

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

JULY/AUGUST 2017

*Bestsellers Turn up  
the Summer Heat!*

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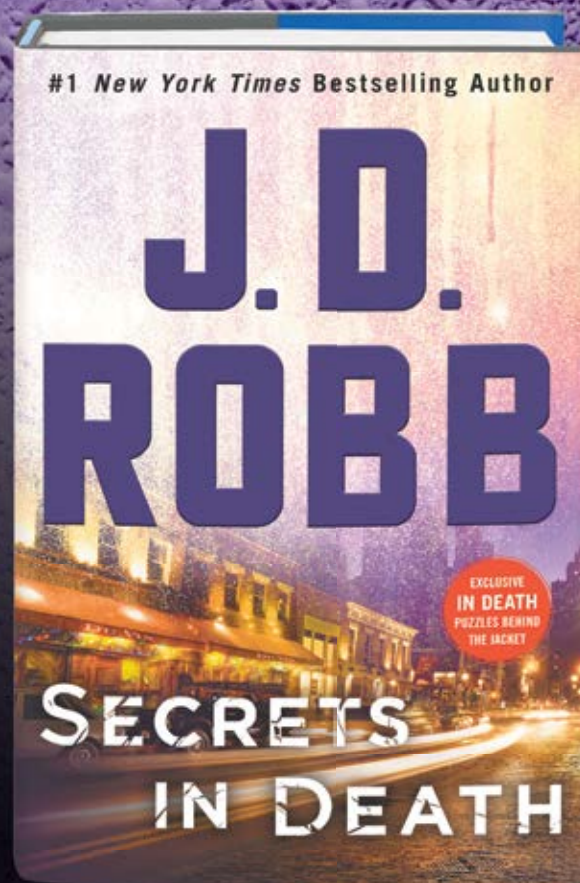
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FOR LOYAL FANS AND CURIOUS  
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## FROM THE EDITOR



Summer is winding down. Many parents are quietly planning parties, because their children are finally going back to school. Now we head into fall, a season that a lot of people think is the best of them all. But is it? Let's take a quick look at all four seasons and see which one wins.

**Spring:** We start to see the thaw and greenery shining through. Spring brings Easter, the biggest holiday of the season, and is a season of change—arguably the most of any of the seasons. For people that live in warmer climates, grills start to heat up. Pools open, things that have been in hibernation for months come alive, and life spreads its wings again.

**Summer:** No matter where you live you have hot or warm weather; humid or dry. You turn on your A/C for the first time and hope it doesn't give off that weird smell. Everyone is grilling, especially on July 4<sup>th</sup>. But we can't forget Labor Day, which leads us into fall. The movies are supposed to be the biggest one's of the year, (the moneymakers, not the Oscar winners).

**Fall:** The best season for sports lovers. The World Series. Football, basketball and hockey return. You pull out that sweatshirt that's been hanging in your closet for months. Fall is filled with holidays. Thanksgiving is the star, but we should never forget Veterans Day and, of course, Columbus Day, and Halloween. Kids are heading to school (as parent's cheer). We see the signs of life from springtime slowly fade out.

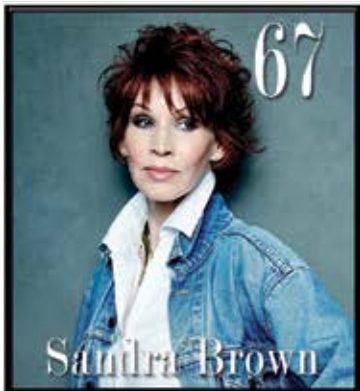
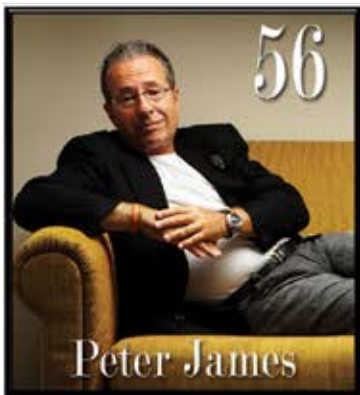
**Winter:** Snow, ice, cold. Three words that excite some people, especially skiers, snowboarders and snowmobilers. That first snow of the year is one of the most beautiful sights of any season. Christmas comes in December, probably the largest holiday of the year and the most expensive. We turn the calendar with New Year's Eve and hope for a better year to come. Winter is the season of change and hope as we all have a shot at a fresh start.

So which season is the best? That depends on what's important to you. Each season has its own special and unique qualities that make it great. Seasons are like people in a way. While they're all different in various ways, they're all equal, with wonderful qualities and something to love. By focusing on the positives of each season, we can learn to love them all equally.

John Raab  
CEO/Publisher  
*Suspense Magazine* ■



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# Lay Down Your Burdens

By Peter Mark May

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but the I79 from Tucson to Florence was paved with something far worse.

Eighteen months had passed since the horrors of Anno Zombie had hit the globe. Slowly the leviathan that was the United States of America was rising from the canvas, after an eight count.

“At least there are jobs for everyone now,” Enrique, a member of the road crew, used to tell him every day, with his gap tooth smile.

“Yes, the loss of ninety million lives and the Civilian Citizen Draft Emergency Bill can do that to the job market,” Kook Randall replied on this occasion.

Many people hated the CCD, but to Kook it had been a game changer. Anyone able to work and not in a job or taking care of young children, under the age of sixty-five *had* to work, and there was work aplenty rebuilding the devastated areas of the country. Millions upon millions had died during Anno Zombie; from the poorest unemployed to the wealthiest billionaire 1%ers in their gold lined bunkers. Death left no hiding place, whatever the size of your wallet. All died, all came back in certain places for a while.

Kook Randall looked upon the liberal marches against the emergency bill with great ire. His real name was Philip, but he'd not gone by that name for nineteen years. He hated his pompous sounding first name and dropped it as soon as he hit college. Leaving behind his mother, his father's early grave, and the name that had been the start of his life's journey. Philip Charles Windsor Randall was his full name. His mother was a British royalist nut from way back. She still lived in Tucson, thinking the zombie year of hell was sent to America as a sign that they must rejoin the British Empire. Her home was draped in British flags, dainty teacups with Charles and Di on them, tea towels, and wondered why she had acquired the nickname 'Queenie' many years ago.

Kook was the nickname his friends had giving him back when he was eleven. Kook was short for kooky. As a kid, before girls came along, he was fascinated with dead things. Roadkill, slaughterhouses, programs late at night about autopsies—he couldn't get enough of them. Then puberty hit, and girls did not want to see a dead coyote with tire marks across the place its brain had once been. No, dead things were out, as soon as he discovered first to fourth base. Without any permanent or regular female companionship, and with recent events, the fascination had returned. The dead animals had talked to him as a boy. All things had a story, he found, if you stared at them long enough. Philip gave way to Kook in college. It had taken being nearly thrown out of college for him to not answer to his name when called by his professors, before they had reached a compromise of calling him Mister Randall.

Kook had owned a travel company, which had two offices. The one in Phoenix which had vanished down an abyss with the rest of the city; and his office in Tucson, which had been burnt to cinders. Strangely this happened a week after the rain had come and flushed the zombie-filled fogs away. He was a man reborn, working in a road reconstruction gang. The work was hard at first. His skin had burnt, and his bones ached, but he slept like a log every night. No more nights of sleepless anxiety about how his businesses were running, no worries that the two married women in each of his offices he was banging might find out about each other. After Anno Zombie—both his sexual partners having died—life was nearly stress-free and nicely uncomplicated. After two weeks, he began to fall in love with manual labor. After fifteen years as an ass-numbing desk



jockey, he felt like a new man, free of burden. The outdoor life suited him. He carried with him a slight claustrophobic fear that remained from the zombie apocalypse. He had been trapped in his store cupboard at his Tucson office for days. Lucky for him, it was where they stored the spare cooler bottles. His stinking zombie workforce trapping him in that dimly lit cramped place, with only a waste bucket of his own urine and excrement for company. He got little sleep, as he was in a permanent state of fear that the dead would break through the heavy locked door to get him.

The outside life, and a 5000-yard line of sight all around made him feel at ease. Kook was in better shape now than since he was dropped from the college track team, for spending all his practice time in Katie Munday's bed, back in his twentieth year. He worked the road, and the road worked him. He poured his sweat into every mile him and his crew re-laid. A good day had a shower or a bath at the end of it and soap to scrub the new black asphalt from his bare forearms. A bad day was when they slept in their vehicles by the roadside and washed with warm bottled water. But mostly they found a good place to bunk. Tony on the crew had a dartboard he carted around with him in the cab of his truck, and Kook had picked up quite a skill at the game; though the math sometimes took a little working out. Usually, they could find a desert watering hole at night that had enough juice to cool the beers and cook up some chili.

Then, like the old days, rumors started to filter down to Kook and his crew. The internet was still a patchwork of old dreams mostly, this far from a town or city, yet word still reached them. From the drivers that delivered to them, to suppliers, and even newspaper snippets.

What were they building the roads with?

A UN charter: 729112A Amendment G was passed with a 97% yes vote. There would be no more burials around the globe. All corpses were to be cremated as-soon-as-humanly-possible. Two countries abstained, and only Hungary voted against it. Instead, they insisted that all corpses should be staked and beheaded before burial.

So the government of the world had a big problem, but the remains of leading huge corporations stepped in and took the contracts governments handed out, glad to get any income after AZ. The clean-up might take a generation, the new President stated on his first address to the nation, but, "by golly, they would get it done." Not by him or his cronies, of course; no, by the companies and corporations pulling the strings behind their backs and whose boards they were secretly on the payroll of. Vast hangers were stacked high with the dead, and they could not be cremated quick enough. It was a nightmare to the companies that held the contracts; they were losing money hand over fist trying to keep up with failing deadlines and EPA fines.

Until one junior executive had a bright spark, so the story goes.

Kook Randall worked for a sub-contracted firm called Highway 12 Corp. Things mentioned in confidential meetings held at their Baltimore HQ, began to leak down the line. What was in the asphalt that the road crews up and down the land and in other countries laid? What had the company had an overabundance of? Reimagining the role of the dead, recycling for a new age, were the corporation "buzz-words." Nobody asked too many hard questions, people were just glad to have survived the zombie hell and have jobs and a roof over their heads these days. Kook and his band of road laying brothers heard them, too. One Catholic guy quit on the spot, with moral outrage; most thought it a bit grim, but a necessary evil. Kook just worked hard, drank his beer, ate his burrito and ignored the same rumors going around the bar they sat in that night.

It was hot as hell inside the bar; air-con was a major premium these days. The hot food and rounds of beers had made Kook feel a little light-headed, and his skin felt cold and clammy to the touch.

"I need a leak," he waved to the guys as he headed for the exit. The rear door was at the end of a short, brown-hued corridor next to the piss smelling restrooms. Kook held his breath and tried not to up-chuck in his throat, as he wavered on unsteady pins-and-needles legs out the rear exit of the dive. He hit the exit bar with his left hand, feeling he might actually faint at any second.

Then he was out into the night. The cold desert air hit him at once, sending a freezing shiver from the nape of his neck right down to his contracting scrotum; but it did the trick. The heat from inside was washed away by the cool night breeze. Kook closed his eyes and swayed in it, letting a more normal ambient temperature return to his overheated body. The rear exit led to the back side and around the right of the dive in an L-shape parking lot. It was mostly filled—but only a quarter full—with the vehicles, rollers, and trucks they used to lay the roads. Kook, losing the urge to vomit, had the sudden call of nature instead. He wandered over to the edge of the parking lot, past his crew's vehicles, to piss on the desert adjacent to the road they would work on in the upcoming days. They worked four days on and three days off. Kook hadn't taken any other days off or vacation since he started. In the end; where would he go, and who with?

Feeling more himself, and with an eased bladder, he shook off and zipped up, ignoring any spots he got on his hands. That's when he heard it on the cold desert breeze.

At first, he thought it was the music from the bar, but as he strained his ears to catch the sounds again, he knew it was carried on the breeze from down the road a ways. Kook walked down the bank that sloped from the empty desert behind him



onto the road. The sounds came again, like someone calling him from just out of range. Kook sniffed and walked on down the road in the direction of the voices that seemed to catch in the cold air. It reminded him of a Bon Jovi open air concert he had seen twelve years ago. It had been a sunny but gusty day. When the winds blew the hardest, the noise from the stage sounded like it was blown away and to the left, so you only caught intermittent snippets of the songs.

It didn't sound like a single voice calling him now, but a stadium full of voices, searching to be heard over the desert wind that buffeted his clothes. He followed the voices for ages; to his feet, it felt like miles. The voices were louder and more urgent as he walked back down the I74. It wasn't until he reached the place where his crew had stopped for the day that they became clear and resonate. There were layers upon layers of voices all clambering for the cochleas in his ears to hear. Haunting, crying, wailing voices, growing in intensity and anguish as he stumbled on. His steps were slower with each footfall, his brain overloading with the tumultuous, overwhelming, encircling sound.

Kook's hands went to cover his ears. The voices were so intense they were pressing him down onto the slightly pliant asphalt he had helped lay only a couple of hours before. He felt his knees sink an inch into the dark road. Only a half moon was visible to illuminate the long stretch of road that ran into the night. His bare hands sank into the dark, warm, grainy road like unseen things were pulling him down to their level to hear their words, understand their fears, and listen to their wails of sorrow. His toecaps, knees, and hands sunk into the newly laid surface as if it were molasses, and not hard road.

Kook was stuck and could do nothing but let them in, let the voices enter him and one-by-one tell him of their deaths and what they needed from him.

It took the remainder of the night to hear their confessions and listen to their pleas.

**E**nrique, Tony and the rest of the crew thought Kook had crashed out early in one of the rooms out in the back of the dive. Rooms that were used back when there were particular "types" of ladies, and not just beer and old records to entertain the menfolk. But the old whoring rooms were all empty.

The eight of them stumbled out of the dive in varying sleepy states, ready to start work on the last day of their shift rotation. Kook was their boss out here, and out here in the desert they were miles from any company bosses and timesheets. They worked hard and played even harder. They checked the vehicles for his sleeping figure but came up with nothing.

Across the road from the dive was the wooden-fenced remains of an old cemetery. It was all that was left of an old ghost town from two hundred years ago that the desert had long since reclaimed. So only the weathered headstones showed what it once had been.

"Where the hell is Kook?" Jesus, another of the crew, piped up and then yawned.

"What the fuck is that?" Enrique called from where he stood at the rear of one of their yellow work trucks. The rest of the crew had to come around the rear of the vehicle to see what he was pointing at.

Figures were walking down the road—hundreds, if not thousands strong. But they looked oddly unique and covered in black, like Brer Fox's Tar Baby. On walked figures of men, women and children in anomalous blobbed shapes, like they had been modelled from dark clay or dipped in black paint. They staggered along the road. In the lead was Kook, the only living one among them. He was staring ahead down the long road, his hands and knees stained with the same asphalt that covered the legions behind him.

Kook ignored the frantic calls from his crew; the ones that could find their voices, anyway. His mind was stuffed full with thousands of voices already. He walked on past his living crew and then hung a right. He left the road and with him the remains of the dead followed, trying to keep the forms of their past lives from sheer will. The rising sun making every step harder and slower than the one before.

Kook passed the threshold of the old cemetery and walked to its furthest perimeter. Only then did he stop and turn as dark figure after dark figure followed him inside. Kook's crew watched in slack-jawed astonishment from across the road as one by one the figures approached him.

"You are at peace now. Lay down your burdens," Kook said to the first asphalt-covered male figure before him. The creature of the dead road gave a sigh of final accomplishment and collapsed into dark dust at Kook's dusty black-stained boots.

The next amorphous figure approached him. The lumpy remains of a woman this time.

"You are at peace now. Sleep in eternal rest," Kook said, and the figure crumbled down to nothing before him.

It took until mid-afternoon for all the dead to be laid to rest again on hallowed ground. Kook Randall bade them each a different take on his farewell, in turn. The old cemetery was covered in black dust by the end. Only then did he leave the cemetery and cross the road to his crew. He moved silently past his stunned friends, fished out his keys from his jeans' pocket and got into the nearest cab.

"I've got more roads to lay," was all he said to them before he drove out of the parking lot and turned right. ■





# THE WRITER'S TOOLKIT:

**Outside feedback? Finding time?  
Is self-publishing worthwhile?**

By Alan Jacobson  
Press Photo Credit: Corey Jacobson

In the last issue, we initiated a series for aspiring writers excerpted from the Writer's Toolkit portion of my AlanJacobson.com website. I created the toolkit in the late nineties in response to readers who were emailing me seeking advice and assistance with getting published. Responding to those messages started taking substantial time away from my ability to write—and when the questions got repetitive, I began mulling solutions. I wanted to share my knowledge to help aspiring writers and new authors avoid the mistakes I had made—but I couldn't do it at the expense of my young career.

I began compiling the questions I received most often, along with the answers I doled out. Sometime after launching my website, with the release of "False Accusations," I began posting these Q&As. Below are excerpts, updated to reflect almost a quarter century of publishing experience...part two of the Writer's Toolkit.

## ON WRITING...

### Q. IS IT WORTH BEING A MEMBER OF A WRITER'S GROUP? IS OUTSIDE FEEDBACK HELPFUL?

A. A few years into my writing career, I got to know what worked and what didn't, where I needed to make corrections, and how to construct a story that remained compelling for 400 pages. Eventually, I got to the point where I edited in my head as I wrote; I discovered I had an inner voice that, once I learned to listen to it, told me to stop and fix what I was writing at that moment—resulting in much cleaner first drafts. But these are the skills that develop in any craftsman who spends years perfecting his work. It was not always that way for me.

To get there, early in my career, I assembled a core group of carefully chosen readers. Most were people who regularly read my genre, but some enjoyed a variety of literature. One was an unpublished writer whose focus was spec screenplays. In addition to my own readers, however, I had an agent who possessed a keen editing eye. She also employed her own group of readers who reviewed (or "covered") my manuscripts prior to submission. As a result, I got a solid cross section of opinions as to what worked—and what didn't. This approach is obviously different from a group composed of aspiring writers, but it did provide outside feedback from a cross section of the population, not unlike those who would be buying my books.

Of course, despite these efforts—writer's groups or independent readers or both—there's no assurance that an editor at a publishing house is going to like your manuscript or agree with the opinions of your readers. I still believe, however, that the



critique process can be valuable and worthwhile.

My general rule of thumb was that if one person in my group had an issue with something in the manuscript, I considered their point—but viewed it as an opinion; the observation could be personal preference or bias. However, if two or three had the same comment...well, that meant I needed to take a careful look and consider making changes.

That said, the key to the effectiveness of this strategy is having the right people in your writing group. Do they write in the same genre? Are they skilled in the craft? This cannot be overemphasized. Getting multiple opinions from people who don't know the nuances of your specific genre (or the tenets of good writing) will leave you more confused and cause you to rewrite sections that should have been left alone. The adage of "too many cooks spoil the stew" needs a tweak here: too many individuals offering incorrect criticism could leave you in the middle of an ocean without a compass. You literally won't know which direction to go in. It can hamstring you—or worse, it can leave you with a manuscript no publisher is interested in publishing.

## Q. WHAT IF YOU WORK AND DON'T HAVE TIME TO WRITE A NOVEL? WHAT DO YOU DO?

**A.** Simply stated, if you never start it, you'll never finish it. If you write a page a day, you'll have the first draft of a novel written in a year. Write two pages a day and it'll be done in six months. Be very protective of your time. Many of us have time we can save during a day. The more minutes you shave from unimportant activities, the more you'll have to devote to writing. Whether driving in a car, waiting in line at the market, or sitting on hold on the phone, try to be thinking about your plot or characters. Take notes. All smartphones have the ability to record audio notes—dictate your thoughts as they come to you. Or, if you prefer the analog method, carry a small notepad with you and jot your ideas down on paper. That way, when you do have time to sit down and write, you're ready to go.

Takeaway: if you want to accomplish something, you have to find a way! Start it so you can finish it.

## Q. WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR WRITERS WHO HAVE HAD A HARD TIME GETTING PUBLISHED?

**A.** Work hard. Don't give up. If you believe in yourself and in your abilities, then you owe it to yourself to do everything possible to get your work noticed. That said, there are certain things you need to do. First, write the best novel you can. Work on it and polish it and don't submit it to an agent until you're sure it's the best it can possibly be. My first agent used to say that even at the point where you feel it's ready to be sent out, it's probably only 50-75% of the way there.

Do your homework. As discussed in last issue's Writer's Toolkit article, research the agents to determine which ones handle the type of novel you're writing.

Nowadays, if you don't want to wait out (or endure) the agent search, an entirely viable alternative is self-publishing through one of the book retailers (Kindle and Nook, for example, have easy to use publishing capabilities) and/or releasing a bound edition through a print-on-demand company like Amazon's CreateSpace division. Many established authors have done this either willingly or because the declining economics of the traditional publishing industry has forced their hand.

## ON PUBLISHING...

### Q. IS SELF-PUBLISHING WORTHWHILE?

**A.** It depends on what you want to accomplish; if your goal is to see your work in print, and you haven't had success getting an agent (or your agent is unable to get you a deal), the answer is probably yes. If it's to sell enough copies to get the attention of the New York publishers, the answer again is yes—with conditions: you must be prepared to market the book with the savvy and resources necessary to give it every chance of succeeding. But there are dangers of going it alone.

If you're unable or unwilling to do this, and the goal is as stated, do not self-publish because *you* guide and control your own destiny. Very little will happen unless you do it or set it in motion. If this is not your forte—or if you don't have the time or money to devote to it, or if things don't go as planned—your sales will be poor. Publishers have access to some of this sales data—meaning you can't hide or erase your sales history. Should you want to get a traditional publishing contract at a later

date, a poor sales history will make it a more difficult task.

It is my understanding that even the sales history of self-published printed books gets recorded at point of sale by the ISBN and tracked via Bookscan, a Nielsen ratings company (yes, the same company that has facilitated the cancellation of many of our favorite television shows during the past few decades). A poor sales history does not carry an asterisk like major league baseball record books...it won't note that marketing or publicity did not perform, or that you didn't set up your account properly with the distributor, or that you didn't get good placement in bookstores...etc.

If you realize what you're getting into and what's involved, self-publishing via digital platforms is now a viable means of getting your work into the public's hands. The stigma of self-publishing still exists—there's a lot of subpar work out there because, theoretically, you don't have a skilled editor filtering out the bad stuff—though, honestly, I've read some awful novels published by the major New York houses. There are reasons for this (e.g., marketing decisions—the publisher felt they could successfully promote the novel's big concept, even if the writing was wooden or sophomoric), but the bottom line is that if you intend to self-publish, I highly recommend hiring a respected professional editor and copyeditor to make your novel the best it can be. Hiring a publicist may also be a wise choice to help generate effective buzz.

## Q. ARE THERE SPECIFIC GUIDELINES I HAVE TO FOLLOW WHEN SUBMITTING A MANUSCRIPT TO AN AGENT?

**A.** When you submit a printed manuscript, it should be on standard white 8.5 X 11" paper. There should be one-inch margins all around, and it should be typeset in a standard font, such as 12 point Courier or Times New Roman. Put your name, the manuscript's title, and the page number in a header at the top of each page.

The manuscript should be double-spaced and printed cleanly. If you have access to a laser printer, even better. Inkjet inks are not waterproof, and editors/agents tend to read while eating, drinking, etc. Drinks spill, blurring your carefully chosen words.

Your manuscript should not be bound in any manner. Do not punch holes and insert into a binder. I used card stock boxes, which hold a ream of pages, give or take, or large manila expanding folders. Bottom line: professional appearance. If you remember that, you're on the right track.

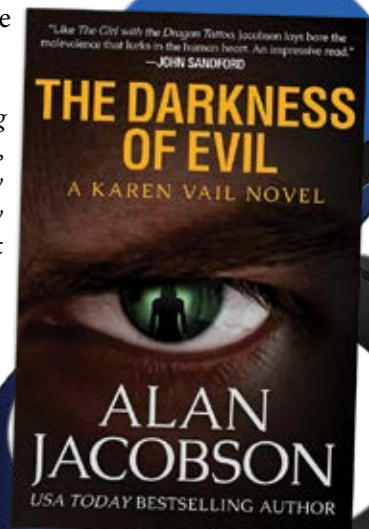
It used to be that agents did not accept emailed manuscripts. However, with the advent of the iPad, Surface, generic tablets, and dedicated e-readers like the Kindle (which can read Word documents), things have changed. If you consult a current reference book on literary agents, it will note the agents' preferred methods of submission. Another option is to call an agent's office and ask if they accept emailed submissions. One size does not fit all, so don't make assumptions—be informed. Better than asking agents to adapt to what you send them, *you* should adapt to *their* preferences.

If submitting electronically, and you have embedded comments or tracked changes in your document, be sure to remove them completely before sending off your manuscript. These can appear hidden, depending upon the settings you've chosen in Word—but visible to the recipient if his or her software is configured differently from yours.

What about sending a PDF? They have the advantage of preserving any formatting that you have in your document, but in my experience, agents and editors do not like PDFs because they are a less flexible file format than Word. Since they are essentially locked down page images, the Kindle interface cannot convert them to a format that can be manipulated. ■

*As author of the FBI profiler Karen Vail series and OPSIG Team Black novels, USA Today bestselling author Alan Jacobson has spent 20 years working with the FBI profiling unit, US Marshals Service, DEA, ATF, SWAT, Scotland Yard, and the US military. Jacobson's books have been optioned by Hollywood and named to best of the year lists. James Patterson, Nelson DeMille, and Michael Connelly have called Vail one of the most compelling heroes in suspense fiction. Follow Jacobson on Facebook (AlanJacobsonFans), Twitter (@JacobsonAlan), Instagram (alan.jacobson), and Goodreads (alan\_jacobson).*

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# WITCHES' BREW

By Gordon Stack

She'd always seemed a little strange, but no one knew why. Then, one day, the pieces of the puzzle began to arrange themselves....

Harry stormed toward her desk. The tallest, most intimidating of the associates at Grubel, Sway and Stein, he was also the only one who hadn't attended a top-tier law school. His "presence," however, made him a natural litigator, so they had hired him, despite his mangy pedigree.

"I get back from lunch, I see this!" He waved a sheaf of paper in Chloe's face. "Jesus." He ran his hand through his hair. "You cc'd the plaintiff's counsel. The plaintiff's counsel! Don't you look when you do an email?"

Chloe saw heads spring up in every cubicle. "Harry, I wasn't feeling well this morning." She tugged at an earring; looked down at her keyboard. Damn right, she hadn't been feeling well. Four phone calls from her mother last night, the last one warning of imminent suicide. Only by the grace of Xanax had Chloe survived the evening. But she had doubled her normal dose, and was zonked out.

"How long have you been working here?" he snorted.

She wanted to say, "Since you were in diapers," but just answered, raggedly, "Sorry, it won't happen again."

He stared at her. "Do you realize what a mess you've made?" She did. She'd made the type of mistake they couldn't afford at white-shoe Wall Street law firms. He paused. "Jesus. If the old man hadn't hired you way back when, I'd kick you out on your ass." Harry spun away. "Jesus."

Once again, her benefactor had saved her job. But that didn't change how she felt about how her life was going. At fifty-three, she was precisely nowhere. Her rapidly gentrifying neighborhood was on the verge of becoming unaffordable, her love-life was comatose, her career was swirling around the lip of the ash-can, and her mom called at least once daily to remind her of these facts.

No wonder her job performance was suffering.

Chloe locked her computer screen and headed to the ladies room for a good cry. When she returned, the small buzz created by her scene with Harry had died down. In this business, "work faster" was stamped on every employee's forehead when they walked through the door in the morning.

After dabbing at her still-wet eyes, Chloe reached into her desk drawer with her right hand, while trying to hit "ctrl-alt-delete" to unlock the screen with the other. At that moment, another secretary, Tanya, passed her desk and opened her mouth to say something. Tanya's eyes drifted down, and took in her co-worker's awkward attempt at multi-tasking. Tanya pursed her lips and walked on, without saying a word.

When Tanya arrived at her destination, the copier room, she found Gloria standing at the machine punching out copies of a brief. "You know," Tanya said thoughtfully, "I just saw Chloe going for something in her desk."

"And?" Gloria scooped up one pile of sorted, stapled documents, put them aside, and put another document in the feeder.

"Could be booze."

Gloria forgot about her copying. "She's a drinker?"

"Could be."

"What makes you say that?"

"You heard that commotion with Harry, right?"

"Who could miss it?"

"She cc'd the plaintiff's lawyer with a draft motion."

"Yeah, she's lucky she wasn't fired."

"But who makes a mistake like that?"

"What are you saying?"

Tanya regarded her. "What was she reaching for in the drawer?"

Gloria blinked, picked up her neat packets of documents and padded back to her desk. She made sure to pass directly in front of Chloe and glance sideways. Chloe was feverishly keyboarding—both hands in plain sight. Gloria went to her own desk and didn't give it another thought.

Until lunch. This time, she wasn't looking; she had already forgotten Tanya's insinuation. But just as she angled past, she saw that Chloe's right shoulder was lowered, her hand dangling into her lower desk drawer, searching for something.

Gloria gasped and kept going.

In the elevator, she found herself alone with Martin, a heavy-set, overworked associate with a shock of blond hair that had started to gray at the ripe old age of thirty. "Funny thing," Gloria said sotto voce, wanting to get it out before the elevator reached another floor and more people poured in, "A couple of us think there's a reason Chloe's been screwing up."

Martin lifted an eyebrow. "You don't say?"

"Uh-huh. You didn't hear it from me, but there's a rumor she may have a drinking problem."

"What? I've never seen her take a drink."

Gloria sighed at his naiveté. "That's a telltale sign right there. You never actually see them do it."

They went their separate ways at lunch. Martin bought a two-dollar hotdog from a street vendor. He could afford to do better, but he didn't have time for a sit-down meal. The sun, this time of day in the summer, threw enormous shadows along the canyon of capitalism. Nobody moved at a normal human pace here. It was a matter of survival. To slow down for even a second was to get trampled by the bulls and the bears.

He was back in the safety of the office in a few minutes. The sparse employee lounge contained the most essential appliance at Grubel, Sway and Stein: the coffee maker. A moment after he arrived to pour his fifth cup of the day, Chloe slipped into the room. She headed to the microwave to heat up her usual cup of herbal tea.

Martin cleared his throat. "How are you doing, Chloe?"

"What?" she startled and wheeled around to face him.

"Uh, everything ok?"

"Oh." Her eyes narrowed. "Everything is fine." Was it his imagination, or was she a bit unsteady on her feet?

The microwave chimed and she retrieved her tea. "I'll see you later," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry," she giggled and left the room quickly.

Martin watched her go. "Holy shit," he said.

Martin was a lawyer, so he knew to tread carefully. He approached Harry in Harry's office. "So, we think she is an alcoholic."

"Jesus," Harry said, "I yelled at her. What if she does something stupid, like drink herself to death tonight? It'll be my fault."

"Hold on, let's not jump to conclusions," Martin said. "We need to be one-hundred-percent sure."

They both went back to work. That afternoon, Harry saw Chloe reach into her desk drawer. He fired off an email to Martin. "Absolute confirmation."

Neither of them dared approach the old man about this. And since they couldn't fire Chloe, they decided to get her to quit instead. Martin created a closed email group, named it *Operation Clean Sweep*, and populated its membership roster with every person who worked on the floor. His first email to the group read:

*Important! You must never, ever repeat a word of this out loud. Particularly in the presence of Chloe. And you must never say anything to Chloe directly. If she gets wind of what we are doing, we could all be sued. Anyway, here's the plan: Chloe is an alcoholic. Yes, I'm sorry to say it is true. We are one-hundred-percent certain. I wish we could help her, but we can't. So, for her own good, and the good of the Firm, we have to either catch her drinking—in which case we can go to the old man and he'll have no choice but to fire her—or get her to resign. How do we do all this? Watch her: nonstop. Look at her. Follow her. Make sure she is never alone, and make sure she knows we are watching.*

*If we do this constantly, we will eventually see her take a swig in the office. If not, it's ok, because we are going to make her life such a living hell, she will quit.*

*Please save this group into your contacts. We'll use it to keep in constant contact with each other. It'll almost be like a second job for all of us: keeping constant watch of Chloe. We'll make sure to "hand off" the watching to one another, so that she can't accuse any one person of shadowing her. I'll be the point person, arranging for this constant surveillance.*

*It begins NOW.*

*Tanya, take a stroll past her desk and give her a good, hard stare. Gloria, wait thirty seconds and do the same. I have the work schedule of everyone right in front of me, and I'll keep you all apprised of when it's your turn. Also, if you get tired of staring at her and want to try something different, stop at her*



*desk and talk to her for a few minutes, all the time keeping an eye on her desk drawer. She'll be desperate to take a drink, but won't be able to.*

*I know this is a lot of work. But it's worth it. Think of her as an infection. We're the antibiotic.*

*Thanks in advance for your cooperation.*

*Martin*

When Maria, from the offices at the end of the hall, saw Chloe heading for the restroom, she followed—their high heels nearly touching. Chloe went for one stall, Maria took the one adjacent. As Chloe finished her business, Maria made sure to keep time. They washed their hands in unison. Chloe reached her desk one step ahead of Maria. The follower stopped to smile. Her teeth were as bright as pearls, but her eyes were fierce. “How are you, Chloe?” she intoned.

“Fine,” the latter said, her voice unsure.

“Good.” Maria took off. In a moment, Drew, their spreadsheet maven, appeared at her desk.

“Hi,” the young man said, fingering his bright necktie. “Bye,” he said, rushing towards the back of the office.

Chloe stared after him, then shook her head and got to work. In an instant, Gloria materialized. Before Chloe could say anything Gloria was gone, replaced by Sarah. Next, it was Jose, then Margaret. This went on for the remainder of the day.

At 4:30 p.m. Chloe went into Harry's office. “What's going on?” she demanded. “It's like I'm being watched.”

“Huh.” Harry was thumbing through a file. “You don't say.”

“Harry, I'm serious.”

He sighed and looked up at her, his eyes turned slightly away, as if to mask the import of his words. “What makes you say that?”

“Every minute there's somebody at my desk. Nonstop.”

“Listen, Chloe, this is a busy place—”

“No, seriously. I'm telling you, I'm...being watched.”

His face screwed up in concern. “Have you thought of maybe...um...taking advantage of some of the services offered by HR? You know, they have lists of people they can refer you to, all covered by our insurance.”

“I'm not crazy!”

“No,” he said slowly, gently. “No, you're not. Listen, if you don't mind, I'm kind of busy.”

That night, she couldn't sleep a wink. Her heart danced a jig as she remembered the bland, grinning faces that had paraded in front of her all day.

“I'm not crazy,” she said again, this time to her pillow. She reached over to her nightstand and pulled out the bottle. This time, she tripled the Xanax. It worked. She fell asleep but, unfortunately, was still half asleep when the alarm went

off. She turned it off without fully awakening. When finally she yawned and felt the sunlight pouring in through the blinds, she saw the clock and relaxed, thinking it must be Saturday.

