

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

MARCH/APRIL 2018

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With Suspense*

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DENNIS PALUMBO

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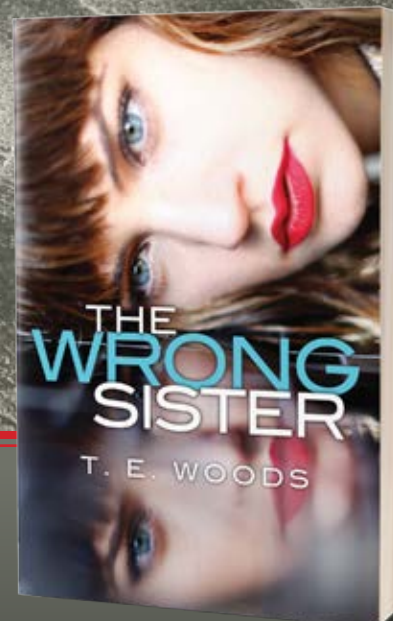
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FROM THE EDITOR

We're already one third of the way through 2018, but I think every year we say the same thing: "WOW, this year is going by fast!" We are coming up to summer movie blockbuster season. It used to be that summer blockbusters started, well...in summer, but now they start in spring, this year as early as March with the reboot of *Tomb Raider*. While we mostly talk about books in this magazine, we love to focus on

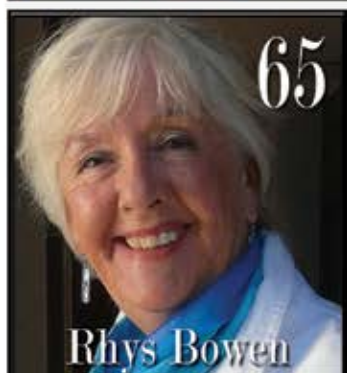
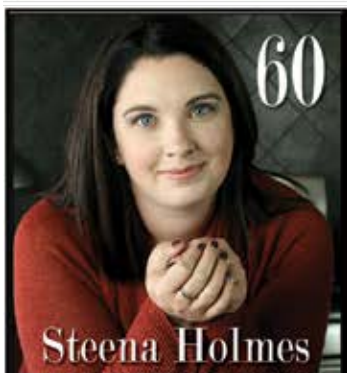
all arts that tell a story within the genre. So, what I decided to do with this letter is give you the top movies you *should* see this summer. I won't put them in order of watching, but instead by release date, starting with the earliest.

1. ***Avengers: Infinity War***. Marvel has been building up for this moment ever since they released *Iron Man*. All the big boys are in this one, and it will probably be the biggest box office winner this year. (April 27)
2. ***Deadpool 2***. Starring Ryan Reynolds, this is the sequel to the wildly popular *Deadpool*. It's rated R for a reason, so don't bring the kids! It's not your average superhero movie, which is what makes it so great. (May 18)
3. ***Solo: A Star Wars Story***. This is another movie outside the normal realm of the *Star Wars* legacy, with Ron Howard picking up the reigns to direct. Depending on the initial reviews and how angry *Star Wars* fans were with *The Last Jedi*, this movie could end up challenging *Infinity War* for biggest box office take. (May 25)
4. ***Ocean's Eight***. Starring Sandra Bullock, Anne Hathaway, Cate Blanchett, Rihanna and more, this is a take on the popular *Ocean's* movies, but with females taking the lead. (June 8)
5. ***The Incredibles 2***. Been waiting for this for years. I want to see the baby kick some butt! (June 15)
6. ***Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom***. I *know*, yet another one. However, they are all pretty entertaining with great CGI. Won't win any awards, but should entertain one and all for at least two hours. (June 22)
7. ***Ant-Man and the Wasp***. *Ant-Man* with Paul Rudd was okay, at best, which is probably why they put him with another hero to stimulate the series. (July 6)
8. ***Mission: Impossible – Fallout***. I'm not sure you can say *Mission: Impossible* anymore when Tom Cruise shows it's more than possible. Becoming the new "James Bond" movie, you will have all the normal scenes and action. Again, won't win any awards, but should entertain you, especially on that big screen. (July 27)
9. ***Christopher Robin***. It's like a play on *Hook* that starred Robin Williams. Christopher Robin is all grown up and headed back to the Hundred Acre Wood to find his childhood spirit again. (August 3)
10. ***MEG***. A book written by Steve Alten, starring Jason Statham. Not only are we so happy to see Steve get his book to the big screen, we might have some 'behind the scenes' interviews for this one. (August 10)

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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SCONES and SCOUNDRELS

By Molly MacRae
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Chapter 1

"Janet, I dare you to read this and tell me you aren't ready to commit bloody murder."

Janet took a step back as Sharon blazed toward her, shaking her fist and the letter gripped in it. Even with the barrier of the sales counter between them, Janet took another step back when Sharon slapped the paper on the countertop in front of her.

Janet Marsh had smiled when the bell over the door of Yon Bonnie Books jingled and Sharon Davis entered the shop, though the smile was against her better judgment. In the few months she'd known her, she'd learned that Sharon had a way of presenting "opportunities" that turned into more than Janet had bargained for. Still, asking Janet if she might be ready to commit "bloody murder" was kicking it up a notch.

"Go on," Sharon said. "Open it. Read it."

Janet couldn't. Sharon's fist held it to the counter.

"I've no doubt," Sharon said, "that Gillian will stop by and give you a copy of your own. But you can thank me for letting you see these ridiculous demands two weeks ahead of your event and not a mere three days prior to." She punctuated each word of the unacceptable time frame with a pound of her fist on the paper.

Janet guessed she could move fast enough to snatch the paper between pounds. Sharon might be ten years younger, but Janet trusted her own reflexes. Even so, she opted for waiting at a safe distance.

With Sharon's last bang, her fist stayed in the center of the paper, pinning it to the counter like a squashed bug. From the way her breath came in ragged puffs, Janet wouldn't have been surprised to see steam jetting from her ears. When Sharon's breathing calmed, Janet stepped forward to give the paper a gentle tug.

"Oh. Sorry." Sharon took her fist away. She shook the hand out then patted it over her short hair. "I'm surprised it isn't standing on end like hackles. Sorry about barging in like a mad dog." She banged the counter one more time. "But Gillian Bennett has a lot to answer for."

Janet had thought the same of Sharon when they first met, but she tried not to hold it against her. Sharon, as director of the Inversgail Library and Archives, was often in a position of having to raise funds or recruit volunteers. Janet knew about the wiles needed by public servants to meet the needs of their institutions. Before following her retirement dream and moving from the prairies of central Illinois to Inversgail on the west coast of Scotland, Janet had been a librarian too.



Even knowing Sharon's temperament, Janet was a bit surprised she was so on edge. Gillian Bennett was the principal teacher in the English department at the Inversgail High School, and it was thanks to her foresight and organizational skills that a renowned writer was coming to spend the next three months as an author-in-residence.

Janet unfolded the paper, but before she could read it, Sharon snatched it back.

"It's a list of the most preposterous demands from a visiting author I have ever seen," Sharon said. "Listen to this."

Janet sat down on the high stool behind the counter and waited while Sharon fumbled a pair of reading glasses. Sharon seemed not to have noticed that Janet hadn't, so far, said a word. Another indication, Janet thought, that Sharon was unusually rattled. True, Daphne Wood was not a typical visiting author. She was an award-winning environmental writer, known internationally as the icon of ecology, who led the life of a modern day Thoreau. She lived in a log cabin she'd built herself in the wilds of Canada, and she was being brought to Inversgail as an author-in-residence for three months of the autumn school term. But more than that, she was being brought home. She'd lived in Inversgail during part of her childhood and her arrival was keenly anticipated, from what Janet could tell. The library was hosting the inaugural author event Friday evening, but there was no reason for that to be as catastrophically rattling as Sharon was making it out to be.

Glasses found at last, and settled on Sharon's nose, Janet assumed she was about to hear a reason. Possibly several.

Sharon snapped the paper to attention and read. "Requirements for library and bookstore appearances: laptop with Microsoft Office and Photoshop software; access to a color printer with scanning, fax, and copier capabilities; photo paper for printer—glossy—two reams; ice cold Pepsi Free—one six-pack; hot tea—any variety, but *no* Earl Grey; Jaffa Cakes; McVities Chocolate Digestives—*dark* chocolate, *not* milk; quiet room away from the public with smoking permissible—if such is not available, though it is preferable, then a porch or similar fresh air structure, well sheltered from weather, is acceptable; tissues; three Pilot G-2 0.5 pens—black; one Pilot G-2 0.7 pen—blue; assistant with Post-its ready and responsible for ascertaining proper spelling of names and inscriptions, opening books to title page for signing, keeping order among patrons waiting in line, popping Pepsi Free tops, pouring tea."

Sharon snapped the paper again and slammed it on the counter. "And at the end of that lengthy and ludicrous list, she asked for a ceramic bowl with fresh water to which I say *havers*."

"A bowl? And she specified ceramic? That's a new one." The fist came down again and Janet hastily added, "It does sound like nonsense. Havers, absolutely."

"I'm glad you agree. So, are you going to kill her or will I have to do it for both of us?"

Janet's eyebrows had drawn steadily closer together as Sharon read. At the repeated question of killing, Janet's eyebrows shot upward. "Surely—"

"It's a joke?" Sharon said. "I thought so, too. I even laughed when Gillian gave it to me. Gillian didn't."

"But surely Gillian isn't responsible for that list," Janet said. "It came from Daphne Wood, didn't it? Gillian must be as blindsided by it as you are. As you and I *both* are," she added for placatory good measure. "And your event is Friday, isn't it? That gives you five days."

"Only if you count today and the day of."

Which, Janet thought, any reasonable person would. "The list is probably negotiable, though, don't you think? And your event is the dedication and *ceilidh* dance to welcome Daphne and recognize Gillian's father for his work in Glen Sgail. It's more of a party and she won't be signing books. It sounds to me like this covers the requirements for the whole three months of the author-in-residence visit and not something you—we—need to worry about." Janet waited until she saw a grudging nod from Sharon. "I'm sure Gillian's only the messenger. And you know what they say about shooting the messenger."

Sharon's nod became a glower. "Clichés exist for a reason."

"In that case," Janet said, "let's indulge in a few more and look on the bright side. I'll talk to Gillian and see what we can work out. You and I won't let that list put a damper on our day or the excitement of Daphne's visit. How does that sound?" To her own ears, it sounded twee, but a guttural noise rose from Sharon's throat, and Janet chose to interpret it as agreement.

She came out from behind the counter and walked with Sharon to the door. She meant just to open and hold the door for Sharon, but then decided to step outside with her. "*Isn't* it a beautiful day? Better than any cliché we can dream up. Cloudless sky, waves gently lapping, Rab and Ranger ignoring the tourists but looking picturesque on the harbor wall."

"Don't let the sun fool you." Sharon clamped her lips on that statement, but too late to keep another guttural from escaping. With a parting sniff, she left.

"She's right, you ken." An elderly woman with a shopping bag had stopped beside Janet. "Do you see yon cat with Rab MacGregor and his wee dog?"

"Yes."

"Cats are aye right. It's washing its ears. Rain's on the way."

If that were true, Janet thought as she watched the woman continue up the High Street, then the cats of Inversgail, Scotland, must have the cleanest ears in creation. She tipped her head to look as high into the clear blue as she could before going back into the bookshop.

Her daughter came out of the storeroom as Janet disappeared down the aisle where they shelved language books.

"Did I hear the sounds of an irate librarian a little bit ago?" Tallie called after her.

"And you didn't come to rescue me?"

"You were using your calm mom voice, so I knew you had it under control."

"I think I reassured her," Janet said. "Somewhat. She had new details for the Daphne Wood program at the library and

our book signing, and they put her in a stew. But you know Sharon." She ran a finger along a shelf until she found the book she wanted, then took it back to the sales counter.

"I don't know Sharon much beyond saying hello or wondering what new stew she's in." Tallie looked at the cloth she'd brought from the storeroom, wiped her hands on it, and then stuck it in a back pocket. "You can't say you really know her either, can you?"

"But she came to me in an agitated state and I consider that the sign of a friend in need," Janet said as she leafed through the book. "Even if I couldn't do much to help in the moment. Ah." She looked up. "Listen to how many words we have for describing rain now that we're here. Black weat, blatter, blaw bye, and dreep. Dribble, drouk, onding, and peuch. Plype, saft, scudder, and smirr. There's more, too, and I've heard some of them, but not all. I'm going to start keeping track. A life list, the way birders do."

"Put them to music and I'll do a jig at Nev's tonight." Tallie looked from the sunny view out the window to her mother. "Is Sharon worried about the weather for Friday night? We've only been in dribbly Scotland a few months and yet we've taken to the scuddering dreeps and blaw byes like ducks to drouks. If we can plan around a plype, what's her problem?"

"You have a good head for vocabulary, dear. But her problem isn't the weather. It's a sudden attack of persnickety specifics." Janet didn't mention Sharon's talk of bloody murder, not wanting to give her daughter, the former lawyer, a cause for alarm. "The Persnickety Specifics"—that's what we can call ourselves when I sing and you do your jig at Nev's. We'll be a hit."

"Nice. I'll go on back to the storeroom and limber up while I finish checking in the order."

The bell jingled again and Janet turned to greet the next customer. Tallie took the cloth she'd stuck in her pocket and whirled it around her head with a whoop as she headed for the storeroom.

The morning's business continued in a steady trickle. Something more than a smirr of business, Janet decided, but less than the all-out frenzy of a blatter. Customers came and went, some passing first through Cakes and Tales, their adjoining tearoom, and bringing with them the smell of fresh cakes and scones. The occasional clinks and clatters from the tearoom were a muted counterpoint to Emanuel Ax tickling Chopin from a piano on the CD playing over the sound system. All in all, and despite Sharon's worries about the impending author visit, it was the kind of morning that made Janet believe she, Tallie, and their business partners Christine Robertson and Summer Jacobs had been sane and completely right when they'd made the decision that brought them to Inversgail.

Six months earlier, and after more months of researching, planning, and finagling, they'd pooled their resources, leapt after their dream, and bought Yon Bonnie Books and the building it had occupied for the past ninety-nine years. Two months after signing their names to the deed, the four had packed up their Midwestern lives and freighted them across the Atlantic. Janet and Tallie, having spent several decades of

summers in Inversgail, were familiar with the town. Summer, a journalist, had studied for a year at Edinburgh University and promised herself she'd return one day for "a total Scottish Immersion Experience." Christine, who'd grown up in Inversgail, was returning home to aging parents after living thirty years with her late husband in the same Illinois prairie town as Janet.

The four women liked the symmetry of being the fourth set of owners since Colonel Stuart Farquhar opened the door of Yon Bonnie Books in 1919. They were already convinced the town would suit them. Inversgail was neither as small as a village, nor as large as a city. It was somewhere in between, and that was just right. They'd studied the shop's financial records and further convinced themselves the business would work as an augmented retirement for the two older women and a revitalizing change of career for the younger two. The scheme they'd dreamed up, which included adding a tearoom next door and a bed and breakfast above, called for as much leaping of faith as it did careful planning. But they'd made the leap, and although there were early-morning hours when Janet imagined their lives as a teetering balance of level heads and a yearning for adventure, she felt they were accomplishing their goal.

*

Tallie, pushing a cart loaded with new books from the storeroom, stopped by the sales counter. "Why *did* Sharon want to share her agitation with us? Anything we really need to worry about?"

"Us? With all we've accomplished?"

"Because more of Daphne's books came in." Tallie patted the books on one side of the cart. Daphne Wood was the kind of versatile author booksellers dream of, one who could write successfully for adults and children. She could capture the imagination of lay readers and the more seriously science-minded. She'd written three beautifully illustrated picture books and a popular series of novels in narrative poetry for the hard-to-please middle school set. "Lovely things," Tallie said, stroking one of the picture books. "Lots of them, too."

"Are there plenty in the window display?"

"Stacks there, too. It'll be a shame if we have to send most of them back. Not so good for the budget either."

"I'll check with Gillian," Janet said. "There might be a hiccup or two, but nothing we can't handle."

"That's because you're Super Book Woman," Tallie said. "Able to read tall stacks of books in a single evening by the fire, although not quite able to reach the top shelf in our lofty philosophy section."

"That's why stepstools and daughters were invented," Janet said. Neither of the Marsh women were tall, but Janet enjoyed her bragging rights for having produced a daughter who, at five foot four, soared over her by two inches.

"Also why we have Rab," Tallie said. "He's coming in today, isn't he? Shall I leave these for him to shelve?"

Janet went to the window and scanned the harbor wall. Rab MacGregor was no longer in sight. Neither was his Cairn terrier or the cat. Rab was an odd-jobs man whom Janet could believe was anywhere from a weatherworn forty

to a fresh-faced sixty. He worked for various people and at various jobs around Inversgail. He also worked for them in the shop and the tearoom, "various" again being a good word to describe his hours and duties, both of which were more or less self-assigned. Rab's services came as a package deal; where he went, so did his dog, Ranger. Ranger was as capable of self-direction as Rab, although Ranger's intentions could never be described as "various." When Rab was on the premises, Ranger invariably directed himself to one of the comfy chairs near the fireplace. He was mindful of the chairs, though, and waited patiently beside "his" for Rab to cover it with a Glasgow Rangers tea towel.

Rab had a reputation for lacking get-up-and-go. Christine accepted his reputation at face value. "He drifts to a different drummer, rather than marches," she'd said when he first came to work for them. "But despite his easy-oasy ways, he does a fine job when he actually shows up. He'll do."

