Francavilla, Irene Koh, Leo Manco, Alberto Ponticelli, Paul Pope, and Mateus Santolouco, as well as amazing color by Jose Villarrubia, and a drop-dead cover by Paul Pope.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): We are speaking here today with Joel Rose, one of the co-authors of a fantastic graphic novel titled, “Hungry Ghosts.” Joel, thank you for coming. How are you doing today?

Joel Rose (J.R.): I’m doing well. It’s my pleasure to be here.





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S. MAG.: When I first received the information about this book, I began to look into it right away. I am a comic book collector, have been for years, so graphic novels are right up my alley; I love the art that goes with the story. I was shocked, as most people will be, when I saw that the other author on this book was Mr. Anthony Bourdain. It was very sad when Mr. Bourdain left this world, but this book, I must say, truly allows the reader to get a glimpse into his soul. Can you give us a little background in regards to the project, the conception and how you became involved?

J.R.: *Actually, Tony and I were longtime friends. The way we met...I had this little literary magazine called Between C & D on the Lower East Side in NYC a while back. One day, I received a comic book in the mail from someone I didn't know. It was crudely drawn but well-written. I was not so much interested but made it a point to always write a note and encourage people in the industry. I basically stated that the "art sucked but his writing was very interesting." I lived in a tenement and, about a week later, someone buzzed me downstairs. I was met with a tall guy in chef's whites; the guy turned out to be Tony and he was the one I'd sent the letter of "encouragement" to. He came upstairs with me and we began a friendship that lasted 35 years. I was very much into his writing. He was a young guy; I was pretty young, too, and we both loved comics. He was always after me about teaming up and creating one. Then, one Thanksgiving he was over at the house and he cornered me about it. He told me a story and we turned it into a graphic novel titled, "Get Jiro!"*

"Hungry Ghosts" is the third iteration of our graphic novel work; and when we worked together, we really had a blast.

S. MAG.: My wife watches *Parts Unknown* and, I have to say, it's usually really tough to get a sense of someone. But with the show, you can really see who Anthony Bourdain was and understand him. When it comes to this novel, about chefs and dealing with Asian and Japanese influences, was this his idea? I mean, I don't even know if the "Game of 100 Candles" you mention is even real; or, was it made up?

J.R.: *Actually, I'm on the same page as you. I knew nothing about some of this stuff. We did an interview together at one time and he mentioned it. We then went out for a drink and he told me all about it.*

100 Candles is a game where a group of samurai would gather and they would basically light 100 candles. They would then tell stories designed to scare the heck out of each other. After a story was complete, they would blow out one candle and stare into a mirror in order to make sure they had not, themselves, been infected by a ghost or a goblin. And...well, we stole that idea (LOL).

That night I went home and looked up the story; I began to read, order books, watch movies, and really get into it. Tony was an autodidact—he knew and loved Asian culture—and "Hungry Ghosts" is actually Pan-Asian and has many iterations throughout Asia. These stories that we tell have been told a hundred times, a hundred different ways, by a hundred different cultures. We joined the line and told our version. When we were going back and forth, we made the samurai into chefs, which was not a big leap, and transferred some of the stories to different locations and set in other times. Tony had an agenda, however. He had an idea of what these stories meant to him and how he wanted to tell them, and we worked really hard to get there.



S. MAG: Now, for people who may be unaware, this is a true thriller/horror novel. It can get a little intense at times. But I have to say, I love the recipes in there and the art. You have several illustrators mentioned. How did you get with them all and make sure the art matched the vision?

J.R.: *The art is phenomenal. We had an idea of how we wanted the book to look, with a different artist for every story. For writers, like me, being able to work with artists who have a completely different vocabulary than we have is a privilege.*

Working again with Karen Berger, a definite comic book 'Hall of Famer' who started "Vertigo," knows numerous artists and put us in contact with many. Paul Pope, another 'Hall of Famer' did covers for "Hungry Ghosts" as well as the story, Boil in the Belly. Alberto Ponticelli did The Starving Skeleton. Vanessa Del Rey did the pirates story; Leonardo Manco did Salty Horse; and then you add in others, like Irene Koh, Francesco Francavilla...the list goes on. And to be in the midst of these comic book "superheroes" was really an amazing privilege.

S. MAG.: Again, that's what I truly love about the graphic novel, being able to push the boundaries with the hardcore images and not just the words. You are able to do more; you give the third dimension to the reader with this novel because they can



“Do your work, spend the time, learn your craft, but at some point realize that it’s not worth torturing yourself any longer.”

see the action. As a novelist, you have to describe images, but with this you can let the art speak.