Realization dawned. “Shit!” She flew out of bed and dressed (mostly), and wound up at the offices of Grubel, Sway and Stein at 11:10 a.m. She expected a scolding from Harry. Instead, he approached her desk, shook his head sadly, and ambled down the hall.

“You're late,” Tanya said, as she stood over Chloe.

“I know.”

Tanya bent towards her. “Can't you see how it's ruining your life?” she hissed, and walked away.

“What? What's ruining my life?”

“You know,” Tanya said over her shoulder.

“I don't know what you're talking about!”

“Right.”

Chloe's mouth opened. She wanted to ask more questions, but didn't know what it was she would ask. “This is inane,” she said out loud, her words garbled from the Xanax that still flowed in her veins from the night before.

“You need help.” Adele, the oldest of the legal secretaries spoke while standing in front of Chloe's desk, hands on her hips. “Look at you. You look like you slept on the street. You can't even talk straight.” The older woman sighed. “I've seen it before, sweetie. You need help.”

“For what?” Chloe pleaded, her voice unsteady. “What do you think is going on?”

Adele hesitated, then shrugged and made a motion with her hand of someone chugging a beer.

“Alcohol? You think I'm an alcoholic?” She let her gaze take in the entire floor of cubicles and rattling keyboards and rushing legal drones. “Is that what you *all* think?” It all made sense to her now. She let out a tiny laugh. “Whew. I thought I was losing it. You people think I'm a drunk. Well, I hate to spoil your fun, but I'm not.”

“Of course you're not, dear,” Adele said, and started to move away.

Chloe stepped out from behind her desk. “I'm not a drunthk!” She heard her words and cursed the drug-induced drowsiness.

Adele shuffled away as if Chloe was radioactive.

Martin was nearby, and ran up. “Easy girl.”

“I'm not a drunk,” she managed, her eyes drawing a bead on his.

He let out a sigh of resignation. “Denying it is one of the surest signs. It's what they all do.”

“But I'm not going to admit it if it's not true. Why would I do that?”

“You don't need to admit anything,” he said, condescension dripping from his lawyerly tongue. “We know.”

“But you're wrong!”

"No, we're not. We know. We are one-hundred-percent certain."

She took a breath, making sure to steady her voice. "I am denying it because you are one-hundred-percent wrong," she said, proud of herself for sounding coherent.

Gloria came up to them. "The more you deny it, the more we know it's true," she said fiercely.

"But—" Suddenly, two thirds of the workers had gathered, and they were pointing, yelling.

"Check her desk," one guy said.

Another man pushed Chloe aside and yanked open her desk drawers. "Nothing," he exclaimed. "It must be in her purse."

One of the women grabbed Chloe's purse and dumped the contents out on the desk. "Nothing," the woman screamed. "You know what that means?"

"I certainly do," Adele put in sagely. "She's got flasks hidden all over the office."

"In places no one would think of looking," Harry shouted, having joined the affair. He towered over the group. "She's turned this place into a cheap saloon," he bellowed. He waved his arms at her. "Get out," he spat.

"Get out," one of the other women repeated. Her purse came flying at her. "Take that, and get the hell out of here."

Now they were physically stalking her towards the door, not actually touching her, but a frothing mass of people forcing her backwards with the weight of their rage.

"And don't come back." One said it; they all said it. Somebody spit at her as a mighty law book was heaved into the air, landing at her feet.

Chloe heard the elevator ding behind her. She fell back, hit "Ground Level," and prayed they wouldn't drag her out of the elevator before the door could close.

Harry reached a hand in, then changed his mind and pulled it back. The doors slid shut. In a few moments, sobbing and shivering with fright, Chloe was tumbling out the doors of Grubel, Sway and Stein for the last time.

That night she called her mother, seeking solace. But her mother said, "You're making all of this up. What was the *real* reason they fired you?"

The next day she called her shrink, asking for an immediate appointment. His receptionist said he had no appointments for a week, but that he would be willing to send a new Xanax prescription to her pharmacy. She accepted this crumb and hung up the phone.

For two days she barely moved. The whole thing was beyond belief. She hadn't done anything wrong. How could something like this happen? Finally she managed to shake off the anger and gather herself to move on with her life. She put together a nice resume, and filed a claim with the State Unemployment Insurance system.

Within a week, she had three interviews. She showed

up for each, and each promised her a quick call-back. Good, experienced legal secretaries were hard to find, after all. However, a week went by and the phone didn't ring.

She called one firm. "We hired someone else, with more experience." The Personnel Director said curtly. She called another. "Oh, the person who had the job before decided to return from...she had been travelling...and we, uh, decided to let her have her job back." The third firm put her on hold—twice. And twice the connection timed out after ten minutes.

Two weeks later, a questionnaire arrived in the mail. It was from the New York State Department of Labor. It read: "Your former employer, Grubel, Sway and Stein, states that you were fired for drinking on the job. Is this true? (Y/N) If 'N,' please describe the circumstances leading up to your termination."

Tears flowing down her cheeks, Chloe wrote, "I did not drink on the job. I am not an alcoholic. In fact, I don't even drink socially." She sealed the envelope, sent it off, and waited. She desperately needed the unemployment check: the rent was due.

Two weeks later a letter came from the New York State Department of Labor: "According to credible evidence, you were fired because you drank on the job. This constitutes misconduct under New York State law. You are therefore disqualified from receiving unemployment insurance or benefits of any kind."

The next day the rent bill came. Chloe couldn't pay it.

"Come in," Harry said, juggling stacks of paper and simultaneously reading from his side-by-side computer monitors.

"You're not going to believe this," Gloria said.

"Make me a believer," he grumbled, not looking up.

"I saw a homeless woman on the subway today."

"Yeah. And?"

"She had a flask in her hand, and was dressed in rags."

"A homeless woman in New York. You don't say," he snorted.

"Remember that woman we fired about a year ago? The drunkard?"

"Vaguely... Yeah, sure. The one who was always reaching into her desk for a flask." He looked up, eyes wide. "You don't mean—"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'll be damned." He picked up a gold-plated pen and twirled it in his long fingers. "So I guess we were right about her."

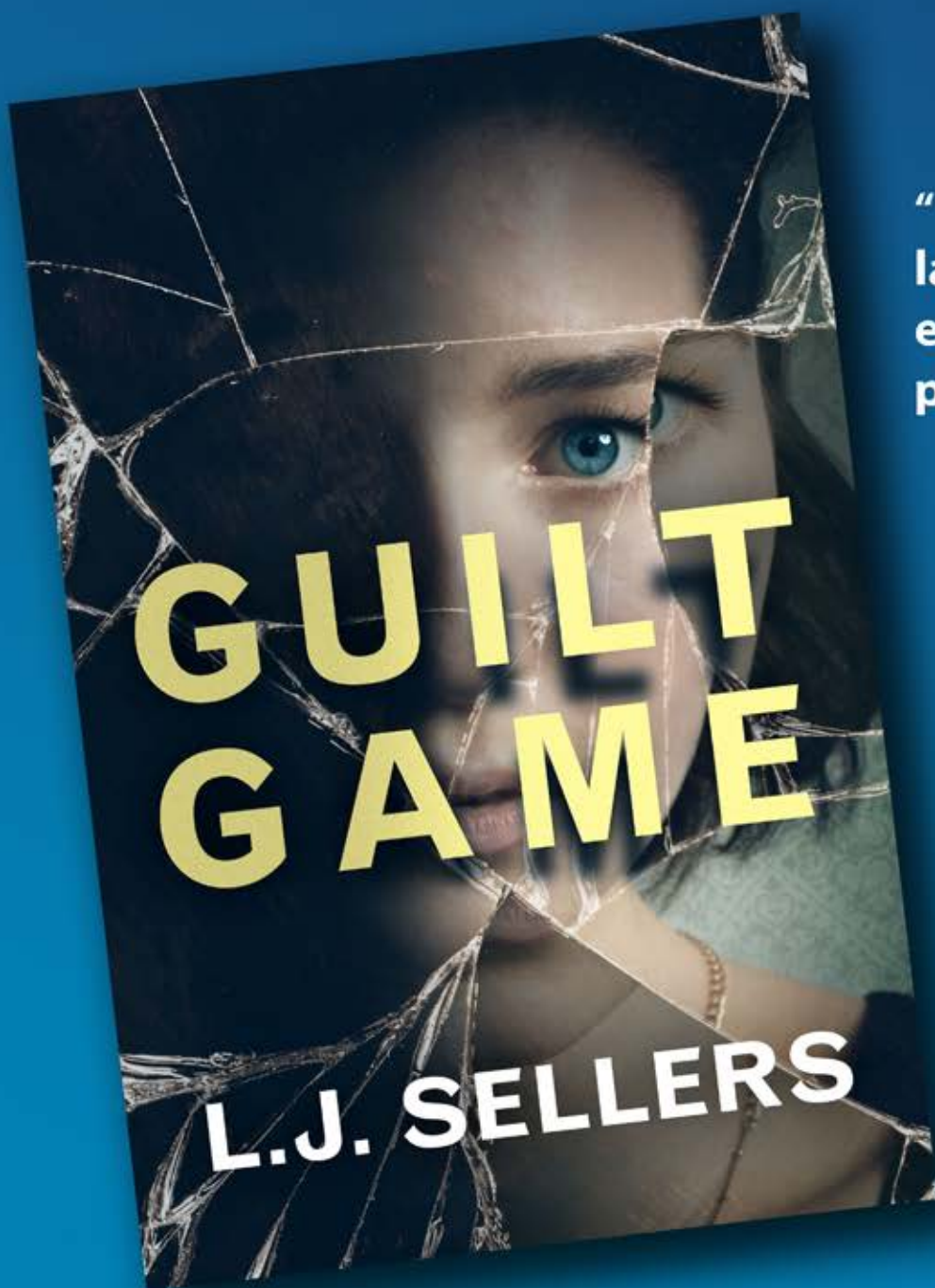
"Guess so."

"Well," he shrugged. "We tried to help, but some people just don't want to see the truth." He sat for a moment pondering his own wisdom, shrugged again, and turned back to his computer screens. ■



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# JEFF MENAPACE

## The Success & Struggle

Interview by Weldon Burge for *Suspense Magazine*  
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Jeff Menapace is a Philly-born horror/suspense author who has won acclaim for his best-selling *Bad Games* series of novels, among his other work in fiction and nonfiction. His novella “Sugar Daddy” was the 2011 recipient of the Red Adept Reviews Indie Award for Horror. His novel “Numb,” while containing some elements of horror, is a dark noir thriller sure to please readers of suspense. And “Side Effects,” a psychological thriller, introduces us to his series character FBI Agent Maggie Allen.

And apparently, he longs to pet a lion!

Jeff is an approachable, amiable guy, and was more than willing to spend a few minutes with us to answer a few questions.

Weldon Burge (W.B.): Your *Bad Games* trilogy has been quite successful, now optioned for future feature films. Not bad! Did you intend to write a trilogy from the start, or was it happenstance?

Jeff Menapace (J.M.): *No way did I intend to write a trilogy from the start! I wrote book one and was able to land an agent with it (this was nearly ten years ago) and he immediately asked me for a sequel, stating that pitching two books instead of the one would help land a publisher. So, I got hard at work on the sequel, completed it, gave it to my agent, and he loved it. But then of course came the inevitable: “Any chance for a third? A trilogy would be fantastic.” I think my reply was something (politely) along the lines of “No f\*cking way. I killed everyone; they’re all dead.”*

*I soon parted with my agent (on good terms) and went the indie route, and “Bad Games” and “Vengeful Games” sold very well. I was hit with lots of letters from readers asking for a third book. So, I totally sold out and whipped up a third. Nah, I’m just kidding. I balked on the idea of a third, and the last thing I wanted to do was sell out and write a cheap imitation*

*of the first two books. Eventually, however, an idea did come to me, and slowly but surely, book 3, “Bad Games: Hellbent” was born, and now, believe it or not, roughly five years later, book 4, “Bad Games: Malevolent” is due out late this summer. Never say never, I guess.*



W.B.: Do you work from an outline or just wing it?

J.M.: *I work from a rough outline. I generally have an idea of what I want to happen, but more often than not, once the characters begin to develop, they take on a life of their own. At this stage, quite often the story will change from my original intentions. It's rare that a story goes exactly as I intended. I guess you could say it's kind of like having several routes to a destination. I'll get there eventually, but I often change routes mid-way, if that makes any sense.*

W.B.: So, why horror?

J.M.: *Well, apart from the standard answer I'm sure most give about always being a weird kid whose mind constantly wandered towards the dark side (and it's assuredly true in my case), I think the thing I like about horror is the primal feeling it instills in us. It forces us to live in the now. I believe people spend so much time worrying about the past and future that no one embraces the now (and I'm certainly guilty of this too). But when you're scared shitless, it kind of forces you to live in the now, you know? It's exhilarating.*



W.B.: Do you really think the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is the best movie ever?

J.M.: *Unquestionably, unequivocally. It is so raw and gritty and real. No twists, no backstory (and none asked nor welcomed), just true in your face terror. It's freaking brilliant.*

W.B.: Stephen King or Clive Barker?

J.M.: *Yeesh! Tough one. I think "Misery" is one of the best novels I've ever read, so it's hard to go against King, but Barker is just so... I don't know how to describe it. His mind—there's no scale to describe his brilliance. His way with words. I've often said that many writers have a style that is imitable if you read them enough. I don't think anyone can imitate Barker. He's one of those writers that makes you both elated and jealous. Elated because you just read a particular passage that was brilliant, and then jealous because you know you'll never write anything that good. LOL.*

W.B.: And, with "Side Effects," you've now started a mystery series with the FBI Agent Maggie Allen character. Is this a natural progression from your horror writing? What do you see as different about the two genres?

J.M.: *I'm always trying to branch out into different genres, and I love serial killer/police procedural thrillers. "Red Dragon" by Thomas Harris is another all-time favorite of mine. So, I wanted to give the genre a shot. I am extremely proud of "Side Effects" and think it's one of the better things I've written, however reception to it has been mixed. Stephen King once said a writer is often the worst judge of his work, and maybe he's right in this case. LOL. Still, I like the book quite a lot, and I really like the characters of Maggie and Morris. I think with some editorial tweaking of book 1, there's a solid series ready to take off someday.*



W.B.: What has been your greatest challenge as a freelance writer?

J.M.: *Technology! I am exceptionally stunted in the tech department. I still have a flip phone! If it was up to me, I would just write all day and let someone else handle all the tech/marketing stuff. But alas, I cannot, and it can be, as you say, a challenge.*

W.B.: If you could go back in time and start over, what would you have done differently?

J.M.: *That's a tough question. I think it's human nature to always wish we did something "different" in the past. But I believe we grow just as much, if not more so, from our mistakes and failures. Obviously, there are little things along the way I wish I could have done*

**“I believe people spend so much time worrying about the past and future that no one embraces the now (and I’m certainly guilty of this too). But when you’re scared shitless, it kind of forces you to live in the now, you know?”**

*differently, but that’s life, isn’t it? How else do you learn?*

W.B.: Your short story *Worm* is included in the Smart Rhino Publications anthology, “Zippered Flesh 3.” What do you find most satisfying about writing short fiction?

J.M.: *The lack of pressure to know that when the story is finished it’s finished. When embarking on a novel, you know you need a certain amount of words in order to reach novel territory, but with a short story, the tale can be told in as little as a few pages. I mentioned “Misery” earlier as one of my favorite novels. King stated that he meant the tale to be a novella, not a novel, but as he got going, the story ventured into that “is it a novel or is it a novella?” length, and I suspect (though I could be a zillion percent wrong) it’s why he inserted the “Misery” novel Paul Sheldon was writing while being held captive by Annie Wilkes into the entire novel itself. Otherwise it would have been too short.*

W.B.: What advice would you offer writers concerning marketing their books?

J.M.: *Huh. I guess the best thing to suggest, other than writing good stuff, is to develop a decent following via social media and a mailing list. A mailing list is very valuable. Also, I cannot stress enough the importance of good editing and a professional-looking book cover. Do not skimp on these! They are worth every penny.*

W.B.: When it comes to writing, what’s on your bucket list?

J.M.: *Not sure. Gathering with a bunch of my peers I respect for cocktails and laughs? Seeing my work on the big screen? Tough to say at this stage in my career.*

W.B.: Imagine you’re lost in the Canadian wilderness, fully dependent on your self-preservation skills. You’ve managed to start a fire. If you could have two other writers hovering around your campfire, who would they be?

J.M.: *You said Canadian wilderness. Their health care is better than ours. So, I wouldn’t worry. Seriously though, I’d probably want Hemingway to bring the booze and the party atmosphere, and then maybe Poe. He’d love Hemingway’s booze, and getting inside his head would be an experience unlike any other, I think.*

W.B.: One last question, just for fun, knowing you’re a fan of the *Three Stooges*. Moe, Larry, Curly, Shemp, or Joe? And why? (And no fair saying you like them all!)

J.M.: *Larry. He was a Philly boy, but also one of the greatest reactive actors ever. Next time you watch an episode, watch Larry’s face during a scene that doesn’t involve him directly. He’s always in the moment. Next, in order of favs, would be: Moe, Curly, and Shemp. F\*ck Joe. Couldn’t stand him.*

W.B.: I wasn’t a fan of Joe either. Too much of a wimp and never funny.

We’d like to thank Jeff for sitting down with us. You can learn more about Jeff and his work at his website, [www.jeffmenapace.com](http://www.jeffmenapace.com). ■



# THE HOUSE ON PRIMROSE LANE

By Gary Hook

Janelle liked everything about the house at 15 Primrose Lane. Its three bedrooms were a little small, but that was just fine for a woman nearing forty and starting her life over after an exasperating divorce. She would have space for a guest bedroom as well as a little home office. The kitchen and two bathrooms had been nicely updated; nothing trendy, just clean and attractive with neutral colors that would be easy to decorate. The family room was just the right size for a small group to flop in front of a big screen television. It had glass doors that opened onto a little patio and garden, and you could see lots of greenery from the inside. The yard was private with just a small patch of lawn and some high shrubs and trees that invited birds and butterflies. Janelle could imagine herself relaxing on the patio on warm summer evenings enjoying a glass of chardonnay and watching birds fly around the yard.

One of the things Janelle really liked about Primrose Lane was that it was so quiet. She toured the house twice before making an offer, and each time Janelle could sense immediately that the neighborhood had a lovely peaceful feeling about it. There were no little kids running around under portable basketball hoops in the street, or teenagers playing whatever loud, obnoxious music teenagers listened to these days. All the other homes on Primrose Lane were nicely maintained with lawns that weren't overgrown and shrubs that were properly groomed. There seemed to be lots of pride when it came to the owners on Primrose Lane.

It was hard to understand why the house had been on the market so long. The listing had gone up about two months before Janelle found it, and still there were no pending sales. That was a red flag, and so Janelle peppered her real estate agent with questions about everything she could think of that might be a problem. Were there termites? Prior water damage? Foundation cracks? Roof leaks? How about the HVAC and duct work? Insulation? Water heater? But to every inquiry, Janelle received the same: "Everything checks out OK," response. The home inspector couldn't find much to write about except for a few cosmetic and trivial repairs, which the sellers happily agreed to take care of.

So it was hard not to get excited about 15 Primrose Lane. It seemed to offer Janelle everything she was looking for. It was the perfect size and setting for her, and about as move-in ready as she could ever dream of.

Janelle had really had it with Doug. The guy just seemed to have no direction or focus in his life. No matter what job he had he complained about it, and when he didn't have a job he complained about that, too. When they first got married Doug seemed pretty grounded, with a good job in corporate IT. But after a couple of years, Doug decided he needed something with more "customer interaction," and chased after a dubious opportunity to do computer systems sales working for a newly formed company, which flamed out pretty quickly after it started up. After that, Doug bounced around from one job to another on a declining pay scale trying to find himself. Janelle thought a man should find himself more around age twenty-five than still be looking at age forty. They started fighting all the time, and Janelle could see her future prospects with Doug weren't looking any better as time went on. One day she called a lawyer to find out about her options, and then from there things just started moving in a direction that ended with Janelle looking at the house on Primrose Lane *without* Doug.

After Janelle made an offer on the house there was a little back and forth between the sellers and the real estate agent, but then the paperwork was signed, some money moved around, and Janelle moved in with the furniture Doug said he could live without, supplemented with a few things Janelle bought for herself to start her new life.

On the day after Janelle moved into the house she invited her two closest friends from work, Chrissy and Tania, for a little housewarming get-together. Chrissy was about Janelle's age and had been living with a man named Matt for several years. She talked all the time about their long-range plans which always involved some kind of marriage ceremony that never seemed to get put on the calendar. Tania was a little younger and in a state of perpetual transition between relationships. They liked to have lunch together and talk about how men seemed to always be a problem. Janelle gave them a tour of the house and they went from room to room stumbling over unpacked boxes. Then Janelle opened a bottle of chilled chardonnay and they



walked around the backyard sipping their wine.

"I love your new place, Janelle," said Chrissy. "This is just the kind of place I'd like Matt and me to find after we move out of our condo. What a lovely garden!"

"You can do some entertaining now," said Tania. "All you need is a little barbecue grill and some patio furniture and you'll be set."

"I feel like I can breathe again," said Janelle. "If only Doug could have just grown up a little we could have had a nice place like this together. It's a shame. But at least now I can make a fresh start of things. And I have my good friends with me!"

The three friends clinked their wine glasses together and toasted Janelle's new home with all of the wonderful future prospects it offered her.

For the next few days Janelle was so busy unpacking boxes and talking to her lawyer about the divorce settlement with Doug that she had no time to think about who her neighbors might be or when she should meet them. And none of her neighbors dropped by unexpectedly to ask any nosy questions, which was a relief. She wanted to settle in first and get acquainted with her neighbors in her own time.

Then one Saturday morning when the weather was particularly pleasant, with an almost cloudless sky and a gentle breeze blowing through the trees, Janelle decided that she should introduce herself to her neighbors on either side of her. After enjoying a light breakfast of yogurt, fruit and coffee, she put on a comfortable pair of three-quarter-length cotton pants with a flower print top and slip-on flats, and walked next door to the house at 19 Primrose Lane, preparing a friendly but not intrusive smile.

Janelle rang the doorbell, and while she waited for it to be answered, she looked around at the front yard landscaping and rehearsed some nice compliments to give the owners when they opened the door. A few moments went by, and then a few more, until Janelle concluded that either no one was home or no one heard the doorbell. She rang the doorbell once more and then began slowly counting off "one potato, two potato," and so forth until she arrived at around "twenty potato," at which point she decided that was enough potatoes and that she should just come back some other time.

Janelle decided she would try the house at 11 Primrose Lane, on the other side of hers, and she more or less repeated the experience at the other house, with maybe not quite so many potatoes.

The weather must be so lovely today, she thought, that no one wants to be trapped inside. She told herself she would keep an eye out and watch for when people came home.

The curious thing was that nobody ever seemed to come home. From time to time over that weekend Janelle stepped outside to the sidewalk in front of her house, looking up and down Primrose Lane for signs of human activity. But there was none. No one mowed any lawns, or walked any dogs, or watered any roses. Finches and chickadees chirped merrily in the trees, and the gentle breeze blew to and fro, but no people ever appeared on Primrose Lane.

Janelle also noticed that no cars ever appeared on Primrose Lane, either. If anybody ever drove to work or a store or drove back home from anywhere, Janelle never saw a single car go up or down the street.

That same Saturday afternoon Janelle saw the mail carrier's truck stop in front of her house. The mail carrier, a man who appeared to be in his fifties with trouble carrying his weight around, stepped as briskly as he could out of the truck to put Janelle's mail in her mailbox, and then stepped as briskly as he could back into the truck. Janelle noticed that he seemed to have a kind of pained expression on his face. She watched the mail carrier from her living room window, and then an idea struck her. She thought she would run out to meet him and ask what he knew about her neighbors. But when she ran outside to follow the mail carrier's truck to the house next door, she was astonished to see that the truck didn't stop there. In fact, the mail carrier's truck didn't stop anywhere else on Primrose Lane. It took off at a speedy clip up the street and then just disappeared around the corner.

As the days went by with no sign of any neighbors, Janelle began to wonder how Primrose Lane could look so nice and well kept up if no one ever came outside to do anything. And she felt a growing sense of unease about living in a neighborhood that seemed to be devoid of human presence.

One day Janelle called her real estate agent, Lorraine, to find out if there was something about this neighborhood that Lorraine should have told her, but didn't, because maybe there was some kind of technical loophole where Lorraine could get away without telling her something problematic and just wanted to make a fast commission, which would be just like a real estate agent to do.

"There's something not quite right about this neighborhood, Lorraine," said Janelle on the phone. "Whoever my neighbors are, I've never seen any of them. No one comes or goes, mows their lawn, walks around, drives to or from anywhere. Is there something you should have told me about this place before I bought it?"

"It's a very quiet and peaceful neighborhood, Janelle," said Lorraine, with a touch of huffiness in her voice that was just inside the boundaries of professional courtesy. "It's exactly what you said you wanted, and I have no idea who the neighbors

are or what they do.”

Janelle could tell she wasn't going to get anywhere with Lorraine, and ended the conversation abruptly.

Then late one night, that is to say early one morning, around two o'clock, Janelle was awakened by a *thump* against the side of her house. It sounded like some kind of blunt object had been thrown against the stucco near the backyard patio. Janelle abruptly sat up in bed when she heard the noise, frozen for a few moments while she remained still and silent. She waited and listened for any other noises, worried about what was going on outside in her backyard, but there was nothing.

Nothing, that is, until her doorbell rang a few minutes later.

“Who in the hell is ringing my bell at two in the morning,” Janelle muttered to herself as she grabbed the alarm clock on her nightstand and peered at the time with groggy eyes that had trouble focusing. Then she slipped out of bed, put on her robe and slippers and stepped quietly down the hallway to her front door, not quite sure of what she was going to do when she got there. The doorbell rang again while she was walking down the hallway, and Janelle thought for a moment that maybe she should just call 911 without answering the door. Instead, she walked slowly up to the front door and peered through the peep hole.

There seemed to be some kind of small figure standing in her doorway, but it was hard to tell because of the darkness. Janelle tripped the porch light, then peered again through the peep hole and saw a small boy who looked to be maybe seven or eight years old. After Janelle turned on the porch light, he seemed to have jumped back quickly a few paces away from the front door, and now stood several feet away looking at it.

Janelle still had an impulse to call 911 without opening the door, but she suppressed it and opened the door slowly, holding it open about a foot. She told herself she could close it quickly and probably keep a seven-year-old boy from charging into her house if she had to.

“What do you want?” said Janelle, staring at the boy with an expression that blended irritation and suspicion. “Who are you? Do you know it's two o'clock in the morning?”

The boy looked at Janelle for a long moment without saying anything. There was something odd about him. His face seemed pale and screwed into a tense expression as if he didn't know where he was and didn't trust anyone to tell him anything. His eyes were sunken and he squinted, as if the porch light were burning him somehow. He wore a striped T-shirt and blue jeans with the cuffs turned up, which Janelle noticed and thought peculiar because it looked so old-fashioned. He just kept looking at Janelle without saying anything.

“What do you want?” Janelle repeated.

“My ball,” said the boy, “it went in your backyard.”

“What are doing playing ball in the middle of the night?” Janelle asked, holding the door firmly so that she could slam it shut quickly if she had to.

The boy just kept looking at Janelle without saying anything, as if he was worried about what Janelle would do to him. Then he started slowly stepping back away from her and down the walkway toward the sidewalk, and when he was about halfway to the sidewalk he suddenly turned around and ran away, up the street, and disappeared.

Janelle had a hard time getting back to sleep after that. In fact, she did not sleep at all, but lay in bed in the dark wondering what a little boy was doing running around in the middle of the night worrying about a ball in somebody else's backyard. And what a strange little boy! He had none of the rosiness that children are supposed to have, and those jeans with the cuffs turned up made him look like something out of one of those old black-and-white TV shows from the 1950s.

As Janelle lay in bed thinking about all this she thought she heard a rustling noise coming from the backyard, and then a faint sound of footsteps around her patio. This pricked her alarm response and she fumbled around her nightstand for her cell phone to call 911. After she found it she crept to her bedroom window, which overlooked the backyard, and knelt down so she could peer through it at one corner trying not to be seen by anyone outside.

There was just enough moonlight that Janelle could make out the shrubs and patio. For a long moment she didn't see anything in the backyard that wasn't supposed to be there, but she could hear what sounded like light footsteps somewhere around the patio. She was about to dial 911 on her cell phone when she saw him.

It was that strange little boy again; he was wandering around the backyard poking into the shrubbery as if he was looking for something.

“My God, he's looking for his ball,” whispered Janelle to herself. “He must have climbed over the fence. In the middle of the night!”

Janelle decided not to call 911 but tip-toed quickly to the glass doors in the family room that opened onto the patio. Then she turned on the outdoor lights.

The boy was startled, and whipped his body around to look in Janelle's direction, holding what looked like a softball. He squinted and his face contorted into an expression of fear mixed with disgust. He ran to the fence, threw the softball over to

the other side, and then climbed up and over himself as if trying to escape from something chasing him.

Janelle watched him disappear, and then her eyes surveyed everything she could see in the backyard from behind the glass doors. She looked around her yard for long minutes with the outdoor lights turned on, not completely satisfied that this one little boy and his softball were the only things keeping her up. But as the minutes clicked by it seemed there was nothing else outside to keep her awake. She turned the outdoor lights back off and returned to bed, though she slept little until her alarm went off.

The next day Janelle decided she would walk around the block and talk to the boy's parents about what had happened, as obviously little boys should not be wandering around in the middle of the night jumping over fences and disturbing neighbors. She decided to find their house and pay them a visit after work, but when she got home that day she found a note taped to her front door. The handwriting was barely legible, almost as if whoever wrote it endured enormous pain in holding a pen. It said: "We're sorry that our boy disturbed you last night, we'll make sure this doesn't happen again." The note was unsigned.

Janelle found it hard to maintain her indignation after reading the note, though she thought it odd that whoever wrote it apparently did not want to identify themselves. It certainly did not invite Janelle to visit and talk about it more.

"Why not just drop by with little Tommy or whatever his name is and say hello and apologize in person?" Janelle said to herself. But then everybody is a little different, Janelle thought, and these folks were apparently more different than others, maybe a lot more different, and everybody has to do what works for them, and if this is what works for them, well, OK, no need to obsess about it. So Janelle decided to let it go.

But the incident with the little boy and his softball rattled Janelle. It was pretty odd, after all. Janelle started finding it more difficult to get to sleep at night. She had always been one of those early morning people who like to turn in before the ten o'clock news on television and get up well before the first beams of sunlight start appearing on the horizon. And she had always slipped into unconsciousness quickly when she turned in and then slept soundly until the alarm went off. But now she found herself lying awake longer when she went to bed.

And she started having weird dreams, too. One night she dreamt she was mowing her lawn while Chrissy and Tania were playing ball with the little boy and she had to maneuver the lawnmower around them. Another night she dreamt she was walking up and down Primrose Lane with a crowd of people around her talking about going to work. And another night she dreamt she was at work and discovered that everybody there was dead, but still walking around and doing their jobs as if nothing had changed. She had had strange dreams before, but the dreams she started having now were the strangest of all, and what was even more remarkable was that when Janelle awoke in the morning, she remembered her dreams as if they had just happened in real life.

One night Janelle could not get to sleep at all. She lay awake in bed trying everything she could think of to help her relax, but nothing worked. She tried breathing in and out slowly, clearing her mind of all thoughts. She tried counting backwards from one thousand. She tried sleeping on her back, then on one side and the other, and on her stomach. No matter what she did her mind seemed to want to stay awake and alert. She watched the alarm clock tick the minutes and hours away, past eleven o'clock, then past midnight, then past one o'clock in the morning. Sleep refused to come.

And then sometime around two o'clock in the morning Janelle thought she heard voices, lots of voices that seemed to come from outside. The voices startled her, because it almost sounded like some kind of crowd had gathered outside. Janelle lay as still as she could, trying to make out what those voices might be saying, but they all seemed to blend together like a group of people having a quiet chat at a movie theater before the feature started.

For several minutes Janelle listened to the voices, not making out anything in particular, wondering why a group of people would be outside talking to each other in the middle of the night. Then she slipped out of bed, put on her robe and slippers, and walked slowly down the hallway to the living room, with its window looking out onto the street. Janelle cracked open the blinds an inch or two and peered out.

And there they were: people, many of them. She could look across the street and see a woman watering the plants in her front yard. A few houses up the street a man was mowing his lawn. There was a woman walking a dog with another woman beside her, and the two of them seemed to be chatting. Other people were outside on the sidewalk or in the street, just talking to each other as if they were at a garden party or a picnic.

Janelle kept peering through the crack in the blinds, astonished that so many people were outside in the middle of the night doing such ordinary everyday things, not really knowing yet what she should do about it. But as Janelle kept staring she noticed something about them that seemed not quite so ordinary and everyday. They all seemed a little frail, and their body movements kind of awkward and jerky. And in the light of the streetlamps Janelle could see that their eyes were sunken, like the little boy who'd showed up at her door.

And then Janelle saw a woman walk by her house who seemed to realize that Janelle was looking out through the crack in



her blinds. The woman walking by stopped on the sidewalk in front of Janelle's house, and her head jutted forward and from side to side as if she was trying to see Janelle. And then the woman on the sidewalk waved! A nice friendly wave, just like one neighbor might wave to another on a spring morning.

Janelle was so flabbergasted at the woman waving on the sidewalk she quickly stepped away from the blinds and almost tripped over her coffee table. *Who are these strange people who get up in the middle of the night to live their lives*, she thought.

It was hard to decide what to do next. Maybe she should just go back to bed and try the breathing exercises again; or maybe, if she tried counting backwards from ten thousand that would be the trick for finally getting to sleep. But Janelle realized she was not likely to get back to sleep no matter how many breathing exercises she did or how many numbers she tried to count.

What Janelle did next, which she told herself was a terrible idea even as she was doing it, was to open her front door and step outside on the porch. The air was a little brisk and so Janelle tightened her robe around her chest. She looked out onto the scene in front of her and saw that the woman on the sidewalk was still waving to her and smiling. Janelle hesitated for a few moments but then raised her hand slowly and gave the woman on the sidewalk a timid little wave. The woman seemed to be satisfied with that and continued walking slowly up the street.

Janelle stepped further out into her front yard until she was close to the sidewalk and then looked up and down Primrose Lane. The woman at the house across the street stopped watering her plants for a moment, and turned to look at Janelle and gave her a wave, too. Janelle waved back, and the woman returned to watering her plants.

"Hello, neighbor!" said a man's voice.

Janelle turned to see a man walking toward her from the house at 19 Primrose Lane. He seemed very old and so frail Janelle thought a gust of wind could blow him away. His face was pale and his eyes sunken beneath dark sockets and there were just a few strands of gray hair across his head. He shuffled toward Janelle with an outstretched hand that shook violently and that was dry and wrinkled like lizard skin. He smiled in a very friendly way.