Janet had a different theory. She'd known Rab during the years her family spent summers in Inversgail. She'd watched him do carpentry repairs, delicate pruning, the mucky and back-breaking work of digging up a water line, and more recently an almost eerie session of reading tea leaves. She believed he'd planted his reputation, that he cultivated, tended, and guarded it, and that behind it there were intricate workings, puzzles, and endeavors they only saw when he let them.

"Rab might be in today," Janet said in answer to Tallie's question. "Or maybe tomorrow. He said it depends on a deadline and whether he beats it or meets it." She heard a snort that sounded like either disbelief or derision. Not from Tallie, though—Summer had arrived from the tearoom with a plate of pastries.

"A deadline?" Summer asked. "Rab really said that?"

"Something like it, anyway."

Janet smiled and took the plate from Summer. She admired Summer's drive to make their business succeed, and the added energy she'd been putting into writing a weekly advice column for the *Inversgail Guardian*. But this attitude toward their lower-octane handyman had crept in recently, and Janet wanted to find out what was behind it. Not on the shop floor, though.

"Time to stop and smell the scones?" she asked instead.

"Smell, taste, and then tell me what you think of them," Summer said. "A new recipe. But tell me later. I have to get back."

"What are you calling them?" Janet asked, passing the plate and a napkin to Tallie.

"If you can't tell what they are, I'll need to tweak the recipe," Summer called over her shoulder. She waved without looking back again, and returned to the clinks and clatters of the tearoom.

"Does she sound stressed?" Janet asked Tallie.

"She sounds like Summer."

Janet took a bite of her scone and considered that. "But you don't think that lately she seems a bit more so?"

"A bit more Summer than Summer? What does that even mean?"

"Maybe she should slow down, look around? I'm not sure."

"Mom, I run three miles every morning to stay in shape, but for as long as I've known Summer, she's burned off the equivalent number of calories just planning what she's going to wear any given day. She's in her element and she's focused. She's fine."

"I'm sure you're right, sweetie. I'll forget all about it and focus on these scones." Janet took another bite. "They're orange, no question. A hint of almond? And something else, but I'm not sure what. What do you think?"

"That you aren't really sure I'm right about Summer. You only call me sweetie when you're distracted."

"What an interesting tic. How long have you been taking advantage of it? But you know, *dear*, you can't always *be* right. That's my job. I'm the smother."

Tallie laughed, as Janet knew she would. "Never in your life have you smothered," Tallie said. "You are the very model of unsmothering motherhood. But going all Mother Hen is another story. You do know that Summer won't appreciate you clucking over her, don't you?" She wrapped her scone in the napkin and put it on the bottom shelf of the book cart, then looked at her mother over the rims of her glasses.

"And she won't appreciate you ignoring that scone," Janet said.

"Saving, not ignoring. It's Monday. I want to get these books put away before the Highland Holidays coach pulls in after lunch."

"Good thinking. Do you want help?"

"Nah. I'll shelve the books. You shelve your worries."

Janet mimed putting a book on a shelf. "There you go. Under *U* for Unfounded."

"And if you ever write your memoirs, I'll shelve them under *N* for Nuts I've Known and Loved."

Janet blew Tallie a kiss and watched her disappear with the cart of books down the aisle between some of the tallest and most eclectic of their mismatched bookcases. She finished her scone, thinking of it as fortification for the onslaught of day trippers the Monday tour bus out of Fort William usually brought. The identity of the spice that complimented the orange so well in the scone eluded her. But that was what labels in the bakery case were for.

She wiped her fingers on her napkin and congratulated herself. She still had a mother's touch. And a mother's ability to reassure her child, no matter how old, how accomplished, or how astute that child might be. What Tallie hadn't heard about bloody murder wouldn't hurt her. ■

The Boston Globe says Molly MacRae writes "murder with a dose of drollery." *"Scones and Scoundrels,"* book two in Molly's Highland Bookshop Mystery series, came out in January. She's also the author of the award-winning Haunted Yarn Shop Mysteries from NAL/Penguin (and being continued by Pegasus Crime). Her short stories have appeared in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine since 1990 and she is a winner of the Sherwood Anderson Award for Short Fiction. Molly lives in Champaign, Illinois. You can visit her at www.mollymacrae.com and www.killercharacters.com.

ENOUGH!

HOW NOT TO OVER-WRITE



By Dennis Palumbo

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There's a great moment in the classic film *Key Largo*, when gangster Edward G. Robinson is asked—given the extent of his wealth and power—what he could possibly still want. “More,” he famously answers.

More. Kind of the American credo in a nutshell, which isn't as damning as it sounds. The word “more,” when appearing before such other words as *individual rights*, *artistic freedom* and *access to information*, stands as a proud element of the Western imperative. On the downside, *more* has also fueled global climate change, a worrisome income inequality, and an almost obscene preoccupation with material things. When it comes to life in general, “more” is definitely a two-edged sword.

I'd argue that the same holds true with the craft of writing. More is not always better. In even the best novels, for example, an overwritten patch of description can bring the reader to a screeching halt, draining the narrative of pace and forward momentum.

Or take monologues. Unless used sparingly, and with a definite intent, a prolonged monologue can often make a character just seem wordy. (And the author just self-indulgent.)

The same is true of lengthy descriptions. Whether of a place, a character's physical appearance, or in the service of the author's thematic or philosophical interests, even the most beautifully-rendered passage can slow the narrative to a crawl.

Over-writing, it's safe to say, is by general agreement a bad thing. Then why do so many writers do it?

Let's be clear: I'm not talking about the normal, expected over-writing that characterizes your first draft. During those explosive, flowing, unfolding bursts of creativity, your inner editor is—one hopes—asleep at the switch until you get the myriad ideas, incidents, breathtaking narrative leaps and beside-the-point stretches of dialogue down. The first draft is when you *do* get to describe a character as “grungy, foul-smelling, disheveled, knuckle-dragging, repulsive and poorly-dressed.” The more socially-conscious might even add: “A grim reminder of the dismantling of the welfare system's safety net in the past forty years.”

No matter. All that hooley gets edited out in later drafts. Or should. Yet, for some writers, it feels like tearing a piece of their skin away to delete any of it. Why? Is it because they think every word they write is golden? Hardly. In fact, it's the reverse.

In my experience with the writer patients in my therapy practice, those who tend to over-write are usually struggling, whether they know it or not, with issues of self-trust. Either they don't feel entitled to be writing in the first place, and thus need a cornucopia of words to try to mask this, or else they feel unsure of their talent and craft. If the latter is the case, these writers try to convince the reader of the legitimacy of the idea or emotion or scene being depicted by packing it with

More. Kind of the American credo in a nutshell,
which isn't as damning as it sounds.

"The latest Tallent & Lowery book from celebrated novelist Amy Lignor is the best yet, an exciting and colorful suspense story with every element we love."

—Night Owl Reviews

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

TALLEN & LOWERY
BOOK FIVE

AMY
LIGNOR

SUSPENSE
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Good writers have enough trust in themselves to know that there's something there, and that they've written enough (but just enough) to convey the thought that sparks the echoing thought in the reader's mind.

adjectives, metaphors and authorial asides. Anything—and everything—to make sure the reader gets it.

On the other hand, writers who trust their skills and/or feel entitled to be writing at all have faith in the narrative and emotional power of the single appropriate phrase, the short though vivid description, the seemingly simple line of dialogue freighted with meaningful subtext.

The ancient poet Gensei wrote: "The point of life is to know what's enough." That's the point of writing as well. Not only does self-trust enable writers to shape their work into its most effective, compelling form, but such writing also has enough "air" in it to allow readers to bring their own experiences to what they're reading, thus increasing the work's relevancy.

In other words, good writing is what is evoked in the spaces *between* the written lines. Good writers have enough trust in themselves to know that there's something there, and that they've written enough (but just enough) to convey the thought that sparks the echoing thought in the reader's mind. They've portrayed enough of the character's emotional life to resonate with similar aspects of the reader's inner world. A single descriptive word, such as *barren* or *choked* or *remorseless*, can bring with it a wealth of associations to thoughts, feelings and images waiting to be stirred into life in the reader's imagination.

How do writers develop self-trust? The way we do in most other aspects of life. By doing. Writing. Risking that our readers will follow us where we're going; that what we have to say, or what we've always felt, or what we openly fear or yearn for, will find a recognizable home in the reader's heart. Self-trust, like it or not, is born of risk. As are most worthwhile things.

Ultimately, if we believe *we ourselves* are enough, we'll believe that what we're writing is enough, too. ■

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IN THE BUD



By Patrick J. McKnight

August 29, 1984

Hand trembling, Mike checked his phone. Then slipped it into his back pocket. One thirty-seven p.m. Twenty-three minutes until the Bolden brothers yanked him back to 2023, but only if he failed.

The man he had to think of as merely a mechanic slammed the hood down on the brown '82 Chevette, pulled a rag from the back pocket of his oily uniform and rubbed the grease from his hands.

The mechanic asked, "What was that you were holding?"

Mike swore silently to himself for being so stupid. Wiped the cold sweat from his forehead with his bare hand. What the fuck was he thinking even bringing a smartphone to nineteen eighty-four, let alone pulling it out so someone could see it? Just bring the note and the cash, they'd said. But no, he didn't listen.

Which was his problem. He made bad decisions. Been that way for years. Had the track marks and the prison tattoos to prove it. But this was his chance to fix all of it. To make all of his pain go away, just like the Bolden brothers promised.

He made a mental note to toss the iPhone in old Farley's pond, if he had the chance.

Rather than tell the truth, he said, "Nothing."

"Nothing? You stared at the damn thing for over a minute. Looked like something from *Star Trek* or something."

"It's a new TV clicker prototype."

"That small? I call bullshit. Where were the buttons? How do I know it's not some commie spy shit?"

A chill wiggled down Mike's spine. *I call bullshit*. Oh how he hated that fucking phrase. But in a rare expression of self-control, he glared at the grease-smeared name on the mechanic's uniform—Charlie—and refused to take the bait.

"I'm not here to discuss a hunk of plastic, Mr. Dysinger."

The mechanic fired up a cigarette and instinctively, Mike's forearms burned.

With the butt dangling from his lips, Charlie clapped him on the back, and said, "I'm just screwin' with ya, pal. So you want to talk about the boy?"

"I want to meet him is all."

"Why?" the man said between smoke rings. "The kid's a goddamn loser, just like the rest of his mother's deadbeat family. Shitty grades. Lousy attitude. Haven't found a single form of discipline that works, though."

"So you've given up punishing him?"

"Good one." Then Charlie flashed a menacing smile. "But one of these days I'll find a way to break the little shit."

The disregard for basic humanity made Mike shiver. Made the needle marks on his arm burn. But beneath the shock, the sweating, and the withdrawal, he shook it off. Maintained his focus.

"Where is he now?"

"What are you? Some kind of old pervert?"

"No, sir. Just a long-lost relative from that deadbeat family of the boy's trying to reconnect with his family tree."

Charlie appraised him from head-to-toe. "Yeah, you don't look so swift. Got that vacant stare they all got." The mechanic tossed the oily rag on the Chevette's hood. Put his hands on his hips like Superman. "It'll cost ya."

Mike had expected nothing less.

"The boy said something about going to the creek behind the house. He hangs out there to do who knows what. Probably got some of my *Playboy's* out there or something." Then Charlie held his hand out. Arched an eyebrow.

Mike dropped a crumpled twenty in the open palm.

"One more thing," he said. "Any idea where I can find a gun?"

The twenty-two rested uncomfortably in Mike's waistband. Of all the horrible things he'd done in his life, he'd never fired a gun. In fact, his only experience with guns was being on the wrong end of a deal gone bad, leaving him with a hole in his bicep, no smack, and forty fewer dollars in his pocket.

Out of usable cash, he hustled across Keenan Center on foot. The Bolden's had traded him one hundred dollars of pre-nineteen eighty-four bills for two hundred dollars of post-nineteen eighty-four bills. All of it went toward the gun. Just two more shitty trades Mike had to endure.

There was nothing special about the day. August 29th held no particular meaning for him. Neither did nineteen eighty-four for that matter. He'd given the Bolden's a range of dates and this was the block of time they had available. Simple business.

The house was on the outskirts of Keenan Center, three quarters of a mile from Charlie Dysinger's garage and just past the Springfield Southern Railway line that separated suburbia from farmland. An easy ride on a Schwinn banana-seat bike for a kid. A pain in the ass job for a desperate, strung-out junkie like Mike.

Dark clouds gathered, threatening to unleash a torrent of rain. The late summer heat only made his chills worse. But whereas most of his life he'd have said fuck it and given up by now, a new sense of purpose powered him through. *Fuck the rain*, he thought, when the first drops dampened his hair.

Only two cars passed him along the lonely two-lane road out of town. The houses quickly went from being stacked atop one another to being nearly an acre apart. Carlyle's creek meandered behind them, hidden from view by the thick, lush tree line. By October, the leaves would be long gone and like curtains pulled back from a window, expose everything to even a casual passerby.

Mike was two houses away when he stopped and confronted his next problem: how to get to the creek. As a kid, cutting through someone's yard was expected, almost a rite of passage. But for an adult, it was trespassing. A surefire

way to attract unwelcome attention. The last thing he needed was one of the nosy neighbors calling a Fillmore County Sheriff and trapping Mike in nineteen eighty-four before accomplishing the first goal he'd had in years that didn't involve getting high, getting laid or finding someplace to sleep.

His time was running out and the Bolden's made it clear, when your time's up, it's up. There's nothing they can do about it. After that, lots of bad things happen.

He checked his phone again, having forgotten to toss it in the pond like he'd planned. He was down to eleven minutes. If someone called the sheriff, it would take them at least five to ten minutes to get all the way out here. But still too close. He could go another quarter mile down the road, where the tree line bends closer to the houses, and hope no one saw him. But that was five minutes he didn't have to spare. If the boy wasn't directly behind the house, Mike was in deep shit trouble and who knew how long it would take to hunt the kid down.

A bright flash filled the sky. The thunder clapped. The rain changed from a drizzle to a downpour. There was no time to waste and no turning back.

He made a break for it between the houses and hoped for the best.

Rotting alongside the creek, Mike knocked one branch away and ducked under another. His clothes soaked against his skin as one of his shoes nearly got sucked into the mud. *Everything was so much easier as a child*, he thought.

He found the boy sitting on a rock, his short legs dangling over the water. His hands holding something that Mike couldn't see. Quietly, Mike inched closer and from fifteen feet, he recognized it right away. It wasn't a *Playboy*. It was a book. A paperback. "A Brave New World." A tough read for anyone, let alone a child. And to think, at this moment Charlie the Mechanic was busy devising sadistic ways to break this boy. A boy whose greatest sin was the love of books.

A part of Mike wanted to go back to the garage, shove the nose of the twenty-two into Charlie Dysinger's mouth and blow the bastard's brains out. But that wouldn't take the pain away. It would make it grow worse.

But damn, it would feel so good.

He pulled out his phone. Nine minutes to go. Even if he jacked a car, assuming another bothered to pass by, and floored it all the way, he wouldn't make it on time. The Bolden's would have him back by then; something he feared more than dying.

He spiked the phone into the muddy ground like a football and gouged it deeper with the heel of his shoe.

"Hey, mister. What's wrong?"

Mike froze. The angelic face of a soul yet unscarred stared at him.

"Nothing," he said.

"Who are you?"

"Just a friend."

"Really?" The kid's face shone with hope. Until, like a switch, that hope dissolved. Mike desperately wanted to find that switch and flick it back on. But he couldn't. No one could. Then the kid mournfully shook his head, went back to reading his book and said, "I don't have any friends."

It's not your fault, Mike wanted to say. It was this shitty world's fault. A world where a hooker gives you the blow job for free because she spotted the scars on your arms as she goes to her knees, and a world where a dealer doesn't break your legs when you're short on cash because your mom's suicide made the front page. Worse when those were the two nicest things anyone had ever done for you.

He grabbed the twenty-two from behind his back. Held it in his rain-slicked hand.

No, kid. It's not your fault.

"Cool gun," the boy said, looking Mike's way again.

It wasn't cool. It was cowardly. So he changed the subject.

"How's the book?"

"A little hard to understand. But my teacher says it's her favorite."

"And you want to impress her?"

The boy blushed and hopped off the rock. Held his hand out.

"Can I see?"

"The gun?"

The boy nodded.

"It's not a toy."

"I know. I've just never saw one in person. Only on TV."

He started to show the kid but stopped.

This was all wrong, he thought. He wasn't here to be friends. Or to bring hope. He had a plan. And the longer he dragged it out, the higher the probability of failure. And the Bolden's had made it more than clear that failing was not an option.

So before he could talk himself out of it, he pointed the gun at his head and pulled the trigger.

And all his pain went away.

Thirty-nine years, three failed marriages and two unsuccessful trips to rehab later, former Fillmore County Sheriff, Luther Oswald, thumbed through a brochure. It was all the Bolden brothers had to read in their sterile, little waiting room. It was all he needed to convince him.

The anticipation made him smile, something he hadn't done in so many years.

Next to the brochure sat an inch-and-a-half thick folder on the glass table. The one that haunted him. That made him a drunk. That cost him his job. That cost him his marriages. The one bloody case he couldn't solve.

So many questions. And he was sure the answers resided

behind that perfectly white door.

After that, the rest was a formality. He'd present his evidence to the current Fillmore County Sheriff. The sheriff would arrest the Bolden's. The District Attorney would press charges. The only unsolved murder of Oswald's career would be solved. And his tortured soul would be healed.

Finally.

He inched up to the edge of his seat. Pushed the brochure aside and flipped open the folder.

To everyone else, this was an open and shut case. There were smudged fingerprints on the gun. A note at the scene. And a body. Six-year-old Mikey Dysinger had committed suicide. Everyone said so. A tragedy, yes. But not a crime.

