

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

WINTER 2019

Crowning the "BEST OF"
2019

Craft Corner

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Inspired by Actual Events

JOSEPH BADAL

*Taking the Mystery Out
of Writing Mysteries*

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A Devilish Decade Departs

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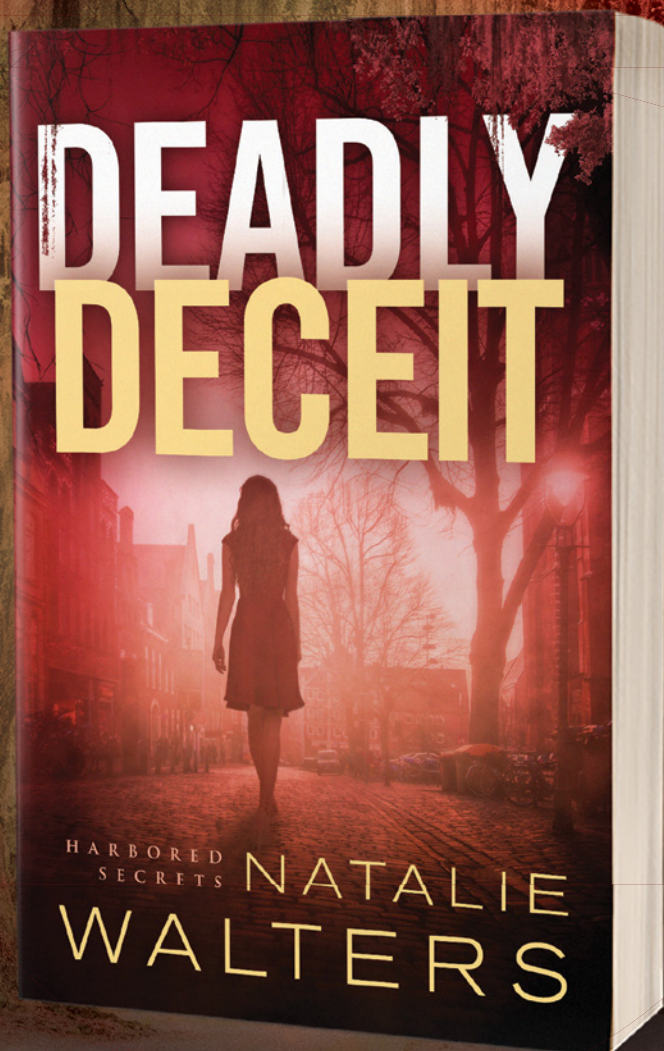
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Abigail Peralta
Vice President, Editorial Dept.

Amy Lignor
Editor

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Weldon Burge
Ashley Wintters
D.P. Lyle M.D.
Andrew MacRae
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Goodbye 2019. Hello 2020. Entering into another *decade*! What can I say? It's been quite a year here at *Suspense Magazine*, and we are excited to close it out with our annual "Best Of" issue—presenting you with our list of annual awards for the best books of 2019.

Every year we say how tough it is, but this year we had the most votes we have ever had in the ten years of *Suspense Magazine's* existence. Since the writing

and the storytelling has gotten so much better over the years, and with the explosion of eBooks and more publishing companies opening up, fans have more to read than ever before, making it that much more difficult to give you the "Best Of" list.

Our list was compiled from our editors' choices, our review team, and fan votes. It's a very agonizing process, as we have a lot of fighting and compromises to handle. We would love to give everyone an award, but then it wouldn't be special for those authors who really took the time to write a memorable book.

The title that won this year's Crimson Scribe Award, the highest achievement our magazine gives out to only one book per year, is an art deco mystery story. It's the third book in the series, one that every mystery/suspense fan should have already read.

Now...I'm not going to give anything away here, so if you want to skip ahead and start getting into the magazine, I completely understand. Heck, if I didn't have to write this letter, I would already be reading and compiling my own personal list of the next books I want to buy. (If you decided to stay and keep reading, however, thanks so much.)

Looking ahead to 2020, we love to hear from fans, authors, readers, mothers, fathers—all of you—and are constantly excited to see what you come up with in the way of contributions to the magazine. So...keep them coming.

It's time for *Suspense Magazine* to 'close the book' on yet another great year. We want to thank all of you for the support you have given us over the years. Without the help of hundreds of people, *Suspense Magazine* would never have made it this long. Remember to subscribe to *Suspense*

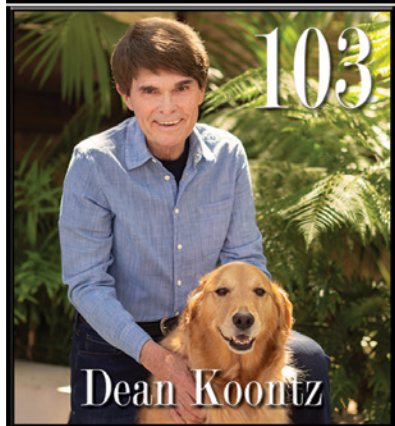
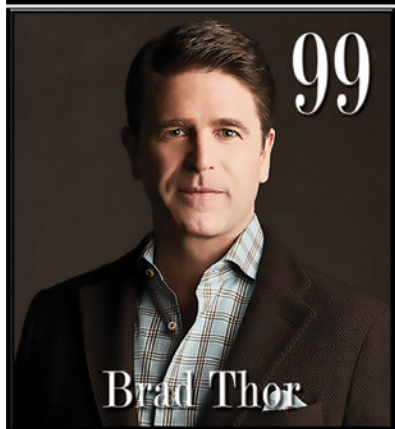
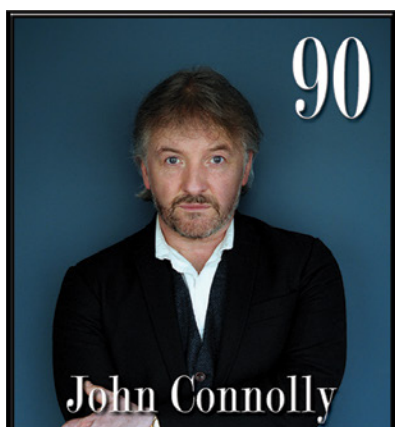
Radio through iTunes and Spotify to catch all the action 'outside' of the pages.

So, here's to a happy and safe 2020 for everyone! See you all very soon and keep reading.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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KILL YOUR CHARACTER: THE FACTS

By Steve Rush

Photo Credit: Provided by Author



When you think you have heard or seen it all—surprise! A story broadcast on TV, radio, or in print relates unimaginable facts of a crime committed against another person or group. Doubt prompts questions to the story’s plausibility.

You are not alone. I supposed the same thing many times. Death galvanizes a reaction. New twists in some form or other—related to either who, what, when, where, why or how—complicated what otherwise appeared straightforward. As startling or amazing as facts seem, how we process scenes remains the same.

Authors slay characters. We execute them to drive our story forward. We plot murders. In some works we devastate character’s families with suicides. We arrange accidents or other events—transportation crashes, slips and falls, on-the-job occurrences, and exposure to toxins.

We create dilemmas. These dilemmas require details. After chosen evidence supports the incident of choice, we introduce clues. Insert red herrings. When every element fits our premise, we invent police detectives, private investigators or amateur sleuths to solve our character’s deaths.

To catch those who kill we assume the role of killer. This calls for writers to *think* like killers. In addition, writers must adopt the roles of crime-scene technicians, sleuths, and prosecutors.

Facts validate scenes. Often these details reflect real-world situations. Skepticism turns focus away when readers see events as far-fetched and unbelievable. Although instances in life often prove true, many surprise us.

Here are two examples:

1. A man arrived to the emergency room with a screwdriver stuck in his head.
2. Police responded to a dispatch and found a man seated at the bar. A tire tool impaled his neck. Radiology exams showed the tool missed his carotid artery by one millimeter.

Both men remained conscious despite the odds. They spoke to medical staff. They received treatment. They recovered from their injuries.

These and other bizarre stories of survival fascinate us. They spawn ideas. We ask: “What if?” We decide to share one

“WE CREATE DILEMMAS. THESE DILEMMAS REQUIRE DETAILS.”

of these A-HA moments with our readers. To accomplish this, we must write to the point of believability.

Readers expect accuracy. Accuracy confirms credibility and, therefore, enhances believability for our audience. Accuracy requires research. We explore the issue to obtain answers to these common questions:

1. How did the victim die?
2. What prompted the incident?
3. What happened afterward?
4. Did anyone seek revenge?
5. Who was the assailant?
6. Were charges filed against the antagonist, or did someone choose vigilantism?
7. Were actions taken based on conjecture or confirmed facts?

Facts necessary for criminal prosecution extend beyond reasonable doubt. The level an investigator must prove their case extends beyond requirements essential to convict the criminal. Protagonists search for, secure, and analyze evidence to expose and support truth. Their accuracy—devoid of doubt and uncertainty—convinces prosecutors to take cases to trial.

The scope or parameter of death investigations begins with a narrow focus of known facts. It broadens to discover unknown facts.

Known facts include:

1. The body.
2. The evidence.
3. The environment.
4. Statements of witnesses and first responders.

Unknown facts include information gathered through:

1. Background checks.
2. Neighborhood canvass.
3. Interviews of persons known to the victim.
4. Informants.
5. Surveillance.
6. Interrogation of suspects or other persons of interest.
7. Search warrants.
8. Results of scientific analysis.

Witnesses include persons who witnessed the event

leading up to and including death; or people with knowledge of one or more involved parties.

Investigation of death scenes begins with the body and presence of physical evidence within its environment. The size of our scope depends on location. Where did your antagonist kill the character? At home? In a place of business? At a job site? On a city street, or out in the middle of nowhere in a field or forest? Each location defines a scope of different parameters.

Elements of the story direct readers where we want them to go until a twist of facts proves otherwise. Our words control the story's course. This includes any device of misdirection. One tidbit of information alters the outcome. An example of this is seen in the following scenario based on an actual event.

Police received a call of a vehicle crash into the front of a business at one o'clock on a Saturday morning. An officer responded to the site. The front of the sedan—from windshield forward—intruded into the building. The officer discovered a woman slumped forward in the driver's seat. Blood matted the woman's long hair. No signs of life. The officer requested the agency's traffic specialists and the medical examiner.

The traffic specialist documented the vehicle's path of travel from a shopping center across the highway. Based on preliminary facts given to the medical examiner, the sedan speeded from the rear of the shopping center, shot across three lanes, and crashed through the building's brick facade.

The medical examiner began the on-scene part of his investigation. Blood-matted hair obscured any visible injury to the head. He parted her hair, and examined her scalp. What he discovered in the tangled hair aimed the investigation in a new direction. When he ran his fingers around the back of the head to the right side, a small caliber copper-jacketed bullet dislodged and fell out of the victim's hair.

One item of evidence redirected the investigation from an alleged traffic accident to a homicide.

Circumstances often confine a search for evidence to one locality, whereas in the above scenario the scope expanded to the area behind the shopping center where the perpetrator shot the woman.

An investigation might lead to an open field or forest where the scope expands beyond the initial event. This proves true for cases when the antagonist moves the body from the site of the crime to a secluded site. In cases of

skeletal remains, a perimeter search outside the core area might expand to hundreds of feet.

Consider the reader's wants when writing death scenes. Readers crave entirety. *Who* died? *What* inciting incident led to the person's death? *When* did death occur? *Where* did death occur? *How* did they die? You may well decide to unload all information about the victim in a single scene, or add suspense and extend it over multiple chapters, such as identifying the character as "unidentified, pending further investigation." This depends on your goal.

The reader wants to know the victim's identity sooner or later. On occasion, a law enforcement officer responds to a death call where identity is known. The source of information could be a relative, acquaintance, neighbor or co-worker. Identity simplifies matters at the onset of the investigation.

At other times, no one present knows the victim. A means of identification—driver's license, credit cards or other proof of identity—might not be on or near the body. Often characters meet their demise other than in their home or workplace.

The body's condition—decomposition or mutilation—might preclude visual identity. Protagonists or other character experts document scars, marks, tattoos, and old fractures observed on X-rays. They take fingerprints, dental impressions, and samples of blood and tissue for DNA analysis and toxicology.

One tidbit to note when constructing facts for death scenes: jurisdiction of the body belongs to the medical examiner/coroner or their designee. The surroundings fall under the jurisdiction of the appropriate law enforcement agency. Police and detectives on TV or in the movies manipulate bodies at scenes. Beyond any check for an ID, coroners and medical examiners deem such behavior inappropriate in real-world death-scene investigations. Any manipulation chances loss or contamination of trace evidence otherwise preserved with proper handling of the remains. ■

Steve Rush's experience includes tenure as homicide detective and chief forensic investigator for Burton & Associates, a national consulting firm in the field of forensic and environmental pathology and medicine. Once hailed as, "The best forensic investigator in the United States" by the late Forensic Pathologist Joseph L. Burton, Steve has investigated 900+ death scenes and taught classes related to death investigation. His specialties include injury causation, blood spatter analysis, occupant kinematics, and recovery of human skeletal remains.

He is the author of two novels published under the pseudonym, Shane Kinsey, three Christian non-fiction books including, "Cause of Death: Autopsy of Jesus," and was part of the development team for "Quincy," a software program designed for coroners and medical examiners.

Milestones Can Be Murder

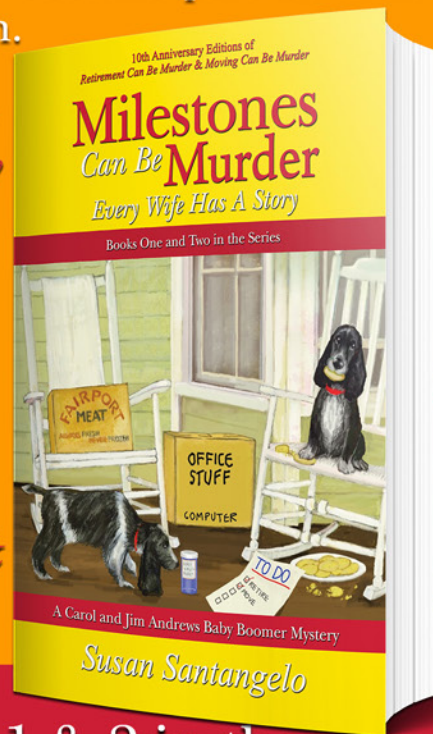
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HUA

By Rita Lakin

She knocks at my door. A timid knock. I let the pathetic creature in. Her clothes are beyond tattered, but of course they would be, with the speed with which they rounded her up. She is a mess; her hair tangled and dirty. Her face pale and flabby, as if all color had been leached out. Eyeglasses are hanging by one strap. I could hardly begin to guess at her age. English was definitely not her first language.

"Lamento molestarte donde esta el bano." With squinty eyes, she hiccups in embarrassment for her lack of English, *"for use el inodoro...."* Then, a nervous giggle.

I know what she means, but I allow her to struggle without admitting that I speak four languages, one of them hers. Does my patched sleeve give away the fact that I am a relic from an earlier lifetime? I was a sixties-era college professor (of Languages, *ha-ha*). The horn-rimmed glasses, and even the empty pipe in my mouth was a set piece. Not to mention, I am in a very bad mood. Understatement of the century.

I point. "Bathroom over there."

She manages another uneasy laugh and rushes to do her business.

This so-called, closet-sized "private room" on the huge cargo plane was meant to show respect for me. Oh, irony! All my life, the joke was always on me. Always the political activist. Won some tiny battles; always lost the war.

The furniture, what little there was, must have come from junk shops. Why did they even bother? They provided me with this poor, gussied up excuse for a classroom—even had a blackboard on rickety legs. A real old blackboard with chunks of dusty white chalk. As if they would provide me with memories of my former life. There's no time to see my 'life before my very eyes.' The inevitable is close now. I spend my precious minutes filling up the board with remembered famous quotes.

I was trying to choose another meaningful quote for what I had seen, as I was being helped to my gloomy little roomette here. Their cockpit door was open and the pilot and the obviously younger co-pilot (a newbie, probably) were climbing into clothing for the flight. The older one probably spinning the lie as to why they were dressed like astronauts, even as to why they'd need the ridiculously heavy helmets. The way they verbally danced around; the younger arguing, the older trying to placate. They reminded me of a Harold & Kumar silly stoner sketch. Were they going to visit the man in the moon to look at its face up close? Or to some whirlwind planet where opiates were free and plentiful?

So here I am, traveling in an old Army cargo plane filled with crying people. Groping one another for comfort. Clutching stars and crosses. Confused. Terrified. Praying that this is a nightmare.

So much for our huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Not for these wretched folks. These were being shoved out by the boot. ICE was a very cold word in a scorching world.

The woman comes out of the bathroom. By the way she's holding the back of her skirt, I could guess the poor thing had wet herself.

She starts for the door, but manages to eke out a tad of courage and bits of English. "Could I stay to here, yes? Is so crowded out there...and so smelling bad."

I pat a rotting wicker chair and indicate she is welcome to sit. My minuscule piece of kindness has her in tears.

Why the hell not? Break up the tedium.

She looks up at the scribbling on the board. "Would you to please to explain?"

Well, always the professor. Here goes. I point and read: "In the innermost recesses of humanism, as its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner who, as a Fascist, turns the world into a prison." Theodor W. Adorno."

"But, what does it mean?"

Doesn't she see that I am too weary to explain? But I take up the chalk again. "Adorno was a German Philosopher who was a critic of society," I say, as I scrawl again: *Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals.*

The woman gasps. She gets the reference. "This thing we fly becomes an oven?"

"Cheaper than actually building ovens. No mess, no wasted real estate. No snooping newspapers. And, best of all, no do-gooders. The world will have assumed you all went back home."

I sigh. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

She sniffs the air; horrified. "Is gas?"

"HUA, lady. *Humanitas Uber Alles.*" I don't bother to translate.

I lead her by the hand and position her next to me on the small, putrid couch. I put my arm around her, and she snuggles up to me. She follows my example and breathes deeply.

Before the drowsiness sets in, she whispers, "But why you?"

I kiss her gently on her cheek. "I tried to shoot him. And I missed." ■

Taking the *Mystery* Out of WRITING MYSTERIES



By Dennis Palumbo
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In Michael Connelly's first crime novel, "The Black Echo," do you remember the clue that helped Harry Bosch solve the mystery?

Me neither.

In Agatha Christie's, "Death on the Nile," what was the mistake the killers made that proved they were guilty?

You got me.

In Stieg Larsson's bestseller, "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," what led Blomkvist to identify the serial killer?

Who remembers? I'm just glad Lisbeth Salander got there in time to save Mikael!

My point, and I do have one, is that often writers think the most important aspect of a good mystery is the ingenuity of the crime, the unraveling of the clues. Which is why many good writers are scared to death of even attempting to write a mystery or thriller.

Fear no more.

Yes, readers of mysteries and thrillers like tightly-plotted narratives, clever red herrings, and a certain element of surprise. And you should always strive to weave as many of these aspects into your cozy whodunnit or procedural crime novel as possible.

But these factors are not what makes a mystery memorable. As Connelly himself once wrote, "The best mysteries are about the mystery of character."

But what does that mean?

Let's start with the basics: What is a mystery? In the simplest terms, it's a story about the disruption of the social order. A crime against society is committed: a man is murdered, a bank is robbed, whatever. We, the readers, want to know two things: Who did it, and why?

At least, that's what we *think* we want.

But, what do we *really* want? We want order restored. We want the violator of the social compact—the killer, the thief, the blackmailer—to be caught, so that things in our world are set right once more. And who do we want to do this? Our surrogate, that's who—the smarter, wittier, and more doggedly determined version of ourselves—the detective hero.

Whether a street-wise cop like Bosch, a whiskey-swilling private eye like Philip Marlowe, or a tea-drinking, sweater-knitting old lady like Miss Marple, we want this one thing from our mystery protagonist above all others: we want order restored.

But not just social order. The best mysteries, in my view, are also about the exploration and resolution of psychological tension. In other words, how do the characters interact? What do they want?

For example, in most mysteries, whether or not a suspect is guilty of the crime, he or she invariably has a secret. A clandestine relationship, a trauma from the past that haunts them still, perhaps even a connection with the killer (or the

“Everybody has some story, some incident, unique to them and them alone.”

victim) that helps complete an entire mosaic of possible motives, entanglements and intrigue.

Henry James famously said: “Plot is characters under stress.” Well, nothing ramps up the stress level of a group of characters like the murder of one among them. A further “turn of the screw” results when the murder comes under investigation by an outside agent—the hero or heroine, the cop or private eye—determined to ferret out the truth.

How does that apply to the mystery novel *you’re* trying to write? A reasonable question. So let’s try a thought experiment.

Remember what it felt like when some kid broke a window at school and the principal gathered you and all your classmates together? Remember the mounting tension as the principal went down the line, interrogating each of you, sometimes even feigning humor or sympathy, but always with the relentless, eagle-eyed determination of a predator searching for his prey?

Well, do the characters in your mystery or thriller feel that way? How do they show it—to each other, to the detective, and, of course, to the reader? Or, perhaps more importantly, how do they attempt to conceal it?

In most memorable mysteries, or in the best thrillers, this context of mutual suspicion and misdirection of motives is pivotal. It’s what keeps the suspense mounting for the reader. Moreover, it’s the crucial element that keeps the laying-in of necessary clues from seeming like a mere litany of exposition. By the time we’re halfway through John le Carré’s, “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy,” the lies and evasions offered by the suspects have us convinced that pretty much anyone could be the culprit. Which is exactly what you, the mystery writer, wants most of all.

Another important aspect of the best mysteries, as vital as that of the deceptive nature of the suspects, is the specific world in which the story is situated. All renowned mysteries and thrillers, from “Shutter Island” to “The Friends of Eddie Coyle” to “Witness for the Prosecution,” take place in a specific arena of life. A secluded prison, the mean streets of Boston, the be-wigged world of British courtrooms. Whatever.

Recall, too, how the key to success for TV’s *Columbo* was the interaction of our rumpled hero with the nuances of the various worlds into which he ventured—from that of classical music to computer science, from Hollywood studios to military schools. His comfortable, familiar character was our vehicle of entry into the specifics of each of these very particular ways of life.

But what does all of the above have to do with you and the book you’re writing? Let’s see if we can break it down.

First, look at your protagonist. And here’s where many new mystery writers get discouraged, and for a very understandable reason. When it comes to the hero—whether hard-boiled private eye or spinster librarian, cop-turned-lawyer or criminal-turned-cop—they’ve all been done. How do you make your sleuth unique?

For me, there’s only one answer: Ask yourself, what makes *you* unique? What scares you, interests you, makes you angry? What do you yearn for, or wish to avoid? What are your hobbies, passions? What’s the aspect of your own character about which you’re most conflicted, unhappy, even embarrassed? Believe it or not, this is where the seeds of an interesting, unusual protagonist are first sown.

For example: My friend, ‘cozy’ novelist Earlene Fowler, likes to make quilts. As does her hugely successful amateur sleuth, Benni Harper. I cite this mostly to prove that you don’t have to be a forensics pathologist in your day job to create a popular or believable hero.

In my own case, the hero/narrator of my series of crime thrillers, Dr. Daniel Rinaldi, is a therapist, as am I. And while I currently live in Los Angeles, Rinaldi’s adventures take place in Pittsburgh, my hometown. In these books, I routinely weave aspects of my personal biography, my clinical training, and my views about the current state of the mental health field into the narrative.

And I can think of many popular mystery writers who likewise explore their own issues, prejudices and concerns when crafting their novels.

In my opinion, the closer the hero or heroine of your mystery is to you, the more vivid and engaging he or she will be to the reader. After all, as Emerson said, “To know that what is true for you in your private heart is true for everyone—that is genius.”

Next, let’s look at the “world” of your mystery story. What is the world you inhabit? Suburban soccer mom or single father? Former football coach, magazine editor, or Rhodes Scholar? Travel agent, computer specialist, or kindergarten teacher?

After all, you know the details of your particular world in a very specific way. You know the ins and outs, and what goes on “behind the curtain.” It’s those details that create the backdrop for the crime that make possible the intrigue, the collision of misleading, back-stabbing, or painfully naïve characters. Think of the background of the legal profession in the novels of Scott Turow and John Grisham. Or that of horse racing in Dick Francis’ many books.

Why is the background so important? Aside from being crucial to our sense of the reality of the story, and presenting us with a view of a world with which we may be unfamiliar (or that we think we know but, in fact, really don’t), a particular arena provides valuable help to the writer when it comes to building narrative and planting clues.

How? To put it simply, the best clues in a classic mystery involve misdirection. A clue usually seems to point in one direction, when actually, looked at from a different angle, it reveals something else. A typical example is the clue that appears to confirm a certain character’s guilt when, in fact, it has been planted to frame that person.

For the writer trying to develop the narrative and plant significant clues along the way, it’s much easier (and, I think, more organic) if the clues emerge from the world of the story. For example, if the bad guy uses some antique pistol to commit the crime, I’m much more likely to believe it in a mystery set behind the scenes at Colonial Williamsburg.

In fact, one of the smartest things a crime writer can do is develop the clues and red herrings out of the world in which the story is set. Case in point: Most used car salesmen don’t know where to get their hands on lethal, yet undetectable poisons. But they *may* know how to cut the brake lines of a car. (Or, failing that, how to blackmail a mechanic to do it for them.)

I’m stressing the use of a vivid background and the investment in character development for two reasons. First, because without these two crucial aspects, no reader will really care how clever or intricate the plot is. And secondly, because of the happy fact that most good mysteries only have two or three pertinent clues in them anyway.

This is really important. Most new writers of mysteries seem to think the plot has to be filled with clues. It doesn’t. One or two gems—the misleading planted evidence, the comment a suspect makes that belies his alibi—are all you need to put the villain away. Or all your hero or heroine needs.

Remember, too, that many clues are just as likely to indicate something that’s missing as they are to reveal something that’s present: the unfound murder weapon, the missing wedding ring on the victim’s finger. Remember this classic exchange from Conan Doyle’s short story, “Silver Blaze”:

Sherlock Holmes to the Inspector: “I refer, of course, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

The Inspector: “But, Holmes, the dog did nothing in the night-time.”

“That is the curious incident.”

Okay, let’s wrap this up. The three things to keep in mind when writing mysteries are:

- 1.) Establishing the unique character of the protagonist.
- 2.) Making narrative use of the world in which the story takes place.
- 3.) Planting clues (remember, only a few) that derive from the particular aspects of that world.

One final hint, to spark your creativity when thinking about writing a mystery or thriller: Is there a little-known fact, an oddity of history or natural science, that you were taught or stumbled upon and has always intrigued you?

For example: I was blown away years ago when I learned that after famed psychologist, Carl Jung, broke with his mentor, Sigmund Freud, Jung founded a clinical journal devoted to “non-Jewish” psychoanalysis. I’m still trying to figure out a way to weave that painful chapter in the history of psychoanalysis into a mystery story.

What’s in *your* background that you can use? What’s filed away in that mental Rolodex in your head that might serve as the germ of an idea for a mystery or thriller? It could be anything. Maybe your grandfather was the first guy in his town to own a car. Or the last one to buy an Edsel. Maybe your cousin ran a betting pool in the seminary while studying for the priesthood. Maybe your mother tells the story of getting hit on by some dorky guy at a bar who went on to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Everybody has some story, some incident, unique to them and them alone. All a writer has to do is “twist” that story a little bit—the “what-if” that inspires all storytelling—and a terrific new thriller or mystery emerges.

The recipe is simple: All crime stems from conflict, and conflict stems from strong emotions. Kind of like life.

Because, in the end, that’s where all the best stories come from. Life, itself. The greatest mystery of all. ■

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.” His series of mystery thrillers (the latest of which, “Head Wounds,” was named a “Best of 2018” by SUSPENSE MAGAZINE) features Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist and trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police.

For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com.



EVIL Lives Here

By Brooke Withrow

For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do ~ Romans 7:19

Jane Montgomery, August 12, 1985

We are never truly alone. Think about it—you are in bed at night engulfed in the darkness, while your room is secure and silent. You toss and turn trying to ease your mind, to make your brain shut off, but nothing is working.

Or those nights you wake up from a peaceful sleep at 3:00 a.m. There is no apparent reason, but the little voice in the back of your head is wide awake and alert. You just have a *feeling*—a feeling that you're not the only thing present in your pitch-black room. Some may call it paranoia, some may call you crazy, but you can't shake the inkling that someone or something is right there with you...watching.

This was exactly how I felt during my stay at the Elison Mansion.

My mother used to say to me, "Jane Elizabeth Montgomery, someday your curiosity will get the best of you."

I would roll my eyes and ignore her remarks about my adventurous nature, never for a second believing that one day she would actually be right. I suppose that was why I became an investigative journalist—the thrill. Every place and every person had a story. The idea of making the unknown known gives me an adrenaline rush. So, when I was offered the job to do a twenty-year anniversary story on 'The Elison Mansion Murders,' I accepted in a heartbeat.

On the dark, gloomy night of October 13, 1965, parents Nathaniel and Victoria, as well as eleven-year-old daughter Isabel were slaughtered by their fifteen-year-old son Dirk. Upon fleeing, his current whereabouts unknown, Dirk spared the life of his twin brother Simon in the hopes that he would tell the tale of that fateful night, in that evil house, for years to come.

So, I packed my bags and set out for the Elison Mansion to speak with Simon. I hoped that this project would bring success to my career and peace of mind to the slain Elison family. Writing the Elison story would allow me to give the tragic tale a bittersweet ending and eliminate the evil that

had resided in the mansion all these years.

Never have I been more wrong.

...

It was a dim, foggy night as I watched the raindrops race down the windows of the taxicab. I glanced over at my one-man film crew, Gregory "Gregg" Brim.

Gregg's disheveled brown hair fell over his face and his thick beard looked as though it hadn't been tended to in months. Soft snores escaped his chapped lips. I rolled my eyes. *Fast asleep. Typical.*

Our taxi driver caught on to my clear annoyance and grinned.

"We will be there in a few minutes, miss," our driver said to me as he looked into the rearview mirror.

I gave him a sympathetic smile, feeling guilty for making him drive my sleeping partner and me an hour outside of Seattle after dark. Then again, Seattle is always dark.

I thumbed at my voice recorder in my lap, waiting eagerly to get this interview started.

Our taxi slowed and turned onto a gravel road leading up to the eerie, intimidating Elison Mansion. The iron gates stood open, rust covering the lock. Cowering willow trees bordered the narrow road, standing defeated in the rain. The bumpiness of the road rattled the backseat, jolting Gregg awake.

"Wha...? Are we there?" Gregg said, appearing more like a skittish meerkat than a human being.

"Had you stayed awake, you would know the answer to that question," I answered playfully, with a hint of sarcasm.

We pulled up to the mansion and slowed to a stop. Vines stuck to the peeling paint, interrupted by foggy windows, with nothing but a dim flickering light peeking through. Though it was old and run down, the mansion still possessed the same impeccable beauty it had all those years ago.

Soggy leaves stuck to the gravel driveway as I stepped out into the drizzling rain. I thanked the driver and grabbed my tattered leather briefcase, slipping my voice recorder into my coat pocket. Gregg cursed under his breath at his camera equipment as I climbed the cracked marble stairs, covered in overgrown vines. Just as I reached for the brass door knocker,

the door creaked open.

I glanced back at Gregg, who was still losing his battle with his camera equipment. As I turned back around, I noticed the door stood open, revealing a middle-aged man, grinning wildly in my direction.

"At last, my guests have arrived," the man said, without breaking his stare at me.

"You must be Simon?" I said, staring at the man in front of me.

He was wearing a navy double-breasted suit with white handkerchief poking out of his lapel. His peppered hair was perfectly combed and his black eyes were hidden beneath thick eyebrows. Had it not been for his uncanny smile, he would've been relatively handsome.

"Ah yes, I am Simon Elison," he answered, reaching to shake my hand. The thick, gold ring on his finger gleamed under the porch light. "You must be Jane and Gregg. Please, please, come in!"

I stepped into the dimly lit foyer. The smell of incense and oak seeped into my nostrils. I padded across the wood floors and looked up at the painted portraits lining the walls. *There they were, the Elison family. The Mr. and the Mrs., young Simon, and little Isabel, forever immortalized on the mansion walls.*

I paused.

Odd, there is no Dirk. I suppose I would take his picture down as well if I endured such a catastrophe at the hands of my twin.

"You two can set up in here while I fetch us some tea," Simon said, interrupting my thoughts as he led us into the first room on the right.

We stepped into the parlor, taking in the roaring fire that cast shadows up the deep burgundy walls. The mirror above the fireplace towered over the rest of the room, almost hiding another world behind its wooden frame. The love seat and chairs were cushioned with cream-colored fabric. The rug and curtains collected dust, but had visibly been exquisite at some point in time. An old grandfather clock stood in the corner.

However, despite the warmth of the fire and the hominess of the room, I couldn't help but feel chills down my spine, knowing what had happened here twenty years prior.

The blood.

The axe.

The bodies.

I grabbed my tape recorder and slipped off my coat, hanging it on the coat rack in the corner of the room. I seated myself in the chair across from the love seat, while Gregg set up the tripod behind me. Simon entered the room carrying a rattling tray of piping hot tea.

"Here we are," Simon said, setting the silver tray on the coffee table.

"Thank you, Mr. Elison," I answered gratefully.

"Please, call me Simon. Mr. Elison was my father," Simon

responded quickly, the mention of his father reminding me as to why I was here in the first place.

"Simon, excuse me," I said. "Shall we get started? Gregg, are we ready?"

Gregg gave me a thumbs up.

"Excellent," I said, pulling out my notebook and pen from my briefcase. "Do you mind if I use a voice recorder?"

"No, Ms. Montgomery, not at all," Simon answered.

"So, Simon, tell us a little about yourself," I said, as I set my recorder on the table.

"Well, I am thirty-five years old and have lived here my whole life," Simon answered. "Upon my family's death, I inherited the mansion and everything in it. Although this house brings back some dark memories, I can never leave. Too much ties me to this place. It's my home. No matter where I go, my family will always be right here with me."

I paused, jotting down a few key details. I was grateful that Simon had set me up perfectly to dive right into the heart of the story.

"Yes, the house," I began. "Legend has it the house is possessed, partially explaining the actions of your twin brother, Dirk."

Simon tapped his ring against the wooden armrest.

"Dirk was the devil in disguise," Simon answered coolly. "However, though there is no excuse for what he did, this house has many secrets."

The wind howling outside caused the old mansion to creak, seeming to respond to Simon's answer.

"Do you ever feel the evil in this house?" I asked. "Rumor has it that your home is alive with the spirits of generations of Elisons."

"All the time," Simon said. "But the past comes back to haunt me. Ever since that night, dark shadows follow my every move."

I took a sip of my tea, my body growing rapidly colder by the minute.

"Simon, tell us the story of the Elison Mansion."

...

Jane Montgomery, August 13, 1985

I tried to write more last night, but the light in this small room faded and I couldn't get my mind to focus. However, I figured I reached a good stopping place before telling Simon's story about Dirk and the Elison Mansion. So, I will pick up where I left off.

"Do you believe in evil, Ms. Montgomery?" Simon asked with a smirk, gazing at me through the shadows from the fireplace dancing across his face. "Because my story isn't for the faint of heart."

"Well, sir, that is why I am here," I answered, suddenly thankful that Gregg had agreed to make this trip with me.

Then Simon began his tale.

Therapists have studied Simon's story about Dirk's behavior, but there has been no definitive explanation as to what triggered his insanity. Some believe it was the parenting

methods—containing the children to a point of isolation. Others believe his madness was innate, bound to happen throughout the course of his life. Even others believe it was caused by the house, that the house was alive. However, with Dirk's whereabouts unknown, an answer is unclear. Yet, one thing is agreed upon—Dirk had slipped into insanity and Simon is the only living witness to make sense of Dirk's actions.

Simon and Dirk were born minutes apart, with their sister Isabel to follow four years later, to Nathaniel and Victoria Elison. The Elison property had been passed down in the family for five generations. After a forest fire destroyed the first home, Simon's great-grandfather rebuilt the home from the ground up, making this version more exquisite than the last. The vaulted ceilings, wooden walls, and grand staircase spoke of nothing but wealth and vigor.

Unfortunately, due to their affluence, the Elison family tree had selected a private, secluded property to plant their roots so as not to be disturbed. When Simon, Dirk, and Isabel longed to see the world outside their home, their parents sternly explained their solitude was for their own good, not allowing them to leave the property. Simon and Isabel accepted their situation with grace, excelling in home schooling and playing "make-believe" to pass the time.

Dirk, however, did not.

Around the age of twelve, Simon noticed shifts in Dirk's behavior. This was also around the time the beatings started, according to Simon. While Simon rarely got into trouble, Dirk constantly challenged his father's authority, exposing his father's abusive behavior. Simon urged Dirk to see the good in their father, trying to help him understand that if he would only listen and behave, Dirk's life would be much easier. Again, Dirk refused.

The older Dirk grew, the more odd he became. Simon shared a room with Dirk, but found that they had grown apart despite their earlier closeness. Simon believed Dirk had grown increasingly jealous of his siblings, noticing that they were treated differently by their father than he was. However, Simon didn't see the depth of Dirk's evil until their fifteenth birthday.

...

"Pardon me, Simon, I must use the powder room," I said, stopping Simon during his story. Had I not been so keen for the story, I would have stopped after two cups of tea. Now I had downed my third and begun my fourth, and I couldn't bear to sit through the meat of the story with a full bladder.

"By all means. The bathroom is down the hall, last door on the left," Simon directed and stood to tend the fire.

I made my way out of the parlor and down the dark corridor, feeling as though the pictures of the generations of Elisons hanging on the walls were watching my every step. I shuddered.

I rarely overreact, but this house gave me the damn creeps.

I hurried through the house and reached the end of the corridor. The door on my right was ajar. I looked back down the hallway. *Empty.*

I pushed the wooden door open with a creak and flicked on the light switch.

The opposite wall was slanted, revealing a small cubby for a window; paintings of flowers, birds, and trees ran up the walls, floor-to ceiling. A brass chandelier hung in the center, three bulbs illuminating the room. Atop the lace bedding sat a variety of stuffed animals and dolls, and in the center of the room sat a table with four chairs, clearly set for a tea party. In three of the chairs sat porcelain dolls; the fourth was empty.

Isabel's room.

I glanced around, feeling a pang of sadness as I saw the innocence lost. Clearly Simon had left his sister's room untouched for all these years, because the room told a story of a young girl never reaching maturity.

I walked across the pink flowered carpet and glanced at myself in the gold floor-length mirror. My jeans fell in a lump on my hips and my blouse was wrinkled from a day's worth of travel. My brown hair was tangled at my shoulders.

Wow, Jane, you look awful.

I noticed a spot of tea on my blouse, and I glanced down to ensure that it didn't leave a stain. As I was fiddling with the blemish, my blood turned ice cold.

I wasn't alone.

I looked back up into the mirror and saw a familiar face.

Isabel.

She looked beautiful in her pink ruffled dress and curly brown hair pulled back in a bow.

Then...I saw her face.

If I could capture the terror in words, I would. But I have never seen an expression so haunting. Her wide eyes bore into my soul and her open mouth screamed for me to "*GET OUT!*"

But when I whipped my head back around, she was gone.

...

The incident in Isabel's room reminded me why I interrupted the interview in the first place, so I quickly went across the hall to the powder room, and then returned to the parlor. My mind was reeling, trying to make sense of what I had just seen. Unfortunately, my host caught on quickly.

"My dear, Jane, you're as white as a sheet!" Simon exclaimed.

I laughed nervously, avoiding talking about what I had just seen.

"No, no, I'm just eager to continue," I answered, not wanting to give an explanation. "You said you saw the depths of Dirk's evil after your fifteenth birthday?"

Then Simon began again.

Following the twin's fifteenth birthday, Simon said there were multiple instances where Dirk was out of control. Dirk had always been an odd boy, with a nervous habit of tapping his index finger repeatedly and zoning out in the middle of a

conversation. However, up until “that night,” there were only a few occasions that still haunt Simon to this day.

That evening, Simon woke in the middle of the night and noticed Dirk’s bed was empty. Finding it odd that Dirk wasn’t in his bed at three a.m., Simon slipped out of bed and into the hallway. When he crept into the corridor, he noticed his parents’ bedroom door was open. Thinking this was odd, considering his parents always kept their door closed, he tiptoed down the hall into their room. When he looked inside, he saw Dirk.

His brother was standing at the end of his parents’ bed, his grandfather’s axe in hand.

Simon whispered to Dirk, but there was no response.

He panicked, raced over to his brother, and grabbed his arm. Today he realized how stupid a decision that had been.

However, when he saw Dirk’s face, there was no emotion in his brother’s features. Dirk gave the axe to Simon willingly, and they went back into the bedroom they shared—all the while their parents remained fast asleep.

Although Simon hid the axe beneath his bed, they never spoke of the incident again.

On another occasion, Simon recalled he was seated in the kitchen when he heard a bloodcurdling scream followed by a loud crash. He leaped up to investigate the noise, and found his sister lying at the bottom of the stairs, tears in her eyes. When he looked up to the top of the stairs to see what had happened, he saw Dirk, grinning.

To protect his brother from another one of their father’s beatings, Simon promised Isabel a new doll if she would keep the incident quiet.

She kept her word, and so did he.

Or at least he planned to.

Until *that* night.

...

Simon paused, the fire dying beside us as we reached the climax of the Elison story—the whole reason I was here in the first place. I wondered if he would be able to get through this portion of the traumatic tale.

“Simon, do you need a minute?” I asked, feeling sympathy for the man across from me. I couldn’t comprehend the emotions he must be feeling.

“Oh no, Jane, I have relived this night over and over,” Simon said, cocking his head to one side. “I want to share that night with you.”

With that, Simon told the story’s tragic ending.

It had been another dark, gloomy Washington night, much like this one. The winds howled outside, and the willows swayed wildly in the gusts. Simon awoke suddenly and heard the grandfather clock in the parlor chime. Three fifteen a.m. He rolled over and looked at Dirk’s bed, noticing it was once more empty. Concerned, primarily because of the incident with the axe a few weeks prior, Simon swung his legs out from under his covers and felt beneath his bed.

The axe was gone.

Simon crept into the hallway. He couldn’t hear anything but he spotted the faint flickering light of the fire peeking out from the parlor. Odd, he had thought, seeing that it was the middle of the night. As Simon walked down the hallway he slipped and fell. Thinking he had tripped over his bare feet, he pushed himself up.

Then he looked down.

He was covered in a familiar crimson, metallic-smelling substance that led down the hallway and through the parlor door—blood.

Simon felt his rapid pulse throughout his body. He tiptoed down the hallway and peeked through the parlor door.

Dirk.

Facing the fireplace.

Clenching the axe in his left hand.

Just as he was about to turn and run, Simon heard Dirk.

“Simon, I know you’re out there,” Dirk said. “I heard you fall in the hallway. Come in. I am not going to hurt you.”

Simon slowly emerged from around the parlor door and stepped inside. That was when he looked down at the rug.

Lined up side-by-side, the bodies of his father, mother, and sister lay still.

Dirk had covered them with a white bed sheet; spots of red covered the fabric. Simon didn’t need to see their faces to know they were long gone.

“Dirk, why?” Simon shrieked. “What have you done?”

Slowly, Dirk turned toward Simon.

“I had to,” Dirk answered. “I had to protect you. This house, Simon, this house is pure evil. It brings out the evil in all of us.”

“What do you mean the house?” Simon yelled. “Do you see what you have done?”

Dirk stepped toward Simon as if the bodies weren’t even there.

“The Elisons are evil,” Dirk said. “Generations of us have lived here and all of their sins fall on the next generation. Eventually, it becomes too much. Once you’re in this house, you can never leave. If you do, there will be consequences.”

Dirk walked to Simon and stopped. He looked at Simon with a cold, blank stare.

“I’m sorry it had to happen this way,” Dirk said. “Take care of yourself. I’ll always be here with you but you won’t be seeing me again.”

With that, Dirk placed the axe in Simon’s hands and disappeared into the night.

...

I pitied Simon as we gathered our things after the interview. He not only had lost his parents and sister on that fateful night, but he had also lost his brother and friend. Now he lived alone in this awful place, reliving the events of that night, day after day.

After October 13, 1965, the police investigated the murders and interviewed Simon profusely. However, he

was ruled too emotionally traumatized by massacre and the disappearance of his brother, so the investigation turned cold.

Simon insisted we stay the night, warning us the weather conditions were treacherous and the roads may be slippery.

"Thank you for the hospitality, Simon, but Gregg and I had best be on our way," I said, thankful I had my story so that I could escape the confines of this house.

Outside, the taxi pulled up on the gravel driveway and honked. I stood to shake Simon's hand.

"Thank you for everything," I said with a smile. "I hope to speak with you again someday."

Simon raised an eyebrow.

"I believe we will be speaking very soon indeed, Ms. Montgomery," Simon said, opening the door and letting us out into the rain.

...

I sat beside Gregg in the back of the taxicab, physically drained and exhausted. My watch read two a.m. as I reached into my pocket and pulled out the tape recorder.

"I hope this caught the whole interview, because sometimes I don't trust you or your camera," I teased, looking at Gregg.

He rolled his eyes and leaned over to go to sleep.

Although my mind was weary, I couldn't shake what Simon had said to me.

'I believe we will be speaking very soon.' What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I shuddered, perfectly content to never go back to that house again.

I switched on my tape recorder and listened to the interview.

Background?

Check.

Family?

Check.

House?

Check.

Dirk?

Hold on.

...Dirk had always been an odd boy, a nervous habit of tapping his index finger repeatedly...

You can't be serious...

I listened to the playback repeatedly with horror, realizing that the repetitive noise my voice recorder had picked up was the sound of Simon's ring, slightly too small for his index finger, tapping against the wooden armrest.

...

Jane Montgomery, August 14, 1985

I returned to Seattle and immediately handed my story over to the detectives. Not only did I have a story that would shake the state of Washington, I helped put a murderer behind bars.

There had never been a twin.

Simon was Dirk.

Psychologists helped me put the pieces together after Simon/Dirk was in custody. After close evaluations, the psychologists determined Simon never had a twin. Instead, he had developed another personality, Dirk, to protect him from his father's abuse. After the murders, however, Simon no longer had any use for Dirk because his fears had been eliminated.

I hadn't seen Simon since our interview. Rumor had it that he was working out a plea deal with the District Attorney, his lawyer advising him to plead insanity. To this day, Simon swears Dirk is real—that Dirk *really* exists.

However, I heard from Simon today. He wrote to me from his holding cell and warned me about what my future holds.

Ms. Jane Montgomery,

I write you to forgive you for turning me in. My therapist tells me it is in my best interests to learn to let go of my anger. So here I am, understanding the position you were in and forgiving you for my demise.

However, I am also writing you to warn you. I wasn't lying when I told you that the mansion is evil. Once you are in the house, you can never truly leave. The mansion is a portal, used to bring out the depths of evil from the shadows and expose the darkness in all of us. It preys on the weak.

Now that I have begun to sort things out in my head, I know one thing to be true. Dirk is very real. However, to me, he was Dirk. To you, he may be someone, or something completely different. Either way, you are a victim of the house now. The evil within will strike you when you least expect it—when you're in bed at night, when you're going down the stairs with your sister...

Seek help while you can.

Regards,

S.E.

...

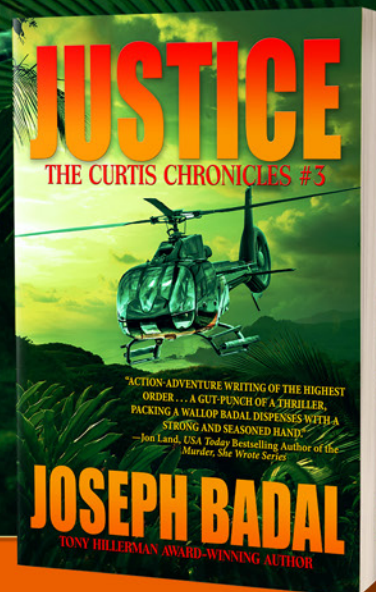
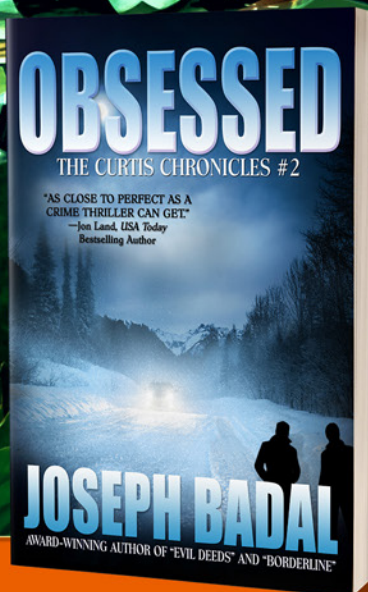
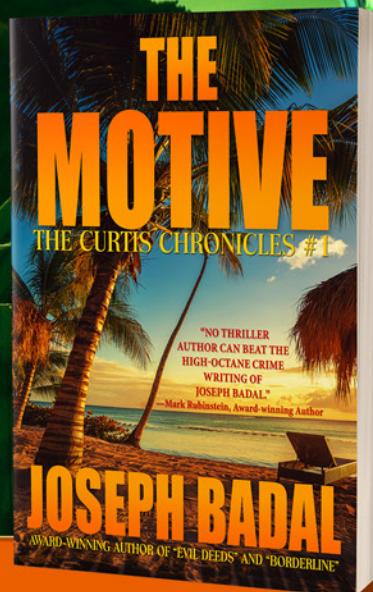
Jane Montgomery, October 13, 1985

After Simon's letter, I was invited to news conferences around the country. Newspapers wanted me to report the story for their paper. Publishers wanted to buy the rights to my book. Producers wanted to make my story into a movie. I had finally been given the opportunities I had always dreamed of as a writer.