Not sure how to respond to meeting her next door neighbor like this, Janelle just stood there for a long moment looking at the man. He approached Janelle and kept his shaking hand outstretched, smiling at her. Finally Janelle took his hand and gripped it lightly, worrying she would break the bones in his fingers.

"It's so nice to meet you," said the man.

"It's nice to meet you, too," said Janelle, not sure if she meant it.

The man nodded and kept smiling at Janelle, and Janelle released his hand from hers. The two of them stood silently for a moment, and Janelle noticed that the man's teeth were badly deteriorated. Janelle thought of several things she might ask him, such as, how long he had lived on Primrose Lane and other pleasantries like that. But whatever she thought of along those lines seemed nonsensical for some reason, so she just returned the man's smile and they stood there silently acknowledging each other for a few moments. Then the man took a deep breath and gave a sigh.

"Well, good-bye for now," he said, and turned around and walked back to the house at 19 Primrose Lane.

"Good-bye for now," said Janelle. "It was nice to meet you."

Some of the other people on Primrose Lane waved at Janelle, too, and Janelle waved back. They all walked to and fro and went about their business. Janelle watched them for a while, and then turned around and went back inside.

After that Janelle walked aimlessly around her house for a while, puzzling over what she had seen. Then she tried going back to sleep, but it did not take long to realize that sleep was not going to happen. So she got up again and went to the kitchen and decided to make herself some herbal tea and just reflect on it all.

What Janelle thought was that she was no longer so enthusiastic about this house on Primrose Lane and all of these creepy neighbors who only come out at night, like maybe they came from the other side of the beyond, or something like that. How often would she have to deal with little boys running around her backyard in the middle of the night? And her next door neighbor looked like he had just stepped out of a coffin on the way to his own funeral! And then there were the weird dreams she was having, and the sleepless nights—none of that was any fun, either. This was definitely not what Janelle had in mind when she bought the house.

After Janelle made her tea she walked to the front window again, opened the blinds and took another look outside. She watched her neighbors continue to water their gardens and walk their dogs and generally hang around with their jerky skeletal movements and their sunken eyes. *No wonder they don't come out during the day*, Janelle thought.

At last Janelle decided she had seen enough. She closed the blinds and sat down on her couch thinking it all through. She thought and she thought some more, and finally decided that in the morning she would call her lawyer to see how things were going with the divorce settlement and find out if maybe some changes could be made to it before everything was finalized and signed by the judge.

"You know," Janelle said to herself, "this place would be *perfect* for Doug." ■



# MEET AN AMERICAN HERO



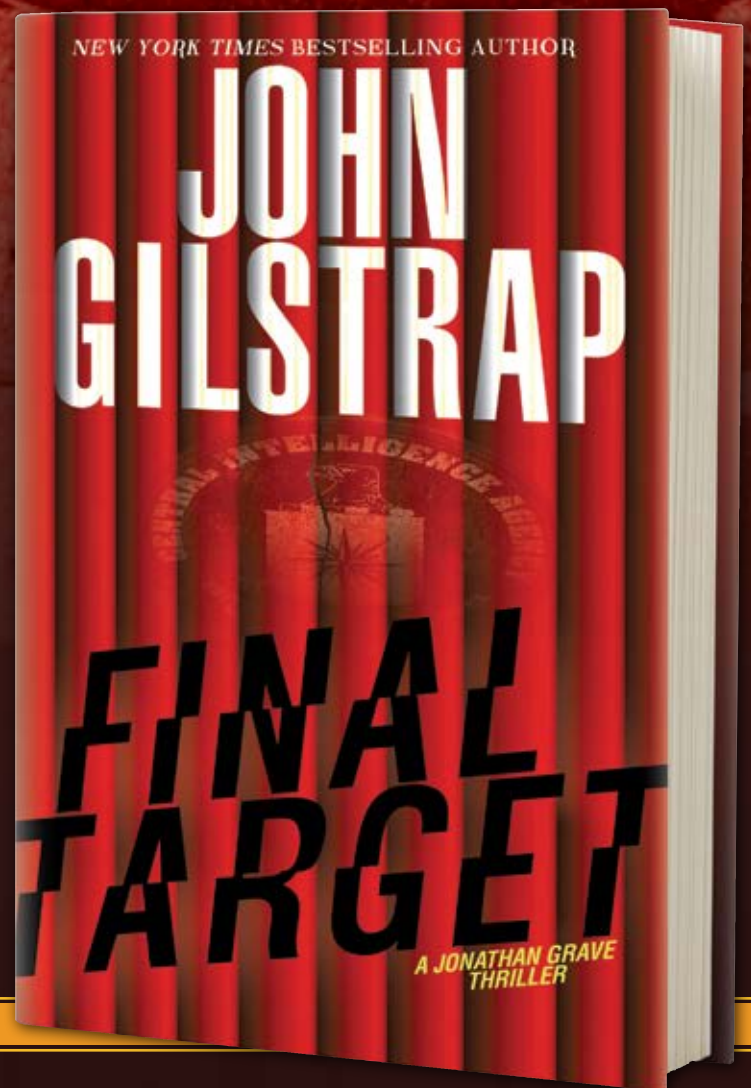
A RESCUE GONE WRONG.  
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The **Jonathan Grave** Thriller Series

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

## LUCKY SUPREME

By Jeff Johnson

This is what you'd call a "fun read." Quick, thrilling, this is a novel filled with many crimes and is just the beginning of what looks to be a very interesting trilogy.

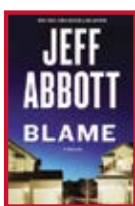
Main character, Darby Holland, is the owner of a tattoo parlor located in the Old Town area of Portland, Oregon: Darby and his cohorts have created their very own "area" during the gentrification of their community.

A phone call to Darby from a friend tells him that Jason Bling, a former employee who quit some months ago, has resurfaced up in Santa Cruz. Jason supposedly has stolen some original tattoo designs by well-known designer, Roland Norton. Darby sets out for Santa Cruz, along with some friends who are all a little strange. Here, he confronts the thief and figures out that Bling's new boss, who owns a mini-mall in San Francisco, may have been the real one behind the theft.

Darby also has other scores to settle, and will face new ones to save his own reputation. Seems that he is a man full of secrets and the tattoo parlor may have just been a place to hide from all of them. From a war between Darby and a very rich collector who follows him back to Old Town; to crimes and tales that land Darby in a sea of federal agents, this is one plotline that keeps readers excited until the very end.

A thrill ride that never lets up, this reader is definitely looking forward to the next book in this series.

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



"Blame" is a genuine page-turner!

We begin with a car crash in Austin, Texas that takes away seventeen-year-old Jane Norton's memory and the life of her best friend's boyfriend, David Hall. Investigators at the scene find a note, written by Jane before amnesia set in, that blames her for actually killing the boy, and not just by accident. Not knowing what happened, Jane is unable to imagine that she intentionally crashed her car, let alone wanted to kill David, even though she is unable to offer an alternative explanation.

Two years go by before someone named Liv Danger posts a message online telling the world of social media that she knows what actually happened the night David Hall was killed and pledging vengeance against Jane. Jane, already guilt-ridden, assumes that this is a cruel joke until someone begins to target everyone connected with the crash.

The closer that Jane gets to retrieving her memory and discovering who exactly this "Liv Danger" is, the more she is sure that there is a conspiracy against her. The whole town seems to be turning away from her, as this terrific tale with terrific characters seems to fly by because it's that fast-paced and that incredibly written. Looking for great twists and turns? Author Jeff Abbott has definitely provided them with "Blame."

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

## BLAME

By Jeff Abbott

## TITLE WAVE

By Lorna Barrett

Sisters Tricia and Angelica Miles are excited to leave the picturesque village of Stoneham, New Hampshire during the snowy month of January for a mystery lovers cruise around the Caribbean. The cruise, on the luxury ocean liner *Celtic Lady*, is being sponsored by the Stoneham Chamber of Commerce, of which Angelica is the current president. The timing of the cruise is perfect for Tricia. Her mystery bookstore, Haven't Got A Clue, is being rebuilt after a devastating fire, and several of the mystery writers who've given talks at her bookstore are featured members of author panels being presented on the cruise. All the sisters want to do for the next seven days is relax and enjoy themselves without any stress or interruptions. And if Tricia could manage to escape her hometown reputation for frequently tripping over dead bodies, that'd be a bonus.

But even before the *Celtic Lady* leaves port, Tricia and Angelica witness a display of temper and bad manners by EM Barstow, a best-selling thriller author. Tricia hosted Barstow at her bookstore once years ago, and the woman was so difficult and demanding that Tricia vowed that she'd never deal with her again. As the cruise progresses, Barstow continues her bad behavior by insulting many of the ship's passengers and crew members, including her fellow mystery writers, her editor, and the long-suffering president of her fan club.

Returning to her stateroom one night, Tricia passes by Barstow's suite and notices that the door is ajar. Curious, she can't help but investigate, and finds the mystery author dead: an apparent suicide. But there's no suicide note, and Barstow had made so many enemies on the trip that Tricia's positive the author was murdered. The ship security officer disagrees, so Tricia starts her own on-board investigation, determined to find the killer before the ship arrives back in New York.

"Title Wave" is another satisfying addition to the prolific Lorna Barrett's *Booktown Mystery* series. Check it out. Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Dieting Can Be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## EVERY LAST LIE

By Mary Kubica

As we all know, this is the author who brought about the bone-chilling book, "The Good Girl," and now she's back with one of the creepiest, dark, intense tales out there in the world today.

A man and his four-year-old daughter are in a car crash. Wife, Clara Solberg, is in shock, horror, happiness and more than a little confusion when her husband is taken away from her, yet her daughter comes out of the crash completely unscathed. Trouble is, the child is also having nightmares and acting strange. Strange to the point where Clara believes there is a whole lot more than just a simple "car accident" behind her husband's death.

Desperate for the truth, and obsessed, Clara searches for explanations and answers. What she finds, however, throws her into a twisted world that will scare the reader to death. The emotions that Clara feels show a dark mind that has been scorched by anger and grief and a need to explore something that should have been left alone.

As it was with "The Good Girl," Kubica delivers pure fiction, but in a way that is far creepier because her plot can certainly be truth in the blink of an eye. A mind can change; it can be altered by the world around them, and watching a "normal" person delve into the depths of murder, horror and evil is more frightening than literally anything on earth. I assume you will see this one "in a theatre near you" very soon.

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





## DEATH OF A LOBSTER LOVER

By Lee Hollis

This awesome cozy focuses on three women and their vacation far away from their hum-drum lives; a vacation that is literally doomed from the very start.

Hayley, Liddy and Mona are getting away from it all by heading to Mona's uncle's cabin located in the small town of Salmon Cove, Maine. Jumping into Liddy's Mercedes, they head out completely excited to get in all that rest and relaxation. Each of the girls has their own reason to be happy: Hayley is a divorced food columnist and always on the lookout for new foods to write about; Mona is just happy to be away from her husband and wild children; and Liddy just wants to get away from her boyfriend for a while.

What they forgot to do was look at the cabin before showing up. Talk about a dump, with no indoor plumbing, Liddy refuses to stay there. Unfortunately, the hotel is booked. With Liddy beyond frustrated, she's ready to turn around and head home until...she runs into a drop-dead gorgeous travel writer named Jackson Young. All of a sudden the cabin is looking a whole lot better.

When they head to the local bar, readers are introduced to truly odd and beloved citizens, including one by the name of Corey who Mona still has feelings for after all this time. Liddy once again gets mad when Jackson stands her up for the lobster bake. Of course, she has to forgive him when he is found dead on the beach: strangled.

By this time, Hayley has already had a run in with Sheriff Daphne Wilkes, who clearly wants them gone. Hayley, who has a lot of history when it comes to sticking her nose in where it doesn't belong, investigates the murder of the writer and ends up behind bars. Who is the murderer? You can find out only if you read the book.

A really fun tale, this is one you will sit and enjoy thoroughly. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

## DROWNING TIDES

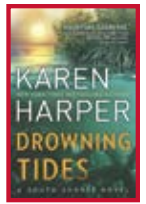
By Karen Harper

When Claire Britten, Forensic Psychologist, started working with Nick Markwood, a lawyer on the South Shore project, she didn't have a clue that it would mean danger for her and her daughter, Lexi. However, when the young girl comes up missing from their Florida home, Nick seems to be sure as to who is responsible for the disappearance.

Now, any reader who has already partaken of the first incredible book in this series, "Chasing Shadows," will be thrilled to know that in this tale you will finally be told how that cliffhanger comes out, seeing as that this story picks up *exactly* where the first left off.

As the tale progresses, Nick must deal with the fact that Lexi has been taken by a man from his own past who actually ended his father's life. Now the man is going after these new people in his world. Nick always knew that he, himself, was in danger from this man, but the kidnapping of a child was certainly not what he expected. Heading to the Cayman Islands, he and Claire will race to find Lexi and unearth the past Nick has kept quiet for a good, long time.

Full of action, murders, and twists and turns galore, this second book in the *South Shore* series by Karen Harper smacks you upside the head again and again. Just when you believe wholeheartedly that you have everything figured out, something new happens and sends you on a completely different path. My advice: Don't get too comfortable. Not only are things not as they seem, but you have to remember that the incredible mind of Harper has a book three in this series coming up. In other words, there will be more answers to come. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



## DARK SATURDAY

By Nicci French

For anyone who has been following the extraordinary "week" that the husband and wife team (Sean French and Nicci Gerrard) has been writing, then you, like the other die-hard fans out there, will be happy to see "Saturday" come.

Central character, psychotherapist Frieda Klein, is still dealing with her past. She firmly believes that the killer who damaged her life is still out there just waiting to strike again. This time out, a friend of hers has asked her to simply sit down and assess a patient being held in a secure psychiatric hospital.

The woman's name is Hannah Docherty. It was ten years ago that Hannah was arrested for killing her entire family inside their house. Hannah was arrested by a particular officer who Frieda speaks to about the crime, letting him know that she believes the police made a mistake all those years ago. Trouble is, Hannah is also causing trouble in the asylum where she happens to be, confiscating knives and using them on other patients/inmates. Hannah, however, barely speaks, and when she does the words make no sense. In fact, she is a poster child for the criminally insane. So why does Frieda want to help this girl so much and prove that ten years ago the cops caught the wrong person? You have to read it to find out.

It is amazing the detective work this woman does while being a psychotherapist. She digs up the crime of the century ten years later and finds some truly extraordinary facts that were overlooked by others in the legal profession. But wanting to help this woman and trying to figure out if this woman even wants her help are two different things, and the path Frieda walks is frightening. Add to this a side story that plays out regarding her past stalker, and you have a goose bump-raising thriller that is definitely setting up fans to have a drop-dead exciting "Sunday."

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

## MARATHON

By Brian Freeman

"Marathon" is truly a title that fits a storyline; from page one, Freeman has readers racing through this book, excited and thrilled to discover who committed a most heinous crime.

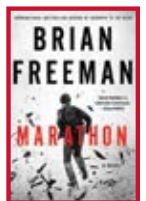
"Ripped from the headlines," this plot is set in Duluth, Minnesota, where they are putting on their annual marathon, when a bomb suddenly goes off, injuring and killing countless bystanders as well as competitors in the race—calling up that real-life frightening day that actually occurred at the Boston Marathon in Massachusetts.

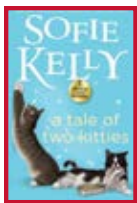
It is a rainy June morning and practically the entire city of Duluth is attending the area's biggest event. When the chaos is over, the FBI and Lieutenant Jonathan Stride of the Duluth PD are asked to find and capture the perpetrator of this horror. The investigation centers on the Muslim community, and Stride, Serena Dial and Maggie Bei join with the FBI to find the terrorists as quickly as possible before anything else happens.

As the rumor-mill on social media erupts, a spectator remembers getting pushed by a young Middle Eastern man holding a backpack near the bomb site. The spectator sees the same face in a photo taken of the marathon and sends the image out to the public. As the photo is seen by millions, a husband and father by the name of Khan Rashid becomes the prime suspect, and the town is torn apart by politics and terror as Rashid is hunted.

Freeman delves into this community being pulled every which way extremely well, and delivers quite a shock before this fantastic psychological thriller comes to an end.

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





## A TALE OF TWO KITTIES

By Sofie Kelly

Owen and Hercules (these two wonderful cats) are on their way to having their next great adventure as they begin to dig into a twenty-year-old scandal by the side of their owner, Kathleen Paulson. Kathleen is a super-smart librarian. She knows almost everything there is to know, except for the fact that her two cats just happen to own the magical power of investigation.

The citizens of Mayville Heights remember when Victor James had an affair with his brother's wife, who later died in a car crash. After that accident, the brothers eventually tried to rebuild their relationship; a process that is halted when one of the men, Leo, turns up murdered. Kathleen finds the body and is shocked that the police believe her friend (and Leo's son) Simon committed the crime.

Yes, father and son argued quite a bit, but Kathleen wants to prove that Simon is innocent. To do this she digs into the town's history, revealing many past scandals and secrets, and works with two feline friends that are a whole lot of fun to watch.

These *Magical Cat Mysteries* by author Sofie Kelly are filled with suspense, great plots, and a human character that is so smart you want to have dinner with her just to get inside that mind of hers. And when it comes to animal friends, Owen and Hercules bring a great deal of amusement and insight to the story. Even if you're the proverbial "dog person," you will still love these guys.

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

## DARK LIGHT: DAWN

Created by Fabrizio Boccardi/Written by Jon Land

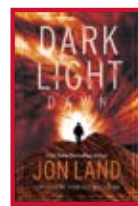
"Dark Light: Dawn" was created by Fabrizio Boccardi, the same person who created "The Seven Sins" and "Black Scorpion." Boccardi's creativity with Land's unmatched prose and imagination have melded together to form a combustible thriller. Land has taken us many places with his storytelling, but this is the first time he's taken us to Hell and back. And what an insatiable trip it is!

In "Dark Light: Dawn," you'll be introduced to two generations of characters. Dale Denton and Ben Younger are partners in a start-up company who are leveraged to the hilt, and desperate to find what others before them could not: a huge oil reserve in Mexico. When their last drill gets clogged, Ben lowers himself into the "hole" to fix the problem. Just when he thinks all is lost, he sees a light in the midst of the darkness. When he reaches for it, his life and the lives of those around him are changed forever. But what if more than his life has changed? What if he has changed at his core, a change that could be passed from one generation to the next? As mind-blowing as this story is, it's the next generation of Dentons and Youngers, Vicky and Max, that will keep you reading straight through the night.

"Dark Light: Dawn" is an epic thriller that uses its characters and story to explore many questions that have plagued humankind for centuries, such as: Does free will exist? And if it does, which is greater, good or evil?

Land has a unique ability to weave plot threads that seemingly have no connection into a piece of art. He also sews time into this tapestry, alternating the present with the past and adding depth to both story and character. "Dark Light: Dawn" will reach into your soul and grab you by the core as it takes you on an incredible journey that would make Stephen Hawking and Charles Darwin envious.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of "Painted Beauty," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



## THE ART OF VANISHING

By Cynthia Kuhn

This is the second book in a series that began with the incredible tale, "The Semester of Our Discontent," and as it was with the first, this plot never lets the reader down. Between the covers is absolute humor, yet under the funny stuff lies a serious suspense-filled story.

In this new book we meet up with Professor Lila Maclean's famous mother. This is one woman you would love to experience, but not as a small child. In adulthood, Lila has to deal with her mom's oddities, as well as deal with her mom's even more famous friend, author Damon Von Tussel, a man who has been loved and hated by one and all.

Strange things begin to occur when Von Tussel is invited to discuss his bestselling book at the English Department located in Stonedale University, during their upcoming Arts Week. Unfortunately, before he can do this, the author goes missing.

The chancellor at the school has made it very clear that he expects Professor Lila to find the missing writer. Sadly, someone has a plan in place that is meant for more people than just Von Tussel. They are sending out warnings, valuable items are coming up missing, and a series of accidents are threatening the lives of guests at Stonedale. As Lila's mom attempts to aid her daughter in finding Von Tussel, even Mom can think of no place where the man can possibly be.

Readers become immersed in the mystery, and will wonder who the culprit is behind all this chaos. After all, it's not very often that you enter a university where people are being erased instead of climbing the ladder of success.

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



## CAST THE FIRST STONE

By James W. Ziskin

It's 1962. Tony Eberle has just been offered his first role in a Hollywood movie called, *Twistin' on the Beach*. Tony is one of those small town good boys who made it to the top, which means his hometown newspaper wants to do a spread about Tony and his rise to fame.

The person sent to Los Angeles to cover Tony's big break is a reporter named Ellie Stone. She's a bit excited; after all, she's going from upstate New York straight into Tinseltown where she's hoping to meet certain stars of *Perry Mason*. The only problem for her comes upon her arrival: Tony is nowhere to be found. No one seems to know where the heck the guy went, and the people in charge of this movie range from being angry to being confused as to why he up and vanished. The small town boy is now officially fired for going AWOL, and Ellie decides that she's going to track him down.

Soon most people simply don't care about Tony or his whereabouts anymore. That is, until the producer of the movie also disappears and with him a script he wrote for a new film. Things turn to murder when the producer's body is found in a ravine outside of the missing Tony's house. Enter Sgt. John L. Millard of the LAPD.

Ellie turns over every stone, looks in every nook and cranny of Hollywood and comes up with leads that lead her to... more leads. She starts to wonder if there's a conspiracy against her as she attempts to separate lies from the truth, which is extremely hard to do in the glamour of Hollywood.

The *Ellie Stone Mysteries* are always fresh, fun, and offer plots that are so well done the reader can guess at virtually everything when it comes to what the conclusion will be... and never be right. Once again, James Ziskin has created a great mystery with flash, speed, and suspense.

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



## FALLING DARKNESS

By Karen Harper

As always when it comes to this incredible author, this storyline is one that will keep the reader up all night, so intrigued that sleep will be hard to get until the end has been revealed. A *South Shores* series novel (beginning where "Chasing Shadows" ended), Claire, Nick, Lexi and Jace are about to go into the witness protection program. The group is rescued and brought to Cuba where a family helps them reach Havana; it is there they can get help to safely reach Michigan, which is their assigned safe house location.

However, in Havana they are found by Clayton Ames and that, again, has them running for cover, trying to keep a step ahead of the bad guys all the time. Constantly looking over their shoulders, their journey involves everything from Nick and Jace having to work together; to Jace still working to win Claire's heart once again when the group finally settles on Mackinac Island. Unfortunately, that dream of being safe begins to feel like nothing but fiction when their witness protection handler is taken from them. Sadly, danger follows them directly to their supposed safe haven, and it begins to get even more difficult when both the characters and the longtime readers no longer know for sure who is helping and who is hindering their chance at ever having peace.

Although the book can stand alone, it is far more entertaining if the reader goes back and soaks up the beginning of these characters and their storylines in "Drowning Tides" and "Chasing Shadows." The author is first rate, and if you find that you have to stay up all night reading all three, you will also find that it is absolutely worth it!

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

## BRING HER HOME

By David Bell

A couple of years after the freak accident that claimed the life of Bill Price's wife, two teenage girls go for a walk and don't come back. Reported missing, one of them is Bill Price's fifteen-year-old daughter, Summer; the other is her best friend Haley. After only a few days, the girls are found in a city park. One of them is dead and the other severely beaten.

Bill has already been living a nightmare, and when he is told that Summer is the one still alive but clinging to life by a thread, he goes on a mission to find out what happened during the two days the girls were missing and bring to justice the monster who kept the girls captive.

Things get even worse for Bill, however, when bits and pieces of Summer's life is spread among her father and others. He soon starts to find out that his own daughter is not who he thinks she is. But when the news comes that Summer is also not the girl clinging to life by a thread, red herrings and strange paths of investigation commence as suspects come out of the closet and even more questions arise. A group of teenage boys have their hands in the case; they were chasing Summer and Haley the day they disappeared. Not to mention, Bill's next door neighbor seems to be a little too interested in what on earth is going on.

It's difficult to say any more in relation to this plot, because nothing can be given away. Readers will love the twists and turns that this writer has given to them. All that can be said is what starts off with a bang ends with one just as grand. Don't expect to stop this story mid-read and re-start the next day. It won't work. With this one, you will most definitely not be able to put it down.

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



## ASSAULTED CARAMEL

By Amanda Flower

Bailey King is living the sweet life in New York City. A successful chocolatier, she's up for a major promotion when her boss retires. She's also involved in a secret romantic relationship with famed television chef Eric Sharp, who happens to be on the panel of judges that'll give the yay or nay to Bailey's new job.

Bailey's priorities change when she receives a message from her grandmother that her beloved grandfather is seriously ill. Ignoring the possibility that leaving may jeopardize her promotion, Bailey immediately heads to the tiny village of Harvest, Ohio. Trading the glamour of Manhattan for the "plain" ways of Harvest is a big change. Harvest is an Amish village, complete with horse-and-buggies, limited access to telephones and electricity, and quaint shops run by the Amish residents. Including Swissman Sweets, specializing in all sorts of yummy treats, which is owned by Bailey's grandparents.

When Bailey first catches sight of her grandfather, he's involved in a heated discussion with an *Englisher* (non-Amish person), Tyler Colton, a local developer who wants to buy Swissman Sweets and won't take no for an answer. Bailey's grandfather refuses to sell, and collapses right on the sidewalk in front of Colton. Bailey is shocked, not just by her grandfather's collapse, but by the fact that Colton simply walks away, leaving the man on the sidewalk.

The next time Bailey sees Colton is late that same night in the kitchen of the candy shop, and he doesn't look very good. In fact, he looks dead, with her grandfather's favorite chocolate knife sticking out of his chest. The local sheriff immediately zeroes in on Bailey's grandfather as the primary suspect. Bailey's two worlds collide as she must make a life-changing choice she never anticipated.

"Assaulted Caramel" is a promising start to a new series. I really enjoyed meeting Bailey's grandmother (Maami) and grandfather (Daadi) and learning a little more about the Amish way of life. Check it out!

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

## MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

By Karen Rose

Baltimore PI Clay Maynard is a good man. His work entails locating children who have gone missing and reuniting them with their families. He has a real emotional stock in this job, seeing as that he lost his own daughter a while ago and has never been able to find her. It was not a brutal assassin or a hardcore criminal that took his lovely girl, it was Clay's own ex-wife. What Clay doesn't know is that they are about to be reunited.

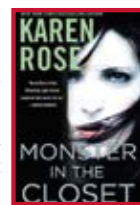
Taylor Dawson is an equine therapist. She is also in the midst of aiding two girls who lost their mother in a brutal way. Taylor has taken emotional stock in their plight because she has always been told tales about her own father by a mother who described the guy as being nothing but a "monster." What Taylor soon finds out, however, is that Mom was lying through her teeth.

It seems like a good world is beginning for Taylor. She loves her job, loves helping the girls, and even has passion building for her own boss's son, Ford. Perhaps the rest of her life will be filled with happiness, and no more secrets and lies.

Of course, this is a suspense thriller, so Taylor (along with the reader) knows that a person of pure evil with a plan all their own is not about to let Taylor live the "good life."

Action prevails near the end of this book. There are a few subplots that can get a little confusing, and there is a certain danger level that seems to be missing, but fans of this author will like the emotional aspects and truly love the conclusion.

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



## THE BLACK CAT SEES HIS SHADOW

By Kay Finch

Readers will be thrilled to go back to Lavender, Texas, which is the cool location for these *Bad Luck Cat* mysteries.

It's that time of year when the citizens of Lavender are gearing up to put on their annual Pumpkin Day Festival. The town is getting filled to the brim with vendors and tourists, and Lavender citizen Sabrina Tate is wondering if she'll have time to finish working on her book.

But the ruckus of the festival is not merely what Sabrina is up against. One of the vendors, Calvin Fisher, actually attacks Sabrina and threatens her. Sabrina is completely confused by the man because she swears she doesn't know him at all, even though he believes he knows Sabrina and acts as if she's his enemy.

The puzzle is solved when Sabrina runs up against a woman who looks exactly like her. Not only that, but this woman by the name of Tia also has a cat named Merlin who looks to be the exact twin of Sabrina's own black cat, Hitchcock.

As if a doppelganger wasn't enough, Hitchcock and Sabrina stumble over Calvin's dead body and the number one suspect is Tia. Somehow Sabrina doesn't believe Tia could possibly be a murderer, so instead of concentrating on writing, she decides to delve into the investigation to find the truth. Let us just say that the cops of Lavender are not happy with her decision.

Hitchcock remains everyone's favorite character as the story moves along and the criminal is finally unmasked. This is the third in this series of mysteries, and they just keep getting better and better with each one. Author Kay Finch has captured "kitty" behavior perfectly and knows exactly how to write a mystery that is as intriguing as it is captivating.

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



## GIVE THE DEVIL HIS DUE

By Steve Hockensmith with Lisa Falco

This book begins when a fortuneteller by the name of Alanis McLachlan gets the surprise of her life.

Alanis has come a long way from the days of helping with her late mother's con games to being the owner of the White Magic Five and Dime. Now a legitimate tarot card reader, this is one woman who can unscramble and understand the cards in a New York minute. So it seems completely strange that the cards did not "tell" her that James McDonald (AKA: Biddle) was not actually dead in a cornfield many years ago. He is still very much alive and about to invade Alanis's life in the picturesque town of Berdache, Arizona.

Things look dark when Biddle appears on the scene and attempts to drag Alanis back into a life of crime. Add in the fact that a new guy wants to sweep her off her feet, and her current beau, Victor, is upset that others are looking out for, and at, his girlfriend.

Soon Detective Robert Dryja appears in town, looking for something Biddle seems to have. But when Dryja's body turns up dead in his room at a local lodge with a card from White Magic in his coat pocket, more trouble erupts for Alanis. A new detective arrives, two old-school mobsters are added to the equation, and some old folks are pushed to their limits when a gun is aimed at Alanis but takes out a pigeon instead.

Humor galore invades this book, hand-in-hand with an incredible mystery and a cast of characters you will never forget. This is the third adventure set in this, the craziest town ever seen, and this reader hopes that many more are written before these authors say goodbye to Berdache, Arizona.

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

## DAY OF THE DARK: STORIES OF ECLIPSE

Edited by Kaye George

It's incredible to be swept away by an author's words, but when you receive a book filled with two dozen fantastic authors' words, the experience goes from incredible to downright awesome. Here, great writers got together to create their own skin-crawling tales focused on one event: a solar eclipse.

Right off the bat comes *Dark Side of the Light*. In this story, a lovely woman is excited about being pregnant (finally) and wants to tell her husband in the perfect way. Hubby, however, works all the time for a secret branch of NASA. He's been out all night and brings home "guilt" flowers. He's not able to tell her what he's doing which causes Joanne to believe he may be having an affair. When she finds out what's really going on, when they head out to view the eclipse, your heart will jump into your throat.

In *Torgnyr the Bastard*, a man who happens to be the ugliest man in the Norse lands is also the Speaker of Law for King Eirik the Victorious, who definitely fits the "barbarian king" title. Torgnyr gets gold pieces from a Christian family who asks him to convince the king not to throw them off their land. But the barbarian is determined to either exile or kill the Christians and it will take a "divine sign" to stop him. A sign such as the solar eclipse?

From the editor of this anthology comes *The Darkest Hour*. This is a haunting tale of a couple who decides that, for the solar eclipse, they are going to rent out their spare room and make some money. They end up renting to a couple with a baby. If you thought *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* was scary, you'll love this one!

Add in another twenty-one cool tales, and you have an anthology of suspense that you will not be able to put down!

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



## CLOWNFISH BLUES

By Tim Dorsey

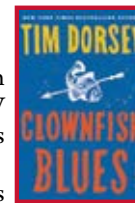
As our story opens, Serge A. Storms and his buddy, Coleman, are enjoying a trip through Florida. There is a reason for this. Serge wants to shoot his own episodes of his favorite classic TV show, *Route 66*. Even though this particular famous route goes nowhere in Florida, Serge does discover that episodes of the show were shot in his very own home state. Therefore, Florida it is!

Bouncing around from town to town and leaving nothing but chaos in their wake, this duo tries all types of things, such as jobs that include worm-grunting and sign-spinning, while concocting even more crazy schemes as they go.

Serge is also becoming inspired while thinking of punishments to give a couple of reality-show folks. But even with all these ideas, their journey deviates off-course when they suddenly learn about a huge scam going on in the Sunshine State. Someone is trying to win the State lottery in a very shady way, and it seems every 'bad guy' is trying to get their very own cut of the money. From drug cartels who are laundering money using the lottery to venture capitalists trying to get into the system, Storms and Coleman are up against some pretty interesting characters when they try to score a cut, as well.

This book, although a bit difficult to get into at first, is filled with comedy. Storms and Coleman make for a good, solid team, and the scam is definitely one for the books.

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





## THE FALLEN

By Eric Van Lustbader

As the second book in author Eric Van Lustbader's series opens, good and evil, secret cults and Lucifer's struggle for world domination arise once again.

Here, it is a fact that the End of Days is upon the world. And in the mountains of Lebanon, a hidden cave exists that houses a man who is about to bring out something that has been forbidden: The Testament of Lucifer.

It seems that Lucifer has decided to rule the world with Satan's Book, and to abscond with gold and another element that is referred to as being the energy of the universe. Lucifer has decided that the big guy up in Heaven has stepped aside, apparently completely ashamed that He has failed, and the Devil now intends to rule the world.

One group, led by Bravo Shaw, is called the Gnostic Observatine sect. Bravo and his blind sister Emma are literally the last "wall" the Devil must hurdle in order to make this 'transfer of power' come true. Presently working in Istanbul, Shaw and Emma meet up with a local who tells them that they must take her daughter, Ayla, on in order to guide them into the mountains of Lebanon. She states that this is where they'll find a cave of secrets; secrets that include the Testament of Lucifer. Only with this data can they stop Satan's plan.

What began in "The Testament" continues here, bringing out more information that includes everything from religion to politics to medieval history and more. Present-day issues clash with history as Emma and Bravo work hard to stop evil from rising. The author is a master storyteller and readers will love figuring out the plot and all the sub-plots as they watch them come together one by one.

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

## DEAD ON ARRIVAL

By Matt Richtel

"Dead on Arrival" is definitely a creep fest. In fact, with this title Mr. Richtel is surely "creeping" up on King and Koontz when it comes to delivering that awe-inspiring fear-factor.

Dr. Lyle Martin is a highly-intelligent, well-respected man who works as an infectious disease specialist. He's also one of the passengers who board a plane in a Colorado ski town, and proceeds to take a nice nap. Sounds quite normal. Problems arise when the doctor gets a rude awakening and meets with some shocking information. It seems that a great many people on the ground are dead.