Only, Oswald didn't buy it. Not for a minute.

He turned a page.

The image of the dead boy's lifeless body covered in mud stared up at him.

He turned another page and swore.

Yes, there were smudged prints on the gun. The kid's prints. But they were big. Too big for a six-year-old. The rain must have distorted them, they'd said. Bullshit. Prints don't distort.

Then there was the note.

I'm sorry I did this. But it was the only way for me to nip the pain in the bud. The only way for me to avoid a worthless life, where no one cares about me. And no one will miss me.

What six-year-old writes like that? And in an adult's handwriting? When Oswald showed the kid's schoolwork to his boss and matched it with the note, his boss didn't care. A kid from the wrong side of the tracks blew his brains out. No one gives a shit. Not even the kid's dad.

That wasn't good enough for Oswald, though. It never was.

But he had nothing to prove otherwise.

Until now.

"Mr. Oswald," a woman called out.

He stood.

"Follow me."

"Gladly," he said.

He threw back his shoulders. Strode behind her filled with a confidence he hadn't felt since the moment he'd laid eyes on the boy. Redemption was so close at hand he could almost taste it.

The woman handed him a contract and led him to another sterile, white room with three chairs and a foot-tall table, arranged more like an interrogation than an interview. Two against one. And in a way, it *was* an interrogation. But not the way the Bolden twins anticipated.

"Please take a seat," the woman said. "They'll be right with you."

It felt like a doctor's office until two men entered. Doctors usually made you wait much more than a minute.

"Please, have a seat," the twin on the right said, gesturing to

the chair. "Do you have any questions about the agreement?"

"Not about the agreement."

The twins glanced at each other and sat down. Oswald did the same.

He curled his lips into a smile. He'd waited thirty-nine years for this moment. His chance, once and for all, to make things right.

"I want to talk about a former client of yours. Michael Dysinger."

The two stared blankly at him.

"You sent him back to nineteen eighty-four."

"Doesn't ring a bell?"

"Doesn't ring a bell?" Oswald set the agreement on the table. "He was a man you two sent back to nineteen eighty-four to kill himself as a six-year-old boy."

"If you say so."

"I do say so!" He dropped the folder on top of the agreement. Pulled out the fingerprints. Pulled out the suicide note. Held up the image of the boy's dead body. "Are you telling me you had nothing to do with this?"

The left twin shrugged and said, "We're telling you we'll have to take your word for it."

"You'll take more than my word for it, pal. This is evidence." He tapped the image of the dead boy. "You're both accomplices to murder."

The two simultaneously smiled in a way that told him they knew something he didn't.

"Mr. Oswald. If this...Mr. Dysinger was a successful client, and nearly all of them are, then he died in nineteen eighty-four."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Unfortunately for you, everything."

Sweat rolled down Oswald's temples. "I don't follow."

"If this Mr. Dysinger died back then. We wouldn't have any record of him now."

"Are you telling me that you don't keep records?"

"What we're telling you, Mr. Oswald," the right twin said, "is that if this person successfully terminated their pain thirty-nine years ago, we would have never met him in this timeline. The closest thing to a record would be," he nodded to the electronic tablet, "an occupied time slot with no name attached."

He pushed back in his chair and raised his hands in surrender. "That can't be. There has to be something." He pointed to the contract. "Dysinger would have had to sign one of those."

"We're sorry, Mr. Oswald."

His mouth was so dry he couldn't swallow. He searched his mind for something. Anything that they might have that he could take to the sheriff. *Follow the money.*

"How do you make money? If you let your clients keep killing themselves in the past, then there's no way make money from them in the present?"

The twins exchanged glances, as if they were waiting for him to put the pieces together.

Oswald thought about it; he wondered who benefitted most from the elimination of people society wanted least. Then the answer became obvious. "Your clients are undesirables who become drains on the system. By eliminating them, you're saving the government tens of thousands of dollars per year, whether it's Medicare or court costs or prison costs. Heck, the savings might be in the hundreds of thousands."

Another exchange of glances.

"Well, fuck me. You're just a pair of leeches sucking off the government teat."

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air.

Oswald stared at the twins in disbelief. He'd been certain that Mikey Dysinger hadn't committed suicide. And he was absolutely right. The kid didn't do it. The government did, with the help of these two ghouls. But he could never prove it because there were no records. Everything was nice and clean. Except it wasn't. Because he was absolutely wrong. Michael Dysinger did commit suicide. All the evidence said so. The prints. Even the note. The only difference was that Oswald now knew how.

And had come to the crushing conclusion that redemption was lost. There would be no arrest. There would be no trial. Luther Oswald would always be the cop who cracked after the death of a little boy.

The Bolden on the right reached down, extracted the agreement from beneath the folder and laid it across his lap.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Oswald?"

He dropped his head. "No."

"Do you have a date in mind?"

"A date," he repeated, looking up.

The left twin nodded at the agreement.

If he couldn't solve the crime, maybe he could prevent it.

He said, "How about August 29th, nineteen eighty-four. One in the afternoon."

The Bolden on the left ran his finger down the tablet and stopped. "I'm sorry. But according to our system that time slot is already taken." Then he tossed Oswald a knowing smile. "Though, I suspect you already knew that. How about something in the morning? Perhaps nine a.m. to ten?"

Oswald slumped in his chair. His defeat was complete.

There was only one thing left to do.

He reached over. Snatched the "Nip Your Pain in The Bud" Client Agreement from the right twin's lap. Pulled a pen from his pocket. Scrawled his name at the bottom without reading a word and dropped the document on the table.

The Bolden on the right said, "Do you require cash for a weapon?"

Oswald stood, patted his sidearm.

And less than sixty minutes later, he ended his pain.

Nipped it right in the bud. ■



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CHAPTER ONE

The banner outside Pans 'N Pancakes proclaimed "JOIN MAPLE MANIA!" The Brown County Maple Festival's logo of a grinning bottle of syrup beamed its invitation. But the look on Professor Sonia Genest's face would

have frozen butter on a tall stack of hot flapjacks.

I'd hung the banner for the fifth annual festival across the wide covered porch of my country store restaurant and had stepped into the road to check the level. Instead, I watched as the voluptuous thirty-something professor glued her fists to her hips. She glared from the bottom step at a portly man in a suit with sharply creased trousers. He'd just climbed out of a black Lexus parked in the last of the ten spots angling in to the store's wide covered porch. Incongruous with his attire was a Red Sox cap perched atop his head.

"How dare you?" she snarled, not trying to keep her voice down. Sonia, a lifelong resident of our little town of South Lick, Indiana, and a regular at Pans 'N Pancakes, had just finished a full breakfast inside. She was a woman who appreciated a good meal.

The man clasped his hands in front of him and sort of smiled, but his top lip curled, making him look like he'd tasted curdled milk. "My dear, can I help it if my grant proposal was funded and yours wasn't?"

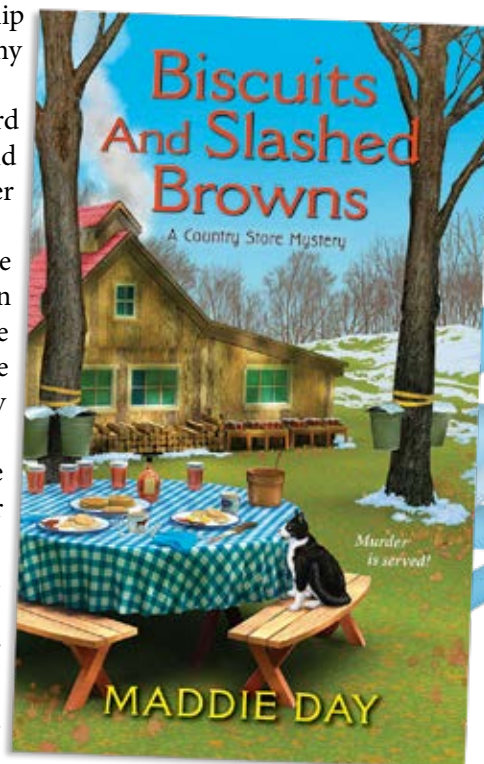
"I'm not your dear, Warren." Strictly business, she spoke each scorn-laced word distinctly. Her outfit was all business, too, a black wool coat over a gray jacket and skirt with black tights and ankle boots. "And if it weren't for the conference, I'd never have to set eyes on you."

The academic conference on maple tree science was on a parallel track with the county's Maple Festival. The festival organizers aimed to bring tourists to town in March, a normally dead time of year for local businesses. On the festival schedule this afternoon was the breakfast cook-off, with area cooks competing to produce the winning maple-flavored breakfast item. And it was slated to be held right here at my restaurant. I hoped I was ready.

I abandoned my banner examination and approached the pair. They must be continuing a prior disagreement. "Good morning, sir. I'm Robbie Jordan, owner and chef here." I extended my hand.

"Ah, Ms. Jordan." The man patted his expansive stomach and talked through his smile, his tiny eyes almost disappearing in the flesh of his cheeks. "I'm Warren Connolly." He offered a puffy padded palm. "I was just coming to sample your menu. Your restaurant is quite the talk of the conference."

I shook his extended hand. I'd never really trusted people who talked and



smiled simultaneously. Sonia looked like she didn't, either.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Connolly," I said. "Are you at Indiana University or from out of town?" A truck rumbled by on the road and I had to strain to hear his response.

"It's Professor Connolly. I teach and do my research at Boston College."

"Research." Sonia surrounded the word with finger quotes. "You call it research to accept money from climate-change deniers and then counter well-established facts with some environmental fantasy?" She shook her head, streaked dark blond hair flying, and turned away, her words sizzling the chilly early-March air. "Great breakfast, Robbie," she called as she headed for her car.

"Thanks," I answered, but I wasn't sure she heard me. I shivered and hugged myself. I wasn't exactly dressed for forty-degree weather in my jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt, and blue-and-white striped store apron. The sun promised to warm the day later, though. Cold nights and warm days created perfect conditions for inciting maple sap to run in the veins of trees all over Indiana's most heavily forested county. Since it was only eight o'clock, we were still in the chilly part of the cycle.

"How about that breakfast?" I said in a bright tone to the professor.

He laid a hand on the railing and nodded once up, once down. "Excellent idea," he said, but his now unsmiling gaze was on Sonia's silver sedan as it disappeared down the road toward the center of town.

Back in the store, Turner Rao gave me a frantic look as I inhaled the welcome scents of bacon and biscuits. Danna Beedle, my able assistant since I'd opened last fall, had traveled to San Diego for a volleyball tournament. Turner was the new part-time employee I'd hired and I'd apparently been outside a few minutes too long. He frantically flipped whole wheat banana walnut pancakes, turned sausages and strips of bacon, and rescued two almost-burnt slices of toast. Across the room a customer with an empty platter waved his hand in the air like he wanted his check, while another caught my eye and held up her coffee mug signaling for a refill. I pointed Professor Connolly to a table for two in the corner, mouthed, "Sorry" to Turner, and grabbed the coffeepot.

I'd restored order in a couple of minutes, grateful I'd found the slim twenty-two-year-old to help out. Danna and I had agreed we really needed a third worker. Turner was a good enough short-order cook to man the grill, and despite his recent college degree he didn't mind waiting and busing tables or doing cleanup. Danna and I also wore all hats around here, although I was the only one who did the books and paid the bills. It was my business, after all.

I'd purchased the run-down country store over a year ago, and had used the carpentry skills my late mother taught me back home in California to carry out the renovation work myself. Now I was the proud proprietor of a popular breakfast and lunch restaurant. I also sold antique cookware and a few other odds and ends in the store, including my aunt Adele's gorgeous yarn from her nearby sheep farm. I was almost finished renovating the second floor of the building into several rooms I planned to rent out as a bed and breakfast. The village of South Lick in scenic hilly Brown County had become my home—my apartment conveniently abutted the store at the back—and I couldn't be happier.

My new life would fall apart, however, if I didn't keep my customers as happy as I was. I delivered a menu to the professor and asked if he'd like coffee.

"Sure." He gave the menu a once-over glance and handed it back. "I'll have the Kitchen Sink omelet, with biscuits, plus bacon—crisp—and hash browns."

In the background buzz of diners chatting, silver clinking, sausages sizzling, I waited for the *please*. When it wasn't forthcoming, I said, "You got it."

"I don't suppose you serve Bloody Marys, do you?"

"Sorry, no liquor license." I decided not to mention I had an entirely legal BYOB policy in place. I didn't advertise it, but regulars knew they could bring a bottle of wine or a couple of beers to lunch to celebrate special occasions. The state restricted the practice to wine and beer only, and I wasn't allowed to pour it. Someone occasionally showed up with a bottle for Sunday brunch, but so far never for breakfast on a Friday.

"I didn't think so." Connolly's mouth pulled down in disappointment. "Where's the best bar in town?" He drummed his fingers on the table. A gold ring featuring an embedded diamond dented his right pinkie.

I glanced at the big old schoolroom clock on the wall—he wanted a bar before nine in the morning? "The Casino Tavern, on the other side of town. Actually it's the only bar in town." A casino in South Lick had flourished for a couple of decades over a hundred years ago, in the heyday of mineral springs spas. The present-day bar was a casino in name only. "The conference is in Nashville, right?" I'd lived in Brown County for four years. By now I said the name of the colorful artsy county seat like the locals did—Nashvul.

"That's correct."

"The bar's on the road out of town heading that way. You probably passed it on your way here." I saw Turner make the hand signal meaning an order was ready. "I'll go get your food started."

Apparently *please* wasn't the only word missing from this Bostonian's vocabulary, since he didn't thank me, either. I gave Turner the order, delivered three platters to a table of South Lick residents, and poured the professor's coffee. He didn't even look up from whatever he was doing on his phone.

Back at the grill, I asked Turner, "Want to switch?" We tried to change jobs once an hour or so to avoid boredom—and to give each other a break from rude customers.

"Sure. One second."

I watched Turner's long smooth-skinned fingers deftly wrap around the handle of the pitcher holding the pancake batter. His mother, Mona Turner-Rao, was a local girl but his father, Sajit, had been born in India. The family owned a maple tree farm in the county and Sajit was also somehow affiliated with the university over in Bloomington. After pouring six pancakes worth of batter into identically sized disks, Turner pulled off his stained apron and donned a fresh one from the box.

I was checking the status of the current orders on the lined-up slips of paper when the bell on the door jangled.

"What's he doing here?" Turner muttered under his breath.

His father hurried toward us. He wore a fleece vest over a blue Oxford button-down, and was bulky where his son was slim. "Turner, I need your help at the farm." His accent wasn't a strong one, but his son's name sounded almost like "Durner."

"Baba, I told you." Turner kept his voice low. "I have a job. I can't just leave."

"But we have much to prepare for tomorrow. You know we are hosting the sugaring-off demonstration for the festival." His hands flew through the air as he talked.

The festival schedule included opportunities to learn about sugaring off—like the one at the Rao maple farm—fun events for children, a Native American maple syrup demonstration in Brown County State Park, and themed culinary cook-offs like the one this afternoon. Sugaring off, the process of slowly boiling down maple sap to remove the water, resulting in thick, sweet syrup, was particularly popular. The organizers were hoping the cook-offs would draw crowds, too.

"I can't." Turner, at six feet standing several inches taller than his father, lowered his face right in front of his father's. "Robbie would be alone here. I'm not leaving."

Mr. Rao exclaimed in whatever his native language was. I didn't understand the word but it sure sounded like he was exasperated.

"You are a smart boy." He shook his head at his son. "What are you doing cooking for your job? And cooking meat, no less! We paid for you to earn your degree. You should be using it, not doing women's work making American breakfast."

I sniffed, and tore my gaze away from the pair. Just in time I flipped the cakes before they burned, and scooted four crispy sausages to the cooler end of the grill. Turner had told me his father wasn't particularly happy about him working for me, but I hadn't realized Mr. Rao felt so strongly about it. "Women's work" indeed. What century did he live in, anyway?

"You didn't pay much for my B.A.," Turner said. "You know I got free tuition because of your IU connection, and I lived at home."

"I have sacrificed much for you. You are my only son."

"And Su is in med school. Your only daughter will be a doctor one day. That should make you happy. Me, I love to cook," Turner said, loading his forearms with four orders. "I want to be a chef. This is great experience for me. Please don't make a big fuss, Baba."

"Leave Sujita out of this. It will be on your head if a hundred people come tomorrow and we are not ready." Turner's father turned away with a huff of air.

I ladled out an omelet's worth of beaten eggs, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Rao freeze. Now what was wrong? I sprinkled sautéed green peppers, mushrooms, and onions onto the egg base, added capers and a handful of grated cheddar, and looked up to see what the problem was. Sajit stared with narrowed eyes at Warren Connolly, who shot him the curled lip under flared nostrils for a second. Then Connolly plastered on a fake grin and waved to Sajit with one pudgy hand.

"Dr. Rao. Join me, would you?" the professor called.

So it was Dr. Rao.

"Climate change denier," Turner's father muttered. This time whatever word he added after that sounded a lot more like a curse than the earlier expression of frustration, but he made his way to Connolly's table.

I exchanged a glance with Turner. He only shrugged. As he delivered the loaded plates to their destination, I turned half of the omelet over onto itself, hoping the two scholars' interaction wasn't going to turn into a display of in-store fireworks. Uproar was never good for business.

CHAPTER TWO

Despite it being March, not July, fireworks was exactly what the conversation between Drs. Rao and Connolly became after Turner's dad sat at Connolly's table. Every time I glanced their way, Dr. Rao did not look happy and Professor Connolly kept

a smug, self-satisfied expression on his face. Turner asked his dad if he wanted coffee or something to eat, but Dr. Rao waved him away with an impatient gesture.