But now, instead, I am here. Surrounded by four white walls, fluorescent lights scorching my retinas. The taste of vomit lingers in my mouth, with today's pill tucked in the pocket of my scratchy bleached uniform. I ignore the screaming coming from down the hall, my index finger tapping against the cold asylum table while the spirit of the house in my head tells me to *kill, kill, kill...* ■

FROM TONY HILLERMAN AWARD WINNER

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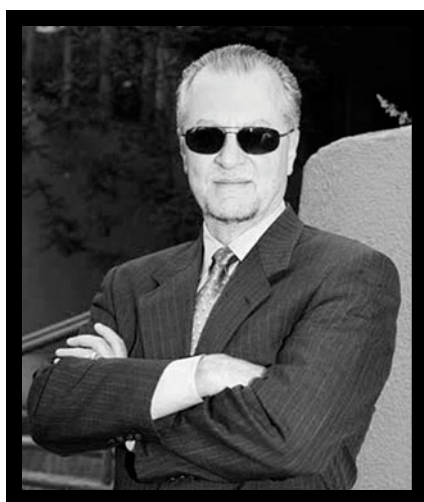
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INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

By Joseph Badal
Press Photo Credit: Sallie Badal



We've all seen the words "Inspired by Actual Events" on the front cover of books, and have heard authors and creative writing instructors say, "You don't have to make stuff up." Many short stories, novels, and screenplays have been based upon real life events that have been fictionalized. Real life events often are the inspirational core for some of the best works of fiction. Would Tom Clancy, Catherine Coulter, Ann Hillerman, Robert Ludlum, or W.E.B. Griffin's novels have been written without the influence of actual events? How about the work of Charles Dickens? Would the *Odyssey* have been written without the Trojan War event?

This column will be dedicated to the influence of actual events on works of fiction. Our first column is from suspense writer Joseph Badal, the author of fifteen award-winning novels, many of which were 'Inspired by Actual Events.'

EVIL DEEDS

On a beautiful spring morning in 1969, in the Athenian suburb of Kifissia, our day began as most days did—loudly and hectically. That's the way things go when you must get ready for work amid the circus created by two boys under the age of three. My wife prepared breakfast as I dressed in my U.S. Army uniform, all the while keeping an eye on the boys.

Our breakfast was always a family affair, with two chairs and two highchairs around a Formica-covered table. My greatest concern was that one or both of our sons might hurl a spoonful of cereal in my direction, causing me to have to change my uniform.

Life was good. Those mornings still conjure up wonderful memories of laughing children and a loving wife and mother. On warm days, we took the kids outside, past the elevated back patio to the gated back yard. We would chase one another, or I might lift one of them on a raised hand as he screamed, "Soup Man, Soup Man," their way of saying Superman. Whitey, a stray dog that had taken to hanging around our home about a month earlier, added to the noise and excitement by barking and rushing around in circles. That's the way it was on that morning in 1969. After hugging and kissing my wife and boys, I left for work.

Then the nightmare began.

Shortly after 9:00 a.m., someone rang the doorbell. Our home was on a corner lot, bordered by streets on the front and one side, by a tall concrete wall that separated us from an elementary school on the other side, and by another wall between us and a neighboring home in the back. A four-foot-high wrought iron fence enclosed the property on the two street sides. The gates in the fence—one on the front and two along the street side—were latched so that only an adult could open them.

Confident that the boys couldn't open one of the gates, my wife walked from the back yard, where the children were seated in a glider swing, and, followed by the mongrel dog, she moved through the house to see who was at the front door. There she found a woman with an armful of scarves and an orange-colored *flokati* rug displayed on the front porch.

The woman was clothed in the colorful, floor-length dress common to Greek Gypsies.

"Halfway between the woman and my wife was our crying 2-year-old son seated in the middle of the street."

"Missy, like to buy rug?" the woman said in a heavy Slavic accent. "Maybe scarf?"

Gypsies frequently stopped at Americans' homes, interested in making cash sales or trading for heavy winter clothing. On this morning, my wife told the woman that she wasn't in the market for anything, thanked her, and moved to close the door. But, unlike other instances when these itinerant vendors had stopped, this woman became insistent that my wife examine her scarves.

"Best handmade scarves you will find, Missy. Guarantee it is best quality."

"No, thank you," my wife repeated. "Maybe another time."

But, again, the woman wouldn't take no for an answer. "You should look at—"

A low, threatening growl rumbled in the dog's throat as she suddenly reversed direction and scrambled toward the back of the house, her paws skittering on the marble floor.

In a strident tone, my wife told the woman at the front door that she didn't have time to look at her wares, then closed and locked the door. As she turned to follow the dog, she heard a child cry out, followed by loud barking.

My wife screamed as she rushed out through the back of the house, leaped from the raised patio to the yard, and, her heart in her throat, saw that our one-year-old son was alone on the glider swing. She raced toward the side street and crashed through the gate.

Thirty yards away was a horse-drawn wooden wagon with a small platform on the back. A man knelt on the platform; his arms were extended toward a screaming woman who thrashed and kicked to dislodge Whitey who had her jaws gripped firmly on the back of one of the woman's legs. The dog growled ferociously as she tried to plant her paws on the road's macadam surface. Halfway between the woman and my wife was our crying 2-year-old son seated in the middle of the street.

As my wife ran forward to pick up our son, she saw the other woman who had a minute earlier been on our front porch supposedly selling wares but actually diverting my wife's attention from our boys in the back yard. Rugs and scarves in her hands, she came around the corner and hurried to the wagon.

By the time my wife had carried our son to the back yard, gathered up our other son, and carried them toward the back of the house, Whitey arrived—having leapt over the four-foot-high fence as she always did whenever exiting or entering our property, a piece of multi-colored fabric in her mouth.

That kidnapping lasted no more than sixty seconds but, along with stories I had been told about kidnappings of children by Communist guerillas after the Greek Revolution that occurred at the end of WWII, it formed the basis for the first novel, "Evil Deeds," in my six-book *Danforth Saga*. The kidnapping event in "Evil Deeds" lasts significantly longer than the actual kidnapping, but without the inspiration of that actual event, the book and the series may never have happened.

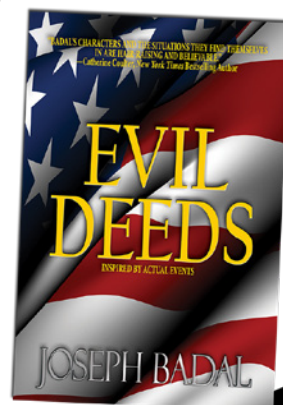
There are two postscripts to this tale. The first is that we adopted Whitey and brought her to the United States where she lived a long and happy life. The second postscript occurred in 2003, when I was a member of a panel at the Left Coast Crime conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. The topic of our panel was "What are you working on now?" When I told the audience about "Evil Deeds" and how Whitey saved our son, a woman in the audience asked, "What happens to the dog in your book?"

I responded that because I wanted the reader to truly hate the antagonist, the dog is wounded and dies. I was roundly booed. Quickly pivoting, I announced, "The dog lives." Everyone in the audience cheered. Moral of the story: never kill a dog or a cat in your book.

To learn more about Joseph Badal and his work, visit josephbadalbooks.com. ■

Prior to a long finance career, including a 16-year stint as a senior executive and board member of a NYSE-listed company, Joseph Badal served for six years as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army in critical, highly classified positions in the U.S. and overseas, including tours of duty in Greece and Vietnam, and earned numerous military decorations.

He is the author of 15 award-winning published suspense novels, is an Amazon #1 Best Selling Author, and a two-time winner of the Tony Hillerman Prize for Best Fiction Book of the Year. He has earned multiple Gold Medals from the Military Writers Society of America and twice earned "Finalist" recognition from the International Book Awards.



TORI ELDRIDGE

Breaks Out With “The Ninja Daughter”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Charles Chessler Photography

Back in 2014, in our “Best of” issue, we published a short story called “Call Me Dumpling” by debut author Tori Eldridge. This was her first short story. What we didn’t know back then was that this story would be the inspiration for Tori to write her book “The Ninja Daughter,” which was released in November of 2019. One of the reasons we started the magazine was for great stories like this, and to see a short story in our magazine blossom into a wonderful book is awesome.

We sat down with Tori to talk about this exciting journey and we think you’ll agree, she’s an inspiration to aspiring authors everywhere. First, we will take a look inside “The Ninja Daughter” and then check out the interview.

After her sister is raped and murdered, Lily Wong dedicates her life and ninja skills to the protection of women. But her mission is complicated. Not only does she live above the Chinese restaurant owned by her Norwegian father and inspired by the recipes of her Chinese mother, but she has to hide her true self from her Hong Kong tiger mom who is already disappointed in her daughter’s less than feminine ways, and who would be horrified to know what she had become.

But when a woman and her son she escorted safely to an abused women’s shelter return home to dangerous consequences, Lily is forced to not only confront her family and her past, but team up with a mysterious—and very lethal—stranger to rescue them.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): I would like to begin by speaking about your debut novel, “The Ninja Daughter.” Could you give readers a “sneak peek” at the story that they would not be able to find, perhaps, on the inside cover?

Tori Eldridge (T.E.): My protagonist, Lily Wong, is a bi-racial Millennial who, after the rape and murder of her younger sister, dedicates her life to becoming a ‘big sister’ to an entire city. She’s a young adult pulled in three cultural directions (Hong Kong, mother; North Dakota Norwegian father, Japanese sensei) in a city renowned for its diversity. She trained and competed in Chinese Wushu since early childhood but studied Ninjutsu on the sly since she was twelve. (For some reason, Lily didn’t think training with a middle-aged Japanese stranger in the park would go over too well with Ma.) With her martial arts and weapons training and high athletic skills in Parkour, mountain climbing, biking, and distance running, Lily has ample tools to hunt abusers and protect the innocent. But it’s her grief and determination that makes her truly dangerous.

While protecting a cocktail waitress—who’s been shamed in the press for accusing a nightclub patron of trying to kill her—Lily tangles with the Ukrainian mob, sex traffickers, and an enigmatic assassin who has a disturbing fascination.

S. MAG.: This is not only your debut thriller novel, but it’s also the first in a series, is that correct? Where did the idea come



about to create these great characters and dive head-first into an entire series?

T.E.: *It all began when I accepted a literary challenge to write a thriller in two hundred words. That micro-story inspired my debut short story (published in Suspense Magazine's "Best of" 2014 issue), which in turn, set the stage for Lily's character, her tragedy-spawned mission, and the first book in the Lily Wong series. She captivated my attention—a multi-cultural heroine for a #MeToo era, fighting to rescue and protect other women while still finding her way as an adult. Although she's detached from her friends and former social life, she's deeply connected to her family. Lily is both highly unusual and completely relatable. A character like that has a lot of stories to tell.*

S. MAG.: In addition, are any of your characters loosely based on yourself and your own family? I ask this because you describe your multi-cultural heritage on your website, as well as the fact that you hold a fifth-degree black belt in To-Shin Do Ninjutsu and, I believe, your main character does as well?

T.E.: *"The Ninja Daughter" is definitely an homage to my Chinese-Norwegian heritage and the ninja arts that have informed so much of my life. That said, Lily's life, personality, and her parents are not my own. Although I drew extensively from my knowledge, skill, and experience, I also touched base with many of my Chinese-American friends and North Dakota Norwegian relatives to deepen my cultural understanding. Lily, her parents, her grandparents, and the crotchety Shanghainese chef she calls Uncle, emerged from this amalgamation of experience. I did the same with Sensei's character and the way in which Lily trains, perceives, and applies her ninja. Some of this is from observing the experiences of my ninja friends, but much of it comes from my own perspective.*

S. MAG.: If you were to name a couple of your own personal mentors when it comes to the literary world, who would you say truly changed your life when it came to walking the path of a writer?

T.E.: *Jonathan Maberry has shown me, by example and mentorship, how to balance creativity and business, foster non-competitive community, and handle myself with professionalism.*

F. Paul Wilson has taught me, by example and mentorship, how to write efficiently vivid prose.

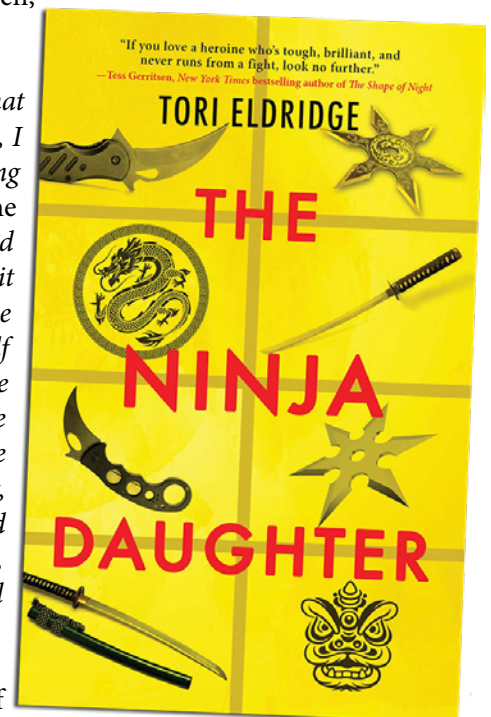
Tom Monteleone has encouraged me, from the start, with his steadfast belief and uncompromising expectation.

I am blessed with an abundance of instrumental friends and writer communities who encourage, support, read, edit, and inspire. It would take an entire essay to mention them all.

S. MAG.: Your background is certainly a litany of creativity, filled with everything from teaching seminars to writing short stories, to performing and acting on TV, film, Broadway, dancing, etc. How, or when, did you decide that writing was something you wished to focus on?

T.E.: *Writing has been a strength and interest of mine since high school, but at that time, I was singularly focused on performing Broadway musicals. After a few shows, I moved to Los Angeles to try my hand at television and film. It wasn't until I was raising my sons and began reading the screenplays submitted to my husband (producer of The Equalizer movies) that I indulged my desire to write. One of my screenplays earned a semi-finalist spot in the Academy Nicholl Fellowship and inspired me to expand it into a novel. Although I adored the creative process, I didn't have any interest in the business-related aspects of the writing profession, so I put the manuscript on a shelf and focused on raising our sons and pursuing martial arts. During this time, I wrote a non-fiction book on empowerment and self-protection. I also created a clothing line and an online store. Since I was operating a business with a website and marketing, the writing biz didn't seem as daunting as it had before. So, I returned to screenwriting, began adapting books to film and television for Lonetree Entertainment, and revisited the manuscript I had shelved over a decade earlier. After completing that manuscript, most of the sequel, and seeing four of my short stories published in anthologies and magazines, I wrote "The Ninja Daughter."*

S. MAG.: When you began this series, did you already have in mind an outline of



sorts, such as how many books there would be in the series when all was said and done; or, an outline of the cases/suspense stories that would make up the series?

T.E.: *Not really. I understood the driving motivation of my character and the core issues of grief, guilt, family, and culture that informed her life. I knew Lily Wong wrestled with the darkness inside her, and her former gregarious self-struggle to break through her self-imposed isolation and secrecy. I also knew that she would fight for the abused wherever she traveled in the world. Halfway through writing the first book, I knew the issues I wanted to tackle for the second. And before I had finished the first draft of the second, I knew where I wanted to take the third and fourth books. I feel comfortable letting the series grow with Lily. Mid-twenties are an exciting, confusing, and volatile time in a person's life, full of reinvention, growth, and discovery. I'm excited to see where she takes me.*

S. MAG.: Being that you help others by teaching the ninja arts, weapons, and women's self-protection, can you offer your own opinion in regards to how you feel the world is doing right now (better or worse), when it comes to women being treated equally?

T.E.: *There have been advancements, but women around the world continue to struggle to be heard. Most people recognize the issue, but many don't grasp the subtleties of what women encounter. It's like trying to define a feeling one has never experienced: We hear the words, but we don't always have emotional context to really understand. Communication is important. It's not always enough, but it's a strong beginning.*

S. MAG.: Could you share a bit about your 'Empowered Living' radio show, the subjects that you focus on, and how you wish to help people gain success and peace in their own lives?

T.E.: *Years ago, I hosted fifty-seven podcasts featuring empowering people chatting with me about significant topics that I felt would resonate universally. I spoke with David Morrell about working through grief, Anne and Christopher Rice about mothers and sons, Steve and Elizabeth Berry about family traditions, and Heather Graham and F. Paul Wilson about collaboration. I interviewed eleven writers in all stages of their careers to speak about positivity and how they promote this in their personal and professional lives.*

I also spoke with famous artists and celebrity leaders, like renowned finger-picking guitarist Tommy Emmanuel and presidential candidate Marianne Williamson. I interviewed Ms. Williamson in her condominium when she was running for California state representative. Our topic was love and politics. Imagine my surprise when she spoke those very words during the first debate!

I met remarkable people and deepened many of my existing relationships through those podcasts. But the most acclaimed show I ever recorded, and one that continues to receive more listens than any in the Authors on the Air Global Radio Network, is the conversation I had with Shamar Rinpoche, the fourteenth reincarnated Shamarpa Red Hat Lama of Tibet. It was especially poignant after he passed away three months later.

S. MAG.: Now that the holidays are coming closer, can you tell readers what you'll be concentrating on in the upcoming months? Will you be attending events, or perhaps book signings while you enjoy the holidays?

T.E.: *Right now I'm in the middle of a thirteen city book tour—fourteen, if you count a pre-launch book event in Honolulu. I won't be done until a few days before Thanksgiving. So my plans for the holidays involve resting, cleaning, cooking, decorating, and welcoming our eldest son, his new bride, and her Cantonese-speaking parents for Christmas. Coincidentally, my daughter-in-law is from Hong Kong!*

S. MAG.: What is the next book to keep watch for?

T.E.: *I turned in the second Lily Wong novel a few months ago and I've mapped out the third book in the series. The second book is set in Los Angeles and takes a deep dive into the sex trafficking of youth. It's a dark and gritty story, lightened by a challenging visit from Lily's grandparents, and her own sardonic humor.*

We would like to thank Tori for sharing her story and talking with us. For more information on Tori and her work, check out her website at www.torielldridge.com. ■

DO YOU HEAR THE *Coffin Bell?*

By Kat Devitt

Our love story ended there. With him in a casket, and me gazing down on him, as if he was a penny dropped into a well.

I once hung all my wishes on him, foolish enough to think it took a man to change my fortunes. But I wronged myself in believing it took love to create happiness. I'd found nothing but disappointment in his arms, watching as my wishes disappeared in the ripples of his lies, hitting my heart like stones.

Even the man he presented to the world had been one grand deception. He made a stranger feel like a friend in the glow of his pearly smile, a beggar—a rich man with a few kind words and coin weighing his pockets. He charmed, and he enchanted. He knew the art in life, and he continued it on in death as mourners crammed into the parlor at the rear of his mother's house.

Many waited behind me for a chance to stare at his corpse, but no one dared rush me on. Who would hurry a dead man's fiancé? Especially when our pairing was considered a love match—and it had been, until his secrets splintered his near perfect image.

I brushed my fingertips against his cheek, cold without his blood flowing beneath his pale flesh. *I still love you*, I thought. *How is it I do?*

My mind held no answer as tears welled in my eyes. His coffee-toned hair, ashen face, and dark suit, tailored just for this occasion, blurred in the mists of my sadness. I had nothing but memories of him, of when he walked in the vibrancy of his youth, a man not yet thirty.

"Mary." A hand brushed lightly against my arm. "You've been standing here for five minutes."

I glanced up to find my friend, Kitty Everly, standing beside me, her china-blue eyes holding me with concern. Her mourning veil was thrown back over her auburn hair, her cherry-red lips curved into a frown. She assessed me with the same knowing look from when we were children, when I wept over the loss of my adored Silky. Only, this wasn't an

eight-week-old kitten we were burying.

She took my hand in hers, her warm fingers so different from George's cold corpse. "Come sit with me by the hearth."

And with that, she led me away. She disrupted my thoughts when no one else would, as she'd always had the liberty to do. No one else had claimed such a right. No one, except for George, when I had trusted him.

Fool that I am. I choked down a sob. Fool that I was.

We settled onto a chaise lounge, gold thread forming a pattern of fleurs-de-lis over a deep crimson. A screen, red and gold roses embroidered into its white cloth, shielded our faces from the crackling flames nestled in the hearth. Burning oak filled my nose as smoke rose from the small fire, climbing up the chimney in swirls. I imagined a soul did very much the same when leaving a body.

"He never feared death," I murmured as I stared into the smoke.

Kitty took my hands into hers. "He passed away in his sleep, when he was dreaming. I'm sure of it." She gave me a hard squeeze, to where she might've cracked my fingers. She only did this when she was trying to lie to me for my own good. "He was thinking of you, perhaps, when he took his last breath. Don't all men dream of the women they love?"

"Women." I chortled at the word. Women, plural. Not singular. George's love had not been singular.

"You mustn't feel guilty, Mary." Her taffeta skirts crinkled as she shifted closer to me. "This wasn't your fault. None of this was expected. George was a vibrant man, and with such a vibrant love for you."

"He died without peace." I turned from her, from the hearth, as fresh tears started to roll down my cheeks. "His mother told me that he was faint in the hours before his death. Servants were coming into his room with buckets, for his vomiting, and he was grasping at his abdomen, swearing at an acute pain."

"Shhh." Kitty guided my head to her shoulder. I eased into the crook, breathing in her lavender scent. She always

reminded me of a walking garden, bringing calm wherever she chose to reside. "None of this will help you."

"You would rather lie to me instead?"

"I prefer to call it 'painting a pretty picture.'"

A small smile bloomed on my lips, a flower burgeoning through a harsh winter. "How could I trust you if you provide me with tales, rather than with facts?"

"Because it is for your own good."

Wailing rang throughout the parlor. I peeked up to see who could be more grieved than me. Mrs. Blackbourne, George's mother, the woman who bore him and reared him. She sat on the floor in a pool of black silks, rocking back and forth, her hands lifted up to God.

"My son! My son! Give him back to me." Her voice cracked, "Please! Give him back to his mother."

Mr. Blackbourne came to her side, kneeling beside her, whispering in her ear. But she would not stand. She tore away from him, her tears coming harder, staining her cheeks, flowing down her chin and splattering onto the floor.

"Come now, dear," Mr. Blackbourne said. "Let us not make more grief for those who have come to see George."

"He's not dead." She tore herself away. "My son, he lives. I know it. All I must do is pray, and beseech myself to the Lord."

"There's nothing He can do." He paused for a moment, looking about at the growing audience. "He has called George home."

"No! No, I know it. George will return to me." Her head fell back, her sobs echoing through the room. Her black veil cascaded down her back, like ink in water. She thought she could rewrite this tragedy with a prayer, but it wasn't to be. I knew more than anyone why his death would remain as it was.

Kitty tapped my shoulder. "This sadness isn't good for your health." She took a handkerchief and dabbed underneath my eyes, at tears I hadn't realized I spilt.

"My love has died."

"You will come have tea with me tomorrow." She said it as if a body didn't rest in the room, as if it was any other ordinary afternoon, in any ordinary home. "Will you promise me?"

I nodded. I couldn't object to her. Either I could lay in my bed, fretting over my mistakes, my regrets, and crying over George's betrayal; or, I could sit down with my friend for a few hours, pretending all was calm and ordinary.

"I will," I said, when I noticed the lacy hem of a dress from a woman passing by. My gaze shot up to catch the woman, without understanding why. And I recognized her for the whore she was.

She walked over to Mrs. Blackbourne with a calm, stringing her ten-year-old daughter along. Her lace swept against the floor, brushing a path for her and her daughter. Her ebony sleeves fell down to her elbows as she shook

out a handkerchief. She fell onto her knees, beside Mrs. Blackbourne, her arm hooked around her, as she offered the cloth.

Resentment brewed in me, like over steeped tea, turning my soul bitter. *How dare she come and show her face here. How dare she enter into this house, with that brat of hers.* I wanted to stand up and scream. I wanted to rush across the room and claw at her face. But I remained in my seat, my hands in my lap, Kitty ignorant to my stewing.

Nothing in this house was ordinary. Nothing about this funeral was ordinary. Even an afternoon alone with Kitty wouldn't return the ordinariness of my life. All the tea and pastries in the world couldn't change what had happened. And no one knew this better than me.

"I saw you staring at that woman yesterday." Kitty reached for a lemon tart and served it onto her plate, beginning the conversation with what she considered a polite question. But she hadn't an idea how my anger permeated.

"Who?" I asked, trying to avoid her study.

"She toted a daughter along." She tore into the tart, continuing with a mouthful, "She comforted Mrs. Blackbourne during her...episode."

"Her hysterics, you mean?"

"Well, Mary, I was trying to tiptoe around that particular word, for the sake of politeness. But, yes, her hysterics."

I took a sip of the Earl Gray tea, warming my belly as I raked over my sorrows. I knew the woman, and I knew her well. I never made her acquaintance. I never even bumped into her on London's streets, but I knew the sinner she was. I knew her caliber—those who take, and take, and take without thinking from whose table she snatched from.

"I've never met her." This wasn't entirely a lie.

"Mary." Kitty gave me a hard stare. "Her presence incited you. Your breathing quickened, and your hands fisted in your lap. I saw nothing of your face, but I saw the tenseness in your back, your shoulders."

"I was joining my grief with that of George's mother."

"Liar." Kitty leaned closer, rattling the teacup against the saucer now in her grasp. "You know her." She sipped. Glared at me over the rim. "And she vexes you."

I averted my gaze from hers. "You needn't know."

There are those who become heated during anger. Their blood simmers beneath their flesh; their cheeks redden, as if lashed a thousand times with a horsewhip. But not me. I become stiff. Sometimes like a reed. I become brittle inside, and I could be broken into pieces, broken up in the waves. Like with George, when I learned of his betrayal.

But sometimes that anger stiffens even further. I become like a rod, ready to thrash over the heads of those who anger me. Much like after his betrayal sank into my mind, and I

struck. If anything, this interrogation infuriated me. And I was stiff enough to lash out.

"Come now." Kitty placed her teacup onto the round, rosewood table resting between us on clawed legs. "We are friends, Mary. We have been for nearly twenty years. Surely you can tell me a little about this mysterious woman."

"I said, no."

"Will you not tell me even a little—?"

I slammed a fist on that table, silver and china rattling and sliding as it rocked on its legs. "By God, Kitty, I said, no."

The table righted itself without falling, but my outburst shook the closeness between us. Kitty leaned back in her chair, her brows furrowed, her lips parted. She sat for a moment recollecting herself.

"Was she George's mistress?" she asked.

Her question came as a dagger to my chest. Sharply, I inhaled. I grasped the wooden arms of my chair, digging my nails into the carved faces of cherubs. I imagined myself gouging out their eyes, making those winged fools, shooting arrows at victims, doomed to learn the pitfalls of love—writhe with the pain in my heart.

Kitty's gaze softened into pity. "Your face tells it all."

"I told you too much when I told you he had a mistress."

"We are friends, Mary. We share each other's secrets."

Not all our secrets.

"None of this is your affair," I snapped.

"It is when it concerns you."

I glanced down at the tea, steam no longer lifting up from the chasm of the white china. I thought how easy it might be to taint it, to put an end to this conversation of ours. But I couldn't. I had left my secrets at home.

"I do not wish to share my humiliation with you." I flew from my seat, storming over to the window to stare at the dark cobblestone streets of St. James's Square. "She was once George's harlot."

"Why might she be invited to his funeral?"

"He acknowledged her daughter as his. Made his parents accept her as their grandchild." I fumed as I saw a mother and daughter pass by the window. "I do not know why they were there, but I do know this: George lied to me. He never told me about their existence. I learned too late about his illegitimate family when I wondered..."

"You wondered what?"

"Why his calls became scarcer. He claimed preparations for our wedding day kept him away, but I am no fool. I sent my lady's maid to follow after him one day, when he sent his pardons for having to miss another visit."

"You needn't tell me more."

I whipped around. "You pressed and pressed me, and now you shall know the reason for my ire."

Kitty slid onto the edge of her seat, about ready to rise. "I

see how it upsets you—"

"My lady's maid trailed after him, and she found him on the doorstep of that harlot's home, shoving his arms through his coat, kissing her goodbye." Something cool trickled down my cheeks. Something salty fell onto my lips. I had cried so much these last few weeks, I was becoming numb to my tears. "I confronted him with my evidence, and he denied it all. I believed him for a time, until the old suspicions bittered my heart. I followed him myself, and I saw him go to her house. I never trusted him again. Not after that."

"Come, sit by me."

Kitty waved at a chaise lounge, but I couldn't rest when my guilt stirred. I already confided too much into my friend. Another hour, another cup of tea, and I'd spill the whole of my tale for her ears to hear.

"No." I started from the room. "I promised to visit George's mother tonight for a poetry reading in his honor. I will be late if I dally here a moment longer."

"Wait, Mary. Unburden yourself to me."

I slammed the door on Kitty's plea. I couldn't tell her how the wrongs of a sinner twisted me into a monster far worse. I couldn't admit to anyone what I had done, or else I might find myself at the end of a hangman's noose.

I sat on a plush chaise lounge beside Mrs. Blackbourne, tears streaming down her cheeks as a guest recited from memory "Queen Mab" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. She clasped my hand into hers, but released me to retrieve a handkerchief, as the reader came to a few lines regarding death, the recurring theme of the night.

*How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
When throned on ocean's wave
It blushes o'er the world;
Yet both so passing beautiful!*

Mrs. Blackbourne sniveled beside me, her whimpers muted by a handkerchief she pressed over her mouth. I stroked her back in small circles, as Kitty would do for me whenever I grieved; for Silky, for George, for lost love.

My tears mingled with hers, but for different reasons. She wept for the emptiness in her bosom, for the loss of her son, while I salted my regrets. I committed unspeakable acts, and now a body lay in a coffin, beneath feet of earth.

"He's not dead," his mother swore. "He's not dead; he only sleeps."

I regarded her claims with the same air as everyone else in the parlor: George was dead. He'd been without breath for two days. He was gone from us; his soul had risen to the arms of heaven, like smoke rising from a flame.

"Will you read this evening?" I asked, wishing to distract her from her mourning. If only for a minute.

"I've never been one for exhibition."

I doubted that very much. "Not even a few lines from Lord Byron? Or Keats? I know how you favor those two poets."

"They're long dead. Only their words survive." She blew into her handkerchief. "But not my George. He lives on."

"Of course he does. In our hearts."

She turned to me, her eyes red around the rims, her nose chafed from blowing and blowing. "You're a sweet girl." She brushed the back of her hand against my cheek. "But you do not understand."

And she began to cry again, much as she did yesterday. Only, she did not wail as the words of a new poem, Shakespeare or Pope or some dead bard, drifted over the grief mingling in the parlor. She sat there shaking, her tears silent.

I rose from the seat as I crossed to the back of the room. I went over to a table laden with refreshments, but I did not bother to pour myself a glass of wine, sherry, or lemonade. I simply watched as friends and family of George dabbed beneath their eyes, staring at the swirls of the Oriental rug beneath their feet.

My throat tightened. Love for George flooded my heart, but remembrances of his mistress and daughter, from the day before, damned the tides from entering my veins. My last image of him struck within my mind, like lightning in a storm. Him rising from his overstuffed wingback, offering to walk me to the door, our empty cups on the table in his study.

Tears slid down my cheeks. I almost turned around to flee when I collided into Kitty. She wore a muted gray dress, lace fringing the neckline, accordion pleats in her skirts. Her hair was pinned into a coif, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

And her china-blue eyes were like fragile porcelain. "We must speak. Now."

"After another poem."

"I went to your home to find you."

"I came here straight away to give my comfort to George's mother." I glanced across the room at the back of the old woman's head, her lace cap covering her bunches of gray curls. "I must remain for her."

"I waited an hour for you."

"I'm sorry for your lost time."

"You know how restless I can get...waiting."

I pinned Kitty with a stare. "What did you do?"

"I nosed around your house. For no other reason than curiosity." She pulled a handkerchief out from the pocket of

her dress, revealing a vial. "And I found this."

I stumbled back a step as I read the label. I knew the secret she held in the palm of her hand; I knew the consequences I might suffer. That is, if I didn't sprinkle her ears with lies. Anything to abate the suspicious look in her gaze.

"Tell me now, Mary," Kitty demanded.

My eyes darted about the parlor. "Put that away."

"Not until you tell me what you used this for."

"Mice."

I hooked arms with her as applause circled around the room. Another recitation had ended. But mine had only begun, and I was raking through my head for an excuse for that blasted vial. "Come, step into the gardens with me."

I tugged on her arm, but Kitty stood firmly by the wine and sherry.

"This is more than what's needed to kill a few rodents," she said, wrapping and tucking the vial back into her dress' pocket.

I could've done a dozen things to rid myself of it. Smash it into a thousand tiny shards. Sprinkle my lawn with the powder. Drop it off in the Thames. Slip it into someone else's pocket. Anything to avoid discovery. *Why had I kept it?*

Perhaps a part of me wanted it to be found.

"Do you not believe me?" I asked.

Kitty shook her head. "I don't know, Mary."

"My cellars had an infestation. I needed it."

"A man is dead." Her eyes wandered to where George's body had lain only the day before.

"Kitty." I seized her hands. I gave her a hard squeeze, trying to reel her away from her doubts. "Please, look at me. I will tell you the truth, as I always have."

"You didn't tell me the truth when Silky died."

"What?"

"You adored that kitten, yes. But when it bit you one day, I saw..." She shuddered. "I saw you sneak something into its water." Her gaze collided with mine; hers was set, determined, tearing down my guard. "You take away life when it hurts you."

"I was a child!"

"And now you are a woman." She broke free from my hold. "I thought you kind, and changed. I thought you had grown out of that perversion, but clearly I was wrong."

"Your accusations are unfounded."

Kitty glared at me, her lips poised to say more, when a pounding came at the entrance door, cutting into the night.

A commotion rose in a whirl of blustering and footsteps. Poetry drifted into the night as the reciter lowered his papers to his sides. Chairs creaked as the small audience turned around to crane their heads. And Kitty broke away from me, poking her head out the doorway.

"A watchman from the graveyard is here," she announced

to the room.

Mr. Blackbourne rose from his wingback by the window, putting his back to the dusky night. "I'll greet the fellow."

He started across the room, pausing to collect his wife from her perch. And the pair departed from the parlor, leaving their guests to whisper in their wake.

I shifted on my feet, a growing agitation climbing its way to clutch at my guilt, my regrets. I walked up behind Kitty, placing my hand on her shoulder, as she strained to hear the conversation out in the hall.

"You shouldn't eavesdrop," I admonished her.

"Shhh." Kitty nudged my hand from her shoulder. "They're speaking of George."

I tried to angle myself to see the happenings through the crack of the door, but Kitty blocked my view, her being a few inches taller. She gave a little gasp. I started, alarmed at her captivation into the affairs outside. Had she betrayed my friendship? Had she raised an alarm?

My throat tightened. My palms dampened. My heart began to beat in tempo with the ormolu clock on the mantel, ticking away the moments until my capture. Or, at least, I imagined as I started backing away from her, swinging my head wildly about, looking for a possible escape.

"Mary Smith."

My name boomed from the other side of the door. And I was a cornered animal, without escape from my hunters. Kitty blocked the only entrance, and exit, from the parlor. Only a shove would make her move, giving me flight, but even then, I might be run down.

Kitty stepped aside abruptly. I thought it a miracle, and without a hesitation I darted for the door. But she grabbed my arm, holding me still, as Mr. Blackbourne poked his head through the doorway, a smile in his eyes.

"Mary, Mr. Redfield, the watchman, wishes to speak with you, too," he rushed. "Oh, come. Come, girl. We might have a wedding yet!"

I furrowed my brows, thinking him mad. I couldn't marry a corpse.

I stepped out into the hall, with Kitty trailing behind. Mr. Blackbourne made no objection to her following along, his giddiness making him seem close to bursting. He shook a little, from nerves, from surprise, from unexplained joy, as he motioned towards a man with dirt smudges on his face, his clothes caked in mud.

"Mary Smith?" he asked, his voice like thunder.

I swallowed. "Yes, sir?"

"Call me Mr. Redfield." He gave me a curious look. "Your fiancé lives."

I stood there...in shock.

Mrs. Blackbourne burst into tears, but this time from joy. "He lives! My God answered my prayers. He lives!" She blew into her handkerchief, bending her head over her folded

hands, offering up another devotion.

"How?" I asked.

"He rang the coffin bell," Mr. Redfield explained. "I was walking by when I heard, and I rushed to fetch a team to dig him out. He sits in our church, at this moment, with our pastor."

I blinked. Not sure what to say. Not sure how to act.

Mr. Blackbourne placed a hand on my shoulder. "Isn't this wonderful, Kitty?"

"How?" I asked again.

"He was in a stupor, seemingly dead." Mr. Redfield lowered his voice to a rumble, "We've called the services of Scotland Yard to look into the matter."

This caught Mrs. Blackbourne from her prayers. "Why?" she asked, her eyes widening, her voice snapping.

Mr. Redfield ignored her, his gaze remaining with me, watching me like a specimen beneath a microscope, print beneath a magnifying glass. "He's weak. He's ill. He's in shock, but he still remembers his final moments before falling into his stupor."

I took a step back, but Kitty caught my arm, willing me to stay.

"He says he finished drinking cocoa with you, Miss Smith. His tasting bitter." He paused, watching me. "Shortly after you left, he fell into darkness."

"What are you saying?" Mr. Blackbourne asked. "Was my son sick?"

Mr. Redfield turned his study from me. "I'm not certain." He sighed, his shoulders sagging, as if his profession weighed on him. "Your son is lucky, though, Mr. Blackbourne. I've only heard the coffin bell twice in my experience. And the first time, the man was delirious from poison."

Mrs. Blackbourne swayed; Mr. Blackbourne coming to her aid, righting her on her feet. He murmured a few words to her, their happiness dissipating with this scrap of news. And Mr. Redfield looked on with a craving in his eyes, as if what he craved was whiskey or gin, weary from this glum business.

"Scotland Yard will solve this mystery," he assured.

Kitty twisted my arm, her glare catching mine. I saw her reach her hand into her dress pocket, caressing the vial. She didn't withdraw it. Not yet, at least. My breathing shortened, my throat constricting, as I felt the hangman's noose tightening around my neck. ■

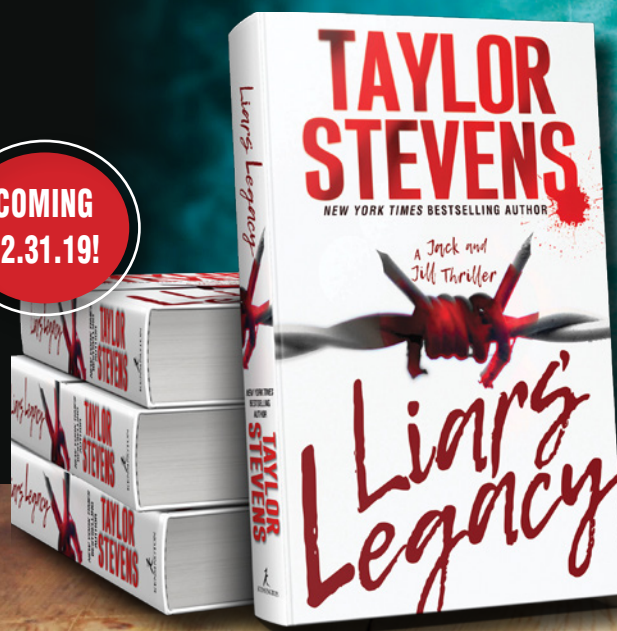
This story was originally published in The Blotter Magazine. Kat Devitt's short stories have appeared in Books 'N Pieces Magazine, TWJ Magazine, Squawk Back, Bold + Italic, Ariel Chart, The Blotter Magazine, and other venues. Kat is a Puschart Prize nominee, Best of the Net nominee, and placed as a runner-up in OPQ Press's 2019 Spooky Samhain Contest. She also acts as the fiction editor for Bold + Italic.

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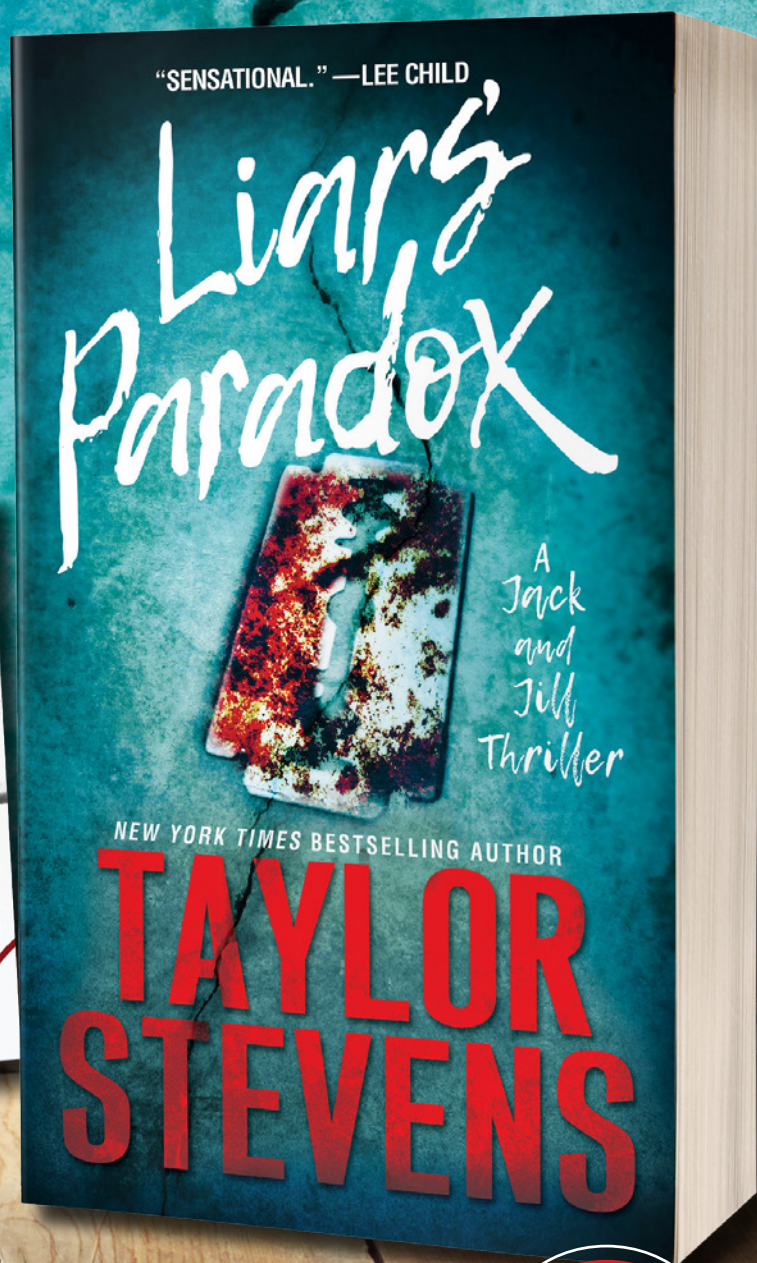
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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

SOMEONE WE KNOW

By Shari Lapena

Everyone has secrets, and in this neighborhood, nobody's secrets are safe. Olivia Sharpe is shocked when she sees a text message on her teenage son's phone asking how his most recent break-in went. Surprised to have been caught, Raleigh admits to breaking into neighboring homes. But it was just a one-time deal. Ok, maybe twice. And he swears he'll never do it again. He didn't take anything, he just snooped through their computers, so it was all harmless, right?

Then, the body of one of their neighbors is found in the trunk of her own car at the bottom of a very deep lake. This neighbor, Amanda, just so happens to live in one of the houses that Raleigh broke into, and when Olivia writes anonymous letters apologizing to the break-in victims out of guilt for what her son has done, Amanda's husband begins to sweat. Will this nosy teenager cause problems for him? He's not sure, but he's prepared to do something about it if necessary.

Amanda had enemies in the neighborhood. She was flirtatious, and beautiful, and young. A combination that threatened the cookie-cutter women who attended book clubs and hosted dinner parties at their homes. When the police begin to uncover secrets, including more than one affair, it becomes harder to narrow down just who is responsible for Amanda's murder.

Olivia's world is turned upside down when more than one person in her circle finds themselves smack dab in the middle of the investigation, including her husband, Paul. It feels like the only person she can trust is her best friend, Glenda. But Raleigh has another secret. He snuck into Glenda's house, a fact that he chose to keep from his parents, and there's something he knows that they don't.

This book is non-stop twists and turns. Shari Lapena will leave your head spinning as you try and make sense of the lies surrounding the families in this neighborhood. And just when you think you've figured it out, you're probably wrong. Absolutely recommend!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



THE SHAPE OF NIGHT

By Tess Gerritsen

In Boston, a horrific tragedy occurs; an event that causes a woman by the name of Ava Collette to run away and secure herself in a basically unknown village located in Maine. It is there that she will hide . . . leaving the past behind in order to survive.

Unfortunately, although the old house in Brodie's Watch seems like an isolated location where Ava can feel safe, what it really becomes is yet another location of violence that Ava cannot (or will not) walk away from.

While dwelling inside her new, yet historical seaside mansion, Ava spots something remarkable and frightening at the same time. It is the ghost of the previous owner of the house; a sea captain by the name of Jeremiah Brodie who died long ago.

This apparition, however, turns out not to be evil, whatsoever. In fact, he welcomes Ava into his house, and even into his arms. Although Ava thinks she might be going crazy after all she's been through, there is a part of her that falls for the ghost and waits impatiently for his visits.

Upside? She's in love. Downside? It seems that the rumor of the captain is not the only gossip about the house that the citizens of Brodie's Watch know about. Apparently, every female who has ever dwelled inside its walls has ended up dead. Whether or not they died by a ghost captain's hand or a very real killer is something that Ava will have to uncover . . . before she becomes the next victim.

Tess Gerritsen has had the "it" factor for a long time, and she continues to show that no matter what she pens, it will rock!

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

BLUE MOON

By Lee Child

Reading a Lee Child book, starring Jack Reacher, is like wrapping yourself up in a warm blanket in front of the fire. Now . . . that blanket, of course, is blood stained and the fire is your car in the driveway, but you definitely know what you're in for.

"Blue Moon" is the latest in the *Reacher Chronicles*. Jack is being a Good Samaritan when he ends up in the middle of a gang war between Ukraine and Albanian street gangs. When Jack sees an older man on a bus with an envelope stuffed with money being eyed by another man, Jack wants to make sure a crime doesn't happen. What Jack doesn't know is that the older man is making his last loan shark payment after selling almost everything he owns.

Jack then has no choice but to make sure the man and his wife are out of danger, but that means taking on both gangs, and systemically taking them down. The action is fierce because, as always, Child writes a page turner that keeps the reader on edge. When you are on the right side of Reacher things go well, but on the wrong side? Well, your day just got a whole lot worse.

"Blue Moon" is a great addition to the already extensive Reacher/Child library. You're gonna love it!

Reviewed by John Raab ■



ALI CROSS

By James Patterson

James Patterson never seems to run out of new pathways to walk. It is well-known that Patterson creates true blockbusters; *Alex Cross* is one series that has sold over 100 million copies. Cross is that ultimate detective/FBI agent who has reached readers worldwide and deserves a place in the literary "Hall of Fame."