That's right, while these people were flying, mankind has had the biggest strike of all time. A new kind of virus surfaced down below and Dr. Martin quickly becomes not only the one who has the skills and intelligence to perhaps stop this hideousness, but also, in a way, has the skills that make him a prime suspect when it comes to creating this disease in the first place.

The doctor has a variety of issues to be dealt with; the most difficult decision he must make, however, is whether or not to even bother saving the world, considering there's nothing but anger in this day and age. Moving at a pace that's not normal to the good doctor, he joins with the labs of the CDC, deals with a secret place called Google X, and then heads to the Capitol.

Let's just say that before you're through with this book, you'll be completely creeped out, yet glued to the pages looking for something or someone to come to light. You will be begging for a conclusion that will explain why you feel the need to look over your shoulder.

This author should be very proud. It's extremely rare that any writer has the ability to scare you to death, but with this book, Matt Richtel can count himself among those chosen few.

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



## FRANKENSTEIN DREAMS: A CONNOISSEUR'S COLLECTION OF VICTORIAN SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by Michael Sims

If you wanted to put together a collection of the greatest sci-fi stories ever, there would be no better path to take than going back to those Victorian days, far before the Millennium Falcon appeared in the stars with Han Solo behind the controls.

In this magnificent collection, Sims has chosen authors that range from the mighty Poe to the infamous Kipling to the beloved H.G. Wells. The stories included are at times horror mixed with sci-fi; while others are sleuths that come upon a sci-fi moment they cannot explain.

Each 'section' offers the background of each author, as well as information on the story that has been chosen. Then, the tale itself comes alive as it once did back in the day. There are too many great ones to choose for review, but let's give credit to that master Poe who, long before a man named King scared the heck out of everybody, put together a sci-fi story regarding a man who was just about to die when a type of hypnosis was used on him to see how long the process could delay the jaws of death in a tale called, *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.

A lesser known writer named Edward Page Mitchell is given two entries in the book, with one titled, *The Clock That Went Backward*. A seemingly benign antique clock, but when certain things are done to it, the clock turns back time and takes two men into the past where war raged in the streets.

The book concludes with *The Horror of the Heights*, starring the still much-loved detective, Sherlock Holmes. Arthur Conan Doyle is represented here with a tale about a fearless pilot who comes upon true monsters in the sky.

Every story is a perfect choice for the topic, because they're perfectly written by the stars of yesteryear!

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

## BOOKED 4 MURDER

By J.C. Eaton

This great cozy mystery is listed as the first in a new series from J.C. Eaton, and with this good of a "first" tale, this is sure to be a series that catches on, draws fans, and goes on for a good, long time. (YAY!)

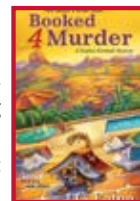
Harriet Plunkett has a daughter named Sophie (AKA: Phee). Mom insists that Sophie fly out to Arizona and investigate the deaths occurring in her book club. It seems that too many of Harriet's friends have died while reading their latest selection. The book has been pronounced "cursed" by Harriet and now everyone is under the belief that they will all drop dead, including Harriet, because of this novel.

Phee reminds her mom that her job working for the police department is in the office of accounting and payroll; she is not a detective. But Harriet feels that Phee must have picked up some pointers while working there. So, being a good daughter, Phee takes a flight and ends up in the retirement community of Sun City West.

These seniors are highly active and Phee finds herself looking for suspects all over the community. When one senior takes a fall and another has their golf cart hit by a car, things start getting even more suspicious, and Phee is not accepting a "cursed" book as being the culprit.

As a media circus begins to build around Sun City West, Phee and her mom get caught up in a real "Agatha Christie" crime, with suspects galore. Funny, great cast, great plot—readers will absolutely love this one!

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







## RUSTY PUPPY

By Joe R. Lansdale

After starting with the best beginning phrase I've read for a long while ("I was still getting over being dead..."), this *Hap and Leonard* adventure was off and running.

Hap, the white half of the team, is recovering from a gunshot wound, dying twice in the hospital, when Louise, a black lady who lives across the street, comes into the office wanting to speak to the other half of the team, the one named Leonard. Her son Jamar, she says, has been murdered in Camp Rapture and she wants them to investigate. Because that's a tough, black neighborhood, she would rather Leonard take her case. When she realizes that she and Hap bonded a few years ago over an incident at a chicken plant, he's hired. And no, she doesn't want the cops involved. She's pretty sure they're the ones who killed her son.

The investigators wade into this murky case, getting rumors and half-truths from reluctant witnesses. One of them, Little Woman, is dubbed a "four-hundred-year-old midget vampire" by Leonard, and the description fits. She's a great character.

They discover that Jamar was trying to gather evidence to defend his sister, who was abusively arrested by Officer Coldpoint, and he may very well have been killed by the cops. The story, buoyed along by the hilarious banter between the two main characters—raunchy but definitely hilarious—takes the self-professed persistent bumbler to an old mill where broken bodies have been recovered from an opaque, toxic mill pond. The bodies are dubbed "rusty puppies" because of the discolored debris they are coated with when they're found.

Hap spins a tale of racial violence, hatred, and brutality while the reader wonders if the duo has met their match at last.

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

## A KILLER HARVEST

By Paul Cleave

Taking the age-old rumor of transference and cellular memory, Cleave leads us through a bizarre story of organ transplant for profit. Police officers on the street are supplying a top eye-surgeon with eyes from criminals. Dr. Toni Coleman is adept at carving out a name for herself in the medical community as the go-to doctor for eye transplants, climbing over the bodies of her victims to get there.

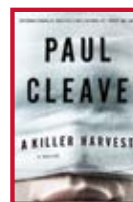
Joshua, a blind teenager, is granted a rare opportunity. His father, a Christchurch cop, is killed in the line of duty and donates his eyes to his son. Through some inept handling by medical technicians, Joshua ends up with one of his father's eyes and the eye of the criminal that killed his father.

As if dealing with the ability to see for the first time—the wonderful and horrendous sights he can now view—isn't enough, Joshua is also dealing with bullying at his new high school, and his first girlfriend. Joshua also must put up with the terror of his dreams and his ability to see visions through the memory transference from both donors.

With a bad guy closing in, Jason must concoct a way to avoid being found while deciphering the secrets to his father's past life—a path that is dark and full of danger. One police officer is convinced that Jason really is telling the truth, but when she's captured, the question is whether Jason will be able to find a way to rescue them all before it's too late.

Cleave gives us an exhilarating chase ending in a breathtaking climax. I'm left wondering about all those other patients who were gifted organs from the same evil criminal...

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



## THE RAGTIME TRAVELER

By Larry Karp and Casey Karp

To music lovers everywhere, here is Larry Karp's and his son Casey Karp's addition to the *Karp's RagTime Mysteries*.

Alan Chandler and his teenage grandson travel from Seattle to Sedalia, Missouri, to meet Mickey Potash, a pianist who says he has found some unknown Scott Joplin music. Mickey shows them an old bag that's filled with handwritten sheets of music, notes and revisions by Joplin, and tells about how he was able to buy these things from an antique dealer in Kansas City.

Alan somehow ends up in the year 1899, in Sedalia, looking at Scott Joplin. Is this real or a fantasy brought on by drugs that Alan takes for the treatment of his cancer? (You will have to read in order to answer this question.) But after Mickey is killed and the bag is taken, Alan continues to travel in time, going after the killer and the stolen bag.

As Alan and his grandson go on their search, they discover two branches of a family involved in Joplin's life and music through the ability to travel back in time. Being that Alan Chandler is ill, he no longer gets upset by time travel and is actually quite excited that this ability—whether it be real or hallucinations—has placed him in one of the leading ragtime musician's lives. They not only work to solve a crime, but they also frolic in an era that was fresh, fun and vibrant while doing it.

For those who have loved these mysteries, you will most certainly love this one. The words of the authors are always descriptive and flow well, the plots are rich and colorful, and the cast of characters, both young and old, are beyond memorable.

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



## FIELDS WHERE THEY LAY

By Timothy Hallinan

It is a week before the big day of Christmas arrives, but visitors to the Edgerton Mall are all a little low when it comes to holiday cheer. Yes, Santa's at the mall, but with so many stores closed and a shoplifter afoot spoiling things for everyone, being festive isn't exactly easy.

Junior Bender (a memorable creation by author and genius plotter Timothy Hallinan), owes a big favor to a San Fernando crime boss, so he agrees to do work for a scary Russian mobster who has adopted the name Tip Poindexter. Tip is also the owner of Edgerton Mall, and the recent rise in shoplifting is really making him mad; he asks Junior to find the culprit and "fix" the problem.

This assignment is a bother for Junior since it comes during a truly emotional holiday for him, but you never turn down a mob boss. The investigation comes together with a solution that few people will be expecting, as will all the storylines that this terrific thriller creates. Junior is literally a prophet at times, a poet at others. (Think Tony Soprano.) He always has something to say that the reader will nod their head at and say, "So true."

From topics of money, the wealthy not understanding that money doesn't buy you manners or class, and taking on topics that can make a holiday extremely sad as you watch the 1% get everything they want, yet do nothing to deserve it, the reader stands by Junior's side and has a whole lot of fun being there. This series has been spectacular from the beginning, and Junior remains one character this reader cannot wait to catch up with again soon.

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

## DANGEROUS MINDS

By Janet Evanovich

The unbelievably rich and extraordinarily funny Emerson Knight is back in this brand new mystery that is a fantastic plot wrapped in laugh-out-loud dialogue.

Riley Moon is a young woman who has become his assistant in solving crimes, yet began as a Harvard grad who fate had placed in Knight's life to help him with his money management skills. On the grounds of Emerson's mansion there also lives a good, old boy named Vernon who has been Emerson's best friend since they were only pups, who can shoot a gun very well, loves to eat red meat and doesn't for the life of him understand vegetarians, and is a man who should be emulated in every book because he's that good of a character. He also lives in an RV on the Knight property that's frequented by happy females.

This time around, a Buddhist monk by the name of Wayan Bagus shows up in Emerson's path looking for nothing more than an island. Yes, an actual island that he's been living on for several months was there one day and the next...gone. So, how exactly does an island disappear without a trace? That's a good question. And one that has this trio of characters joining together, using Emerson's money, contacts and sage wisdom to attempt to solve this highly improbable crime. The people they end up battling are villains that you would never believe in a million years could be the "bad guys," even though they do have ties to the government.

Every single page, and that is not an over-exaggeration, of this book offers something that others simply do not deliver: comic timing. The crime is cool, the villains are interesting and everything from getting thrown into the wild to being thrown over a balcony inside a museum happens in this one. And watching the relationship grow between Knight and Moon is so much fun. Evanovich has created, yet another, fantastic series.

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

## GRAVE ERRORS

By Carol J. Perry

It's autumn in Salem, Massachusetts, and Halloween is approaching fast. Lee Barrett, a former on-camera news personality, is currently teaching a course in television production and investigative reporting at the Tabitha Trumbull Academy of the Arts. Lee needs a subject for her annual class assignment—producing a video involving some aspect of Salem history. When one of her students suggests doing a video about the traditional Mexican holiday, Day of the Dead, which is celebrated on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, it seems like a perfect fit.

Not wasting time, the class takes a field trip very early the following morning to Howard Street Cemetery, one of Salem's oldest, known for its creepy, crumbling headstones. According to local legend, the cemetery is also haunted by the ghost of Giles Corey, who met a grisly end there by being suffocated with rocks a few centuries ago because he wouldn't confess to being a witch. As the class begins to explore the cemetery, one of the students, Dorothy Alden, tells Lee that she has come to Salem to solve the mystery of her sister Emily's recent death. The police have closed the case, calling it death by accidental drug overdose. But since Dorothy knows her sister never drank liquor, nor took drugs, she's certain it's murder.

As the class continues its visits to the cemetery to shoot footage for the video, a few students report seeing mysterious white shapes in the exact spot where Giles Corey was murdered. Then a body is found in the cemetery—one which was recently murdered. And Lee and her police detective boyfriend begin to connect the current crime in the cemetery to an unsolved missing person case, and the death of Emily Alden.

"Grave Errors" is the fifth in the *Witch City Mystery* series. Author Carol J. Perry spins a fascinating yarn, effortlessly blending folklore and history with a touch of the paranormal into a truly satisfying mystery. I'm looking forward to number six

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



## HOLLYWOOD HOMICIDE

By Kellye Garrett

There is nothing more satisfying to a reader than picking up a novel and being pleasantly surprised by how good it is. That's how I felt reading "Hollywood Homicide." Kellye Garrett has written a clever mystery with an appealing protagonist and supporting cast, all while spoofing the Hollywood lifestyle in a satirical yet joyous manner.

Our protagonist, Dayna Anderson, is a *retired* semi-famous, black actress known for the commercials she starred in. After her gig was cancelled, and not dealing well with rejection, she decides to shun Hollywood and find a "real" job. Broke and needing to help her parents financially, she spots a billboard depicting a crime victim and offering a generous reward for any tips leading to the assailant. Dayna takes it upon herself to investigate the murder, determined to get the reward. All this leads up to the adventure of Dayna's life, filled with enough drama to fill an entire season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

Kellye Garrett has written one of the most interesting protagonists in a long time, but better than that, is her supportive cast. Dayna's friends—Sienna, Emme, and Omaryi—are loveable, laughable characters you wish were your friends. "Hollywood Homicide" is satire at its finest, and a compelling murder mystery with the best ensemble cast I've read in a long time. I didn't want it to end, and it left me hoping for another to follow.

Whether you are into hard-boiled crime stories, thrillers, or cozies, I recommend you pick up "Hollywood Homicide." Kellye Garrett's writing and Dayna Anderson and friends will become your guilty pleasure.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of "Painted Beauty," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

## THE HIMALAYAN CODEX

By Bill Schutt and J.R. Finch

This incredible tale is set in the 1940s when zoologist R.J. "Mac" MacCready is working in his office at the Metropolitan Museum of Natural History in New York City. Pete Hendry drops by with a present for Mac; a set of jawbones, believed to be from a dwarf mammoth.

Hendry tells him that the creature is from the frigid mountains of Tibet, found in a secret area known only as the Labyrinth. Highly interested, MacCready is soon off to the Himalayas, where he soon finds out that there is something far more unique than just jawbones residing in this secret location. Mac learns this could also be home to a codex written by the Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder; a codex that may just uncover all the answers to human evolution. Rumors abound that Pliny uncovered a new race of human beings. Rumors that lead Mac and his team to battle all the horrendous elements of a Himalayan winter, as well as terrifying creatures and vicious terrain as they search for a treasure that may turn out to have been buried long ago for a very good reason.

"The Himalayan Codex" has everything to intrigue and captivate the reader. Mac is as close to Indiana Jones as you can get, and the story has all the added thrills and chills that come with the WWII setting. Lots of action, a ton of thrills, everything leads to an ending that will have the reader going back to the beginning just to enjoy the entire thing all over again. 5+ Stars!

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





## LOVEMURDER

By Saul Black

This is the second “can’t put down” serial killer thriller that features San Francisco Detective Valerie Hart. The first being the highly cool and completely riveting, “The Killing Lessons.”

It’s too bad Detective Hart was just about to go out the door on a weekend getaway from her job when the call comes in that a body has been discovered. The victim has been brutally murdered. Worse, is the fact that a note left with the victim’s body is addressed to Valerie personally.

The victim she doesn’t recognize, but as Valerie looks the crime scene over, the clues start to point in a certain, frightening direction. They seem to point directly to a maximum security prison where an inmate named Katherine Glass is waiting to be executed for a series of very brutal murders she carried out. Katherine is in prison looking at her demise because Valerie was the one who put her there.

This new corpse has been killed in the same ways Katherine took her own victims long ago. Unfortunately, Katherine has a solid alibi, considering she was in jail when this killing occurred. The last thing Valerie wants to do is get involved with Katherine’s grand finale, but when another body is discovered with yet another puzzling clue, Valerie knows she’s stuck.

Knowing in her heart that Katherine Glass holds the key to solving these new murders, Valerie must learn what Katherine knows before the killings continue and before Katherine meets her maker. Unfortunately, she has no choice but to ask Katherine to help her catch the killer, and the mystery that unfolds is beyond chilling.

As it was with the first tale written by Saul Black about Valerie this, too, is one that deserves a place of honor on all suspense lovers’ bookshelves.

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

## MISS KOPP’S MIDNIGHT CONFESSIONS

By Amy Stewart

In the third novel covering Constance Kopp’s exploits, we find ourselves now fully immersed in the storyline Stewart continues to extract from the first female sheriff’s deputy in the United States. Based on newspaper articles—the infamous stories written about the real ‘Officer Kopp’—Stewart has regaled us with the fiction she weaves into the missing pieces of history, in an extraordinarily interesting fashion.

The three Kopp sisters live together in rural New Jersey in the 1910s. Fleurette, the youngest—who is actually the daughter of Constance from a dalliance in her youth—and Norma make up the surviving clan. The matriarch Kopp, having died a few years prior, forced the girls to look out for each other, and Constance—a well-built and tall girl for her age—convinced Sheriff Heath to hire her to look after the female prisoners in the county jail.

Many of the young women in the jail are runaways or imprisoned on alleged morality charges, often trumped up by parents not wanting the young ladies to live at home because they were a little free-spirited. Constance, because of her history, feels emboldened to help some of these girls, and takes on the district attorney who is determined to put these girls into a reformatory until they turn twenty-one.

While she’s watching out for the girls in her care, she fails to notice that her daughter/sister, Fleurette, who had recently turned eighteen, absconded with a dance troupe to entertain audiences all over the east coast. Trying to keep up with her job and determine if her family is safe and not in the hands of a flim-flam entertainer makes for an entertaining read, and has Constance examining her own moral code. Stewart has another winner on her hands with “Midnight Confessions.”

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



## SHALLOW GRAVE

By Brian Thiem

Oakland Homicide Sgt. Matt Sinclair’s third case is far easier to deal with than the last one he had to take on. So even though he must handle the painful memories of his second case, it’s actually quite a relief when Sinclair is assigned a much more routine crime.

Shane Gibbs, a member of a gang called Savage Simba, has been shot at the Iron Horse Bar by Reggie “Animal” Clement. Animal has already lawyered up, but everybody already knows he did it, so it’s only a matter of time before the Oakland Department finally wears him down. After all, turf wars and gang spats happen all the time in Oakland. But when a second corpse shows up and it is not the body of yet another gang member, things start getting really sticky and far from the “routine.” This new body is found in a shallow grave. However, it is the body of Sinclair’s old mentor and ex-partner, Phil Roberts.

The chief of police basically wants to announce “case closed” where this is concerned, but Matt and his new partner don’t believe that the cops have even scratched the surface on this one. As the two look into Robert’s past, secrets that some folks would do anything to keep hidden start coming out, but Sinclair won’t stop until he finds the truth of the matter, even if it does mean ruining his ex-partner’s reputation in the process.

Readers will love the fast-moving plot of this tale which seems to be part-sequel and part-remake of the last case, with old and new cast members that will have even more readers jumping onto the *Matt Sinclair Mysteries* train.

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

## THE WRONG DEAD GUY

By Richard Kadrey

For those who loved “The Everything Box,” the fast-moving tale that began this supernatural series that is drop-dead funny to boot, this is the sequel you’ve been waiting for; and one that is just as good as its predecessor.

The story is led by Coop, a former thief who, because of saving the world once before, now works for DOPS, more commonly known as the Department of Peculiar Science. This is the top-secret government agency that keeps up with the odd and strange out there in the world. Coop is now supposed to perform a heist, with his boss’s permission, of course. Along with his pals (a list that includes a professor that is half-cat and half-robotic octopus), Coop must swipe the sarcophagus of an Egyptian wizard from an antiques show. Problem is, when the job is done and the sarcophagus is opened, a surprise involving magic and escape occurs, something DOPS can’t explain in all their years of dealing with oddities.

Coop must do his research and attempt to “find” the now missing mummy. Coop believes that this wizard is looking for some old document that could help him bring his love back to life. However, even if all this magic could resurrect the dead woman, she’s not the type of female anyone would want around, especially because if she comes back, most likely her whole undead army will rise with her.

Coop must deal with everything if saving the world is to happen once again by his hand; everything from politicians to fortune hunters to the entire magical community.

Readers, if you haven’t experienced Coop and his supercool friends as of yet, do it now. This series is definitely a thrill to read and allows you to have a ton of laughs as well.

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





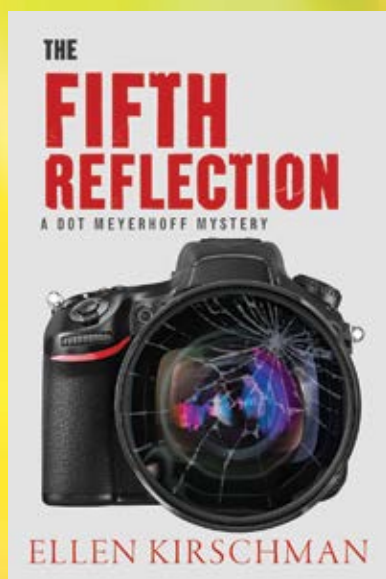
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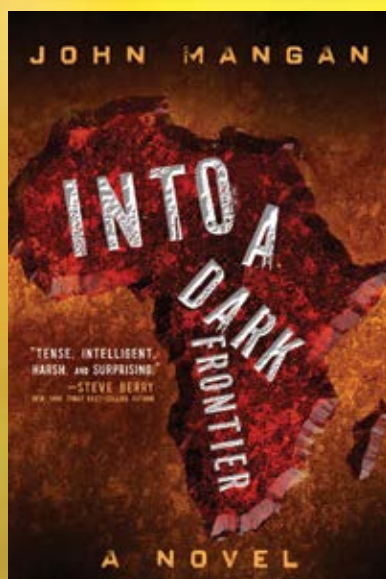
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## TWO NIGHTS

By Kathy Reichs

With the beloved character of Temperance Brennan (AKA: Bones) leaving our TV sets, it's a relief that Kathy Reichs' fans everywhere (and there are millions) are able to feast their eyes and brains on this new character, Sunday ("Sunnie") Night.

Right off the bat, you gotta love the name. In addition, Sunnie is far different than Temperance, and her introduction to the world comes with a rough story, as she is hired to find out about a bombing that happened a year or so ago.

Sunday has an interesting backstory. In her younger days, she was taken in by a policeman who, when she turned to rebellion, had given her the choice of jail or the Army. She did some time in the Marines which led to a job with the Charleston Police Department, where she was involved in an accidental shooting that left her wounded and living on a pension.

Turning to investigative work is what brought her to the case of Stella Drucker, the granddaughter of Opaline Drucker, who may have been kidnapped by a cult after this bombing had taken place. Accepting the job, Sunday heads to Chicago where Mrs. Drucker's connections provide her with first-class treatment and information from the police who are handling the case.

Being a paranoid person, Sunday sets up motion detectors in her room and moves from hotel to hotel while she works. She does hear from the bombers and is able to avoid one trap meant for her, but gets stuck in another at the Ritz, where she kills one of her attackers. Calling in her twin brother, Gus, they chase the suspects from Chicago to California and back as the story twists and turns.

Kathy Reichs has always been fantastic at writing characters. The upside with this is the fact that this character is a whole new ball of wax. She has her own fire, and will be extremely interesting to follow.

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

## ODD NUMBERS

By Anne Holt

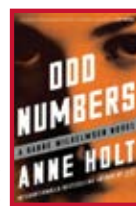
This new *Hanne Wilhelmsen* mystery will have all readers, who thoroughly enjoy plotlines that involve bombings, extremist organizations and more, absolutely thrilled.

Inside the Islamic Cooperation Council's offices located in Oslo, Norway, a bomb explodes. Unfortunately, along with that bombing also comes the threat of yet another explosion being planned; a much bigger explosion that will occur during the celebration Oslo has planned for the Norwegian Constitution. Needing a great deal of help in a very short amount of time, it is difficult for the police to know where to turn.

Hanne Wilhelmsen, once a special adviser on cold cases for the Security Service, is now the owner of a life that is as relaxed as it will ever be. She is living with her family when the bombings occur. In addition, a friend of hers resurfaces after a long time and asks for help with his son Linus, who has sunk into some truly dark waters. As Hanne begins to help, more and more doors begin to open wide, showing Hanne the truly menacing evil that the entirety of Oslo is up against.

Being a translation, the story is a bit difficult at times to follow, yet the intriguing, sinister plot is most definitely a reason to keep trying.

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



## YOU'LL NEVER KNOW, DEAR

By Hallie Ephron

For anyone who's super-scared of those porcelain dolls that appear in horror movies, this is one book that will have you hiding under the blankets.

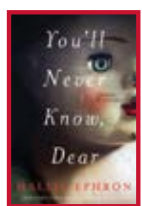
We are in the Deep South in an area that boasts large, historic homes. Lis and her mother, Miss Sorrel, are sitting on their porch on an unusually warm January day, with their old dog Binty, eating finger sandwiches. Miss Sorrel is depressed because this is yet another anniversary of her other daughter's disappearance.

When they were only children, Lis and her young sister Janey were playing outside when Lis ran off for a minute and returned to find her sister gone. The only thing Janey had with her that day was a porcelain doll made by her mother. Miss Sorrel created her own line of dolls that are now collector's items: Lis had the first and Janey had the second. Each anniversary a classified ad is placed offering anyone who can come up with Janey's missing doll a \$5,000 reward. Miss Sorrel will never give up on the fact that Janey will come home one of these days. But when a doll does arrive on Miss Sorrel's doorstep, life goes from sad to frightening.

Vanessa is Lis's daughter and she works in a sleep study program, finding a way to be able to stop nightmares in their tracks so people don't have to suffer anymore. When she has a dream about her grandmother and then receives a call saying her mother and her grandmother are in the hospital because an explosion has occurred at their house, Vanessa drops everything, even though it's the last thing she wants to do.

A cold case; a local cop who's sweet on Lis that's always causing trouble; a mother who looks and acts more like her cold, painted dolls every day... add all this together and you have one gigantic mystery with a huge creep factor that's absolutely riveting.

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



## THE PAINTED QUEEN

By Elizabeth Peters and Joan Hess

As the 19<sup>th</sup> installment of the *Amelia Peabody Novels of Suspense*, you'd think that things would've faded a bit, but you would be very wrong. This is, yet again, a real page turner in the lives of an archaeological family who is now facing a vendetta as they begin to chase a real artifact.

"Dull" is not in the vocabulary, nor the lives of Amelia Peabody and her husband, Professor Radcliffe Emerson—the greatest Egyptologist in the world. This tale begins in the relaxing world of an elegant suite in the beauty of Cairo. Amelia is taking advantage of the serenity in her bubble bath when... a man rushes into the room, screams "Murder," and falls down dead with a knife protruding from his back. At the commotion, Radcliffe rushes in; he also ends up finding a card with the name "Judas" written on it inside the dead man's pocket. Add to that the oddity that he trips over a small carved wooden head of Akhenaton, the Heretic Pharaoh who ruled the capital city, Tell el-Amarna. This is bizarre because that just happens to be the location of Radcliffe's next dig.

They soon find out that the man was carrying Amelia's name. It seems that someone has been keeping an eye on her, but neither know why. Heading to the excavation site, they find that their own son had an attempt made on his life, as well as the chief excavator of the Amarna site, Herr Morgenstern, who has disappeared to Cairo.

There is a plan afoot, as readers will soon learn, in regards to a family who has sworn vengeance upon the Emerson clan. Why? You'll have to read to find out. The discovery of a Queen Nefertiti artifact leads to more murders, abductions, floods, races and a whole lot more. There is a reason why this bestselling mystery series continues: the writing, the cast, the plots, and everything in between remain fantastic.

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



## MURDER AT THE PUPPY FEST

By Laurien Berenson

Melanie Travis has a very busy life. Not only is she a teacher at a prestigious private school in Greenwich, Connecticut, she's mom to twelve-year-old Davey and three-year-old Kevin, wife of Sam, and, oh yes, proud owner of five Standard poodles—all of whom are show dogs. But you know that old saying, "If you want something done, ask a busy person"? That certainly applies to Melanie, especially when helping abandoned dogs is concerned.

Melanie's a little hesitant, however, when she's enlisted by another family member to help out at Puppy Fest, an annual fundraiser to benefit Puppy Posse, a local dog rescue organization spearheaded by wealthy philanthropist Leo Brody. But, of course, she agrees. An added bonus to her volunteering is that she'll get to meet Leo Brody for the first time, plus see the inside of his magnificent house in swanky Belle Haven.

Unfortunately, Melanie's reputation for breeding and showing pedigreed poodles has preceded her, and she starts off on the wrong foot at the fundraiser with one of Leo's many offspring, the very prickly Jane, who runs the rescue organization. Things go from bad to worse when Jane sends Melanie to find her father, who always gives a welcoming speech to kick off the rescue event. The good news is that Melanie is finally able to find Leo in the huge house. The bad news (especially for Leo) is that he's dead on his study floor. Libby, another of Leo's offspring, is fearful that a member of the family is responsible for her father's death, and enlists the reluctant Melanie to find out the truth.

"Murder at the Puppy Fest," the twentieth in the *Melanie Travis Canine Mystery* series, is pure fun from start to finish. I loved it!

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

## THE BOY WHO SAW

By Simon Toyne

Solomon Creed, the hero of "The Searcher," is back in a new thriller from Simon Toyne, author of the *Sanctus* trilogy. In 2015, the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, there are still men in France who are keeping deadly secrets.

Solomon has no memory of his life prior to less than a month earlier. His name comes from a label inside his suit jacket that reads: "This suit was made to treasure for Mr. Solomon Creed." The jacket fits him perfectly. But there's another tag that gives the name of the tailor and an address in the south of France.

Hoping to learn his history, Solomon arrives in the town only to find the tailor, one of only a handful of survivors of a Nazi extermination camp, was brutally murdered earlier that day. The bloody corpse shows signs of torture and a Star of David has been carved in the man's chest. On the wall, written in blood, are the words "Finish what was begun." The police in town take Solomon into custody, a suspect in the murder, but he uses his peculiar skills to escape.

The tailor's granddaughter, Marie-Claude, is researching the camp to write its history, and she's connected with the Jewish heritage her grandfather kept secret. It cost her and her young son, Leo, including a brutal physical assault by her husband, a police officer involved with a Neo-Fascist party. The now ex-husband was recently released after four years in jail. Solomon believes Marie-Claude and Leo are the next targets of the killer, and he's determined to protect them.

Toyne weaves the multiple threads of the plot into a seamless cloth. The story races along as Solomon and Marie-Claude uncover the story of the camp and how that history is motivation for murder seventy years after the end of the war. Even if you haven't read the previous book, "The Boy Who Saw" will grab your imagination and not let go, even after you read the last page.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■



## THE LYING GAME

By Ruth Ware



Four friends brought together by three words: *I need you*. For Isa, Thea, Fatima, and Kate, there is no stronger bond than friendship, or so it seems. In school, the girls were less than popular for the antics they stirred while playing The Lying Game. The rules of the game were simple: tell a lie, stick to your story, don't get caught, never lie to each other, and know when to stop. And for the most part, the lies, although extravagant, were harmless. That is until one friend asks the impossible of the other three; tell a bigger lie, a more dangerous one that could put all of their livelihoods on the line. For four young girls who knew no greater love than the one they shared with each other, they were willing to do anything for one another.

The story plays out between the past and the present when, years after the girls have last seen each other, they're called back together when their biggest secret is threatened to be exposed. With jobs and families and everything on the line, the girls are forced to recall the rules of the game, but immediately upon joining back together it is clear that trust has broken between them and suddenly the events that occurred on that one fateful night don't seem so clear anymore. Will they uncover the truth about the night that has the power to ruin them all, or will someone else beat them to it?

"The Lying Game" by Ruth Ware is an engrossing psychological thriller that begs the question: How far would you go to protect your best friends? And where would you draw the line to protect yourself?

Reviewed by Abigail Peralta ■

## WENDIGO

By Vaughn C. Hardacker

"Wendigo" is a thriller that will haunt every reader for a long time after they've read it all. Bringing Native American folklore to life, this story focuses on an evil spirit of legend that is able to possess someone and turn them into a creature whose menu turns out to be human flesh.

John Bear is sent to investigate the death of a man in the North Woods of Maine. What John runs up against are memories of tales he was told as a child about a mythical creature called a Wendigo. However, John states that this flesh-eating creature is very, very real even though no one wants or even tries to believe John's "out there" story. Until...more and more deaths occur and fear takes over.

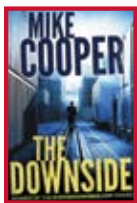
The North Woods is humongous; Maine actually produces two hundred forest products that contribute billions to the state's economy, and is the second largest paper producing state in the US. This huge area is where the Wendigo is hunting, and since everyone is either in a state of fear and panic or complete and utter ignorance regarding these deaths, John must go it alone to not only prove that a story he was told in childhood is real, but also to stop this creature from doing any more damage.

This is one of those supernatural thrillers that literally makes your flesh crawl. Hardacker does such an amazing job with descriptive passages that you almost shake in the cold winds of Maine, hear the creaking of the forest limbs, and feel the breath of a legendary killer come to life on the back of your neck. If you are one of those King fans who believe in master storytelling that whisks you away into a world of horror and fear, then this creation is a "must read."

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







## THE DOWNSIDE

By Mike Cooper

A thief named Finn, with expertise in absconding with extremely large objects, gets out of prison and wants nothing more than to start his life over. He just reaches freedom when he receives an invitation that proves too tempting to pass up. To succeed, Finn will have to break into a heavily guarded private vault and move the goods past guards, police, and SWAT officers. The odds are impossible, but Finn loves a challenge.

Heist novels are a blast to read when done well, and Cooper has the talent to pull it off. Finn is a perfect anti-hero, and the breakdown of the job truly makes for gripping reading. This novel won Otto Penzler's inaugural MysteriousPress.com Award, and it's easy to see why. Hopefully Cooper has plans for another bold thriller featuring Finn.

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

## SKITTER

By Ezekiel Boone

Of the many life forms that have evolved from prehistoric days, spiders are the ones that humans have the most contact with on a daily basis. They're among the top five most-feared creatures on earth. The Smithsonian Institute says that "typical temperate habitats may support up to 800 individual spiders per square meter..." That means you are always within six feet of a spider.

These little creatures skitter around, rarely troubling humans, who almost always obliterate every eight-legged blob of flesh that appears in their vision. On a personal note, I recently smashed a hundred-year-old milk glass lamp, one of the only things left to my wife from her mother, in order to smash a spider with the rolled-up *TV Guide*. My wife forgave me, as we both have arachnophobia, and yes, the web-weaver died.

Boone thrusts humans into a plague of spiders that can strip a human of all flesh in thirty seconds. Whole cities, especially on the West Coast, are under forced military quarantine and China has already obliterated most of itself with nuclear bombs to eradicate the beasts, all to no avail. The president of the United States must make the ultimate decision; how much of America can the government abandon or even blast into oblivion, as collateral damage, to save the rest?