After about ten minutes Dr. Rao stood so suddenly his chair clattered over sideways. “No. That is simply not acceptable. All the science is against you and you know it.” If voices could kill, the deadly force of his would have.

I watched from the cooking area as Professor Connolly blinked. Turner cringed. Other customers turned to stare.

Connolly flipped open his hands. “You have your opinion, Sajit, and I have mine.”

“It’s not a matter of opinion,” Turner’s dad spat out, each word distinct. “The maple genus is suffering all over as the temperatures warm. The entire cycle is disrupted. Insects, microflora, all of it.”

“My funders believe otherwise.”

Dr. Rao stared at Connolly. He turned on his heel and left without saying good-bye to his son. Turner frowned but didn’t seem to mind. I was just glad the exchange had ended without a Roman candle going off, not to mention an even bigger explosion. Nobody wants their delicious breakfast interrupted by someone else’s fireworks. Interesting that it ran along the same theme as Sonia’s objection to Connolly earlier.

The professor left a few minutes later and the next hour turned so busy I didn’t have time to think. Rushes like that were exhausting but always proved great for the old bottom line. The crowd had to be due to all the folks here for the festival. I served and cooked for far fewer familiar faces than usual. Ten o’clock brought the opposite, a total lull in business.

“Sit down for a few while you can, Turner,” I said. “And make yourself whatever you want to eat. If it’s as busy as it was earlier, we won’t have a minute for lunch until we close at one-thirty.” I was still trying to ensure he felt welcome as my employee and also paced himself on rest and eating. The last thing we needed was one of us passing out from low blood sugar. I threw a slice of sharp cheese on top of an unclaimed pancake and topped it with another, making myself an ad hoc sandwich. I brought it and a glass of milk to a table and sank blissfully into a chair.

He joined me several minutes later, with a plate full of an egg-veggie scramble and a pile of overly crisp hash browns.

“I didn’t realize your dad felt so strongly about you working here,” I ventured after he sat. “I hope it’s going to be okay at home.”

He swallowed a bite of potato. “It’ll be fine. But it’s time for me to move out. Dad grew up in India, and the expectations for first sons—and especially only sons—are pretty different there, even now.”

“But you were born here, right?”

“I sure was. At the hospital in Bloomington. A Hoosier, born and bred, even if I don’t quite look like one. And I haven’t gone anywhere, Robbie, except twice to visit the rels in India.” He sounded wistful.

I cocked my head. “Your father seemed upset you’re cooking meat, too. Do you mind cooking it? I’m sorry. I never thought to ask you.”

“I don’t mind. The Hindu religion discourages the eating of meat, particularly beef, because the cow is sacred. But my father knows I’m only preparing hamburgers, not consuming them.” He gestured to his plate. “It’s not like we live in a vegetarian country, anyway.”

“Especially here in Indiana. People love their meat. Beef, pork, lamb, you name it.” I wanted to ask what his mom thought of Turner’s choice to train as a chef, but I didn’t want him to feel that I, his boss, was prying into his personal life. His dad had brought the issue to my grill—asking about his father was fair game. Then Turner answered my unasked question anyway.

“At least Mom’s got my back. She’s always said Su and I could do whatever we wanted with our lives, as long as it was legal and we could support ourselves.” He scarfed down his eggs while I finished my pancake sandwich. “Are you all set for this afternoon?”

I shot a quick look at the clock. “I think so. I’m really glad I decided to close an hour early today. The judges and officials will be here by two-thirty, so we should have plenty of time to clean up and get the place presentable. I’ll have my biscuits all ready to pop in the oven fifteen minutes before the entry deadline.”

“The doors open at three, right?”

“That’s right, and the judging is at three-thirty. I hope we pack the place.”

“The contest is for a single locally made breakfast item, I think you said.”

“Exactly, and it has to include maple. The county doesn’t have a multi-cook station facility like they set up on those cooking competition shows, so the cooking won’t be live.” I cringed a little. Murder had entered my life more than once since I’d opened the store, and I’d become just a teensy tiny bit sensitive to phrases like *live*. “I’m doing maple biscuits—but they’ll include your secret ingredients. The judges are going to love them.”

“Who’s judging?” He stood and cleared both our places.

“Some of the scientists at the conference, I think, and maybe a few locals, too. I don’t know who they’ve tapped to do the honors.” I joined him in the kitchen area. “I’m going to prep the dough now. It’ll bake up better after a couple of hours of

chilling.”

“Good idea.”

“I don’t really care if I win the contest or not, even though they’re lumping chefs together with amateur cooks. But it’s great exposure for the store and restaurant.” I measured out flour, baking powder, salt, and the touch of both curry powder and cayenne Turner had added, with scrumptious results, a month earlier. As I cut in the butter, I asked, “Do you know the professor who was in this morning? The man from Boston?”

“The one my father was talking to?”

“That’s the one. His name is Warren Connolly. They didn’t exactly seem to be best buds.”

“I’ve never seen him at the house. But my father knows all kinds of people professionally.”

“What’s your dad’s exact occupation again?” I added the milk and syrup to the flour-butter mixture and gave the dough a quick knead.

“He’s a research biochemist, and he used to spend all his time looking at cellular structures.” Turner finished setting up the last table for the next round of customers just as the little cowbell on the door set up a jangle. “He’s tacked into climate change waters recently. Mostly because he’s seen the change in the trees on our farm.”

As I mused on Turner using a sailing term like “tacked,” a tall thin figure in uniform pushed through the door.

“Hey, Buck, come on in,” I called to our lanky police lieutenant as I wrapped the thick disk of dough in plastic. “You said your dad tacked into a change in career. Are you a sailor?” I asked Turner.

His dark eyes lit up. “You bet. Me, a sailboat, Lake Monroe? It’s the best.”

“I used to sail off the Pacific Coast back home.”

“You did? Sailing on the ocean is one of my dreams. To be executive chef on a touring yacht. I told you I’ve never been anywhere except India.” His eyes were dreamy, focused on a faraway horizon. “I want to see the world, but from the water.”

“It’s a great plan. You should totally go for it.” I wasn’t sure his father would agree. I carried a menu over to Buck.

“I hear y’all talking ’bout sailing?” he asked, laying his uniform hat on the small table he preferred at the back of the restaurant, where he could eat and keep an eagle eye on the town, too.

When I nodded, he went on.

“You might could sail a boat all the way to China through the hole in my stomach right about now. I’m that hungry.”

No wonder. He was only about six foot a hundred—or at least a foot taller than my own five three—and as skinny as a twig. “You must have a metabolism like a hummingbird, Buck.” I smiled fondly at him.

“Welp, I got me a appetite like a horse. Can I get one of everything?”

“For a change?” I snorted.

“Shucks, Robbie. Anymore, I don’t even know why you ask.”

A couple of minutes later I carried over a tray and set down three plates in front of him. He beamed at the sight: two over easy next to three links and a mound of hash browns, a tall stack of my signature pancakes, plus a couple of biscuits covered in creamy homemade sausage gravy. He tucked his napkin into his collar and his fork into the biscuits.

“You ain’t seen no more dead bodies, have you?” he asked, laden fork halfway to his mouth, gravy dripping onto the pancakes.

“I’m happy to say I haven’t.” A shudder ran through me remembering the body my friend Lou and I had encountered this winter while we were out snowshoeing. The man had been murdered, and his killer had later come after my boyfriend, Abe, and me during an ice storm. “Thank goodness.”

“I sure don’t know what it is with you and murder. You’re like a flame to them moths.”

Was I? It was true, I’d encountered three murders since my store opened, and I was the one who’d found two of the bodies. One, in fact, right here in my store. But surely all those were coincidence. I had no intention of brushing up against even one more violent person. I loved my thriving store-restaurant and my town and I had a solid relationship developing with Abe. Life was good. My plan for it definitely didn’t include murder. ■

Maddie Day is a talented amateur chef and holds a PhD in linguistics from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her latest bestselling Country Store mystery is “Biscuits and Slashed Browns” (Kensington Publishing), and her new Cozy Capers Book Group Mysteries series debuts in January, 2019 with “Murder on Cape Cod.”

As Agatha and Macavity Award nominated Edith Maxwell, she writes the Local Foods Mysteries (Kensington Publishing) and the Quaker Midwife Mysteries (Midnight Ink). “Turning the Tide” released in April, 2018. Maxwell also writes award-winning short crime fiction. She is President of Sisters in Crime New England, co-chair of the New England Crime Bake, a member of Mystery Writers of America, and lives with her beau and two elderly cats north of Boston.

You can find all of Maddie’s/Edith’s identities and work at edithmaxwell.com. She blogs every weekday with the other Wicked Cozy Authors at wickedcozyauthors.com. Look for her as Edith M. Maxwell and Maddie Day on Facebook and @edithmaxwell and @maddiedayauthor on Twitter.



There Was a Crooked Man

By Rosanne Limoncelli

There was a Crooked Man, and he went a crooked mile, I whispered to myself as I slipped between the leafless trees of the barren orchard in the frigid darkness. In my left hand I held a flashlight which I didn't dare use; in my right I gripped my handgun that I didn't want to use. But the safety was off and it was ready to defend me in a microsecond. I intoned my childhood magic spell to ward off ghosts I was sure lurked in my grandparents' orchard when I was a child. The twisted trees were innocuous in the daytime but at night the crooked branches took on a menacing presence.

It was past midnight and as quiet as any deserted farm in the middle of nowhere would be. Dead quiet. Any sound I made refracted louder in the web of branches over my head. My breath was raspy as it escaped from my lungs, my parka rustled as I moved forward and, no matter how carefully I stepped, my boots crunched the packed snow. I slipped from tree to tree in the blackness, ducking the grasping contorted branches, hoping not to be heard by whoever was behind me.

The old trees gave me the creeps even before my grandfather burdened me with nightmares fed by the bedtime stories he told. Stories of the bones his father found buried so many years before when he first dug into the earth to plant the young apple trees. Human bones. I pictured those bones buried beneath me and imagined the spirits rising from the root-riddled ground when I played outside as a child. As the sun dipped, the light would play tricks, and I'd run through the orchard while the shadowy trees transformed into phantoms of gnarled old men and women. Branches were bony arms that reached out to grab me, twigs were spindly fingers ready to scratch across my arms as I sprinted. I would dash back to the house in a panic, slipping between the ancient trees, fear speeding my feet in the race against the darkness. Surely it was the nursery rhyme that kept the ghosts from getting me.

He found a crooked sixpence, against a crooked stile. I wasn't sure if the words came out of my mouth aloud or if they only ran around inside my panicked brain. My car was dead, so was the phone, and I hoped to avoid that state myself. The route through the orchard was a shortcut and I prayed I'd get to the road before I was found. Normally I'd take the long way, down the gravel drive that wound around the west side of the property leading out to the county road. But tonight was about as far from normal as it could be. I thought that my grandparents' abandoned farmhouse would be a safe place to hide for a few days. They'd lost it to debt before they died and it lay fallow ever since. The trees no longer bore fruit, the house was just a container for dust and cobwebs. I needed a place to think things through. But I chose wrong. Now instead of being able to find help quickly, I had put myself deeper in danger. I was miles from civilization, too far for anyone to hear me if I called out, and without my car I'd have a long journey in the freezing darkness before I could find safety. If I was that lucky.

It was my grandmother who taught me the nursery rhymes that countered my grandfather's stories. In truth, neither of them had much skill as replacement parents after my parents died; they were farmers more than anything else. They fed and

watered me and were satisfied that I grew. In their minds, that was the whole job. I took off on my own as soon as I could and they hardly noticed. The ghost stories and nursery rhymes were all I had left of them. Now I hoped my magic-spell-prayer would still work in the pitch black orchard. But this time I needed it to keep me safe from real men not ghosts. Bad men who would like to reach out their real arms to grab me. Me and what I had in my backpack.

The house was as cold and dark as the inside of a grave as I sat at the dusty kitchen table just moments before I heard the front door open. I didn't know how they found me but I was ready. My coat already in place, I pulled the backpack on my shoulders and slipped noiselessly out the back door. The backpack that was full of the treasure I found, the treasure they wanted back. I admit I took the money like a common thief, which is what some people might call me, but I prefer the term "Entrepreneur." I lived off the mistakes of others, squeezing out a little extra cash here, expanding the profit there. I was adept at playing the game. When you live in the margins you learn to be creative.

Hearing about that drop-off had been a gift, almost like winning the lottery. What could be easier than picking up a bag of cash that was meant for someone else? I often benefitted from overheard information. I had a gift for being in the right place at the right time. I paid attention to what was going on around me and I took advantage of situations. I was a survivor living on ingenuity, quick reflexes, and luck. I never hurt any one person too deeply and the lesson they learned about being too trusting was worth more than the money they lost. It's not like I ever killed anyone. I wasn't a real criminal, I was small-time in a big world.

I moved as fast as I could through the orchard while I tried not to snap a twig or collide with a tree trunk. Or a person. It was too dark to tell the difference. It must be a *he* and not a *them*. There were only two exits to the farmhouse and only one door had been covered. He must have spent a few minutes searching the house before following me out the back door, unintentionally giving me a head start. I'd be even farther ahead if I hadn't stopped to try the car but of course he had taken care of disabling it first. Checking the car was useless and a waste of valuable time. But so were regrets.

I knew he must be close behind me, but if I could make it to the county road that led to the highway then maybe some trucker might give me a ride. I had money for gas and tolls, plenty, after all that's why I was in this mess. I swear, if I knew what kind of people that money belonged to, I probably would've just left it sitting in the duffle bag next to that old stone wall, all one million dollars of it. Probably. If I get out of this, I'll never be greedy again. But then, I wouldn't have to be, would I? I'd run many a scheme in my life but I never found a payday like this one. I shifted the backpack on my shoulders. A million dollars in used one hundred dollar bills wasn't light.

I heard something. I stood stock still. My nose was numb with cold but my hands were clammy as I gripped the flashlight and handgun tighter. I held my breath so I could listen for any hint of another human being, but all I could hear was the drumming of my heart. I moved forward slowly, my arm straight out aiming the muzzle in front of me as I ducked under a low branch. Then something rustled up ahead. I dropped the flashlight and gripped the gun with both hands. A crushing, bounding noise pushed my heart up into my throat, beating lickety-split. It was a doe, her eyes full of fear as she rushed by me, her heavy hooves missing me by inches as I swiveled at the force of her.

Every part of me was buzzing, both hands iron-clamped to the weapon I still held straight ahead. I turned back, just the last row of haunted trees to pass, within sight was the road illuminated by a lone streetlight.

"He bought a c-c-crooked cat, which caught a c-c-crooked mouse." I heard my stuttering and knew that time I had definitely spoken out loud. The echo of my voice filled my head and helped push me toward the end of the orchard. Almost there, almost to the road—

"And they all lived together—" The tall, blond man spoke loudly as he stepped out from behind the last tree pointing his gun right at me.

My breath froze in my lungs, but the adrenaline rush from the encounter with the doe lifted my hands that held the gun and I squeezed the trigger. He fell from the bullets before he could say, "—in a little crooked house."

He was dead. My hands shook as I wiped the gun clean of my fingerprints and dropped it next to him on the ground. I watched my breath make small clouds over the body of the man who would have killed me. I chose my life over his. I was no longer a petty-criminal-entrepreneur, I was a murderer. I couldn't go back. There was nothing else to do but take his keys, drive his car to the closest airport and pay cash for tickets to somewhere warm.

I was someone else now, so I might as well start over someplace new. ■

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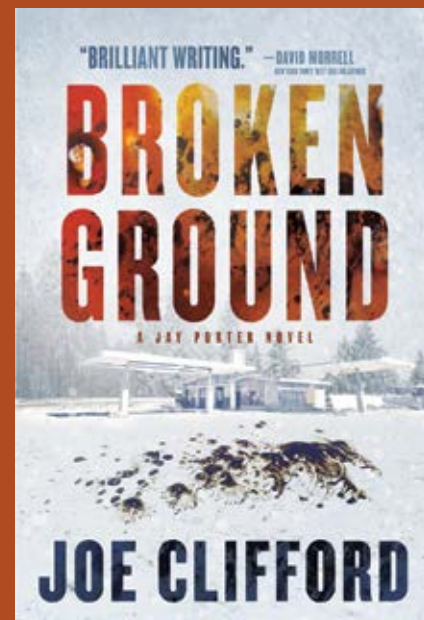
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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

HIS RISK

By Shelley Shepard Gray

This incredible series, *The Amish of Hart County*, has proven to be among the “best of the best” when it comes to romantic suspense.

For those who have been following these intriguing journeys, this time around Calvin Fisher is the main character who said “so long” to the Amish, their way of life, and Hart County at a very young age. He was only fourteen when he turned his back on the place. Now, all grown up, Calvin has reappeared in the location that he always said he would never re-visit again. Reason being, his brother became ill and Calvin wants to be by his side.

Calvin must work hard to clean up the past and try to heal old wounds by making amends with his family and friends. However, Calvin must also continue to lie to these people because no one can know about his job and various other secrets he’s keeping.

Alice, the local school teacher, captures his heart. She works to steer clear of him because of his past, but she finds it virtually impossible to not fall in love with this truly brave man. Calvin becomes torn, as well, when danger suddenly erupts in the county. A great many people are put in harm’s way, including Alice, and Calvin believes that it is his fault. He must find a way to stop the evil from increasing while trying to keep his true self a secret.

This series is a long-running one with each new tale offering up fresh characters that are wrapped in a perfect web of romance and intrigue. Readers will be thrilled to get their hands on this newest mystery and look forward to reading even more.