J.R.: *Exactly. For me, John, there are different styles of writing comic book scripts. Some, like Alan Moore, will give every detail. I don’t see that well, literally and figuratively, so I leave a lot of space for artists to counteract with the story. And when you get artists of this caliber, whatever script Tony and I wrote, these guys made it*

ten times better. Everything you are seeing on the page, I did not put that down. As far as the “hardcore” parts you see, that was Tony. His mantra was “blood and splatter.” He wanted that. He was a suspense/mystery novelist in his heart to begin with. As you know, he wrote “Bone in the Throat” and “Gone Bamboo” which were both mysteries/suspense, before he had this incredible breakthrough as a chef tell-all/kitchen confidential superstar.

S. MAG.: And I think that’s why people will look at “Hungry Ghosts” and shake their heads thinking, “Tony was a graphic novelist? I thought he was a chef.” But, for you, over 35 years you saw the evolution he made in his career and as a person, which was astonishing.

J.R.: *I believe he would rather have been “R. Crumb” than anyone else. (LOL)*

S. MAG.: Never really loved the spotlight, did he?

J.R.: *No, what you said before, about what you see on TV. That was who he was: a good guy who truly cared about other people, other cultures, and someone who wanted to get to know all kinds of people. He was not impressed by “one power” or anything like that. He preferred to go into your house and hang out in the kitchen with your mom while she was making dinner. He was just a genuine soul.*

S. MAG.: You certainly have books in your own right. Were these projects perhaps, out-of-the-box for you? What were you able to learn from these experiences that you take with you into your own writing?

J.R.: *I did learn a lot. Tony and I worked together for such a long time that what I learned from him, and what he learned from me as well, is that at some point you have to let it go. Do your work, spend the time, learn your craft, but at some point realize that it’s not worth torturing yourself any longer. You’ve reached some plateau of competence in your craft where you don’t need to berate yourself any longer. And that was the great lesson for me while working with Tony. Because the way we worked, we pushed it as far as we could individually and then passed it to each other, back and forth, and did not torture ourselves with self-doubt. That was a great freedom. And I’m not saying I’m great at it, but I’m better at it than I was.*

Since this tragedy happened on June 8th, when I get to that torture place I say “stop”



The Knight of Manor Crawford



By John Sims-Jones

A man's home is his castle.

As long as I could remember, that phrase had always seemed wrong. Was my childhood home my father's castle? Certainly not, if my mother had anything to say about it. Was the apartment I lived in during my twenties a castle? No, it was the cottage of a lowly serf, owned by the landlord who ruled over all creation. And was my first home with my wife a castle? If so, it was merely a transitional castle, a placeholder while we saved for a better castle in a nicer neighborhood.

But this? This was truly a castle.

Here stood the Manor Jefferson, once ruled by the frustratingly long-lived Grandmother Madelyn, who sat upon her wealth as she waited for her far nicer and more deserving offspring to die penniless. At the ripe age of ninety-two, the queen finally passed away, leaving her estate to my wife and me, including the sprawling house that would finally serve as our own true castle. After an excruciating but obligatory twenty-four hours of mourning, my wife and I dubbed each other Queen Anna and King Daniel Crawford, and we waited with growing impatience for the lawyers to permit us to claim our new residence.

After months of legal discussions and unwarranted claims from bitter, estranged relatives, the transfer was finalized and we moved our meager possessions into the newly titled Manor Crawford. This wasn't particularly difficult. We had little, and there was more than enough space to store it all. Within two weeks, our old house was emptied and placed on the market, and we were fully moved into our new home across town.

The Manor Crawford was three stories tall, with a massive entry room from which all three floors were visible. The room opened upon an imposing staircase, old and creaky up close, but majestic when viewed from a distance. This led to the second floor, where it was then flanked by two spiral staircases providing access to the upper level. Both levels contained several bedrooms, washrooms, and studies, as well as a library on the third floor. On the ground level lay the kitchen, dining room, salon, and Queen Madelyn's bedroom, which we agreed to lock away and never set foot in again. Call it out of reverence for the dead, but realistically it was out of a desire to shed all traces of past ownership as we settled into our new home.

In her old age, Anna's grandmother had difficulty

accessing the upper levels of her house, and had hired people to clear out the rooms she couldn't use. It gave the house an unbalanced look, stately on the bottom, empty on the top. With a large sum of inherited cash at our disposal, Anna and I agreed it was time to purchase new furnishings—furnishings of our own choosing rather than that of a greedy, elderly tyrant.