Boone takes us on a whirlwind trip from continent to continent as everyone makes the decision on how to either destroy the wee beasties or save themselves from attack, and then dumps us into our own oblivion to wait for the third book in this trilogy. I have never felt so uncomfortable reading a novel but anticipating the next one, knowing it will creep me out and give me nightmares!

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



## FRIEND REQUEST

By Laura Marshall



Social media has become a familiar part of our lives, and for Louise, a cryptic friend request from someone she knew in high school starts her down a terrifying path in Marshall's debut. The email Louise receives just says that Maria Weston wants to connect with her, but Weston disappeared almost thirty years ago. What happened to her, and why is she now contacting Louise? She begins to reach out to other fellow students for answers. What she discovers should have remained in the past, and threatens to destroy her life in the present.

While it is a bit predictable—both what happened and everyone's involvement in it—the writing is stellar and the character of Louise is first-rate. The concept itself is also a clever way of telling the story, so readers should accept this friend request. Marshall has a bright future writing thrillers ahead of her.

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

## MAIGRET'S FIRST CASE

By George Simonon

The beginning of Inspector Maigret's career is upon us. A tale of a very young man who is eager to begin his very first investigation that leads him to explore a wealthy family in Paris and their darkest secrets.

First published in 1949, this tale begins in 1913. Jules Maigret is a Secretary in the Surete; he is not out solving mysteries or fighting crime. His career path changes the day a flute player runs up the steps of the Station House saying that he has just heard a woman screaming for help.

Maigret being the one the man confides in heads with the flutist into the home of a very wealthy family, barging through their doors in the middle of the night. Under the very watchful eyes of the owner, Maigret searches the home but doesn't find anything disturbed. As it turns out, the owner of the house is a friend of Maigret's boss; a boss who is definitely not thrilled with Maigret's actions. Maigret convinces him that there is a problem afoot, and finally the chief gives Maigret the nod to look into the happenings of the Paris family.

Although a translation, which makes parts a bit difficult to comprehend at the outset, Maigret is an extremely popular character, starring in over seventy-five mysteries.

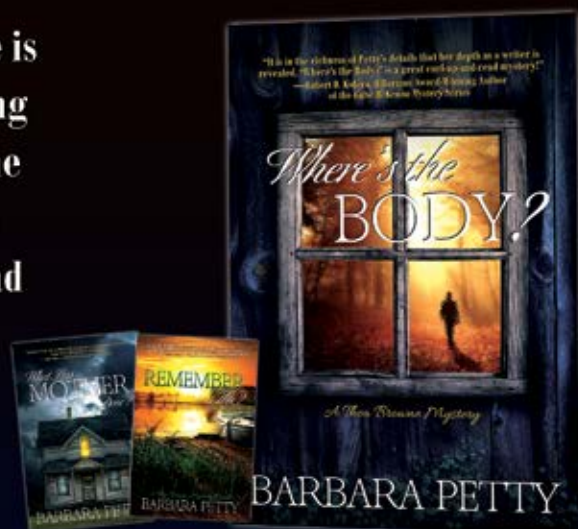
Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

**"Everyone needs a friend like Thea Browne! Petty's style is sensitive and engaging, her story is engrossing, spanning three generations of richly-drawn characters. It is in the richness of Petty's details that her depth as a writer is revealed. 'Where's the Body?' is a great curl-up-and-read mystery!"**

—Robert D. Kidera, Hillerman award-winning author of the *Gabe McKenna* Mystery series

# BARBARA PETTY

SUSPENSE  
PUBLISHING



*A Thea Browne Mystery*

## WONDER WOMAN 2017

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



I have not been a fan of the DC universe so far with *Suicide Squad* and *Batman vs. Superman*, and I have to admit I'm not looking forward to *Justice League*, especially with the rumored massive reshoots currently taking place. I had heard *Wonder Woman* was wonderful, so I reluctantly saw it, and saying it is the best DC movie since *The Dark Knight* does not really convey how much fun this film is. Imagine a strong female superhero battling the evil Nazis during WWII, and throw in some Greek mythology. The chemistry between Gal Godot who plays Diana and Chris Pine as Steve, along with their banter, is worth the price of admission, and the elements of obvious green screen with that dusty gray look and feel does not feel overwhelming. Stay for the main characters and their acting, and try to ignore the cheesy battle stuff. Hopefully the filmmakers will learn from this movie for future DC adventures.

## DUNKIRK 2017

Genre – Action/Drama/History (PG-13)

Speaking of WWII and the Dark Knight, the director of the Christian Bale *Batman* films explores a WWII event relatively unknown on this side of the Atlantic for his latest film. In 1940, the Germans advanced into France and Allied troops were stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk. The film follows the evacuation while the battle rages on. The movie covers three separate stories over different periods of time, and since Nolan drops the viewer right into the battles, it feels like we are trapped with everyone. Characters are not identified, making the film a raw and tense experience rather than an emotional one. This movie will be a front-runner for Oscar nominations for the sound and cinematography experience alone.



## DESPICABLE ME 3 2017

Genre – Animation/Action/Adventure (PG)

Everything about the story is a bit of a hit and miss, with a lot of short storylines that don't seem to have any resolution, or the writers of the movie just forgot that certain plot points occurred earlier. Still, if you enjoyed the previous ones in the series, this one is a lot of fun as well. Minions equals quality, and the jokes still land in a delightful way.





## SPIDER-MAN: HOMECOMING

### 2017

Genre – Action/Adventure/Sci-Fi (PG-13)

Starting over for a third time for this franchise could have been a frustrating mess, but the filmmakers knew what they were doing. Throwing Peter in high school and mixing him with the Marvel universe and the *Avengers* add to the festivities. Besides a wonderful new actor named Tom Holland playing Peter Parker, the movie sings with Michael Keaton as the Vulture. He is arguably the best villain to grace the *Spiderman* films, and there are some scenes that are downright terrifying due to the stellar acting of both Keaton and Holland. Best *Spiderman* movie since the second one with Tobey Maguire.



## WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES

### 2017

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

The third movie in the latest prequel is the best one yet. The leader of the Apes, Caesar, wants nothing more than for his kind to live in peace and be left alone by the decimated human population. A power-mad general has other ideas. The special effects are staggering, and the story is both gut wrenching and heartfelt. Watching this movie will have you rooting for the Apes to beat humanity. Andy Serkis truly makes Caesar come alive, and he deserves a special Oscar for his acting talent and how he's the glue that holds the entire series together. The filmmakers also do a great job connecting the dots to the original 1968 film with Charlton Heston. All three movies are exceptional, so if you haven't seen them, start watching right away.



## THE HITMAN'S BODYGUARD

### 2017

Genre – Action/Comedy (R)

Here's a fun romp that is both over the top violent and also extremely predictable. A bodyguard who has hit the skids reluctantly receives an assignment to protect an assassin who is a much-needed witness. His testimony holds the key to imprison a dictator who rules by force and terror. The villain seems to either snarl or shoot people, which is annoying, but what makes this work is the bromance chemistry between the bodyguard played by Ryan Reynolds and the hitman played by Samuel Jackson. Have them make snide comments at each other for two hours and you have a winner. The main meal might have needed some more cooking time, but their sauciness is quite tasty. ■

*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."*



Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

# Dani Overgoor

*Reflections at Night*

*MAD SCIENTIST*







Dani Owergoor is a Brazilian artist with a great deal of talent. The works that come from her mind to the page possess a truly rare quality—the power to hold a person’s gaze. Each and every one of her pieces call out to viewers, as if urging all who set eyes on them to take the time to explore each corner of the creation.

Working with statues, as well as studying and learning the various photo manipulation techniques, has allowed Dani Owergoor to grow, and bring to life works that include everything from beauty to mysticism to characters and surroundings that are quite unforgettable. Here, she opens up about her background, her favorite works, her perfect “creation” space, and even uncovers the one question she would ask the great Dali if only she had the chance.

*Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.):* Brazil is known to be beautiful, with vibrant colors and landscapes. Can you tell readers about living there and how these surroundings perhaps effect your work?

*Dani Owergoor (D.O.):* I live in a huge capital surrounded by concrete. I know most people think that all Brazilians live near the sea, but it is not this way: I don’t get many inspirations by living in a city made of stone! When I have the opportunity, however, I love to visit Brazilian beaches, and what I bring to my work from those visits are the colorful skies. From the green fields, I bring the trees that you can see in my works. I have some repetitive elements that I like to use in my works as well, such as

*the moon, trees, and particular landscapes.*

S. MAG: Did you always want to have a career in the arts? Were you particularly drawn to art and creating pictures at a young age, or did this passion evolve later in life?

*D.O.: I never thought about making a lifetime career in the arts, it just...happened! But yes, in my young age I used to paint horses and the planets of our Solar System—completely different than my current endeavors!*

S. MAG.: You speak on your DeviantArt page about using statues in your pieces. Can you explain a bit about this process? Is there a specific area of Photoshop you have yet to dive into that you are truly looking forward to studying?

*D.O.: Statues are very similar to 3D rendered images; they are almost a “blank page” ready to be painted. I don’t know for sure when I started to play with statues, only that I like them a lot when it comes to editing. Unfortunately, I’m not as familiar with drawings and paintings. Playing with statues gives me more opportunities to try different techniques than just photo manipulation, because my art is a mix of both. I can say that I look forward to studying more drawing and painting techniques in the future.*



## *A TALE OF DRAGONS*



*TOUCH OF WIND*

*“I’m fascinated with the night and its lights, reflections by the moon and emanating from the stars.”*



S. MAG.: What are your own personal inspirations that bring about this amazing art? Any specific places, people, or creators that inspire you?

D.O.: *I am inspired by many things. Most of them are movie scenes/special effects, fantasy books, and surreal landscapes from movies. I also browse other artists' galleries. I am lucky in the fact that I get that spark of inspiration to create a new piece constantly!*

S. MAG.: If someone were to ask you if you had a particular favorite when it came to your own work, which would that be and why?

D.O.: *One of my works I like very much is called, "Long Way Home," from 2011 (<http://fav.me/d55zwmwj>). This was my first desaturated artwork. It means a lot to me because I have a "heavy hand" for colors and most of my works are extremely colorful. Also, the scene can have many interpretations, but as the title says, I prefer to think that the character shown is heading home. I am also incredibly happy with my latest work entitled, "Traveller," which gives me a similar feeling (<http://fav.me/dbjfkzm>).*

S. MAG.: If you had to pick one "scene" and/or "image" that you would love to create but haven't yet, what would it be and why?

D.O.: *Those powerful and surreal landscapes! I can't count how many times I've seen something and thought: "Oh my, how I wish I could do that!" But they are all made by illustrators, so, only by reaching their level would I be capable of that creation! But speaking on the media I currently use, photo manipulation, I admire a great many pieces from Carlos Quevedo, Marcela Bolívar and some female Russian artists—their art mixes photo manipulation with paintings, such as Perla Marina, Lilia Osipova, Cornacchia.*

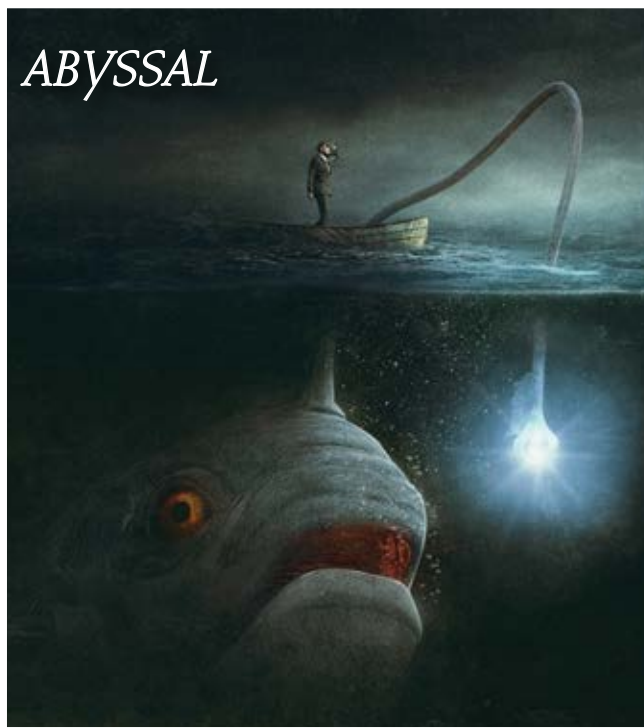
S. MAG.: Can you tell future artists about the evolution of a picture? How do your ideas come into being? And once they do, can you give a bit of a description as to how you work? (Such as, do you like silence; do you like working outdoors better or in a studio?)

D.O.: *All I can say is, this all involves a great deal of study and practice! The evolution of one piece and then the next, will happen only with practice. This involves building your knowledge of Photoshop tools and what the software can offer you. You must in order to learn and discover. And a good course makes it even better!*

*I usually don't force ideas to come; sometimes I'm just browsing stocks and resources and happen to find something that calls my attention, something that asks, "Please, do something to me," and then the idea for an entire scene arises. Sometimes I'm reading a book and I want to create a specific scene; or even, before sleep, something comes into my mind and when I wake up*



“But I’m a bit demanding  
when it comes to my  
work environment;  
I need 100% silence!”



is still there until I “put it on paper!”

But I’m a bit demanding when it comes to my work environment; I need 100% silence! I usually close windows to avoid external noise: no TV, no radio or music, no people talking. Otherwise, I get distracted. In my house it’s just me and my husband, but he has his own office about ten minutes from home, so he spends the days there and leaves me a quiet home to work in.

S. MAG.: If you could be a character in fiction, or a character in a famous painting, who would it be and why?

D.O.: I would be Venus in “The Birth of Venus” by Botticelli. Mostly because of the scenery. I am a beach/sea lover, and everything from the beach to the shells to the sea elements calls to me.

S. MAG.: If you had the chance to sit down with a famous painter from history, who would it be? Would you have a specific question you would like to ask them?

D.O.: Salvador Dali! Only to have the chance to ask: “What the hell did you have in your mind to create those freaking amazing, insane pieces?”

S. MAG.: Looking at your gallery, it seems you have a great fascination with the supernatural—the wispieness of a ghostly figure, the power of the full moon upon the land, etc. Is there a category that you would like to delve into one day? Do you have any future projects in the works that fans should keep an eye out for?

D.O.: You know, you are the first who came to me summing up the style of my art: moon, land, the wispieness of a ghostly figure—even though other people have noticed, no one ever told me, and I always waited for someone to come and ask, “Why do you use so many moons in your work?” I’m a “day” person. I love sun, blue sky, colorful sky, etc. And I’m truly a happy person, full of life, lover of life, lover of a good and healthy humor... But I’m fascinated with the night and its lights, reflections by the moon and emanating from the stars. I love what we can fantasize in the night by adding blue, purple, silver lights, and making something more fantastical, surreal, dreamy, or glowing! A mixture of beauty and darkness! It’s just a personal taste.

I never think too much about what I’m going to do next. I just let the days flow and allow the ideas to be born in my head. When I feel taken by an idea, I start a new work—sometimes the concept goes well and sometimes not. But I’m always here waiting for the ideas to come in order to bring my next project to life!

After viewing these incredible works, it’s easy to bet that many people will be waiting to see exactly what Dani’s next stunning project will be. To view Dani’s full gallery of work or to contact her about her cover design, go to <https://dani-owergoor.deviantart.com>. ■



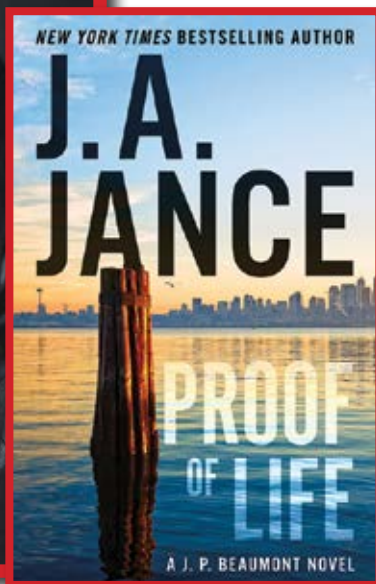


# America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

## NEVERTHELESS, SHE PERSISTED: J. A. JANCE ON WRITING

By Barry Lancet and Anthony Franze  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

*In this series, authors Barry Lancet and Anthony Franze interview other suspense writers about “the rules” of writing. In this edition, Barry talks with acclaimed bestseller J. A. Jance.*



From the time J. A. Jance decided to become a writer to the publication of her first novel, thirty-four years elapsed. Not by design, but because she was shut down at every turn.

Her initial inspiration came in the second grade when she was swept away by L. Frank Baum’s “The Wizard of Oz.” Once she enrolled at the University of Arizona after high school, she headed straight over to the building that housed the creative writing program, where the professor in charge told her *girls* weren’t welcome. “They ought to be teachers and nurses.”

The year was 1964.

Soon after, the other shoe dropped. “I married a guy who was allowed into the creative writing class that was closed to me and shortly after we got married he told me there was only going to be one writer in our family and he’s it.”





For years, Jance wrote poetry in secret, and dreamed of something more. Flash forward eighteen years and the marriage crumbled. “I was divorced, living in Seattle, had two little kids, no child support, and a full-time job selling life insurance.” Saddled with the responsibilities of a single parent, she found time to write from four o’clock in the morning until seven, at which time she woke the kids, prepared them for school, then headed for her day job.

That’s how she wrote her first three books. In 1985, her second effort, “Until Proven Guilty,” became her first published novel. It was also the debut of Detective J. P. Beaumont, and eventually led to a career as a bestselling novelist. The twenty-second Beaumont, “Proof of Life,” is due out this September.

The initial courtship with Beaumont involved six months of fruitless struggling before the first line of the story came to her on a train ride. “And from the moment I wrote those words, ‘She might have been a cute kid once,’ ” Jance says, “I was inside J. P. Beaumont’s head, walking in his shoes, following him around crime scenes, hearing what he was thinking, and seeing the world through his eyes. We’ve been together as author and character ever since.”

Today, Jance is a household name and has published more than fifty novels and novellas, spread out over four series. Her pace never flagged. “I had a burning desire to write,” she says, “and that burning desire has kept me going.”

I recently sat down with Jance to discuss her advice on how newer writers can find the same fire.

**“I MET OUTLINING IN MRS. WATKINS’S SIXTH-GRADE GEOGRAPHY CLASS. I HATED IT THEN, AND NOTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED TO ME IN THE INTERVENING DECADES HAS CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT OUTLINING.”**

## **A WRITER IS SOMEONE WHO HAS WRITTEN TODAY**

After her divorce, Jance bought her first computer, a dual floppy with 128k of memory. The technician who installed her writing software arranged for a message to appear on her screen whenever she booted up her machine: “A writer is someone who has written today.”

For the young, as-yet-unpublished Jance, this early inspiration from such an unexpected source was a godsend. The powerful nuance message struck home. A writer is not someone who *should* write today, but someone who *has written*.

While her old computer is long gone, the message lingers to this day. As does her appreciation of the technician’s gesture. “That was such a gift to me while I was trying to get started. And it’s a gift I’m happy to share.”

And Jance stays the course. She writes every day, except when she’s traveling. “Pretty much I exercise, drink some coffee, have some breakfast, read the papers, and go to work, from late morning on into the evening.” During the summer, she works on the back patio or in the gazebo. She does not rely on a desk. Instead, she manages quite well with a laptop, which she uses as it was originally intended. “I have long legs,” she says with a chuckle.

## **OUTLINING IS OUT**

“I hate outlining,” Jance says with some heat. “I met outlining in Mrs. Watkins’s sixth-grade geography class. I hated it then, and nothing that has happened to me in the intervening decades has changed my mind about outlining.”

It drives her husband Bill crazy. Unlike her first husband, Bill is a big fan of her work, but he’s more left brained and a



planner by nature. “He is a wonderful guy, a retired electronics engineer. He would really like me to outline, but we’ve been married for more than thirty years and it still hasn’t happened.”

So how does she begin? “Because I write murder mysteries, I usually start with somebody dead and I spend the rest of the book finding out who did it and how come. That’s my rule.”

## IF YOU HIT A WALL, REEXAMINE MOTIVATION

What about when a story stalls out? Then, Jance says, “I have to do the hardest thing authors have to do. Which is change my mind.” For her, *motivation* is often the answer. Reexamining a character’s motivation usually offers a solution to the puzzle.

“Early on, I would be writing along and I’d get to a place where the story just stopped cold. What I used to do is throw everything away. Now, I’ve come to understand that what that really means is I have a problem with motivation, in a character. Because the homicide usually happens off-screen, I sometimes need to change killers.”

In her second book she discovered seventy pages from the end that the man she thought was the killer was innocent. Did she change his motivation? No, because it turned out he was innocent all along.

## GET TO THE BANANA PEEL AND FINISH THE RACE

Jance has a unique way of spurring herself on. To keep herself on track she counts word totals every single day. “I know that the book is supposed to be between ninety-five thousand and a hundred thousand words long. Any shorter than that it looks like it’s double spaced when it’s typeset; any longer, the print has to be smaller. So I aim for ninety-five thousand.”

But she breaks down the process further. “I know that the first twenty percent of a book is the hardest part to write. I know that the last forty percent is the ‘banana peel’ of the book.” By which she means that it’s the easiest part. It just slides right by. “By counting the words every day, I know if I am getting close to the banana peel.”

Getting to the peel is vital. “It’s the point where, whether you are writing the book or reading the book, you’re going to want to keep on to the end. It’s the fastest part. In terms of writing, that’s when you have all the pieces in place and you need to get everybody who needs to be there to the point where the crashing climax can take place.” ■

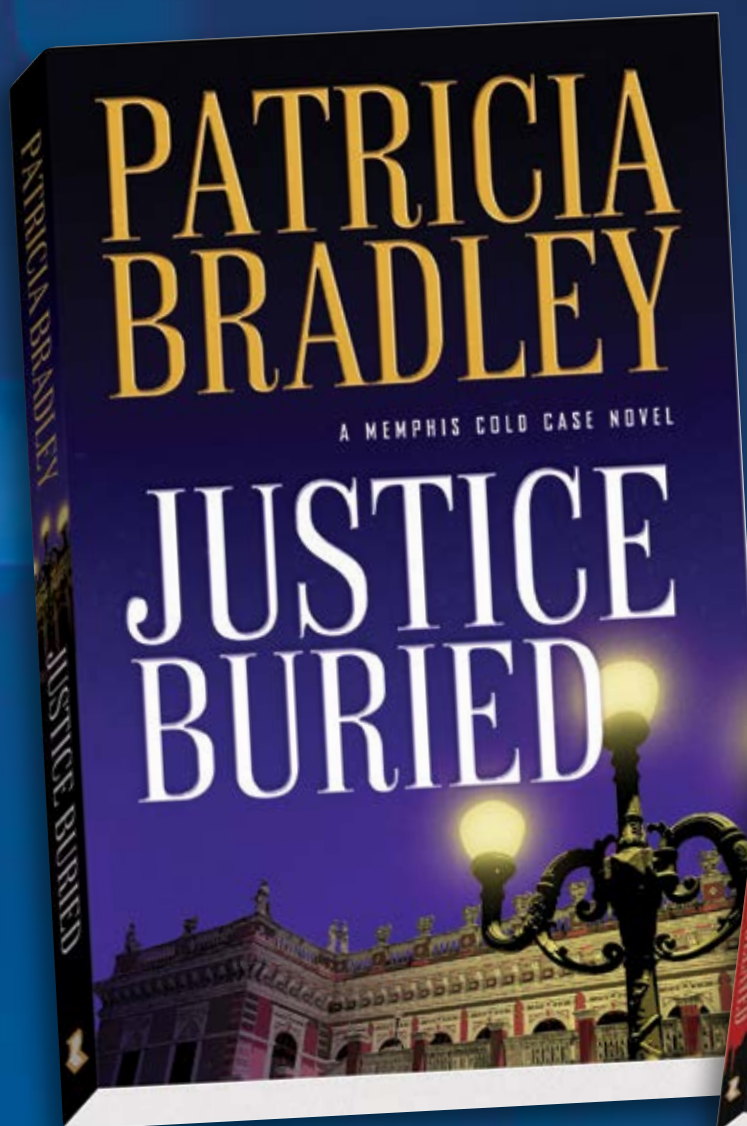
\* *Barry Lancet* is the author of the award-winning international suspense series featuring Jim Brodie. The latest entry is “*The Spy Across the Table*” (Simon & Schuster) and sends Brodie careening from Washington, D.C. and San Francisco to Japan, then on to South Korea, the DMZ, and the Chinese-North Korean border. An American expat raised in California, Lancet has lived in Japan for more than twenty years.

\* *Anthony Franze* is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of thrillers set in the Supreme Court, including “*The Outsider*” (St. Martin’s Press, 2017), which the Associated Press called “a winning novel.”

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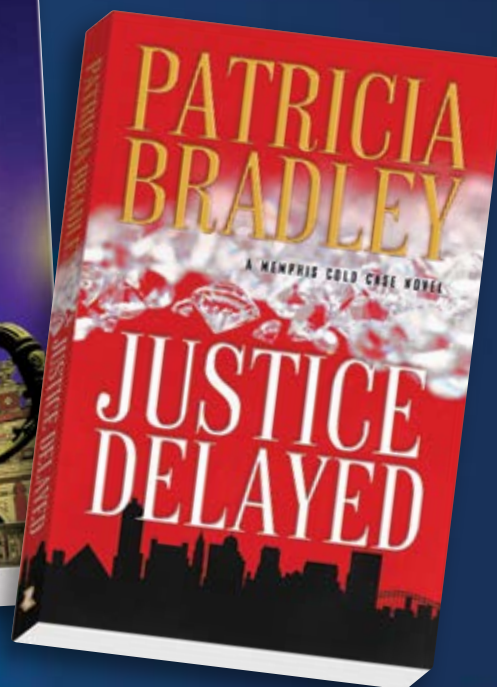


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# Scripted Suspense:

## Tess Gerritsen on “I Know a Secret” & the Duality of *Rizzoli & Isles*

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Derek Henthorn



**NEW YORK TIMES AND INTERNATIONALLY** bestselling novelist Tess Gerritsen was trained as a physician but traded in her prescription pad for a pen and paper while on maternity leave from a successful practice. She made her fiction debut with 1987’s “Call After Midnight” and wrote eight more romantic suspense titles before revisiting her scientific roots with the breakout medical thriller, “Harvest” (1996); “Life Support” (1997), “Blood Stream” (1998), and “Gravity” (1999) followed. Then, Gerritsen unwittingly launched a series featuring Boston homicide detective Jane Rizzoli with the publication of “The Surgeon” (2001); medical examiner Maura Isles was introduced in “The

Apprentice” (2002). The author continues to alternate series installments with standalones; her most recent in the latter category, 2015’s “Playing with Fire,” was nominated in the category of “Best Hardcover” by the International Thriller Writers. Her books have been published in more than forty countries and have sold in excess of 30 million copies across the globe.

Gerritsen’s newest, “I Know a Secret,” is the twelfth entry in her popular *Rizzoli & Isles* series (following 2015’s “Die Again”). Those characters served as the basis for TNT’s hit dramedy, which recently wrapped following seven seasons. But before *Rizzoli & Isles* became small screen super sleuths, they existed on the page—and they have maintained an identity separate from the show throughout its run. In this latest entry, the two must balance a crossover of personal and professional demons as a cunning killer enacts a real-life scary movie, leaving a string of mutilated bodies across the city. Much of the plot derived from the author’s recent foray into filmmaking; she wrote the screenplay for the indie horror film *Island Zero*, directed by her son, Josh Gerritsen.

Now, Tess Gerritsen takes us between the lines of “I Know a Secret” . . .

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): In what ways did your love of horror movies coupled with the making of *Island Zero* inspire the plot for “I Know a Secret”? Also, how is the storytelling the same and how does it differ?

Tess Gerritsen (T.G.): *Many of the details about the horror film world in “I Know a Secret” came straight from my experience of making Island Zero. For instance, I wrote about the scrappy nature of the indie filmmaking community and how so many of them do it for sheer love, not money. Some of them would literally sell their cars and pawn their belongings to fund their projects. Also, I found that horror-film fans are some of the sweetest, least scary people in the world. It’s an enthusiastic crowd, and a surprisingly large number of them are women.*

*The difference in storytelling between making horror films and books is quite simply, money. A large part of indie filmmaking involves scraping up the funds to pay your budget, and there’s a lot to fund, from actors and equipment to crew and post-production. Filmmaking is a collaboration from start to finish, while writing a book is just you, alone, at your desk.*

J.B.V.: How do you endeavor to balance the actualities of crime with entertainment—and in what ways does the lens of fiction



lend itself to explorations of real-life social issues?

T.G.: *I've always used my novels to explore social or scientific themes. My medical thrillers often dealt with the ethics of "should we be doing this just because we can?" My crime novels cover all sorts of topics, from human trafficking to sociopathy. In "I Know a Secret" I discuss the topic of "false memory syndrome," which has led to tragic consequences for families. Many relationships were destroyed because psychologists encouraged patients to remember abuses that never happened.*

J.B.V.: In this book, you get to play with the often conflicting notions of science and religion. Why does this remain an evergreen topic—and how does it symbolize the complexities of Maura's relationship with Daniel Brophy?

T.G.: *I think it's a topic that preoccupies us as a society and a country as well. I was trained in science, so naturally I fall on the side of "there's got to be a scientific explanation for everything." But that attitude doesn't stop me from having a deep curiosity about faith and its value to believers. That conflict is played out between Maura (the unbeliever) and Daniel (the believer), and it's part of the tension between them.*

J.B.V.: The idea of families—those given and those made—continues to inform your work. Why is it important to you to ground your narratives in some semblance of domesticity—and how do the resulting personal relationships inform your characters' professional identities?

T.G.: *I think of my characters as real people, so of course they are going to have real lives, complete with family, friends, and conflicts. In fact, family conflict is one of the most interesting things to write about and I relished exploring the Rizzoli family's dramas—Jane's parents and the breakup of their marriage, the sibling rivalries, and the struggles of being a new parent. When we first see Jane (in "The Surgeon"), she's a single professional who can focus only on her job. In short order, she's married and a mom, and her attempt to juggle job and parenthood are the struggles of working parents everywhere.*

J.B.V.: Rizzoli & Isles exist separately on the page than they do on the screen. What are the unique joys and challenges of writing characters that are known to both reading and viewing audiences?

T.G.: *I have always kept my books separate from the TV show. There are a number of differences between my book characters and TV characters, and that has led to confusion among viewers and readers. Some, in fact, will only watch the show or only read the books, because they can't handle those differences. But I loved seeing the TV interpretation of two women whom I created, and the recognition that came from "Oh, there's a TV show based on your books?!!" The best part of all? The show helped my book sales.*

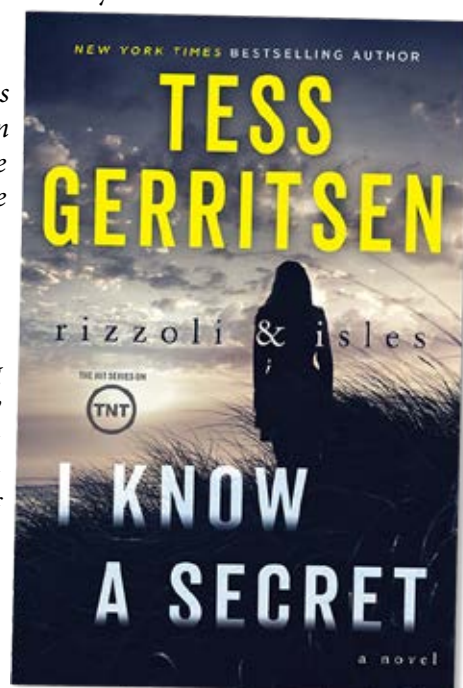
J.B.V. You don't subscribe to publishing's traditional series book-a-year trajectory. In what ways is this a calculated risk—and how do you see the benefits as outweighing those factors?

T.G.: *For many years, I was a book-a-year author. Then a few years ago, I realized I was getting exhausted and I wasn't able to tackle the projects I really wanted to do. So I began to pull back, and there would be years when there was no book from me. Meantime, I've been able to produce the film *Island Zero*, I've traveled for pleasure and I've taken time to smell the roses.*

J.B.V.: Leave us with a teaser: What comes next?

T.G.: *A few quirky things are on the horizon. I'm writing a book totally unlike anything I've done before—a (very) erotic thriller that may or may not involve a ghost. (And may or may not be published under a pseudonym.) Also, my son and I are collaborating on a new film project, a documentary feature film called *Pig*, about the centuries-long interaction between humans and pigs. We look at the subject from the point of view of archaeologists, biologists, pet owners, religious scholars, and—of course—chefs.*

We'd like to thank Tess for her time. To learn more and watch for upcoming releases, check out her website at [www.tessgerritsen.com](http://www.tessgerritsen.com). ■



# REJECTION



By Dennis Palumbo

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

At some point early on in a writer's life, he or she has to come to terms with rejection. After twenty years as a Hollywood screenwriter, and now as a novelist and essayist, I know *I* certainly have—I hate it.

Occasionally I'll read about some writer who is apparently so well-adjusted that he or she sees having their work rejected as just another event in the writing life. In other words, the rejection has no more (nor less) meaning than having the work accepted.

I confess, I can only stand back and admire such creatures. And wonder what planet they come from.

Because frankly, when I toiled in the screenwriting vineyards, I wanted people not only to accept what I wrote, but like it. A lot. Hell, I wanted them to *love* it. (Even while acknowledging the well-known truism that, at a certain level, they could never love it enough...)

On the other hand, having my work rejected was cause for *tsuris* of near-Biblical proportions—the familiar gnashing of teeth, rending of garments, etc.

On one such occasion, a friend of mine looked at me and said, somewhat testily, “For God’s sake, don’t take it personally.” “How *should* I take it?” I replied. “*Impersonally?*”

That, in a nutshell, is the paradox of rejection. It isn’t intended as personal, but it’s impossible not to *experience* it that way.

Let me give you an example. Years ago, on staff at a popular sitcom, I joined the producers in a casting session, auditioning actresses for a guest shot on the show. After seeing about a dozen talented young women read, we chose one. Later, I happened to overhear a couple of the others walking away, dejected.

“I should have dressed differently,” one of them said. “Sexier.”

“I over-played that last part,” said another. “I should have been more subtle.”

I’d heard similar laments from actors and actresses before, of course. “If only I’d done this, or that...” “If only I were thinner, prettier...” “If only, if only...”

What made it even more ironic in this case was the fact that we’d cast this particular actress because it was getting close to lunchtime and we were all hungry. As it turned out, all the actresses had been reasonably competent, so we just picked the next one who wasn’t taller than the show’s star and made tracks for the studio commissary.

Our agenda—in this case, hunger—could *never* have been known or predicted or prepared for by the others auditioning.

The same is true for writers. In my experience, not only is it a mystery why certain good novels and short stories get rejected; often it’s a total mystery why they get *accepted*. I don’t have a writer patient who hasn’t been perplexed when something he or she considers a lesser work is bought, while something they feel represents their best work is consistently

I wanted people **not only to accept** what I wrote, but **like** it.  
A lot. Hell, I wanted them to **love** it.