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



HOLMES ENTANGLED

By Gordon McAlpine

Although there have been many books and movies created about this famous detective, this one stands out from the rest.

The book begins in Argentina in 1943, where a strange manuscript has been found buried in a horribly-organized library. The librarian who discovers these pages, which he soon sees as a treasure, follows a “dream” and heads to a P.I. for help. You see, after the man discovered this book, he was shot at by a blond assassin.

Now, we go back in time as the pages are read by the P.I. The creator of these words begins to speak, putting this, his final case, into the record books. In his seventies now, he’s been using disguises to assume various identities to stay away from the limelight and let the public believe what was written about him—that he left London behind to live a quiet life. The truth is he’s sitting at St. John’s College, Cambridge, when a man enters his classroom and introduces himself as Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle claims that a “ghost” came to him during a séance and told him that this man in disguise is actually the great Sherlock Holmes. He proceeds to show Holmes his gunshot wound and tells him an odd story that Sherlock doesn’t buy, and asks Holmes to solve the case.

The writing is fantastic. The character is perfectly written, and the plot is extremely interesting. But what makes this book memorable is how much emotion Holmes offers, especially when he speaks of his now departed partner and best friend, Dr. Watson. It’s even fun to meet Watson’s wife, who he took later in life, who just so happens to be a familiar character to readers and helps Holmes solve this case. To say more would be wrong. Let’s just say that the entire Holmes’ “realm” will be proud.

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

THE CUTTING EDGE

By Jeffery Deaver

“The Cutting Edge” is the next incredible installment from #1 *New York Times* author Jeffery Deaver, in the *Lincoln Rhyme* series.

Planning for a wedding is already a stressful time, but now having to also deal with a killer that calls himself “The Promiser,” Rhyme and Sachs really have their hands full. After a triple murder in Manhattan’s diamond district, the killer leaves behind over a half-million dollars in gems, which only confuses Rhyme as to the motive. Then another murder committed against a couple that had just visited a wedding planner, has Rhyme thinking that this isn’t about money, but about the couples themselves. “The Promiser” makes a mistake and leaves behind a witness, one that can foil his plans. The chase is on for Rhyme and Sachs to find the witness, which puts them in the crosshairs of the killer.

Deaver delivers another explosive book in the series. After reading this, it’s very easy to see why Deaver is on the short list as being one of the best thriller writers ever. Writing a series has its’ challenges, one is to always keep the series fresh and keep fans wanting to see what happens next. Deaver is a master at that. As soon as I think, “ok, he can’t do better than this,” Deaver not only proves me wrong with “The Cutting Edge,” but he keeps me up all night wanting to finish it. Damn you, Jeffery Deaver, for giving us another book that will end in sleepless nights. It will be no surprise to see “The Cutting Edge” appear on many lists for being the best book of the year.

Reviewed by John Raab ■



AUNT POLDI AND THE SICILIAN LIONS

By Mario Giordano

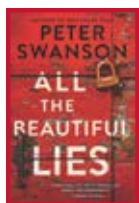
As the story goes, when Auntie Poldi decided to move from Munich to Sicily at the age of 60 years, her reasoning was that she wanted to be there in order “to drink herself comfortably to death with a sea view.” Her ex-husband came from Catania, and his three sisters have welcomed her to join them there; however, Poldi has always followed the beat of her own drummer and instead buys a villa so she can live on her own. It is a tiny place just down the street, and to help her manage life on her own, she hires Valentino: a local jack-of-all-trades, Valentino has the skills to help with the villa running and restoration.

Valentino is a wonder at work until he simply... disappears. Poldi has a gut feeling; she strongly suspects foul play caused the disappearance. She heads to a local estate that Valentino mentioned just before he vanished. The owner of the estate is very cordial and invites Poldi to dinner with her cousin, the owner of another large estate. Poldi does her best to charm everyone involved, yet she isn’t all that lucky at finding people to confide in. That ends when she crosses paths with Police Detective Vito Montana.

Soon the missing person’s investigation turns into an unsolved murder when Valentino is finally discovered... dead as a doornail. New characters galore enter the tale and new suspects abound. Not to mention, a romance grows while one lead after another goes absolutely nowhere.

This story is rich with colorful characters and offers up a whole lot of fun. So, grab something to eat before taking your place on the couch, because this is one book you’ll want to read in one sitting.

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



ALL THE BEAUTIFUL LIES

By Peter Swanson

College graduation is just days away for Harry Ackerson when his life is suddenly turned upside-down. Receiving a call from his stepmother, who resides in Kennewick, Maine, Harry is told that his father has died. Apparently he has committed suicide. Harry returns to Maine during this horrific time, missing his father who ran a local bookstore. But the world around Harry seems almost twisted when his own stepmother begins to get a little too “up close and personal” with him.

Then comes a woman by the name of Grace McGowan. Here we have a girl who sparks Harry’s interest, yet also makes him feel as if she’s hiding more than a few things. Grace stands by her story that she is new to Kennewick, yet her actions seem as if she has somehow known Harry’s family, or at least one of them, for longer than she’s letting on.

Grace begins to question Alice’s role in Bill’s death, and Harry soon finds himself embroiled in a world where his father’s apparent suicide becomes an apparent murder, with various suspects being mentioned to the local police department. But as he begins to wonder about his stepmother and begins to feel more than a little wary when it comes to her sensual moves and the attention she’s paying him, Harry suddenly finds himself with nowhere to turn and no one to trust.

Swanson gives complex, intriguing backstories for these characters and makes sure to place those twists and turns perfectly so that this becomes a true psychological thriller. You question who the hero is and which woman actually owns the evil intent that could have brought about the demise of Bill. And when someone else turns up dead, the story goes from 0-to-60 in a split-second. Peter Swanson has done a fantastic job with this one!

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

S.T.A.G.S.

By M. A. Bennett

If the opening line, “I think I might be a murderer,” doesn’t grab your attention, then you’re going to miss out on a superb debut YA thriller.

At St. Aiden the Great School—better known as STAGS—Greer MacDonald finds herself immersed in a world she’s unprepared for. It’s not an issue of smarts, she’s got that. It’s not a problem with her scholarship either, which is how she’s able to attend the high-priced institution. It’s the hostility from her peers...those who notice her existence. To others, she’s invisible.

So, she’s as surprised as anyone when she receives a coveted invitation from the Medievals, the most powerful students in school, to join them on their annual weekend of “huntin’ shootin’ fishin’ ” during the mid-term break. Greer is excited and nervous and when she learns that this invitation could lead to bigger and better things—a spot in the Medievals next year, perhaps?—she’s made up her mind.

The Medievals are a group of six who ooze confidence as their birthright. They make the unwritten rules—social media and technology are deemed “savage” and unacceptable if you want a chance to fit in. What’s a girl to do? Greer packs her bag.

As the weekend arrives, Greer is whisked away to the estate of head Medieval, the gorgeous Henry de Warlencourt, for formal dinners, a stag hunt, pheasant shoot, and trout fishing. She’s quickly surprised to find that she’s not the only misfit in attendance and starts to question why Shafeen Jadeja, nicknamed the “Punjabi Playboy” and Chanel Ashton, “Carphone Chanel,” were there.

But, the Medievals have plans for their guests. This is an annual event after all, and each day of the “huntin’ shootin’ fishin’ ” is going to play out exactly as it has for many, many generations. Or is it?

Though the underlying foundation isn’t a new concept, Bennett tells the story well with pacing that defies her debut status. Intense and suspenseful, this book will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■



I, A SQUEALER

By Richard Bruns

This gripping true crime is a real blast from the past. Written in 1967, Bruns had the manuscripts hidden deep away until his daughter convinced him now was the time to tell the truth...again!

The first time he squealed and ratted out his friend, Bruns was shunned all over Tucson as he was caught up in the onslaught of fake news (yes, even then) that the case of the “Pied Piper of Tucson” generated. Hounded by the press, he eventually had to leave town as his face was plastered all over the news...not just his face, but also the accusation brought forward by Charles Schmid, the accused, who in retaliation and to deflect guilt from himself turned those accusations back on Bruns.

Schmid had murdered three teenage girls. Bruns believed him. In fact, he helped him hide two of the bodies. Fingering his friend was Bruns only defense. Bruns, a teenager himself, was afraid for his own life and fled to Ohio, where months later, no longer able to bare the angst and guilt of not telling the police what Schmid had forced him to do, made the call to turn the wheels of justice in motion to get his friend arrested.

We’d all like to think that faced with the right or wrong decision we’d all make the correct call. But when the lines are blurred and friendship, then fear, become involved, who knows what that decision should be. Ultimately Bruns stood up to be counted and felt the brunt of his decision for decades. Know, in the end, you can judge for yourself.

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

HER LAST DAY

By T.R. Ragan

This author’s main characters are as different as different can be when it comes to the team of Jessie Cole, Private Investigator, and Ben Morrison, whose job is to uncover facts and then report them to the world in his role as an investigative journalist. The one thing these people do have in common is the fact that they have had to deal with their own personal nightmares.

Jessie is a pro when it comes to finding missing persons, except when it comes to the disappearance of her own sister. Sophie vanished and left behind her daughter for Jessie to raise. Ben’s nightmare came in the form of a car accident. Wounds heal, but Ben also came away from his accident with a case of amnesia. The one thing he does remember is Sophie, but he can find no reason as to why that would be. He meets up with Jessie when he goes to her about doing a series of articles that would focus on Sophie and try to renew the search for the woman. Jessie is certainly happy about this because perhaps they can stumble over something that the initial investigators missed.

Jessie has a full plate, however. Not only is the Sophie case a true obsession, but she is also facing criminal charges and jail time for shooting a stalker, while also dealing with her own romantic heartbreak when a former lover and police detective shows up in her life once again and rejects her outright.

Add to all this the fact that a brutal killer who has eluded police over the past six years, taking away 13 lives in the process, has now reappeared in Sacramento—dubbed “The Heartless Killer”—and you have a story that is non-stop action, with secrets and danger waiting around every corner. T.R. Ragan has already proved to be a fantastic writer, and each new title never fails to intrigue readers.

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



PERISH FROM THE EARTH

By Jonathan F. Putnam

This is the second book in the incredible *Lincoln & Speed* series, and is even better than the first.

We begin with Joshua Speed racing toward the sea vessel, *War Eagle*, trying to make it before its departure. You see, the captain of the ship works for the Speed family and Joshua needs to speak with him in regards to financial obligations that he's not meeting. Making it just in time, Joshua finds himself opening the door to a salon and entering a room filled with some truly colorful characters. Here, a gambler is at work, and the room is filled with everything from an artist to a dandy to a drunken fool. Joshua ends up speaking with one passenger by the name of John W. Jones from Nashville.

Jones has been trying to figure out how this gambler is winning. He wants nothing more than to uncover the scheme and then bet all the money in his pocket. If he wins, he can go home and fulfill his dream of purchasing property. Although Joshua tries to talk him out of such a fool's venture, John lays down his money and...tragedy erupts. Now the positive man from Nashville has become suspect number one in a murder case.

Enter Abraham Lincoln. A new lawyer, he's traveling the circuit from county to county bringing justice to remote locations. He's called upon by his friend Speed to prove this man's innocence. But as they begin to investigate the crime, they find that the *War Eagle* is filled to the brim with lies and deception.

Putnam has done a great job of bringing the famous man alive. It's highly interesting to see Honest Abe's early days, and hopefully Putnam is at his keyboard right now creating the next title in this truly cool series. Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

A LOYAL SPY

By Simon Conway

The incredible author of "The Agent Runner" has done it again. Taking the horrific subjects of jihad, Bin Laden, and the act of betrayal and pain that occurred on 9/11, he has put together a tale that, at its very core, is about two childhood friends and the paths they chose to take.

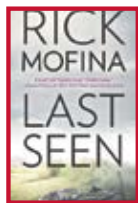
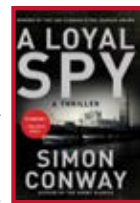
Jonah is a man who was raised to live a life in the intelligence universe. Smart, he knows the dangers that come with the job, but this is something he never expected. Growing up, he had a friend by the name of Nor ed-Din who was also being groomed for the same type of job and lifestyle as Jonah. But as the years passed, it ended up where Jonah had to take his friend's life... or, at least, he thought he had. His last memory of his friend was seeing him, face-down, in ice-cold water. Turns out, however, Nor had not gone to his maker after all.

Jonah was Nor's handler on a mission, but Nor was sent packing when the Soviets were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. It took many years, but they were once again brought together when Nor's services were engaged during a completely botched assassination attempt on Bin Laden's life. In fact, it was then that Jonah first got the horrible idea that his once best friend may actually be working for the enemy and had created his own private act of terrorism.

A non-stop adventure begins after the dark days of 9/11 where readers will follow Nor through some of the most amazing and frightening locations available; places where there is a chance millions of innocent people will lose their lives.

So, who's the good guy? Who will win? Are these friends looking at things the wrong way? Every person who is engaged by authors such as Brad Thor will love Simon Conway's ability to pen the perfect spy story that stays with you long after the tale is over.

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



LAST SEEN

By Rick Mofina

A parent's worst nightmare is realized in Mofina's latest thriller. Cal Hudson, his wife Faith, and their young son Gage are spending the day at a local carnival when the unthinkable happens. Gage disappears in the midst of a haunted maze, and the frantic parents cannot find him.

Cal works as a reporter for a popular newspaper, but spends more time with his phone and work than focusing on his family. His wife puts up with his never being around, but it gets to her. Now they are forced to put aside their squabbles to find their son. Even though they were together when Gage vanished, both of them have suspicions that the other one might be responsible and behind the crime.

The ending is both surprising and appropriate for the story. Mofina crafts marvelous tales that showcase the world of newspapers and family dynamics. Why he is not a household name for his thrillers is the real puzzle.

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* ■

RED ALERT

By James Patterson and Marshall Karp

This is the latest book in the *NYPD Red* series and yet another blockbuster that boasts the name, James Patterson.

In this day and age, it is always more than a bit frightening when a great number of powerful, rich people come together in an enclosed space. Frightening, because it opens the entire event up to pain and tragedy that terrorists or other evil-doers can create. Tonight, inside Pierre's Cotillion Room, the wealthiest of the city, including the Mayor of New York, have come together to raise money and celebrate a public housing plan that was put together by an organization called the Silver Foundation.

Amongst the people who are devoting their time and money to this cause are members of the security detail: Detective Zach Jordan and Detective Kylie MacDonald, two of the NYPD Red task force.

Unfortunately, the moment plays out as it was foreseen. The room is shaken when a bomb goes off at the event and the detectives, along with their brethren, have to figure out who, what, and why this tragedy has occurred.

The crimes begin to mount up when another killing occurs, that of a female filmmaker who just so happens to be in a very non-posh part of the city when her life is taken. When this investigation goes into high-speed, this particular woman's life causes even more confusion and personal heartache for the two detectives.

NYC soon finds that there is a killer who is not done making their point in the Big Apple, and the NYPD Red must track down the killer before others lose their lives. It becomes even more frightening when they find out that perhaps this killer is actually set deep within high society and has at their disposal secrets that NYPD Red knows nothing about...yet.

For those who have fallen for this action-packed series, this newest book will be yet another thrilling crime spree with heroes and bad guys galore.

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





GREEKS BEARING GIFTS

By Philip Kerr

The words “master storyteller” are used sparingly in the industry, which they should. But when it comes to this man and his fantastic character of Bernie Gunther, those two words really sum it up.

We are in the year 1957, and Bernie is a claims adjuster who has been sent to Athens to investigate a claim that came from a very important client. The claim stems from the fact that a ship has supposedly been sunk and Bernie's employers, a German insurance company, want him to check this out before they have to step up to the plate and pay off the claimant. But when Bernie digs up the fact that the ship in question once belonged to a Greek man of Jewish faith who spent time at Auschwitz, he starts to believe that this was no accidental sinking; instead, it becomes clear that this was an act of revenge. When the claimant is then found dead, shot through the eyes, Bernie sees this even *more* clearly. After all, now his employers don't have to pay out anything... no matter if the claim was real or not. But, with Bernie's luck, the job is not done. He's asked by the Greek police to help with the investigation, and he's soon pulled into the dark history of WWII and the deportation of Jews.

Enter Lieutenant Leventis, who is working the same type of case. These new deaths mimic ones that occurred during the war. Leventis has always suspected a certain SS Officer to have committed these crimes; however, he became untouchable during the war, hiding behind the German government. Leventis has never forgotten his name, though, and knows this is the second chance he's been waiting for to see this creep come to justice.

With Bernie and Leventis working together and a monster on the loose, readers will embark on a thrill ride that once again shows why Philip Kerr is clearly deserving of that “master storyteller” title.

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

THE CLARITY

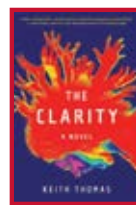
By Keith Thomas

This is a thrilling story featuring a psychologist by the name of Dr. Matilda Deacon. When readers first meet the good doctor, she is working diligently, doing mounds of research as she attempts to learn how memories are made and actually stored within the human mind. This in-depth work was sparked when her path crossed with an odd young lady going by the name, Ashanique. The doctor was immediately fascinated with this girl's story; not a surprise, seeing as that it is a grand one that you would really only think of finding in the world of fiction. But as the girl speaks more and more about her odd memories that include the last soldier who was killed in WWI, the doctor's skepticism begins to transform. The transformation grows even further when this girl begins speaking about a group called “The Night Doctors” who supposedly chased after her. Seems that, after more research is accomplished, this particular group was mentioned in the past... by a patient who was later found dead.

The more they talk, the more Matilda forms an opinion that the girl is telling the truth; that she and her mother have, in fact, been hunted by an assassin who is on a quest to find something stored in Ashanique's deep-seated memories.