Through the month of May, I scoured antique stores and craft shops each day after work, looking for anything and everything that might match our new home's aesthetic. My wife and I seldom consulted each other on these purchases, as the house was large enough for decorative space to not be a highly contested commodity. Every time I chanced upon a nice painting or piece of furniture, I asked the clerk to ring me up and help me load it into my truck. Once home, Anna and I worked together to unload my acquisitions, then quickly selected an empty spot in the house in which to place them.

Of all the craft shops at my disposal, my favorite was The Craft Emporium, an old timey store operated out of a once-abandoned warehouse. Unlike many of the other stores, this one often commissioned local and regional artisans, and because of this featured a better and more variable selection. Many of the store's paintings and sculptures ended up in our home, and over time I had become familiar with most of the names of the artists behind my favorite works.

On a warm day at the end of May, however, I found myself staring into the face of someone entirely unfamiliar. It was a mannequin, made of wood and clad in the gleaming steel of a suit of armor, staring coldly at me from his corner with an air of confidence and determination. I stared back, equally resiliently, as I sized up this new and unexpected arrival to the otherwise unimposing craft store.

I called over the store clerk, curious to know who made the figure in question. The alleged artist was a metalworker by the name of Allen McIntyre, a young man specializing in medieval themed reproductions. Looking at the imposing knight before me, I couldn't help but feel skeptical. The armor simply seemed too powerful, too ancient in appearance, to be a mere reproduction. But the clerk didn't know that, and I wasn't prepared to correct him, lest the price be adjusted accordingly. Without betraying the armor's real value, I indicated I would like to purchase it for the price on the tag,

which he naively accepted without hesitation.

Anna could hardly conceal her surprise when I arrived home with my new decoration. I explained to her that no castle was complete without a suit of armor, to which she smiled faintly. She went inside to retrieve a hand cart, and we wheeled the knight inside. I told her I intended to place him at the head of the stairs on the second floor, and after great exertion and several breaks, we finally got him in place. From his position, the knight looked over Queen Anna and King Daniel, over the stairs and entryway, over the entirety of Manor Crawford.

Over the following days, my purchases subsided, though the house was still far from full. It didn't matter to me, as I had found what was to be the centerpiece of our residence. Each morning, as I exited our second story bedroom, I was greeted by the suit of armor, whose stoic silence I came to view as a sign of respect towards His Highness. It was nice, having a subject for the kingdom. It was just the touch I needed to feel like I was truly at home in this new setting.

As summer ended, Anna returned to her work, teaching literature and arithmetic to the lowly peons of Dawson Elementary School. Where once we had spent our evenings together, doing little beyond basking in the wealth of our newfound kingdom, now our time together grew scarce in a wave of lesson plans, grading, parent-teacher conferences, and school clubs desperate for faculty involvement.

This was no different from any other year, but in the expanse of the new house, I found myself feeling lonelier than usual. With Anna locked away in the study grading quizzes and homework, I started spending more time on the steps of the main staircase under the shadow of my friend, the knight. At first, we sat in silence, thinking quietly to ourselves while we simply enjoyed each other's company. But over time, I began to chat with the armored man, imagining how a knight might respond in even the most mundane of conversations. It was harmless fun, a way to pass the time and stave off evenings of never-ending boredom.

As October passed and fall began to descend upon our town, I began to suffer from insomnia. In the stillness of night, the creaking of the house had become more apparent, and I soon understood why most castles were built of stone instead of wood. When awakened, I tried to talk to Anna, but as the problem persisted, she claimed I was making her too tired for work. It was hard to feel sympathetic when I also had to work each day, but I apologized and promised not to bother her anymore.

Instead, I sat up with the suit of armor, listening to the creaking of the house and whispering whatever sleep-deprived thoughts my mind could produce. By this time, I had developed a full character profile for the knight, and it became easier to imagine his responses. He was calm and collected, respectful, yet wise enough to tell me when I was wrong. In short, he was everything a knight ought to be, a composite of every film and book character I'd ever encountered in a medieval setting. Because of this, I never named him. It was too difficult to choose a name when I already associated him with so many different characters.

In the dark, I spoke to him about problems at work,

the frustrations of marriage, and my ongoing resentment of family members I seldom even saw after the inheritance dispute. This all seemed unbefitting of a king, I thought, and I told him as much. For being the ruler of Manor Crawford, incumbent to a vast fortune, it was surprising how little of my life had changed, how much I still lacked control.

The suit of armor listened quietly, empathetically. He seemed to understand my frustrations, but also knew that no easy answer existed. My office, Anna's school, and her greedy relatives were all beyond the reach of my kingdom, and sometimes concessions must be made to keep the peace. And so we sat there, a king without a crown, and a knight without a sword.