Stay true to yourself, and  
keep giving the marketplace  
your best until it takes it.

rejected.

As my anecdote about the audition demonstrates, the agenda of the marketplace—the sometimes incomprehensible, ever-changing, and often-maddening needs of publishers, editors and agents—is out of your control. And not about you.

Therefore, their rejection of material you submit to them is not some injury personally directed at you. However, as I said before, your *experience* of the rejection is personal. In fact, it can't be anything else.

So let yourself be angry, frustrated, even grief-stricken—after all, as a friend of mine once remarked, when a painful thing happens, a period of mourning is appropriate.

But now the good news: Since you can't know (or control) the outcome of any short story or novel submission, you're free to just do your work. Rather than shaping your writing to please others, or to try to duplicate or anticipate the next trend, your best bet is to write about what excites and moves you, to make your growth as a writer the ultimate goal.

Darryl Hickman, a wonderful acting teacher, used to tell his students, "Keep giving them *you*, until you is what they want."

Not a bad piece of advice for writers, either. Stay true to yourself, and keep giving the marketplace your best until it takes it.

Remember, too, that rejection comes and goes, but so does acceptance. For a writer, over the long haul, it's mastery of your craft, wedded to the sheer love of doing it, that sustains.

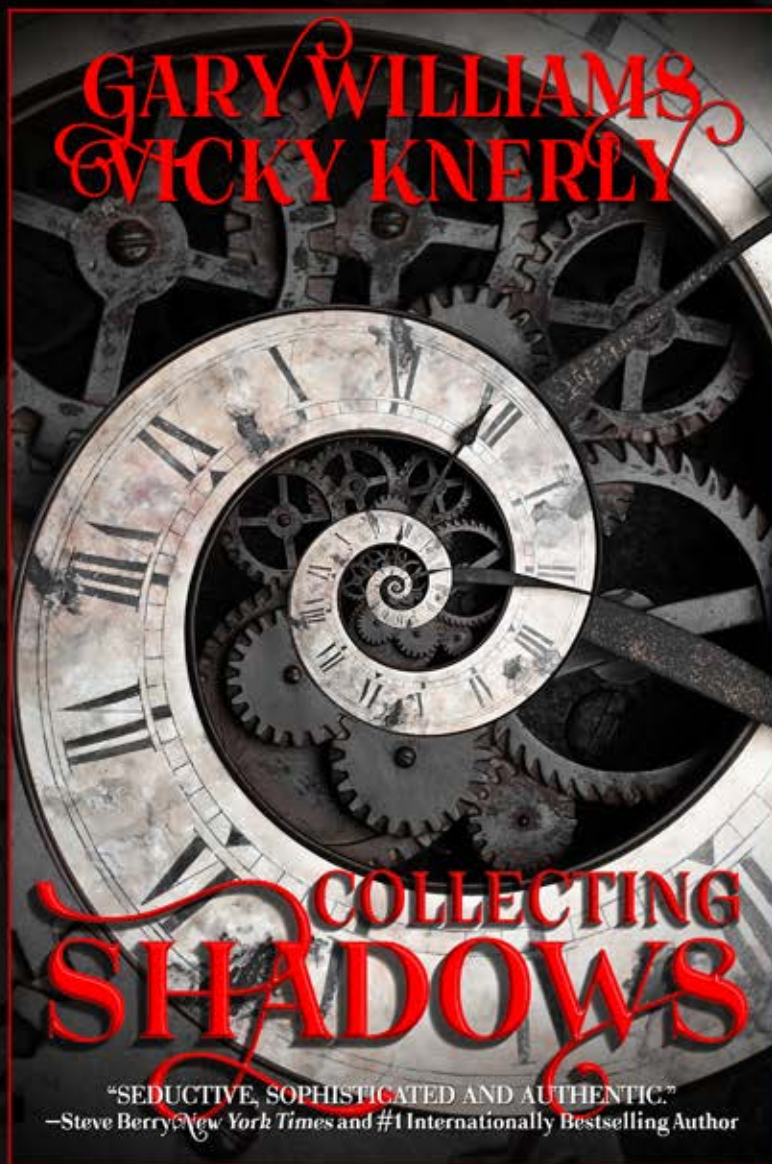
And, finally, though the powers-that-be can accept or reject your work, you can do something they *can't*: write. The plain fact is, you are the sun, and the industry is the moon. It only shines by reflected light. ■

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is now a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in "From Crime to Crime" (Tallfellow Press). His acclaimed series of crime novels ("Mirror Image," "Fever Dream," "Night Terrors" and the latest, "Phantom Limb") feature psychologist Daniel Rinaldi, a trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police. All are from Poisoned Pen Press.

For more info, please visit [www.dennispalumbo.com](http://www.dennispalumbo.com).

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SUSPENSE  
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# A MURDERER CAME TO TOWN

By Justin Boote

Remember that this is a small village. We don't have an army of forensics or Scotland Yard agents swarming like flies everywhere. We should have though, considering what's going on. Although to be honest, they did send us a couple of detectives from Norwich to help out after the third murder. My God, do we need it.

We now have five murders to take care of. The same perpetrator, it appears. All with strangulation marks around the neck and then a small, pointed object thrust into the heart to finish the job. Sick bastard. All young women too. Whole lives ahead of them.

Let me just take you through the basics; what was only released to the press.

The murder happened six weeks ago. Sonia Anson, eighteen years old. She was on her way home from the university, studying to be a nurse. That dying breed of human that actually *wants* to help others. Her semi-naked body was found amongst a small clutch of pine trees in the middle of the local commons ground, half a mile from home. Can you believe that?

Obviously everyone who knew her was questioned—which was a lot of people, damn near the whole village—and everybody knew about it quickly. The previous murder was three years ago. Husband got drunk and killed the missus.

We, that is myself and my partner Chris Jenkins, figured that the perp would be in custody within two days max. A jealous boyfriend got carried away and fucked up big-time. Happens all the time. In other towns. We spoke to her family, all known acquaintances, every boyfriend she'd had in the last few years. Nothing.

Fuck.

I've been on the police force for twenty-three years. I can hear my retirement calling me from beyond...and now this. Believe me, we did everything humanly possible to catch the guy, but not a single witness, not a single stupid hair to connect anyone.

I've seen those "Disappeared" programs on Discovery, and after a week with no advance on the case, I remember thinking, "Please God, don't let this happen to me." I knew the family as well, see. Hell, my son went to school with Sonia. Imagine how I felt when they called me every day asking for news and I couldn't give them shit. Imagine how *they* felt.

Anyway, a week goes by and I get a call from one of the officers on patrol. A body's been found, same M.O. Let me tell you, my last check-up at the doctors was six months ago and he said I could look forward to a long and happy retirement. Well, if my heart didn't pack up on me then, the doctor's a damn prophet, I thought. I remember groaning, swearing, and then telling the constable to not touch a goddamn thing. After a week I thought perhaps Sonia's murderer must have been someone driving through, perhaps a little high, saw her walking home and had an idea. Not anymore.

Maria Parkins. Nineteen years old. Studying law at the same university. Well, she could certainly do with some law now, couldn't she. Laying among the bushes in the same commons ground; semi-naked, strangled, stabbed. Knew the family also. When I told them about what had happened to their daughter, the father almost punched me. Instead, he said to get the son of a bitch that had done it and then let him at the guy first. You know what? I think I might have done that as well. Especially after seeing the poor girl's mother break down like she did.

So, forensics was called in—if you can call the two old guys closer to retirement than I am forensics. Before Sonia's, the last time they'd probably seen a dead body was at medical school. But, give them credit, they did a good, thorough job. I like to think so anyway because, once again, not a single witness or piece of evidence appeared.

I went to her funeral, you know. Shit, whole damn village did, and you better believe some harsh words and looks were pointed in my direction. And who could blame them?

So, what did I do? Every one of the six officers on my books were refused holiday or time off. We questioned every single person at the university where they studied, every single person in the village over the course of the next week. Guess what? Yep, you're right.

That's when I started to get really worried. Visions of a Son of Sam or Boston Strangler on my doorstep started running through my mind like diarrhea from a poisoned dog. We had posters put up, spoke to the local radio station asking—no, begging for any possible information, and got nothing. What I did get was a serious case of migraines and sleepless nights. I just couldn't lay in bed at night thinking that the perv might be out there right now, stalking another. And of course, how



can you curfew horny young kids? Forget it. They all live under the premise that "it won't happen to me."

So, what did I do this time? Well, I patrolled them streets myself. All over the village, looking for anyone acting suspicious. Any kids I saw—especially girls out on their own—got a good bollocking as well, I can tell you. But it was all for shit. A week after Maria, I got a call from a hysterical old woman out walking her dog in the commons. I didn't even have to listen to the whole version. I just knew what she was going to say.

And I guess *you* just know what she found.

Diane Whithers. Eighteen years old, but this one was no student. She worked at the local drinking hole. No arguments with rowdy customers, no boyfriend, no enemies. I won't bother with the details. You already know.

This time we did finally get some help come in. Shit, we were on national T.V. by now, so the nearest town sent us their best. I took them through all the files which looked pretty damn embarrassing and thin, and they got to work.

Me? A long, happy retirement I'd likely get when I'm in a casket, I thought, 'cause they didn't come up with anything either. It's like the perp was a phantom or something. To the detectives, it was impossible for somebody in the village to not know something. And I agreed completely. But just who the hell was it? No-one seemed nervous, nobody had left the village, and all possible suspects had alibis.

So I started reading up on serial killer cases. The big ones. The top investigators said you had to get inside their head, think like the killer did. Well, I'd get into the fucker's head alright if I caught him, I thought. I'd get so far in, he'd be screaming out of his arse.

But you know what? The guys that study these people are damn clever folks, and probably a little nuts as well, if you want my opinion. See, I read those books and how the perp might think, act. I think my wife saw it also, because she certainly started acting weird around me, like I was a stranger or something. Apart from the fact that I'd been patrolling almost every night for the last two weeks, and I guess I didn't look too good, I know my nerves were shot to shit. That I can tell you.

So, a week goes by. I had two men constantly patrolling the commons, knowing that each murder was happening almost exactly a week after the last. You know that feeling, similar to *déjà vu*, or whatever they call it, when you just know something bad is going to happen and you just can't shake it off. Well, the days leading up to the fourth, I felt like I had an ulcer the size of fucking Everest down there. Couldn't eat, sleep, shit. And then what happens?

Decided to have a wander myself around the commons, and there it was, just lying there.

Now, I do remember kneeling down beside her. I think I might have cried a little with the frustration and sense of impotence. Me, not being a crying man, it's one of those little details one tends to remember in a crisis. And this was a damn crisis. How in the name of the Lord did he get away

with it? Two men had been posted all night, I was also in the area. It must be someone who knows our plans, I thought. If not, how else?

The press had camped out in front of my station and wanted blood. Words related to and including 'incompetent' were written in their papers. Sometimes I think they didn't want the perv to be caught. With each new murder, they had another ten thousand copies sold.

Vultures.

But with this one came a bigger problem. Forensics said they'd found a print on the screwdriver. How can that be a problem? We've had a break. Perv finally fucked up, got sloppy. Well, the problem was that he hadn't got sloppy at all. Apparently, I'm the one who did.

See, that print was mine.

Well, let me tell you, I swore blind that I hadn't touched the weapon. Swore a lot actually. I told them old bastards at forensics they'd made a mistake. Must have. I wasn't so fucked up as to do anything like that. Hadn't done it in twenty-three years and certainly wasn't going to start now, I told 'em. But they did their tricks again, and yep, that was mine alright.

Well, all I can think is that while kneeling there, crying, I must've figured that somehow I'd touched it without realizing. Wouldn't make a lot of difference anyway. They didn't find nothing else and no witnesses, so put it down to stress, I said. Won't happen again, I said.

Problem is, it did.

The next week, just like clockwork, we got another. Young girl, close to the others. Said they'd found another print on the weapon. Guess whose it was?

Now I started getting all panicky. Especially when the two from Norwich called me into their office. Said they'd been speaking to my wife. She said that I'd been going out a lot of nights, staying out all night sometimes, then coming home and acting 'strange,' all excited and rushing with adrenaline like. Had I been home the night of the murders, they asked. "No," she said. Where was I those nights, they asked me. And you know what? I don't...fucking...remember. How can you expect me to? I had a major murder investigation going on. Yeah, sure, I was probably out those nights. But I don't recall where I went and, no, no one can verify that they'd seen me.

They got a search warrant for my house. The missus, well...she was in shock. Went and stayed with a sister. Couldn't handle the embarrassment, she said, of having journalists harassing her. Somehow they found out, see.

In my garage, they reckon they found half a dozen screwdrivers, just like the ones used on the girls. So? Everyone has screwdrivers in the garage.

But if I'm honest, I'm scared. I'm an upholder of the law. Never been in trouble in my life. Fuck, I was trying to catch the guy, so how can they say it's me?

I don't know what to do, so you better help me, Mr. Fancy Lawyer.

I mean...I couldn't really do those things. Could I? ■

# LINDA FAIRSTEIN

## “DEADFALL”: Death, Mayhem & the Bronx Zoo?



Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Katherine Marks

Linda Fairstein is a name that has been on the top of bestseller lists and fans “must-read” lists for a good, long time. And now, with her beloved character Alex Cooper starring in her 19<sup>th</sup> caper, “Deadfall,” this incredible author once again delves into an area of suspense that is not only thrilling to read, but also places focus on a category of crime that seems to grow each year.

With her background of leading the Sex Crimes Unit of the DA’s office in Manhattan for more than two decades, Linda Fairstein is seen among her peers as America’s foremost legal expert on sexual assault and domestic violence. Taking time out to visit with *Suspense Magazine*

and discuss her brilliant new novel, Linda also talks about her passion for “The Big Apple,” her love of research, and her foray into bringing mysteries to the younger market.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Are there days where you miss life as a prosecutor? If you had any particular cases you wish had worked out differently, is that something you can work out through your character, Alex Cooper? Is Alex a muse as much as a character to you?

Linda Fairstein (L.F.): *I miss life as a prosecutor every single day! My thirty years in the DA’s office was so richly rewarding, and the work I did there has remained a passion of mine. I’m still a lawyer and consult on cases, as well as work with the Manhattan DA’s office on projects like eliminating the country’s rape evidence collection kit backlog. In my 19 Alex Cooper novels, the cases are fictional, and although some of the motives are drawn from real life, so far I have not tried to work out a different case solution through my fiction. Alex and Mike are both ‘muses’ to me—they live in my head full-time, whether I am writing or not—and they are often the force that propels me back to the keyboard.*

S. MAG.: You worked so many high profile cases, can you tell your fans what was one of the most exciting/difficult cases you ever worked on?



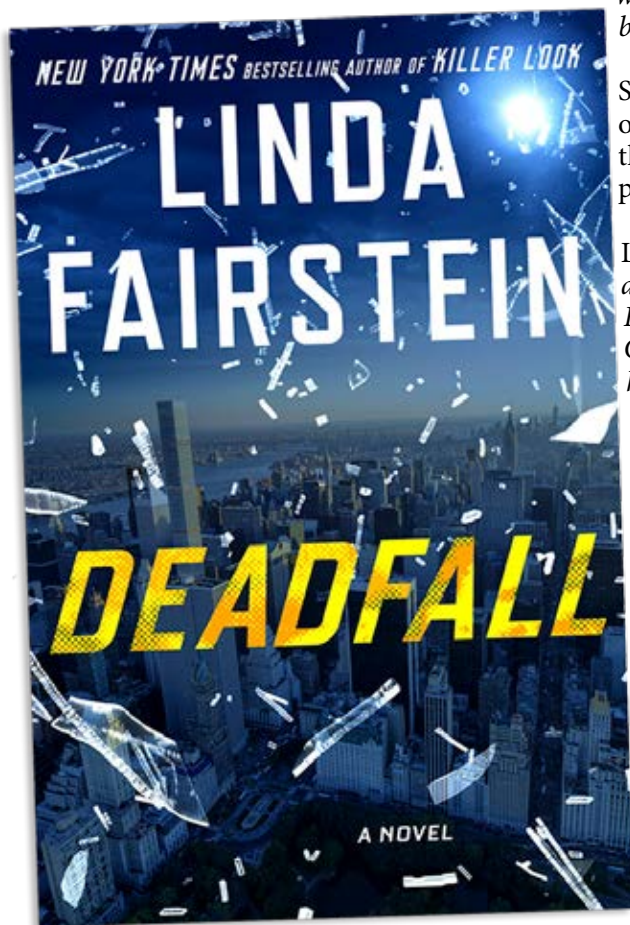
L.F.: My first high-profile case, which I prosecuted in 1977, was one of the most exciting and difficult cases I've ever worked on. I had only been in the DA's office for five years, had just been assigned to lead the country's pioneering Sex Crimes Unit, and had never imagined having to work in the media spotlight in New York City. But the perp was a prominent dentist named Marvin Teicher, who had been accused of sedating patients during surgery and molesting them. In the 70's, when the landscape was pretty bleak for survivors reporting sex offenses, the idea of charging a health care professional was especially radical. It was actually a landmark case that went all the way to the Supreme Court, because we had used a video surveillance system—like a wiretap, but with video instead of audio—breaking into Teicher's office to install a hidden camera in an air-conditioning duct directly over the dental chair. Our witness, after three victims reported sexual abuse to the police, was an undercover detective with an abscessed tooth (she was pretty hard to find!). The trial was a real battle, and Teicher was convicted of the charges. For me, it was a real baptism by fire.

S. MAG.: Working in the Manhattan District Attorney's office for such a long tenure, you and New York seem to go hand-in-hand; when you speak about it, you speak with such a passion in your books. Is there another city that rivals NYC for everything from scenery to citizens?

L.F.: I grew up in a small city called Mount Vernon, right outside of New York. But Manhattan was only for special occasions in my youth—Christmas shopping with my mother, Broadway shows with my parents, and an occasional family dinner. My passion for the city and its history developed when I moved there after law school, in 1972, and got to know the mean streets incredibly well because of my job as a prosecutor. It was a crash course for me and my young colleagues. It never ceased to amaze me that crime scenes were often the most elegant places in the city—like the tragic murder of a violinist at the Metropolitan Opera House—or that many important places had been buried under later buildings—like the old reservoir that became the foundation of the great New York Public Library. (Yes! The reservoir that played such an important role in Caleb Carr's "The Alienist.") Everyone has a favorite city, but for me, there is no place like New York—for history and mystery.

S. MAG.: Could Alex Cooper work in any other city?

L.F.: I think Coop could work anywhere in the world, especially if Mike Chapman travelled along with her. It might take her a while to learn all the nooks and crannies, and to find the best restaurants, but she'd adapt.



S. MAG.: The latest Alexandra Cooper novel, "Deadfall," is a truly outstanding plot. Can you give our readers some inside info regarding that title that can't be found on the book jacket? Why delve into this particular area of crime?

L.F.: I've been interested in endangered species animals for a long time, and have been on the board of the White Oak Conservation Center in Florida since I was introduced to it by a beloved friend, the late Howard Gilman, in the 1980's. But in the last two years, stories about how human predators have trafficked endangered animals and their valuable

*"In my 19 Alex Cooper novels, the cases are fictional, and although some of the motives are drawn from real life, so far I have not tried to work out a different case solution through my fiction."*

*treasures (ivory, rhino horn, tiger bones) has really caught my attention, because of the shrinking population of these great creatures in the wild. When I was researching issues for the book—at the spectacular Bronx Zoo!—I first heard the expression ‘deadfall,’ which is a kind of trap—a lure set by hunters to capture prey. Of course, there’s also the fact that the District Attorney had a very dead fall into Coop’s arms on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum.*

S. MAG.: As always, this book is extremely well-researched, especially the fascinating history on the Bronx Zoo. Are you a researcher at heart?

L.F.: *I am a killer researcher. I can’t imagine the authors who pay people to do their research for them. It’s so important for me to see and feel and smell the surroundings, because I think that makes it much more immediate for the reader. And doing research at the Bronx Zoo? It doesn’t get to be much more fun than that.*

S. MAG.: If you had not been in the legal realm, what career path do you believe you would have chosen? Would “writer” have been in the top spot?

L.F.: *Growing up—as all my old yearbooks reflect—I always said that I wanted to be a writer. My father, whom I adored, used to roll his eyes and insist that I educate myself to have a career. By the end of my four college years, I admitted he was right, and went to law school to pursue a career in public service. That landed me in the DA’s office. I never gave up the dream of writing fiction, so it was full circle when I began to do the Alex Cooper series. Law and literature—pretty swell combination for me.*

S. MAG.: Do you have any personal idols in the writing industry? Is there a specific author that you just cannot wait until their next title hits the market?

L.F.: *I am a voracious reader and especially love crime fiction. I love my competitors, and count many among my friends—David Baldacci, Lee Child, Mary Higgins Clark, Harlan Coben, Michael Connelly, Nelson DeMille, Lisa Gardner, Lisa Scottoline, Karin Slaughter, Kate White (alphabetically, to be sure!). Some I’ve met only once but admire—like Louise Penny and Sophie Hannah. And then there are those I devour and hope to meet one day—like Tana French. And I’m leaving out scores of others.*

S. MAG.: Alexandra Cooper has officially, with “Deadfall,” finished her 19th case in this particular series. Will she continue? In addition, what other characters/books are you working on at this time?

L.F.: *Of course, if Coop survives “Deadfall,” she’ll be back in a 20<sup>th</sup> caper—with Mike and Mercer. Last year, because of my great respect for the role that the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew played in introducing me to series crime fiction as a kid, I published my first book for 8-12-year-old young readers. The debut story, “Into the Lion’s Den,” features 12-year-old Manhattan sleuth Devlin Quick, whose mother is NYC’s Police Commissioner. Dev will be back in November with “Digging for Trouble.”*

S. MAG.: If you could have dinner with one character or writer (past or present) who would that be and why? Is there a particular question you would love to ask them?

L.F.: *I’m so lucky that I get to have dinner often with thriller writers like the ones listed above. Any of them are welcome to call me and I’ll be there! I’d kill to spend an evening with Will Shakespeare—murder and mayhem, history, comedy, sonnets—oh, Will, how did you do it? Talk to me!*

And, quite frankly, with the crime, murder, mayhem and spice that Linda Fairstein brings to her fans, I have a feeling Will would be asking the same thing of his special guest. To keep up with Linda’s books and events, check out her website (enjoy the tigers!) at [www.lindafairstein.com](http://www.lindafairstein.com). ■

## DEADFALL

By Linda Fairstein

“Deadfall” is defined as being a trap specifically created for a weight to fall on an animal or a human, killing it or at least disabling whichever critter it might hit. And this new Fairstein book is aptly named for both the trap, as well as the monumental shock when the weight of the truth falls on the reader. Not to mention the impact to Assistant DA Alexandra Cooper when her boss is found murdered.

Upon beginning this tale, she’s still on leave from her kidnapping and is on her way out for the evening to a fundraiser at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Suddenly, a figure rushes up the stairs of the museum, calls out her name, and falls in her lap—dead as a doornail. It doesn’t matter that she works as the head of Manhattan’s Special Victims Unit, Alexandra is still treated like any other “person of interest” in a crime.

Now Cooper is out of work until the problem is solved. A detective is assigned to the case who works in a different area because they must be someone Coop doesn’t have a working history with; unfortunately, this detective has held a grudge against her since she prosecuted his brother-in-law for raping a college student.

She is also not supposed to be helping her lover, Detective Mike Chapman, but the two are working together and believe that there are people who know far more than they’re telling in regards to the DA’s murder.

A complex web doesn’t even cut it as a description. From global trafficking reaching into both the human side and the wildlife side inside the Bronx Zoo, this case never stops growing. Alexandra and Mike learn a great deal of information regarding secret societies, organizations devoted to both preserving and hunting endangered species and more, as the story reaches a climax that no reader sees coming.

Yet again, Linda Fairstein has hit the proverbial “bulls-eye” with this awesome thriller.

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



# PETER JAMES

## *Talks Roy Grace, Crime Fiction & Proves Why We'll Always be Fans*

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Maxim Aryukov



When you look at Peter James' life and career, this is one author who could definitely fit the bill for being "the most interesting man in the world." His mother was the glovemaker to Her Majesty the Queen, much like Shakespeare's father, aye? Peter also lived for a decade in a haunted manor that was built atop Roman ruins and played home to four ghosts, including a Centurion. It was also his book, "Host," published in 1994 on two floppy disks that went down in history as being the world's first electronic novel.

Now comes the 13<sup>th</sup> tale of *Roy Grace*, and creator Peter James has taken the time to speak with *Suspense Magazine* about the new path of this tale, what he thinks of the future of crime

fiction, and updating readers on an interesting "miracle" of a thriller that he's been working on for almost 25 years.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): The *Roy Grace* series is now on book number 13. Tell readers all about the latest title, "Need You Dead."

Peter James (P.J.): *This was actually the first time I've written a whodunit, placing a modern spin on that classic 'whodunit' tradition. The book begins with a woman named Lorna Belling who's in an abusive relationship with her husband. She works from home as a hairdresser and has been having an affair for over a year with a guy she "thinks" is named Greg. All this time Greg has been telling Lorna that he, too, hates his marriage and is going to leave his wife. He goes on holiday to the Maldives, off the coast of India, with his wife, Belinda, where he is going to tell her their relationship is over so he can begin anew.*

*One day, a hairdressing client comes to Lorna's house with pictures of her recent holiday in the Maldives. Lorna sees Greg and his wife in some of these pics, all loving and happy as can be. She asks her client who they are and the client gives names that are most definitely not 'Greg' and 'Belinda' and goes on to say how nice it was to meet a couple who loves each other so much. Lorna plans on confronting Greg bigtime when they meet up again.*

*In the meantime, she has been planning for her escape by slowly selling everything. She has advertised her car, a little Mazda MX5 on EBay, and a guy agrees to the price. He claims he has sent the money; Lorna claims she hasn't gotten it and believes that the man has been a victim of e-fraud. Trouble is, this guy has a history of violence and begins to get abusive with Lorna. He wants his money back ASAP and assumes she is swindling him. When Lorna is found dead, you have three prime suspects for the killing, with another on the way. So that's the basic set-up of the story.*

S. MAG.: Roy Grace has gone through a lot of life stories now. What was your reasoning behind setting this one as more of a whodunit? Challenging your character, or you as an author?

P.J.: I think it's really important for an author to try to raise the bar with each book, and each time write a "new" book. I have a set of characters readers know and, fortunately, really like, but I always want to do more. I remember my own heroes, such as Alistair MacLean—once they got successful, they trailed off. Their books turned formulaic. I have always tried to avoid that. With the 'whodunit' format, I've always liked it and wanted to do it at some point. I remember catching Agatha Christie's last ever TV interview. They asked her how she did her plotting, and she said that she planned the first draft of her book, normally having round about nine or ten characters, then she would write the story. When she got to the end of the first draft, she thought about which one of her characters would have been the least likely to commit the crime. I loved that. Her plotting was great. What I never really loved about the books is that, as a reader, I like to see character development and progress. With Miss Marple, bless her, she was always the same at the end as in the beginning. You never really knew much about her life, but the plotting was always clever. I wanted to have a go at trying to plan that whodunit but not know until the end who did it. I wanted to be surprised.

S. MAG.: How much of a surprise has Roy Grace given you over these past thirteen books?

P.J.: Oh, he constantly surprises me. I think I had originally planned to write just two books: one to introduce him and the personal mystery of his missing wife; and then the second book to solve everything. When I was asked to create a fictional detective, I had never done that. I had always had police in my books, of course, while writing psychological thrillers, but I had never had a policeman with his own mystery before. I thought about the hard work, the hundreds of clues a detective has to go through every day to solve crimes. But I thought it would be interesting to have a very good detective who had his own personal mystery that he just couldn't solve. When you first meet Roy in "Dead Simple," we learn that his wife had vanished off the face of the earth ten years before and he's been trying to figure it out ever since.

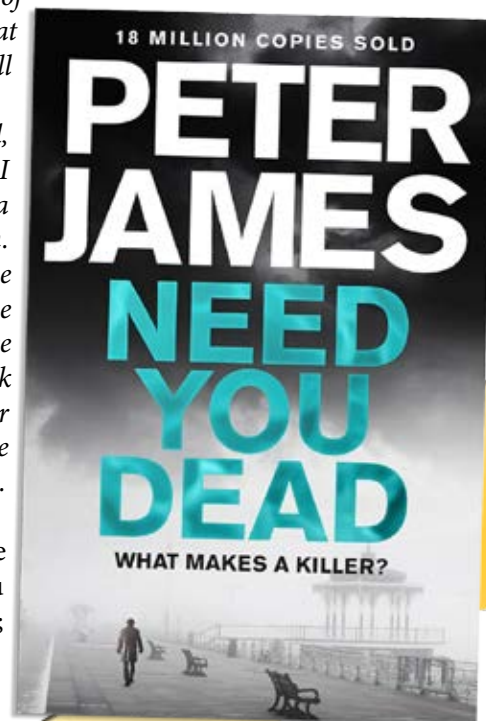
When "Dead Simple" came out, I was inundated with mail from readers who were speculating on what might have happened to Roy's wife and I thought...I could have some real fun with this. Ideas popped in my head and various scenarios that would challenge and surprise the reader. As a writer, I like to plan, but I really want that surprise element. You can't surprise your reader unless you surprise yourself, and some of the things in regards to Roy and his wife have really come as a huge surprise to me.

S. MAG.: Speaking of surprise, do you feel that more of these new "types" of politicians today, that are so different from what we have ever seen before, will end up in crime fiction books?

P.J.: I believe authors have to be careful. Readers read to escape the horrors and reality of the world. With crime fiction, you are taken into a dangerous world, but you know that favorite detective of yours, like Harry Bosch, will be holding your hand through it all and, by the end of the book, will put the crazy world back in order.

What's interesting is that when you look at when crime fiction literally exploded, going up in numbers while the thriller went down, it was at the end of the Cold War. I believe readers found something 'romantic' about the cold war thriller. I mean, Russia was creepy, but in a romantic way. There is nothing romantic about Islamic terrorism. Thrillers set in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, etc., do not resonate with readers like those great thrillers once did. Which is why crime fiction took off. The tales resonated with the reader, but didn't scare them. Go back to Shakespeare's time: he was writing what we would label crime fiction today—at least half of his plays had a court scene. Even back to the earliest storytellers, like Sophocles' story of King Oedipus who murders his father and sleeps with his mother. I mean, what other genre shelf would he be on besides crime fiction? Crime is eternal and worldwide: every nation has its own varied types of crime.

S. MAG.: One thing that is also worldwide is technology. You see more and more detective novels integrating high-tech, which causes a bit of lazy detecting. Have you tried to back out of the tech range to make it more difficult for Ray to solve crime; to keep him from going soft?





P.J.: There are actually more low-tech types of crime solving that fascinate me. An example: ten years ago the police had this great idea to use people who did not have the ability to hear or speak watch drug deals through telescopes and lip read, instead of bugging the location, which proved more successful.

I brought the idea of low-tech into the new "Need You Dead," because I love being innovative, like the police. In two of my last three titles, I explored the work of a forensic podiatrist. He discovered something now used very successfully in apprehension—that everyone's footprint is unique. The way you walk, your gait, is as unique as your DNA. This man has software that can lift your "footprint" off the ground and pick you out of a crowd just for the way you walk. And there is something even scarier than that...

Over a year ago I got a call from a detective at Scotland Yard who asked if I'd be interested in learning about something called "super-recognizers." They wanted me to perhaps put it in a book to make police forces around the U.K. aware of it. You see, it seems the average human being can recognize 23% of faces of people they've never met. The police with all their training: 24%. And even the smartest computer in the world could only reach 25%. After the London riots, the detectives tried to recognize the rioters, but they'd all worn baseball caps, hoodies, etc., which made it almost impossible. Turns out, they had a custody officer who was looking at video and started picking out the rioters by simply their earlobe, or the shape of their nose or chin. He led to 150 convictions. This is when they discovered there are people who can do this, and called them "super-recognizers." The Yard has built a team, many of them civilians/volunteers, who just sit and look at video all day long and recognize criminals. I brought that in to "Need You Dead," and it plays a key role in the climax of the book.

S. MAG.: Taking a look into the future, what else are you working on?

P.J.: I am working on a novel called, "Absolute Proof," that will be coming out in October, 2018, and I'm really excited about it. This is a thriller about what would happen if somebody credible claimed to have absolute proof of God's existence. I don't like to say the words "Dan Brown" when I describe this book, but it is that "type" of thriller. It's also the longest book I've ever worked on, beginning in 1993.

Back then I got a call out of the blue from a guy calling himself Harry F. Nixon. He said he was not a nutcase; he was a bomber navigator in WWII and a recently retired professor of mathematics. He told me that he had "absolute proof of God's existence" and that he'd been told there was an author named Peter James who could help him get taken seriously.

I met with the guy, shook his hand, and he said, "You and I have to save the world." I sat him down and he talked about his wife who had recently died of cancer. He said he promised her before she died that after, he would get a medium to try and make contact. When that session was held, a man came through instead saying he was a representative of God and that God was extremely concerned about the state of the world. God thought if He could reaffirm mankind's faith in Him, that the world could get back on an even keel. As proof that this messenger's words were bona fide, he stated three pieces of information that nobody on earth knows.

I went to see a friend of mine who was a bishop at the time and said: "What if somebody claimed to have absolute proof of God? What would you want as proof?" He said he'd want something impressive: a major miracle. I said, "What if he couldn't deliver that? What then?" He said, "I think they'd be assassinated, because whose god would it be? Who would want to claim it?" Every different faction of the Anglican faith has ownership right now, same with Judaic, Islamic religions, etc. All the atheist states, like China, don't even want a higher power usurping them, thus the guy would be assassinated for sure. And I thought: "Yes, I've got the story!"

The main character is a Sunday Times journalist who gets the same phone call I received. And the three pieces of absolute proof come in the form of the compass coordinates to the tomb of Akhenaten, the first monotheist Pharaoh of Egypt; the location of the Holy Grail; and the location of the Ark of the Covenant. I have written three central characters being, the journalist on a mission to find all of this proof, a billionaire evangelist who has seven churches who really doesn't want proof because then he'd be exposed as a fraud, and a pharmaceutical giant who desperately wants to get their hands on the proof, and possibly Christ's DNA, because it would add such value to their own products.

The key I had to find to make the book work was some sort of absolute convincing proof that no atheist could reject. When I found that, the book went forward. It's written, and I am in the States for a bit of final location research because the book begins in a fictitious bar in L.A. called The Fairfax Lounge, and the whole climax of the book also takes place here.

And, I'm doing a sequel to "The House on Cold Hill." I love ghost stories because there are no rules. When you're with Roy, you have to check on all that detecting stuff. Ghosts are refreshing.