With a killer on the move, the story brings clarity to such issues as reincarnation. Readers will not turn away from this book; the fast pace and memorable characters will see to it that the entire story is read in one day. Thomas has done a fantastic job of merging suspense and science together to create a truly unforgettable tale.

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



WHEN LIGHT LEFT US

By Leah Thomas

For those who are riveted by the UFO crash of 1947; those who tuned in every week to see Mulder and Scully try to uncover the “truth” about alien beings; and those who simply love the thought that creatures of high intelligence are somewhere “out there,” this book is for you.

This new author has come on the scene telling a story of the aftermath of one family's alien encounter. The family goes by the name of Vasquez. The kids had a bit of a harsh time in their lives when their father left them, abandoning the family by climbing into a ‘mothership’ that appeared; it seemed he wanted to live a fantastical life in an alien world instead of being a father and raising his very human children. After that decision, the children were heartbroken. But, oddly enough, Dad is soon replaced by a figure called Luz that just so happens to appear in the canyon behind their house.

These kids shoot basketball with Luz, talk to him, spend time with him, and end up seeing the world in a whole new way. But then Luz disappears, taking something away from each of the Vasquez kids and leaving this trio of young humans to deal with life, a new school year, and people that they no longer feel attached to.

No, this is not *E.T.*, nor is it *The X-Files*. What Thomas has done, however, is merge emotion, family ties, the supernatural and the real world together in order to form a story that definitely deserves the attention it's getting. Whether an adult or young adult, this is an imaginative title that shows how family members work together, and how the bond of real friendship can alter the future.

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



IT TAKES A COVEN

By Carol J. Perry

The seventh in the *Witch City Mystery* series has an attention-grabbing opening. And made me hungry for more. Who could resist reading that the protagonist, Lee Barrett, hears about the sudden death of Megan, one of her dearest friends, while doing a tasting to choose a cake for one of her former student's weddings? Almond cake with vanilla cream filling? A mysterious death? Count me in. Megan was a practicing witch in Salem, the Massachusetts town famous for witches, and loved by all. Her sudden death is a very big deal.

The plot thickens when Lee, trying to fulfill her maid of honor duties, learns that the best man is a recently released felon, and the ring bearer for this very unusual wedding is a talking crow named Poe. Speaking of crows, suddenly Salem is filled with them, annoying and even frightening the locals. And two more witches are found dead.

Lee knows a little more about this than most people. No, she's not one herself, but her best friend, River North, is. River believes all three deaths, plus the crow invasion, are her fault because she's in possession of a dangerous spell book owned by Bridget Bishop, the first woman to be executed for witchcraft in Salem in the seventeenth century. Bridget wants her spell book back, and there's no fury like a dead witch's fury. Because Lee is a sryer, a person who can see things in reflective surfaces that others can't, Bridget keeps popping up to issue a variety of threats that would scare anybody.

With the able assistance of her cat, O'Ryan, and Aunt Ibby, Lee and River join forces to solve the murders and return the book to its rightful owner.

“It Takes A Coven” is a fast-paced whodunit that entertains from start to finish. Of particular interest is the fact that Bridget Bishop is a true historical person. And, who knows? Maybe she continues to haunt the city of Salem.

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

AGENT IN PLACE

By Mark Greaney

Right off the bat the incredible author of *The Gray Man* series puts the reader in a chair and turns up the action to a neck-breaking speed.

The foundation of the tale has Court Gentry being hired to pull off a dangerous mission. A group of ex patriots living in Paris want to kidnap the mistress of dictator, President Ahmed Azzam. Azzam is the President of Syria and the husband of First Lady, Shakira. The mistress, fashion model Bianca Medina, is the one they wish to kidnap, however, because they feel that if they can upset the President they will have the upper-hand in getting the Syrian regime to finally fall.

But as it always is with these stories, there is an 'unknown' that wasn't counted on when the deal was struck; Bianca has just announced the arrival of her baby boy, letting the world know that the only heir to the dictator's throne is her son. Which not only makes for good headlines, but also introduces a real threat to the President's powerful wife.

Let's just say that Court needs all the luck he can get, because in order to attain Bianca's cooperation, he will have to somehow bring the boy out of Syria alive. But can he do even more than that? After all, with this mission he could be at just the right place and time to see this brutal dictatorship blown to smithereens.

Greaney is known in a variety of circles, seeing as that he was one who took over the writing of Tom Clancy's *Jack Ryan* series for a time. He has certainly proven to be one of the best in the business when it comes to writing stories of pure action and adventure. For those who already follow the path of *The Gray Man*, they already know that this character engages the mind from word one, and this newest title is no exception to that rule.

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

NEVER ALONE

By Elizabeth Haynes

This fantastic book by Elizabeth Haynes cannot appear on bookshelves soon enough. Truly exciting, this is one title that's sure to be on top of all summer "must-read" lists.

We begin with Sarah Carpenter. Living on the moors of North Yorkshire, she spends her time in a farmhouse with her two dogs. Sarah has had rough times in her past, most especially the death of her husband. Now comes the time when her two children, Louis and Kitty, are packing up and leaving for the university. In other words, the farmhouse is about to become more than a little isolated. Upside for Sarah is the fact that she does have friends and support, even a very best friend by the name of Sophie who she can rely on to be there for her.

Lives certainly change on a daily basis, and although Sarah has lost her children to adulthood for a time, a new person comes into the area that may alter her own personal romantic future.

His name is Aiden Beck, and he's no stranger. Looking for somewhere to stay for a while, Sarah offers up a room and looks forward to spending time with him. Sarah, however, seems to be the only one happy with Aiden's appearance. Her children are wary of this man's motives and Will Brewer, a friend, has taken it upon himself to check up on Sarah as often as he can. Even her relationship with Sophie has become a bit distant since Aiden's arrival.

Drama enters quickly: Sophie disappears, winter weather is closing in, and even Kitty goes missing. Sarah finds herself a bit frightened as the odd and dangerous things seem to pile up as quickly as the snow outside. And when Mother Nature blocks the road and takes away any chance of Sarah leaving the farmhouse, Aiden's motives come to light.

A truly great read, Haynes has hit it out of the park once again!

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



THE TORCH BETRAYAL

By Glenn Dyer



In this World War II thriller inspired by true events, OSS Agent Conor Thorn, races across Europe on a mission to locate missing battle plans for Operation Torch—the invasion of North Africa—before they fall into enemy hands.

Along with M16 super-agent, Emily Bright, they uncover a maze of deception leading from London to the Vatican. For the readers already familiar with double-crossing Soviet spies, such as Kim Philby, Dyer does a great job of weaving historical facts and figures through this tale of rip-roaring spy intrigue.

For Thorn, a man with a heavy-heart and a career on the downside, this is his chance at redemption. Knowing he cannot afford to fail, he pushes the mission to the limit, accusing one of Churchill's own cabinet members of passing secrets to the Abwehr. In a tense gun battle that takes us into the waning pages of the novel, Thorn and Bright struggle against overwhelming forces in an attempt at a successful mission. When the one chance exposes itself, Britain's Nazi mole is also almost exposed in the aftermath.

In his sizzling debut, Dyer feeds us frenzied spy-tale for the ages in this first book of the series. His reflections of the world in 1942 are an accurate portrayal of the times our fledgling OSS cut their teeth on, and their achievements to help end the war.

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

IF I DIE TONIGHT

By Alison Gaylin



The Hudson Valley is a peaceful area in New York State where only a small amount of law and order is needed to keep citizens safe. But in the town of Havenkill, bloodshed is about to happen and a case of monumental proportions is on the horizon.

We begin with a Facebook letter posted by Wade Reed, saying goodbye to the ones he loves (mother, Jackie, and brother, Connor). Apparently, the law is after him, and he believes he's heading towards death at the age of 17.

Jackie Reed is a woman with issues. Ever since her husband divorced her for his much younger assistant, she has been trying desperately to raise her two boys. But the older they get, the less Jackie seems to understand them.

Pearl Maze is a new cop in the historic town; she prays that she can bury her tragic past while also hoping that the broken building she works in now doesn't fall down on her head.

Out of the blue, an 80's icon from the music world, Aimee En, ends up in the Havenkill PD stating that a teenage boy stole her expensive car while she was driving through town. She states that another boy heard her screams and came from out of the darkness to save her. His name was Liam Miller and was apparently hit by the car. Liam loses his life and the hit-and-run soon becomes a case of murder. When the car is found, stories begin to change.

The author does a fantastic job of offering up all points of view, from Wade's look at what went wrong in his life to even Connor's revelations about what his older brother asked him to hide. Readers will not notice they're holding their breath while turning the pages of this one, because the action never stops, and sometimes the darkness feels as if it's creeping into your own home.

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



LAKE SILENCE

By Anne Bishop

The Others is a top-notch series. With this book, Bishop now enters into an off-shoot series titled, *The World of the Others*, and this first story is absolutely fantastic.

Vicki DeVine is a woman who has gone through a divorce after being married to a rotten guy. What she got out of the marriage, besides the inability to open up her heart to another, is a piece of property called The Jumble. Being the sole owner, she has put everything she has into restoring the rustic cottages and main house located beside Lake Silence which abuts the Village of Sproing. The Others, who are predators that control most of the land throughout the world and all of the water, rules this area. The Others include everything from vampires who are, literally, bloodsucking attorneys, CPAs, etc.; and shifters that include everything from the Crowgard to the Beargard. Vicki must call the human police, however, when her lodger Aggie Crow stumbles across a dead body.

Officer Wayne Grimshaw who wants no part of Sproing finds himself reassigned here. He discovers an old buddy of his, Julian, in Sproing. Julian has a special gift for knowing/seeing bad things. Because of a nightmare event during his time as a cop, Julian now runs a small bookstore that sits across the road from the police station. Wayne asks Julian for his help; people want to pin this murder on Vicki, even though it's clear no human could've killed the man.

Joining forces, with even a vampire attorney named Ilya Sanguinati pitching in his services to help Vicki, these people strive to find a killer and stop other humans from taking over the property. Because if they do, creatures galore will turn The Jumble into one giant Bloodbath.

The scenery, the characters, the creatures, the wit, you name it, everything is perfect in *The World of the Others*. It will be thrilling to see where this author's incredible imagination goes next.

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

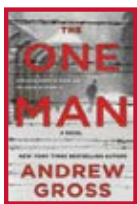
DRASTIC MEASURES

By Dayton Ward

Fans of *Star Trek: Discovery* will love this look back at a major historical event in the *Trek* mythos while also delving deeper into the characters of Philippa Georgiou and Gabriel Lorca. Set 10 years before Michael Burnham commits treason and the Klingon War begins, Georgiou leads a team of people to assist in aiding the colony on Tarsus IV. Lorca and his team watch in horror as the governor of the colony, Adrian Kodos, implements a solution to the crisis that will be remembered for all of the wrong reasons.

Ward is a fan of the *Star Trek* franchise, and he is also a terrific writer. He does a great job utilizing what diehard fans already know and still gives the proceedings a unique spin. He also creates a great story even if you haven't seen the new series. Perfect for fans of *Star Trek* and those who just like a good sci-fi thriller.

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* ■



THE ONE MAN

By Andrew Gross

Andrew Gross has written a fascinating and exciting story set in hell: the Auschwitz concentration camp.

In 1944, both Germany and the Allies are racing to create enough fissionable material to build an atomic bomb. There are different methods used to make Uranium-235. The Germans used the heavy water method while the Allies focused on gas diffusion. But the foremost expert in gas diffusion is renowned physicist Alfred Mendl, a Polish Jew who's currently in Nazi-occupied Europe. The OSS has tried to get Mendl and his family out with forged Paraguayan passports, but German Abwehr officer Colonel Franke has seen through the deception and shipped the family to Auschwitz.

In a last-ditch attempt to get Mendl, the OSS creates a bold plan. They recruit Nathan Blum, another Polish Jew who managed to make it out of the country on a mission to save a priceless Torah from destruction by the Nazis. After his escape, word reached him that his remaining family was slaughtered in a reprisal for a resistance attack. Blum's working in Washington as a translator until he's called to meet "Wild Bill" Donovan and the OSS director's deputy, Captain Strauss. The new mission they have for him, approved by FDR, is to return to Poland, sneak into Auschwitz, locate Mendl, and get him out.

Meanwhile, Mendl fears he won't last much longer in the camp and with his death his work will be lost. He reaches out to Leo, a chess prodigy with a brilliant memory. Leo has some protection provided by the Deputy Commandant's wife, Greta, who enjoys chess. But while their friendship helps Leo survive, her husband's jealousy may be the chess player's downfall. And even as Blum undertakes his assignment, Franke has gotten wind of the plan.

Gross blends research and detail with a fast-paced story and well-drawn characters, each with their own agenda. He evokes Auschwitz in all its horror, yet also captures the humanity within an inhuman world. The story will stay with you long after you read the final lines.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

KILLING IN C SHARP

By Alexia Gordon

You gotta love those ghosts! For any fan who has become completely enraptured by the character of Gethsemane Brown, you will not only love the 'spirit' in this one, but you will also be thrilled to join up with Gethsemane on her third adventure.

This newest book once again hands Gethsemane a murder on a silver platter and she uses all her skills and talents to unravel the mystery to the best of her ability. It was in Book #2, "Death in D Minor" where Gethsemane saved her beloved friends by tangling with a hotel developer that was sleazy with a capital "S." This man was going to do everything he could in order to make Gethsemane give up the Irish cottage she loved so that he could turn it into a tourist trap and make cash... and he failed.

This time out, she not only has a crime, but she has a ghost who is far more vengeful than anyone can possibly imagine; a spirit that is going to take out her revenge for her own murder centuries ago.

As Gethsemane attempts to deal with this unforgiving entity who likes to wreak havoc in the lives of students, fellow teachers, and good old Inspector O'Reilly, a music reviewer is suddenly found dead as a doornail in the orchestra pit of the opera house. When a famous composer is arrested for the murder, Gethsemane collaborates with a true crime author to find out what really happened. Add to all this a team of ghostbusters coming into town in order to find proof that ghosts really do exist, and you have an all-out, fun-filled story that Alexia Gordon has already proven she can write exceedingly well.

Nothing to do here but sit back and enjoy this one. Around every corner there is a new character to meet, greet, and perhaps... run away from!

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

THE DEMON CROWN

By James Rollins

"The Demon Crown" is the newest title in the powerful *Sigma Force* series, and it is just as awesome as the ones that came before.

As the story opens, a group of scientists discover a location that is unlike any other place on earth. It seems that everything on this particular island has disappeared and the land has been possessed by an unknown species. But before the scientists can report their discovery, an attack occurs on the group leaving only one alive: Professor Ken Matsui from Cornell University who is an entomologist—an expert on venomous creatures.

This horrible species can be traced back to a secret buried a century ago under the National Mall. This buried treasure is a cache of bones preserved in amber and was hidden away by a group led by Alexander Graham Bell to protect people in the future. After all, it isn't something that can be "played" with, since it holds the secret of life after death.

To stop this from getting out, Commander Grayson Pierce of Sigma Force is set to issue a direct attack on the island. However, the Sigma Force team, created to be America's front line against threats, has its work cut out for them with this mystery that traces back to the original founding of the Smithsonian Institution. And with each step they take to destroy it, the deadlier this menace becomes. The thing they're hunting is changing, growing and spreading, able to adapt and survive, becoming stronger and smarter. On top of all this, Commander Pierce is slowly running out of luck and options on how to take this thing out. He must collaborate with Sigma's sworn enemy, The Guild, to find a way to stop total annihilation of the known world, even if it means sacrificing one of his own men to do it.

Once again Rollins offers up a full plate of nonstop action, suspense and complete excitement! Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

MURDER AT HALF MOON GATE

By Andrea Penrose

This is the second incredible *Wrexford & Sloane Historical Mystery*, and for those who missed the first, it's important to know that the Earl of Wrexford (AKA: Wrex), is a real pain. He says exactly what he wants to say, without remorse, whenever and wherever he wishes. He knows all about the world of science, and also has the ability to drink a lot and end up in the worst situation possible.

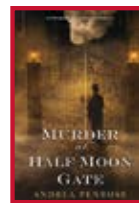
Last time out, when he was the one and only suspect in a gruesome murder, he came across a very smart woman by the name of Charlotte Sloane. A widow, she's also the mother of two street urchins that she has adopted going by the names of Raven and Hawk. Charlotte is also London's favorite satirical artist, working under the assumed name of A.J. Quill. She exposes secrets that the elite of London would rather keep buried, which makes her a decent wage that's allowing her to move out of the slum-like area she's been living in with the boys.

When Wrex and his friend are walking one night, leaving a gaming/alcohol establishment, they basically trip over the dead body of a man who has created a machine that will help industry grow and, unfortunately, oust humans from their jobs. Wrex believes he can simply turn this case over to the regular law of London and walk away. But, as fate would have it, he becomes so embroiled in the case that he and Charlotte end up trying to find out who killed this man and why.

The suspects are many, and more bodies are turning up, exposing a group who will do anything to keep the machines out and the people employed.

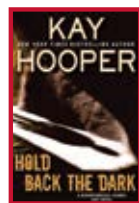
Once again, the relationship and banter between the two stars of this series is incredible. Readers will look forward to seeing Charlotte and Wrex again (and, hopefully, very soon).

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



HOLD BACK THE DARK

By Kay Hooper



There's a very good reason why Kay Hooper has stayed near the top of my 'must-read' list, and if you're already a fan, then you're already in on the secret. Hooper is a master of both plot and character development.