A knight without a sword!

The words rattled in my mind, and I was struck by the pure injustice of the situation. For months, I had walked by the suit of armor, and not once had it occurred to me that the knight was incomplete. Where once I had believed the house was fully decorated, it once again seemed as spare as the day we moved in, and I resolved to rectify the situation as quickly as possible.

The next day, I stopped by The Craft Emporium, where I asked the clerk if any new pieces by the metalworker had come in. He mentioned several smaller suits of armor and a coat of arms, but claimed that very little had come in recently. I encouraged him to contact the metalworker and see about commissioning a sword to go with the armor. Of course, I had my own doubts about whether my knight had really been created by such a modern artisan, but there was no point discussing the matter with the clerk. Regardless of the armor's origin, I was sure the metalworker would be more than capable of producing a worthy sword to accompany it.

Sure enough, the sword arrived in two weeks, and the knight's stately presence was restored. Anna seemed confused by the significance of the sword, but she was good-natured about it, conceding that it did seem like a perfect match for the suit of armor. With its blade restored, the knight developed a more commanding presence within the house, and I felt this sense of confidence rubbing off on me. Though my circumstances hardly changed, my outlook improved, and I was now more than content to be king over my modest but respectable dominion. Even Anna seemed to notice a brightening in my demeanor, though it was really during the private late night conversations on the stairwell that I displayed the greatest enthusiasm.

Even as my insomnia subsided over time, I continued to stay up simply for the companionship. Eventually, I even stopped going to bed when Anna turned in, as there was no sense in doing so if I was only going to get up again. Instead, I would wait outside the door until she was asleep, then go immediately to the stairs to commune with my friend. I always began by telling him about my day, no longer out of frustration, but because he seemed curious, as any good adviser to the king ought to be. When I spoke of the day's various challenges, I would often reflect on how much more capable I was at handling adversity now than in the days before. The suit of armor, in his patient silence, seemed to agree that it was a remarkable change.

Once October ended and the holidays loomed near, I was summoned by my wife to discuss diplomacy in regards to her relatives. She, too, had been upset by the arguments over the late Madelyn Jefferson's estate, and she desperately wished to mend these relationships before there was time to grow completely apart. She proposed that we invite them all over for Christmas as a sign of good faith from our family to theirs. They would stay at our expense, would eat our food, and would receive gifts from us. After all, who could possibly resent someone who was willing to share so much?

Now that I was equipped with a newfound sense of self-confidence, I told her it was a great idea. It was important to put on a brave face for the kingdom, no matter how much I abhorred the idea in reality. And thus, under the king's decree, invitations were prepared and distributed across the region. Within two weeks, we received word from her relatives, all of whom displayed a spiteful willingness to abuse our hospitality.

The first set of relatives arrived on December 10th, thirteen days before the agreed upon arrival date. When questioned about the unexpected arrival, one of Anna's sisters gave the ever-so-subtle explanation that they wished to spend some extra time in the house that was rightfully theirs. I was wise enough not to argue over the matter, instead contenting myself to assign her and her husband to her dead grandmother's old room. This was, of course, a violation of our agreement to keep the room locked away, but it seemed necessary in order to punish such insolence accordingly.

Within four days, the rest of the guests had arrived, bringing the occupancy of Manor Crawford to sixteen people, myself and Anna included. The demands of our guests increased exponentially as they tested the bounds of our patience and hospitality. Each day when I returned from work, I joined Anna in the kitchen as we slaved away to meet the demands of our hungry visitors. When I wasn't cooking, the parasites would send me off on supply runs, asking me to pick up food, toiletries, and other things they were more than capable of obtaining themselves. At first, I would ask for repayment, but each time they'd claim to be in dire financial straits, and it became clear they'd developed a plan to reclaim their inheritance one travel toothbrush at a time. Eventually, I gave up hope of being repaid, and simply became grateful for the opportunity to leave the house.

The next week progressed in much the same way, with no sign of improvement. Anna and I tried desperately to remain cordial, but nothing we could do or say would ever undo the perceived injustice of having been the primary beneficiaries of Grandma Madelyn's will. Not only did every conversation steer towards money, but I was beginning to notice a distinct disregard for our property, as multiple plates and glasses broke under the pretense of clumsiness. One vase was even smashed to pieces while we were off at work. Even still, we remained polite to the relatives, assuring them that our possessions meant far less than our time with family.