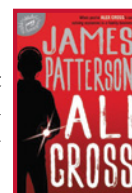
And now, that fantastic character has spawned a way for middle grade readers to get in on this legend's life. With this title, Patterson focuses on Alex Cross's son, Ali. This is a great kid who's eager to become part of the "family business" and follow in his father's footsteps. But Ali soon learns that the old adage "be careful what you wish for" is absolute fact.

Abraham, Ali's best friend, disappears one day, and Ali is scared and desperate to find out what happened. It doesn't help that at the time Abraham goes missing, their entire neighborhood becomes a target for burglaries. Even Ali's own house is tarnished by these crimes. Without the help of his dad, who happens to be on trial for a crime that he didn't commit, Ali must use his own abilities to find clues. When Ali's search uncovers info that may not help retrieve Abraham but, instead, may hurt his own family, he finds himself in a frightening world that will define his future career.

For adult readers who are Patterson fans: yes, there are a few holes in this story that you would never find in one of the adult thrillers that Patterson is famous for, but middle grade readers will absolutely love this tale. He is a character who'll become as beloved as his father over time, and it will be interesting to see how he grows up.

My suggestion is for one and all to read this in order to not only be a part of Ali Cross's very first case, but also to become enthralled with yet another Patterson character.

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



THE FIFTH COLUMN

By Andrew Gross

Andrew Gross does it again! Yes, we are back in the era that brought us a world on the brink of war, a horrific villain in the form of the Nazi Party, and so much more...

It is February 1939. Europe is ready to fight, and in Madison Square Garden in the great New York City, twenty-two thousand people are gathered at a hate-filled rally cheering for the swastika and all it represents.

Charles Mossman is sitting in a bar in Hell's Kitchen trying to deal with the depression that comes from losing your job and your marriage when a group carrying Nazi flags burst through the doors. Trying to defend himself, Charlie takes one swing, and the consequences that follow are beyond tragic.

Two years goes by and the U.S. is still deciding on whether or not to enter the war that is continuing to consume the globe. Charles's estranged wife and six-year-old daughter, Emma, are now living in the German-speaking NYC neighborhood of Yorkville, where support for Hitler can be found everywhere. As Charles tries hard to pull himself back up and start a new life, he discovers that a couple living in the neighborhood, who have grown fond of his daughter, may just have German ties that could end up bringing even more destruction to Charlie's doorstep.

Andrew Gross presents the "fifth column"—German spies placed in all facets of life and in every neighborhood. As this historical thriller moves forward, readers will be drawn in to Charles's story and how he unveils a sinister conspiracy that could literally hurt his daughter and destroy the world at the same time.

Another intricate plot that is beyond fascinating!

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



LATE CHECKOUT

By Carol J. Perry

The city of Salem, Massachusetts is famous for its seventeenth century witchcraft trials. It's also the setting for the popular mystery series penned by Carol J. Perry, who was born in Salem on Halloween Eve. Fans of the series know that each book has a touch of the supernatural included in its plot. The newest one, "Late Checkout," adds a large dose of Salem's favorite holiday—Halloween—to the story as well.

Lee Barrett loves her job as field reporter for Salem's WICH-TV, which means that, rather than sitting behind a desk in the studio, she's able to cover events as they are actually happening. Lee's private life's going pretty well, too. Her handsome sweetie, Pete Mondello, is a detective on the Salem police force, and she shares her home with her research librarian aunt, Ibby, and a large gentleman cat, O'Ryan. Lee is also a scryer—a person who has the ability to see things in reflective surfaces that other people can't. Lee's life changes abruptly when her hours are cut due to the arrival of the station manager's nephew. Determined to make the best of the situation, Lee decides to volunteer at the Salem Library to help Aunt Ibby. Her first responsibility is shelving book returns, and as she goes through the spooky upstairs stacks, she discovers a dead body buried under a pile of fallen books. The deceased is soon identified as Wee Willie Wallace, an ex-con and former minor league baseball player, who hasn't been seen in Salem for years. The police determine Willie's been murdered, and Lee fears the murderer might think she was an eyewitness to the crime. But her psychic powers aren't enough to save her from becoming the victim of the most unusual kidnapping I've ever read.

"Late Checkout," the ninth in Perry's *Witch City Mystery* series, is so much fun that I hated to have it end. I just love this series.

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

BRYANT & MAY: THE LONELY HOUR

By Christopher Fowler

There's nothing quite as nostalgic in classic mystery novels than the duo, the crime pair that solves mysteries together. If that's the kind of dynamic you love in any mystery, then "Bryant & May: The Lonely Hour" is sure to strike a chord, for the loving detectives have another case they must solve, though their relationship may be at stake.

Four o'clock in the morning is an unsettling time; the lonely hour, as it's called in the military. And someone is killing very specific people at that time, but unfortunately, none of the victims seem to have any connection to each other. They are all Facebook friends, but in a digital age where anyone can be friends online and not in real life, it seems unlikely that these people have any other connection to each other. And yet every night another one is assaulted and killed, and it's up to Bryant and May, the lead detectives of the Peculiar Crimes Unit of London, to stop these bizarre killings before the murderer can strike again.

But if only it were that easy. There's tension in the PCU, tension that's escalating even between Bryant and May. They go off separately, determined to solve the case without the help from the other. Which only leads to disaster, as long time Bryant and May fans will surely scream as they progress through the book. Can Bryant and May save the day before it's too late, or will their strife with each other tear this investigation to shreds?

With wild twists and turns and a cast of unique characters, "Bryant & May: The Lonely Hour" is sure to excite fans old and new. There's no crime duo like them anywhere else, they truly are one of a kind.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



CAPTURING THE DEVIL

By Kerri Maniscalco

One of the most thrilling killers of all time that has been explored again and again in the literary world is Jack the Ripper. This series, however, has stood out from the lot because of the fresh webs woven by the incredible author, and characters she created that have captured readers from the word 'go'.

The upside is that this book is stellar reading. The downside is that tears will be shed because this is the finale of this bestselling series.

For those who have somehow missed this brilliance, it is Audrey Rose Wadsworth and Thomas Cresswell who are hunting an elusive killer known only as the White City Devil. As the romance between them has bloomed, they have played a horrific game with a brilliant serial killer, but they now find themselves far away from the streets of London.

Audrey and Thomas land in America, and they are quick to learn that the U.S. offers a new brand of excitement, brashness, and mystery that their home does not. In Chicago they attend the thrilling World's Fair, where they also find themselves knee-deep in an event filled with unsolved murders.

The action-packed trail they walk is disarming, as Audrey and Thomas begin to investigate the cases of missing persons and murders that have been mounting up on a daily basis. Not only must they discover and capture this determined serial killer, but they also find themselves playing this cat-and-mouse game inside the infamous "Murder Hotel" that the depraved felon built to use as a torturing device for those who do not leave well enough alone.

The romance rises, the mystery grows, and readers will gasp as the villain takes one last victim that no one saw coming.

This is a series that gets five stars on every board and every list. It is a true shame to see it disappear, but I'm thrilled to see what this incredible author comes up with next.

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

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

By Angie Fox

I was looking for a fresh and adventurous book to read for Christmas. “The Ghost of Christmas Past” offers just that! Ghost hunter, Verity Long, had been excited about going to a Christmas Eve party hosted by her future in-laws, until an argument with her cranky mother-in-law-to-be just before leaving to go to the party left her staying home to spend the evening with her pet skunk, Lucy, instead of with her fiancé, Ellis. Before Verity has time to let this all soak in, a ghost who saved her skunk a few years earlier shows up to ask for a favor. Thankful to the ghost for saving Lucy’s life, Verity is more than happy to help Donna with her dilemma. After all, rescuing a family of animals sounds harmless enough—even with the threat of ghosts Donna had warned her about.

Resident ghost, Frankie, is hilarious and has to go on all of Verity’s ghost adventures, including this one despite his own Christmas Eve plans. Yes, Frankie may be dead, but he still has a social life! Feeling confident with Frankie along, Verity tells Donna that she is free to go “visit” her new grandson.

Before long, though, the seemingly harmless animal rescue turns into a more dangerous situation than Verity could have imagined, and three visits from three more ghosts further threatens the rescue mission.

By the time the ghosts are finished showing visions to Verity, she gets a dose of self-discovery and also realizes how much Ellis’s family needs help to keep from being destroyed by the family’s grumpy matriarch—Verity’s very own mother-in-law-to-be. After a harrowing animal rescue, Verity sets out on a Christmas Eve mission to rescue a family tradition.

Reviewed by Patricia Wilson ■



READ AND BURIED

By Eva Gates

Things are certainly busy both outside and inside the Bodie Island Lighthouse Library, off the coast of Nags Head, North Carolina. The Classic Novel Book Club is reading Jules Verne’s “Journey to the Center of the Earth,” and coincidentally, workers are digging outside the library itself to repair cracks to the library’s foundation. Both activities come to an unexpected halt when the workmen discover a battered tin box buried in the excavation pit. The box contains a Civil War-era diary and tucked inside is a hand-drawn map of the Outer Banks along with a page written in a mysterious code.

News of the discovery travels fast, despite the best efforts of Bertie James, the library director, and her assistant, Lucy, to keep the diary and map confidential until the proper authorities can investigate and figure out its value. And therein lies another problem. Several local organizations immediately start arguing as to who is best suited to examine and authenticate the discovery. Things become so heated that Bertie and Lucy have to bar them from the library. Later that night, Lucy and her boyfriend, Bodie Island Mayor Connor McNeil, find the dead body of historical society member Jeremy Hughes inside the library. And the map and coded page are missing.

Lucy’s nemesis, Louise Jane McKaughnan, admits that she entered the library after hours to examine the mysterious map and page, using the key that Bertie had hidden (but obviously not very well) under a rock outside. But she denies seeing Jeremy, or his killer. Lucy resolves not to get involved, but her curiosity is piqued when she learns that Charlene, another librarian, was having a secret affair with Jeremy. Then the library has a second break-in, and suspicions and gossip spread like wildfire.

“Read and Buried” is the sixth in the *Lighthouse Library* series written by the prolific Vicki Delany as Eva Gates. It’s a rollicking good read that cozy fans will love.

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



SEALED OFF

By Barbara Ross



There’s no business like a family-owned business. Just ask Julia Snowden, part-owner of the Snowden Family Clambake Company in scenic Busman’s Harbor, Maine. Julia left her high-powered job in New York City to return home to Maine and put her financial expertise to work in the family business. After a rocky start in her new position, the business is now turning a profit, and Julia’s romantic life now includes her new love, Chris Durand. Things are looking great for Julia, both professionally and personally.

The Snowden Family Clambakes take place on Morrow Island close to Windsholme, the now abandoned mansion that has been in Julia’s family for generations. Because the business is doing well, plans are now underway to restore the mansion to its former splendor, so the family can live there during the summer months. As the summer is winding down, a Russian demo team has been hired to begin the renovations. While clearing out the mansion, the team discovers a secret room that has been sealed off for decades. Even the elderly Marguerite Morrow Morales, the last living relative to actually live in Windsholme in its glory days, is baffled.

As intrigued as Julia is about the secret room, she has more immediate problems to deal with. Tops on the list is her boyfriend’s brother, Terry, who’s just been released from prison. Terry is temporarily working for the clambake company, and with his quick temper, has come to blows several times with another crew member, Jason Caraway. When Jason is found murdered, the police immediately zero in on Terry as chief suspect. When Chris asks Julia to clear his brother’s name, she reluctantly agrees to help. Then another body is discovered, plus a secret diary detailing both long-ago and more current events. To add to the mystery, the current events are written in Cyrillic text.

“Sealed Off” is a seamless blend of secrets transformed into a page-turner any mystery fan will love. I did!

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

GOOD GIRLS LIE

By J.T. Ellison

Not only is this author amazing, but this is one book that had me thinking back to the roots of my own small hometown where a private school was the site of many secrets.

In this unforgettable tale, readers head to the small town of Marchburg, Virginia, and enter the halls of The Goode School which is a prestigious prep school known as a “Silent Ivy.” Inside the walls of this institution are daughters of the wealthiest and most influential families. The school states that it accepts only the best and the brightest, even though the “biggest pocketbook” will also be taken aboard. But, like the other grand historic names, it is an elite school with traditions that prepare young women to one day graduate and move on to universities in, yes, the Ivy League.

However, there is now a “dark seed” that’s gotten through the walls of this prestigious place and seeks nothing more than to poison every elite mind it finds. The students shown in this book are actresses who know how to give off “appearances” in order to hide their own secret societies from prying eyes. But their futures may just crumble when a very popular student is found murdered; a crime that will not be swept under the carpet no matter how many rumors are spread that the girl took her own life.

Friendships built on lies, a school that may look special but is truly the Tower of Babylon shaking on its foundation – every facet this author weaves will have you chilled to the bone. Out of all the books you choose to read, make sure this is the one you do *not* overlook.

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

DEATH OF A GIGOLO

By Laura Levine

Romance for freelance writer Jaine Austen is looking up—both personally and professionally. After ditching her deadbeat husband, Dickie Elliot, several years ago for more reasons than this review has space to list, he pops back into her life, a changed man with a great job, and the kind of washboard abs that only ongoing workouts at the local gym can produce. Dickie's also become a vegetarian and is into meditation, but Jaine's willing to forgive that part as long as she can still have her junk food fix on the sly.

A hot and steamy romance novel is also what Jaine's hired to ghostwrite for wealthy, eccentric, Daisy Kincaid, who's determined to make a name for herself as a professional writer. As Jaine toils away spewing out purple prose galore, she gets to know and become friends with Daisy's inner circle: her elderly suitor, her personal chef, her maid, and her secretary. Everyone is getting along well until Daisy falls under the spell of a much younger stud named Tommy who moves into Daisy's mansion and completely takes over her life. Daisy's inner circle is appalled at the influence Tommy has over her. When Daisy and Tommy announce their engagement, and their wedding is scheduled to take place in just a few days on a huge yacht Daisy has booked for the occasion, it's the last straw for everyone, particularly Tommy, who's found a short time later stabbed to death.

The always curious Jaine can't resist snooping around, and she discovers that each person in the inner circle not only hated Tommy, but also has a secret they're desperate to hide from Daisy. And Daisy has a humdinger of a secret, too.

"Death of a Gigolo" is another hilarious edition in Laura Levine's *Jaine Austen* mystery series. It takes a talented author to keep a long-running series fresh, and Laura Levine is at the top of her game in this one.

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



GENESIS

By Robin Cook

Every time a new Robin Cook comes out, the thrill automatically sets in. After all, this MD didn't become a *New York Times* bestselling author and create all the books he did by simply being "good." With this title, Cook takes one of those constantly-talked-about subjects and creates a medical thriller that shows readers out there why he is still among the very "best."

Using his already beloved characters, Jack Stapleton and Laurie Montgomery, a mystery involving taking DNA from an ancestry website in order to catch a killer, comes to life. It begins the second Kera Jacobsen's body shows up on Montgomery's autopsy table. This victim was a 28-year-old social worker and, at first sight, looks like she's taken her own life through a drug overdose. Of course, Montgomery is the best in her business and doesn't just settle for "face value" when it comes to finding out the cause of death.

She and her new pathology resident, Dr. Aria Nichols, uncover all kinds of mysterious information. Not only do the people closest to Kera state emphatically that she never touched drugs during her lifetime, but oddly enough the administrators from the hospital where the victim worked are insisting that this entire thing be swept under the carpet. In addition, the dead woman was ten weeks pregnant, yet no one knows who the father could possibly be.

A new technique to find out more comes into play when Aria suggests using genealogic DNA databases to track down players in this case who have a need to stay shrouded in silence. But as things progress, another social worker is murdered and the answers need to be found even quicker... before the killer strikes again.

Cook can once again claim to be the "master" of the medical thriller!

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

THE DESERTER

By Nelson DeMille and Alex DeMille

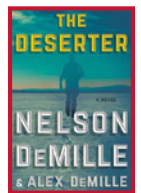
This book grabs you from the start and doesn't let you go until the last page. Nelson and Alex have created a suspense tale that causes the reader to experience so much tension, you'll start to wonder just how far the rubber band can extend.

Army Captain Kyle Mercer mysteriously abandons his post in Afghanistan. But when he's captured later on video killing the very men that supposedly kidnapped him by beheading them, the Army suddenly realizes that Kyle is off the grid and officially one of the most dangerous deserters ever known. Kyle is spotted in Venezuela a year later and the Army calls on CID agents Scott Brodie and Maggie Taylor to bring him in. What Brodie and Taylor don't know is that Mercer is very valuable to someone; someone who doesn't want Mercer to be brought back to the States to face a court martial, but instead wants him dead.

Brodie and Taylor go from whorehouse to henhouse to outhouse and all points in between to find Captain Mercer. This killer, however, has friends that are protecting him, and when Brodie suspects his partner of possibly having another agenda, he must decide who he can trust, and who may be out to stop him.

This book has many layers, and the father/son DeMille combo works to perfection. Readers will think one thing, only to be thrown into a totally different direction on the next page. While the pace isn't quite a thriller, that's also the beauty of the book. It brings the reader along at a suspenseful, frightening speed with many mystery elements introduced throughout the tale.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



THE BIG BOOK OF REEL MURDERS: STORIES THAT INSPIRED GREAT CRIME FILMS

Edited by Otto Penzler

As a passionate book fan and a true movie fanatic, I must say that I have finally found a book that meets both my needs. There are many anthologies in the world that take a look at movies, and how books and cinema relate, but this compilation is a true red carpet production that is even greater because of the fact that the Edgar Award-winning Otto Penzler takes on the editorial role.

This is the latest book in what is called *The Big Book* series. It takes all readers by the hand and allows them to partake of the stories that spawned some of the most beloved movies of all time. It is already a hair-raising, spine-tingling experience when you open a book about the silver screen and see the names of Poe, Christie, and Hitchcock leaping from the pages. But it becomes even more fascinating when you begin to read the literary foundations that created some of the most everlasting films.

Briefly, you will enjoy Stevenson's truly horrific story that was later transformed into *The Body Snatcher*. You will finally see where Bond, James Bond came from when taking a look at Fleming's very first gift of 007 in "From a View to a Kill." And so much more!

These are tales that helped raise the likes of Boris Karloff and Marlon Brando to the ultimate heights of cinematic fame, and because Otto Penzler delivers this "Director's Cut" perfectly, you will be able to relive those first magical moments when true literary giants merged with Hollywood, itself. Enjoy!

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

ALL THAT'S BRIGHT AND GONE

By Eliza Nellums

I would have never thought a book starring a small girl and her imaginary friend would sweep me away, but Eliza Nellums "All That's Bright and Gone" brought me to unashamed tears.

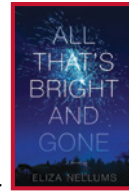
Six-year-old Aoife just wants her mom to come home. But after her mother got confused while driving to the mall, she has to stay at the hospital until she feels better. Luckily Aoife has her best friend, Teddy, a bear that only she can see, and her Uncle Donny who is taking care of her. Aoife really wants Mama to come back before the Fourth of July, because she promised to take Aoife to see the fireworks by the lake.

Aoife thinks she has to solve a mystery that's been plaguing their family for years if she wants to help Mama. Ever since her older brother Theo died, Mama hasn't been the same. Aoife has the good inkling her brother was murdered. If she can solve the murder, she just knows her Mama will recover. But Fourth of July is soon, and time is running out; if she ever wants Mama to come home, she's going to have to solve this mystery, and quick.

Aoife goes on adventures and investigations with Teddy, both trying their best to solve the mystery of her older brother's murder. But maybe it's not going to be as easy as Aoife first thought it would be, and danger is not out of the question. Especially when Teddy seems to be hiding a few secrets of his own...

This story tackles hard themes through the innocent eyes of a child, thus making them touching and jaw-dropping. This book is sure to touch the hearts of many people—and hopefully a few bears as well. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Bailey Day, author of "The Amazing Imagination Machine" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



ECHOES: THE SAGA ANTHOLOGY OF GHOST STORIES

Edited by Ellen Datlow

If you don't know by now, we are in the decade of "Lovin' Them Ghosts." Why, you ask? Turn on the TV. From *Ghost Nation* to *Ghost Adventures*; from *Ghost Hunters* to *The Most Haunted*, just click on your remote and you will see someone "out there" tracking through an eerie location, speaking with ghosts and getting them on tape for your entertainment.

Well, when it comes to books, you have the same thing. But this one just so happens to be a fantastic anthology with a menu of contributors as long as my arm. The odds are better than anything that you will pick up this book and be offered a "gift" from one of your absolute favorites. To name only a few: Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Hoffman, Vincent J. Masterson, A.C. Wise, M. Rickert, Seanan McGuire, M.L. Siemienowicz, Terry Dowling, Carole Johnstone (and, believe me, the list goes on), come together to scare the pants off you.

I would most assuredly agree with the fact that this is the "essential collection" of ghost stories that you have to have on hand in the house at all times. It also truly helps that the editor, Ellen Datlow, is a name that not only contributes to this ever-growing genre, but also has helped define the entire thing. Ms. Datlow is an author who knows what it means to delve into a good ghost story, being that she has been the editor of various works in the supernatural suspense and dark fantasy arena. With thirty tales all together, the reader is able to choose from the traditional story, like those that used to hit the big screen and bookshelves decades ago—to the up-to-date, bizarre thrillers that leave you gasping for air.

I've never been so pleased to be so "spooked" in my life!

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

A TIME FOR MURDER

By Jon Land

"A Time for Murder" is, believe it or not, the 50th installment in the beloved *Murder, She Wrote* book series. Bestselling author Jon Land has been the creator of the last three installments and has brought to the series some truly memorable thriller elements. With "A Time for Murder," Land explores the start of Jessica's very first murder as well as her personal life with husband, Frank and nephew, Grady.

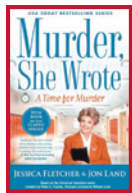
In a word, this book is a "Masterpiece." Land captured the essence of a *Murder, She Wrote* TV episode, and placed it into a book format that fans want, offering much more in regards to Jessica's own life.

We are taken back to Appleton, Maine, where Jessica was working as a substitute teacher. It was then that the principal of the school was murdered. Jessica and Detective Amos Tupper (yes, *that* Amos Tupper) come together for the first time to solve the crime.

Jump 25 years into the future and another murder occurs that links back to the Appleton murder. Land puts together an incredibly tangled mystery that has many layers. We call Land a thriller writer but with, "A Time for Murder," he has put his name on the short list of the top mystery whodunit authors of today.

Run, don't walk, in order to scoop this one up. The only mystery should be when the next installment is coming out and how long we'll have to wait for it!

Reviewed by John Raab ■



WHAT ROSE FORGOT

By Nevada Barr

A web is woven by many authors out there who have the ability to take all areas of writing and meld them together perfectly. This tale is one of the best "webs" ever woven. Not only do you have a riveting thriller on your hands, but you also have humor. The dialogue is witty throughout, which offers a perfect reprieve at times from the constant suspense this writer provides.

A woman in her sixties wakes one day with a memory that is more than a bit fuzzy. It feels almost as if she's been drugged. Her name is Rose Dennis and she's wearing a hospital gown. She discovers quickly that she's been placed into the Alzheimer's Unit of a nursing home. Rose may not remember how she got there, but she certainly knows that Alzheimer's is not a problem she has ever experienced. It gets even worse when she overhears a conversation inside the home where an administrator states that Rose will not even make it through the week.

Putting a plan together to get out of there before this unknown evil takes her out, Rose falls into an acting role to make those all around her believe that she has Alzheimer's. She forgoes the medication they give to her, and puts together her escape scenario.

The web is even more tangled because Rose's family did commit her; the legal papers were signed; and the law sides with the home in regard to Rose's state of mind. But when a killer appears in the middle of the night, Rose knows for sure that she's not crazy. Aid comes from her granddaughter, Mel. Mel is talented when it comes to the world of computer hacking, and this unlikely team will jump great hurdles to find a killer and try to uncover why Rose was marked for death in the first place.

You'll love Mel and Rose's relationship, and the twists and turns will leave you breathless.

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



THE HOUSE ON HALLOWED GROUND

By Nancy Cole Silverman

Every time a new mystery series begins, there's a part of me that wants some literary institution to sound an alarm—letting all readers know that there's a new "gang" in town not to be missed. Well...consider this a sonic boom announcing the new *Misty Dawn Mysteries*. And let me tell you, this is one that you definitely do not want to miss.

Right off the bat you're entertained as you meet Hollywood psychic, Misty Dawn. In her first time out of the gate, Misty moves into a house belonging to Wilson Thorne. Thorne has recently passed away after working as a set designer. As with many spirits, Thorne has not yet left his home for a reason. He seems to be completely unaware of the fact that he's dead, and when Misty explains the situation and how he might help himself "rest in peace" if he helps her, Thorne is not exactly the happiest of dead people.

Thorne and Misty do form an odd alliance, however, when an actress by the name of Zoey Chamberlain pleads for help. Zoey is in a state because she believes that the home she has just moved into is haunted. When Misty goes to The Pink Mansion, which is a truly historical Hollywood Hills home, she doesn't run into any kind of evil ghost; what she instead finds is the dead body of Zoey's best friend.

The murder has taken place here and the police are very quick to believe that Zoey is the culprit. They also don't believe, even though she's maintaining her innocence, that some family curse was responsible for murdering the girl.

Misty does not jump to conclusions, and with Wilson Thorne's help, she works to unveil the secrets of The Pink Mansion that will have readers enthralled. This is the first in a new series that introduces a truly cool team that I look forward to following in the years to come.

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



THE WAREHOUSE

By Rob Hart

George Orwell's classic "1984" receives a modern and realistic update with Hart's latest novel.

In the near future, everyone accesses anything they want online, and most everyone utilizes a company called Cloud to obtain these items, from simple groceries to housewares. This company is so big, that they are responsible for the majority of the workforce. A position at this company involves an extensive interview, and then if selected, a move to a live-work facility where housing is provided. The location of the apartment is close to the section where one will work, and every employee wears a wristband with a chip that accesses everything from your bank account to door locks.

Paxton applies and hopes to receive any job except for security. Of course, he is hired in security. Zinnia applies for a position, but she doesn't care where she ends up since she's actually a corporate spy assigned to help destroy Cloud from within. She begins with a job on the warehouse floor, where she is tasked with retrieving items requested from the general public. She finds the exact shelf location, grabs the product, and brings it to a conveyor belt where it heads to shipping. With the exception of a short lunch and two bathroom breaks, this is her 8-hour day. She also needs to keep up with a specific quota to avoid a reprimand. Zinnia's life is in danger if she reveals what she learns, but she might not live long enough to report to her superiors due to the dangerous circumstances of her job on the warehouse floor.

Hart has crafted a terrifying scenario utilizing what can easily be humanity's future when relying too much on technology and corporate entities. By focusing on two people newly hired to Cloud, Hart immerses the reader in this company and the city it has created. Of course, it appears too good to be true, and looks are deceiving.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers ■

CITY OF SCOUNDRELS

By Victoria Thompson

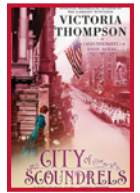
Fans will know Thompson from her very popular *Gaslight Mystery* series. Well, "City of Scoundrels" is now the third book in her *Counterfeit Lady* series.

Set during World War I, main character Elizabeth Miles finds herself thinking about one thing: When will her fiancé, Gideon, be drafted to fight in the war? Enter Tom Preston, a co-owner of a footwear company that makes the shoes for the Army. Tom married a woman that his family would have a real issue with, so he needs a new will to protect her and her child.

When Tom is killed, Elizabeth and Gideon find out that the family knows about Tom's new wife. The new will is also missing, raising suspicions on the family, especially Tom's brother, who will get everything if the new will is not found.

Thompson pens a very clever and intelligent mystery. Fans of her other series will fall in love with the intricate plot and very unique characters. She is clearly on the short list of great mystery writers of today.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



THE BODY LIES

By Jo Baker

This heart-pounding story takes the familiar plotline of a student-teacher relationship to the extreme. It straddles an already blurred line between fiction and fact, truth and lies. All in the guise of an academic psychological thriller.

A thirty-year-old unnamed pregnant narrator walking home from a shift at a London bookshop is traumatized after an attempted rape by a runner in a blue anorak. Weeks later, her son is born, but fear and paranoia continue to stalk her.

Three years pass and she tells her teacher husband Mark that she can no longer live in the city. The couple compromise with a wobbly commuter marriage when she takes a lectureship position on how to write novels (she's written a successful one) at a university in the "back of beyond" countryside. Everything "looked so comfortable, and safe... a world away from [her] old life." But she feels isolated and, as the newest member of the faculty, begins to feel uncomfortable.

Her discomfort steadily increases when Nicholas Palmer, one of the students in her postgraduate course, turns in a manuscript which appears to be drawing from elements of her own personal life. His obsession quickly turns into a fatal attraction. She comes to believe that he's making her a character in his story. The narrator fears the "prospect of being written by someone else; the fear of having no say" in who she is at all, causing her PTSD to resurface.

Baker structures this novel around the three terms of the college year: Michaelmas, Lent, and Trinity. Fiction and fact intertwine as Nicholas believes that he "only writes what happens. If he writes it, then it's true."

Truth and lies intersect in brief passages which are related to the body of the title. They whet the reader's appetite until the identity of the victim is revealed after the dark secrets of several lives are disclosed.

The novel is also interlaced with complaints filed by other postgrads, along with statements from student services and administrative officers. These, in addition to Palmer's manuscript and the narrator's breathless account of the events, contribute to the cumulative suspense of "The Body Lies."

Reviewed by Robert Allen Papinchak ■

MURDER IN ST-REMY

By Susan Kiernan-Lewis

American expat Maggie Newberry is looking forward to spending the upcoming Christmas holidays with her family and close friends. But first, she has an item to check off her To-Do list. Maggie has written the first draft of a mystery, "Murder in the Village," and romance writer Fiona Bellemont-Surrey, a difficult person under any circumstances, has arranged a coffee date so her own agent, Cressida Harris, can look at the manuscript. Cressida is staying with Fiona for the holidays along with her publisher, Charles Hemingway, and her about-to-give-birth 14-year-old grandniece, Nuala. Nuala has been dumped at her great aunt's house until after the baby is born to ensure that the child will be put up for adoption. When Nuala shows up at the coffee date uninvited, it's immediately clear to Maggie that the teenager and her great aunt dislike each other intensely. The tender-hearted Maggie can't get the young girl out of her mind and wishes there was something she could do to help her.

Early the following morning, Maggie and her husband, Laurent, are awakened by a sound outside that they first think is a cat. When the couple investigate, they're shocked to find the sound is from a newborn baby girl inside a cardboard box left outside the front door. Maggie immediately knows that the baby is Nuala's, but how the baby ended up on the doorstep is unclear. The infant has a note tucked in beside her identifying her as Bindy, and begging Maggie not to let anyone take her. When Nuala is found hiding out in a local monastery, Maggie and Laurent agree to shelter her and the baby until after Christmas. Then Fiona is stabbed to death and Nuala is found holding the knife that killed her. Merde!

"Murder in St-Remy" is the fifteenth in the *Maggie Newbury* mystery series by Susan Kiernan-Lewis. I loved the characters, the setting, and all the plot twists and turns. Highly recommended. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Milestones Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE MURDER OF HARRIET MONCKTON

By Elizabeth Haynes

There are many stories based on facts, but I have to say this is one of the most spine-tingling ones I've ever had the pleasure of reading. It was back in 1843, that the nation became fascinated with a young woman by the name of Harriet Monckton. Monckton, only twenty-three years old, was found murdered in the privy behind the chapel she regularly attended in Bromley, Kent.

Being that Harriet was from a respectable family and background, it was not a surprise that the entire community was absolutely horrified by her death. But what was even more hideous was the fact that the autopsy revealed Harriet was six months pregnant when she died of poisoning.

Because no killer was ever found or punished for the crime, this author wrote her tale based on factual information so everyone could remember the fate of poor Harriet. Using flawless narration, the author draws data from coroner's reports and court testimonies so that she can tell the tale from the personal viewpoints of each character; and all of these characters had a reason for wanting the woman to die. Harriet Monckton's life was apparently very busy. Having at least three lovers, she was a true scandal for that time period. Many people were suspected of her murder, including her own close companion, Miss Frances Williams.

Readers will find themselves engrossed in the suggestions that are brought up by this author when it comes to a small town that looks a great deal like they were hiding secrets and guilt behind a veil of innocence. Small towns have a history of hypocrisy in novels, and this is one that will make you truly think of what can be hidden when people band together to conceal their most heinous actions.

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

SINS OF THE FATHERS

By J.A. Jance

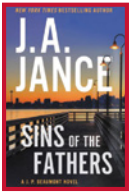
J.P. Beaumont is back in the latest installment by J.A. Jance called "Sins of the Fathers." This is the twenty-seventh book in the *Beaumont* series.

J.P. Beaumont is a former Seattle homicide cop, but now works as a P.I. He loves retirement and has decided to get a dog. All that changes when his past knocks on the door in the form of an old friend, Alan Dale. Alan has a newborn baby in his possession, his granddaughter, and needs Beau to help him find his missing daughter.

Beau has to go into the dark places of Seattle to find her, since Alan's daughter is an addict. She felt that by leaving the baby with her father, the baby would have a better chance at having a good life. What J.P. doesn't know is that he is a lot more involved in their family dynamic and has to remember his past to find the answers.

J.A. does an outstanding job of delivering a very emotional book, wrapped up within a mystery that keeps the reader on edge to the very end. Just when you think you have things figured out, J.A. says...no, no, you haven't seen anything yet. "Sins of the Fathers" is a perfect fit within the series, but now things have changed. How much, you ask? Fans will have to wait for the next one to see.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



THE KILL CLUB

By Wendy Heard

"The Kill Club" follows Jasmine "Jazz" Benavides, a 28-year-old product of the foster care system, who desperately tries to save her 13-year-old brother Joaquin from suffering the same fate. He is currently still under the care of his adoptive mother, Carol Coleman, Jazz's former foster mother and abuser-in-chief. Jazz will stop at nothing to try to get custody and keep him safe.

Aside from her day job, Jazz is also a drummer in a local band. When someone seizes and then dies at one of her shows, she inadvertently becomes part of a vigilante murder club. The rules are simple: don't talk about murder club. When bodies start turning up with the same playing card at the scene, the police think it's the work of one serial killer who they've called the Blackbird Killer.

But the murders aren't random. They're part of the murder club—an eye for an eye. As a member of the Club, Jazz will be assigned a random stranger to kill (disguise, poison, and playing card provided), and she can dictate who she wants killed later—and someone with no connection to her will do it. She'll never be a suspect. It's clean. Easy. And she wants Carol gone.

When Jazz becomes involved with Sofia, Joaquin's assistant principal at school, things get complicated. Jazz gets her Kill Club assignment and realizes her target is anything but random. When she breaks the Club's protocol and doesn't complete the kill, it puts the bullseye on her back and she spirals into a race for her own life. With those closest to her threatened, can she trust anyone?

With more twists and turns than a roller coaster, this gritty, fast-paced thriller will have you flipping pages until your fingers catch fire. And just when you feel safe, the chilling ending reminds you: it's a secret club for a reason.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks ■





PURSUIT

By Joyce Carol Oates

The dream always came back. *"In the tall grasses the bones were scattered together so it looked (almost) as if they were dancing. Lying down where they'd fallen a long time ago."*

Abby still can't shake her childhood nightmare. The question always invading her brain, *"Did you think you could escape us?"* The dream attacks again on the night before her wedding.

But she's not the same girl whose parents disappeared when she was five, then lived with her aunt in a ramshackle house.

She's now an employee at the Rehabilitation Center for the Blind in Hammond, New York. That's where she met her new husband, Willem, when he volunteered to read to the blind. He's studying to be a doctor, and Abby isn't sure she's worthy enough to marry him.

Willem and his family are conservative Christians, members of the strict Reformed Methodist Church where so many benign things are forbidden, like chewing gum and artificial sweeteners. God is watching what you eat. Abby wonders how a girl like her can ever fit into his world.

Abby *"loves Willem, and that is why she fears him. She fears loving him, for loving is the prelude to loss. The fear that she will never see him again, one day. This very day, he may disappear from her. As her father disappeared, and then her mother."*

The morning after the wedding, Abby and Willem leave for work and school. When Abby gets off her bus, she inexplicably walks into traffic. While she's in a coma, Willem stays by her side and vows to find out if walking in front of the bus was an accident, or Abby sabotaging their new life.

Together, Abby and Willem will also find out what happened to her parents, finally putting the dancing bones to rest.

Author Joyce Carol Oates' staccato-style narrative will keep readers on their toes, each short burst of words impaling our brains with vivid details of loss, love, and the struggle to leave a terrifying past behind.

Reviewed by K. L. Romo ■



CALL DOWN THE THUNDER

By Dietrich Kalteis

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s counts as a period of American history that tested humanity's mettle and will to live. This is certainly the case for Sonny and Clara Myers, who work the family farm in Kansas. That is until Clara seeks sunnier climes in California, leaving Sonny to his own devices and dark thoughts on the family's farm. Things quickly go from grim to terrifying for the abandoned Kansas farmer.

The banks, feared and despised by the locals, work like vultures over the starving Kansas populace, picking at the bones of the hard-working residents until there is nothing left. Sonny, in debt to his eyeballs, is no exception. Life is made even worse thanks to the Ku Klux Klan, who've decided Sonny deserves a bit of fire and hate for his views. When his wife returns with a group foolishly hired by the mayor to manufacture rain over the parched landscape, Sonny launches a criminal heist he believes will return his household to better days, and maybe even bring Clara back home, only he's got to survive the Klan first.

At times heartfelt, and deftly written throughout, *"Call Down the Thunder"* takes readers on a desperate, Dust Bowl era crime caper that quenches our thirst for gritty historical crime fiction.

Review by Patrick Whitehurst ■

SELL LOW, SWEET HARRIET

By Sherry Harris

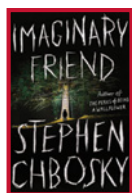
Garage sale entrepreneur Sarah Winston has built a spotless reputation for her business. As a former Air Force spouse who's moved countless times, she's a real pro when it comes to organizing and packing. She also has an eye for spotting priceless finds in a client's dusty basement and knows how to display and price items to maximize profits.

Winter is a slow time in Sarah's business, so she's happy to be hired by Jeannette Blevins to clean out her late parents' house. Sarah is really intrigued when she learns that the late couple were retired CIA agents. Sarah is in the middle of the cleanout when a man, identifying himself as Jeannette's brother, appears at the house. The next thing Sarah knows, she finds the man unconscious on the floor. The man is rushed to the local hospital, but when Jeannette sees him, she says he's not her brother. Then the man disappears. When Sarah finds a camera hidden in the house, she's really spooked out. Is this job worth risking her life?

As if her life isn't already filled with enough drama, Sarah is enlisted by the local authorities to use her many personal friendships on the nearby Air Force base to help solve the shocking murder of Alicia Arbas, a young military wife. Sarah beings to ask questions about Alicia, and she gets a variety of conflicting stories about the dead woman. Someone is clearly lying, but who? With so much on her plate at one time, and not wanting to be left alone in the Bevins house while she's cleaning and pricing objects for the sale, Sarah hires Harriet Ballou to help. This turns out to be a wise choice, as Harriet is a former FBI hostage negotiator.

"Sell Low, Sweet Harriet," is the seventh in the *Garage Sale* mysteries. Every title in this series is well plotted and a pleasure to read. Can't wait for book eight!

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



IMAGINARY FRIEND

By Stephen Chbosky

There are difficulties in life, as we all know. But one of the biggest was to read the amazing *"The Perks of Being a Wallflower"* and then having to wait for this author's next release. But, I have to tell you, the wait was completely worth it!

This is the tale of Christopher. He is seven years of age; he is in a new town and a new school; and he has his very own imaginary friend.

Kate Reese is Christopher's mom. She is a single mother who had to hit the highway in the middle of the night in order to run away from a dangerous, abusive relationship and find a new location where she could improve life for her and her son. What she finds is a small town in Pennsylvania named Mill Grove. This is one of those communities where everyone knows everyone else, and it's a town that would be overlooked by anyone who may perhaps be chasing Kate down. Like the unforgettable location of *"The Bates Motel,"* there is only one road in and one road out of Mill Grove, so it certainly seems high up on the safety meter.

Then ... the worst happens. Christopher disappears, only to walk out of the woods at the edge of town six days later. He is unharmed, but the voice in his head of his new imaginary friend is a voice only he is privy to. The voice gives him a goal: Christopher must build a tree house in the woods by the time Christmas comes around, or his mother and the rest of the townspeople will *"never be the same again."*

There are so many spoilers that could be revealed by mistake, that I will stop here. Just know that this is a fight between good and evil that you have not seen the likes of before.

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

THE GIRL BEHIND THE RED ROPE

By Ted Dekker and Rachelle Dekker

When the name “Dekker” appears on a shelf, it is a fact that I usually run to get a copy of the book as fast as possible.

In this new title, a woman by the name of Grace leads readers through a world of both belief and evil. Grace and her family are part of a religious cult that dwells deep in the hills of Tennessee. This community is, quite literally, behind a red rope and has a rule in place that if you cross the rope, something extremely bad will happen to you.

It was a decade ago that Grace first saw something that changed history when it was unleashed upon the world. But according to the cult, their people are the safest because staying behind the red rope—and living by the rules at *all* times—will keep them alive no matter what may be happening to others.

It is her own family’s questions, however, that brings outsiders near the red rope and the fury on the other side is suddenly crystal clear. Enemies with devious thoughts and ideas are now close to her, but she has a hard time figuring out who, exactly, is the most evil. After all, the people in her community believe whatever they are told, and their fears about whatever might be over the rope keep them stuck in this spooky cult without ever asking questions or wondering why.

The Dekker’s have written a pure guessing game for the fans out there. When the book has ended, which side of the red rope would you choose to be on? Once you find out where the darkness spawns from, you might be surprised at your initial answer. There are no real boundaries to this one, and that’s the fun. The Dekker’s have created a tale that allows your imagination to run wild...even if your body can’t.

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



THE VICTIM

By Max Manning

This is one of those books, much like a certain football team, where some will love and praise it, while others will be left confused. I am of the former group. In fact, the uniqueness of the writing was what I saw as being the most fun aspect of this read. Cleverness is used by the author when he tells his tale from the point of view where: If I had done this...would my life have ended up like that?



We meet Gem Golding. Gem is having a horrible evening. A carjacker ends up in her world as she’s attacked on her way home from work. She experiences “that” moment that none of us ever want to face—where she must make a decision that will alter her life forever. This criminal has a purely treacherous mind; evil and destruction is a goal of his and Gem is the choice he has made this night. The book proceeds to tell the reader what Gem’s life and future will be when she fights for herself against this villain; and what it will be like if she surrenders to him and just prays he won’t end her life, just hurt her.

This is a pure cause-and-effect machination that, although some writers have tried it before, ends up being entertaining, thrilling and dark. You feel for Gem, and come out wondering what exactly you would do when faced with pure evil.

I have to herald Max Manning for putting together an ingenious plot, allowing me to dive into a psychological thriller that I really enjoyed.

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



APPLE CIDER SLAYING

By Julie Anne Lindsey

This book is the very first in the new *Cider Shop Mystery* series by Julie Anne Lindsay.

Welcome to Blossom Valley, West Virginia! Here is where Winnie and her grandmother run the Cider Shop. But when the body of Nadine Cooper is found dead, the police immediately look at old “Grannie” as suspect number one. Winnie decides it’s up to her to find the real killer and save her beloved grandmother. Fans of any cozy mystery series will find this to be *exactly* what they are looking for. It’s a very cute and well-written mystery, giving readers enough clues (if they open their eyes) to find the killer before it’s revealed.

Julie does an outstanding job of creating the perfectly quaint little town, with very lovable characters that will have readers putting the *Cider Shop Mysteries* on their watch list, waiting anxiously for the next one.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



THE LYING ROOM

By Nicci French

Wife. Mother. Friend. Dependable employee. Neve Connolly is all of these things. But she’s also a woman bored with her life.

Neve had never been unfaithful to Fletcher, her husband of twenty years. But the attention given to her by her handsome boss, Saul, lured her in. The affair had been Neve’s escape from the humdrum that had enveloped her. She once again felt like a young and sexy woman, devoured by a passion she hadn’t experienced in a long time.

The text from Saul comes in the early morning, as her family eats breakfast—the beginning of a regular day. *Come as soon as you can.*

But two hours later, instead of kissing her lover inside the door of his apartment, she finds herself tiptoeing around his lifeless body, cleaning every surface and erasing any trace of the romantic dinner they’d enjoyed the night before.

Neve hopes her involvement with his death will disappear, but details continue to surface one after another, requiring Neve to keep erasing her clandestine footprints in Saul’s life. When Detective Hitching asks difficult questions, Neve must lie about the details of her relationship with Saul, and her falsehoods tangle into a knot of deceit that she hopes won’t trip her up.

Neve’s teen daughter, Mabel, has been hard to deal with the last few years. She’s both reckless and distant. When Mabel tells her she knows about the affair, Neve realizes that Mabel might be involved in Saul’s death. Neve will do anything to protect her daughter, even sacrifice herself.

As the investigation continues, what Neve discovers about her daughter, her husband, and her friends shocks her. She wishes for nothing more than the boredom of her old life before Saul. And will she be able to escape a killer still on the loose?

Author Nicci French entertains readers with a chilling reminder that a lie is like a snowball rolling down-hill. With each new layer, it gains momentum that we might not be able to stop.

Reviewed by K. L. Romo ■

In a time of social and political unrest, you might as well take a break and traverse the oldest city in the United States with a man and his dog.

Walking Guen Again

In this second installment, Gary and his dog, Guen, return to the historic streets of St. Augustine, Florida, to discuss such wide-ranging topics as sporks, speed humps, James Bond, Common Core math, a gigantic water bowl, Antonio Banderas, and a superhero Dachshund named Edgar.

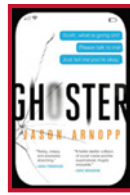
Walking Guen

Follow along as author Gary Williams and his female yellow Labrador retriever, Guen, walk the historic streets of St. Augustine, Florida, and discuss such soft-hitting social topics as The Village People, bubble wrap, ice cream, rain, skinny jeans, barbeque and tennis shoes.



GARY WILLIAMS
@WILLIAMSKNERLY

On Sale Now



GHOSTER

By Jason Arnopp

People will already know Jason Arnopp from his huge hit "The Last Days of Jack Sparks". Here, however, he comes back with a thriller that is perhaps even more engaging because it is so realistic. This is set in our own social-media obsessed era that delves into the evils of online dating, odd social media posts, etc., that occur on a daily basis.

The main character, Kate Collins, is a woman who you automatically want to follow. Working as a paramedic in Leeds, she is getting ready to relocate to Brighton and move in with Scott, the man she loves. What follows, however, scares her to death. When she arrives, not only is the apartment completely empty but Scott has disappeared as well. The only thing left that she can find is his cell phone.

Needing to know more, she begins searching the phone – from social media to texts, etc.—in order to find out what is going on. But then... the strangest things in the world begin happening to her. Phone calls arrive where whispers can be heard. Her walls are marred with strange scratches, yet she doesn't know from what or whom they came from. Her biggest fear is the fact that no matter how she tries to stay in "reality," she begins to know for certain that someone is watching her from afar.

What happened to Scott? Kate soon finds out that Scott may not be a victim of anything. In fact, he may just be a man she knows nothing about. And what is about to be revealed to her may just cause her own tragic demise.

Fantastically written. Just as "Jaws" made you not want to go into the water again; "Ghoster" makes you not want to pick up the phone ever again.

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

FINAL OPTION

By Clive Cussler and Boyd Morrison

This is the latest installment in the *Oregon Files* series by Boyd Morrison, and it is yet another that offers the reader everything to be expected from a grade-A Cussler adventure. All the action, all the tension—it's definitely all there—but this one just happens to have a twist at the end that will leave you with your mouth gaping.

Juan and the team are put in the fray right away when someone from the past, who was thought to be dead, comes back with vengeance in their heart. The Oregon is now going to have to face its' twin, named The Portland, but with some upgrades. And if you thought that was bad enough, The Portland has "sea friends," and one of them just so happens to be a submarine commanded by a captain who also has a score to settle with Juan.

Boyd just took the series and turned it on its' proverbial head, spun it around, and allows readers to see that just about anything can happen. I, for one, can't wait to see what's next. The *Oregon Files* series has become the best series in the Cussler library, and with Boyd Morrison directing the stories, I have a feeling it will only get better.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



THE PEARL DAGGER

By L.A. Chandlar

I am one in a million of fans when it comes to the cool *Art Deco Mysteries* that Chandlar writes. Yes, this is the third. And although it sounds familiar, I have to say that these just keep getting better.