In fact, everything this author writes is refreshing. Not only is the Roy Grace series constantly giving fans a great mystery, but now they can even look forward to the unveiling of 'absolute proof' that God exists! For more information, head to Peter James's website at [www.peterjames.com](http://www.peterjames.com). ■



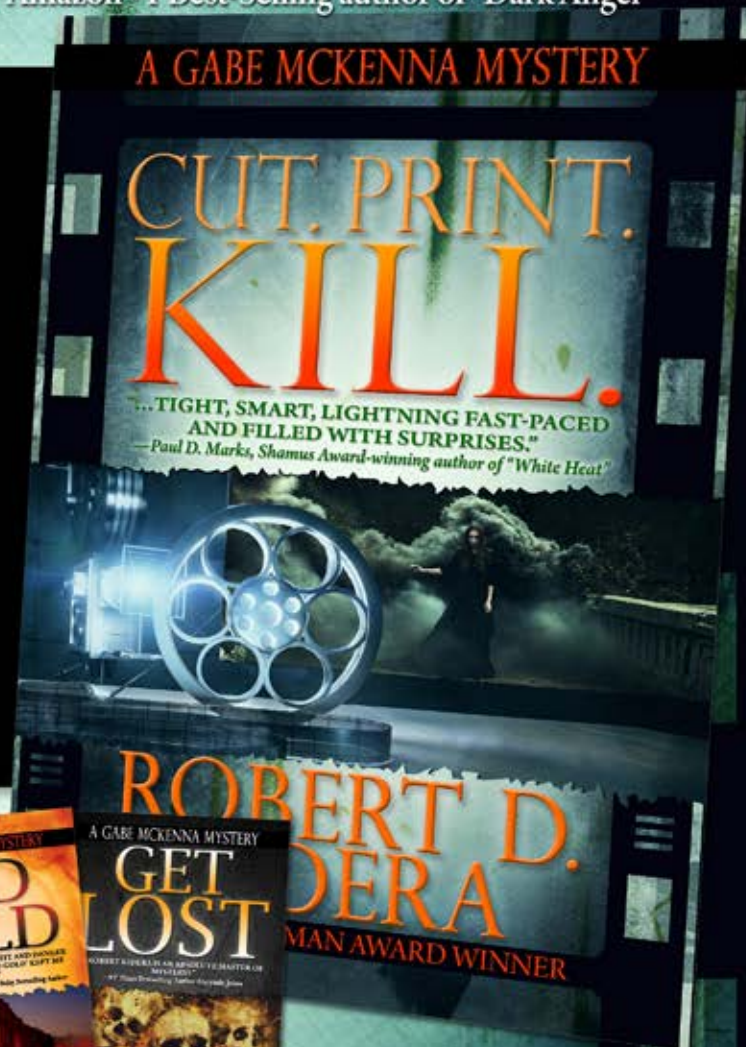
THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE  
MORE LIE...

# ROBERT D. KIDERA

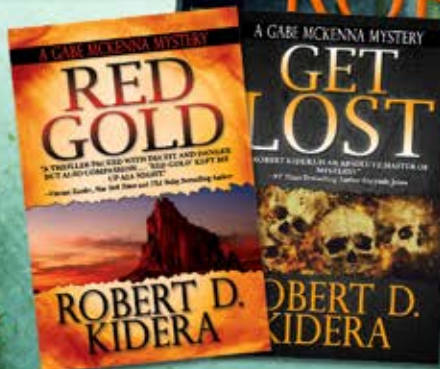
"KIDERA IS A RISING STAR IN THE MYSTERY GENRE. HIS LATEST OFFERING IS AN EPIC STORY PROPELLED BY A DYNAMIC CAST OF CHARACTERS AND A ROLLER COASTER RIDE OF ACTION AND TENSION."

—Joseph Badal, Tony Hillerman Award-Winner and Amazon #1 Best-Selling author of "Dark Angel"

Reeling from family betrayal and tragedy, Gabe McKenna charts a new course as historical consultant on a motion picture filming in New Mexico. Before you can say "Action!", he is entangled in a web of illusion and deceit, where death plays a starring role. With the help of The Onion, a private investigator and long-time friend from New York, Gabe peels away layer after layer of dishonesty, battles brutal drug cartels, is accused of murder, and must unmask a mysterious, seductive woman to reveal the truth in a world full of lies.



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SUSPENSE  
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# Forensic Files

## Q&A: CAN CARBON MONOXIDE CARTRIDGES BE USED AS A METHOD OF MURDER?

By D.P. Lyle, MD

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



**Q:** My victim is in a locked room with one small window in an abandoned warehouse, and is being slowly killed by carbon monoxide fumes from little cartridges that are timed to activate at certain intervals. There is also a booby trapped bomb in a briefcase in the same room, which will be detonated when the levels of carbon monoxide are high enough. How long would it take the victim to fall unconscious? Is it possible to ignite a bomb's fuse with this gas? If it is possible, and the victim is rescued before the bomb detonates, would they be able to recover completely from carbon monoxide poisoning, and how long does recovery take?

**A:** First of all, carbon monoxide will not explode, nor does it readily burn, so using it as a fuse or as an explosive material isn't a possibility. You could have a carbon monoxide detector on the bomb that would ignite when a certain level was reached, so in this regard it could be viewed as a fuse of sorts.

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is stealthy, treacherous, and deadly. It's also common. You've seen it in the papers or on the news. A family is found dead and the cause is a faulty heater or fireplace. A suicide victim is found in his garage with the car engine running. Campers are found dead in a tent, a kerosene lantern burning in one corner. Each of these is due to carbon monoxide.

CO is a tasteless, odorless, colorless gas that is completely undetectable by humans. It results from the incomplete combustion of carbon-containing fuels—paper, wood, gasoline, and many other combustible products. Faulty stoves, heaters, and fireplaces, as well as the exhaust from a car engine, can fill the air with CO. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a more common cause of death in fires than the fire itself. In your scenario, you supply the CO via cartridges so none of this is needed in your story, but this may be part of the investigation as to why the victim had CO toxicity—if the cartridges aren't found, etc.

Carbon Monoxide's treachery lies in its great affinity for hemoglobin, the oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) carrying molecule within our red blood cells (RBCs). When inhaled, CO binds to hemoglobin producing carboxyhemoglobin. It does so 300 times more

**THE ME MAY BE ASKED TO EVALUATE A LIVING VICTIM IN THIS SITUATION IF THE EXPOSURE WAS DUE TO A CRIMINAL ACT OR IF A CIVIL LAWSUIT IS INVOLVED.**

# MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT CO IS ONLY TOXIC IF IT IS IN AN ENCLOSED AREA, BUT THIS IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE.

readily than does oxygen, and thus displaces oxygen. In other words, if the hemoglobin is presented with both oxygen and carbon monoxide it is 300 times more likely to combine with the CO. The result is that the blood that leaves the lungs and heads toward the body is rich in CO (carboxyhemoglobin) and poor in O<sub>2</sub> (oxyhemoglobin).

This strong affinity of hemoglobin for CO means that very high blood levels can occur by breathing air that contains only small amounts of CO. For example, breathing air that contains a carbon monoxide level as low as 0.2% may lead to blood CO saturations greater than 60% after only 30 to 45 minutes. So, a faulty heater or smoldering fire that produces only a small amount of CO becomes increasingly deadly with each passing minute.

This powerful attraction for hemoglobin explains how certain individuals succumb to CO poisoning in open areas. Most people believe that CO is only toxic if it is in an enclosed area, but this is simply not true. There have been cases of individuals dying while working on their car in an open area, such as a driveway. Typically the victim is found lying near the car's exhaust. Similarly, the newly recognized problem of CO poisoning in swimmers and water skiers, who loiter near a dive platform on the back of a powerboat whose engine is at idle, is another example of this affinity.

The degree of exposure to CO is typically measured by determining the percent of the hemoglobin that is carboxyhemoglobin. The signs and symptoms of CO toxicity correlate with these levels. The normal level is 1 to 3%, but may be as high as 7 to 10% in smokers. At levels of 10 to 20%, headache and a poor ability to concentrate on complex tasks occur. Between 30 and 40%, headaches become severe and throbbing and nausea, vomiting, faintness, and lethargy appear. Pulse and breathing rates will increase noticeably. Between 40 and 60% the victim will become confused, disoriented, weak, and will display extremely poor coordination. Above 60%, coma and death are likely. These are general ranges, but the actual effect of rising CO levels varies from person to person.

In the elderly and those with heart or lung disease, levels as low as 20% may be lethal. Victims of car exhaust suicide or those that die from fire in an enclosed room may reach 90%.

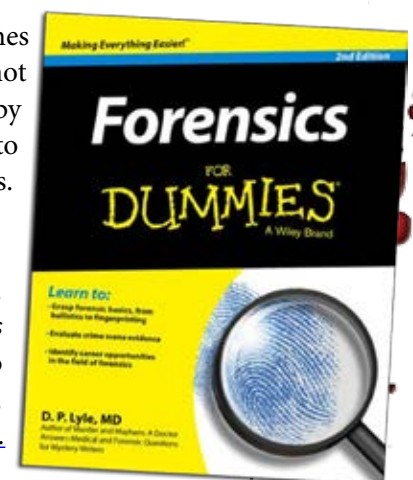
Carboxyhemoglobin is bright red in color and imparts this hue to the blood. When the ME performs an autopsy and sees bright cherry-red blood, he will suspect CO poisoning as the cause of death. This finding is not absolute, since cyanide inhalation or ingestion can also result in bright cherry-red blood and tissues. Also, individuals dying from cold exposure or corpses exposed to very low temperatures may show bright red blood. Livor mortis in these situations may also be red or pink in color.

At autopsy, the internal organs in victims of CO intoxication are also bright red. Interestingly, this color does not fade with embalming or when samples taken by the ME are fixed in formaldehyde as part of the preparation of microscopic slides.

Individuals who survive CO intoxication may have serious long-term health problems. The brain is particularly vulnerable since it is extremely sensitive to oxygen lack. Symptoms and signs of brain injury can begin immediately or be delayed for several days or weeks. The most common aftereffects include: chronic headaches, memory loss, blindness, confusion, disorientation, poor coordination, and hallucinations. The ME may be asked to evaluate a living victim in this situation if the exposure was due to a criminal act or if a civil lawsuit is involved.

Your victim would become sleepy, confused, disoriented, clumsy, and develop headaches as the level of CO in his body rose. He would finally lapse into a coma and would die if not rescued in time. Treatment is simply to remove him from the area and give him oxygen by way of a facemask and oxygen tank. If he is to be OK, it should only take a few minutes to an hour to recover. He may then be normal or have any of the above long-term problems.

*D.P. Lyle is the Macavity and Benjamin Franklin Silver Award winning and Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, Scribe, and USA Best Book Award nominated author of many non-fiction books as well as numerous works of fiction, including the Samantha Cody thriller series, the Dub Walker thriller series, and the Royal Pains media tie-in novels. To learn more about D.P., check out his websites at <http://www.dplylemd.com>, <http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com>, or Crime and Science Radio at <http://crimeandsciencradio.com>.*





# *She's Back—With Gifts!*

## Brenda Novak Returns with “Her Darkest Nightmare”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Strangely, there was a time when writing was the last profession this author expected to undertake. In school, Brenda Novak was a fan of math and science, and when it came time to pick a major in college, business was the choice. But fate knew better.

When Brenda sold her first book, the rest became history. The awards, the fans, the titles, she has excelled in both the romance genre as well as the world of suspense. Now, with a brand new book being released that begins a brand new series, readers will be excited to learn all about the character of Evelyn Talbot and what this woman—with a deep desire to learn all about the inner-workings of the psychopathic mind—will bring to the suspense landscape.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Tell us all about your new book, “Her Darkest Nightmare.”

Brenda Novak (B.N.): *This is actually the first book in my new series—The Evelyn Talbot Chronicles. Evelyn is a psychiatrist who studies serial killers at a remote facility in Alaska. She’s had some trauma in her own past which has given her this burning desire to unravel the psychopathic mind. When she was a teenager, she was attacked and tortured by her boyfriend for three days before he slit her throat and left her for dead. Ever since, she has been trying to answer questions like: Why she trusted him? How he could have fooled her so much and betrayed her so violently? All of this leads to wanting some sort of understanding, so she’s essentially studying the worst of the worst.*

*The fun thing is, when you have a facility like this, you have an endless stream of villains so you can write book after book after book, making it good fodder for a series.*

S. MAG.: Was there a specific reason why you picked Alaska as the backdrop for this series?

B.N.: *I really liked the weather up there, the remoteness of it all and how that remoteness would affect the law's ability to do different investigative techniques. It gives you a hero who's smart but somewhat untried because the worst he's handled up until now is hunting and fishing infractions. He doesn't have a team of forensic people to rely on. In fact, the entire town is only 500 people. And the vast territory for body disposal, animals carrying the corpse off, etc., allows for a list of scary stuff to be implemented.*

S. MAG.: What makes this different than other series fiction you have done?

B.N.: *I am writing the third book now; the second will be out October 3<sup>rd</sup> and is titled, "Hello Again." The different thing about this series is that it isn't the kind where hero/heroine meet up with the villain and it's over. There are no cliffhangers, each book's arc/mystery does have its own ending, but the characters certainly continue. It's more along the lines of the Outlander series. My villain isn't dead at the end, causing him to create more trouble in future books, but the immediate conflict is concluded; that particular curve is final. Hopefully readers will like these characters enough to want to continue and see what happens next.*

S. MAG: It must be a big contrast when you write romance versus suspense. How do you keep both of these genres rolling along? And between the two, is there a more difficult one to write?

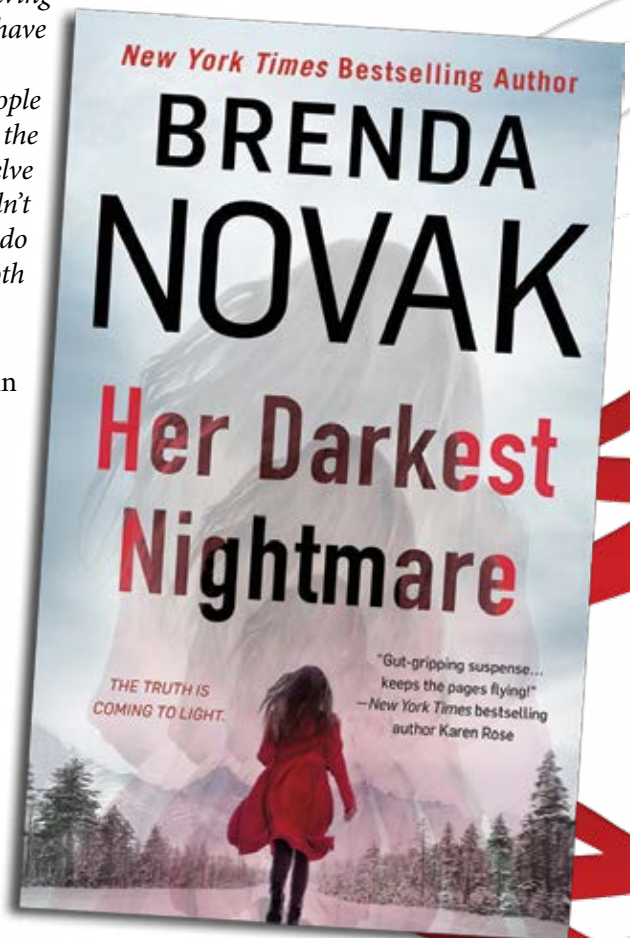
B.N.: *To me, whatever book I'm in the process of writing is the hardest genre. If I'm writing a romance, I say this is the hardest one because there is no puzzle or mystery to prop up the structure of the story to make it interesting. You have to keep up the emotional tension throughout to make it riveting. So, even though you don't have the trouble of building the puzzle, you have to make sure it is wrought with emotion.*

*So then, when I get into a suspense, I think it is truly complicated because of having to make sure that puzzle is good and has the right twists and turns, while still building the romance arc and weaving the two together. I liken it all to a sorbet. I've cleansed my palette, now I have to do something else.*

*Because I have such an interest in bad behavior—why people psychologically do things—I feel like I'm channeling myself through the character of Evelyn, which gives me a chance to go darker. I get to delve into things with the suspense genre that really fascinate me. But I wouldn't want to write only that because it would be too dark for me. I like to do the lighter, small town contemporary romance as well. For me, doing both genres really balances out my brain.*

S. MAG: You have gone darker over time. Just reading this first book in the series, did you do research to create this darker tale?

*"As a reader, I will read any genre as long as it has that emotional element that grips me, so I try to do it in all my own books. Whatever I write—historical, suspense, contemporary—that's one thing that readers can rely on."*





B.N.: *Actually, I have toured prisons, like Soledad prison and the territorial prison in Florence, which was really fascinating. I actually knew someone on death row there. He was the man who killed my mother's best friend's daughter; it was her husband. So it was kind of shocking. I'm really interested why criminals do what they do. To me, it's counterproductive. I mean, if your destroying your own life in the process of taking another, was it really worth it?*

S. MAG: I think you may be the only author writing in a prison-based environment where you have the ability to introduce people quickly who are coming into the facility. You can develop darkness in these people and go deeper into the minds of the characters. Does this ever get confusing, with the romance and suspense being so different?

B.N.: *The way they're doing the covers and the cover copy adds to the darkness factor, but I don't go bloody or violent; that's not what I would want to see as a reader. But I like the suspense element of it all. The jackets, the back copy—it does feel dark but there is still a romance running through it.*

S. MAG.: So, in essence, you've added different layers of texture and flavor for readers to taste with your suspense?

B.N.: *That is my goal. And to further alleviate confusion, my agent has been really insistent that they be spaced wider apart. One genre needs to be easily identifiable from the other. Romance and suspense both have different marketing, and the publisher is only a publisher of suspense for the Evelyn Talbot titles. And they are great. They never ask me to pull back on the romantic threads; they seem to be happy with the mix.*

S. MAG.: What's something you're challenging yourself with as an author in regards to this series that maybe your readers and fans will see as being different?



B.N.: *First of all, it's the continuing relationship. I have never done a series with the same characters. Before, I gave you a new hero or heroine and a new villain every time. With this one, the villain is carrying through. You also still have a hero and heroine who are working through their relationship together. I have to not only make sure that each story is satisfying by itself, but also that the entire arc of the series is satisfying to the reader. And it gets more and more challenging the deeper you get, because no reader wants to see a couple together, happy, and then torn apart. I would have a rebellion on my hands if I did that, so I have to be really, really, careful.*

*Evelyn and Alaskan State Trooper, Sergeant Amarok love each other, but things stand in their way, even that dark location. Evelyn is from Boston and isn't sure she can commit to this cold, remote place for the rest of her life. And what if they have kids? She can't leave and go away, yet she's at the age to have kids, but with the past trauma she's not even sure if she can—so there are many different issues standing in this couple's way.*

S. MAG: I see a lot of authors who use two names for their work depending on genre. Such as using their real name when

writing suspense and a pseudonym for their romance. You use your real name on all books, is this a marketing challenge?

B.N.: *For marketing, it's easier because you only have to concentrate on promoting that one name. The challenge comes in with something like a website. Luckily, today's readers are a lot more willing to allow authors to write in different genres, so they are taking their cues not from the author's name in regards to what they write, but off the book cover and back copy. I also think that you have to have something common that runs through all your work to use the same name successfully. For me, that's having it be very emotional or dramatic. Even my romances are not light and funny; the characters are more on the gritty, real side. That's the one basic continuity element I write in both genres, keeping all tales big and dramatic.*

S. MAG: As a reader, I always felt that you never fell fully under the romance umbrella. I always pictured that heaving bosom, Fabio tearing off his shirt, etc. Your romance has always had a lean toward suspense.

B.N.: *I do blend drama with the romance. The books lean toward women's fiction a lot of times, which make them really hard to cover. If you put on this sweet romance cover, you think you're getting a Debbie Macomber read; if a different cover, perhaps a Diane Chamberlain. I would say I'm a mix. Robyn Carr would be a closer fit. And whereas Debbie Macomber is straight PG characters, mine are a little more sensual, like Nora Roberts. Definitely not erotica, but definitely not sweet.*

S. MAG.: You fall into that Sandra Brown vein. Even with the suspense, there is always a strong emotional thread that carries through her books, as well.

B.N.: *Well, thank you. She is one of my idols. To me, that's what a story is. As a reader, I will read any genre as long as it has that emotional element that grips me, so I try to do it in all my own books. Whatever I write—historical, suspense, contemporary—that's one thing that readers can rely on.*

S. MAG.: Switching gears, can you speak a bit about your diabetes fundraising?

B.N.: *Actually, 2017 is the first year I took time off. I did the auction for ten years. And when I saw that it had run its course, I decided I needed to segue into something new and fresh, so I began the digital box sets. I did those for two years and raised close to a hundred thousand each year. The auction was like having another full-time job, but the sets were manageable. With five new releases this year, and writing for two publishers, I decided to step away for 2017 to make sure all deadlines were met and that the releases came off without a hitch.*

S. MAG: What's your promotional schedule coming up?

B.N.: *I'm doing only reader-related events this year, and not writer-related. I did the "Heart of Dixie" reader luncheon and am even doing my own event which will be a mimosa brunch held in Sacramento in a beautiful old mansion. We have 200 seats for the event, and have already sold 188. It will be a lot of fun.*

S. MAG.: Speaking of fun, can you talk about your book group?

B.N.: *It is an online book group that features other authors when I don't have a book coming out. We have had so many be a part of it, and it's been so fun. I fly to the author's home and interview them after our club reads the author's book. We have a live event so that the book club can interact with the author and ask questions. We also have these great professional reader boxes made up of the author we are featuring and members of the club get autographed copies of their box and other cool reader stuff with it. We thought it would be something to do for fun, but people began clamoring to buy the boxes, so it became bigger than originally planned. We also have "The 50+" commemorative pin for readers who have read 50 or more of my books. We also have a birthday program for the readers and a whole lot more. We have 8,500 now and its growing every day!*

Not a surprise, when you consider the amount of fans there are for this incredible author's work. Whether a romance lover or a craver of suspense, Brenda Novak is one writer who never lets the fan down. To find out more information and see how to become a member of Brenda's incredible book club, head to [www.brendanovak.com](http://www.brendanovak.com). ■



"Reading a new *Carol Andrews* mystery is like visiting an old friend. You may not have seen each other in a while, but you pick up right where you left off, pulled into her tales of her crazy adventures."

—Barbara Ross, author of the *Maine Clambake Mysteries*

## *Every Wife Has A Story*

A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

"An outstanding series."  
—Midwest Book Review

### *Dieting Can Be Murder*

*Every Wife Has A Story*

Seventh in the Series



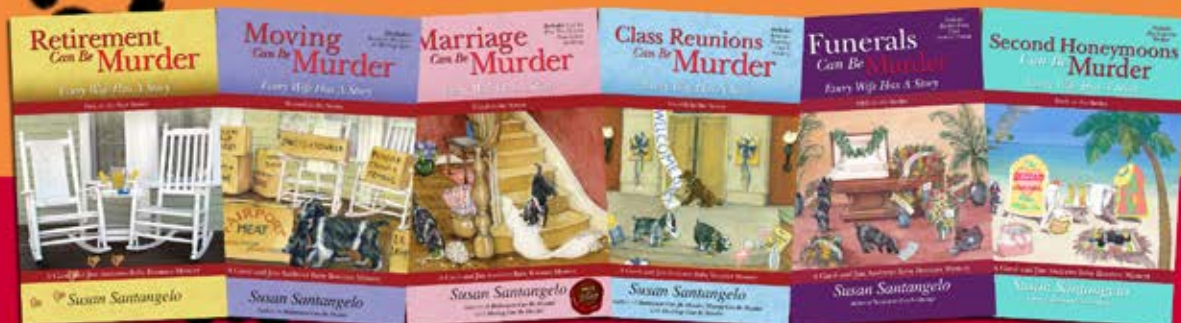
A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

*Susan Santangelo*

Author of *Retirement Can Be Murder*

There's a little too much to love about Carol Andrews these days, thanks to the extra calories she consumed during her second honeymoon in Florida with her husband, Jim. Determined to shed the extra pounds before the birth of her first grandchild, Carol joins Tummy Trimmers, a new, holistic approach to fighting—and winning—the battle of the bulge. But her weight loss regimen is interrupted by another group member, who collapses on Carol right after completing a meditation exercise to help lose weight, and dies. When the evidence points to murder, the always curious Carol can't resist adding sleuthing to her personal weight loss routine.

<http://babyboommysteries.com>





# It's Personal in "Seeing Red" with SANDRA BROWN

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Andrew Eccles



**B**eginning her amazing writing career in 1981, Sandra Brown has since published over seventy novels. Being a lifelong Texan, Sandra grew up in Fort Worth and, before embarking on her writing career, worked as a model at the Dallas Apparel Mart, as well as in television, including feature reporting on the nationally syndicated program "PM Magazine."

With her new book, "Seeing Red," fans are excited to immerse themselves in yet another suspenseful, thrilling and sexy tale. Taking the time to sit and talk with *Suspense Magazine*, Sandra shared some personal tales, the best piece of advice she ever received, as well as offered information on the "worlds" that are out there, still waiting for her to explore.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): "Seeing Red" is your latest book. Tell us a little about it.

Sandra Brown (S.B.): *The idea for the story is loosely based on the Oklahoma City bombings. I had a personal brush with that because both of my children were at the University of Oklahoma at the time. My daughter was downtown taking classes in the city at the Medical Arts building when the horror occurred. All of the pre-med students were grabbing their things saying, "We have to go!" before anyone even knew what had happened. My daughter wanted to get back to the main campus, but the authorities were so quick to determine that it was a terrorist act, they threw up a*

*grid around downtown, blocking roads, etc.*

*This was only about three weeks before she graduated, so during the days before and leading up to commencement, there was a kind of pall over everything. At the actual commencement ceremony for the entire university, which was held on the football field, they brought some of the survivors onto the stage and everyone paid tribute. It affected us, certainly not to the extent that some had to suffer, but it was a personal brush.*

*Everyone shivers when they remember the photo of that fireman carrying the child's body out of the building. I was thinking about that photo. Nothing needed to be said; no caption needed to be written. It just resonated with people. That's when I began to think about those people in iconic photos—whether it be hero's like that fireman, or horrors. I wondered: "How does that photo*



# “One time I wrote a book because of a song lyric; a phrase that just struck me.”

*affect their lives? Do they live it down? Do they learn to live with the instant fame that it brought them, whether it be positive or negative? And that's when I got started on the characters for "Seeing Red." One character creates a career from that fame, while the other just wants to get out from under it. An interesting dynamic was created.*

S. MAG.: Why are Kerra Bailey and Trapper the perfect characters to lead this book?

S.B.: *With Kerra, I drew upon the TV journalist world I know. Again, I have had a personal brush with that. My husband and I both worked for the ABC affiliate in Dallas: he was a news reporter and I was on the fringes, doing mostly fluff pieces for a show called PM Magazine.*

*I think that a newsroom literally vibrates with energy; there is always the potential for disaster. I was working at the STAR Telegram in Fort Worth when Charles Whitman fired shots from the University of Texas tower. I was in high school when JFK was assassinated. He was in Ft. Worth, where I lived, that morning and our whole community was rocked by the news when it happened. Human interest stories came from everywhere after that from people who covered the news. Such as Bob Schieffer, a friend of ours, who got a call from Oswald's wife; and this news director we later worked for who had actually met Oswald—all of these stories give newsrooms the potential for drama and danger.*

*I draw upon media for characters and backdrops for a lot of my stories. I make sure that 1) I am familiar with the environment; and, 2) that the environment lends itself to storytelling. For those reasons, I thought Kerra would be perfect. Kerra and Trapper, my hero and heroine, are always at odds but also have some type of codependence when it comes to each other. At the same time, they are antagonists. He's trying to flee a story and she is trying to resurrect it, which instantly places them at odds. Of course, it's also a Sandra Brown book, so the chemistry is definitely there too! (LOL)*

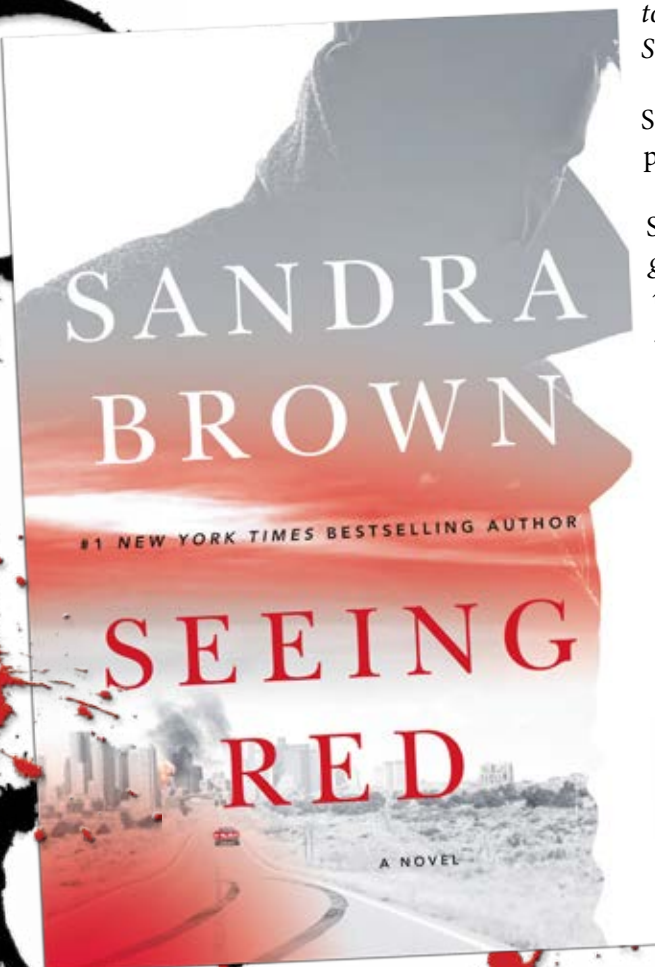
S. MAG.: When thinking about a new book, is it the character or the plot that gets you going?

S.B.: *It's both and all of the above. I wish I knew, but I don't know what got me to thinking of this idea for "Seeing Red." In fact, I don't know where any of the ideas for novels come from. Sometimes it can be something I hear, like a news story; or, sometimes I can see a situation that strikes me as odd or compelling, interesting, intriguing...so much so that I want to know what's really going on.*

*One time I wrote a book because of a song lyric; a phrase that just struck me. So, basically, 99% of the time I have no idea what makes the idea come forth.*

S. MAG.: What is one piece of advice you have taken with you since you started your career that you pass on to younger/newer authors?

S.B.: *This is perfect, because I did get a piece of advice that I still remind myself of every single day. When I first began, I had published three or four romances for the Ecstasy line (Dell), and I was getting all nervous that I wasn't doing enough to promote my books. My contemporaries were sending out bookmarks, and even taking doughnuts to the men who drove the trucks who distributed the books. I was worried. But when I brought it up to my editor, she said: "Write a good book. Pay attention to the book first. Don't put the cart before horse. No matter how bad your book is, no amount of promotion will make it good. If*



you get the world's attention, you better have something good to say."

I speak to new writers about this who are now busy tweeting, etc., and I ask: "How does the time you spend on social media compare to the time you spend writing the actual book?" Because at the end of the day, it doesn't make any difference. You have to deliver a good book.

Now there is so much more demand on writers to be on Twitter, Facebook, etc., and social media is a huge consumer of time. The real irony is, the more you feed this giant blue whale the hungrier it gets and the more it demands.

I have learned to discipline myself; to turn all of that off and concentrate on re-writing a particular scene that needs a lot of work. Of course, that's not the sexy part of the career that new writers want to hear about. The part where you sit, alone, and grind it out. But I believe that is what's essential to making a successful career. At some point in time you will have to spend hours, weeks, and even years in solitary putting words on paper that people want to read. If there is a shortcut to that, I haven't found it in 35 years. There is no magic formula to creating a great book, and it is certainly not social media!

S. MAG.: What book would you say was your transition from straight romance into more suspense/thriller writing?

S.B.: *It was a little bit more gradual than that. The first crossover—a romance that definitely had elements that I was not permitted to use at the time—was "Slow Heat to Heaven." It was the first book 'out of category,' and it was a standalone. It kind of had readers saying: "Wow! And she used to be such a nice girl." (LOL) I loved it.*

*The book that really created at least a larger spot on the genre map for me was "Mirror Image." It was my third crossover book and my first to make the New York Times bestseller list. I had been writing for nine years at that point, so it took me a while. But that book really changed my career. I was no better a writer than the day before it made the New York Times or the day after, but it was how the industry and consumers perceived me as an author, so I would say that was the turning point.*

S. MAG.: What can we expect to see from you in the future?

S.B.: *I wish the hell I knew. (LOL) My editor is coming to one of my appearances on the "Seeing Red" book tour and taking me to dinner. The next night my publisher is coming to the next event and taking me to dinner. I assume both will ask me that question. I will say, "We just got this one in the can and got it published."*

*Yesterday it was very quiet and I sat alone with my notebook on my lap. I do have an idea and I told my husband that the character is revealing himself to me in little snippets. My husband said, "It's always a good sign when you hear voices."*

*You see, it's like that. It is hard to describe, but in a way I never feel like I've created anything. I feel like the story is already there, already happening, and it's just up to me to excavate it. I feel like both the characters and the situation are already taking place in some parallel universe and, like an archaeologist, I just will join it in progress. So my husband's remark was so true; the characters are trying to attract my attention. I feel like they're waiting for me to find them.*

*I'll give myself until Labor Day, and then I have to start putting words on paper. I may start with a vague idea and then it will all of a sudden hit me—that 'Aha!' moment. When I discover what that one thing is that I know and no one else knows, I know that there is a story. That one thing is the thread that connects everything together, and I have to find that before I know I have more than just an idea...I have a story.*

Readers hope that she will "dig" those characters up soon, because Sandra Brown masterpieces are difficult to wait for! For more information on upcoming titles and events, head to [www.facebook.com/AuthorSandraBrown](http://www.facebook.com/AuthorSandraBrown). ■

## SEEING RED

By Sandra Brown

He's known as "The Major" to the world. Now seventy, Major Franklin Trapper is still known as the 'hero' who was caught in a picture decades ago; a man who raced from a building that had just been bombed, carrying a little girl in his arms. He loved the limelight at the time. He loved the interviews and having people ask him for autographs, etc. But then... it was as if he went into hiding. He hasn't done any interviews in a while, yet there is one journalist who has appeared on his horizon that's not about to take "no" for an answer.

Her name is Kerra Bailey and she's a mini-star in Dallas, Texas. With the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bombing coming up, she wants nothing more than to get an interview with the hero turned recluse. But her reasons exceed good ratings.

She shows up on the doorstep of the Major's son, John Trapper. She wants his help; trouble is, John and his father no longer speak. For John, when his father became a hero he stopped being a father. John still seethes over that fact and he tells the journalist that she will have no help from him. But when she tells him to take another look at that famous picture, John finds something that he's never seen before. He suddenly knows the journalist needs more than help; she needs protection.