Go to Prosperity is the message that's broadcast into the consciousness of psychics across the country and around the world. It comes as headache-inducing pressure to most, but bulldozes through with far more force to the Chosen—a motley crew of psychics who are dealing with obstacles in life based on their extrasensory abilities and skills (or not) to manage those 'gifts.'

Prosperity, North Carolina, is a small mountain town in the Appalachian Mountains and lives up to its name. Chief Deputy Katie Cole loves her job and the work, but she knows that something is coming. There's a pressure building in town, and normally cool heads no longer prevail. When she and her boss, Sheriff Jackson Archer, are called to the scene of the suicide of a loving father and husband, the tragedy defies logic. But the suicide doesn't compare to what they'll find when they arrive at the quiet home of the Gardner family. The horror they encounter there is beyond comprehension. They need support and Katie doesn't have a difficult time convincing Archer that she's got an outside-of-the-box idea.

The Special Crimes Unit is run by the enigmatic chief, Noah Bishop, with his wife, Miranda. They are highly respected both in and out of the paranormal community. His team must convince the Chosen to put aside their fears to face an unknown enemy with the tools—or lack of—that they possess. If they don't, the world as we know it will become a living nightmare.

In perfect storytelling fashion, Hooper builds layers of intrigue and introduces you to each new character with ease, planting the seed needed to place the reader directly into the plot as if we're fighting evil together. A captivating read, you'll find this one hard to put down.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■

PHOENIX BURNING

By Isabella Maldonado

Maldonado's second novel following "Blood's Echo" literally opens with bullets flying, and does not let up from there.

Homicide Detective Veranda Cruz has a vendetta against the Villalobos cartel. The leader of this vicious group, Adolfo, has plans to eliminate anyone that stands in his way of achieving his goals, even if it means killing his family members and destroying the city of Phoenix in the process. For Cruz, it's more than just protecting the city and the people she cares about, it also is quite personal. Will the task force be able to stop this reign of terror?

Maldonado utilizes her extensive knowledge and experience working in law enforcement to create a story that feels authentic. It can be a bit graphic at times, but the cartels are not known for hugging puppies. The bigger question is what does Maldonado have in store for Cruz next?

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





EXPOSED

By Lisa Scottoline

In this, the fifth book in the *Rosato & DiNunzio* series, the story opens on Mary DiNunzio's father and his friends from their close-knit South Philly neighborhood calling Mary in; in need of a lawyer.

The older men are great comic relief: her deaf father, Matty, and three men named Tony. They are differentiated by their nicknames, Tony "From-Down-the-Block," Pigeon, and Feet. But the case Mary is called in on is a serious one. A man from her childhood, Simon, has just been fired from his job at OpenSpace, a company that makes cubicles. The reason for his firing was obviously bogus and the timing is horrible. He has lost his insurance just when his baby daughter, Rachel, desperately needs an expensive bone marrow transplant for her ALL (acute lymphoblastic leukemia). Mary says that, of course, she will help him sue OpenSpace.

That's a problem, though, as her law colleague, the tough, prickly Bennie Rosato, points out. She tells Mary that OpenSpace is owned by Dumbarton, which is a client of their firm. Will Mary have to quit her job with the firm to help the old family friend? Will this come between Mary and Bennie? The latter believes she should not take the case.

There are lawsuits and countersuits that pile on to the complications. Rachel's illness causes ripples in every direction. As the reader is taken into the sad world of childhood cancer, layers of guilt and deception are uncovered on many levels, and both Bennie and Mary realize that the personal and professional consequences are huge for both of them.

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

MURDER IN THE LOCKED LIBRARY

By Ellery Adams

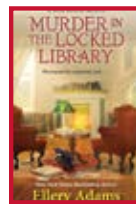
In this fourth *Book Retreat Mystery*, readers will have so much fun returning to Storyton, Virginia. Here, we are talking about settling in to such places as, the Agatha Christie Tea Room, the Henry James Library, and so many more. (Don't you just love those names?)

Jane Steward is our main character and she's the mother of twins, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Jane works at Storyton Hall as the manager, and now that her children are back in school and break is over, Jane must concentrate on a huge project that the Hall is doing. They will be building a brand new attraction that will be named in honor of Walt Whitman: a luxurious spa that all visitors will absolutely love to take part in.

Now, when breaking ground on various sites, odd things *have* been found before. But when it comes to Storyton Hall, in the ground they not only find bones (and strange ones, at that), but an old book is also part of the discovery. A book that the attendees of the Rare Book Conference in Storyton are drooling to get their hands on, offering Jane any help she needs in order to solve this mystery. Turns out, the mystery is about to get even bigger when one of the visitors turns up murdered inside the library.

This group of intriguing characters and suspects will keep readers riveted until the last page. Ellery Adams has proven, yet again, that this series will go on for a long time to come. In fact, the author has done such a brilliant job in the first four books of this series that readers should be wanting to live in Storyton by now, no matter how many people end up dead there. Just like Jessica Fletcher did for Cabot Cove!

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



THE NEW NEIGHBORS

By Simon Lelic

Jack and Sydney both have something to say. Unfortunately, their stories may be just a bit too late to save their own lives.

This is a young couple who was happy...originally. Although there are two sides to every story. What Sydney wanted was a home. She wanted a foundation that would perhaps see marriage, a child, and a long, comfortable life for both she and Jack. What did Jack want? Well, he hems and haws, but he caved when he and Sydney saw this particular house and she wanted it. Of course, when Jack put a bid in to purchase the house, he assumed that it would be far lower than the other bids that would come from the large amount of people who were also at the Open House that day. Turns out...the owner just so happens to want that "perfect couple" and Jack's bid is the one accepted.

As they are setting up house, so to speak, a vile thing is found in the attic. A vile, smelly thing that has both of these people wondering if this was the dream house they actually wanted. As other things crop up, both of them soon believe this is one dream that may have turned into an actual nightmare.

As the child next door becomes more than a bit odd and murder comes to their back door, Jack and Sydney find themselves being watched by local law enforcement, and it may just take a miracle to get them out of this disturbed house and bizarre existence they've gotten themselves into.

With each chapter told from a different perspective—going back and forth between Sydney and Jack's point of view—this tale never gets tired or dull. Lelic has done a great job leaving a trail of breadcrumbs that leads readers to a completely unforgettable end. An end that may just cause many house hunters out there to settle for a rental.

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

NIGHT MOVES

By Jonathan Kellerman

Jonathan Kellerman is back with his friends and characters beloved by readers everywhere, Detective Milo Sturgis and Dr. Alex Delaware, psychologist/advisor to the police. This great relationship has gone on for years, and has definitely endured the passage of time.

As always, Milo calls Alex late one night with news of a strange new murder to solve. It seems that a family, out for supper, returned home and settled down for a spot of "family time" before heading off to sleep. But when the father of the group runs downstairs to find some reading material to help him get some shut-eye, instead of a great book on the shelf, he finds a mutilated dead body on the floor. It seems that the body has been basically blown away, but the hands have also been removed which will make it even more difficult to identify the victim and begin to understand why on earth this body was placed in this very "normal" family home to begin with.

This case grows stranger and stranger as it progresses, bringing in the backstories and lives of odd neighbors, a young teenager, and a whole lot of families who are just a little 'funny' as the twists and turns mount up page after page. The entire police force, it seems, along with Alex are all looking into different ways on why and how this crime occurred. But, as it always is with Kellerman, no reader will even guess the finale of this one.

There are people who remember Alex Delaware from his first appearance in the world of suspense fiction back in 1985. And perhaps it still surprises one and all that even though the good doctor has been around for decades, every crime that lands in his lap is new, fresh and an expertly carved puzzle that seems even better than the one that came before.

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

LIGHT IT UP

By Nick Petrie

For those who have fallen for war veteran Peter Ash, this is yet a new thrilling book that will have you waiting on eggshells for Ash to return.

Peter Ash has been living what you would call a simple life; his days are peaceful as he rebuilds hiking trails located in the state of Oregon. God knows, he needs the rest, considering all the danger he's put himself into over the years. Unfortunately, the calm and peace is interrupted when he receives a call from one of his good friends, a man by the name of Henry.

Henry needs to tell him about his beloved daughter who owns a security company in Denver, Colorado. This company has a very strange clientele, made up of cannabis dealers. Of course, when you're talking about Colorado, you're talking about cannabis businessmen and women, seeing as that it is legal, and they need to be protected from highwaymen who are out there ready to steal both the cannabis and the huge amounts of money these people carry.

Henry tells Ash that a large sum of money has been stolen. Henry's son-in-law was the transporter at the time, being the operations manager for the security company, when he, the money, and his vehicle disappeared completely.

Peter decides to help his friend. But when he places himself on a cash run, he, too, comes under fire. These hijackers seem to be all over the place, and the crimes are growing more dangerous and happening more often than ever before. Peter now finds himself locked in another nightmare that involves murder, kidnapping and a plan that readers will never see coming.

Once again, author Nick Petrie has provided a non-stop, gritty mystery that is difficult to put down. In other words, Peter Ash has moved into the realm of characters that end up doing time on that "big screen." Hear that Hollywood? Your newest action hero has arrived!

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

MURDER MOST FERMENTED

By Christine E. Blum

For readers who were lucky enough to sit down with the Ladies of the Rose Avenue Wine Club in Blum's first mystery, "Full Bodied Murder," they are going to welcome these fun, intelligent women back into their lives with glee.

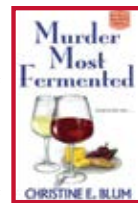
This time around, Annie "Halsey" Hall is once again the lady readers will be focused on. Originally hailing from the Big Apple, she became the newest member of the Rose Avenue Wine Club when she left behind a horrible marriage in NYC and decided to become a Southern California vineyard owner.

The first time around Halsey ended up with a dead neighbor. This time out, still dwelling with her beloved yellow Lab by the name of Bardot, Halsey is excited to begin digging her own vineyard off the incredible Rose Avenue. But, much like before, her situation goes haywire when instead of grapes she stumbles over yet another dead body.

It's starting to look a little bit like perhaps someone in this notorious group of women, with all their eccentricities and talents, may just have a taste for murder. But... who can you trust anymore, right?

Aimee, Sally, Penelope... the list goes on when it comes to Blum's fantastic characters and all their quirks. And the list of suspects for the crime are also a whole lot of fun to read. In addition, you will still love Bardot. Right out of the gate, so to speak, we get to see exactly how much this Lab has grown and how quickly she can now pull a wagon up a hill after hearing only the word, "Squirrel!" Add to that a guide of what the Rose Avenue Wine Club Drank and a Rose Avenue Guide to Wine Pairing, telling readers the foods that go best with certain types of wine, and you have a "second" in a series that is just as tasty as the first.

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



THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF SAM HELL

By Robert Dugoni

Some stories are simply special, extraordinary in fact, and Robert Dugoni has given his fans a gift that I fully expect to find on everyone's 'Best of' lists by year end. Seamlessly shifting between the present and past through emotionally-riveting flashbacks and current-day turmoil, Dugoni introduces you to Samuel Hill (aka: Sam Hell).

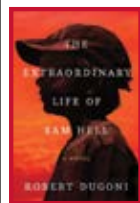
Madeline Hill isn't daunted when her son, Samuel, is born with red eyes, also known as ocular albinism. Deep down, she always knew that her son was destined for greatness and she's got enough faith in God to keep Sam headed in the right direction. Honestly, she has enough faith to keep nearly everyone in the small town of Burlingame, California in line as young Sam soon learns.

She certainly doesn't run from confrontation when six-year-old Sam is rejected from attending Our Lady of Mercy by the principal, Sister Beatrice. However, his mother has made it clear: Madeline's son won't be attending public school. Sam doesn't fit in at the Catholic elementary, yet finds lifelong allies in others who equally stand out: Ernie Cantwell, the sole black student, and Mickie Kennedy, a girl who defies the norms.

However, even with the help of his very vocal and protective friends, Sam's adolescence is peppered with instances that cause him to question his faith in everything, especially the greatness from God his mother professed, and he carries that baggage into his adult life. It will take a young girl, in dire need of a hero, to help Sam see that maybe his mother wasn't so far from the truth.

Distinctly different in style from Dugoni's typical fair, "The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell," is a captivating and poignant journey of strength and the power of finding your true self. Without a doubt, this is Dugoni's best yet.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■



HE

By John Connolly

Anybody who absolutely loved Laurel & Hardy will be thrilled with this masterpiece from John Connolly. This is a stunning work that absolutely places readers into the Golden Age of Hollywood where they meet, greet, and embrace a duo who built a comedic partnership that ended up lasting long after they departed this world.

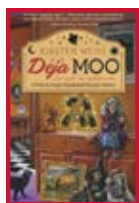
We begin with Stan Laurel, talking about his partner at the end of his life, and living with his fourth wife near the sea in a small apartment. Laurel is not in good health and is no longer making movies. We meet a different type of comedian when we meet Stan. He seems to be a bit of a difficult man who is not so nice to his wives, of which there were many. Ambitious and hardworking, he was very loyal to friends and extremely creative when it came to the performances he gave to the world.

The other side of the coin shows Oliver Hardy experiencing some of the same luck. When it comes to love, he shows a life where at least two of his ex-wives are suing him for alimony by the year 1930. But, even though their private lives were troubled, the two made over 100 movies between the years of 1926 to 1951, entertaining millions of people while respecting and relying on each other. One of them is definitely better when it comes to acting, while the other is the driving force behind their rise to fame and their ability to stay at the top of the ladder over the decades.

"He" is a work of fiction, as readers see Stan looking back on their careers now that Ollie is gone. You meet the real heroes behind the duo and learn the ins-and-outs of Hollywood, whether good or bad, throughout. Even if you are of an age where Laurel & Hardy are not 'stars' in your mind, after reading this, you'll definitely be a fan.

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





DEJÀ MOO

By Kirsten Weiss

Even though the holiday season has come to an end, this book brings us back to the time of mistletoe and reindeer. Maddie Koslowski lives in San Benedetto and runs her paranormal museum there; a museum that happens to be a huge draw for visitors and locals. However, it does play second fiddle to San Benedetto's Christmas Cow.

This bovine statue is huge and made out of straw. Placed in the town square every single year, it ends up being set on fire... every single year. Even though this is peaceful wine country, this criminal act takes place no matter what is done to stop it. This year, however, it's far worse.

Maddie is headed to help her mother guard the display when her truck breaks down. Unfortunately, she misses a great deal: Four gingerbread men and Santa Claus shooting flaming arrows at the infamous cow. That would be enough excitement, but when she and Police Detective Jason Slate do arrive, the burnt cow falls down more than a notch on the excitement meter when placed side-by-side with the president of the San Benedetto Dairy Association; a man who just so happens to be dead, with an arrow in his chest. Leo, an employee at the museum, did get the murder on tape. But, unfortunately, the killer was in costume.

Things happen fast as Maddie's mother is placed in protective custody and the community becomes frightened by the "cursed" cowbells on display at Maddie's museum. Slate is injured when he pushes Maddie out of the way of an oncoming car that seems to be aiming right for her. Now, not only does Maddie need to locate a killer and protect her mother, but she must also save her business while, apparently, being the focus of someone's evil intent.

This, Book #3 of the *Perfectly Proper Paranormal Museum Mysteries*, is all about charm, fun, quirky characters, and will make readers want nothing more than for the next tale to arrive.

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

THE WITCHES' TREE

By M.C. Beaton

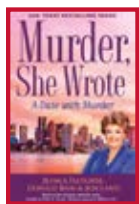
Agatha Raisin is bored with her life. Her detective agency hasn't seen challenging cases for quite some time. In fact, most of the cases she's been hired for are to find lost pets. Truth be told, this fifty-something retired London PR agent, who moved to the bucolic Cotswold several years ago in search of a life that exists in fairytales (and Agatha's imagination; including the required handsome prince) is depressed and lonely. At the moment, Agatha not only has no challenging case, but she has no possible man on the horizon who she can obsess about. Not that she'd ever admit that to anyone, but the people in her inner-circle know all the signs.

When an elderly spinster is found hanging from a local landmark, The Witches' Tree, Agatha jumps at the chance to get involved, whether the police want her help or not. In no time at all, another body turns up. This time it's the policeman who's doing guard duty outside the murdered spinster's house. And then, before Agatha can come up with a list of suspects, a third person is murdered, the wife of Sir Edward Chumble. Sir Edward, a pompous fool who fancies himself the lord of the manor (even though no one else in the area does) immediately puts Agatha on retainer to solve his wife's murder. At last, she has a legitimate reason to involve herself in the investigation.

Now there's no shortage of suspects, and one common link between the three murders seems to be a dinner party that Sir Edward and his wife hosted the night of the first death. But when the sometimes brilliant/sometimes very annoying Agatha begins investigating in earnest, she finds herself the object of death threats from the local coven of witches.

I always enjoy reading about the intrepid Agatha's adventures, especially the highs and lows of her romantic life. "The Witches' Tree" is *wicked* good fun. Check it out!

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



MURDER, SHE WROTE: A DATE WITH MURDER

By Jessica Fletcher, Donald Bain and Jon Land

For years, fans of "Murder, She Wrote" have been entertained by hundreds of TV episodes and dozens of books written by Donald Bain. Now, in 2018, there is a new sheriff in town! The reigns of this brilliant series have been passed to bestselling thriller author, Jon Land, with this latest installment, "A Date with Murder."

Fans will be thrilled. After all, Jon is a very prolific writer in his own right; his bestselling *Caitlin Strong* thriller series is extremely popular. When Jon got the call to continue this *USA Today* bestselling series, I'm sure he looked at it as a brand-new challenge. This would be a writing style that is different for Jon. Given this curve ball, Jon took it and did as he always does: hit it out of the park.