For anyone who loves historical mysteries, in this third installment of the series you will head back into New York City during the time of the Great Depression. You will learn of Mayor La Guardia's "special team" and be given more information about the Red Scroll Network.

Lane Sanders is an employee of Mayor Fiorello (AKA: Fio) and she has already shown herself to be talented, spirited, a quick thinker, and a fun all-round character. Recently, she and her boss have been able to keep some truly rich conspiracies happening in The Big Apple under wraps. Unfortunately, after a murder takes place using a pinball racket, Lane and the Mayor must face a brand new leader who stands up and begins a new awakening of an "oldie-but-goodie" crime network.

This network will not only be plowing through America, however; this new voice will bring violence and destruction throughout Europe... unless someone can stop him.

Lane heads to London in order to begin. Problems arise there, of course, because she is stepping back on to the soil where her own parents lost their lives while working undercover. With her will be an ally named Finn Brodie, who also wants to squash the nightmares he has from his own horrific past overseas.

Readers will be locked in a plot that brings "Macbeth" to mind, and a stunning pearl dagger will be the ultimate clue to finding and stopping a syndicate that is bound to achieve evil glory. Once again, Lane is awesome. As the books move forward it is interesting to see more and learn more about this fantastic woman. And I can't wait to see what number four has in store.

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



By Jeff Ayers and John Raab

JUMANJI: THE NEXT LEVEL

2019

Genre – Action/Adventure/Comedy (PG-13)

After the events of *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*, the four friends are separated. Spencer thinks his life is miserable, and when he comes back home on break to meet up with his friends, Spencer begins to realize the only time he truly felt important was when he was trapped in the Jumanji video game with them. He repairs it, and when he does not arrive at the restaurant where his three friends are waiting, they realize something is wrong. They go to his house and find Spencer's grandfather, Eddie, and his former friend Milo. An investigation downstairs reveals a fixed Jumanji game, and they realize that Spencer must have gone back in by himself. They decide to rescue him.

Here is where the real fun begins because a glitch occurs as they reenter the game, but also adds an element of surprise that quickly puts their mission in jeopardy. From that moment, the madcap hilarity and adventure ensue. Knowledge of the first film is an absolute must to get the full pleasure of the mixed up details, making it almost incomprehensible at times to newcomers to the franchise. Anyone who enjoyed the first film featuring Dwayne Johnson, Jack Black, Karen Gillan, and Kevin Hart will find this one just as much fun because of the writers and filmmakers playing with expectations. A post-credit scene unveils another possible sequel, but hopefully, cooler heads will prevail until another stellar script is drafted.

Reviewed by Jeff Ayers ■



KNIVES OUT

2019

Genre – Comedy/Crime/Drama (PG-13)

Knives Out is a whodunit mystery starring Jamie Lee Curtis, Daniel Craig, Don Johnson, Chris Evans, and Michael Shannon, just to name a few. The movie starts out with the death of renowned crime writer Harlan Thrombey. On the surface, it looks like Harlan committed suicide, but when outside detective Benoit Blanc (played perfectly by Daniel Craig) is hired by an anonymous person to look into the death, you start to think this could be a case of murder.

The story lays out several clues, if you can catch them all, to what happened on that night. Then when another death occurs, the plot thickens. Fans of Agatha Christie and "Clue" style mysteries will love this. They will hit themselves on the head at the end when Benoit lays out the crime, for having missed so many things. This is definitely a 'must see' movie for all mystery lovers. The acting is great, with Jamie Lee Curtis, Daniel Craig and Chris Evans being the stand outs. Director Rian Johnson (*The Last Jedi* and *Looper*) is also the screenwriter behind this flick and shows that he still has the chops to bring an audience a solid, memorable film.

Reviewed by John Raab ■

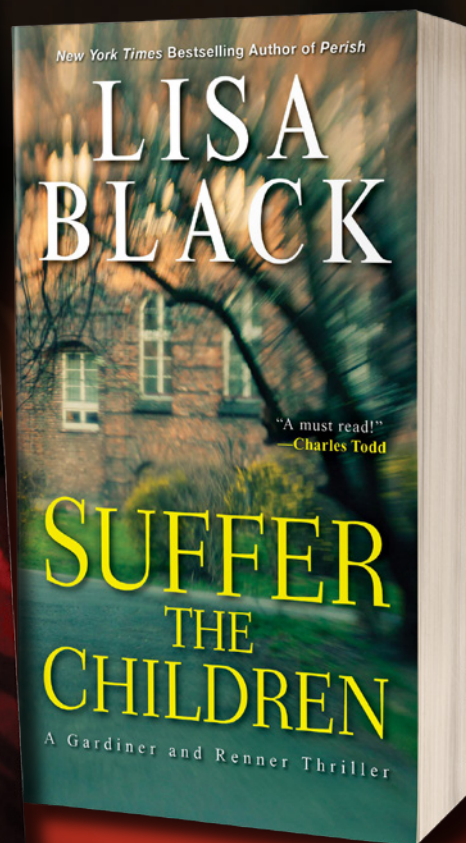
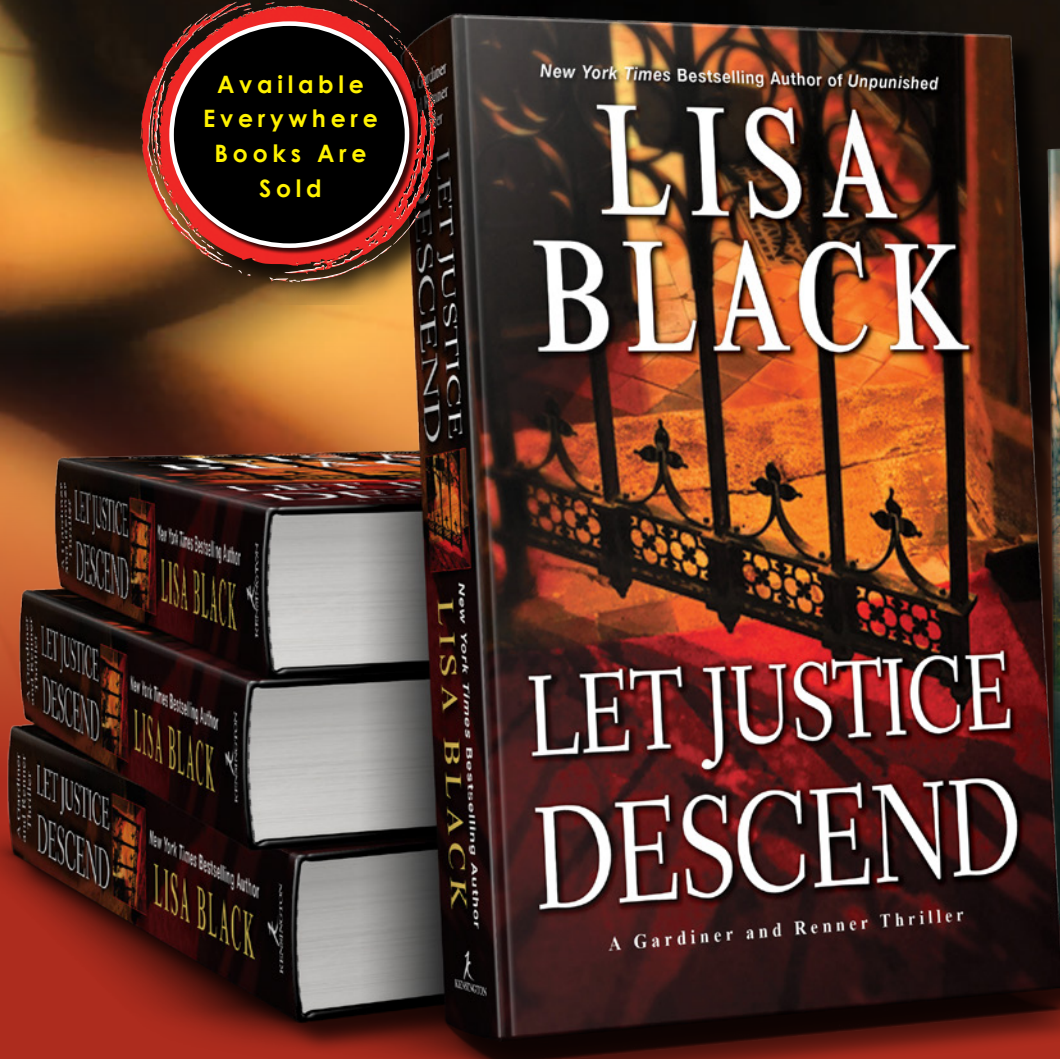


Jeff Ayers co-hosts *Beyond the Cover* with John Raab, and is a freelance reviewer for the *Associated Press*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. He is the author of several books in the worlds of both fiction and non-fiction, including "Voyages of Imagination: The Star Trek Fiction Companion" and the thriller "Long Overdue."

“AS ALWAYS WITH BLACK, THE
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SUSPENSE
IS INCREDIBLE.”

—*Suspense Magazine**

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The New York Times bestselling author's fifth installment in the **brilliantly twisted thriller** series finds Cleveland forensic scientist Maggie Gardiner thrown into the world of politics when a U.S. Senator is killed three days before the election.

“A WELL-PLOTTED
and paced THRILLER
with a pair of intriguing
protagonists.”

—Booklist



Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

ELLYSIUM
is the "Dream Weaver"
of the Art World

THE HOUSE

HIS NAME IS GENE RAZ. However, because of the stunning works of art he creates and the galleries of his pieces that mesmerize all those who come upon them, not surprisingly the title “Dream Weaver” was bestowed upon him from his viewers. This magnificent artist’s imagination knows no bounds.

Born in Germany, Gene is a digital artist/designer who produces “feasts” for the eyes. A resident of Munich, he finds inspiration everywhere—from relaxing in Englischer Garten to emotions living deep inside the soul, he lives life to the fullest. Vivid. Distinct. Vibrant—these are just some of the words used to describe his work. We at *Suspense Magazine* are honored to have Ellysium here with us to close out 2019!



BALLOONS IN SUNSET

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Can you tell our readers about your “niche” in Germany? Are there certain places you go for inspiration?

Gene Raz (G.R.): *There are many places that inspire me but mainly nature itself, emotions, visions, dreams and a lot of imagination.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, is there a location out there that you one day wish to visit; and, if so, what about this specific locale do you believe would bring out even more ideas from your amazing imagination?

G.R.: *I would really like to visit Alaska and Iceland. I think my imagination would fly in places like that.*

S. MAG.: Your work is incredibly vibrant. The colors are truly amazing. What form did you begin your creative pursuits in? Such as, did you start with digital art, such as Photoshop, and move on from there?

G.R.: *I started using Photoshop some time ago, mainly as therapy, and I am currently following a Concept Art course, both in digital painting and photobashing.*

S. MAG.: Is there a specific program you use that you like above the rest? If so, what would that be and why does it excel for you when making your creations? In addition, is there a program that you are looking forward to learning in order to expand your skills even more?

G.R.: *Not really, because Photoshop is my main software. Sometimes I use PaintStorm Studio, for digital painting only.*

Ja, I would like to learn how to use Cinema 4D and venture into 3D for the creation of my work in Concept Art, but only as a complement for objects.

S. MAG.: *Suspense Magazine* met you back in 2014, and we are so pleased to have you back with us to close out 2019. Can you tell us what you’ve been up to in the past five years since we last spoke? I see that you were given the name “Dream Weaver” on deviantArt. Was that something that came as a surprise?

G.R.: *Work hard, without giving up. During all this time I have learned a lot, improving my scenes and leaving my comfort zone many times.*

No, it is no surprise that they call me “Dream Weaver,” because I really am. Also my responsibility in Wallpapers Galleries



善山吊橋

吊橋

善山

DON'T GIVE UP

THE SACRED TREE

in deviantArt, as Community Volunteer, has made me love art much more and work much more with my community in DA, a community of wallpaper creators of which I feel very proud.

S. MAG.: You chose the artistic name, Ellysiumn. Can you tell us why that was, and what the “title” means to you?

G.R.: *My used name is related with Elysium (Elysian) Fields (the resting place or paradise for mortals related to the gods, not with Elysium movie). I couldn't put that name because it was chosen and I decided to customize it by making some changes in the letters, adding an 'L' and an 'N' – “El(l)ysium(n).”*



THE CLOCK TREE

S. MAG.: How has your work changed over the past five years? Do you see yourself trying different ‘genres’ as you move forward in your career? Is there a specific “image” or “world” that you like to delve into more than others?

G.R.: *Concept Art, both in science fiction and scenery (dreamscapes), which includes matte painting. My current work, everything I am learning with the course, is aimed at digital paintings.*

S. MAG.: Can you tell us if there is one specific piece that inspires you today from the tremendous galleries you have accumulated? And, if so, what about that work stands out to you?

G.R.: *I can't choose one today, because many of them have deep meanings to me. The list is very long!*

S. MAG.: Do you have young, up-and-coming artists calling on you for advice or help on the websites? You have such talent, I would assume that many look for you to be a mentor to them?

G.R.: *Ha, many artists, mainly beginners, ask me for advice through deviantArt because it is in DA where I am in contact with my community. I always listen to everyone but I can't always respond to what they ask because I don't have free time, but I always plan things. Anyway, if I can help, I do it!*

S. MAG.: We wish you a Happy New Year coming up and would like to know what we should be on the lookout for in 2020 when it comes to your work?

G.R.: *I wish you the same: Happy New Year! And you can always see the projects on my gallery.*

We'd like to thank Gene for taking the time to speak with us. To learn more about this incredibly talented man, check out www.deviantart.com/ellysiumn. ■



CHRISTMAS TALE



SUSPENDED TIME



UNDER THE RAIN

*"A TWISTING TALE OF ROMANCE,
**SELF-DOUBT, BRAVERY,
AND MYSTERY.**"*

—INTERVIEWS AND REVIEWS

***JUSTICE LIES JUST ON THE
OTHER SIDE OF FEAR. . .***

Harper Reynolds traded crime scene photography for a life surrounded by the outdoors. But her hopes for a peaceful life are dashed when she inadvertently captures a murder being committed. Fleeing the scene in fear, she also loses the camera.

Former Green Beret Heath McKade was surprised to find his childhood friend Harper back in town—and in need of his protection. With limited resources and no other evidence of the murder found, law enforcement's hands are tied. Determined to see justice done, Heath and Harper must confront explosive secrets from the past in their search for the killer—and confront their feelings for each other.

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COZY BEST OF 2019

“CLIFF HANGER” by Mary Feliz (Lyrical Underground; July 16, 2019): *When a hang-gliding stranger is found fatally injured in the cliffs above Monterey Bay, the investigation into his death becomes a cluttered mess. Professional organizer Maggie McDonald must sort the clues to catch a coastal killer before her family becomes a target . . .*

Maggie has her work cut out for her helping Renée Alvarez organize her property management office. Though the condominium complex boasts a prime location on the shores of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, aging buildings and the high-maintenance tenants have Renée run ragged. But Maggie’s efforts are complicated when her sons attempt to rescue a badly injured man who crashed his ultra-light on the coastal cliffs.

Despite their efforts to save him, the man dies. Maggie’s family members become the prime suspects in a murder investigation and the target of a lawsuit. Her instincts say something’s out of place, but solving a murder won’t be easy. Maggie still needs to manage her business, the pushy press, and unwanted interest from criminal elements. Controlling chaos is her specialty, but with this killer’s crime wave, Maggie may be left hanging . . .



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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Mary Feliz (M.F.): *My sixth book, “Snowed Under,” releases June 9, 2020. Maggie and her pal Tess investigate a cold case amid the stunning and deadly Lake Tahoe winter landscape.*

S. MAG.: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have and why?

M.F.: *I think every teacher is a superhero. That web-flinging stuff sure would come in handy for a teacher, but I’m convinced they’re already equipped with Spiderman’s enhanced strength, speed, reflexes, durability, stamina, healing and agility, not to mention his “Spidey sense.” When you throw in research skills, reading, and their lifelong impact on our lives . . . they’re unstoppable!*

S. MAG.: If I wasn’t an author, I would be a _____.



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M.F.: *A naturalist. I became a certified California naturalist this year, but would love to have a deeper understanding of animals, plants, and geology in my neighborhood—the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, a fabulously beautiful and rich natural resource.* ■

“LEFT FUR DEAD” by J.M. Griffin (Kensington; June 25, 2019): *On Fur Bridge Farm, Jules cares for rescued rabbits. But when a killer strikes, she’ll need a rabbit to rescue her . . .*

Juliette “Jules” Bridge prides herself on the tender rehabilitation she provides for injured or abused rabbits on her New Hampshire rescue farm, but she has a very special relationship with one bunny in particular. Bun is a black-and-white rabbit who happens

to have the ability to communicate through mental telepathy. Once she got over the shock, Jules found her furry friend had a lot to say.

One frigid March morning on their walk together, Bun spots a body. The police identify the frozen stiff as Arthur Freeman, aka Arty the Mime. Jules and Arty knew each other on the children's party circuit, where he'd perform magic tricks and she had an educational rabbit petting pen. With Bun egging her on, Jules decides it's time they hop to it and put their heads together to discover who silenced the mime. But their investigation leads them down a rabbit hole of more suspects and lies, while a killer sets a trap for them . . .

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

J.M. Griffin (J.M.G.): *"Murder at Harbor Village" by G.P. Gardner.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

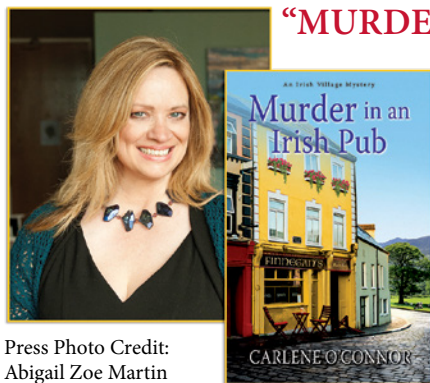
J.M.G.: *The second book in the Bun & Jules series, "Who's Dead, Doc?"*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

J.M.G.: *While doing research for a book while I was on Block Island, RI, a woman rushed up to me, threw her arms around me and said, "Oh, my goodness, you're J.M. Griffin. I've read all your books." I think there's nothing more validating than that.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

J.M.G.: *I am extremely honored and thank the people who chose my book as a "Best of." ■*



Press Photo Credit:
Abigail Zoe Martin

"MURDER IN AN IRISH PUB" by Carlene O'Connor (Kensington; February 26, 2019):

When competing card sharps stir up Siobhán O'Sullivan's quiet Irish village, a poker tournament turns into a game of Hangman . . .

In the small village of Kilbane in County Cork, for a cuppa tea or a slice of brown bread, you go to Naomi's Bistro, managed by the many siblings of the lively O'Sullivan brood. For a pint or a game of darts—or for the poker tournament that's just come to town—it's the pub you want.

One player's reputation precedes him: Eamon Foley, a tinker out of Dublin, called the Octopus for playing like he has eight hands under the table. But when Foley is found at the end of a rope, swinging from the rafters of Rory Mack's pub, it's time for the garda to take matters into their own hands. Macdara Flannery would lay odds it's a simple suicide—after all, there's a note and the room was locked. But Siobhán suspects

foul play, as does Foley's very pregnant widow. Perhaps one of Foley's fellow finalists just raised the stakes to life and death.

With conflicting theories on the crime—not to mention the possibility of a proposal—tensions are running high between Siobhán and Macdara. Soon it's up to Siobhán to call a killer's bluff, but if she doesn't play her cards right, she may be the next one taken out of the game . . .

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Carlene O'Connor (C.O.): *I'm glad you asked. I've been busy, and I'm so excited for the year (and books) to come. Here's what's happening with me in 2020 . . .*

"Murder in an Irish Cottage," February 2020. In a remote—and superstitious—village in County Cork, Ireland, Garda Siobhán O'Sullivan must solve a murder where the prime suspects are fairies . . .

"Murder in Connemara," August 2020. Second in the Home to Ireland series this will be a Barnes and Noble exclusive for one year before going to the regular outlets. In this second mystery, Tara Meehan is drawn into several murders that take place in neighboring Connemara, a gorgeous, but lonely place to die.

"Murder in Galway," April 2020. In April of 2020, "Murder in Galway" will be published in all retail outlets after being a Barnes and Noble exclusive for the past year, and it will also be released as an audiobook.

"Murder at an Irish Christmas," Fall of 2020. A special Christmas edition in The Irish Village Mystery series. Siobhán

O'Sullivan and her brood will travel to wild and rugged West Cork, Ireland, to spend Christmas with the renowned orchestra conductor, Enda Elliot. But when he's found crushed underneath a 90-pound harp, Siobhán gets drawn into a murder that's more than a little bit off-key.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

C.O.: *Help! I've been stuck in this capsule for a hundred years and I didn't write a single word. Don't let that happen to you. There's only one rule all writers agree on: Just write!*

S. MAG.: What is the best book you read in 2019?

C.O.: *I love psychological thrillers. I toy with writing one. Until then I read everything I can, and there are so many fabulous ones, tons of authors I love in the genre. But the one that sticks out that I read in 2019 is "Lock Every Door" by Riley Sager. It was a ton of fun to read and it kept me up at night—I had to finish it. I went on to read all three of his, but having lived in New York City for 15 years, I especially liked this one. Many images from the novel (I won't give anything away) still pop up in my head, which is always my mark of a good book. ■*

"MURDER'S NO VOTIVE CONFIDENCE" by Christin Brecher (Kensington; June 25, 2019): *Nantucket candle store owner Stella Wright specializes in creating unique candles for every occasion. But someone sets the stage for murder when a Memorial Day celebration becomes a wedding to die for . . .*

Jessica Sterling's candlelight-themed nuptials promises to be the perfect kick-off to the summer's first official holiday weekend. Stella's thrilled to have been chosen to provide the decorative centerpiece for the wedding ceremony: a two-foot-tall scented unity candle—a symbol of the happy couple's love. But it looks like the bride-to-be's uncle won't be walking his niece down the aisle after he's found dead. The murder weapon is Stella's seemingly indestructible candle, now split in two.

When a beloved local bartender is arrested, Stella's sure a visiting police captain running the case made a rush to justice. With superstitious brides-to-be canceling orders and sales waxing and waning at her store, the Wick & Flame owner decides to do some sleuthing of her own. Abetted by a charming reporter and challenged by the town's sexiest cop, Stella's determined to shine a light on the truth and uncover a killer who's snuffing out her own flame.



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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Christin Brecher (C.B.): *I'm excited to share that two more books in the Nantucket Candle Maker Mysteries will hit the shelves in 2020. This February 25th, readers can enjoy "Murder Makes Scents." I see this book as a cozy mystery wrapped in an action-adventure send-up. In one of my favorite scenes, Stella finds herself dressed as a spy, following the scent of a dangerous criminal, all while keeping to the speed limit of Nantucket's cobblestone streets in her red Beetle rather than an Aston Martin.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

C.B.: *I joined social media one year ago, as a new writer, and have enjoyed meeting readers in our growing online community. We've shared cold remedies (very recently!), book lists, recipes, and cozy mystery ideas, along with so much else. The best is that I've been able to connect some of the names with faces—Meg, Elaine, Mitzi, Jan and others—at book signings and events. It's been an unexpectedly cozy part of being a new writer.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

C.B.: *Did this really happen? Still can't believe it. Thank you, Suspense Magazine, for including "Murder's No Votive Confidence" on the list. I've spent a lot of time with Stella Wright, her friends, and family on Nantucket Island. I love Stella's determination to see justice done, and I couldn't be more thrilled that she and the series have resonated with readers as well. ■*

DEBUT BEST of 2019



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by Publicist

“COME AND GET ME” by August Norman (Crooked Lane Books; April 9, 2019): *At Indiana University, someone’s been studying the female student body: their dating customs, nocturnal activities—and how long they can survive in captivity.*

When award-winning journalist Caitlin Bergman is invited back to campus to receive an honorary degree, she finds an opportunity for a well-earned victory lap—and a chance to face the trauma that almost destroyed her as an undergrad. But her lap becomes an all-out race when a student begs her to probe an unsolved campus disappearance: Angela Chapman went out one Friday night and never came back.

To find the missing woman, Caitlin must join forces with a local police detective and the department that botched her own case so long ago. But while Caitlin follows the clues behind Angela’s disappearance, someone else is following her . . .

Unearthing secrets hidden beneath an idyllic Midwestern college town, Caitlin must expose what really happened to Angela—before she, herself, becomes the newest addition to a twisted collection.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

August Norman (A.N.): *As a debut author, I couldn’t imagine the sheer mountain of content available in the marketplace. To have caught the attention of both the readers and staff of Suspense Magazine is not only an immense honor, but proof that people are falling just as much in love with Caitlin Bergman as I have.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

A.N.: *The adage ‘Write what you know’ is fine for getting students out of their heads, but I’ve found my personal formula to be ‘Write what you know makes you angry, or horny, or passionate, or exhausted from giggling.’ Technology changes the second it’s included in a manuscript, but universal emotional stakes transcend time and place. Also, find the humor in humanity, no matter how dark the world may be.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

A.N.: *As an author, I’m counting down the seconds to the September release of “Sins of the Mother” (Crooked Lane Books), a story of Caitlin Bergman’s relationship with her birth mother, a mass grave, and a cult in coastal Oregon. On a larger, more personal scale, my wife and I are expecting our first child in late March, early April, so anyone following me on Instagram or getting my newsletter should expect ridiculously-staged, and possibly inappropriate, photos of a crime fiction-loving baby and an exhausted, but proud papa. ■*

“THE NIGHT OLIVIA FELL” by Christina McDonald (Gallery Books; February 5, 2019): *A search for the truth. A lifetime of lies.*

In the small hours of the morning, Abi Knight is startled awake by the phone call no mother ever wants to get: her teenage daughter Olivia has fallen off a bridge. Not only is Olivia brain dead, she’s pregnant and must remain on life support

to keep her baby alive. And then Abi sees the angry bruises circling Olivia's wrists.

When the police unexpectedly rule Olivia's fall an accident, Abi decides to find out what really happened that night. Heartbroken and grieving, she unravels the threads of her daughter's life. Was Olivia's fall an accident? Or something far more sinister?

With flashbacks of Olivia's own resolve to uncover family secrets, this taut and emotional novel asks: how well do you know your children? And how well do they know you?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Christina McDonald (C.M.): *So many good books came out in 2019, it's hard to pick just one! I think the best book I read in 2019 is actually a nonfiction, which is unusual for me. "When Breath Becomes Air," by Paul Kalanithi, is luminous and life-affirming while somehow managing to be absolutely tragic and completely hopeful at the same time. It's beautiful. Everybody should read it.*



Press Photo Credit: Justyna Kantecka

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

C.M.: *I'm so excited for my second book, "Behind Every Lie," to release in February 2020. It's about a woman who wakes in the hospital after being struck by lightning and discovers her mother has been murdered. And then she learns the police are suspicious of her. It explores the complicated nature of mother-daughter relationships, family trauma, and the danger behind long-held secrets. (<https://christina-mcdonald.com/behind-every-lie/>)*

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

C.M.: *Walter White from Breaking Bad is my favorite villain because he has such a strong motive for his actions, showing the good and bad we all are capable of. My favorite heroine is Katniss Everdeen. I love her strength, her resilience, and her devotion to her family. She's strong, a fighter, a survivor. The perfect embodiment of female empowerment.*

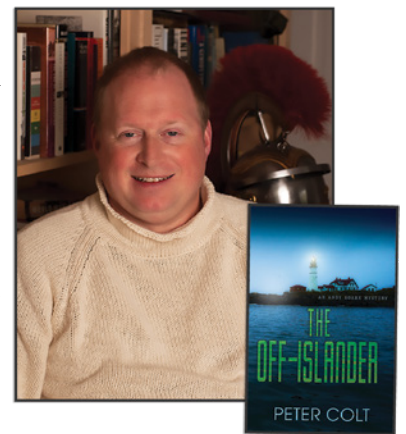
S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

C.M.: *I'm so thrilled and overwhelmed with gratitude! I've wanted to be a writer since I first picked up a crayon, so being able to do what I do is a dream come true. Knowing that my book connects with readers and that they're loving it is just so wonderful. Thank you so much, *Suspense Magazine*, and thank you wonderful readers!* ■

"THE OFF-ISLANDER" by Peter Colt (Kensington; September 24, 2019): Boston, 1982. Private investigator Andy Roark has spent the past decade trying to rediscover his place in the world. In Vietnam, there was order and purpose. Everything—no matter how brutal—happened for a reason. Back home, after brief stints in college and with the police force, Roark has settled for a steady, easy routine of divorce and insurance fraud cases.

Roark's childhood friend, Danny Sullivan, dragged himself out of blue-collar Southie to become a respected and powerful lawyer. Now he wants Roark to help one of his clients with a sensitive request. Deborah Swift, wealthy wife of an aspiring California politician, is trying to trace her father, last seen on Cape Cod, who walked out on her and her mother long ago. Other investigators have turned up nothing, but Roark's local connections might give him an edge.

The case takes Roark to the island of Nantucket, tranquil in its off-season, and laden with picturesque charm. Yet even here, on the quaint cobblestoned streets and pristine beaches, Roark's finely honed senses alert him to danger just below the surface. Nothing is quite as it seems. And the biggest case of Roark's career may just shatter what little peace of mind he has left . . .



Press Photo Credit: Elizabeth Bean

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Peter Colt (P.C.): *In 2020, fans can expect to see the sequel to "The Off-Islander." The working title is "The Back-Bay Blues." In*

it, we see Andy Roark hired to investigate two murders of Vietnamese immigrants in the Boston area by a mysterious woman. Andy has also befriended a Vietnamese restaurant owner and is forced to recognize that there were people who lost much more in Vietnam than he did. The mystery takes Andy back to the West Coast as he follows the trail of secrets that many had hoped were long forgotten. I am definitely biased, but I think that Andy Roark fans will be happy to go with him on his next whiskey-soaked adventure.

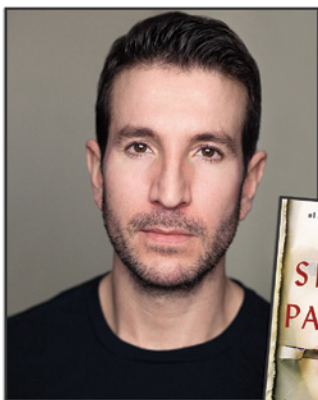
S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

P.C.: As an author of books that take place both in the 1980's and involve the Vietnam War, not just the war but very specific parts of it, I strive for authenticity. I do a lot of research and try very, very hard to make the characters and situations credible. I also want to tell stories that are entertaining; there is no point in writing something that no one wants to read.

One day, a man commented on "The Off-Islander." His words were very complimentary, he liked the story, he hoped there would be a sequel and soon. That was in itself, very, very cool. What was even more so was that the man was a Vietnam Veteran. He had been involved in the type of work that my character had done in Vietnam. To have that man contact me and tell me he liked my book...that was a huge honor. Not only did he like the book but I managed to write about his part of the war and not screw it up!

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

P.C.: Being chosen as a "Best Of" by *Suspense Magazine* is one of the best compliments I have ever received. It means that people who read the book, liked it enough to take a few minutes out of their busy schedules and nominate "The Off-Islander." That people liked it enough to vote for it. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have published the book in the first place, then to have readers nominate and vote for it, to win a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine*, that is the proverbial cherry on top! ■



"THE SILENT PATIENT" by Alex Michaelides (Celadon Books; First Edition edition; February 5, 2019): Alicia Berenson's life is seemingly perfect. A famous painter married to an in-demand fashion photographer, she lives in a grand house with big windows overlooking a park in one of London's most desirable areas. One evening her husband Gabriel returns home late from a fashion shoot, and Alicia shoots him five times in the face, and then never speaks another word.

Alicia's refusal to talk, or give any kind of explanation, turns a domestic tragedy into something far grander, a mystery that captures the public imagination and casts Alicia into notoriety. The price of her art skyrockets, and she, the silent patient, is hidden away from the tabloids and spotlight at the Grove, a secure forensic unit in North London.

Theo Faber is a criminal psychotherapist who has waited a long time for the opportunity to work with Alicia. His determination to get her to talk and unravel the mystery of why she shot her husband takes him down a twisting path into his own motivations—a search for the truth that threatens to consume him . . .

Press Photo Credit: Wolf Marloh

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Alex Michaelides (A.M.): *A therapist investigates a murder by a mute famous painter.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

A.M.: *I would say not to be discouraged by feelings of inadequacy and thoughts that you are not good enough. With perseverance, anything is possible.*

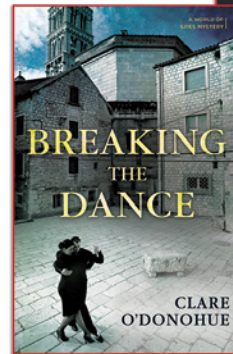
S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

A.M. . . . *a magician.* ■

Romantic SUSPENSE BEST of 2019

“BREAKING THE DANCE” by Clare O’Donohue (Midnight Ink; May 8, 2019): . . .
And now they’re back and bound for Argentina!

Husband and wife college professors, Hollis and Finn Larsson, think their days as accidental spies are behind them. But just weeks into a new school year, a mysterious envelope arrives containing two passports. The photos are of Hollis and Finn but the names are Janet and Tim McCabe. Within hours, the couple is forced onto a private plane headed to Argentina with an Interpol mission to find Irish art thief Declan Murphy and a haphazard plan to get home with their lives—and marriage—intact. As clues take them from the mountainous north through the tango halls of Buenos Aires to the southernmost tip of Tierra del Fuego, they rush to find Declan and escape from the clutches of those who would do them harm.



Press Photo Credit: Clare Logan Conner
Oomphotography

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Clare O’Donohue (C.O.): *A married team of professors find themselves spies fighting an international cabal.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

C.O.: *I’m working on number 3 in the World of Spies series as well as the last book in the Someday Quits series, which honestly was a fan request because I thought I had finished the series.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

C.O.: *So many! My weirdest is after leg surgery recently I had a catheter put in by three nurses. While I’m laying on the table, legs splayed open and a catheter bag being put on, the nurses start telling me which books of mine they’ve read and liked . . . can’t really explain how odd and flattering that was, all at once.*

S. MAG.: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have and why?

C.O.: *I’m big into Supergirl at the moment, and the one gift I’d like is invisibility. I listen in on conversations as it is, so I’d love a more subtle way to do it.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

C.O.: *I guess I would be what I actually am—a senior producer for CNN/HLN doing true crime documentaries.* ■

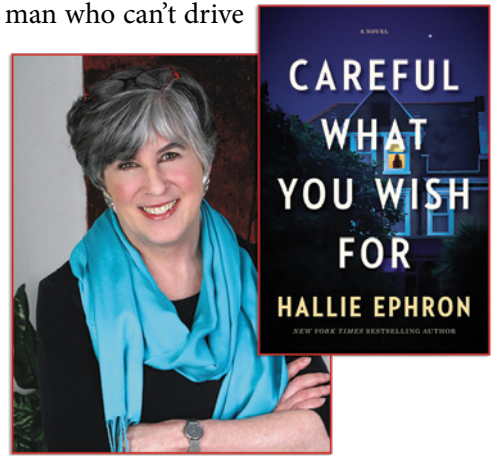
“CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR” by Hallie Ephron (William Morrow; August 6, 2019): Emily Harlow is

a professional organizer who helps people declutter their lives; she's married to a man who can't drive past a yard sale without stopping. He's filled their basement, attic, and garage with his finds.

Like other professionals who make a living decluttering peoples' lives, Emily has devised a set of ironclad rules. When working with couples, she makes it clear that the client is only allowed to declutter his or her own stuff. That stipulation has kept Emily's own marriage together these past few years. She'd love nothing better than to toss out all her husband's crap. He says he's a collector. Emily knows better—he's a hoarder. The larger his "collection" becomes, the deeper the distance grows between Emily and the man she married.

Luckily, Emily's got two new clients to distract herself: an elderly widow whose husband left behind a storage unit she didn't know existed, and a young wife whose husband won't allow her stuff into their house. Emily's initial meeting with the young wife takes a detour when, after too much wine, the women end up fantasizing about how much more pleasant life would be without their collecting spouses.

But the next day Emily finds herself in a mess that might be too big for her to clean up. *Careful what you wish for*, the old adage says . . . now Emily might lose her freedom, her marriage . . . and possibly her life.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Hallie Ephron (H.E.): *Alfred Hitchcock meets Marie Kondo in a locked storage unit...*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

H.E.: *I was teaching a writing workshop when I realized that one of the students in the class had been my doctor. It made for one of those moments when you're up in front of a classroom feeling completely naked.*

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain?

H.E.: *Elle Driver (California Mountain Snake) in a movie filled with delicious villains, Kill Bill. And I usually hate graphic fictional violence. Go figure. ■*



"BLIND SPOT" by Brenda Novak (St. Martin's Paperbacks; Reprint edition; August 27, 2019): With Jasper Moore, the privileged boy who attacked her when she was only sixteen, finally caught and in prison, Dr. Evelyn Talbot, founder and head psychiatrist at Hanover House (a prison/research facility for psychopaths in remote Alaska), believes she can finally quit looking over her shoulder. She's safe, happier than she's ever been and expecting her first child. She's also planning to marry Amarok, her Alaska State Trooper love interest and the town's only police presence.

But before the wedding can take place, a psychopath from the much more recent past comes out of nowhere and kidnaps her in broad daylight. Instead of planning her wedding, Evelyn finds herself doing everything she can to survive, save her baby and devise some way to escape while Amarok races the clock to find her—before it's too late.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

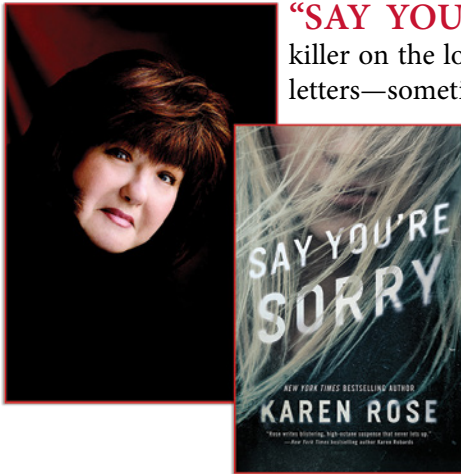
Brenda Novak (B.N.): *"Where the Crawdads Sing." I loved, loved this book!*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

B.N.: *I have a women's fiction novel coming out April 7th—"The Perfect Summer."*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

B.N.: A scientist. ■



“SAY YOU’RE SORRY” by Karen Rose (Berkley; February 12, 2019): There is a serial killer on the loose, preying on vulnerable women. The only identifiable mark the killer leaves are letters—sometimes one, sometimes two—all carved into the torsos of his victims. Together they spell “Sydney.”

When he grabs Daisy Dawson, he believes he has found his next victim. But despite her small stature, she fights back with an expertise that quickly frees her. Before fleeing the scene, Daisy also manages to grab what proves to be crucial evidence: a necklace from around the killer’s neck.

The necklace is more than a trivial item—it is a link to a cold case that Special Agent Gideon Reynolds has been tracking for seventeen years. With Daisy’s help, Gideon finally has the opportunity to get closer to the truth than ever before.

But they might not get the chance, as the serial killer has a new target: Gideon and Daisy.

Press Photo Credit: Deborah Feingold Photography

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Karen Rose (K.R.): *Hard question! I listen to a lot of audiobooks (to minimize eye strain from looking at my monitor all day). I was moved to tears so many times by “Galaxies and Oceans” by NR Walker, narrated by Joel Leslie. Two lost souls, Patrick loves the ocean, Ethan loves the stars. Patrick is grieving the loss of the love of his life, a fisherman lost in a storm. Ethan is fleeing an abusive partner—a famous politician. Together they find a second chance at life. It’s sweet and funny and kind and made me cry more than once. They, of course, get a happily ever after, but they have to work for it and they dragged me with them, every step of the way.*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

K.R.: *Doctor, hacker create family while protecting kids from a killer.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

K.R.: *Book two of my Sacramento series, “Say No More,” will be released this summer! Mercy Callahan and Rafe Sokolov hunt down the man responsible for stealing childhood from both Mercy and her brother Gideon (“Say You’re Sorry”). Featured is the Sokolov family—who I love—Gideon, Daisy, and Tom Hunter.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

K.R.: *There are so many! I love meeting readers, all over the world. One I love happened in the UK back in 2012. A British woman came to my London signing with a rolling suitcase filled with all my books, 14 at this point. Halfway through me signing them, she leaned forward and whispered, “I need to say thank you from my husband. He used to be annoyed when I read your books, because I’d get absorbed and ignore him. Then he realized that he always got lucky after I’d finished the book.” She was blushing and so was I, and then we were both laughing. I wrote in her book, “I’m happy to keep your hubby happy.” Then I realized what that sounded like and revised it to: “. . . help you KEEP your hubby happy.” LOL.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

K.R.: *A high school math teacher. Of all my jobs other than author, teacher has been my favorite. There is a comfort to math, a yes/no, 2+2=4 structure that always makes sense. And seeing young minds discover this for the first time is a true joy. It’s worth all the eye-rolls and mutters of “When will I ever use this?” to see just one kid get it. ■*

BEST OF HORROR

“INSIDE THE ASYLUM” by Mary SanGiovanni (Lyrical Press; May 7, 2019): A mind is a terrible thing to destroy . . .

Kathy has been hired to assess the threat of patient Henry Banks, an inmate at the Connecticut-Newlyn Hospital for the Criminally Insane, the same hospital where her brother is housed. Her employers believe that Henry has the ability to open doors to other dimensions with his mind—making him one of the most dangerous men in modern history. Because unbeknownst to Kathy, her clients are affiliated with certain government organizations that investigate people like Henry—and the potential to weaponize such abilities.

What Kathy comes to understand in interviewing Henry, and in her unavoidable run-ins with her brother, is that Henry can indeed use his mind to create “Tulpas”—worlds, people, and creatures so vivid they come to actual life. But now they want life outside of Henry. And they’ll stop at nothing to complete their emancipation. It’s up to Kathy—with her brother’s help—to stop them, and if possible, to save Henry before the Tulpas take him over—and everything else around him.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Mary SanGiovanni (M.S.): *I have a post-apocalyptic novella coming out from Cemetery Dance. I'm also working on a haunted house novel and a graphic novel adaptation of Richard Chizmar's "Widow's Point." Further, I hope to get started working on another Kathy Ryan novel toward the end of 2020.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

M.S.: *I'm honored to be included in this list. To me, it means recognition from an experienced and esteemed source, and achievement of a successful blend of suspense and supernatural horror. I appreciate the acknowledgment of "Inside the Asylum," and am so pleased to be listed among such great writers.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

M.S.: *A singer. I enjoy singing, even if only to myself in the shower or on a commute. I took singing classes back in high school, but I've liked to sing since I was a little girl. I find it soothing to connect with music, and through music, something beautiful, in that way.* ■

“PROJECT 137” by Seth Augenstein (Pandamoon Publishing; May 8, 2019): Where have America's missing persons gone?

As a doctor in the post-Blackout United States of America of 2087, Joe Barnes struggles to save his patients and uphold his Hippocratic Oath. Even so, he's an idealist, and his home life is one of happy expectation as he and his wife Mary prepare to welcome their first child after a “medical miracle” makes their dream possible.

But a teenaged boy dies unexpectedly on Barnes' watch and a girl goes missing, and as Barnes becomes



obsessed with finding the killer, patients keep dropping dead from strange diseases that should no longer exist at the end of the 21st century. With the help of his mentor, he chases a phantom force at work in the hospital and discovers a terrifying link to a human experimentation program from the barely-remembered chaos of World War II.

The forces behind the spreading pestilence threaten to spark another global cataclysm—and slaughter Barnes’s young family—unless the good doctor can stop them in time. ■



Press Photo Credit: Rebecca Cain

“NO ONE’S HOME” by D.M. Pulley (Thomas & Mercer; September 1, 2019): Margot and Myron Spielman move to a new town, looking for a fresh start and an escape from the long shadow of their past. But soon after they buy Rawlingswood, a foreclosed mansion rumored to be haunted, they realize they’re in for more of the same . . . or worse.



After a renovation fraught with injuries and setbacks, the Spielmans move in to the century-old house, and their problems quickly escalate. The home’s beautiful facade begins to crumble around them when their teenage son uncovers disturbing details of Rawlingswood’s history—a history of murder, betrayal, and financial ruin. The Spielmans’ own shameful secrets and lies become harder to hide as someone or something inside the house watches their every move.

As tensions build between the family members, the home’s dark history threatens to repeat itself. Margot and Myron must confront their own ghosts and Rawlingswood’s buried past before the house becomes their undoing.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

D.M. Pulley (D.M.P.): *A dysfunctional family’s dream house becomes their worst nightmare.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

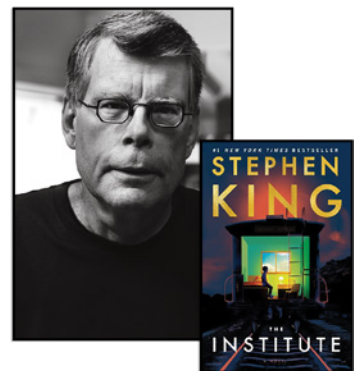
D.M.P.: *One of my fans just may be related to a famous killer, and he came to my library book talks to find out more. My third novel, “The Unclaimed Victim,” unravels the mystery of Cleveland’s unsolved Torso Murders. While evidence suggests the killer might have been Dr. Francis Sweeney, my story presents a darker solution to the crimes. Dr. Sweeney’s relative stayed after the book signing, and we discussed at length the reasons I felt Sweeney might be innocent despite his family’s suspicions. He walked away seeming relieved and more curious than ever.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

D.M.P.: . . . *renovating houses in underserved Cleveland neighborhoods.* ■

“THE INSTITUTE” by Stephen King (Scribner; September 10, 2019): In the middle of the night, in a house on a quiet street in suburban Minneapolis, intruders silently murder Luke Ellis’s parents and load him into a black SUV. The operation takes less than two minutes. Luke will wake up at The Institute, in a room that looks just like his own, except there’s no window. And outside his door are other doors, behind which are other kids with special talents—telekinesis and telepathy—who got to this place the same way Luke did: Kalisha, Nick, George, Iris, and ten-year-old Avery Dixon. They are all in Front Half. Others, Luke learns, graduated to Back Half, “like the roach motel,” Kalisha says. “You check in, but you don’t check out.”

In this most sinister of institutions, the director, Mrs. Sigsby, and her staff are ruthlessly dedicated to extracting from these children the force of their extranormal gifts. There are no scruples here. If you go along, you get tokens for the vending machines. If you don’t, punishment is brutal. As each new victim disappears to Back Half, Luke becomes more and more desperate to get out and get help. But no one has ever escaped from the Institute. ■



Press Photo Credit: Shane Leonard

"BUNZEL HITS ALL THE RIGHT NOTES IN *SEVEN-THIRTY THURSDAY*, AN INTENSELY PERSONAL TALE THAT HAS ECHOES OF BOTH GREG ISLES AND JOHN HART."

—Jon Land, *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Murder, She Wrote* Series

Seven-Thirty THURSDAY

Thirty years after his mother's grisly murder, Rick Devlin returns home to Charleston to care for his dying father, who was convicted of the homicide but whose new claims of innocence cause Rick to dig into the facts behind her violent death, a decades-old hate crime, and the grim roots of his family's dysfunction.



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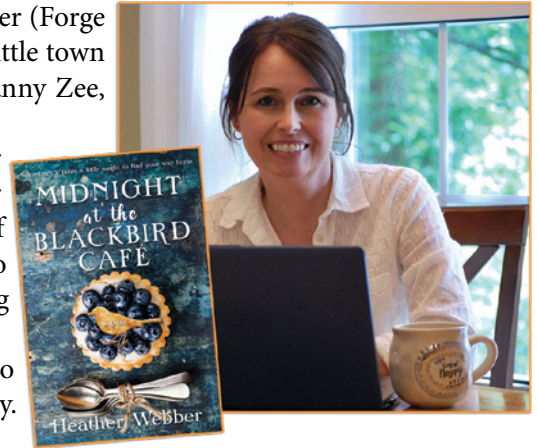
SUSPENSE MAGAZINE • SUSPENSE RADIO

DARKURBAN Fantasy BEST OF 2019

“MIDNIGHT AT THE BLACKBIRD CAFÉ” by Heather Webber (Forge Books; July 16, 2019): Nestled in the mountain shadows of Alabama lies the little town of Wicklow. It is here that Anna Kate has returned to bury her beloved Granny Zee, owner of the Blackbird Café.