This is a non-stop action, drama, sexy tale that sees the hero shot by a stranger, the reporter jumping out a bathroom window to evade the killers, and a son who has tried forever to let that bombing go, yet can't, because each day a new set of clues pops up that proves this twenty-five-year-old bombing is still unsolved.

Sandra Brown has put it all into this one, fans. There is not one dull moment, and you will find yourself gasping on more than one occasion as the secrets are revealed.

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



# NORMAN PODER'S BLUE PERIOD

By Russ Heitz

**NORMAN PODER WROTE CHILDREN'S BOOKS.** His life was quiet, peaceful, uncluttered. He was not interested in fame, or million-dollar advances. The thought of buying a gleaming yacht never entered his mind, and the Best Seller list was something he rarely glanced at. Until he met Clarissa.

She was the new girl in the secretarial pool at Morton-Smith-Skideaux when Norman arrived one grey October morning with a neat, error-free manuscript tucked inside his beige vinyl briefcase. Clarissa was impressed. Not with Norman. He seemed rather dull and lifeless in his brown, time-shiny suit and owlsh glasses. What impressed her was the fact that he was a writer, the first 'real writer' she'd ever met. She was even more impressed when she learned he was a bachelor.

She was not impressed with the books he wrote. Talking squirrels, grandmotherly bunnies, and trips to Uncle John's farm were all very nice, but they did not fit her image of what a 'writer' should write. *Never mind about that*, she thought. With a little guidance, he would see the light.

Norman Poder did not have much experience with women. So it was not surprising that he found Clarissa completely overwhelming. She was taller than he was, heavier. Not a bad figure; perhaps just a little too generous in the bust and hips. A lot of eye makeup. A cloud of very sweet perfume. What overwhelmed him most, however, was the way she talked. Which was *all* the time.

An hour later, after concluding his business with Henry Skideaux, Norman had found himself being towed—rather forcefully—out of the office, down the hall, and into the elevator. Clarissa had declared a coffee break. "We simply must have a celebration," she bubbled. "After all, it isn't every day that a writer signs a book contract!" Her unnaturally long eyelashes fluttered like butterfly wings in a high gale.

Twenty minutes later, Norman was still listening stoically as Clarissa's endless chatter bounced around the yellow walls of the almost empty cafeteria. Finally, after another breathless twenty minutes dragged by, Henry Skideaux stalked into the cafeteria and looked around pointedly. When he zeroed in on Clarissa his high, pale forehead furrowed deeply. Clarissa's eyes snapped to her watch. She blushed, grimaced apologetically at Norman, and heaved herself out of her chair.

"Gotta go," she said with a bright smile. "Henry needs me."

As she hurried away, buttocks jiggling, she wagged the fingers of one hand over her shoulder and trilled, "See you soooooo-oooo."

Norman blinked at his empty coffee cup. He would not deliver another manuscript for at least six months. Maybe longer. She should be gone by then, working somewhere else. Surely Henry Skideaux would not accept that kind of aggravation every day.

Much to Norman's chagrin, Clarissa appeared at the door of his small, second-floor walk-up on the outskirts of Philadelphia one week later to the day.

"Norman Poder! How lovely to see you again!"

She threw her arms around him and smothered him with a bosomy hug right there in the hallway. Then she thrust him away abruptly and held him at arms' length, beaming.

"I was in the neighborhood anyway doing an errand for Henry and I thought to myself, you simply must stop in to see Norman. You don't mind if I call you Norman, do you? Mister and Ms. and all that business seems stuffy, don't you think? I'm a Ms. myself, Ms. Tillburg, although divorced, of course, but I would much rather you call me Clarissa, or Clare, that's what Walter always called me, my ex-husband. The rascal just up and left me one day. Never did find out why. Another woman I suppose, someone slinky and eighteen with long blonde hair no doubt. May I come in?"

Bewildered, Norman was shouldered aside as Clarissa burst into the room and settled herself on his tiny, crushed-rose sofa. She patted the cushion beside her and Norman sat down obediently.

"You being a writer must be very exciting," she said, her eyes darting around the small living room with both interest and disapproval. "I mean, what with big cars and yachts and cocktail parties and jetting back and forth to Europe. I know how you writers are. Oh yes, I do, I've met quite a few at the office, you know, and I've read all your books too. How many are there? Seven, I think, and all very cute. I'm sure the kiddies just love them." Her eyes latched onto his. "But frankly, Norman, if I may be so bold, I think you are wasting your time on children's books. You should be writing best sellers." She jabbed her finger into his chest repeatedly, emphasizing each example. "Adventure, mayhem, sex, demons, political scandals, Mafia lawyers, things like that. That's where the money is."

Norman was at a total loss to explain, even to himself, how it happened, but within two weeks Clarissa had taken over his apartment. Four weeks later she quit her job and married him. Six weeks after that she moved him—them—into a plush, high-rise condo that overlooked the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And by the first of the year, Norman was hard at work on a new 'realistic' novel.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Clarissa said firmly.

**THE NEXT TWO YEARS SLID BY IN A SWIRL OF WORK.** Besides stories for Jack & Jill, Golden Press, and Morton-Smith-Skideaux, Norman worked on three different novels. Actually, it was a collaborative effort. Clarissa supplied the ideas. Norman did the writing.

First there was a book about four sisters—identical quadruplets—who opened a massage parlor in Las Vegas and secretly practiced witchcraft on the Mafia moguls who owned most of the gambling casinos. The next was about an ex-airline pilot who bought a rambling adobe castle in Arizona and turned it into a sex therapy dude ranch for Hollywood starlets and big-name actors. And then he wrote a suspenseful epic concerning a Playboy Bunny who joined the CIA, became the lover of an Arabian sheik, and single-handedly smashed OPEC.

They were disasters. Each in its own way.

After countless submissions by his agent, "Underground Bunny" was finally accepted by a small paperback publisher in Newark who used it for a tax write-off. Nationwide, it sold one hundred and three copies and got one review. *The Rabbit Breeders Monthly of Crockett, Kentucky*, called it a "filthy, filthy book."

Norman was disappointed by the failures, but not surprised. Clarissa was not surprised either. She was outraged.

"It's your publisher, Norman," she said, stamping her chubby foot. "He simply does not know how to handle your talent. No hype. No gossip column blurbs. No late-night TV talk shows. I can't find a copy of the book anywhere, not even on Amazon." She wagged a finger and winked an eye. "A different publisher, Norman. Simple as that."

**IF THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THEIR MARRIAGE WERE BUSY, THE THIRD YEAR WAS FRANTIC.** Clarissa became even more determined to turn Norman into a 'real writer' once and for all.

And Norman tried. He really did. For twelve, fourteen hours a day he made notes, planned chapters, ripped up pages and started all over again. On a diet of Maalox and ink-black coffee he aged ten years and lost twenty-seven pounds.

Clarissa never looked better. She beamed and hovered and urged him on until another manuscript was finished. "This is the one, Norman," she said, her teeth clamped together tightly. "I can just feel it. Can't you?"

Another suspense yarn, "The Great Trolley Hijack" did slightly better than "Underground Bunny," but only slightly. One reviewer called the novel 'flat.' Another called it 'uninspired.' And the third reviewer suggested Norman 'try his hand at children's books.'

Confused by yet another setback, Clarissa became hostile, then petulant, then moody. While Norman went doggedly back to his desk to try once more, she sat in the kitchen, hour after hour, unnervingly quiet. After three weeks, she suddenly snapped her pudgy fingers one afternoon and then slammed out the door. When she got home six hours later she promptly went to bed. The next morning the silence ended; the plan was ready.

She rushed a bleary-eyed Norman Poder into the kitchen and sat him down to a well-spread table and started in, green eyes blazing.

"You know how I feel about book reviewers, Norman, I think they're all crazy. They don't know what they're talking about. Any of them. But...well, I may be wrong. Not about all reviewers, of course. I still think 99% of them should be laying bricks or plumbing toilets. But one was right, one out of a thousand, maybe, but we must give credit where credit is due."

Banging pots, dropping forks, spilling salt, Clarissa hurried on. "Remember the one in that bus magazine? Called you uninspired? That's hard to take, believe me, I know. But I've thought about it, all this time, and you know what? He was right."

She paused for a breath, fussed with a pan of soft-boiled eggs, and then went on. "It's the city," she announced. The egg shells exploded under her knife. Hot egg yolks shot like mini-geysers into the air. "There's no vitality here, no real life, just dirt and noise and crowded streets. Here, eat. I know what I'm talking about, Norman. I've done some reading and I've done some checking, too. Use more salt. It helps the digestion. Do you know where the real writers go? To live, to work, to play, to get inspired? Not Greenwich Village, not New England, not Paris, not even California. Not any longer. No sir. For your



information—I was reading all about it at the library—they go to Florida. That's right! By the droves they're going. And do you know where in Florida? Do you know where the hot spot is? The real center of creativity? The writing capital of the whole state?"

Norman paused, the yellow dripping spoon before his mouth.

"Sarasota," she said firmly. "That's where. John D. MacDonald lived there. So did Borden Deal, MacKinlay Kantor, Evan Hunter." She ticked them off one by one. "They're all dead, I think, but that's beside the point. James Patterson lives somewhere around there, too. Anyway, that's where we're going to live, Norman. Because the only thing you need is some inspiration, and that's exactly what Sarasota has. Palm trees, sunshine, the Gulf of Mexico, beaches, yachts, everything. It'll open up a whole new world, Norman, I know it will."

Clarissa breathed a deep satisfied sigh. She looked over Norman's head, out the window, past City Hall and into the smoggy Philadelphia air. "We're moving to Sarasota," she said dreamily, her eyes half-closed.

Norman stared at his large wife for a full thirty seconds but said nothing. When the mascaraed green eyes came back into focus, she said, "Eat, Norman, your eggs are getting cold."

**SINCE CLARISSA MARRIED HIM, NORMAN HAD EARNED VERY LITTLE MONEY.** The talking squirrel stories were getting buried beneath reams of sex and blood that didn't sell. So when they got to Sarasota they had to settle for a modest, two bedroom rental near a noisy shopping center. It wasn't Bird Key. It wasn't even Siesta Key, but they were in Sarasota. The tennis courts, Lamborghini, and Excalibur boat would come later, as soon as Norman wrote a best seller.

While Norman was wracking his brain for an idea, Clarissa began sniffing out the addresses of every writer in the area, famous or not. Then she checked every chain bookstore, as well as every paperback rack in every drugstore, bus terminal, and airport within a hundred miles. Three weeks after they arrived, Clarissa rushed into Norman's cluttered little study with the results of her survey. She demanded an answer. "Do you know how many James Patterson books are on sale right this minute?"

Norman gulped down some gin and shook his head.

"Of course I don't know the exact number," she rushed on, "but it averages out to six under his name alone and nine collaborations! On each and every book rack from here to Tarpon Springs. Believe it or not, Billy's News Agency right here in town has thirty-seven different Patterson novels spread out on one rack. Thirty-seven! Bringing in God knows how much money every day. Every single day, Norman. Every. Single. Day! And you should see the house he lives in. It's gorgeous. I saw it in a magazine."

She stopped to catch her breath, gave her husband a long, thoughtful look, and then pinched his pale cheek. "Thriller suspense stories, Norman. That's where the money is."

A year later, Norman's first suspense thriller was released: "Rocky Gibraltar, Hired Assassin." It was not a best seller; but the sales and reviews were not bad. And Norman was pleased.

Clarissa was not.

"One book," she said sadly, shaking her head. "In a year's time? Sean Flannery does a book every month, and he lives right on the beach." With a sisterly pat, Clarissa told Norman to get to work.

This time, however, Norman could not get to work. Try as he might, the second *Gibraltar* novel refused to hatch. No setting, no victim, no plot. The more he struggled and thought, the less he came up with. The strain was beginning to show.

He started sitting around all day in his baggy, red boxer shorts, drinking gin. He started wandering around the house all night. Several times Clarissa found Norman in the backyard, staring up at the stars. He wouldn't shave for days on end. He started getting grumpy, short-tempered, angry at her, of all people, and she couldn't see why.

It couldn't have been her hints. Although heaven knows they *certainly* deserved a swimming pool much more than the Doones who lived next door and were retired and not wealthy and certainly not artistic, and yet they were going to build a pool! And anyway, she hadn't been talking that much about buying a house with a pool for themselves. She just mentioned it, every now and then, as an incentive, to spur Norman on to greater heights.

But the more hints she dropped about having a fancy home of their own with their own swimming pool and tennis court, the less Norman appeared to care one way or another. Sometimes Clarissa thought he wasn't even listening to her. Finally, she decided it was time to take off the white gloves. It was time for an ultimatum.

"If you don't write another book and buy me a house with a pool, Norman, I'll have to leave you. It's as simple as that."

Her eyes were like emerald chisels, chipping away at his soul. "I'll fly back to Philadelphia, get my old job back with Henry Skideaux, and start all over again. Find myself a *real* writer!" She snorted. "And you know what will happen then? Your so-called career will come to a shrieking halt. It'll be finished. Over. Kaput." She shrugged omnipotently. "It's your choice, Norman. Fame and fortune with me? Or a dead end street alone?"

**NORMAN DIDN'T RESPOND AT ALL TO THE ULTIMATUM BUT IT SEEMED TO CLARISSA** that things

started to improve, especially when the men from Sunny Day Pools started pounding stakes in the Doones' backyard. It wasn't like Norman to be hobnobbing with construction workers, but at least he was doing something. He called it research. Clarissa called it loafing. But after a while she began to relax. After all, he had stopped growling at her. And after all his chit-chat with the construction workers, she was absolutely certain he had decided to buy a home of their own. A home with a pool. As an added bonus, she also knew he was making notes for a new novel.

Next door, sitting beneath a tangerine tree, the Doones, too, were glad to see Norman out again, walking around his own backyard, a clipboard in his hands. They didn't know him very well, although the three of them had shared a six-pack when Clarissa wasn't home.

"Nice sort of chap," Scotty said to his wife, his accent clipped, lilting. "Quiet, mild mannered."

"Too bad we can't say the same for her," his wife Jan said, pursing her lips. Many times she had watched as Clarissa followed Norman in and out of the house, chattering ceaselessly, shaking her index finger at him. "No wonder he looks so pale and thin all the time," Jan said to her husband.

The day the backhoe came to dig up the Doones' backyard, Scotty and Jan went away on vacation. They thought it would be fun to leave for a while and then come back when the pool was finished.

When they returned a week later they found Norman standing on their diving board, fully dressed. After raving about the crystal blue clarity of the water, the new flagstone patio, and the drooping new banana plants, Jan casually asked about Clarissa. Norman told them she was off on a house-hunting trip to Miami. He wasn't sure when she'd be back. She wanted to check out Key West, too, Norman said. And maybe the Fort Lauderdale area.

"I see," Jan said. "Well, we'll hate to see you leave, but everyone wants a place of their own."

As summer passed, the Doones swam in their pool nearly every day. Occasionally, in the afternoon, they would see Norman stretched out in the sun, or reading under a tree. Bachelorhood, even the temporary kind, was obviously agreeing with him. Each time they saw him he looked more fit and tanned than ever before. And by the sound of the typing late at night, they were sure his writing was going well.

Leaning over the low chain link fence one Sunday morning, Jan and Scotty asked Norman what his new book was about. Norman smiled mysteriously and told them they would have to wait and see. And how, he asked, did they like their new pool?

"Very much," Scotty said, rolling his rrr's. "Had some trouble the first few weeks, during the rains. Drain pump backed up or something. Stained the water." Scotty shrugged. "Whatever it was, it went away."

By September, Norman's new book was finally finished. Jan cheered and Scotty clapped him on the back. To celebrate, they split another six-pack while Norman explained the politics of publishing. Later, Scotty suggested they all go for a swim but Norman declined, regretfully, and left. He still had a few phone calls to make, he said, to his agent and publisher.

Much to the Doones' amazement—and Norman's as well—when the book was released it shot to the top of the Best Seller list. Five magazines were battling for serialization rights. Three book clubs sued each other over it. *Reader's Digest* condensed it. And Norman was invited to every cocktail party and charity ball in Sarasota.

**SOON AFTER THAT, NORMAN PODER MOVED AWAY.** Months later the gossip columns had him living in France on a sleek new yacht. Scotty and Jan couldn't imagine that, not the Norman they knew. But they were happy for him, wherever he was, and they wished him well. They seldom thought about Clarissa. "I suppose they got a divorce," said Jan.

"Maybe so," said Scotty. And that was that.

Though not much of a novel reader himself, from time to time Scotty would glance at a book review. When he did, he thought of his old neighbor. One evening, while thumbing through a tattered copy of *Newsweek* after Jan had gone to bed, Scotty was surprised to find a familiar face peering out at him.

The beard was new, the hair longer, the face fuller, but it was definitely Norman. The picture accompanied a review of his first breakout novel.

Dated two weeks after the story had been sold to the movies, it was the most glowing report of all. Scotty, grinning with pride, skimmed from line to line.

"Great new talent ... grippingly suspenseful ... incredible authenticity ... a crowning achievement."

Then, as Scotty read on, the burgeoning pride he felt for his ex-neighbor suddenly drained away. In its place, an icy chill ran down his spine.

"With his latest *Rocky Gibraltar* masterpiece, 'The Deep Blue Pool,' the reviewer had written, "Norman Poder has finally established himself as a master of the thriller-suspense genre. It is a good thing he has chosen writing as his profession instead of murder. Our law enforcement officials would have their hands full indeed. Who, but Poder, could devise such an original method to dispose of a corpse? Beneath a swimming pool, no less. Under eight feet of water and two of cement ..."

Scotty did not read the rest. His hands felt cold as he entered the garage. After stuffing the old magazine deep into a trash can, he went back inside and crawled into bed.

It was a year before Scotty went swimming again. ■



# SWINGING

By Scott Miles

When Jim read the headline: “Fishermen Find Body in River Near Wyandotte,” he first thought calling those grifters who chugged motor-oil sized cans of shit beer and lazily casted a line every other hour ‘fishermen’ was generous. Secondly, Wyandotte is where these ‘fishermen’ found the decomposed body of his brother, Ronnie, thirty years ago.

Jim flattened the Saturday morning newspaper on the dining room table, the ink smudging under his damp, meaty paw, and he imagined his brother’s bloated body slogging through the Detroit River, lungs full of murk, the chop slapping at his head, his temple repeatedly thudding into the muddy shore.

Jim replayed this messy scene in his head for the last thirty years, and as he does with every dead body that’s yanked from the water near Wyandotte or Del Ray or River Rouge or Trenton, Jim put on his shoes and made his way riverside that morning to catch the story.

\*\*\*

It was too late for a crime scene, and the only fisherman Jim could find was half in the bag. Jim stopped the man as he was lugging a bucket of unused chum back to his car. The man also had a wet paper sack with two ratfish inside. The fumes of alcohol from his maw outweighed the stink of the fish.

“They bitin’ today?” Jim said.

“Been worse.”

Jim lit a cigarette, offered one to the older black man, and while admiring the rough-hewn patches of white beard crawling along the man’s face, he asked, “You see what the body looked like?”

The fisherman looked askance, then made a jerk-off motion with his hand down near his crotch, and said, “You get off on this shit or what?”

Without a hand gesture, Jim assured the fisherman he did not get off on this.

“Fat, ugly, and purple.”

“White?” As soon as Jim asked, he regretted the question.

“Would it have made headlines if the body was black?”

“Probably not,” Jim said.

“It’s not the first dead body we’ve seen pop up over here. But they all look the same.”

Jim studied the burden in the man’s eyes. He could feel the soul of the fisherman hurtling toward the light. It was a quiet journey. The fisherman didn’t have much time on this planet. Neither one of them did.

“Badly decayed?”

“Nah. It was fresh. Still intact,” the fisherman said.

“You see the color of his hair?”

The fisherman squinted, and said, “Gray and gross. Thick, like an unwashed mop.”

Jim’s brother had hair like that, but instead had cakey coils of dirt-red hair. The neighborhood kids, of course, called him Howdy Doody or fire crotch or carrot top. Jim wanted this teasing to be some skewed version of camaraderie for his brother, but the words eventually transitioned into something cruel.

“What’s it to you?” the old man said.

“Let’s just say it’s everything to me,” Jim said. “Thanks for the info.” He gave the fisherman a five-spot and moved over to the coffee shop on Biddle to have some coffee.

\*\*\*

Jim’s father, a welder by trade, referred to it as the Funny Farm, which was a hunk of farmland his family owned, over a hundred acres located in Ontario, an hour northwest of Toronto. Woods, some veggies, some fruit—a gooseberry bush that yielded a spectacular jam—but mostly it was a dairy farm and stunk of manure. The strained grunts of cows could be heard from the main house all day long.

Jim's uncle ran the farm. Everyone called him Uncle Hernia, a name Jim didn't quite understand until he was much older, despite the man's jerk-jellied limp and scuffed mahogany walking cane.

Every summer when school ended, Jim's father drove him up to the farm where his uncle put him to work. On the ride north, his father stopped at every bar possible, each one a grubby, disagreeable tavern barely visible from the side of the road. Jim would sit alone in his father's Thunderbird, waiting for the old man to finish his beer, no keys in the ignition, the windows rolled down, the tick of an overheated car and the buggy thicket of Canadian meadows his only music.

His brother Ronnie, born nine years after Jim, stayed home with his mother, as he was much too young to do the work, which perhaps made the boy soft and lily-livered.

The work was grueling, even to a strapping teenager like Jim, but there was also solace and isolation up at that farm; leeches in the nearby lake. Jim missed his high school buddies while milking the cows, or filling the grain bins, or while catching late movies in town by himself during the weekends, or smoking cigarettes in the alley behind the diner after a piece of rhubarb pie and a cup of black coffee.

There was no one to cut up with, no one to chase with his dick. Jim learned to accept the stillness of the cool evenings, the well-articulated thrum of the mornings. Toward the end of the season was always bittersweet. Late August, the corn arrived, the harvest was plentiful, and the burnt yellow leaves fell to the earth. Jim would get some scratch from his Uncle Hernia, and he was finally able to go back home with his father, back to the roughshod streets of Detroit, the chuckholes, the bent traffic lights, civilization.

Before he could blend back in with his high school buddies in the fall, however, Jim had to help with the task of slaughtering the substandard dairy cows, bludgeoning the animals in the head with a sledgehammer. It was a daunting chore, slippery, the cow's brains often hanging loose after one good pop, grizzly skull chips lying about. Jim's natural heft helped him swing, and the older farmhands who pitched in during previous summers had already done their share. Swinging was his job, and Jim tried to be proud.

\*\*\*

Ronnie was a rotund kid, beefy, despite the drugs, despite the burning desire to run himself ragged. Jim drank his coffee at the coffee shop and thought it must've been hard work dragging his brother's fat ass to the river. Ever since 9/11, Homeland Security has cracked down on the Detroit shoreline, but thirty years ago, and even today, there are still pockets of unused land or industrial waste spots that offer those sweet, unimpeded moments someone needs to dump a body into the river.

While Jim took up welding like his father, Ronnie dropped out of high school and moved to the city where he swiftly attended his many vices: drugs, drink, lewd and lascivious behavior, gambling.

Ronnie's insolvency eventually landed him with the wrong people. These people knew their father. These people knew everyone's father in River Rouge. These people came to see Jim and his father after work one day. They talked in the garage with the smell of acetone and bagged grass. These people made threats against Ronnie, against Jim, against Jim's father, against Jim's mother.

The threats were useless, and Jim's father made that clear to these men in the garage. Jim's family had no collateral. They had neither money nor political power. Their only possessions were the Thunderbird, their welding equipment and their clothes, which were filled with holes from welding sparks.

"So, do your worst," Jim's father said.

"What're we going to do?" Jim asked his father after the men left.

"What *can* we do, Jim?"

That's when his father left him alone in the garage, and Jim had those same quiet but discordant moments he experienced up on that farm; lonely, hollow, only the soft drone from the inner workings of a world no one could understand toiling away in the background.

\*\*\*

Those mornings near the end of August, to escape the cows, Jim would feign sickness. He would wake up and complain of blinding headaches, nausea, but his Uncle Hernia never bit.

"Here. Take this," his uncle said, and handed him a weathered can of menthol camphor, the tin cover dented in a way that fit Jim's forefinger perfectly. "Daub some under your nostrils. You'll be fine."

With each swing, his nostrils numb and runny, the overpowering sting of the greasy camphor blurring his eyes, Jim would sink deeper and deeper into acquiescence, realizing and eventually accepting the fact that these cows had no other fate.

\*\*\*

Years after his brother was found in the river, and shortly after his parents passed away (mother: aneurysm; father: cadmium poisoning), Jim inherited the house in River Rouge, along with his father's welding equipment, the hole-riddled clothes. Around this time, Jim began to notice the variety of bodies that washed up in the river: suicides, car accidents, drownings.



Once, a recreational scuba diver found a headless man stuffed in the trunk of a car resting on the river bottom. Various body parts would also float around the river. Fleshy stumps snagged on fishing hooks as fishermen jigged for walleye. Jim tracked as many bodies as he could, collected newspaper clippings, thought about joining a scrapbook club, if only to socialize about the macabre.

Jim always stopped at the coffee shop on Biddle after snooping with the fishermen, who always had more details than the newspapers. The coffee shop owner was a meddling Pole named Martin, and he quickly latched on to Jim's scrapbook game. Jim could always feel Martin watching him from behind the cappuccino station, his eyes scanning as Jim fingered the newspaper clippings, jotting down his logic, tracing maps, and enjoying the best cup of coffee this town had to offer.

"You know they have those articles online these days?" Martin said once.

"What's that?"

Martin had pale skin and thin, emaciated teeth which poked obtrusively from his mouth when he talked. "The internet," he said. "You can bookmark these same newspaper articles. Everything is archived."

Jim laughed and hastily folded up the clippings, stuffing them into his pocket.

"I know what you're doing. I know about your brother," Martin said.

Jim remained guarded, composed. "You know nothing of my brother."

"Maybe that's true," the Pole said. "But I do know he's not going to wash up on that shore again."

"It's not my brother I'm expecting," Jim said.

\*\*\*

They pulled up in a hampered white cargo van. Jim had been walking home from Barney's Bar on the corner, besotted with gin on a Friday eve, work done, entwined with thoughts of vagrancy. A fierce man in the passenger seat jumped out of the van and decked Jim hard. On his knees, the gravel chewing into his work pants, Jim could hear crabbed moans in the back of the cargo van.

"Get up!" The kick came from a steel toe boot and vacuumed out his entire cavity.

The driver then got out of the van, too, and together they hoisted Jim off the ground. The men were a blur, an angelic but violent tandem. They slammed him against the metal wall of the van, dented, which, again, seemed to fit Jim perfectly. They took turns at his midsection, particularly the spleen.

The men then dragged him to the open back door of the van, forced him to look.

Inside the van Jim saw his brother bound with ragged rope, a burlap sack cinched tight over his head. Ronnie was in the middle of a conniption fit, and as he scrambled helplessly along the floor of the van, Jim noticed the floor was covered with potting mixture, errant jade leaves.

"Jim? Jim?" his brother said. "Is that you, Jim?" A fold of flab escaped his brother's shirt.

The driver of the van extended a blackjack and popped Ronnie in the knee a few times. Like a halved worm, Jim watched his brother as he writhed, inching further away from the violence.

"This is it," the passenger of the van said. He was short of breath. "Last chance."

Jim stood mute, paralyzed. The inky eyes of both men never wavered.

"Close it up," the driver said, who then approached Jim and pressed the leather truncheon to the side of his face, whispered with salty air, "We'll be back for you." Jim noticed a strip of white hair that ran along the man's otherwise black locks, the color and texture like a skunk's tail.

The van doors closed. The driver clipped Jim in the back of the knee with the blackjack and Jim fell to the ground, his head near the scratched bumper of the van, an orange tennis ball secured on top of the trailer hitch. The exhaust was strong, heating the side of his face. Jim pulled himself up, leaned his weight against the van door, felt the rumble of the van surging with life.

With a closed right fist, Jim gave the metal door a thump three times.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Then the white cargo van screeched off.

\*\*\*

They never came back for Jim, or his mother, or his father. Ronnie's body washed up the following spring on Mud Island, across from a busy boat launch in Del Ray. His brother's right leg below the knee had been snapped off, presumably where the men had sloppily tied the cinder block to weigh Ronnie down.

As often as Jim envisioned his brother washing up on that shore, a malady he wouldn't wish upon his worst enemy (another one: his brother's hand dragging across the marshy sticks, the cattails sunning themselves without care), he was glad he didn't see the dead body. His mother insisted on a closed casket, insisted they would remember Ronnie as he was in pictures—aloof, a freewheeling grin, an insular glare.

Jim's father remained tight-lipped throughout the police proceedings, never mentioning the visit from the men, never

mentioning any insight into his son's gambling debts. Jim and his mother did the same. The detectives called them in to the station and asked all the right questions, but they didn't press, even escorted Jim's mother out of the exam room with a caring hand on her shoulder.

The local news made vague reports of Ronnie's death, which wasn't exactly mysterious or overly tragic, but rather ordinary. Ronnie's leg never turned up either, and no one ever again mentioned the cause of death or why his brother was in the river in the first place.

\*\*\*

Jim had just bought a maple sapling at a nursery out near Metro airport when he again spotted the same white cargo van. This time it was parked. This time it was eight years after Ronnie was found on Mud Island. This time it was late summer, the days soaring by, Jim's welding life still in its infancy, the bumpy road of mild dermal abrasions and respiratory issues far, far ahead.

Earlier that spring, a bolt of lightning had downed an old pear tree in the backyard. Jim had the tree uprooted, the metal fence mended, and the sod replaced. Jim was glad the tree was gone. He hadn't eaten a pear from that tree in years, as he disliked the grainy texture, the dry residue that remained in his mouth afterwards, the syrupy fragrance from the fallen, sun-beaten fruit on the ground.

After securing the sapling in the bed of his pickup truck, the burlap rubbing his forearms raw, Jim approached the cargo van in the back of the lot. The dent from his body was still there, and he could see the trailer hitch still had the same orange tennis ball on top, just dirtier and more frayed.

Jim went back to his truck and waited inside the cab with the windows rolled down. The parking lot was calm and tranquil, only the dull, encompassing roar from low flying planes filled the air. Soon, the nauseating crawl of a headache was inching its way up his neck, and the smell of cindered wood and earthy mulch seeping out of the nursery was making him gag.

Twenty minutes later, a man Jim recognized as the driver exited the nursery carrying two potted ferns with hooks that would eventually be placed on a trellis. Jim watched the man as he opened the back of the van and situated the ferns inside, his white streak of hair now set against a backdrop of blanched gray hair. The parking lot was absent of customers but full of parked cars, the sun glinting off the windshields, the black tar pavement absorbing the last of summer's warmth.

Jim grabbed the fencing mallet from the bed of his truck, which he'd used earlier in the week to hammer in the posts of his new fence. He was also going to use the mallet to pound in the stakes of the maple tree, the stakes fuzzy and pillowed like unwashed socks. Jim approached the van again, trembling. Only the legs of the driver could be seen behind the doors, his boots depressed, flecked with mud.

Picking up into a momentous jog, Jim lowered his shoulder and barreled into the van's back door, bulldozing the driver's body, the parking lot whirling. Jim opened the van door and saw that the man's body was heavy with unconsciousness. He slammed the door again into the man's flailing head to make sure.

Jim composed himself and stood over the man. He took a deep breath and began his upswing, then brought down the mallet on top of the man's head. The mallet made a soft thump. A warm trickle of snot began to seep from Jim's nose as he brought down the mallet again, and again, and again.

When Jim was done swinging, the parking lot was still vacant. Everything had happened quickly. Hooking his raw forearms underneath the man's armpits, Jim lifted the man up and then heaved him into the van next to the ferns. One of the ferns kicked over and spilled rich dirt onto the van's floor. He then rummaged through the man's pockets and found the keys. The van started without issue.

\*\*\*

Welding the chains and weights to each limb of the dead body and then dumping the man into the river did not present a problem. The body slid in, swirled briefly, like waste in a flushing toilet, and then disappeared with slow, boiling bubbles rising to the top of the dirty river water.

The most difficult part was deciding where to ditch the van. After cleaning it with bleach and disposing of the ferns, Jim settled on leaving it in a small industrial park near the airport. Dusk had begun to eclipse the day and brought along with it a cool wind. The walk to a nearby liquor store was almost pleasant.

The cab Jim called from a payphone dropped him off at a hoagie shop down the street from the nursery. Jim contemplated getting a sandwich for dinner, something robust with red sauce, fatty meat. Instead, he walked back over to the nursery's parking lot, which was emptier than when he left it.

The maple sapling was still in the bed of his truck, tilting somewhat to the left. Jim would plant it the next morning, and over the years, as he went down to the river whenever a dead body washed up, after eventually realizing the driver of the van was secured safely on the river bottom, the tree grew, the leaves strong with veins and a color that was most spectacular in the fall. ■



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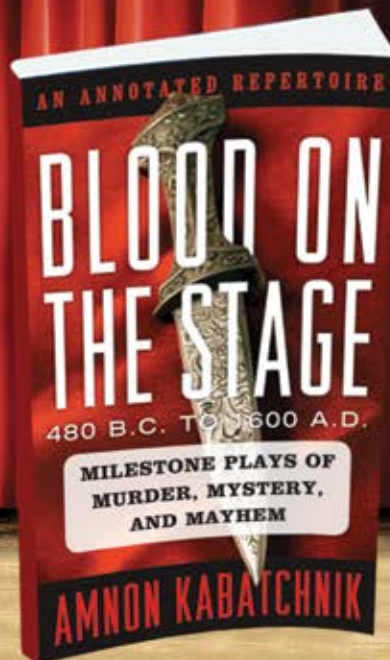
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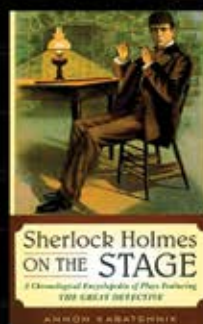
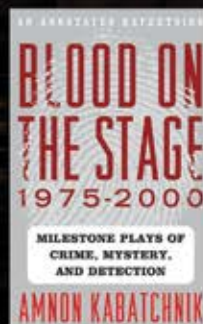
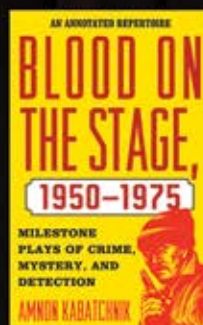
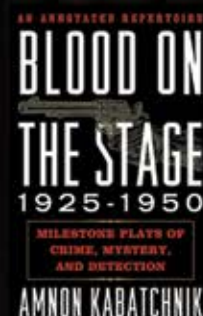
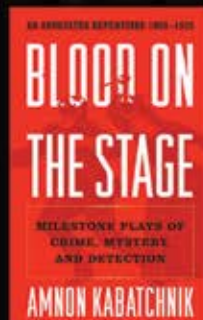
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