During this time, I seldom had opportunities to sit down with the suit of armor. Much of the family stayed up later than Anna, and her aunt and uncle were staying in one of the guest rooms nearest the stairwell, where it was quite easy to

eavesdrop on our conversations. Instead, Anna and I would sit up together each night, too tired to pretend to be good hosts, but too angry to fall asleep immediately.

On December 23rd, after finally managing to fall asleep, I was soon awakened by the sound of Anna crying. I sat up and held her, allowing her to sob into my shoulder until she felt better. When she could speak again, she apologized for waking me. I assured her it was all right, and that given the circumstances, nothing she did could ever make me angry with her. This seemed to calm her down, or at least make her feel less guilty, and she soon lay back down and fell asleep.

I, on the other hand, was now wide awake at three in the morning. Almost instinctively, I rose from bed and crept down the hallway to the staircase. The suit of armor stood illuminated in the moonlight, which shone through large, un-curtained windows. It was a familiar sight, one I had sorely missed during the past two weeks.

I sat in my usual spot on the top step of the stairs, and in spite of my fear of being overheard, soon found myself chatting with the knight as usual. I expressed my disdain for Anna's family, now revitalized in the wake of the holiday season. The knight listened patiently, and I was grateful to once again have a friend upon which to vent my frustrations. Of course, Anna and I had discussed these problems as well, but it was hardly fair to burden someone going through the same ordeal. With the knight, I could not only commiserate, but truly vent.

More than the way the family treated me, I despised the way they treated Anna. I was merely the in-law, a newcomer benefiting from their own relative's demise. But Anna was a direct descendant to Madelyn Jefferson, and she had shown her relatives nothing but kindness, even as they pursued legal action against us. And now, here they were abusing our kindness at every step while my wife cried herself to sleep in our bedroom. Just sitting there thinking about it, I could feel myself being overcome with a feeling of...

My thoughts were interrupted by the dull clanking sound of metal and wood colliding. I turned to see the knight's wooden face exposed, his metal helm lying inexplicably upon the floor. I reached down to retrieve the helm, noticing with detached amusement that it fit snugly upon my head. Wordlessly, the knight prompted me to remove the rest of his armor, until nothing remained but the wooden mannequin underneath. The leather straps now tightened about my arms and legs, I grasped his sword in hand, then turned to face my loyal subject.

Though his wooden eyes remained expressionless, and his mouth remained closed, I understood what I must do. As I looked about the darkened halls of Manor Crawford, I saw that I was no longer its king, nor Anna its queen. The throne had been stolen, taken from us by her vile, merciless relatives. Our kingdom had fallen, and our claims to royalty, as rightful as they may have been, had fallen upon deaf ears.

No, I could no longer be a king, not without a crown. But I had my sword, and I had my armor, and no one could stop me from becoming a knight.

And there were dragons left to slay. ■

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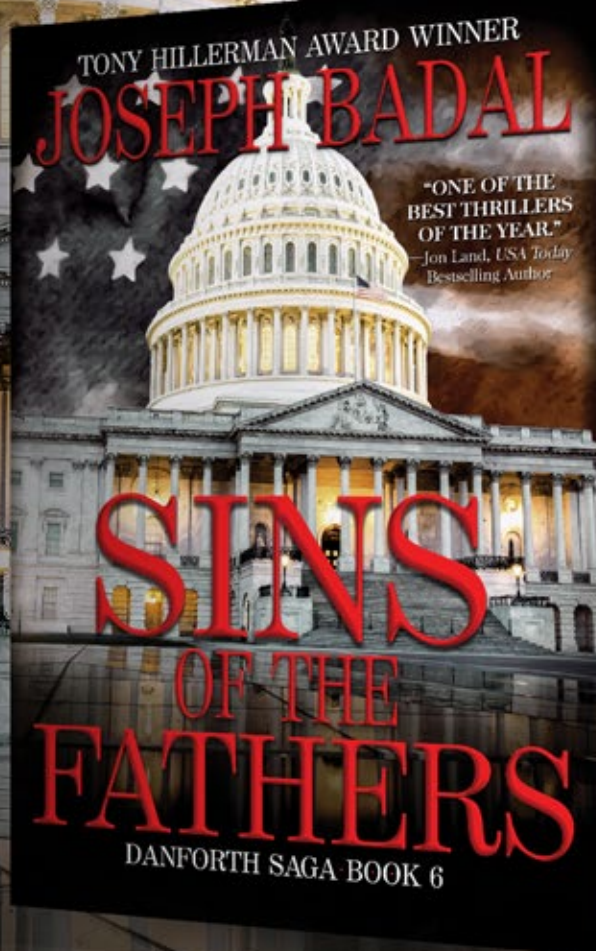


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