It was supposed to be a quick trip to close the café and settle her grandmother’s estate, but despite her best intentions to avoid forming ties or even getting to know her father’s side of the family, Anna Kate finds herself inexplicably drawn to the quirky Southern town her mother ran away from so many years ago, and the mysterious blackbird pie everybody can’t stop talking about.

As the truth about her past slowly becomes clear, Anna Kate will need to decide if this lone blackbird will finally be able to take her broken wings and fly.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Heather Webber (H.W.): *My next book, “South of the Buttonwood Tree,” will be released in July. It’s a women’s fiction/magical realism novel about a woman who finds an abandoned infant.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

H.W.: *This is such an honor, especially with “Midnight at the Blackbird Café.” This past year I took a leap of faith by switching from writing mysteries to writing women’s fiction, and I’m beyond grateful that my mystery readers took that leap along with me. For them to recognize this book as one of the Best of 2019 means the world to me.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

H.W.: . . . *a full-time Etsy crocheter—creativity runs deep within me.* ■

“NINTH HOUSE” by Leigh Bardugo (Flatiron Books; October 8, 2019): Galaxy “Alex” Stern is the most unlikely member of Yale’s freshman class. Raised in the Los Angeles hinterlands by a hippie mom, Alex dropped out of school early and into a world of shady drug-dealer boyfriends, dead-end jobs, and much, much worse. In fact, by age twenty, she is the sole survivor of a horrific, unsolved multiple homicide. Some might say she’s thrown her life away. But at her hospital bed, Alex is offered a second chance: to attend one of the world’s most prestigious universities on a full ride. What’s the catch, and why her?

Still searching for answers, Alex arrives in New Haven tasked by her mysterious benefactors with monitoring the activities of Yale’s secret societies. Their eight windowless “tombs” are the well-known haunts of the rich and powerful, from high-ranking politicians to Wall Street’s biggest players. But their occult activities are more sinister and more extraordinary than any paranoid imagination might conceive. They tamper with forbidden magic. They raise the dead. And, sometimes, they prey on the living. ■





Press Photo Credit:
Hadnagy Photography, Butte Montana

“STORM CURSED” by Patricia Briggs (Ace; May 7, 2019): My name is Mercedes Athena Thompson Hauptman, and I am a car mechanic.

And a coyote shapeshifter.

And the mate of the Alpha of the Columbia Basin werewolf pack.

Even so, none of that would have gotten me into trouble if, a few months ago, I hadn’t stood upon a bridge and taken responsibility for the safety of the citizens who lived in our territory. It seemed like the thing to do at the time. It should have only involved hunting down killer goblins, zombie goats, and an occasional troll. Instead, our home was viewed as neutral ground, a place where humans would feel safe to come and treat with the fae.

The reality is that nothing and no one is safe. As generals and politicians face off with the Gray Lords of the fae, a storm is coming and her name is Death.

But we are pack, and we have given our word.

We will die to keep it. ■

“VENGEANCE ROAD” by Christine Feehan (Berkley; January 29, 2019):

Breezy Simmons was born into a ruthless motorcycle club—and now that she’s out, she’s never going to be that girl again. But when her past catches up with her, Breezy must go to Sea Haven to seek out the man who almost destroyed her. The man who chose his club over her and left her feeling used and alone.

As vice president of Torpedo Ink, Steele is ride or die for the brothers he lived through hell with. He never thought he’d find something as pure as his feelings for Breezy, or that keeping her safe would mean driving her away with cruel words that turned her love for him to ash.

Now, Steele won’t let her walk away twice. He’ll do whatever it takes to make Breezy his woman again—especially when he learns the real reason she came to him for help, and that the stakes are higher than he ever could have imagined . . .



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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Christine Feehan (C.F.): *They can expect to see that I may have gone a little crazy! LOL. I’ve got six new books coming out in 2020, including two books in my Torpedo Ink series. Also in 2020, I’m excited to share that Walmart will be creating exclusive limited edition variant covers for my GhostWalker series! They’re the same books, but Walmart will have limited edition covers for them. I am very grateful to Walmart for their continued support.*

The 2020 schedule for new releases is: “Vendetta Road,” January 28th; “Lethal Game,” March 3rd; “Shadow Flight,” May 5th; “Desolation Road,” June 30th; “Dark Song,” September 1st and “Leopard’s Rage” on November 3rd.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

C.F.: *It means a lot to me since this is a suspense magazine recognizing paranormal romance/urban fantasy. I value being seen as a versatile author. I do a great deal of research for my novels, which appeal to both men and women even though they are romance novels. Romance writers are being recognized more and more for writing in various sub-genres. Mystery, suspense, action, thrillers, there are a great deal of sub-genres in the romance category and they are well crafted, well researched and well received. I love to see them recognized. And that my book “Vengeance Road” was recognized is especially thrilling for me since my Torpedo Ink series is so new and matters so much to me.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

C.F.: *I would continue being a martial artist, which I was for decades prior to becoming an author. I would teach self defense to women and would love to teach younger women and children. I think it’s important for all children to be taught at an early age that no one has the right to put their hands on them. ■*

HISTORICAL BEST of 2019

“MILADY” by Laura L. Sullivan (Berkley; July 2, 2019): I’ve gone by many names, though you most likely know me as Milady de Winter: Villainess. Seductress. A secondary player in someone else’s tale.

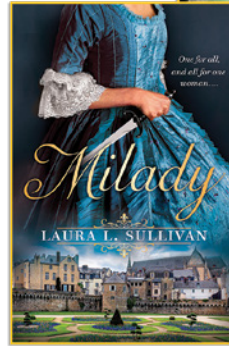
It’s finally time I tell my own story. The truth isn’t tidy or convenient, but it’s certainly more interesting.

Before you cast judgment, let me start at the beginning, and you shall learn how an innocent girl from the countryside became the most feared woman in all of Europe.

Because we all know history was written by men, and they so often get things wrong.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Laura L. Sullivan (L.L.S.): *How about only three words? “Musketeers, Minus Men.”*



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

L.L.S.: *Words and stories can change people. I'd like to remind writers, now and in the future, that you don't have to write a story about revolution to spark a revolution in a person's mind. A single sentence that resonates, a single character's choice, can alter a person's entire outlook. For myself, I don't have a gift of oratory or leadership, but I hope the stories I tell contribute in a small way to making people more socially aware, and braver in the face of adversity. To this end, I advise writers to choose their words with care, but let their passions and beliefs shine through every story they tell.*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

L.L.S.: *For beauty of prose, I burn with envy whenever I read Laini Taylor's books! More generally, I have a secret desire to create an endless, cozy, life-affirming, funny series with endearing characters, like Alexander McCall Smith's 44 Scotland Street books.* ■

“MURDER AT CROSSWAYS” by Alyssa Maxwell (Kensington Books; July 30, 2019): *In late August 1898, reporter Emma Cross attends the final fête of the Newport social season and discovers the party's over for a visiting prince . . .*

The days are getting shorter as summer's end approaches, which means it's time for the Harvest Festival, the last big event of the season, held by Mamie Fish, wife of millionaire railroad tycoon Stuyvesant Fish, at their grand “cottage,” Crossways. The neocolonial mansion is decked out in artificial autumn splendor, and an extravagant scavenger hunt will be held. But the crowning jewel of the evening will be the guest of honor, Prince Otto of Austria.

As acting editor-in-chief of the *Newport Messenger*, Emma had hoped to leave her days as a society reporter behind her. But at the last moment, she must fill in and attend the Harvest Festival. With nearly every eligible daughter of Newport high



Press Photo Credit: Erin Manuel

society in attendance, Emma can almost hear romantic dreams shattering like glass slippers when the prince fails to appear. The next morning, he is found dead in the side garden at Crossways, making it clear a murderer crashed the party.

The prince has been stabbed in the same manner as another man, recently found on nearby Bailey's Beach—who strongly resembles Emma's half-brother Brady's father, presumed dead for nearly thirty years after a yachting mishap. As Emma investigates a connection between the two victims, she is joined on the hunt by Mamie Fish herself. But they must hurry—before the killer slips away like the fading summer . . .

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Alyssa Maxwell (A.M.): *I'll have two releases in 2020. In my Lady & Lady's Maid series, we'll see "A Silent Stabbing" in March. The idea for the book came while watching a British reality show called Escape to the Country. This particular episode took place in the Cotswolds, where*

my fictional Renshaw family resides, and since there is always a segment about something particular to the area, this time they featured a popular pear cider called Perry. The plot of "A Silent Stabbing" revolves around two brothers feuding over the possible sale of their pear orchard and their tradition of making the village's favorite brand of Perry. When one is murdered and the other is accused, the entire village mobilizes to bring in the harvest, while sleuths Phoebe and Eva do their part to save the Perry and bring a killer to justice.

Then, at the end of August comes "Murder at Kingscote," the 8th Gilded Newport Mystery, where my sleuth must solve yet another crime on posh Bellevue Avenue in Newport, Rhode Island. Kingscote, owned at the time by Ella Rives King, is one of the smaller mansions in town, but with a tantalizing blend of styles that come together in the most charming manner, and a family that proved even more interesting than I'd imagined when I started out to write their story. I discovered a built-in, real-life mystery and a villainess that plagued the family for years, and family issues that made it easy to shed guilt on Mrs. Rives's own son. I explore some new themes in this book, including the then popular sport of boxing, and the treatment of the insane.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

A.M.: *Indeed I do. The daughter of an elderly reader wrote to tell me her mother had discovered my Gilded Newport books at her nursing home, and that they brought her such joy because she had lived in Newport as a young military wife in the 1940s, and it was some of the happiest years of her life. It turned out she had been renting an apartment in the home of my husband's great aunt, and the two had become good friends. When the woman moved away, Great Aunt Thelma sent her a beautiful set of four Shelley teacups that they had used together for afternoon tea. The woman has since passed away, and her daughter sent those teacups to me as a thank you for bringing such happy memories to her mother's last days. Apparently, when she passed away, the staff found her copy of "Murder at the Breakers" with the bookmark on the last page, signifying that she had finished the book that night. As I told the daughter, knowing this is a gift I'll hold in my heart for the rest of my life.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

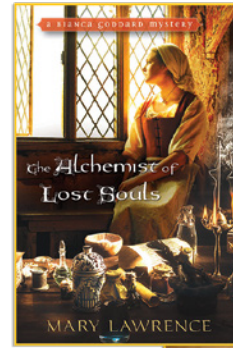
A.M.: *If you want to be a successful writer, you need to believe in yourself, believe in your ability to create stories that will be meaningful to readers, and believe in the "magic" of your process. There will always be days when you think you can't do it, or when other people tell you you can't do it, but you have to put discouragement aside and simply keep writing. Develop your voice as a storyteller. Learn to dig deep and explore themes that are important to you. Write like no one will ever read your work—meaning toss aside any inhibitions you have and don't hold back. But, while you're writing, attend workshops and writers conferences, network with other writers, and learn all you can. Decide what kind of career you want—traditionally published, self-published, hybrid, or whatever else might exist in the future. Keep your eye on that goal and don't settle for less, even if it means waiting longer to achieve your dream. Most of all, be patient and be persistent. Keep writing! ■*

"THE ALCHEMIST OF LOST SOULS" by Mary Lawrence (Kensington; April 30, 2019): *A dangerous element*

discovered by Bianca Goddard's father falls into the wrong hands . . . leading to a chain of multiple murders.

Spring 1544: Now that she is with child, Bianca is more determined than ever to distance herself from her unstable father. Desperate to win back the favor of King Henry VIII, disgraced alchemist Albern Goddard plans to reveal a powerful new element he's discovered—one with deadly potential. But when the substance is stolen, he is panicked and expects his daughter to help.

Soon after, a woman's body is found behind the Dim Dragon Inn, an eerie green vapor rising from her breathless mouth. To her grave concern, Bianca has reason to suspect her own mother may be involved in the theft and the murder. As her husband John is conscripted into King Henry's army to subdue Scottish resistance, Bianca must navigate a twisted and treacherous path among alchemists, apothecaries, chandlers, and scoundrels—to find out who among them is willing to kill to possess the element known as *lapis mortem*, the stone of death . . .



Press Photo Credit: D. Sliman

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by Suspense Magazine mean to you?

Mary Lawrence (M.L.): *Some awards in this genre are associated with a conference and are chosen exclusively by the conference attendees. Certainly, it's an honor to receive one; however, Suspense Magazine's "Best of" award includes recommendations from readers, contributors, and editors to the magazine. The voting is open to the public. Because of its broader scope, the award is more competitive and the recognition of being named has greater significance.*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

M.L.: *“The Alchemist of Lost Souls” is a story of alchemy and murder in the slums of Tudor London.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

M.L.: *The fifth Bianca Goddard Mystery, “The Lost Boys of London,” releases in May of 2020. I'm also at work on a novel set during the American Civil War.* ■

“THE DEVIL’S DUE” by Bonnie MacBird (HarperCollins; October 10, 2019): It's 1890 and the newly famous Sherlock Holmes faces his worst adversary to date—a diabolical villain bent on destroying some of London's most admired public figures in particularly gruesome ways. A further puzzle is that suicide closely attends each of the murders. As he tracks the killer through vast and seething London, Holmes finds himself battling both an envious Scotland Yard and a critical press as he follows a complex trail from performers to princes, anarchists to aesthetes. But when his brother Mycroft disappears, apparently the victim of murder, even those loyal to Holmes begin to wonder how close to the flames he has travelled. Has Sherlock Holmes himself made a deal with the devil?

A message from Bonnie: Sherlock Holmes has been my superhero of choice since I was 10 years old. I would love to have his combination of encyclopaedic knowledge, acute observation, superior reasoning power, and physical stamina . . . and the best friend in the world, John Watson. Holmes is a mystery himself, and his flaws make him fascinating. I started my series for HarperCollins with “Art in the Blood,” followed two years later by “Unquiet Spirits.” I love spending time in this world, I'm a Victorian at heart. To have my third “The Devil's Due” chosen as a Suspense Magazine ‘Best of’ for 2019 means the world to me. HarperCollins has recently seen fit to order two more, and I'm hard at work now on “The Three Locks.” Emulating my hero, Conan Doyle, is challenging but I love the challenge! ■



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Young **BEST of 2019** ADULT



“KILLING NOVEMBER” by Adriana Mather (Knopf for Young Readers; March 26, 2019): *November is as good as dead. She just doesn't know it yet.*

At the international Academy Absconditi, there's no electricity, no internet, and an archaic eye-for-an-eye punishment system. Classes range from knife throwing and poisons to the art of deception. And the students? All silver-spoon descendants of the world's most elite strategists—training to become assassins, spies, and master impersonators.

One is a virtuoso of accents—and never to be trusted. Another is a vicious fighter determined to exploit November's weaknesses. And then there's the boy with the mesmerizing eyes and a secret agenda.

November doesn't know how an ordinary girl like her fits into the school's complicated legacy. But when a student is murdered, she'll need to separate her enemies from her allies before the crime gets pinned on her . . . or she becomes the killer's next victim. ■



“RAGE” by Cora Carmack (Tor Teen; August 27, 2019): *Princess or adventurer.*

Duty or freedom.

Her Kingdom or the storm hunter she loves.

If Aurora knows anything, it's that choices have consequences. To set things right, she joins a growing revolution on the streets of Pavan.

In disguise as the rebel Roar, she puts her knowledge of the palace to use to aid the rebellion. But the Rage season is at its peak and not a day passes without the skies raining down destruction. Yet these storms are different...they churn with darkness, and attack with a will that's desperate and violent.

This feels like more than rage.

It feels like war.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Cora Carmack (C.C.): *Twister meets Game of Thrones through a female gaze.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

C.C.: *In 2020, fans can expect the conclusion of Aurora's Stormheart trilogy with “Reign.” And then I've got a few other projects that I put on hold in previous years that I hope to get back to soon. I'm also open to the idea of more books in the Stormheart universe with new or familiar characters if there's enough interest in that. The great thing about the world is that there is still so much left to explore—there are multiple cities and climates we've not yet visited, and those areas have storms and histories of their own.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

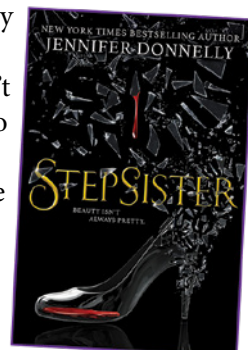
C.C.: *More than you could fit on the page probably. I wrote “Rage” at a time when I was dealing with tremendous health issues, having just been diagnosed with epilepsy. It was hard to trust my brain about everyday things, let alone discerning whether or not I had done justice to the story I wanted to tell. So, every time a reader reaches out to say they enjoyed the book it feels like a victory. And moments like this, when the book receives recognition I never would have expected (especially considering “Suspense” isn’t my typical genre home), I am more than grateful. I am revitalized. Thank you.* ■

“STEPSISTER” by Jennifer Donnelly (Scholastic Press; May 14, 2019): Don’t just fracture the fairy tale. Shatter it.

Isabelle should be blissfully happy—she’s about to win the handsome prince. Except Isabelle isn’t the beautiful girl who lost the glass slipper and captured the prince’s heart. She’s the ugly stepsister who cut off her toes to fit into Cinderella’s shoe . . . which is now filling with her blood.

When the prince discovers Isabelle’s deception, she’s turned away in shame. It’s no more than she deserves: she’s a plain girl in a world that values beauty; a bold girl in a world that wants her to be pliant.

Isabelle has tried to fit in. She cut away pieces of herself in order to become pretty. Sweet. More like Cinderella. But that only made her mean, jealous, and hollow. Now she has a chance to alter her destiny and prove what ugly stepsisters have always known: it takes more than heartache to break a girl. ■



“THE VANISHING STAIR” by Maureen Johnson

(Katherine Tegan Books; January 22, 2019): The Truly Devious case—an unsolved kidnapping and triple murder that rocked Ellingham Academy in 1936—has consumed Stevie for years. It’s the very reason she came to the academy. But then her classmate was murdered, and her parents quickly pull her out of school. For her *safety*, they say. She must move past this *obsession* with crime.

Stevie’s willing to do anything to get back to Ellingham, be back with her friends, and solve the Truly Devious case. Even if it means making a deal with the despicable Senator Edward King. And when Stevie finally returns, she also returns to David: the guy she kissed, and the guy who lied about his identity—Edward King’s son.

But larger issues are at play. Where did the murderer hide? What’s the meaning of the riddle Albert Ellingham left behind? And what, exactly, is at stake in the Truly Devious affair? The Ellingham case isn’t just a piece of history—it’s a live wire into the present.



Press Photo Credit: Angela Altus

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Maureen Johnson (M.J.): *Probably “Catch and Kill” by Ronan Farrow. It’s true crime, it’s journalism, it’s history, and it’s justice. And a very suspenseful book!*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

M.J.: *Boarding school, site of 1930s crime of the century. Teen detective wants to solve. More murders ensue. (That’s 17 words, but hey.)*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

M.J.: *The final book in this series, “The Hand on the Wall,” is coming out in January. The entire story wraps up—all the answers are there. I’ll be announcing some more things soon!* ■

BEST of 2019 ANTHOLOGY

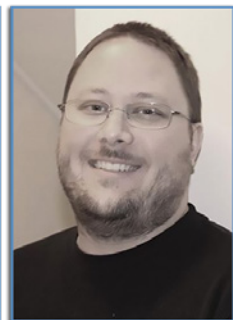
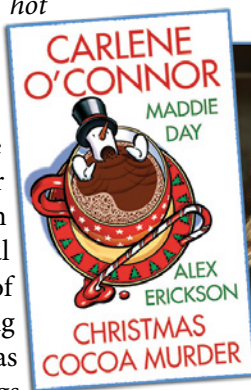
“CHRISTMAS COCOA MURDER” by Carlene O’Connor, Maddie Day, and Alex Erickson (Kensington Books; September 24, 2019): *‘Tis the season for hot chocolate and mouthwatering treats. But sometimes too much of a good thing can be downright deadly . . .*

Christmas Cocoa Murder by Carlene O’Connor: Siobhán O’Sullivan’s hopes for a quiet Irish Christmas are dashed when the local Santa turns up dead in a carnival dunk tank of hot cocoa. Now instead of hunting down holiday gifts, she’s pursuing a heartless killer. Seems the dead Santa was no angel either, stealing neighborhood dogs to guide his sleigh. But was it his holiday antics—or worse—that led to his death by chocolate?

Christmas Cocoa and a Corpse by Maddie Day: When local businessman Jed Greenberg is found dead with a Chocolate lab whimpering over his body, the police start sniffing around Robbie Jordan’s country restaurant for answers. Was it something in Robbie’s hot cocoa that killed Jed, or was it Cocoa the dog? As the suspects pile as high as her holiday tree, Robbie attempts to get to the bottom of the sickly-sweet murder . . .

Death by Hot Cocoa by Alex Erickson: A Christmas-themed escape game seems like the perfect pre-holiday treat for bookstore café owner Krissy Hancock and her best friend. But when the host is found dead in a pool of hot cocoa, it’s up to Krissy and her team to catch the killer—or escape before getting killed.

There’s nothing like a hot cup of murder to warm up the holiday season!



Carlene O’Connor Press Photo Credit: Abigail Zoe Martin
Maddie Day Press Photo Credit: Meg Manion Silliker
Alex Erickson Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Maddie Day (M.D.): A lot! I (as Edith Maxwell) have a short story, “One Too Many,” coming out in the spring edition of Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. “Murder at the Taffy Shop,” Cozy Capers Book Group Mysteries #2, releases from Barnes & Noble at the end of March. The end of June sees “Nacho Average Murder,” Country Store Mysteries #7 (which follows “Christmas Cocoa and a Corpse,” my novella in the anthology). Sometime in the fall “Candy Slain Murder” will release, #8 in the series, as well as “Taken Too Soon” (written as Edith Maxwell), my sixth Quaker Midwife Mystery.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

M.D.: It has happened to me several times, that a fan writes an email saying she took my book to the hospital when her mother was having surgery, or her father had had a stroke, or she herself had to be hospitalized for several weeks. She’ll tell me my story helped her get through the experience by taking her away from it for a blessed period of time. That means the world to me and keeps me writing.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

M.D.: *Write the best book you can. Study your craft, revise, polish, revise more, and proofread. While you're doing that, find your tribe. Find a group of other writers in your genre and learn from them. Most of all, if you want to write a book, you will.* ■

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Alex Erickson (A.E.): *More books, of course! Both "Dial 'M' for Maine Coon" (Forever Pets) and "Death by French Roast" (Bookstore Café) should be out in 2020.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

A.E.: *This might be memorable only to me—or even matter to only me—but the first time someone came up to me at an author event and pulled a book out of their bag that they'd brought from home for me to sign really sticks out. It was the first real "Wait! I have a fan!" moment of my career. To have someone say, "I came here just for you," means the world, especially since it combats the doubt monsters who are always lurking and waiting to pounce.*

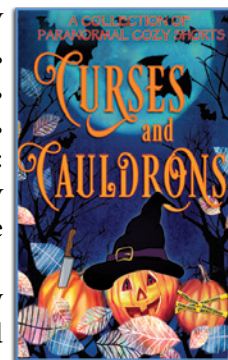
Or wait . . . is that just me?

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

A.E.: *. . . working in television or radio somehow. Maybe I'd be writing scripts—I'd wanted to do that at one time. Or maybe I would be working cameras or soundboards or something of that nature. I'd at least put my college studying to good use that way!* ■

"CURSES AND CAULDRONS" A Paranormal Halloween Mystery Anthology by Tegan Maher, ReGina Welling, Misty Bane, Amorette Anderson, Elle Adams, Morgana Best, Danielle Garrett, Bella Falls, April Aasheim, Mona Marple, Ava Mallory, Jenna St. James, Stephanie Damore, K.M. Waller, and Nikki Haverstock (Amazon Digital Services LLC; September 1, 2019): Looking for fun, spooky Halloween mysteries? Then you'll be spellbound by this paranormal cozy collection crafted by more than a dozen of your favorite witchy authors.

We've brewed up this Halloween anthology packed with brand new mysteries featuring your favorite magical characters. Conjure up a copy, and see if you can figure out what's going bump in the night!



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

ReGina Welling (R.W.): *How could I choose? I'm an avid reader and there are so many good books out there. I have varied interests, so I read a lot of different things. This year, though, I spent a fair amount of time rereading books/series that I've loved in the past. I reread the entire In Death series by JD Robb and also the Dresden Files books by Jim Butcher. All excellent books, plus, I've heard the new Dresden Files book is finished, so there's that to look forward to in the next year or so.*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

R.W.: *That's easy but I need twelve words: Everly Dupree helps spirits find peace whether she wants to or not.* ☺

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

R.W.: *Thanks for asking! I'll be publishing "Ghost Haste" in February, book four in the Haunted Everly After series, and "Spell to Pay," book seven in the Fate Weaver series at some point during the year. I have a couple of other things planned, but I won't be sharing titles of those just yet.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

R.W.: A *photographer*. ■

“FROM TWISTED ROOTS: THRILLER, HORROR, AND MYSTERY SHORT STORIES” by S.H. Cooper (Amazon Digital Services LLC; May 25, 2019): The most wholesome families have the darkest secrets.

Most little girls don't dream of growing up and spending their days surrounded by human blood. My sister was not most little girls.

Inside you'll experience intimate firsthand accounts of modern day murders, kidnappings, and violent revenge. Other stories are heartwarming with whimsical mysteries, gothic fairy tales, and supernatural monstrosities. ■



“FULL THROTTLE” by Joe Hill (William Morrow; October 1, 2019): *In this masterful collection of short fiction, Joe Hill dissects timeless human struggles in thirteen relentless tales of supernatural suspense, including “In The Tall Grass,” one of two stories co-written with Stephen King and the basis for the terrifying feature film from Netflix.*

A little door that opens to a world of fairy tale wonders becomes the blood-drenched stomping ground for a gang of hunters in “Faun.” A grief-stricken librarian climbs behind the wheel of an antique Bookmobile to deliver fresh reads to the dead in “Late Returns.” In “By the Silver Water of Lake Champlain,” soon to be an episode on Shudder TV’s *Creepshow*, two young friends stumble on the corpse of a plesiosaur at the water’s edge, a discovery that forces them to confront the inescapable truth of their own mortality . . . and other horrors that lurk in the water’s shivery depths. And tension shimmers in the sweltering heat of the Nevada desert as a faceless trucker finds himself caught in a sinister dance with a tribe of motorcycle outlaws in “Throttle,” co-written with Stephen King.

Replete with shocking chillers, including two previously unpublished stories written expressly for this volume (“Mums” and “Late Returns”) and another appearing in print for the first time (“Dark Carousel”), *Full Throttle* is a darkly imagined odyssey through the complexities of the human psyche.

Hypnotic and disquieting, it mines our tormented secrets, hidden vulnerabilities, and basest fears, and demonstrates this exceptional talent at his very best.

Press Photo Credit: Lawrie Photography

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Joe Hill (J.H.): *Probably Alice Hoffman’s “The World That We Knew,” which is lovely, and devastating, and luminous. It’s about a teenage girl fleeing the Nazis with the aid of an unstoppable golem. Although it’s also about young love, the things that are worth sacrificing your life for, and the migration of herons.*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

J.H.: *I am sorry to say I am a complete believer in the power of the perfect elevator pitch. It may be a bit reductionist but in my line, if you can’t identify the hook in one or two delicious sentences, you probably need to think about your story some more. That said, the newest book, “Full Throttle,” is a collection of short stories, which makes it elevator pitch resistant. Better to just take one of the tales and describe that one. So: “Faun” is about a man who finds a little door into a fairy tale world like Narnia or Wonderland and begins running hunting parties over there to shoot unicorns and orcs. Don’t bother calling my screen agent for the rights . . . Netflix already picked them up!*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

J.H.: *I'm a comic book guy from way back . . . my breakthrough gig was writing for Spider-Man. Mickey Spillane also wrote for comics. It's a good apprenticeship for a commercial writer. You learn to pace a story within an inch of its life and you keep the fists flying and the hot kisses coming.*

I'm back in the comic book game now, curating my own line of horror mags under D.C.'s Hill House Comics imprint, and writing a few myself. The most recent is called Basketful of Heads. That one is about a woman fighting for her life against a gang of home invaders with a mysterious agenda. They've got guns, but she's got a Viking axe with occult properties—she can take off a man's head with one swing of the blade, and afterward the decapitated noggin remains alert, alive, aware and talking. So she begins to hack her way to the truth of what they're after.

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

J.H.: *Would that be a memorable experience with one of my readers . . . or a memorable experience of being a fan myself? I once (seriously) crept up on Elmore Leonard in a dark alley and gave him a signed book. My hand was shaking. No one ever wrote better crime novels than Leonard.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

J.H.: *Anytime anyone tells you something you wrote was one of the best things they read this year, you gotta feel good. Ultimately that affirmation is what most of us are really hoping and working for, and everything else is just a means to that end.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

J.H.: *Are you sure they'd really want to hear my writing advice? It would probably be better to apologize to them for boiling the planet and poisoning the oceans with crap . . . not that I'd expect them to be inclined toward forgiveness.*

Besides, I wouldn't dare try to advise writers of the future. Who knows what the publishing business might look like then. It's possible in another hundred years novels will be delivered in pill form. You'll be able to put a Ross McDonald novel on your tongue and let it dissolve. I imagine it would taste like a mellow whiskey and the sea breeze off the Santa Monica pier. Maybe with a bitter aftertaste of gunpowder.

S. MAG.: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have and why?

J.H.: *I have a continuing comic book series, Locke & Key, that I've been working on since 2007 with my soul brother, artist Gabriel Rodriguez. In it, a boy discovers a key that allows him to open a sinister looking door . . . and when he crosses the threshold, his spirit leaps from his body, and he can sail around as a ghost. Bode Locke isn't a superhero, but I've always loved the idea of astral projection, being able to walk through walls and explore the world unseen.*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

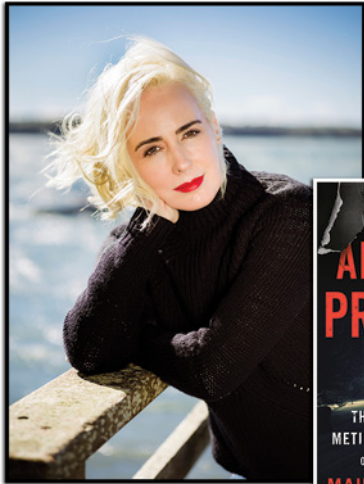
J.H.: *So many! Don't get me started. It would be a pretty long list. I'll name one. My dad has labored for decades as an obscure, underground novelist. One of his relatively unknown works is a thriller called “The Outsider,” which came out a couple years back. I'd love to write just one novel in my life that runs that hard. Reading it was like being strapped to a rocket.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

J.H.: *Unemployed?*

More seriously, I've always had an intense desire to play make-believe professionally. My head is always shooting off into my own private narratives, and if it's going to do that, I might as well get paid for it. I had a flirtation for a few years with film. Maybe if I wasn't a writer, I would've wound up directing for TV or summin'? Or teaching film? It's not hard to imagine I might've wound up teaching film history, a subject I loved in college. If I couldn't do make-believe, maybe it would've been enough to have a career dedicated to thinking and talking about it. Plus, anytime I didn't feel like lecturing I could just put on a movie. My students woulda loved me. ■

TRUE CRIME BEST OF 2019



Press Photo Credit: Dorothy Hong

“AMERICAN PREDATOR: THE HUNT FOR THE MOST METICULOUS SERIAL KILLER OF THE 21ST CENTURY” by Maureen Callahan (Viking; July 2, 2019): Ted Bundy. John Wayne Gacy. Jeffrey Dahmer. The names of notorious serial killers are usually well-known; they echo in the news and in public consciousness. But most people have never heard of Israel Keyes, one of the most ambitious and terrifying serial killers in modern history. The FBI considered his behavior unprecedented. Described by a prosecutor as “a force of pure evil,” Keyes was a predator who struck all over the United States. He buried “kill kits”—cash, weapons, and body-disposal tools—in remote locations across the country. Over the course of fourteen years, Keyes would fly to a city, rent a car, and drive thousands of miles in order to use his kits. He would break into a stranger’s house, abduct his victims in broad daylight, and kill and dispose of them in mere hours. And then he would return home to Alaska, resuming life as a quiet, reliable construction worker devoted to his only daughter.

When journalist Maureen Callahan first heard about Israel Keyes in 2012, she was captivated by how a killer of this magnitude could go undetected by law enforcement for over a decade. And so began a project that consumed her for the next several years—uncovering the true story behind how the FBI ultimately caught Israel Keyes, and trying to understand what it means for a killer like Keyes to exist. A killer who left a path of monstrous, randomly committed crimes in his wake—many of which remain unsolved to this day.

“American Predator” is the ambitious culmination of years of interviews with key figures in law enforcement and in Keyes’s life, and research uncovered from classified FBI files. Callahan takes us on a journey into the chilling, nightmarish mind of a relentless killer, and to the limitations of traditional law enforcement.

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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Maureen Callahan (M.C.): “*Wild Game: My Mother, Her Lover and Me*” by Adrienne Brodeur. *This gorgeously written memoir is reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier: a slow-moving psychological horror story set among the privileged and beautiful. From a very tender age Brodeur, in awe of her glamorous yet dangerous mother, becomes enmeshed in her mother’s extramarital affair. I read this book in three sittings and paused before the last, asking myself: Are you really ready to leave these crazy, fascinating people?*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

M.C.: *Unprecedented serial killer terrifies FBI; our military secretly built him.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

M.C.: *I would imagine technology will never alter the fundamentals: Your first draft will be unspeakably bad—everyone’s is.*

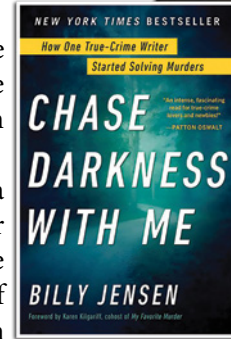
Write 500 words or four hours per day. Seek out first readers and tell them to be brutal. And if you're in it for the money, publishing is probably even less profitable in the future! ■

“CHASE DARKNESS WITH ME” by Billy Jensen (Sourcebooks; August 13, 2019): *Have you ever wanted to solve a murder? Gather the clues the police overlooked? Put together the pieces? Identify the suspect?*

Journalist Billy Jensen spent fifteen years investigating unsolved murders, fighting for the families of victims. Every story he wrote had one thing in common—they didn't have an ending. The killer was still out there.

But after the sudden death of a friend, crime writer and author of “I’ll Be Gone in the Dark,” Michelle McNamara, Billy became fed up. Following a dark night, he came up with a plan. A plan to investigate past the point when the cops had given up. A plan to solve the murders himself.

You’ll ride shotgun as Billy identifies the Halloween Mask Murderer, finds a missing girl in the California Redwoods, and investigates the only other murder in New York City on 9/11. You’ll hear intimate details of the hunts for two of the most terrifying serial killers in history: his friend Michelle McNamara’s pursuit of the Golden State Killer and his own quest to find the murderer of the Allenstown Four. And Billy gives you the tools—and the rules—to help solve murders yourself.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

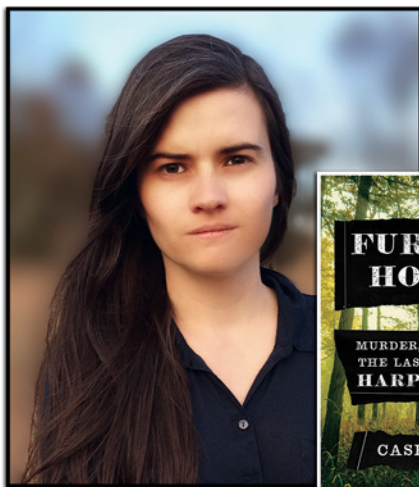
Billy Jensen (B.J.): *Journalist starts solving the murders he writes about.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

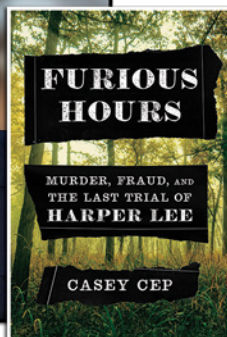
B.J.: *The crowds on the book tour were amazing. I did 12 cities in 12 days. Two hundred people at each stop. The signing line went on for hours but I wouldn't trade it for the world. So many had personal stories to share, and so many people brought me booze, which I couldn't bring on the plane so . . . you get the idea.*

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

B.J.: *It's a toss-up between Hans Landa and Hans Gruber. Favorite hero/heroine? Indiana Jones.* ■



Press Photo Credit: Kathryn Schulz



“FURIOUS HOURS: MURDER, FRAUD, AND THE LAST TRIAL OF HARPER LEE” by Casey Cep (Knopf; May 7, 2019): Reverend Willie Maxwell

was a rural preacher accused of murdering five of his family members for insurance money in the 1970s. With the help of a savvy lawyer, he escaped justice for years until a relative shot him dead at the funeral of his last victim. Despite hundreds of witnesses, Maxwell's murderer was acquitted—thanks to the same attorney who had previously defended the Reverend.

Sitting in the audience during the vigilante's trial was Harper Lee, who had traveled from New York City to her native Alabama with the idea of writing her own “In Cold Blood,” the true-crime classic she had helped her friend Truman Capote research seventeen years earlier. Lee spent a year in town reporting, and many more years working on her own version of the case.

Now Casey Cep brings this story to life, from the shocking murders to the courtroom drama to the racial politics of the Deep South. At the same time, she offers a deeply moving portrait of one of the country's most beloved writers and her struggle with fame, success, and the mystery of artistic creativity.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Casey Cep (C.C.): *The ten-word version is: Harper Lee's obsession with the murder of a serial-killing preacher. But I'll preface those with three more: it's all true!*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

C.C.: *More than a few times now, I've had someone at an event present me with a letter from Harper Lee, including some from when she was investigating the murders at the heart of "Furious Hours." It's such a rewarding experience for me because the person often knew Lee so there's a lot to talk about, but it's also fun for the audience, because we get to share the joy of discovering something new together.*

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

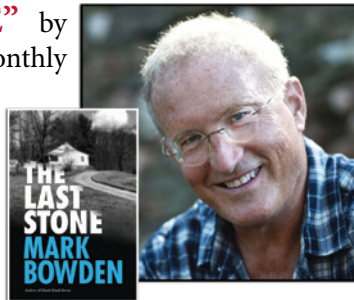
C.C.: *I think my answer is the same to both questions because there's a very rich literary and theological debate about whether he's hero or villain: Satan in John Milton's "Paradise Lost." As to whether or not he's fictional, well, that's a whole other debate. ■*

"THE LAST STONE" by Mark Bowden (Atlantic Monthly Press; April 2, 2019): On

March 29, 1975, sisters Katherine and Sheila Lyons, age 10 and 12, vanished from a shopping mall in suburban Washington, D.C. As shock spread, then grief, a massive police effort found nothing.

The investigation was shelved, and mystery endured. Then, in 2013, a cold case squad detective found something he and a generation of detectives had missed. It pointed them toward a man named Lloyd Welch, then serving time for child molestation in Delaware.

As a cub reporter for a Baltimore newspaper, Mark Bowden covered the frantic first weeks of the story. In "The Last Stone," he returns to write its ending. Over months of intense questioning and extensive investigation of Welch's sprawling, sinister Appalachian clan, five skilled detectives learned to sift truth from determined lies. How do you get a compulsive liar with every reason in the world to lie to tell the truth? "The Last Stone" recounts a masterpiece of criminal interrogation, and delivers a chilling and unprecedented look inside a disturbing criminal mind. ■



Press Photo Credit: Pascal Perich

"A delicious glimpse at what happens when the veil between the two worlds unexpectedly parts. I dare you to put this book down!"

—Suzanne Giesemann, Author of "Messages of Hope"

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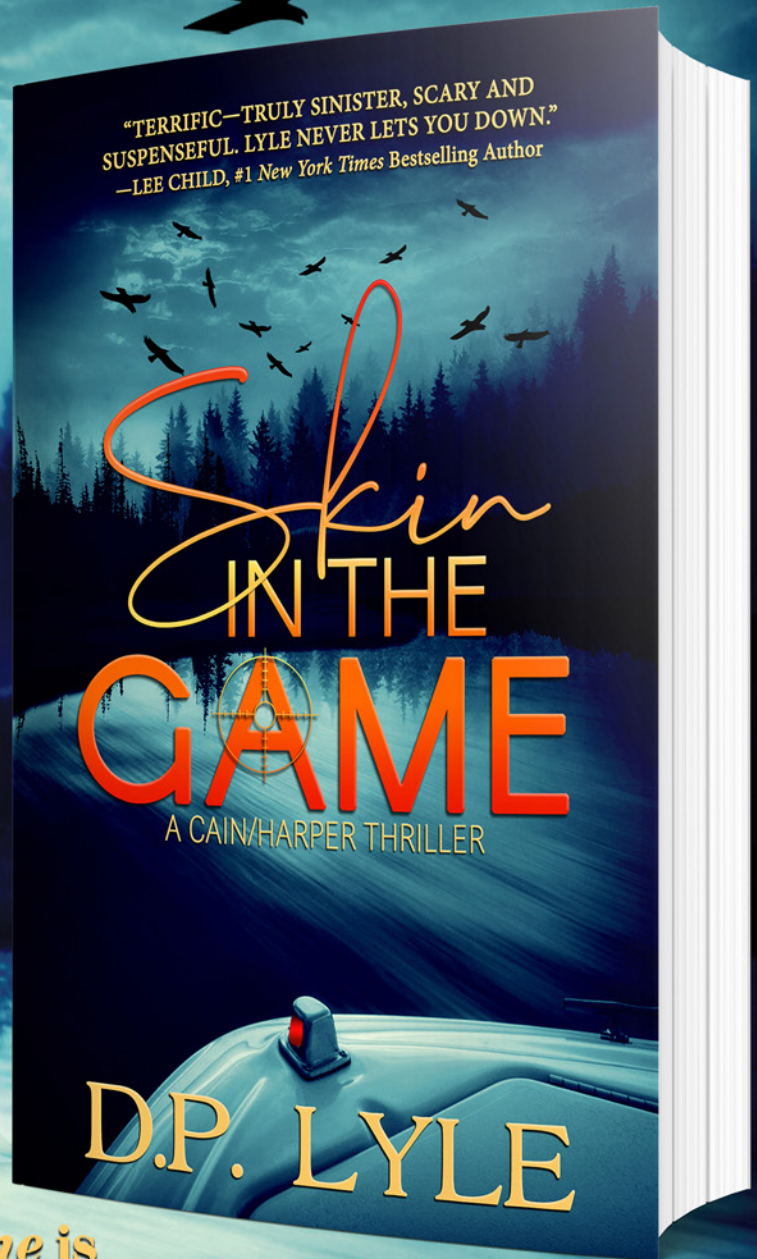
After recovering from amnesia five years ago, Jessica Mack never told anyone she had started hearing voices from the spirit world. Now, forced to use her "gift" to help find missing four-year-old Ethan Starkey, she can no longer ignore the voices. Time is running out for little Ethan as Jessica, and Sage Boles, a man with a mysterious past, are guided by the voices to a séance, where they hope to get clues to the child's whereabouts.

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SUSPENSE THRILLER

BEST of 2019

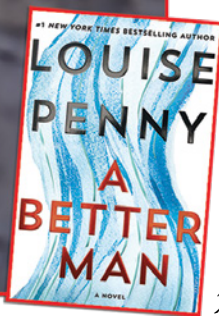


“A BETTER MAN” by Louise Penny (Minotaur Books; August 27, 2019): It’s Gamache’s first day back as head of the homicide department, a job he temporarily shares with his previous second-in-command, Jean-Guy Beauvoir. Flood waters are rising across the province. In the middle of the turmoil a father approaches Gamache, pleading for help in finding his daughter.

As crisis piles upon crisis, Gamache tries to hold off the encroaching chaos, and realizes the search for Vivienne Godin should be abandoned. But with a daughter of his own, he finds himself developing a profound, and perhaps unwise, empathy for her distraught father.

Increasingly hounded by the question, *how would you feel . . .*, he resumes the search.

Press Photo Credit: Jean-François Bérubé



Against Gamache becomes crueler, a body is discovered. And in the tumult, mistakes are made.

In the next novel in this “constantly surprising series that deepens and darkens as it evolves” (*New York Times Book Review*), Gamache must face a horrific possibility, and a burning question.

What would you do if your child’s killer walked free?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Louise Penny (L.P.): Friends meets “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

L.P.: *Be brave. Believe in yourself. Break the ‘rules.’ Write with joy and without fear of what others might think. And, oh yes, have fun!*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

L.P.: . . . *very disappointed in myself, for allowing the fear of failure to keep me from my dream.* ■

“AN UNSETTLED GRAVE” by Bernard Schaffer (Kensington; July 30, 2019): “*There’s a thousand scavengers in these woods.*”

Before being promoted to detective, Carrie Santero was given a rare glimpse into the mind of a killer. Through her mentor, Jacob Rein—a seasoned manhunter whose gift for plumbing the depths of madness nearly drove him over the

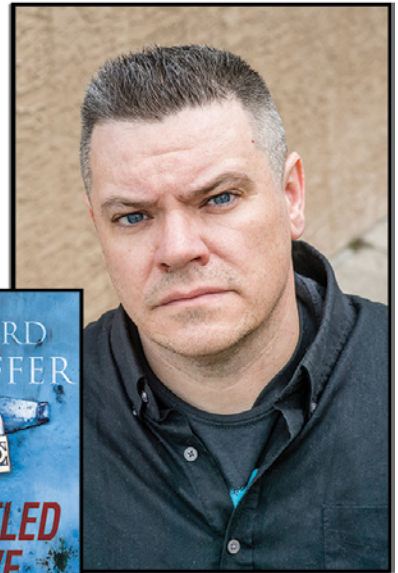
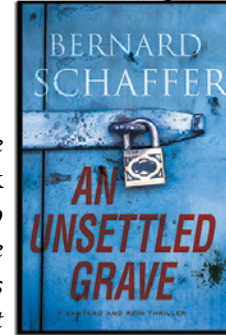
brink—she was able to help capture one of the most depraved serial killers in the country. Now, the discovery of a small human foot buried in the Pennsylvania woods will lead her to a decades-old cold case—and the darkest secrets of her mentor's youth.

"Nobody trusts an animal that tries to eat its own kind."

Thirty years ago, a young girl went missing. A police officer was murdered. Another committed suicide. The lives of everyone involved would never be the same. For three agonizing decades, Jacob Rein has yearned for the truth. But when Detective Carrie Santero begins digging up new evidence, she discovers some answers come with shattering consequences.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Bernard Schaffer (B.S.): *I'm loving the new annotated Lovecraft volume "Beyond Arkham" by Leslie S. Klinger. I was a huge fan of Klinger's Sherlock Holmes Annotated series. They are all gorgeous books. I'm relatively new to Lovecraft. It's wonderful to have such a knowledgeable guide along with me like Klinger. I also admire that they did not shy away from confronting Howard's despicable views. They could have ignored them. Instead, they say out front that he was a racist and anti-Semite and yet we can examine his work regardless.*



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

B.S.: *This is so difficult. It's easier to write an 80,000 word novel than it is to write a product description about the novel. Nearly as awful as the task of coming up with a title for the damned things. Let's see . . . A Cold Case Exposes Secrets of a Detective's Past.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

B.S.: *"Blood Angel," the third in the Santero and Rein Thriller series, comes out in the summer.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

B.S.: *Well, it's awkward to talk about, but at the 2018 ThrillerFest I was crammed into an elevator next to George RR Martin. I was pretty drunk. George played it cool and acted like he wasn't a fan, or had ever even heard of me, which I thought was admirable on his part.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

B.S.: *It's a huge honor. I'm so pleased people enjoyed "An Unsettled Grave." Writing is a solitary endeavor and you work alone for months on end with no idea of how anyone will respond to your creation when they finally read it.*

All the characters live with you for a long time before being sent out into the world to fend for themselves. When they are found by readers and given a home, it's the most gratifying thing in the world.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

B.S.: *Real authors finish their work.*

I've had so many people ask me to listen to their ideas for an unwritten novel or wanting me to read their first few pages. I always tell them the same thing. Finish your book. Put it away. Go work on something else. Go back and do a rewrite. Put it away. Go work on something else. Go back and do a rewrite. After you've gone through all that, and the book is as perfect as you can possibly get it, then I'll look at it.

Stephen King gave all of us permission to be authors in "On Writing." Permission is granted. You don't need me or anyone else to coddle you into continuing on. If you really want to do this, you must have the strength and fortitude and vision to see it through and finish it, all on your own.

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

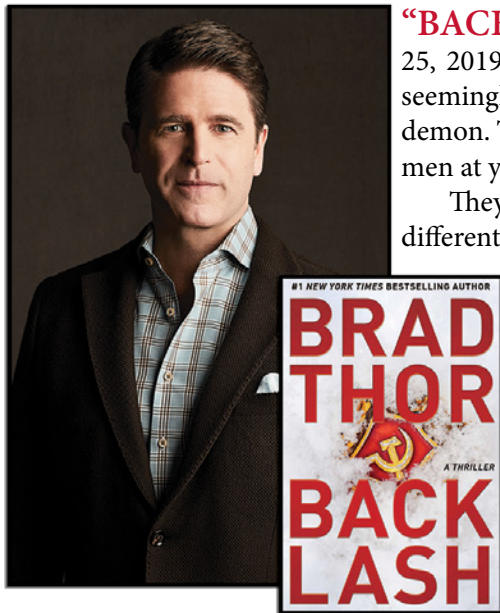
B.S.: *My initial answer was "Miserable" but then I looked back at some older issues and saw my friend Robert Dugoni already used that one.*

I'd be a rock guitar virtuoso. I can't play any instruments at all and have no musical talent to speak of, but I'm fascinated by the masters of the guitar who continue to ply and perfect their craft.

There are videos of Prince being in the audience at various functions where people are playing music, and he'd somehow walk toward the guitarist and they'd surrender their instrument to him. Then he'd proceed to do things with that guitar that no one else was capable of. Once he was finished, he'd unstrap the guitar and hand it back and vanish into the crowd again. The band on stage would just stare blankly, as if they'd been momentarily visited by some otherworldly power.

There's something about writing in all of that, if you look. We are all given the same thing at the outset. A blank page. A keyboard with all the same letters and numbers. What you do with it, what you create with it, that's the difference between the guitarist in the house band and Prince.

Muhammad Ali used to say that fights are won when you are jogging out on the road at five AM, with no spotlight or crowds to cheer you on. Writing is the same. It's about how hard you are willing to work when no one is looking. It's the same as it has always been. It's the same as it will always be. ■



Press Photo Credit: Jeremy Cowart

"BACKLASH" by Brad Thor (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; First Edition edition; June 25, 2019): In ancient texts, there are stories about men who struck from the shadows, seemingly beyond the reach of death itself. These men were considered part angel, part demon. Their loyalty was to their families, their friends, and their kings. You crossed these men at your peril. And once crossed, there was no crossing back.

They were fearless; men of honor who have been known throughout history by different names: Spartan, Viking, Samurai.

Today, men like these still strike from the shadows. They are highly prized intelligence agents, military operatives, and assassins.

One man is all three.

Two days ago, that man was crossed—*badly*.

Now, far from home and surrounded by his enemy, Scot Harvath must battle his way out.

With no support, no cavalry coming, and no one even aware of where he is, it will take everything he has ever learned to survive.

But survival isn't enough. Harvath wants *revenge*.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Brad Thor (B.T.): *I created a special, exclusive edition of "Backlash" for Barnes & Noble in 2019. In it, I included a bonus chapter. That chapter has a VERY big hint of what's next for my protagonist, Scot Harvath. I'll be sending the chapter out to my email subscribers in early 2020 and they'll get a taste of what'll be coming in the summer. It's going to involve more intense, non-stop action, more international intrigue, greater peril, and higher personal stakes than Harvath has ever experienced.*

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

B.T.: *It is an incredible honor—doubly so on this book. With "Backlash," I tried to stretch myself as an author and to do things I had never done. With every word, I wondered: is this right? Am I doing this correctly? It feels right, but what will readers think?*

I took a lot of risks, but they all paid off. The reader reviews and critical acclaim for "Backlash" have been fantastic.

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

B.T.: *Never take anything for granted—especially your readers. Listen to them. They're the people you work for. You owe it to them to produce the absolute best book you are capable of and then to turn around and get better with your next one. If you*

continue to do that, they will continue to keep you employed. ■



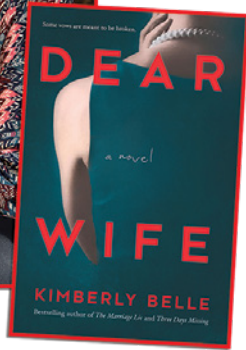
“DEAR WIFE” by Kimberly Belle (Park Row; Original edition; June 25, 2019): Beth Murphy is on the run . . .

For nearly a year, Beth has been planning for this day. A day some people might call any other Wednesday, but Beth prefers to see it as her new beginning—one with a new look, new name and new city. Beth has given her plan significant thought, because one small slip and her violent husband will find her.

Sabine Hardison is missing . . .

A couple hundred miles away, Jeffrey returns home from a work trip to find his wife, Sabine, is missing. Wherever she is, she’s taken almost nothing with her. Her abandoned car is the only evidence the police have, and all signs point to foul play.

As the police search for leads, the case becomes more and more convoluted. Sabine’s carefully laid plans for her future indicate trouble at home, and a husband who would be better off with her gone. The detective on the case will stop at nothing to find out what happened and bring this missing woman home. Where is Sabine? And who is Beth? The only thing that’s certain is that someone is lying and the truth won’t stay buried for long.



Press Photo Credit: Brandon Wattson

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

Kimberly Belle (K.B.): *“Stranger in the Lake,” a story about a newlywed woman who discovers a body under her lakeside home’s dock. The police show up, and in the stress of the moment, she follows her new husband’s lead and lies about ever having met the woman in passing. It’s not a big lie, and she doesn’t really think much of it at the time, but soon that one little lie turns into an avalanche. Coming June 2020!*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

K.B.: *“Daisy Jones & The Six” by Taylor Jenkins Reid. Beyond the brilliant and unique format, she perfectly captured that 70s, rock-and-roll vibe. I was entranced!*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

K.B.: *A travel scout. For me there is no better adventure than flying off to some faraway place and discovering something new, but it’s not a cheap hobby. I could use an expense account. ■*

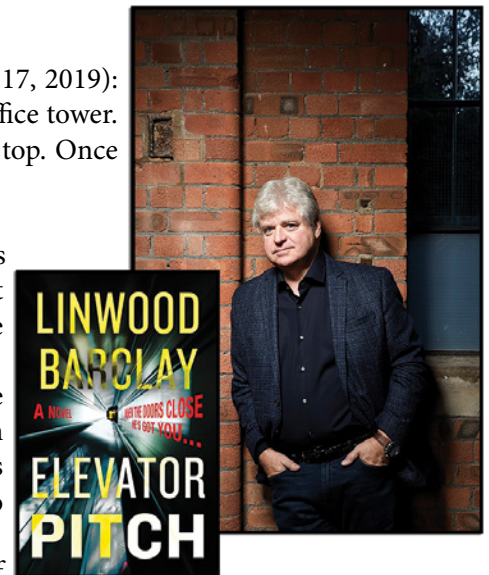
“ELEVATOR PITCH” by Linwood Barclay (William Morrow; September 17, 2019): It all begins on a Monday, when four people board an elevator in a Manhattan office tower. Each presses a button for their floor, but the elevator proceeds, non-stop, to the top. Once there, it stops for a few seconds, and then plummets.

Right to the bottom of the shaft.

It appears to be a horrific, random tragedy. But then, on Tuesday, it happens again, in a different Manhattan skyscraper. And when Wednesday brings yet another high-rise catastrophe, one of the most vertical cities in the world—and the nation’s capital of media, finance, and entertainment—is plunged into chaos.

Clearly, this is anything but random. This is a cold, calculated bid to terrorize the city. And it’s working. Fearing for their lives, thousands of men and women working in offices across the city refuse to leave their homes. Commerce has slowed to a trickle. Emergency calls to the top floors of apartment buildings go unanswered.

Who is behind this? Why are they doing it? What do these deadly acts of sabotage have to do with the fingerless body found on the High Line? Two seasoned



Press Photo Credit: Ellis Parinder

New York detectives and a straight-shooting journalist must race against time to find the answers before the city's newest, and tallest, residential tower has its ribbon-cutting on Thursday.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Linwood Barclay (L.B.): *Someone is sabotaging elevators throughout Manhattan. Better take the stairs.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

L.B.: *Slightly up in the air. The paperback release of "Elevator Pitch," of course, but we may delay my usual September release until early 2021. But there may also be a surprise or two I can't talk about yet.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

L.B.: *At an event last year a woman told me that her son—a successful businessman in his 30s—had never read a novel. I can't recall if it was a reading disability, didn't have the attention span, or just couldn't find anything that really engaged him. She gave him one of my books, and something about them worked for him. Now he's reading all of them. That story was pretty special.*

S. MAG.: Who's your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

L.B.: *My favorite fictional detective is Lew Archer, created by Ross Macdonald. I like how he's more than just a private eye. He's this cleansing, exposing buried family secrets to purifying sunlight. As for a villain, probably no one has ever filled me with as much fear as the Wicked Witch of the West from The Wizard of Oz. When I was a kid, they'd air that movie every year around Christmas. She scared the bejeesus out of me. She even hated dogs.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn't an author, I would be _____.

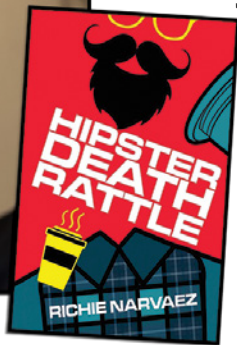
L.B.: . . . *unemployable.* ■



Press Photo Credit: Erich Wood

"HIPSTER DEATH RATTLE" by Richie Narvaez (Down & Out Books; March 30, 2019): Murder is trending. Hipsters are getting slashed to pieces in the hippest neighborhood in New York: Williamsburg, Brooklyn. While Detectives Petrosino and Hadid hound local gangbangers, slacker reporter Tony Moran and his ex Magaly Fernandez get caught up in a missing person's case—one that might just get them hacked to death.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?



Richie Narvaez (R.N.): *Lots of napping is what I'm planning, what I'd like to do. But I will be busy! I have a YA thriller coming out in May called "Holly Hernandez and the Death of Disco," to be published by Arte Publico. It features a young Nancy Drew type, and she has an archrival, and both are working to solve a murder in 1979. Also I have a bunch of noir stories that have been published here and there over the last ten years, and I'm putting them together in a collection for the kind folks at Down & Out Books.*

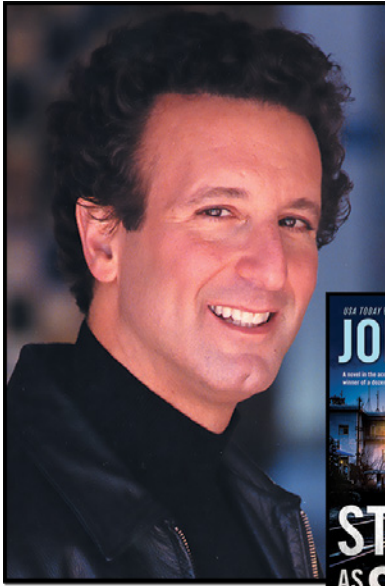
S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

R.N.: *I recently did a talk about "Hipster Death Rattle" for a college class on Long Island, and those students were amazing. They brought up moments and points about the book I didn't remember or think of. One student said it was the best book he'd ever*

read. He admitted to not being a reader, but the fact that my book affected this student kind of blew my mind.

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

R.N.: Honestly, it means a lot to me. Book publishing can feel like being in the middle of a stampede of voices, struggling to be noticed in the multitude and frenzy. I mean, there are easily millions of us trying to do this thing and trying to find readers. In that process, you can feel invisible, unseen. So being recognized in this way for my little book by such a cool and vital magazine makes me very happy. ■



“STRONG AS STEEL” by Jon Land (Forge Books; April 23, 2019): 1994: Texas Ranger Jim Strong investigates a mass murder on a dusty freight train linked to a mysterious, missing cargo for which no record exists.

The Present: His daughter, fifth generation Texas Ranger Caitlin Strong, finds herself on the trail of that same cargo when skeletal remains are found near an excavation site in the Texas desert. She’s also dealing with the aftermath of a massacre that claimed the lives of all the workers at a private intelligence company on her watch.

These two cases are connected by a long buried secret, one that men have killed and died to protect. Caitlin and her outlaw lover Cort Wesley Masters must prove themselves to be as strong as steel to overcome a bloody tide that has been rising for centuries.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

Jon Land (J.L.): *Texas Ranger Caitlin Strong pursues the real villains behind the opioid crisis.*

Press Photo Credit: Rayzor Bachand

S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

J.L.: *Validation in an age of ever-declining sales.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

J.L.: *Have as much fun writing the book as you want your readers to have reading it.* ■

“THE CHAIN” by Adrian McKinty (Mulholland Books; July 9, 2019): VICTIM. SURVIVOR. ABDUCTOR. CRIMINAL.

YOU WILL BECOME EACH ONE.

Your phone rings.

A stranger has kidnapped your child.

To free them you must abduct someone else’s child.

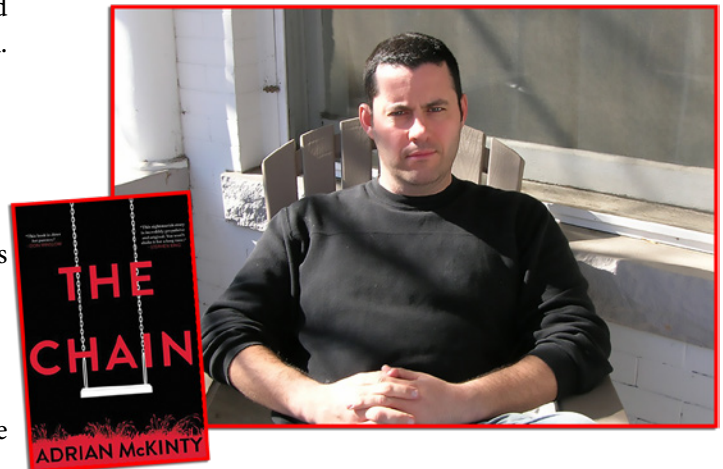
Your child will be released when your victim’s parents kidnap another child.

If any of these things don’t happen:

YOUR CHILD WILL BE KILLED.

YOU ARE NOW PART OF THE CHAIN.

“You are not the first. And you will certainly not be the last.” ■



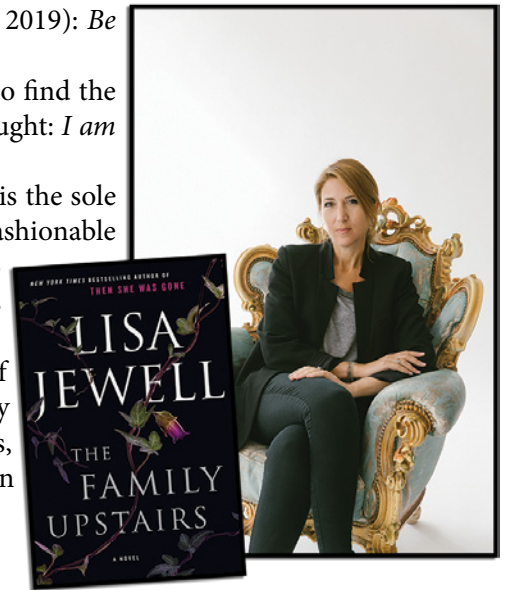
Press Photo Credit: Leah Garrett

“THE FAMILY UPSTAIRS” by Lisa Jewell (Atria Books; November 5, 2019): *Be careful who you let in.*

Soon after her twenty-fifth birthday, Libby Jones returns home from work to find the letter she’s been waiting for her entire life. She rips it open with one driving thought: *I am finally going to know who I am.*

She soon learns not only the identity of her birth parents, but also that she is the sole inheritor of their abandoned mansion on the banks of the Thames in London’s fashionable Chelsea neighborhood, worth millions. Everything in Libby’s life is about to change. But what she can’t possibly know is that others have been waiting for this day as well—and she is on a collision course to meet them.

Twenty-five years ago, police were called to 16 Cheyne Walk with reports of a baby crying. When they arrived, they found a healthy ten-month-old happily cooing in her crib in the bedroom. Downstairs in the kitchen lay three dead bodies, all dressed in black, next to a hastily scrawled note. And the four other children reported to live at Cheyne Walk were gone.



Press Photo Credit: Andrew Whitton

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

Lisa Jewell (L.J.): *The best book I read in 2019 was neither a thriller nor a suspense novel in the traditional senses of the terms, but was nonetheless utterly suspenseful and thrilling. I read it one day, gripped until the very last page. It was “Unfollow” by Megan Phelps-Roper, a memoir about growing up as a member of the Westboro Baptist Cult and ultimately escaping. Even though I knew what was going to happen from the outset, learning more about the background of the cult and understanding more about the psychology behind it was fascinating. Phelps-Roper is an amazing writer and I’m so glad she got the chance to share that talent with us in this remarkable memoir, as opposed to wasting it on writing hate-filled placards and tweets.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

L.J.: *In 2020 I will be publishing my 18th novel. Well, hopefully—I haven’t finished writing it yet and it’s being very badly behaved right now! It’s called “The Invisible Girl” and will publish in the UK in August and in the US in early November. It’s very different to “The Family Upstairs,” which was very much a work of pure fantasy and imagination. This one is set in modern day in the area of London in which I live and is about a neighborhood dealing with the aftermath of a girl going missing on their street.*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

L.J.: *There are three ways to answer this question. There’s the one that supposes I had never actually been an author, to which the answer would be a secretary as that is what I was before I became an author and what I had imagined I always would be. The second answer approaches the question without income or qualifications as an issue, and in this case the answer would be a midwife. Or a vet. The third answer approaches the question with income and qualifications as issues and the answer here would be an editor. I love editing my work and have edited other people. ■*



Press Photo Credit: Lynn Wayne

“THE MURDER LIST” by Hank Phillippi Ryan (Forge Books; August 20, 2019): Law student Rachel North is the ultimate reliable narrator—she will tell you, without hesitation, what she knows to be true. She’s smart, she’s a hard worker, she does the right thing. She’s successfully married to a faithful and devoted husband, a lion of Boston’s defense bar. And her internship with the powerful District Attorney’s office is her ticket to a successful future.

Problem is—she’s wrong.

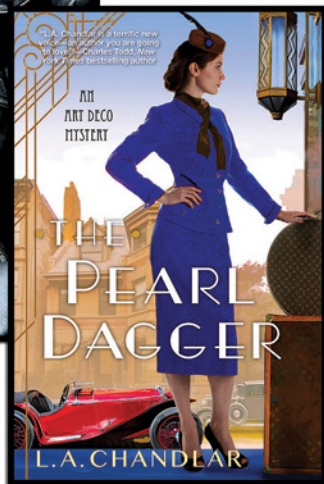
Rachel. Jack. Martha. Who is next on The Murder List?

And in this cat and mouse game—the battle for justice becomes a battle for survival. ■

And the Winner is. . .



Press Photo Credit: Britt Dyer Photography



“THE PEARL DAGGER” by L.A. Chandler (Kensington; August 27, 2019): *As the Great Depression loosens its grip on New York City, Mayor La Guardia and his team meet their greatest foe in the fight against organized crime . . .*

Lane Sanders and her fiery boss, Mayor Fiorello “Fio” La Guardia have managed to contain the explosive underground conspiracies of New York’s most sinister schemers. But after a seemingly harmless pinball racket claims the life of a trusted ally, a new ringleader signals the rebirth of an all-too-familiar crime network at home and across the pond . . .

Spurred on by the possibility of a violent syndicate spreading like wildfire through Europe, Lane sets sail for London—the city where her parents began the undercover work that led to their tragic undoing. And this time, she won’t chase down childhood nightmares without Finn Brodie, who vows to dispel his own difficult secrets abroad . . .

While Finn confronts a devious sibling’s plot that echoes Orson Welles’s *Voodoo Macbeth*, Lane discovers that a dazzling pearl dagger may wield the ultimate clue to guide their hunt for justice on two sides of the ocean. With terrors from the past and present converging, Lane can’t save herself unless she starts believing that, like her weapon of choice, she also has the power to be both beautiful and dangerous.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2019?

L.A. Chandler (L.A.C.): *Oh man, that’s like asking which is my favorite child. You know what really stuck with me, is David Morrell’s “Murder as a Fine Art.” It’s the first in the Thomas De Quincy novels (“The Opium Eater”) and it offers a dark and gritty world like Caleb Carr’s “The Alienist” with memorable characters and a remarkable plot.*

S. MAG.: Hollywood pitches are very brief. How would you pitch your book to the movies in ten words or less?

L.A.C.: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel meets Gangster Squad.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2020?

L.A.C.: *I have a stand-alone book that my agent is currently shopping about a modern day journalist sent on a mission to New York to dig up lost stories about the Christmas holidays. The idea of getting to be a vicarious witness to historical events, especially lost ones that we may not know much about, has always been a delicious thing for me. I also am writing a modern day suspense novel that is like Stand by Me meets Big Little Lies.*

S. MAG.: Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

L.A.C.: *My biggest fan is a man named Ron from Chicago. In his eyes, L.A. (which he*



“It’s a lot of work being an author and putting yourself ‘out there.’ My hat is off to every single author, because it takes a lot of guts and fortitude.”

insists on calling me instead of Laurie) can do no wrong and he adores the world within the Art Deco Mysteries. Every Bouchercon, he and his wife Tobi find me and all I hear is “L.A.! how is L.A.? Don’t you just love L.A.?” They’re adorable! The other is actually with an author who’s a dear friend, James Ziskin. I LOVE his 1960s Ellie Stone series and he wrote a blurb for me about “The Pearl Dagger.” The way he “got” Lane and her world just took my breath away. Seriously, bonding over books is the best thing ever.



S. MAG.: Who’s your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

L.A.C.: *I loved the complexity of Sethos as a villain within the Amelia Peabody series by Elizabeth Peters. But for an all-bad, dark villain: Dr. Jekyll in Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” It’s a deeper and more complicated read than many might know unless they read it recently. I actually have Lane, my protagonist, reading it in book 2, “The Gold Pawn,” as well as a villain as they cross paths. For a favorite classic hero, Jean Valjean in “Les Misérables”—it’s one of the only books that ever made me cry. But I personally love as a “friend” Deanna Raybourn’s Veronica Speedwell for her intelligence, independence, and love of adventure mixed in with a spicy (and often hilarious) love of her sexuality.*

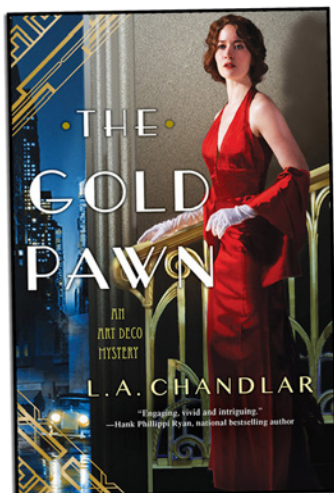
S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as the “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

L.A.C.: *It’s been such a wonderful, encouraging, fun experience! It’s a lot of work being an author and putting yourself “out there.” My hat is off to every single author, because it takes a lot of guts and fortitude. I am so grateful for this award; it’s incredible validation.*

S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

L.A.C.: *Keep going and don’t think you have to do this alone. The writing community is extremely helpful and encouraging. Be strong. You can handle rejection and long hours because creating a world of story and characters is incredibly satisfying and more exhilarating to bond with readers than you can imagine. It’s worth it!*

S. MAG.: If you could be a superhero, which one would you be? And what is that one special gift of his/hers you want to have and why?



L.A.C.: *Wonder Woman. Always Wonder Woman. Except that I’d add the ability to fly. And I can do that because I’d write it into my story. I’ve always admired her intelligence and strength, not to mention her theme song. And I really dig her golden cuffs.*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

L.A.C.: *“The Count of Monte Cristo.”*

S. MAG.: Finish this sentence: If I wasn’t an author, I would be _____.

L.A.C.: *...unfulfilled and still searching for a big part of my heart.*

To learn more about L.A. Chandler, go to www.lachandlar.com. ■

"Rick Cahill ascends to the top ranks of the classic private eyes."

—MICHAEL CONNELLY, *New York Times* best-selling author

LOST TOMORROWS

A RICK CAHILL NOVEL

ANTHONY AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

MATT COYLE

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—MEG GARDINER

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A “Murderous” Trio Offers Readers Christmas Cheer

Homicide for the Holidays: *Carlene O’Connor, Maddie Day & Alex Erickson* on “Christmas Cocoa Murder”

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*



‘Tis the season to be festive . . . and felonious! Just in time for the holidays, a trio of Kensington’s tried-and-true cozy mystery authors—Carlene O’Connor, Maddie Day, and Alex Erickson—have teamed up to deliver “Christmas Cocoa Murder,” a collection of thematic novellas that serve up a little something sweet . . . and a little something sinister.

Carlene O’Connor Press Photo Credit: Abigail Zoe Martin; Maddie Day Press Photo Credit: Meg Manion Silliker; Alex Erickson Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Carlene O’Connor is the author of the *Irish Village Mysteries*—the fifth of which, “Murder in an Irish Cottage,” will be released

on February 25, 2020. She also wrote “Murder in Galway,” which serves as the launching point for a second series. O’Connor comes from a long line of Irish storytellers, and splits her time between Chicago and the Emerald Isle.

Bostonian Maddie Day—aka Edith Maxwell—is an amateur chef and the Agatha and Macavity Award-nominated writer of the *Country Store Mysteries*, the seventh of which, “Nacho Average Murder,” will be published on June 30, 2020. She also authors the *Cozy Capers Book Group Mysteries*, which debuted with “Murder on Cape Cod.”

Alex Erickson is the author of seven *Bookstore Café Mysteries*, the most recent of which, “Death by Café Mocha,” came out in August. He also writes the *Furever Pets Mysteries*, introduced with “The Pomeranian Always Barks Twice.” Erickson makes his home in Ohio, where he lives with his family and resident felines.

From the publisher:

CHRISTMAS COCOA MURDER by CARLENE O’CONNOR

Siobhán O’Sullivan’s hopes for a quiet Irish Christmas are dashed when the local Santa turns up dead in a carnival dunk tank of hot cocoa. Now instead of hunting down holiday gifts, she’s pursuing a heartless killer. Seems the dead Santa was no angel either, stealing neighborhood dogs to guide his sleigh. But was it his holiday antics—or worse—that led to his death by chocolate?

CHRISTMAS COCOA AND A CORPSE by MADDIE DAY

When local businessman Jed Greenberg is found dead with a Chocolate lab whimpering over his body, the police start sniffing around Robbie Jordan’s country restaurant for answers. Was it something in Robbie’s hot cocoa that killed Jed, or was it Cocoa the dog? As the suspects pile as high as her holiday tree, Robbie attempts to get to the bottom of the sickly-sweet murder . . .



DEATH BY HOT COCOA by ALEX ERICKSON

A Christmas-themed escape game seems like the perfect pre-holiday treat for bookstore café owner Krissy Hancock and her best friend. But when the host is found dead in a pool of hot cocoa, it's up to Krissy and her team to catch the killer—or escape before getting killed.

Now, the authors stir up some cozy Christmas cheer—but with a dash of danger . . .

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): What inspired the idea for your contribution to “Christmas Cocoa Murder”—and, in your opinion, why does the holiday season lend itself so well to tales of murder, mischief, and mayhem?

Carlene O'Connor (C.O.): *Friends of mine who live in Kilmallock, County Limerick, Ireland, (the town on which Kilbane is based) have two adorable boys who participate every year in the town play called a panto, or pantos, or pantomime. I had no idea what a pantos was and did some research on the tradition—taking a fairytale and producing it at Christmas with men often in drag, and audience participation—it sounded like too much fun for Kilbane to miss out on. Hot cocoa was the theme and I wanted to do something original which is when I decided to throw in the dunk tank to the town's celebrations. (Poor Santy!) Christmas lends itself well to murder and mischief, because the contradiction between the joy and the evil is inherent, and of course with all those folks home with idle hands—trouble always ensues.*

Maddie Day (M.D.): *I was hashing through the plot of my novella with my Wicked Authors blogmates. In the Country Store Mysteries, Robbie Jordan runs a breakfast and lunch restaurant in a restored country store. I figured the murder would be via hot cocoa. Jessica Ellicott said, “But the others are surely going to do that. Why not have a black Labrador named Cocoa?” Thanks to Jessica for the light bulb moment! I decided Cocoa was a rescue puppy and a grandson's Christmas gift, and I ran from there.*

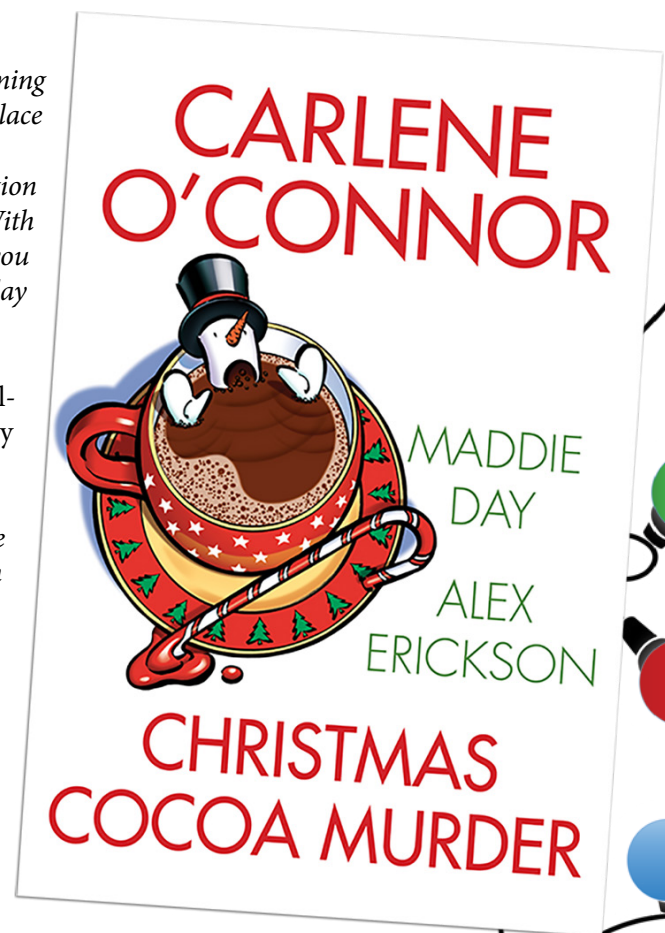
Many think of family, home, warm lights, and good food for the holidays (although those with difficult—or no—families have a different view). Having murder, tension, and suspense drop into the mix is a perfect contrast, especially when justice is restored in the community at the end, as we do in cozy mysteries.

Alex Erickson (A.E.): *My wife, actually. While I was brainstorming ideas, she mentioned that an escape room would be an interesting place for a murder mystery. I latched onto that and didn't let go.*

I believe the holidays work so well because of the juxtaposition between the joy inherent in celebration, and the misery of murder. With cozies, you often end on a happy note, despite the murder, and when you throw in holiday cheer, the highs tend to be higher than in non-holiday themed stories, while the lows never quite sink as low.

J.B.V.: What are the unique challenges of writing a novella vs. a full-length book—and how do considerations such as series continuity and readership (old vs. new) play into story development?

C.O.: *I did have to do some juggling to figure out the timeline because in book four of The Irish Village Mystery series, we were left with some major news and I couldn't deal with that news in the novella. That led to a decision to set it back in time slightly before Siobhan becomes a garda. Once that was worked out, I think it played nicely. If readers are new to the series, their curiosity may be piqued as to what they've missed out on, but that's a good thing if it prompts them to find out. I may go lighter than other writers on trying to catch new readers up with everything that's been developed, but I always give enough so that they can pick up any book in any order and still understand the storyline.*



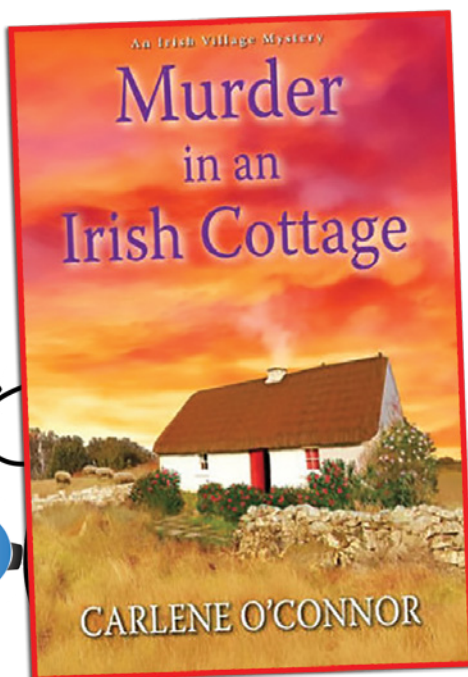
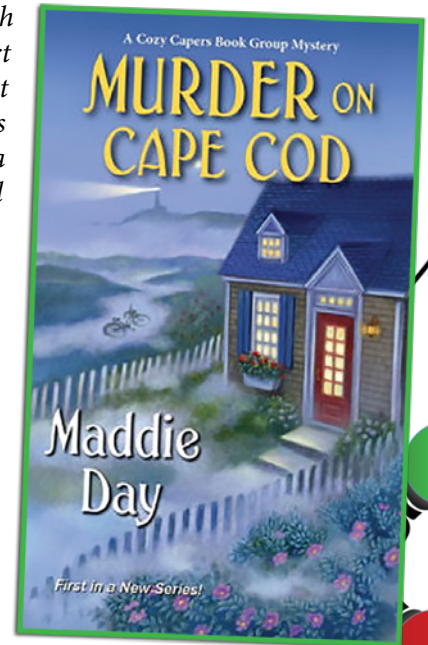
M.D.: This was my first novella, and while I tend to write sparse first drafts of full-length books, they are still over twice as long as our editor requested for this collection. My short stories are pretty terse, too. Still, I was surprised at how easy it was to write a really short novel. I worked in a little backstory so continuing fans would feel at home and new readers would get the picture. In terms of the series, "Strangled Eggs and Ham" took place in a steamy August, so "Christmas Cocoa and a Corpse"—which I'm calling book #6.5—slotted perfectly into book time.

A.E.: The biggest thing I struggled with was how to incorporate much of what goes into the novels into something of a length that doesn't allow for it all to fit. How do I get all the characters the readers expect in the story without shoehorning them in? The same goes for favorite locations. There's only so much space in a novella, and some things that might normally go into a novel have to be cut.

Which lends itself to the second part of the question. I tend to have my characters move forward from book to book. Relationships change. People come and go. But in a novella, it's harder to establish and change those relationships in such a small space. I decided not to have any big shifts in the novella because, quite frankly, I knew not everyone who read the series would want to read the novella, and I didn't want those readers to miss out on important character developments. There would also be new readers coming into Krissy's world who would have no idea who these people are or why they should care. With a shorter format, I didn't have time to explain every relationship, so I felt it best to leave much of it out. It all came down to balance, and I hope I hit it just right.

J.B.V.: Do you recall ever having given or received a particularly meaningful book at the holidays? If so, can you reflect on that experience, and also tell us why books can/do make memorable presents?

C.O.: I do think they make wonderful gifts, and I like to give books (not my own—that would be obnoxious) as gifts, usually a book I've particularly loved. It's also nice to pick up on the reading preferences of friends, and family, or a special interest and buy a book that fits in. I didn't receive books as gifts often as a child and that's because we were regulars at the library, and then later the bookmobile. And now people never know what book to buy me because I've usually already bought and read it. Signed copies make great books, too!



M.D.: I've always received books for gifts, even as a child, and always give them. Years ago, before I had a book out, my sister Janet, who lived in Quebec at the time, gave me "Still Life," Louise Penny's first in her now mega-successful series. I have followed Louise's career, gotten a recent book signed by her to Janet, and have said in public that if I could write like Louise Penny, I could die happy. Books give us lasting joy, a journey to life beyond our circumscribed spheres, and a way to connect with others.

A.E.: I'm going to veer off here a little. I get books during the holidays all the time because I've always read, and everyone knows that it's an easy gift to give me. Instead, I'm going to go back to when I was in school. I was a big reader, and at the time, was always reading books some thought I shouldn't: Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and so on. One day, my history teacher gave me two books, one of which stands out. It was called "Sleepwalk" by John Saul. Her giving me that book gave me permission to read the sort of stuff I loved, and made me realize that not everyone looked down on us readers and writers, because at the time, I struggled. I've never forgotten that little show of kindness and understanding, and believe that moment helped shape my path forward.

J.B.V.: What are your own favorite holiday stories (book, film, television, etc.), and why?

C.O.: It's a Wonderful Life, "A Christmas Carol," "Time and Again" (Jack Finney), and as kids my sister and I loved The Year Without a Santa Claus. (Heat miser!)

I saw It's a Wonderful Life for the first time when I was in my early twenties and so the movie is wrapped up in that particular moment in my life and those friends. It captures the feelings of sadness and desperation that can come with the stress of Christmas, especially when there are real issues happening in one's life, the holidays can exacerbate negative feelings as well. I think that's the reason we need a variety of books, and movies, because the universal message is we're not alone, and it's not always easy.

I've seen and read "A Christmas Carol"—plays, movies, the actual story—and I love it every time.

The Year Without a Santa Claus—Just try and stop my sister and I from watching Heat Miser and Cold Miser go at each other with that song. Just try!

"Time and Again" by Jack Finney. I loved this book—I actually read as a kid even though it's not a kid's book. Who doesn't love New York at Christmas time, especially when time travel is involved? I need to read this book "Time and Again." (See what I did there?)

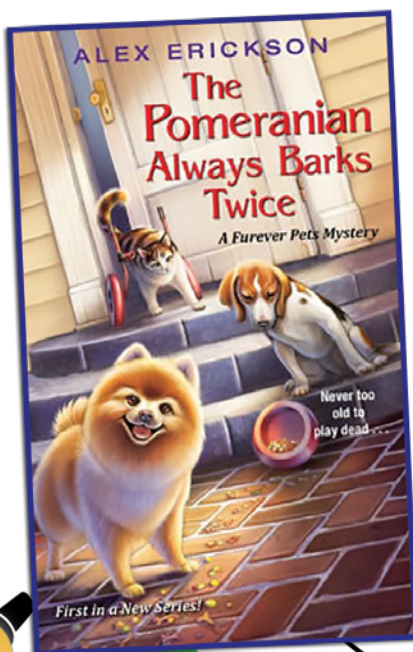
My mother's favorite movie is The Year Without a Christmas Tree and her favorite book is "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" and I'm fond of those as well.

M.D.: *I am fond of Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol, as well as the Muppets version (I'm not a big holiday movie watcher), because they are accessible and cozy. My sons—wearing their new jammies—recited Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from Saint Nicholas" every Christmas Eve while they were growing up. They're in their thirties now, but they'll both be home for the holidays for the first time in years, and I hope they'll reprise the performance!*

A.E.: *I think I'm an oddity because I don't watch or read holiday stories. Sure, if a series has an episode or novel set during the holiday season, I'll watch/read, but I never value them above other installments. I think part of it is because I tend to gravitate toward stories that are darker, or maybe sadder. Many holiday stories are too happy for me, I guess. Call me weird.*

J.B.V.: What does the New Year have in store for your beloved protagonist?

C.O.: *Hmmm. I'm tempted to say, 'Nice try!' There may be weddings. Not saying whose. There will be murder. There will be a novel set at Christmas and for this the O'Sullivans will travel to West Cork, and there will be a new bookshop in town. And possibly a new garda is coming to Kilbane. I will leave it at that. Cheers!*



M.D.: *Robbie Jordan returns to her hometown of Santa Barbara for her tenth high school reunion in February. I tell the story in "Nacho Average Murder," which releases in June, 2020. While in California, among old friends and a high school nemesis, Robbie learns her mother's death three years earlier might not have been a natural one, after all. As she digs deeper, an environmental activist friend of her mom's is murdered. Needless to say, Robbie's week of warm-weather vacation turns into a hunt for a killer.*

A.E.: *Well, for one, she's hoping to avoid another murder. Krissy would like to get through a holiday without something horrible befalling her, or one of her friends. We know, of course, that's unlikely, but hey, she can always hope, right? She does have her sights set on one of the local cops, Paul Dalton, and one of her resolutions will be to make sure that she stops holding herself back and will finally take the plunge. Will he reciprocate? Or will she even be able to get past her fears and take that big step in the first place?*

And if she does, will she be able to do so without someone dying?

I guess we'll have to wait and see. We'd like to thank the co-writers of "Christmas Cocoa Murder" (a Suspense Magazine 2019 "Best of") for spending time with us during the holiday season. ■

ALAN ORLOFF

From Mechanical Engineering to Engineering Thriller, Mystery & Horror Fiction

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Alan Orloff has had a diversified career during his lifetime, far more than most folks. Lucky for us, he's now settled into writing award-winning novels and short stories. His debut mystery, "Diamonds for the Dead," was nominated for an Agatha Award for Best First Novel. His novel, "Pray for the Innocent," won the 2019 ITW Thriller Award in the Best E-Book Original category.

Alan's short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and other publications, including *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Noir at the Salad Bar*, *50 Shades of Cabernet*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, and many others. His story, "Rule Number One" was selected for the 2018 edition of "The Best American Mystery Stories" anthology. His story, "Happy Birthday" (published on *Shotgun Honey*), was a 2018 Derringer Award Finalist in the Flash Fiction category. And his story, "Dying in Dokesville" (published in *Mystery Most Geographical*) won the 2019 Derringer Award in the Short Story category.

Alan is always willing to chat with readers and fellow writers. So, it was no surprise when he agreed—without hesitation—to talk with us for *Suspense Magazine*,

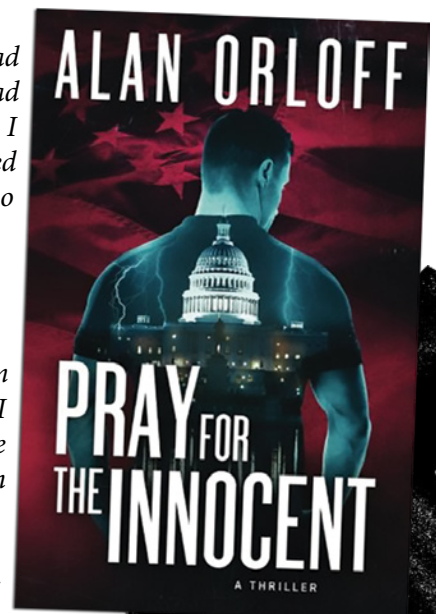
Weldon Burge (W.B.): Alan, thanks for chatting with us. You come from a diverse background. A degree in mechanical engineering, an MBA. You've worked on nuclear submarines, at a marketing research firm, and have even driven a forklift, among many other things. Now you're a full-time writer. How in the world did that happen?

Alan Orloff (A.O.): *A very good question, one that my wife asks me all the time. I wish I had a better answer, but one day I just decided to give writing a try. While I never (never!) had taken a creative writing class (or shown any desire to do so), I'd always been a big reader. I guess I finally got fed up reading other people's stories and wanted to write my own! I started slow, with a proof of concept. Could I write a short story? I did, it didn't stink (too bad), so I took a few workshops, then a few more, and kept at it. Still doing it, too.*

W.B.: Tell us about your latest thriller, "Pray for the Innocent."

A.O.: *Don't hate me, but I woke up at 4 am with the premise for this novel fully formed in my head. I recommend this method very highly! (Although, every morning since, when I wake up WITHOUT a great idea in my head, I have to admit I'm a little disappointed.) The book kicks off with a slight sci-fi twist and then it's off to the races. (It was fortunate enough to win the ITW Thriller Award for Best E-Book Original.) Here's a brief description:*

In the shadow of the Pentagon, a secret DoD brain research experiment goes



terribly wrong, and an ex-Special Ops soldier escapes, believing he is Viktor Dragunov, the Russian operative from the 80's thriller novel, "Attack on America." To capture him, the Feds turn to the person uniquely qualified to predict his next moves, the man who created the fictional character, best-selling author Mathias King.

Now a reclusive English professor, King is reluctant to get involved, having sworn off the culture of violence after a deranged fan murdered his wife. But when innocent people start dying, King is thrust back into that dark world. With help from his enthusiastic graduate assistant Emily Phan, King must outsmart his own creation—while outmaneuvering the cover-up-loving Feds—before Dragunov succeeds in his hell-bent mission.

To destroy America.

W.B.: Your first novel, "Diamonds for the Dead," was nominated for an Agatha Award for Best First Novel. What was your inspiration for that book?

A.O.: Two things came together for this novel. When I was around ten years old or so, my family discovered we had some relatives in Russia who were being persecuted. They'd been in and out of jail and were struggling to immigrate to Israel. I also had another relative, local, who I only saw on holidays. He was a diminutive man who always laughed at my jokes and enjoyed his schnapps just a little too much. I combined these two ideas to come up with the beginnings of my story.

W.B.: You've self-published three horror novels—"The Taste," "First Time Killer," and "Ride-Along"—as Zak Allen. Why self-publish? And why did you decide to go with the pseudonym?

A.O.: A few things factored into my decision. I got this great idea for a horror novel (in my opinion, of course), and I couldn't NOT write it. So I did. But my agent at the time didn't represent horror, so I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. At the time, many writers were having success self-publishing, and

I figured I might as well give it a try. I discovered I wasn't very good at it. Of course that didn't stop me from trying again. And again. I think I've learned my lesson (at least for a while)—I'll do the writing and I'll leave the marketing and promotion to the professionals.

I used a semi-pseudonym (Alan Orloff writing as Zak Allen) to keep reader expectations in check. I didn't want those readers who enjoyed "Diamonds for the Dead" (a

nonviolent, traditional mystery) to pick up another "Alan Orloff" expecting one thing, only to be grossed out reading about cannibals. Don't get me wrong—grossing out readers is fine, as long as they get sufficient warning!

W.B.: Your Last Laff Mystery series—"Killer Routine" and "Deadly Campaign"—has a comedian as your lead character. Do you have experience as a stand-up comic or have you worked in a comedy club? If not, what research did you do to write the novels?

A.O.: I've never tried to perform comedy on stage—too terrifying. But as an experiment, I worked up about twenty minutes of "open-mic night quality" material to use at book events (for those people not familiar with open-mic, the routines can be really, really bad). I discovered that having an audience made up of your friends who have come out to support your book launch reduces (but doesn't eliminate) the heckling! You can actually see one of these events on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjcM7v5S2LU>.

W.B.: What authors inspired or influenced your writing?

A.O.: In high school, while all the other students were laboring over James Joyce and William Faulkner, I was reading Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Stephen King. Then, Dean Koontz and Harry Harrison and Robert C. Clarke. In the 80's, I was working in Boston and my boss introduced me to a PI named Spenser. I devoured all those books as fast as I could.

W.B.: Carl Hiassen, Elmore Leonard, or Lawrence Sanders?

A.O.: Put me down for Block.

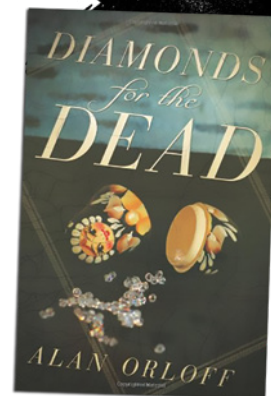
W.B.: You've completed the Herndon (VA) Police Department's Citizen's Police Academy. How has that advanced your career?

A.O.: I wanted to write about crime, but I was a child of white-bread suburbia. So I took the Citizen's Police Academy to learn a few things. And learn I did! We talked about gangs and drugs, we saw a K9 demonstration, we got to use a LIDAR gun, we went to the shooting range to use a real gun, we visited the detention center, and we went on a ride-along. In fact, my ride-along experience was so incredible that I wrote a novel called . . . (wait for it) . . . "Ride-Along."

W.B.: We met at the Creatures, Crimes, and Creativity conference. What would you tell new writers are the benefits



“Actually, I believe that most writers—no matter how much innate talent they might possess—can benefit from taking classes and workshops.”



of attending such events?

A.O.: I love conferences and conventions. In addition to learning about craft, you can also learn about the business of publishing (a squirrely business, I have to say). Perhaps most important are the connections you can make with other writers. Writers are fascinating people, and they come to the table with such a wide variety of experiences—both within and outside of publishing.

W.B.: On a similar note, you teach fiction-writing classes at The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland. How would you “sell” this to a young writer? What do you personally find most fulfilling doing this?

A.O.: There's a saying: “Some writers are born, others are taught.” Actually, I believe that most writers—no matter how much innate talent they might possess—can benefit from taking classes and workshops. There are so many writers looking to get published that you have to be really, really good to stand out from the crowd. For me, the benefits are twofold: I always learn something while teaching; and it feels good to be able to help beginning writers—we were all beginning writers once!

W.B.: Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, or Quentin Tarantino?

A.O.: Three faves, but I'll go with Scorsese.

W.B.: If you could have written any classic novel, from any time period, what would it be?

A.O.: As I mentioned above, I'm not really into the classics, unless Agatha Christie counts. I thought the device Christie used in “Murder on the Orient Express” was very clever. I wish I'd thought of the idea behind “Jurassic Park.” A dinosaur theme park with real live dinosaurs? Brilliant.

W.B.: Do you think about marketing at all when you're in the “creative mode”? In other words, do you tailor your work to its potential market?

A.O.: I wrote “The Taste,” so you would think that potential markets don't factor into my writing. They definitely should, however! I have noticed that, increasingly, I'll put aside the more outlandish ideas I get and work on stuff that is a little

more mainstream (read: marketable).

W.B.: What are you working on now? (Tell us about “I Know Where You Sleep.”)

A.O.: I'm very excited about the release of “I Know Where You Sleep” (Down & Out Books, February 2020) because it's my first private eye novel! (I got to join the Private Eye Writers of America.) And working with the very passionate people at Down & Out Books has been great, too.

Here's a description:

“I know where you play,” rasps an ominous voice on the phone at Jessica Smith's gym. “I know where you pray,” whispers the same voice at her church. The police are no help, so Jessica, tired of fleeing and unwilling to be cowed into hiding, turns to her last resort—PI Anderson West.

West dives into Jessica's case, pro bono. With some overzealous help from his loose-cannon sister Carrie, he unearths a horde of suspicious men in Jessica's life—vindictive ex-beaus, squirrely co-workers, skittish boyfriend wannabes. But are any twisted enough to terrorize her?

After the stalker breaks into Jessica's bedroom—I know where you sleep—and she goes missing, West must find her before the stalker does. Or before Jessica tries something foolhardy, like facing up to the tenacious bastard on her own, armed only with a handgun and a prayer.

W.B.: And, last question, just for fun: Ginger or Mary Ann?

A.O.: Mary Ann. Ginger is a little too high class (and high maintenance) for me. I'm a down-to-earth guy, and Mary Ann seems a little more my speed.

W.B.: Always fun to talk with you Alan!

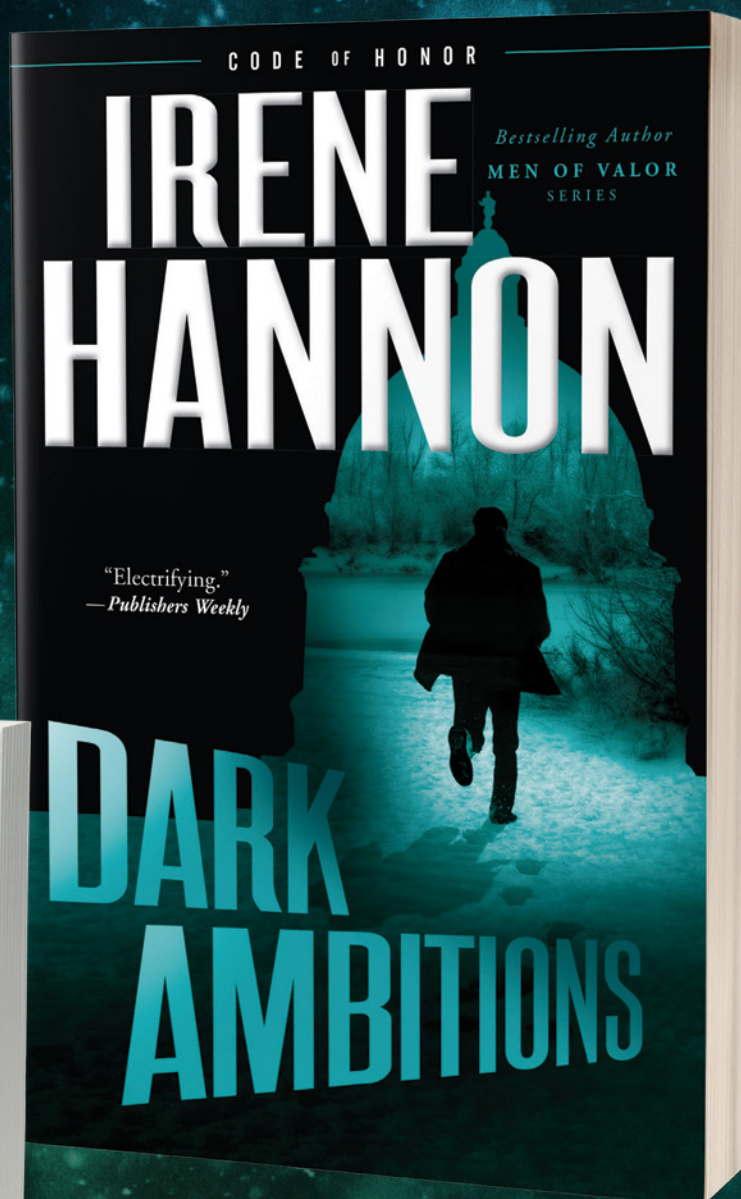
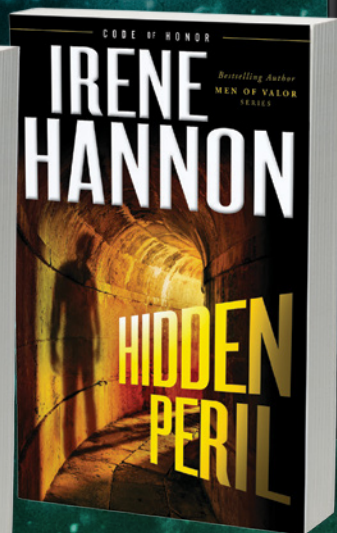
For more information about Alan Orloff, check his website at <http://alanorloff.com> and his Facebook page at www.facebook.com/alanorloff. ■

Join the search for a cold-blooded killer with an ambitious goal . . . **AND DEADLY INTENT**

Former Army Night Stalker Rick Jordan usually has his camp for foster children to himself during the winter months. But someone has visited recently—leaving a trail of blood. One of the two clues left behind tips Rick off to the identity of his visitor, who soon turns up dead. The police deem it an accident, but Rick isn't convinced.

With the help of private investigator Heather Shields, he sets out to decipher the remaining clue. Except someone doesn't want them to succeed—and will stop at nothing to keep them from finding the truth.

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John Connolly

BRINGS CHARLIE PARKER BACK IN HIS SEVENTEENTH INSTALLMENT

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Ivan Gimenez Costa



International Bestselling Author John Connolly sat down with us and talked about his latest *Charlie Parker* book, “A Book of Bones.” This is the seventeenth book in the series and John has no intention of slowing down.

John was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1968, and has, at various points in his life, worked as a journalist, a barman, a local government official, a waiter and a dogsbody at Harrods department store in London. (A dogsbody, for our North American friends, is a ‘go-fer.’) He studied English at Trinity College in Dublin and Journalism at Dublin City University, subsequently spending five years working as a freelance journalist for *The Irish Times* newspaper. He divides his time between Dublin and Portland, Maine; makes regular donations to the wine industry; and keeps a number of dogs in a remarkable degree of comfort.

Let’s take a look inside “A Book of Bones,” and then check out the interview.

He is our best hope.

He is our last hope.

On a lonely moor in northern England, the body of a young woman is discovered. In the south, a girl lies buried beneath a Saxon mound. To the southeast, the ruins of a priory hide a human skull.

Each is a sacrifice, a summons. And something in the darkness has heard the call.

Charlie Parker has also heard it, and from the forests of Maine to the deserts of the Mexican border, from the canals of Amsterdam to the streets of London, he will track those who would cast the world into darkness.

Parker fears no evil—but evil fears him.

John Raab (J.R.): We have an exciting interview, none other than the #1 bestselling author, John Connolly. We’ll be talking about a lot of things, including the latest *Charlie Parker* title, “A Book of Bones.” Thank you for coming, John.

John Connolly (J.C.): *Glad to be back, gentlemen.*

J.R.: Congratulations on the 17th *Charlie Parker* book. I have to say, he has become a household name when it comes to thrillers. So let us in on what we will experience in “A Book of Bones.”

J.C.: *Actually, this follows on directly from the previous book, “The Woman in the Woods,” which ended with Charlie wanting to hunt down a lawyer by the name of Quail. It soon becomes clear in this new story that Quail has been led back to England and*

Charlie, Angel and Louis are required to go after him. And finding him means globetrotting a little.

I have to say, there's a difference to me between thrillers and crime novels. Crime novels thrive on confinement. The setting is a house on an island, or a boat on a river, everybody on a train—locations where no one can escape. That claustrophobia is what gives them a lot of that potency. Thrillers need to roam a little; they have that velocity. So, in my mind, that is why "A Book of Bones" is definitely in that thriller category. It moves from Maine to the Mexican border to the Netherlands, and finally to England. It also roams through time because it goes back to the early 16th century; it drifts and you get to see different versions of these characters. I wanted to do something a bit ambitious, I suppose.

In addition, we don't really associate crime novels with the kind of length that comes from thrillers. My friend Declan Hughes, whom I love very much, said that no crime novel should be over 60,000 words because if it was good enough for Dashiell Hammett, it should be good enough for everyone else. (LOL) And yet, you can do more things in a bigger book. Of course, you can also read a short book at times and it can feel long. I remember reading one of the Booker winners, which I like to read because it expands my horizons, but I read this a while back and it was the longest short book I ever read in my life. I started to believe that when I went to bed someone was adding pages to it because I could never seem to get to the end of it. So, I guess the trick is to give people a long book but something that doesn't "feel" long. Something that's like luxuriating in a warm bath, where you think to yourself: "Oh, I only have one hundred pages left and I don't want it to end."

I guess that's the hardest part. Long answer to a very short question, isn't it?

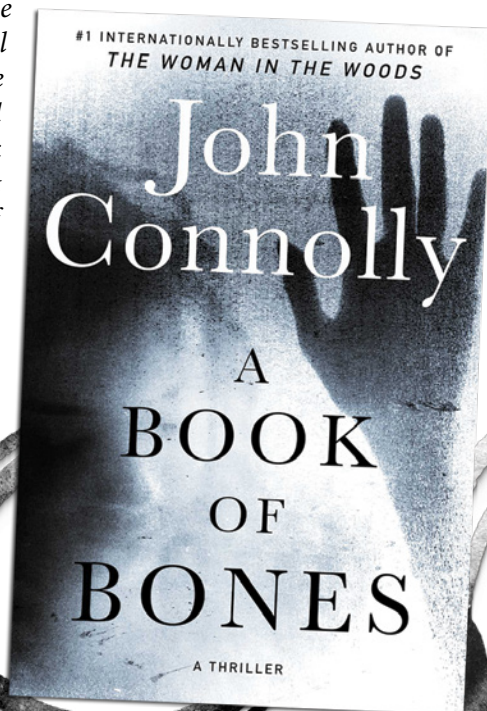
Jeff Ayers (J.A.): Actually, it was a great answer. Since you write so many different genres, I'm wondering, especially with "A Book of Bones," how did you change from doing crime or thriller elements to the historical?

J.C.: It's never really been an issue for me. I view genre as just a tool, and the more tools you have in your writer's box, the better writer you are going to be. Having gone off and done things like "He: A Novel," which was a piece of literary fiction; and "The Book of Lost Things," which is basically fantastical literature, I kind of feel like I've learned a lot of skills, but I also feel like it's made me less of a purist in regards to genre. I don't trust purists. I don't trust people who have rules about how things should be written.

I had dinner with a friend of mine, a mystery bookseller, who is still very much of the view that the mystery novel should not have any elements of the supernatural at all. He thought this was completely beyond the genre and that I had taken a wrong turn right at the start of my career. He also believed that it still wasn't too late for me to get on the right path. Yet I never felt that way about the mystery genre. In part, that's perhaps to do with my heritage. I don't come from England and I don't come from America, so I'm not beholden to either of those traditions. I come from a society that was always just very comfortable with things like folklore, the fantastical, the supernatural, etc. And I come from a Catholic background, and it's very hard to be both Catholic and a rationalist, you know. You carry both things around with you.

So when I began writing, what emerged was a combination of that background and things I loved. I didn't realize until a year or two down the line that many people counted this as "coloring outside the lines" and they were uncomfortable with it. There's this view that the mystery novel begins with the birth of Sherlock Holmes and ends with either the death of Hercule Poirot or Raymond Chandler, depending upon how much of a purist you are, and anything outside of that doesn't really count at all. But this is not something I think about. I begin writing and all these influences come into it. I mean, if you are a purist and want to read only those mysteries that adhere to Father Ronald Knox's Rules of Mystery Writing, or whatever it may be, then there's plenty of mystery fiction out there for you. You will never run out of that stuff. But it doesn't really change things. It doesn't advance the genre in any way. Genres in any field—whether it be art, music, or writing—change by people experimenting and pulling things from the outside. Gradually that stuff gets absorbed into the mainstream and things change a bit.

I sometimes think that mystery fiction is a very conservative genre; it hasn't changed that much in many ways. If you say someone is writing a standalone novel, people clutch their pearls. It's like you told them you're going to write the next book in Sanskrit or something. And yet, you read a mystery standalone and it's not very different from what the author has written before; it's just more of a chance that one of the lead characters will die. I feel that as I get older I'm getting more and more interested in expanding my horizons. I once said to my editor that not only should every book be an experiment, but every book should



“I ONCE SAID TO MY EDITOR THAT NOT ONLY SHOULD EVERY BOOK BE AN EXPERIMENT, BUT EVERY BOOK SHOULD ALSO CARRY WITH IT THE RISK OF FAILURE.”

also carry with it the risk of failure. Because if it doesn't, I'm not going to learn anything or improve. And yet I understand why readers get frustrated with me because I go off and do other things. Booksellers also get frustrated by this because they only have one section with your name on it, and if you go from mystery to fantasy to literary fiction, they start wondering where they're going to put you. It becomes easier for them to not order books that don't conform to their expectations of you.

J.R.: Sounds like lazy booksellers. I mean, authors like Stephen King write different genres.

J.C.: *I know. And I know King would say that he really doesn't think in terms of genre fiction anymore. He's probably right, because when you reach a certain stage like King, you become a genre unto yourself. You are a genre, therefore, anything you choose to do will be acceptable because it conforms to the genre that is "Stephen King." That's a very exceptional group of novelists who get to do that. The rest of us muddle along the best we can. When I talk to young writers, I say to them that every writer compromises. Somewhere along the line you'll have to compromise, so it's a very good idea to decide where your point of compromise is going to be as early as possible. In general, it's a point along two intersecting axes—one is commercial and one is creative, and each requires a sacrifice. So if you're going to write very, very commercial fiction, you'll most likely not receive a lot of critical acclaim. Creatively you may feel a bit stymied, too. On the other side, if you're going to write experimental fiction, you may have to sacrifice a certain amount of commerciality. But you may also feel a greater degree of artistic satisfaction. So somewhere along the line we decide where we will compromise.*

When I wrote "He: A Novel" it involved a certain amount of compromise. My editors wanted to pay me (and they did in the end) an advance that would cover my mortgage for about a month and a half. That was the level of their commitment. They were going to publish it and publish it well, but I had to accept part of the sacrifice. I had to take on part of the risk, and this was after being with them 18 years. I accepted that because I knew it wasn't going to sell like a Parker book; I didn't know if it was going to sell at all. But after a decade of working on this book, it was enough for me to know that it was going to be put out there well.

What was interesting is that the traffic between literary fiction and genre fiction is almost entirely in one direction. Literary writers like writing detective fiction because there is a degree of intellectual respectability to it. Whatever genre they choose, there's almost no traffic in the other direction; you've got the road pretty much to yourself. I learned a genre writer writing literary fiction will always be the dog walking on his hind legs. Readers feel you will eventually come back to walking on four legs. The view is that a literary writer can bring something to genre fiction; they will elevate the standard of the writing. But a genre writer writing literary fiction could not possibly have anything to offer. So it was interesting taking that on.

J.R.: I would think the tough part in genre writing is trying to rehash the same kind of storylines written over and over again. That's why I love the Parker series, especially when you insert those paranormal elements. Now, after 17 books, I would think you've had to regenerate this character a couple of times. "The Burning Soul" has always been my favorite in the series. It was like a turning point where you took Charlie and said: "We're going in this direction now." Do you have a book like that? Where you took Charlie, put him in a blender, and threw him back out?

J.C.: *Yes. I would say it's like rewiring the machine. "The Black Angel" is one of those books for me. I had taken time to find out exactly what writer I wanted to be. I was very young when I was first published and I was taken a bit by surprise. One of the best decisions I ever made was writing a standalone which, to be fair, Parker kind of figured into the background of it. But I also sat down and wrote short stories and novellas for a year. I was trying on different hats, so to speak. So when I came back to "The Black Angel," I'd had time to think about what I wanted to do within the genre and how I could expand on the elements that interested me. Could I introduce metaphysical and supernatural elements into the book and still keep it within the mystery genre?*

And then there was "The Wolf in Winter," which was a book where I very consciously was thinking, "Okay, I'm gonna change a lot of things here." It's a book where, halfway through, the narration changes from first person to third person and never changes back again. I was thinking about what would happen if you take the lead character out of the book and don't tell the reader what happened? If a reader who has been used to hearing Parker's voice for eleven or twelve books...what would happen if you take the voice away? What do they have left? And what does that allow you to do as a writer that you might not otherwise be able to do? I've just dealt with a title that will be coming out next year called "The Dirty South." This is a book that definitely expands

Parker. It's set very shortly before the events that occur in "Every Dead Thing." So, Parker has just lost his wife and child. He's in the process of hunting the man who killed them but hasn't got a lead yet. It asks the question: What if you take away everything the reader likes about this character? There is no supernatural in this one because that part of him has not been opened yet. There is no empathy or compassion because he doesn't have any yet. He's just this creature of grief and rage. When he arrives in a small town, he doesn't care that young women are being killed. He just wants to leave and find the man who killed his wife and child. That's an experiment. Do you like this guy anymore, because this is him? I always want to stretch the character and wonder what longtime readers will think.

J.R.: The one thing they can't say, though, is that you write the same thing over and over.

J.C.: Exactly. What's wonderful about mystery readers is their loyalty. Of course, they are loyal to the character, not the writer. If you stop or alter your direction, you will lose some. I mean, take John Sanford. I think he is a spectacular author. But if he said to me that he was going to write a great Russian novel, I would probably say, "That's wonderful. But is Lucas Davenport in it? Because if he's not, I may not want to buy it." So, I'm like that, too.

One of the lovely things about mystery fiction is that we get to spend time with these characters year after year after year. I always wondered why literary fiction didn't do that more often. There was a great tradition of it once, but in the 20th century we didn't see much of it. John Updike did it with the 'Rabbit' novels and Richard Ford with the Frank Bascombe novels, but those are the exceptions. And yet, there is in a way something quite fascinating following a character from his youth to old age, because the texture of the book changes; the character's view of the world changes. So there are possibilities that I sometimes think writers out there could take advantage of. But, to each their own. (LOL)

J.A.: That leads into the question I have for you, actually. When Charlie Parker was formed in your mind, did you see everything about him or have you learned along the way? And, do you have an end game in mind for him?

J.C.: Actually, I don't believe writers who say they had a trajectory for their character mapped out from the beginning. That sort of smacks to me of reverse engineering. I feel most of us are surprised when we get published, so it's mostly a shocker and we have to deal with what we've begun. I'm not by nature a planner, so I suppose that's the difference. When I sit down with a novel, I don't really know what I'm going to do until I'm at least two-thirds of the way through it. It's a gradual process. I think, and I hope, I write very character-driven novels. You can't write those as "novel writing for dummies," where you know when you sit down to begin that the character wears hats, likes the Dodgers, has a penchant for lattes, etc. That's not character writing to me. You want to find out who the character is, like Parker. There are still parts to explore for me.

When it comes to an end game, one of the things I always wanted to do was write a sequence of novels that when you read them in order, you had a sense of a larger plot unfolding, and at some point that plot would require a conclusion. If I had to write a final chapter today, I know really what that final chapter would be. But I really like writing these books; I would find it difficult now to stop writing them and not see the world through their eyes.

J.R.: Is www.johnconnollybooks.com the best place to find out all the information on your upcoming titles?

J.C.: Yes, and we have all kinds of quirky things on there, so it's a lot of fun.

J.R.: Will you be going to any events where people can run into you, like Bouchercon in 2020?

J.C.: Actually, I don't do that often anymore. As I got older, I found large crowds more difficult than when I was younger. And also, to be fair, I don't want to be around people that act like me when I was younger. Those that shout in bars... I mean, Good Lord, people, some of us are trying to nap!

J.R.: Well, hopefully, if my wife and I can hit Ireland, we can sit in a small pub with no crowd.

J.C.: Absolutely, we can do that.

We would like to thank John for taking the time to talk with us. If you want to listen to the entire interview, simply subscribe to Suspense Radio on iTunes or Spotify. For more information on John, please visit his website at www.johnconnollybooks.com. ■

JANET EVANOVICH

GETS A BIT “TWISTED” IN BOOK TWENTY-SIX

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Roland Scarpa



We are very excited to bring you a wonderful interview we had with #1 NYT bestselling author Janet Evanovich. She talked with us for about thirty minutes, and you can listen to the entire interview on Suspense Radio. Simply subscribe on iTunes and/or Spotify, where she talks “Twisted Twenty-Six” and much more.

Take a little look inside “Twisted Twenty-Six” and then check out our interview with Janet below.

Grandma Mazur has decided to get married again—this time to a local gangster named Jimmy Rosolli. If Stephanie has her doubts about this marriage, she doesn’t have to worry for long, because the groom drops dead of a heart attack 45 minutes after saying “I do.”

A sad day for Grandma Mazur turns into something far more dangerous when Jimmy’s former “business partners” are convinced that his new widow is keeping the keys to a financial windfall all to herself. But the one thing these wise guys didn’t count on was the widow’s bounty hunter granddaughter, who’ll do anything to save her.

John Raab (J.R.): We are very excited about speaking for the first time with none other than #1 NYT Bestselling author, Janet Evanovich. We’ll be talking about “Twisted Twenty-Six,” the newest title from her *Stephanie Plum* series, and more. Janet, thanks for coming on. How are you doing?

Janet Evanovich (J.E.): *I’m doing great and I’m looking forward to talking about “Twisted Twenty-Six,” and many other things.*

J.R.: Let’s just dive right in. Give us a little taste of what you have Stephanie involved in this time?

J.E.: *A lot of this is about her grandma—Grandma Mazur. Grandma Mazur is such a fan favorite and I hadn’t spent a lot of time with her lately, so I thought I would do a couple of books. There is an ending here that continues on into the next book. And the next book leaves off the numbers. (Yay!) I couldn’t come up with anymore numbered titles so the book after this one, even though*

it's number twenty-seven, will be called "Fortune and Glory." It's my ode to Indiana Jones. I'm willing to steal from anyone (LOL).

J.R.: A lot of people don't realize that line actually came out in *Temple of Doom*. I know my Indiana Jones, too.

J.E.: *It's a big adventure with Grandma Mazur. She was married 45 minutes to some killer mob guy and now his friends think that she has the key to a fortune that he left. It's all about finding the key and saving Grandma Mazur. Lots of killers, pyromaniacs, and of course, we destroy a couple of cars.*

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): I'm so thrilled that you focused on my personal favorite character, Grandma Mazur. When you were writing this book, did you learn something about her that you didn't realize during the twenty-five previous times?

J.E.: *I wouldn't say I learned something, but I think readers will. I also wanted to make this book a little bit more introspective for Stephanie. I think we learn more about her; we see a lot more about her relationship with Grandma, too. Grandma is always a fun character; she's out there. But I think you'll discover that Grandma has a philosophy of life. There's a lot of grit to Grandma that we don't always see. She is fun and comedic, but there's also this very tender, serious, loving relationship between her and Stephanie. In my more recent books, I thought it was time for the characters to grow a little bit. That was one of the things that I looked forward to with this book.*

J.A.: And it certainly showed. It was great! Thank you.

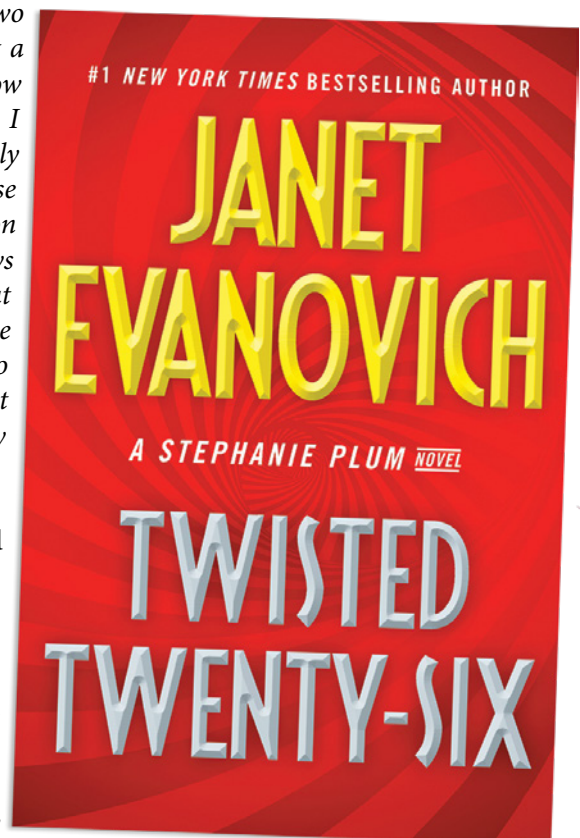
J.R.: The one thing you do see when you have a long running series is that the plots and the character lines start to run parallel. When you have those challenges, how difficult is it for you to keep the character lines straight and then bring in a new plot?

J.E.: *I don't know that I would call that a challenge. Just writing is a challenge. I work really hard so that my reader doesn't have to, and I think lots of times people will look at what I've done and say, 'Wow, that was easy. You really ripped that one off.' I actually spend a lot of time making it look like it was easy. Like I just sat down and the 'thing' just came, but it's surprising the things that actually are challenges. For instance, transition. I spend a lot of time looking at transitions, making them seamless so the reader isn't stopped because we're moving from scene to scene. I try to make that transition slow without slowing the reader down.*

The relationships between the characters, especially Stephanie and the two men, Joe Morelli and Ranger, is the most difficult part of the series. I start a new book and I'm like, "What was I thinking? How'd I even get into this? How the heck am I going to pull this off again?" The storylines running together, I like to think of as a braid—you have the plotline, the romance line, the family line, and the personal development for each of the characters. You weave these all together like you're making a braid. Sometimes it's easier, depending upon how much time I've put into preparing ahead. Life intrudes, so I don't always have a chance to make an outline ahead of time. I know where I'm going, but I don't know a lot of the detail. I kind of fly by the seat of my pants on some books but when I have prep time, that book goes faster for me. When I go to bed at night, I take a steno pad and write down notes about what I did that day, and then I make notes about where I want to go tomorrow or the day after and I can move through.

J.R.: You said you work hard so your reader doesn't have to. I've never heard it put that way before but I think that's a great line.

J.E.: *I don't want my readers to have to pick up a dictionary and look up words. I like to keep it at a very human level. I even work very hard at names, hoping that they're memorable. I have a lot of new people in a book sometimes and I think it's difficult for the reader to keep all of that straight, so I try to limit that as much as I can. I don't have flashbacks; I know I hate them when I read and I don't want to be bothered with a flashback. I write an entirely*



“GRANDMA IS ALWAYS A FUN CHARACTER; SHE’S OUT THERE. BUT I THINK YOU’LL DISCOVER THAT GRANDMA HAS A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.”

linear book so that the reader starts on page one and just glides through until the book is done.

I read dialogue aloud because I want to hear the “music” of the page. I can see if it flows and if it’s easy for the reader to understand. I tend to have a lot of dialogue and I personally like dialogue when I read. I think that’s an easy way to get to know a character. I don’t like to be “told” about the character; I like to find out for myself by the way they react, by their actions, by the way they talk—the dialogue and use of language that they have.

When I first started writing, I had no skills. I was not the kid who wanted to write a book; I was the kid who could draw. When I first started writing, I realized my dialogue was really wooden. I took some acting classes that forced me to get up on stage and do improv, which really helped. Actors and writers do very similar things. You think about the character, who they are, and how people understand those characters by what they do. What kind of hand gestures do they use? What kind of words do they use? How do they tilt their head? So by getting on stage and having to show how my character was nervous or angry became invaluable to me, and I use what I learned then in my writing.

J.A.: I have to ask, because you work so hard thinking about all those things when you’re putting words on a page, how do you co-write with someone else?

J.E.: It’s a little like wearing someone else’s underpants. In the past, my co-authors, Phoebe Sutton and Lee Goldberg, were my friends for years before we decided one night in a bar to write a book together. Now I’m co-authoring with my son. The process is, we get together ahead of time and talk about what we want to accomplish. They had their ideas about how they wanted to set it up. Lee wanted to do a con man kind of thing; and I only did a couple of books with Phoebe, which was a very different experience. Lee writes hour long series, and Phoebe wrote half-hour sitcoms, and when I received their manuscripts you could really see this. After we talk about it, they write the first draft and I just pick it apart and send it back.

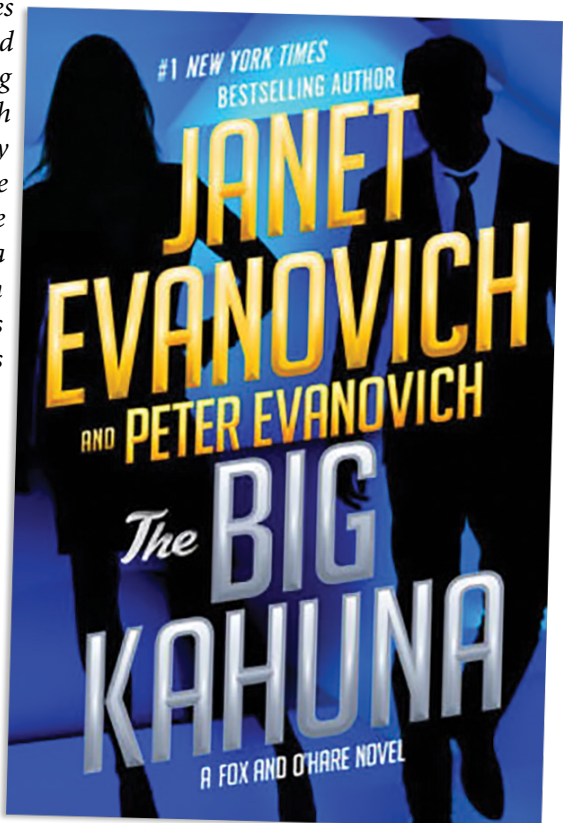
I have a team here; my daughter, my son, and my husband all work together. We all edit the books. Everybody sees it from a different point of view. My daughter does the Gen-X edit and my husband does the transitions . . . so when the co-author books come in, we all take a look and then edit it from our points of view. Both Lee and Phoebe decided after doing books with me that they were going back into television. They’d had enough of me, I guess. I’m working with my son now, who is brilliant. It is a very easy process because he has worked with me for so many years as an editor. We’re like a little herd, this family. We all move around together. We all live in the same neighborhood. We actually even like each other. So my son and I talk a lot as he’s writing the book. He’ll call up and say, ‘Oh my God. I’ve just written a great scene. You have to hear this.’ And we read the scene and it’s great. He’s doing the Fox and O’Hare books. The last one is out now and the next comes out in March. We’re having a lot of fun with it.

J.A.: You signed with The Story Factory a couple of months ago. What do you see going forward with your brand?

J.E.: World domination.

J.R.: There it is! A new world order.

J.E.: Exactly. Shane Salerno is nuts, I have to say. I imagine this guy has no life. He works all the time. I’ve never had an agent like this. I have this image of him getting dressed in, I don’t know, jeans and a nice shirt, and then gets into this big ass car and goes into his office where he works all day. Then, at



6 o'clock he comes home, but at two in the morning, he's still working—emails and phone calls. I think he goes to bed and sleeps somewhere between the hours of 4 to 5 a.m. California time, because I don't know how this guy does everything that he does. He also works really well with my family. My daughter, Alex, does a lot of interface with the publisher and does everything online. She has a couple of people working for her and they do all my online marketing which allows me to write. You just can't do everything. Then Shane comes in and he just has ideas shooting off his head like fireworks while talking with Alex. It's been a very exciting process. So when I say 'world domination', I actually mean it.

J.R.: When you're looking ahead, do you see an end game for Stephanie? Do you have plans mapped out, or are you going to just let it roll?

J.E.: *I'm enjoying doing it and see no reason to end. Not to mention, the fans seem to be with me. I would love to see this go to television.*

J.R.: There's only 85,000 television sites that are streaming their own content right now; you would figure someone would pick it up.

J.E.: *Well, it's sitting with Sony right now. I don't know. I imagine that Shane is trying to figure out how to take Stephanie to television. But I have no intention of stopping anytime soon.*

J.R.: Did you like the Katherine Heigl movie? Did you like what they did with your character?

J.E.: *I thought Katherine Heigl was great. She put that wig on and she was Stephanie. I thought the production was a little lacking; I would have done it a little differently. I wanted it to have more kick ass music, too.*

J.A.: Let's say Sony gives the green light, who would you cast to play Stephanie?

J.E.: *I don't have anyone right now. I keep having people and then the years pass. Sandra Bullock was always the perfect Stephanie.*

J.R.: She would have been a good one. She popped into my head when he said that, but you're right, she's a little older now. We need to find that twenty-five-year-old Sandra Bullock.

J.E.: *Maybe it's someone who's not a big name...someone who hasn't been "discovered" yet.*

J.A.: Who do your fans lean to in terms of who they want Stephanie to end up with?

J.E.: *It's pretty much 50/50. It's interesting. The fans come out to signings and half of them are dressed in black, like with Ranger shirts, and the ones that are the Joe people are usually a bit saner than the Ranger people. They're mellower; they come with the kids.*

J.R.: You should capitalize on that and do a little *Twilight* thing. Have Team Ranger and Team Joe and see what happens.

J.E.: *For years we were trying to grow the audience. We had this online store going and people were able to buy Ranger and Joe shirts and hats. Everybody thought I had this big thing but the store was in my garage. We would be sitting there at 4 o'clock in the afternoon with everybody stuffing t-shirts into bags and rushing out to the post office.*

J.R.: Unfortunately, we've blown through our time. Is www.evanovich.com the best place for everyone to find all of your information?

J.E.: *I think it's a good place to start.*

We would like to thank Janet for taking the time to talk with us. Again, if you want to listen to the entire interview on the podcast, simply search Suspense Radio on iTunes or Spotify. For more information on Janet and all her writing, check out her website at www.evanovich.com. ■

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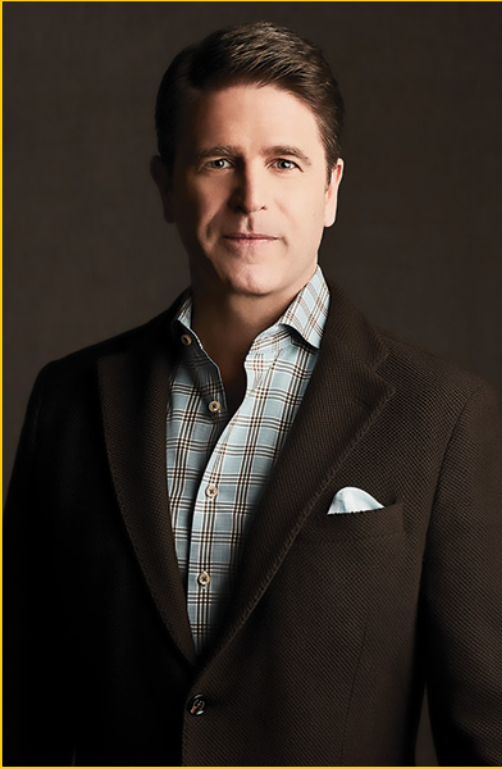
**"GRIPPING, CHILLING,
AND ORIGINAL."**

—ERIC RICKSTAD,
New York Times bestselling author
of *The Silent Girls*

BRAD THOR

Ups the Ante in "BACKLASH"

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Jeremy Cowart



We are pleased to bring you this very exciting interview with one of the top thriller writers of our generation, Brad Thor, where we talked with Brad about his latest book, "Backlash."

Brad Thor is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty thrillers, including: "Near Dark," "Backlash," (one of *Suspense Magazine's* Best Books of the Year), "Spymaster" ("One of the all-time best thriller novels"—*The Washington Times*), "The Last Patriot" (nominated best thriller of the year by the International Thriller Writers Association), "Blowback" (one of the "Top 100 Killer Thrillers of All Time"—NPR), and "The Lions of Lucerne" ("One of the best political thrillers ever"—Barnes & Noble).

Brad has served as a member of the Department of Homeland Security's Analytic Red Cell Unit. He has also lectured to law enforcement organizations on over-the-horizon/future threats, and has been a keynote speaker for the National Tactical Officers Association annual conference.

Let's take a quick look inside "Backlash," and then check out his interview below.

In ancient texts, there are stories about men who struck from the shadows, seemingly beyond the reach of death itself. These men were considered part angel, part demon. Their loyalty was to their families, their friends, and their kings. You crossed these men at your peril. And once crossed, there was no crossing back.

They were fearless; men of honor who have been known throughout history by different names: Spartan, Viking, Samurai.

Today, men like these still strike from the shadows. They are highly prized intelligence agents, military operatives, and assassins.

One man is all three.

Two days ago, that man was crossed—badly.

Now, far from home and surrounded by his enemy, Scot Harvath must battle his way out.

With no support, no cavalry coming, and no one even aware of where he is, it will take everything he has ever learned to survive.

But survival isn't enough. Harvath wants revenge.

In the most explosive novel Brad Thor has ever written, page after captivating page of action, intrigue, loyalty, and betrayal will keep you hooked until the very last sentence.

John Raab (J.R.): I am pleased to be able to bring back a great guest, the author of "Backlash"—which is number 19 in the bestselling *Scot Harvath* series—Brad Thor. Great to have you with us, Brad. How have you been?

Brad Thor (B.T.): I'm doing well, John. I hate to correct people but, actually, although I've written 19 books, "Backlash" is actually

the 18th in the Harvath series. I did a spin-off book called “The Athena Project” that Harvath was in for a short while, but it wasn’t part of the series.

J.R.: Gotcha. Well...still have to say that eighteen in a series is quite an accomplishment. To me, it seems like Harvath is one of those characters that’s a different breed. Tell us how and why Scot Harvath keeps readers coming back for more?

B.T.: Absolutely. I think Harvath is probably one of the biggest challenges that an author faces; writing a series character always has you wondering how to reveal parts and pieces of the character to keep him interesting enough for readers each time. That’s the challenge for me.

I set the bar higher for each book. A friend of mine recently used sort of a Zen concept when he talked about this called “Beginner’s Mind,” because I go at every one of my books with the thought: “If I weren’t already published, is this book good enough to get me a publishing contract?” I always tell people I will drive an Uber before I “phone a book in” and expect fans to buy it. As a writer you should always be looking for ways to improve yourself. Writing is one of these great careers where you can constantly get better. I spend a tremendous amount of my time during the year when not writing a book, reading books about writing. So I’m constantly trying to improve my craft.

J.R.: I think that’s important, too. Much like being an athlete or a musician, you are constantly practicing and learning in order to perfect what you do. In your case, so that when people pick up “Backlash,” or all other titles, they see a different Brad Thor and Scot Harvath all the time.

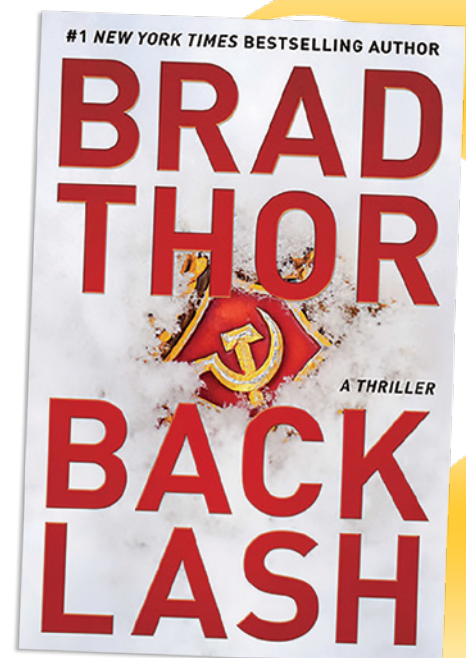
B.T.: Exactly. I have friends who are athletes looking to press say...an extra two pounds because it would make a big difference on the field. That mindset is part of my nature. My dad is a no-longer active U.S. Marine and my mom was a flight attendant for TWA. They were very much the ‘never rest on your laurels’ type of people. They always said that if you’re lucky enough to have a career and someone is willing to pay you to do something you love, than you better show up every day and give everything you have. So book writing has always been that way for me.

I was just listening to Aaron Sorkin who wrote the screenplay for “The American President” with Michael Douglas, and he admitted something I think many writers would be too scared to admit. He said that his “default setting” is writer’s block. So if he’s not writing, that’s what he’s set on. He said it was odd when he did get words on paper. I laughed at that, because I really admire this man and his work. As a writer, and for your listeners who are writers, we all know that it’s really tough to come in every day, sit down, and write. Because we’re creating stuff out of thin air; there is no instruction manual. So for someone like me who has a very organic process—I don’t put together an outline—it’s tough. I come into my office every day without a thought of what I’m going to do, so I get stressed. I think it was Dorothy Parker who said, “I don’t like writing; I like having written.” So while I enjoy my job, the best part is to get on the road, go on tour and meet fans, or hear from them through social media. Writing is tough. Of course, if it wasn’t, it would be boring. I love the challenge!

J.R.: Tell us a little about “Backlash.”

B.T.: Well, it opens with my main character, Scot Harvath, being taken captive—which is something that has never happened in any of my books. This foreign group is going to risk taking this guy on his own home turf who has been a real pain in the ass for them, and there’s a lot of blood and bad stuff in the process of this group putting a bag over his head. They drag him overseas and they’re going to take him to their own version of a black site. Once there, they’ll get everything they can out of him and then they’re going to kill him. But on the way there, the plane he’s on develops catastrophic engine failure and it goes down. He finds himself in one of the most inhospitable, remotest regions in the world. He has to get out before they get him, but no one knows where he is so Scot knows that no “rescue crew” will be sent out to find him. The race is on to get to the border and get out of this particular country before the bad guys can catch up to him. Of course, back home in America it’s frantic because everyone is trying to figure out where he is and what happened to him. They want to pick him up and get him out of his predicament. In this case, however, it’s not finding the needle in the haystack that’s important, it’s finding the haystack. I read that recently and thought that really summed it up.

J.R.: The one thing I do when I get a book to review is read the synopsis. I want to know what the author put together for me in order to give me some understanding



of the story up front. The thing that got me in this one is your bad guy. I got into it and immediately saw that this particular bad guy was going to be a bad ass. Talk to us a bit about this creation.

B.T.: *Mark Twain originally said something along the lines of, “the difference between fiction and reality is that people expect fiction to make sense.” (LOL) They don’t expect reality to make sense at all. The bad guy in this is actually based on a very real life guy whose group has been in the news. They do a lot for bad foreign powers. They’re behind the scenes in places like Syria and Iran. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 90s, this really weird cult-like pagan religion grew up in Russia based on mainly Nazi ideology. There was a Special Forces officer who took “Wagner” as his call sign (Wagner was a famous composer who was actually Hitler’s favorite), and he created basically the Blackwater of Russia. Now, private military cooperatives are not allowed to exist in Russia, but this one does and does all of Putin’s bidding. This man is sent all over the world to do this sneaky, deadly stuff in the shadows so Putin can say, “Yeah, that’s not us. That’s some other guy.” The Wagner character is an absolute devotee of the Nazi’s, particularly the SS, and he makes his men swear an allegiance very similar to the allegiance the SS men swore to. So, yes, he’s a very real and very bad guy.*

J.R.: That scares me more, to know it’s based on a real person.

B.T.: *Just part of the fun of writing the books. I call my stuff “faction” because you don’t know where the facts end and the fiction begins. Fans say a lot that while they read, they leave their laptops open to see what’s true. I like to put in those Easter eggs, so to speak, but I don’t go overboard because I want them to have those thrills but not get bored. And I think when people close the books they’ve definitely learned something.*

J.R.: I did. Now, my co-host, Jeff Ayers, couldn’t be here with us tonight but he had a couple of questions he wanted to throw into the ring. He wants me to ask if you think that the military fiction genre has replaced spy thrillers; and, why did you stop writing the *Athena* series?

B.T.: *Last one first: I wrote one book in the series, “The Athena Project,” to see what they would do in the marketplace and how readers would accept them. It did great, but that year I had to write two books and it was extremely hard. I watched my dog actually go gray in front of my eyes; I think he was sucking up my stress. That was pretty much my only reason for not writing another. If I could take a year off from Harvath, I would write another Athena. And I always wonder, if I could get off two books a year, would they be the high quality that I want them to be? So maybe if I had a 25th hour in my day, it would work. Who knows? Maybe there would be an Athena and a Harvath in one year.*

What Jeff is saying about the military stuff, I think that in the post 9/11 world we began seeing so much and getting such a picture of things—the special operation’s world in particular, like with the SEALs, special forces, recon Marines, etc.—that we were exposed to very interesting real life characters. And they’ve become more interesting than the spy world.

I have the best of both worlds in my thrillers. I have a hybrid guy who was a Navy SEAL at one point before being recruited to do espionage work, so he has both backgrounds. Which is the most fun. I’m not strictly beholden to one genre; I have a foot on both sides of that line.

J.R.: In today’s social media bonanza and highly political society, when citizens know so much more than they ever knew before, I think that got rid of a little of the mystique of the spy. Do you kind of agree? And do you think citizens know too much sometimes?

B.T.: *We do know a lot about what’s going on. I think there’s a great appeal with the military side of things because there’s a lot more action happening on that end. There are risks with spies but if you talk to a real spy, they’ll tell you it’s a lot of long periods of boredom punctuated with quick spots of excitement.*

You think of George Smiley, and looking at some of these characters, I think audiences have changed. They want Bond more than Smiley, so as a writer you have to keep the adrenaline flowing. Starting with President Carter’s era, we got away from human intelligence gathering and turned more towards computers and data. So that true Cold War era spy still exists, but they have to go out and build human networks. With my books, I have real spies telling me things like “that wouldn’t happen,” or that “there would be six guys between that one guy and Harvath.” And I say to them that I know, but I’m not writing a technical manual or a ‘how to’ book. I have to keep that action-packed pace going throughout in order to keep the reader intrigued. If Harvath had to go through six locks before a door opens you’d lose the sizzle.

We are living in a time of tons and tons of information. I like freedom. I like freedom of information, the freedom to write what you want, read what you want, etc. I’m cool with that. What I’m not cool with are people like Bradley Manning, or Edward Snowden, or these 20-somethings that are deciding what should be a national security secret and what shouldn’t. They don’t happen to like something, so instead of finding a sympathetic senator who might be open to a proper investigation, they just

expose it. I think that's not good. The stuff that gets out there, some of it can be bad. I think we see too much being exposed which can put the democratic process and people in danger.

J.R.: I agree. And now that we get all this information, we now have to deal with false information and the need to sort through all of it.

B.T.: *Exactly. And now people are confused. A large percentage of people get their news from Facebook, which is scary. We can always romanticize the past, when we had a limited exposure to the news, because now it has become fragmented. There's fake news, and seeing the same story from all different points of view. I think we have greater access to information now, but are dumber than we've ever been. We've lost the ability to think and reason critically. It's still there, but we've put it in the attic. There's so much data, it's like drinking from a fire hose. It makes me happy to shut my stuff down at the end of the day and barely watch the news anymore.*

J.R.: You write in a volatile field. Do you ever receive (no pun intended) backlash from your fans? How do you deal with one that says this or that isn't true, or you're too political?

B.T.: *This spring it will be two years since I made a vow to not talk about politics on social media. The current political environment, no matter who you vote for, is hyper-partisan. It's toxic to a certain degree because it's not so much about trying to persuade people as it is trying to bury people. I write international thrillers that involve some international politics, but I've dialed back the Oval Office scenes. I write a little about the White House, but I focus on the FBI or CIA more. I don't want people to misunderstand or read things into what I write. I don't want to have those discussions on social media. By doing this, I've been able to write without having to walk through the minefield, if that makes sense.*

J.R.: It somewhat breaks my heart when you say that you sort of altered what you wrote because of this.

B.T.: *Actually, I looked at it as a challenge. My number one job is to entertain people and get better at doing that every time. So I looked at this as an opportunity to come at the information through the eyes of different characters. I still have a president in the Oval Office, but coming at scenes from a different direction has allowed me to grow as a writer. Instead of looking at the glass half-empty or half-full, I'm interested in putting that glass on a glass coffee table and seeing what it looks like from underneath, or at a 90 degree angle. I get to look at things different ways using the eyes of different characters.*

As long as warfare has existed, politics have been involved. I just found new ways to do it. People give you a suspension of disbelief when they read your books, and I don't want to break that fantasy, so I don't want to put things in that stops them and makes them wonder: "What does he mean by that?" I want them to keep reading. So don't be heartbroken. (LOL) I like the challenge.

J.R.: You mentioned you like going on tour. What conventions do you like to hit?

B.T.: *In 2020, I'm doing the Tucson Literary Festival which I believe is in March, and I haven't been able to do that for a while so I'm looking forward to it. I get a lot of nice offers, but to create a book a year, raise a family, be a husband and father is difficult, so there's not much time left for conventions. I have done a lot of events for the Barbara Bush Literacy Foundation. It is a lovely, non-partisan group of people promoting literacy across the country and I've met some lovely authors there.*

J.R.: I know you're active on Twitter, but www.bradthor.com is still the best place to find out about all that's going on with you, right?

B.T.: *Absolutely.*

J.R.: Well, it's been great talking to you. I can't believe book 18 is out and I assume you're already done with 19, which means you're probably already looking or working on number 20?

B.T.: *Yes. Summer 2020, will be the 20th book I've written, and the 19th in the Harvath series. My newsletter subscribers will soon be getting the announcement of the title and maybe even some cover art to go along with it. So sign up for the newsletter if you haven't yet at www.bradthor.com to get all the information.*

We would like to thank Brad for taking the time to talk with us. If you want to listen to the entire interview, please subscribe to Suspense Radio on iTunes or Spotify. ■

DEAN KOONTZ

is Anything but “Nameless”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Douglas Sonders



When you speak of the greatest authors in the suspense/thriller genre in the past century, you'll note that you can't have a list without Dean Koontz being on it. Dean is one of the most recognizable names in the literary world and now he has done something completely new. Dean had just finished up his *Jane Hawk* series, and when he was approached by Amazon to do something very cool, "NAMELESS" was born. "NAMELESS" is a group of six, longer than short stories but not quite novellas ("In the Heart of the Fire," "Photographing the Dead," "The Praying Mantis Bride," "Red Rain," "The Mercy of Snakes" and "Memories of Tomorrow"), that all tie together into one story. This has been done before, but what's "extra" nice is that if you are an Amazon Prime customer, you get all the books for free. Yeah, you read that right: FREE.

We were extremely honored to be asked by Dean to come to his home to interview him. To say it was probably the coolest three hours of an interview we've ever done, is an understatement. After Dean gave us a quick tour of his house, including seeing his library of over six thousand copies of his own books, we sat down with Dean in his office and spoke about everything. If you want to listen to the entire interview, please subscribe to Suspense Radio on iTunes or Spotify.

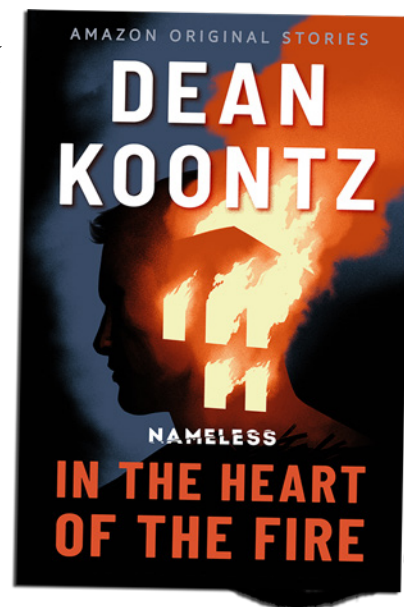
Let's take a quick look inside the first book "In the Heart of the Fire" and then you can check out the interview below.

A bloodthirsty sheriff is terrorizing a small Texas town where justice has been buried with his victims. Until Nameless arrives—a vigilante whose past is a mystery and whose future is written in blood.

Anyone who crosses Sheriff Russell Soakes is dead, missing, or warned. One of them is a single mother trying to protect her children but bracing herself for the worst. Nameless fears the outcome. He's seen it in his visions. Now it's time to teach the depraved Soakes a lesson in fear. But in turning predators into prey, will Nameless unearth a few secrets of his own?

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Dean Koontz comes "In the Heart of the Fire," part of "Nameless," a riveting collection of short stories about a vigilante nomad, stripped of his memories and commissioned to kill. Follow him in each story, which can be read or listened to in a single sitting.

John Raab (J.R.): We're sitting down with #1 *New York Times* bestselling author, as well as #1 international bestselling author (you can bestow any title you wish actually, and it's all going to make sense)—none other than Dean Koontz.



Let's jump directly into "Nameless," a collection of six serial stories. Can you give us some information on the background of the series: Where the idea behind it came from, and why you decided to do the project?

Dean Koontz (D.K.): *Actually, Amazon came to me a few years ago and wanted me to do a novel that they would illustrate. I enjoyed working with them a great deal and it sold a lot of copies. Recently they asked if I would ever think of doing a series of novelettes with the same character, which is how I came up with the idea for "Nameless."*

Amnesia is an old gambit but I was looking for something different to do with it. My thought was to have a character who was moving around, ostensibly bringing justice to people that the system never delivers it to, and having him deliver it with a vengeance. But it's not justice; as he tells them, "I'm just serving the truth." There is no such thing as justice. It changes with time, culture, and different people have different ideas of what it is, but the truth is only the truth. So he's on these cases where he knows absolutely that this person did it and brings them their due. But then I thought, if he had amnesia, and can't remember back two years ago when he first started this, that would add a level of mystery to it. But I didn't want the amnesia to be a medical issue, so he's pretty sure he had it engineered because there's a past he doesn't want to remember. That would add this whole new layer to it, and I went from there. He's got this whole system that anytime he shows up in a town, there's a car waiting for him. He's got a motel booked and paid for. He often carries no ID, and everything he needs from weapons to cash is there. So...who's behind this?

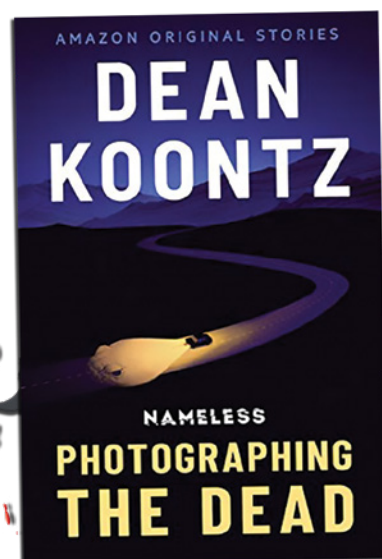
I wanted a story to stand alone yet have this overriding arc so you could go into it any place and begin, but would be more rewarding if you read them straight through. I did about a four page presentation and Amazon responded strongly to it for Amazon Prime. I proceeded to write the six, and I found myself liking the next one even better than the one before, so I knew the character was working. It was also refreshing. When you start a novel, you have a minimum of five or six months working on it in your future. But with a novelette, you're looking at a few weeks, and that's very appealing. I also wanted to take novelettes and have them vivid and colorful and crammed with action, like a fast-moving novel, but with a good pace.

J.R.: So you liked the change?

D.K.: *I don't know what happens in publishing careers, but it has happened to me before. A publisher is having a good run with you and then it's like everyone gets kind of tired; the enthusiasm isn't there. My way to fix that is simply to move. And I hate change, in fact. I stay a long time with a house, but there comes a point where you say to your agent, "Do you think this is working?" And he says, "No."*

Before we went "shopping," the agent said we wanted to include Amazon. And I was wondering about that. I mean, you won't end up in Barnes & Noble, and certain independents won't carry it, because they don't do that. But I did have a great experience with them. So we went out, got eight offers, and Amazon was financially the best. But that didn't really make the difference. It was the marketing proposals they did. There was literally no comparison. I looked at what they were talking about, and I had never had marketing to this degree. I thought this seemed outside-the-box, and it was time to try it. I have to say I love everyone I work with. Efficient, personable, everything moves like clockwork. They're really committed to what they're doing and I'm energized by it. It has revitalized me creatively.

Shannon Raab (S.R.): I think they're going to open you up to a whole new generation of readers. You own the rights to several titles, of course, from years ago. Would you ever consider—with this new excitement and energy—taking another look at them and perhaps bringing them back?



D.K.: *I did buy back a lot of books from my early years, but there are so many new ideas that are more interesting to me now, so I'd like to move forward. The creative ideas are coming, the juices are flowing, and I want to seize on that immediately.*

J.R.: Is that why you're not thinking about a new long series in the near future?

D.K.: *Yes. I always knew that Odd Thomas would be long; he was a character on a journey to complete humility, so I didn't know how long it would take to write that. But I loved the character and I loved the journey. It wasn't until I figured out how I could write the last book that I wrote it and was able to move on. When it came to Jane Hawk, people would ask me why I wrote five instead of one, or three. But I knew, what she was up against was the most powerful conspiracy I had ever imagined and it wasn't realistic that she could beat it in one book or even three. I get mail from readers talking about a scene where she was so clever and that they were amazed she'd handled a situation so quickly. I laugh because, for*

me, it takes like three days here trying to figure out what on earth she would do, but that was the fun part. Those came along because I was reading novels where people were supposedly “off the grid,” but I could see all kinds of ways you could find them. So I thought, “What if I created a character who truly knew how to get off and stay off the grid, but what if the entire government and law enforcement knows and is looking? That would be fun because it would be so difficult. You have to do things you haven’t done before to make it worth doing. I come into this office for all these hours and I want to be entertained.

My brother-in-law, Vito, who passed away a year ago, was just the best. After running companies with over 2,000 employees, he retired and they came here to work with us. He worked in the office and he was so meticulous, I could give him any research. (I’m not online in this office because I don’t trust myself. I know what an obsessive personality I am, so I never go online.) Vito would go on Google Street (which is the greatest thing for a writer.)

S.R.: Yes. And “Nameless” is everywhere. . .

D.K.: Jane Hawk was the same way. She’s in those neighborhoods and on those streets. I said to him, I need to know the Austin airport. Not sure how long the scene was going to be, but I needed to see everything. I remember walking into his office while he was downloading the images and the screen of the computer went grey. Suddenly, a silhouette of him came up.

J.R.: The camera took a picture of him, right? Terrorism and stuff?

D.K.: Yup. (LOL) I said, “Oh, crap, guess you’re not flying anymore.” Then, I was talking to this P.I. friend and he said something like this is a new generation, and that the camera eye is not the only one; there’s another one in the screen itself. I used that premise in “Devoted.” Scary world we’re headed into.

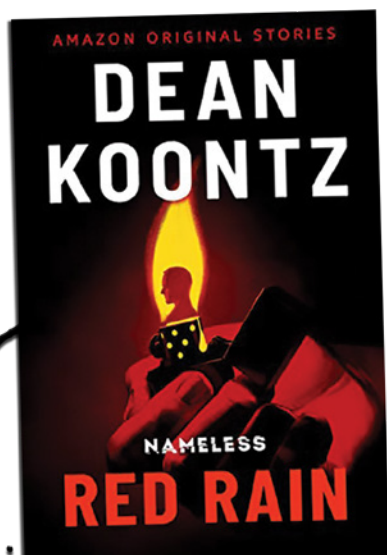
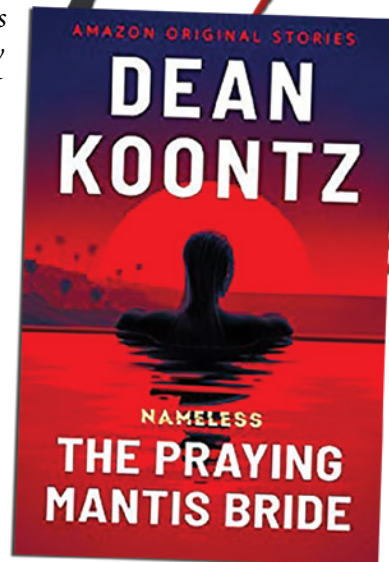
J.R.: It makes for a lot of different paths to take as an author. I mean, now there’s convenient technology everywhere. How do you balance that to make sure your characters don’t just pull out Google, but actually have to talk to people and hunt down clues?

D.K.: Because in the real world, technology doesn’t solve every problem. Jane Hawk, of course, is highly sympathetic because of the child she has to hide away, and losing her husband. But I wanted her to be tough. She has to interrogate people. In the first book, where she has a guy strapped to a chair, she has to do just that. I was terrified writing it, but I realized the techniques of how she had to go after the information. She couldn’t use technology and just “see” what was in his head. But she’s a rogue, and even though I didn’t want her to break anyone physically, she breaks them psychologically. And I think she turned out to be pretty good at it. (LOL)

S.R.: In “Nameless” (and many other books), you add a lot of quips. As violent or as dark as it gets, I had some serious laugh-out-loud moments. I mean...how do you add levity to these situations?

D.K.: I learned long ago that even in the darkest moments of life, when you get past them, you can look back and see the humorous moments. I mean, human beings are an unconsciously absurd species, so there’s really humor in everything. I also wanted to make sure that I never romanticized evil. When I have a bad guy, I want him to scare you. But I want him to be absurd to some degree, because that’s what evil is. It works in the short run but it never works in the long run. So if you can laugh at that character a bit, even while being scared of him, that’s great, but I never risk romanticizing it. Although “Nameless” never goes too far with that, I’ve been known to write some that do. To me, the humor is important to the flavor of certain projects.

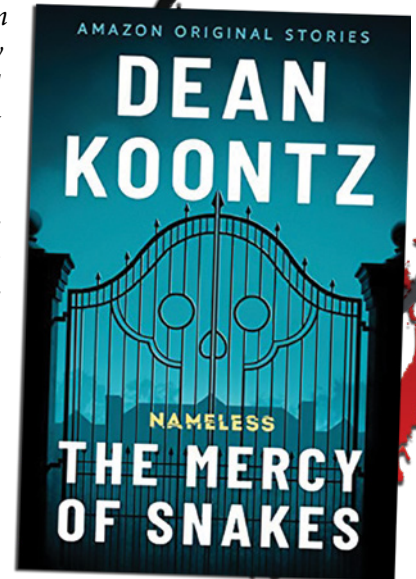
S.R.: Has Amazon looked at “Nameless” for an episodic series? It’s certainly the whole package.



D.K.: Well, "Nameless" just came out, so I don't know exactly where it will go. I've been around so long, I've seen a lot. When I speak to others, I tell the story of the screenplay "Midnight." It was greenlighted, they had the budget for it, it went out to 26 directors and something like 11 wanted to do it. But for some reason, the most unlikely one was chosen. It got so odd I had to get out of the project, and it all spiraled into oblivion.

With "Frankenstein," the network wanted the first episode to be expanded into two hours. I started, and right at that time the agent brought in a young director and told me the guy was fabulous. Unbeknownst to them, this had also been given to Martin Scorsese. He was looking for his first fiction piece for T.V., and he wanted to do this. But, by that time, the other agent had offered it to this young director. Marty became a co-producer on the project, and I thought we truly had an 800-pound gorilla; I mean, we had Scorsese, so it couldn't go wrong. But when I finished the expansion, I got this feeling that something was going very wrong and found out that there was another writer writing behind me. They had taken out the humor, the love story, and went for the grunge/gore instead. All the texture had been pulled out.

I had a "Created By" and an "Executive Producer" credit and I insisted that all of my credits come off. I could see the mess. I got this letter from Marty that said he was stunned when this happened; that he would have shot the script as it was. Apparently, when he'd discovered changes, he called the producer and asked things like, "Why would you change that?" He told me it was wonderful working with me, but he backed out of the project, too. That's the last time I wrote a screenplay. I was stunned that people of substantially less talent than Scorsese decided they knew better than he did. So, I decided not to waste time on screenplays.



J.R.: 500-plus million books sold. That's a heck of a built-in audience to go in and change it.

D.K.: There have been various issues. When it came to Odd Thomas, there was a beautiful script written, and they were halfway done shooting the movie when half the budget disappeared. Stephen Sommers, the director, was told there was no more money but he knew there was. He had a crew and cast sitting in Santa Fe and he asked these people if they would stay there, on their own dime, while he went back to C.A. and found the money. Every single one of them stayed there for a month, but he could never raise as much cash as he'd had in the first place. I think it turned out okay, but it's heartbreaking that so much of the original script was squashed. I think if he'd been able to make his script, it would have been a giant hit. As it was, there was so much contention it ended up on DirectTV and/or Netflix.

J.R.: When you look back on "Watchers," "Phantoms," "Shattered," the books from the 80's, do you think they'd have the same amazing effect on people today as they did back then?

D.K.: That's an interesting question, actually, but I don't know how to answer it. I know I couldn't write "Phantoms" today because I've since moved a different way. I'm glad I wrote it when I did. My publisher at the time wouldn't buy "straight thrillers," she needed horror in them. When I delivered it, she said there was too much horror, so she printed 5,000 copies in paperback—but it took off. It was always at that point when the paperback people saw the potential. And now audio has grown significantly.

J.R.: I'm listening to "Darkfall" now. I just rediscovered it and I think it takes on a new life in audio. Do you listen to your audio books; are you involved in the creation of them at all?

D.K.: I trust the people I work with, so I don't listen to them. It somehow feels egomaniacal to do that, actually. I remember people loved the narrator for "Odd Thomas," and he came back to do "Watchers" and he's great. Audiobooks have exploded. The number of downloads are amazing. Of course, if you're living in C.A. where you spend half the day in your car, you need something to listen to.

J.R.: That's what I'll do on the train. It's a nice hour; put the headphones on and get away from real life while I'm working.

D.K.: If I had them on while working, I couldn't write. I even have the blinds down because I'll start staring out at a beautiful day and not work.

S.R.: So... "Devoted." Tell us about it.

D.K.: Well, it's got a golden retriever (LOL), but it's not like a prequel or a sequel to "Watchers." The idea came to me on a day when I was reading about a type of bacteria that was classified as some kind of 'kingdom' many years ago. They discovered that it could transfer genes from various species into other species. Not all genetics come down through generations, because this can move genes from plants and animals into humans. While I was reading that, I thought it was cool. I thought, "What if someone was doing an experiment with this, a person like Elon Musk who thinks they're going to live forever?" Of course, technology is not going to let that happen. But what if they were experimenting and trying to put stuff in themselves that would expand their life span? I came up with these characters—a widowed woman and her autistic son—who were going to be my main people.

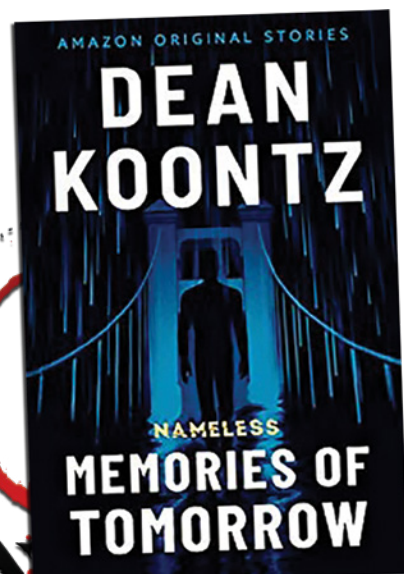
In "Watchers," genetic engineering and labs were responsible for 'creating' a dog. With this I thought, "What if we have these dogs lying among us that are much smarter than we realize?" They've found each other in little communities in this book and they communicate through something called "The Wire." Not created in a lab, but created from over 100,000 years of dogs and people living together, evolving. There are just a few of them, but they speak to each other telepathically. They don't know where they came from, and they start to buy in to the premise that they must have been engineered in a laboratory, but that isn't it. I definitely wanted to keep the original story of the lifeform that moves genes, because I knew it was going to be good for the villain. At one point, this man is coming at the woman and her son, this autistic boy is 11 but he knows something is wrong. He's never spoken, but he is a savant; he doesn't believe his father died in an accident and has been doing research for a couple of years, bringing him to the attention of some pretty bad people. When they're at their most desperate, and terrified of this guy coming towards them, this one dog hears him. The dog has never heard the boy talk before, so the boy is now on "the wire" but he doesn't know it. So, a little bit of "Watchers" but totally different. I had the best time doing it. It was emotional, but one of the fastest paced books I've ever written because there are so many elements moving at once.

S.R.: You've always written in multiple genres and not kept in a "box." With this new opportunity at Amazon, is it comfortable in this new world; or was it a hard transition because you were used to the other direction?

D.K.: "Devoted" has a sort of far out idea with these dogs, but it had no problem elsewhere. It deals with a concept that's much like a Michael Crichton idea, mixing elements in a different way. I didn't pull back at all, so it is a cross-genre novel, and has had very good strong reactions. So they aren't putting shackles on me. And I've had those before. I worked with one a long time ago that said they couldn't publish "Midnight" because the character was a child. So I couldn't publish it for seven years, because it would be YA and I was still growing an audience. Now, the character is a child, but she grows up. They said that it was YA and couldn't work. Oddly enough, it didn't set my career back, it enhanced it. I was told that "Midnight" was going to come out as #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. Of course, she also said to me not to get too excited because that would never happen again.

J.R.: She was wrong.

D.K.: We had four more and she always said that after each one. The reason was, she said, that mixing elements didn't succeed. I thought we were seeing them succeed and one day we'd have to admit it to ourselves. I've had some interesting notes, to say the least, from editors in the past.



J.R.: My wife loves to edit. (LOL) One of our authors teaches writing to a class and he read her edits to the students one day, and said, "See? Even I get yelled at." Of course, sometimes the edits make you look at things in a different light. You rewrote a couple of the older ones, didn't you?

D.K.: Oh yes. I am an obsessive, so I write twenty to thirty drafts. A lot of editors will send me notes about how it's so clean, but I don't want to have weaknesses. When you have things where you convince yourself, "No, that's okay. I don't need to work on it more," then that will be the one edit they come back with.

On the book I just delivered, I went back (because of an editorial note) and added a chapter to put the reader more on edge in regards to a total sociopath. He misses from the book for ninety pages before returning, and they wanted me to add something so that the reader could see the craziness in the guy and be tense until he reappears. Then my British publisher wrote me a four page letter; she loved the book and wanted almost no changes made. In the last chapter, she just thought I could add a paragraph embedded in my ending that would be a bit dramatic. When I did it, the final sentence was so wonderful

it brought tears to my eyes. If that recommendation hadn't been there, it would have been okay the way it was, but the other ending didn't make me as emotional. I love the characters and it made me love them even more. That's what I want editing to be—an honest give-and-take. Because, as we know, when the book is published it doesn't read: "By Dean Koontz with Incredible Suggestions By..."

J.R.: A lot of American authors are phenomenal in Europe, but not so much in the U.S. Are there places you're popular and didn't even realize it?

D.K.: You kind of learn it's happening when they buy one and publish it, then another one, and then come back and buy twelve others. The books are very popular in Japan, Norway and Sweden. Sometimes it slides down. I had a point where I became fed up with agents, and for 14 years made my own deals. My attorney friend said that the business was changing, and it was time to have agents again. So I told him that our thirty year relationship was on the line, because he was going to pick the agent out. He recommended Richard Pine and Kate Witherspoon, partners at Inkwell. They are completely different and it has been really good. So...I only had to reach age 71 to find them.

I often laugh because people look at this career from the outside and see this amazingly smooth arc, but it was a bumpy road. Things that you can't believe happened, did. I say to young writers, persistence is an important talent, because in my experience there are a million people saying we just can't wait to publish you the 'right way.' But everyone has their own opinions as to what that way is, so I've had books not published in the past by a publisher who wants something "different."

J.R.: That happens again, just send me an email. (LOL) Well, this has been fabulous. So, "Nameless" is coming out and "Devoted" in March of 2020?

D.K.: Yes, and working on another Amazon book, but we don't have an actual date on that yet. I don't think anyone will publish in a major way in October because of the presidential election, so I would guess, December.

J.R.: And people can go to www.deankoontz.com to find out, or is Amazon doing a little something, too?

D.K.: Amazon is running all of it. I don't want to run it but I do write some tweet-sized things for them that they post; I don't really go on and look at my website or Facebook.

S.R.: Completely offline.

D.K.: Exactly. It's the only way I could have written this much for this long.

We would like to thank Dean for taking the time to sit down with us. For more information on Dean and his works, visit his website at www.deankoontz.com. If you're looking for "NAMELESS," head to Amazon. ■

WILLIAM NIKKEL

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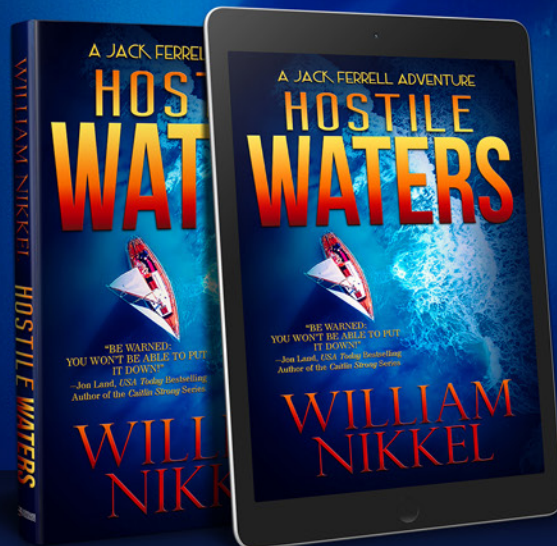
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SUSPENSE
PUBLISHING



My Meredith



By Theresa Barrett

I haven't seen Meredith in three days, which is what I told the police this morning when they knocked on my door. I was the last one to see her alive, according to Detective Went, a severe-looking man with a walrus mustache. He said it with the sinking timbre of accusation before dipping his whiskers in the cup of coffee I'd offered him, as if I would have abducted my best friend and done God knows what to her. When I told him she left my apartment in perfect health, adding that I had walked her to her car down the street since it was late by the time she went home, his mustache twitched like a feather duster. I hate mustaches. All they do is collect food scraps and liquids until they are stiff with rancid waste. They transport the decay, sloughing it off here or there to pollinate the world with filth. I had considered once, a long time ago, carrying around a battery-powered razor and shaving off every mustache I saw, but that would be crazy. There are so many out there, I'd never have time to do anything else.

I've been thinking about Meredith a lot since then. She wasn't one to run away from her problems, but if she had, no one would have blamed her. At least I wouldn't, not after noting the fear in her wide eyes the last night I saw her. She was hysterical. Said she thought someone was following her. The pink varnish on her fingernails had started to chip off onto her collarbone as she twisted the silver seahorse charm on her necklace. I got up to get her a damp paper towel so the paint chips wouldn't get lost in the creases of my couch, but she grabbed my wrist. Hard. She pleaded with me to get her some help. *Get help*, that's all she could say. She wasn't making any sense.

I didn't mention Meredith's paranoia to Detective Went because I didn't understand it myself. She was always so level-headed, I thought she might have been on something that night. All she needed was a good night's rest. I knew for sure she wasn't crazy. She is a psychiatrist after all, and I think they make them take a test before they're handed their license, just to make sure they won't be a danger to anyone while poking around inside other people's heads.

Cool and calm Meredith always had an answer for everything. Except for whatever she thought was happening to her. I'd noticed her behavior change about a week ago. It started after my mother died. It wasn't a surprise, the passing

of my mother. I'd been waiting for it for some time. She was barely able to pull herself out of bed in the mornings, and she had stopped eating as if to nudge her already failing bodily systems to give up on her like she had on them. She died clutching the collar of her rose-patterned nightgown, her fingers digging into the material so hard they had to cut the fabric around her hands to get it off of her for the autopsy.

Meredith came to the funeral and that was the first time she mentioned anything about someone following her. An asshole in a Buick had tailgated her until she pulled into the church parking lot, then he sped away—with black smoke drifting up from his tires. My mother's guests had ignored the scene, but then that wasn't a shock. I never liked my mother's friends. Meredith had walked up the stone steps shaking and upset. When I asked if she was okay, she laughed it off and pretended like nothing happened, but I saw an undercurrent of fear in her face. Her perfect teeth snapped shut in a too-wide smile as the organ music started, case closed.

After the funeral, we sat in my living room drinking vodka and staring at the blue reflection on the wall coming from the bubbles in my fish tank.

"I think of it as a kindness, to go in your sleep," she said.

Meredith was always doing that, finding the silver lining. It was annoying. A burst water pipe was an opportunity to start that bathroom remodel I'd been putting off. A bout of food poisoning was a delightful excuse to catch up on the sleep I'd missed after a tough week. The complaints about my overbearing mother were a misstep because at least I *had* a mother.


She can't say that anymore, I thought with a smile.

Her eyes traced the undulating trajectory of the orange goldfish as they bobbed for flakes of food. A nearby table lamp cast the tank's underwater world in a dark shadow against the wall, morphing the plastic treasure chest into a shipwreck and my lazy goldfish into sharks hunting for seals.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess if you've got a choice, dying in your sleep is the way to go."

"Are you going to be okay? I mean, you were spending a lot of time with your mother toward the end. The abrupt change can sometimes bring up unresolved issues."

"I'll be fine."



I thought about that as I drank. The unresolved issues. The compulsive dread I used to feel whenever I walked behind people on the stairs, terrified I was going to reach out and shove them; or when the thought of every sharp knife in the kitchen would make my skin itch because I just knew I was going to pick one up and hurt someone; or the way my hands would shake whenever I poured a drink as I tried to remember whether or not there was poison in the glass. But I never did any of those things. And these days I barely think about poison and knives and shoving people down stairs. Anyway, they had nothing to do with my mother. Disordered thinking, that's all it was. I was fine.

"I'm fine," I said again.

We settled into a comfortable silence. I followed the shark-shaped shadows of my goldfish until my eyelids began to droop. The vodka had warmed me, and Meredith's spiced vanilla perfume felt like being wrapped in a warm blanket with bread baking in the oven. Just as I thought I might fall asleep, I felt the cushion next to me depress. Meredith's breath tickled my neck as she whispered in my ear: "They're coming. They're coming for me."

I jolted upright and the vodka I was still holding spilled onto my leg.

"Are you okay?" Meredith sounded as calm as ever, but I caught the slight tremor of her fingers as they dropped the silver seahorse.

"What the hell, Meredith," I said.

"What?" She twisted on the couch and looked me straight in the eye.

"You just said, 'They're coming for me.'"

"No, I didn't."

"You did. You just whispered it in my ear."

"When?"

"Just now."

The skin on her forehead bunched up, as rich and pale as whipped cream. Her eyes drifted over my face and the creamy waves thickened. "Jesse, maybe we should—"

I shook my head. "Sorry. Never mind. I was falling asleep. It must have been the beginning of a dream."

She looked relieved. Thinking back now, if I had pressed the issue, maybe things would have turned out differently. Maybe she wouldn't be missing anymore. But that's just what people tell themselves when they want to feel bad about their decisions.

#

I'm sitting in my favorite chair, the soft leather one that faces the window, when the doorbell rings. I don't move for a long moment. I'm mesmerized. There's some kind of darkness on the wall that wasn't there before. A long, black mark in the center of the aquarium's shadowy world, dangling above the sharks hunting for seals. It resembles a fishing lure or paralyzed bait. It's faint, but I'm sure I'm not imagining it.

The doorbell rings again.

"Jesse Bernhardt? It's Detective Went." His voice is muffled by the closed door.

I can't move. Or maybe I just don't want to. All I can do is stare.

The dark streak undulates occasionally, in tandem with the plastic seaweed that came with the treasure chest. I wonder when I first noticed the mark. Was it yesterday? Two days ago? The night Meredith was over here talking about how someone was following her and she was too scared to go home alone?

"Jesse Bernhardt?" Detective Went's thick knuckles pound on my door.

I get up and flick on the automatic coffee machine before opening the door.

Detective Went scratches his chin. "Good morning, Jesse. Can I call you Jesse?"

"Morning."

He walks right by me, not bothering to pause for an invitation.

"Hey, wait a minute." I tie the belt on my bathrobe tight, pulling until the fabric twists the skin over my hip bones. "You can't just come in here and—"

"Not going to work today?" Detective Went digs for something inside the breast pocket of his jacket.

"No. Not feeling too well, I guess."

"You guess."

"My mother died last week."

"Sorry for your loss," Detective Went says, the words coming through his mustache. He doesn't look sorry. He looks as keyed up as a knock-kneed mare trapped behind the starting gate, waiting for a gun to go off. "Unfortunately, I have some more bad news. We found Meredith. I'm sorry, but she's dead."

Maybe he never looks sorry. Maybe his winter-dried skin is always drawn in hysteric wrinkles, and maybe he always squeezes his notepad and quirks his eyebrows and holds a big breath inside his big chest as if waiting on the edge of his seat.

"Wait." I shake my head. "What?"

"Meredith is dead," he says a little louder.

My head feels light and suddenly there's a hole in my chest, the empty-well kind where you can drop a coin down into the dark pit and never hear it plop into the scrim of mud and mildew on the bottom.

"I'm sorry," I say, wobbling over to the stool at my kitchen counter. "I need to sit."

"Of course."

Detective Went follows me into the kitchen and sniffs the air. It's vaudevillian. A mute question. A half-hearted attempt at courtesy.

"Help yourself to some coffee." I point to the clean mug I'd set out for myself earlier.

I flatten my palm on the cool granite. The knives tucked in the drawer below my hand make my fingers tingle until they twitch. Before the detective notices, I rest my chin in

my hands.

I can see the streak from here. Something about it makes my palms sweat, especially when Detective Went's eyes linger in its direction. It's all too much, the knives and the shadow and my bobbing, golden sharks. My knees crack as I jerk to a standing position. I move to block his view of the dark splotch, hoping he hasn't seen it.

"Feeling better already, I see." He smiles, but there's something rotten behind it, as rotten as the crust coating his mustache. "I have a few questions for you, seeing as how the last time you saw Ms. Meredith Grand was when you walked her to her car on Tuesday evening, and the coroner puts her death only a few hours after you claim she left your apartment." He flips the pages in his palm-sized notebook.

"How did she die?" The question comes out as a whisper. I almost don't hear myself say it over the last gurgles of the coffeemaker before its orange light shuts off.

"Strangulation. Specifically, hanging."

"Jesus." I rake my palm over my mouth, trying to keep the bile from creeping up my throat.

"Looks like it was a suicide."

"Meredith would never do that."

"Of course, of course. We're still waiting on the full report from the medical examiner, but you should be prepared to accept that maybe she did—"

"I don't believe you. I don't know why, but you're lying."

He sighed. "Look, I know the cops around here have got a bad reputation, but I'm telling you, we're still the good guys. Most of us, anyway. You'll always have the guys that beat innocent people or plant evidence, but that's no reason to think I'm lying."

No one speaks for a while. The detective pours coffee into the mug and takes a sip. He winces at the heat and rubs his lips. I'm not sure, but I think I see a fine dust tumble from his mustache. I grab a wet wipe from the package on the counter and sweep it across the granite.

"You know," he says, placing his mug on the dry part of the counter, "you might be right about Meredith. Maybe it wasn't a suicide. There might have been signs of a struggle."

He taps his chin in caricature of a deep thinker. Was this some kind of police tactic? Pretending to agree with me to throw me off balance? Would I be one of those people in handcuffs, giving interviews to local news stations, crying about how the police made me confess to something I didn't do?

"What do you mean, 'might have been?'" I asked.

"Like I said, the medical examiner needs to finish his report. But if I were you, I'd be praying it was a suicide. You were the last one to see her alive, remember? That'd make you a prime suspect. You'd be at the top of my list, anyway."

"I don't know what happened to—"

"Of course, of course. But just in case, is there anything else you can tell me about that night? Was she planning to meet up with anyone later?"

"Like I told you last time, she didn't mention anything about what she planned to do later that evening."

"And what about you? Did you have any plans later that evening?"

"No." I shrug. "I wasn't feeling well, so I wanted to go to bed early. It's why she left in the first place. I tried to get her to stay. She was scared."

"Scared of what?" the detective asks. "You?"

"No." It comes out like a question. My eyes flick over my shoulder to glance at the mark and then turn back to the detective, who is staring at me with even more interest.

"Well, now this is interesting," he says. "Ms. Grand pays you a visit and then says she has to go because she's scared."

"That's not what I said!"

"Then tell me again, because it sounds to me like you didn't say nearly enough the first time around."

He taps the stump of a bite mark pocked pencil against my counter and waits. So I tell him everything. About the car at the funeral, about how she hadn't sounded like herself lately.

"And she kept asking me questions," I say.

"What kind of questions?"

I rub my tired eyes and try to remember. "I don't know. Was I hearing things? Did I feel like someone was after me, too? It was weird."

Detective Went doesn't write any of this down, he just stares at me with his eager eyes until I move to pour myself some coffee.

"Well, I guess that's all for now." He closes his notebook and slaps it on the table, *flap, flap*, like a fly knocking against a windowpane, desperate to get inside. "Let me know if you remember anything else."

"Of course. If I remember anything I'll let you know."

When the door closes behind him I slump to the floor. I continue to stare at the black stain until the coffee goes cold.

#

The mysterious shadow is bigger today. I've done nothing lately but think of Meredith and look at that smear; think of her and wonder what that stain could be. It has a slithery shape, only I can't tell if that's from the ethereal reflection of the aquarium or if it's all in my head. I've tried scrubbing the wall, taping newspaper up to hide it, but the only thing that works is if I turn off the table lamp nearby, so that's what I do. I flick my thumb over the switch. On-off, on-off, always hoping the next time I switch the lamp on the shadow will be gone. It never leaves.

I don't know how long I've been staring. When I blink, my eyelids scrape down with a rough, sandpaper flutter that stings. I consider keeping my eyes closed, but as soon as my vision goes dark I see Meredith's twisted blue face. Her eyes bulge in a surprised, unblinking look I've never seen before. A death stare loaded with accusation. The look says: *Why didn't you try harder? Why didn't you save me?* The seahorse

necklace she never took off dangles from the manila rope around her neck, then falls with a thick plop onto the carpet in her walk-in closet.

The phone in my kitchen rings. It's eleven o'clock. I press the cold, plastic receiver against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey. I thought you were coming in to work today. We were expecting you at the meeting this morning."

It's Rose, my officemate. I picture her sitting at the desk we share, gnawing on a pen cap with her crooked canine tooth.

"Sorry," I said. "I guess I just wasn't up to it."

"Of course. Take as much time as you need. Listen, a detective showed up today looking for you. Are you—?"

"I have to go." I hang the receiver back on the hook.

My head hurts. A lot.

The smudge on the wall no longer looks slithery. A limp loop dangles from a long string, swaying the tiniest bit. Like a noose. And it's silly—I know it's ridiculous—but I think that shadow might have killed Meredith. I have the same heavy pit in my belly as I used to get whenever I walked behind people on the stairs. The same horrified certainty that something terrible was about to happen.

How long have we been friends? Meredith had asked me the last night I saw her. *Do you trust me?*

I wish I had gone with her like she wanted me to. *Just come with me, everything will be fine. I swear.*

A knock on my door. A hard rap that I recognize now as belonging to Detective Went.

"Shit," he says when I open the door. "You been getting any sleep lately?"

"Not much."

"Mind if I—" He steps forward, but I put my hand on the door frame to block him.

There's something sinister about that mark. I need to figure out where it's coming from before—

"Coffee smells good," he says, and suddenly it seems silly to leave him in the hallway when I'm not even sure if anyone but me can see the shadow. Besides, if he does see it, then maybe that means I'm not crazy.

"Come in."

He heads straight for the kitchen cabinets, opening and closing them as if he owns the place. A loud, candy-wrapper crackle sounds as he squats to open the door to my pots and pans.

"What are you doing? Stop that." I race over and grab his shoulders but he won't budge. "The mugs are in the cabinet next to the fridge."

A plastic bottle tumbles to the floor as he pushes his hands inside the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

"I said stop!" I push with all I have and the detective's shoulder hits the open cabinet, producing a wooden rattle.

"Jesus, calm down." He dusts his shirt off and stands, toeing the door closed with his dirty shoe. "You wouldn't

want me to get the wrong idea, would you?"

"I think you should leave."

"Now hang on a minute. I got something I want to show you."

He slips a yellow envelope I hadn't noticed before from under his elbow and pulls out a grainy photograph.

"That you?"

He taps the photo and his finger is thick and yellow, and he must bite his nails when he's not smoking cigarettes, but what's he pointing at? I lean in and see a black and white figure wearing a wool coat just like the one in my closet.

They're coming for me, Meredith had said. Maybe they're coming for me, too.

"That's not me," I said. "It can't be."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Because that sure looks like you, heading out of Meredith's apartment building just minutes after she was murdered."

The grainy pixels underneath his finger begin to swirl and my head hurts again. I blink and Meredith's bloated, accusing face stares back at me, and I can't take it anymore, so I stare at the shadowy mark. For the first time in days, I'm grateful for its existence because it makes my brain stop rattling in my skull. Maybe that black smudge did kill my friend, but how am I supposed to explain that?

Detective Went gathers the photograph and slips it back in the envelope. "I think it's time we took a trip down to the station."

I could make it all go away; I could erase that shadow and whatever happened to Meredith if I just turn off the table lamp. A flick of the thumb, that's all the situation calls for.

"I just need to..." I step past the detective and reach for the lamp. "Then it will all go away."

Suddenly Detective Went is next to me and the sour tobacco and coffee smell of his breath turns my stomach. He grabs my reaching hand and pushes me against the wall, and it knocks out my breath, but that's okay because I don't want to breathe anymore.

"You stay right there," he says. "Don't move."

He walks across the room. The plastic covering on my aquarium goes *click*, and it's not the kind of click the lamp switch that I wish would just turn off makes. The slithery mark twitches and then grows into a horrifying black sea monster larger than the shadows of my goldfish. It leaps out of the water and into my living room, into Detective Went's wet hand.

"This look familiar?" he says.

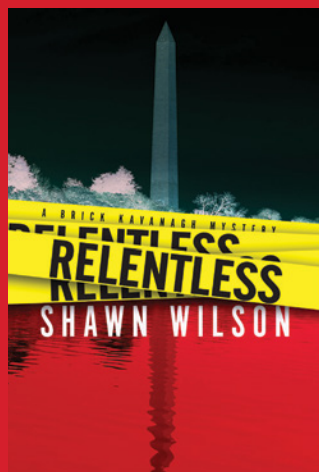
Tears drip to the carpet as I look down, expecting a small noose nestled in his palm, but instead I see Meredith's silver seahorse next to a broken silver chain. The shadowy mark. It wasn't in my head.

I take a big, deep breath.

Guess I'm not crazy after all. ■

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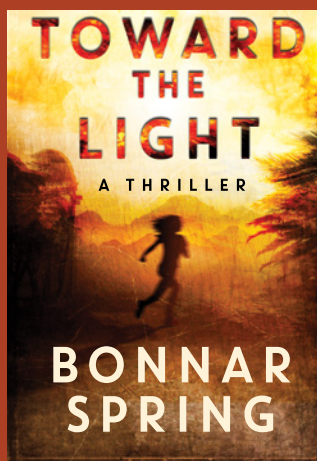


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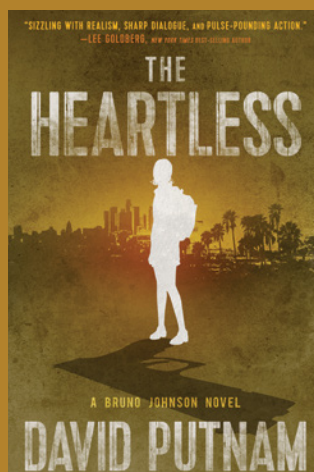


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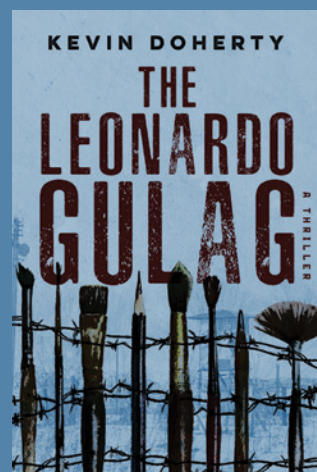


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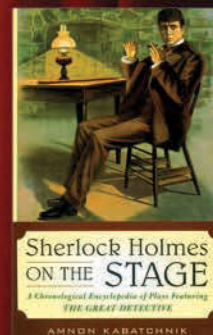
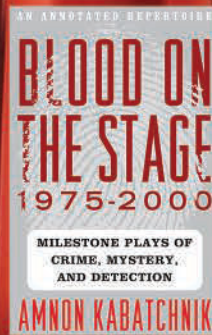
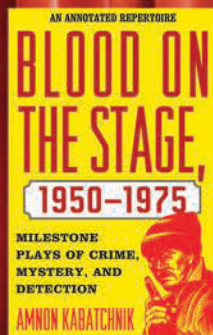
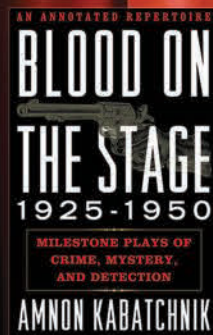
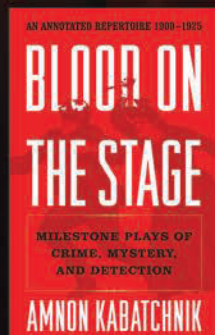
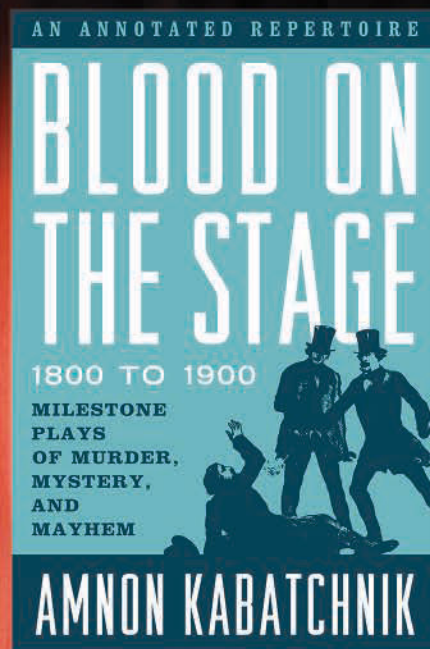
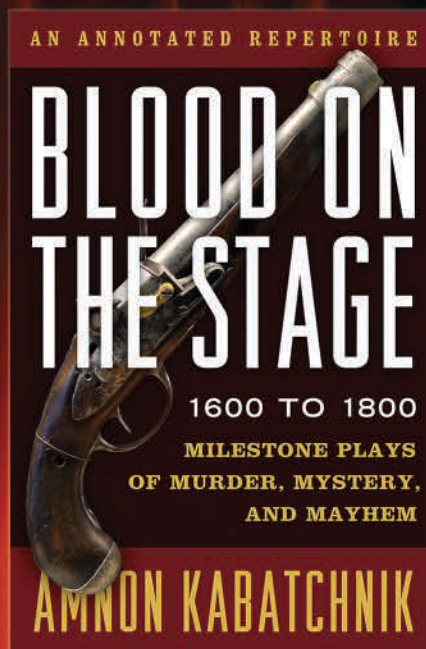
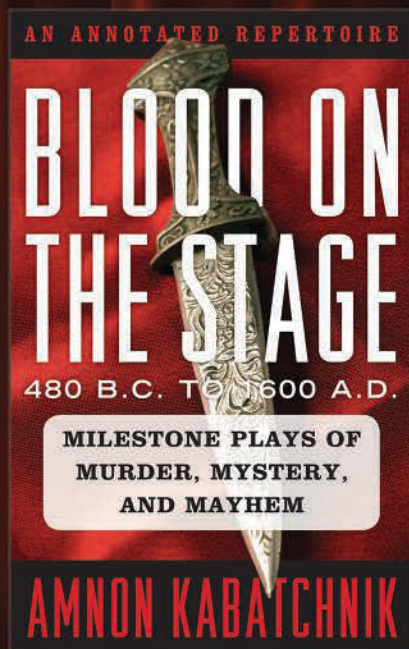
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