"A Date with Murder" could easily be argued as being the best in the series thus far. Jon takes his thriller style and weaves it into a "whodunit," creating a true masterpiece in the genre. Jessica Fletcher is thrust into another case when she suspects her friend Barbara "Babs" Wirth's husband did not die from an ordinary heart attack; a theory that places her in the crosshairs of a killer.

You don't have to wait till the last page to figure out who did it. It was Land! He expertly drove home the dagger and brought about a very clever mystery that will have readers excited to get their hands on the next Land installment.

Reviewed by John Raab ■

THE RISING SEA

By Clive Cussler and Graham Brown

Hard to believe, but this is #15 from *The NUMA Files*, a series of books that has made readers, again and again, thank the gods that Clive Cussler decided to be an author long ago. Also adding his immense talent and imagination to this new "Kurt Austin Adventure" is Graham Brown. He and Cussler certainly make a duo that truly does not know how to create a bad book.

This time out the NUMA team is facing a global threat; taking on a desperate mission to make things right; and facing a conclusion that could kill millions of people if they don't do their job.

Kurt Austin, Zoe Zavala and the rest of the team are attempting to understand why the world's sea levels are suddenly rising at such a quick pace. The explanation for it being a glacier melt and nothing more is unacceptable at this rate. Therefore, something or someone truly sinister has to be behind it.

There are many incredible locations they'll head to, and many secrets they'll find, but it will all lead to an underwater mining operation that no one knew was even in the works. Not a surprise, considering it's buried in the East China Sea and is there for a secret purpose that could end up bringing about a worldwide catastrophe.

As always with NUMA, a plot is in the works that is more dangerous than the characters, or readers, can possibly imagine. As the fast-paced, action-packed story unfolds, the risks for NUMA grow large as powerful figures attempt to reach the top of the ladder while crushing everyone else under their feet.

Cussler and Brown have both received high praise for their writing, and this is yet another book that earns it. From a diabolical man to a killer weapon to a violent assassin, there's nothing this tale fails to offer. Readers will be locked into this story from word one and will be absolutely floored by the awesome ending.

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

WITH ONE SHOT

By Dorothy Marcic

Subtitled, "Family Murder and a Search for Justice," this book is based on true events that occurred when writer, Dorothy Marcic, began uncovering her own family's skeletons.

This is all about what happened when Marcic's uncle was killed in cold blood, and how solving this mystery showed how flawed the justice system in America can be. Marcic took this on and tells readers how she worked for two years to find the truth behind this tragedy, and the steps she had to take to make things right.

Her uncle, former Detective LaVerne Stordock, lost his life in a horrible way, leaving his entire town more than a bit shocked by his death. It wasn't as if the crime was just set aside or buried by the police. In fact, they were able to get a confession from Stordock's widow, Suzanne. With the wife filing an insanity plea, it seemed as if the case was tied up. Trouble is, other data came about that did not exactly coincide with what Suzanne had confessed to.

The author not only offers up a very complete story that is a true thriller, with mystery, betrayal, and secrets being at the very core of what took place, but she also adds in family pictures, artist renderings and recreations of the crime scene, and more so that the reader can truly see every detail that came to light.

The love that Marcic has for her uncle and the mission she took on in order to finally let him rest in peace is what makes this book a heart-wrenching tale. Not only will it intrigue readers, but it will also make them want to pat Dorothy Marcic on the back and commend her for all her hard work.

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

THE ESCAPE ARTIST

By Brad Meltzer

Readers, Brad Meltzer is one great writer!

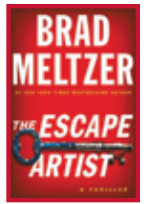
In the frozen skies of Alaska, a small plane contracted by the military has taken off with seven passengers on board. One of these passengers is a woman who is all Army; she is loyal to her country and joined the forces to build something strong. While writing a note to her boyfriend, the plane begins to shake. With no hope of living more than a few seconds, she writes a smaller note and puts it in a place where someone will find it and know who her "last words" were meant for.

At Dover Air Force Base, Jim "Zig" Zigarowski is a morgue "magician"; one of those few who can take anyone, no matter what horror they died in, and make them look as young and handsome/pretty as they were before their untimely deaths. This way, when the families wish to say goodbye, they do not have to witness a nightmarish vision.

Zig moved fast to take on a case being brought in. The corpse's name is Nola Brown. Zig knows her from long ago when Nola saved his own, now deceased, daughter. He wants to help Nola for the kindness she showed. But when Nola is placed on the gurney, the next stop Zig must make is to the home of his friend and Dover's chief homicide investigator, Master Guns. He must tell him that the body on his gurney is not Nola Brown. And what he found with this body is even more astounding.

A case begins that will set readers on their ears. Meltzer offers up chapters showing the life of Nola Brown and how she was mistreated throughout the years. There are twists, turns and clues around every corner, and nothing (unfortunately) can be given away here. Just remember the aforementioned words, "This man is a great writer," and you'll know why you *must* read this book!

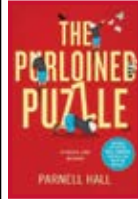
Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of "The Double-Edged Sword" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE PURLOINED PUZZLE

By Parnell Hall

Many authors are writing humorous mysteries these days. But very few are writing laugh-out-loud-so-often-that-you-have-tears-running-down-your-cheeks mysteries. That honor belongs to the one and only, hilarious Parnell Hall, who has held that title for me, along with the late great Joan Hess, for many years.



For those of you who have not yet made the acquaintance of Hall's protagonist, allow me to introduce you to Cora Felton, known to the general public as the Puzzle Lady, author of a nationally syndicated crossword puzzle column and the grandmotherly face of a best-selling children's cereal. In reality, her niece, Sherry, is the puzzle genius in the family and Cora is a hard-drinking, chain-smoking woman in her senior years who couldn't construct or solve a crossword puzzle to save her life. She's also had more men over the years than should be allowed, and peppers her vocabulary with words that might make the average sailor blush. Cora also packs a gun, and often finds herself the unwanted recipient of crossword puzzles that contain clues leading to a murder.

In "The Purloined Puzzle," Cora is approached by an annoying teenage girl who claims that she's found a puzzle and demands that Cora solve it. Cora can't get rid of the girl, so she suggests involving Harvey Beerbaum, a true crossword constructor, in the fun to get herself off the hook. But the puzzle has been stolen, and a blood-stained knife is found in its place. In no time at all, a body is discovered in the middle of Main Street and Cora has another murder investigation on her hands. The plot really thickens when she finds out her least favorite ex-husband, Melvin, is in town and may have purchased the knife.

Hall places clues to the murder throughout the book in the form of actual crossword puzzles constructed by Will Shortz, *New York Times* crossword puzzle editor.

"The Purloined Puzzle" is the nineteenth in this delightful series. I loved every single word!

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

TRACKS

By LaLa Corriere

Tucson-based PI Cassidy Clark and her best friend, attorney Breecie Lemay, take on the mob in this fast-paced international thriller, chasing drug lords responsible for the apparent death of their college girlfriend, Catherine, the mob boss's wife, who was in the process of divorcing the powerful Anthony Bibbione.

Once they test the ashes from Catherine's urn, in an attempt to establish that there were traces of heroin in her body and that she was cremated to hide the crime, they are amazed to find that in the urn there are no human ashes at all. What has really happened to Catherine? As the *Cosa Nostra* has a stranglehold on the distribution of heroin in the Tucson area, Cassidy assembles her team of investigators to track down the local bad guys, while she and Breecie take off for Rome and try to track down Catherine's son and perhaps her true cremated remains.

Journeying from Rome to Florence, the duo find themselves in Monteriggioni tracking down evidence that shows Bibbione's pregnant girlfriend was also dead, slaughtered with the dead child removed, in a clumsy attempt to stop a paternity test. As the bodies pile up the ladies rack up the evidence, until, inevitably, they end up kidnapped themselves.

This well-done thriller/crime-fiction tale not only takes us on a tour of Italy but also on a tour of the twisted mind of a sociopath, presenting enough twists to keep the reader in a tail-end spin.

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





THE CROOKED STAIRCASE

By Dean Koontz

I'm not sure what planet one has to be living on to not already be a fan of the *Jane Hawk* series. Because now, following two amazing predecessors, readers will find themselves stunned once again.

Sara is on her way home. This is a woman who lost almost everything she had built for herself at the hands of a hideous man. What he left her with was lies, wounds that will never heal, and fear. When she enters her new home that fear grows exponentially because Jane Hawk is sitting at

her table.

Jane has done the voodoo she does so well and awaits Sara. Not to hurt her, just to get her help. Jane needs to know everything Sara can tell her about the ex. Jane shares information Sara didn't know, and Sara does the same, including how she was tortured by said ex and wants nothing more than to see him go down in flames. A plan is set.

Jane is getting closer to the group known as Techno Arcadians; people who are slowly taking over the world by using a serum to turn normal peoples' minds into those of robots. Robots who will do anything they say, such as kill people like they killed Jane's beloved husband. Jane needs as much evidence as possible to get these powerful people behind bars and stop the sick utopia they're intent on building. Scared for her son who is in hiding, Jane is also a fugitive fraudulently indicted on various charges created by these Acadians.

Let us just say Jane gets the path she seeks, ends up utilizing something she despises, finds her son in peril, and uncovers a "crooked staircase" that, unfortunately, is not a figment of imagination.

There is so much to say... All that can be said, however, is: to readers, THIS is a series you don't want to miss. And to Mr. Koontz, "This is outstanding! I need more Hawk ASAP!"

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

SPEED THE DAWN

By Philip Donlay

If you want to experience terror, this is where to get it. Donovan Nash is back once again in this new novel by Philip Donlay, and finds himself living in a world where fire is quite literally raining from the sky.

It is not the end of the world, but for certain people on Earth it sure seems like it. Giant meteor showers are occurring, pummeling down all across Northern California. These horrific showers of white hot meteor fragments are creating giant sparks that bring huge fires to life. The landscape is extremely dry so it's the perfect spot for Mother Nature to use to create hell on earth. And with each shower, these huge fires are moving ever closer to Monterey Bay.

Donovan Nash is one who finds himself in the middle of this nightmare. He has been injured, and his pain is growing worse by the second. All he can concentrate on is keeping himself and the people who are with him alive until the sun comes up and they can try one more time, in the light of day, to find a path out of the fires.

His own wife, Dr. Lauren McKenna, is working with the Pentagon, trying to stop the fires from spreading any further in order to save the seven million people living in the area who have no way to escape. If she makes one wrong move, the man she loves will be turned to ash.

Donlay is a fantastic writer; he is so emotional and vibrant with his words, that it makes the present day situation, the fires that have laid waste to many areas in the state of California just recently, even more frightening. This is the eighth thriller in the *Donovan Nash* series and, if it's possible, this is one character who continues to get better and better as time moves forward.

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



CLOSER THAN YOU KNOW

By Brad Parks

From the author of the incredible "Say Nothing," this new title is so riveting that it pulls you even deeper into the thrilling imagination and amazing writing of the talented Brad Parks.

The main character in this book is Melanie Barrick. She was given a warning long ago. She was told that disaster is always closer than you know. Melanie's early life was not one of peace and serenity. She grew up in the foster care system and barely got off that roller coaster. Now, being an adult, life is certainly on the sunnier side, considering she has a husband and a child she truly loves

more than life. It's gotten to the point where she's finally in a good place and wishes to put everything bad in the past and leave it there.

Unfortunately, life is never that easy and disaster is right around the corner yet again. Out of the blue, while she's at work, Social Services removes Melanie's son from his daycare center. Life becomes even more confusing when she gets home and realizes that the law has invaded her space and found enough cocaine to put Melanie behind bars for a good long time. She has got to prove this is a setup. She must prove she is innocent to the world, before her own beloved son is lost to "the system" that still causes Melanie nightmares.

Add in a lawyer who is struggling to solve a cold case while she's supposed to be helping Melanie, and you have a tale that at times makes the blood run cold.

Brad Parks is a master at creating frightening, emotionally-overcharged stories that take your breath away. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



THE WINDOW

By Amelia Brunskill

Talk about your very worst day. A young girl named Jess is called out of her gym class and taken to the principal's office. It is there that she learns her twin sister, Anna, has lost her life. Thing is, Jess believes that the odd explanation being given for Anna's death is most definitely not what actually happened.

Right off the bat readers learn that Jess is the complete opposite of her popular sister; Jess has no skill or desire to excel at sports, school, or anything else. But she does have a loyalty to find out exactly what happened to the sister she loved. When she's taken home, she stares at the bedroom window that the law has stated is the one Anna "accidentally" fell out of as she was trying to secretly leave the house. But as Jess begins to investigate this story, she uncovers a myriad of lies that the sister she once thought she knew had been telling.

Looking through her sister's belongings, Jess finds the first odd clue: a love poem written by Anna. The very next day, wanting nothing more than to get some answers, Jess heads to school just to hear that Lily Stevens, Anna's best friend, has suddenly moved to Florida. And when she calls Lily, she gets nothing more than another odd statement right before Lily hangs up on her and blocks her number from her cell.

The trickling of clues starts to erupt: from a teacher who apparently had a "thing" for Anna to a young boy who Anna was supposedly going to run away with and get married to, Jess finds herself wrapped in a mystery that will have readers sitting on the edge of their seats until the truth about what happened to Anna is revealed.


This debut author has done a great job creating a methodic tale that builds perfectly to the ultimate finale.

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

GARY WILLIAMS & VICKY KNERLY
"WE DEMAND MORE FROM THIS DYNAMIC DUO—AND SOON."
 —Rosa St. Claire, *Miami Examiner* on *Indisputable Proof*,
 Named one of the Best Fiction Books of 2012

SAMUEL TOLEN RETURNS

@WILLIAMSKNERLY



ALL SYSTEMS DOWN

By Sam Boush

Boush invokes Tom Clancy mixed with a TV show from a few years ago, *Revolution*, to showcase the horror of life when the power gets turned off. The blackout is the result of a hacker from North Korea, and the mass panic and chaos that follows is terrifying and feels frighteningly real. Boush takes his characters from all walks of life including the military, a former police officer seeking a job, and a nosy neighbor who takes advantage of the widespread fear to seize power.

Rather than a standard thriller with the hero and definable villain, Boush writes the story as a journalist showcasing different aspects and survivors of this new world, while putting the reader deep into the turmoil. This is clearly the first novel in what should be a gripping series, and he's off to an amazing start.

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* ■

THE OTHER LADY VANISHES

By Amanda Quick

She is referred to by a powerful group of men, a group who also sell drugs in their spare time, as Patient B. Her real name, however, is Adelaide Blake and she has just been able to escape from Rushbrook, California in order to stay safe and begin again.



Narrowly escaping this frightening scene (to the reader, it will be downright thrilling), Adelaide moves to a place called Burning Cove, California in order to stay safe and begin again.

It is the glorious 1930's and Burning Cove is a favorite among the Hollywood movers-and-shakers. Adelaide is now working at the local tea shop creating her special tea's that offer people everything from tranquility to a better, more restful sleep. Florence Darley is her boss and loves teasing her about the new neighbor who has moved in beside Adelaide that constantly arrives at the tea shop. As far as Florence is concerned, the handsome, widowed Jake Truett is there to hit on Adelaide and not just to enjoy a 'nice cup of tea.' Turns out, Florence was right.

The story unfolds fast. Truett has a reason for being there. Although he states that his doctor told him to go somewhere and relax for his health, Jake is really there to find a blackmailer and steal back an item they have. Not only is the "Psychic to the Stars" soon found dead, but a man comes to town that Adelaide knows wants to either take her back to Rushbrook, or take her life.

There are so many secrets and thrilling characters, plot twists and great action in this one that makes it easy to say, Amanda Quick has definitely outdone herself!

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

WARNING LIGHT

By David Ricciardi

A major earthquake in Tehran creates an international crisis, and a commercial flight suffering mechanical failure must make an emergency landing on a restricted airport runway. When one of the passengers, Zac Miller, starts taking photos on his cell phone in the lobby after deplaning, he is immediately detained and accused of being a spy. That's when the fun truly begins. Miller is in fact a CIA agent, but he has never been trained in any capacity beyond desk work. When a murder occurs with his fingerprints all over the evidence, he realizes he must dig deep and find skills he didn't know he had in order to escape from a foreign country and clear his name.

This is Ricciardi's first novel, and from the well-crafted and intense storyline it's hard to believe that he has not written dozens of prior thrillers. Definitely seek this one out.

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* ■

BEYOND THE PALE

By Clare O'Donohue

When our tale first begins, readers find themselves in a cottage in Ireland on the banks of the monstrous Atlantic Ocean, sitting with a man who is desperately checking his computer, waiting for his bank to show that a transfer of money has been made.

Quickly we move to the home of Hollis and Finn Larsson. These are two people who are both college professors working in Michigan. Although they love each other, Hollis has been getting antsy. She wants to get a stamp in her passport, or at least take a vacation with her husband and try to get his butt out of the chair and away from the game on the TV. Finn is happy with the relationship and doesn't really understand why Hollis needs excitement to boost their marriage. What neither expected, however, was just how much excitement they were about to get handed.

One day an old friend named David Agnelli contacts Hollis out of the blue and wishes to catch up. Turns out, David has been working with Interpol and what he's really after is Hollis's husband. Finn is known for verifying old documents, and now a manuscript has shown up that Interpol needs his help with. This special manuscript is in the hands of an antiques dealer in Dublin. Seems that Interpol already knows it's a fake, but they believe clues are located within it that were written by an undercover agent who may need help. But other people are suddenly placing bids to get this from the dealer, and for evil reasons all their own.

Excitement definitely comes into Hollis's life. But instead of something that could inject life into her marriage, she may just be facing someone who will end her and her husband's lives once and for all.

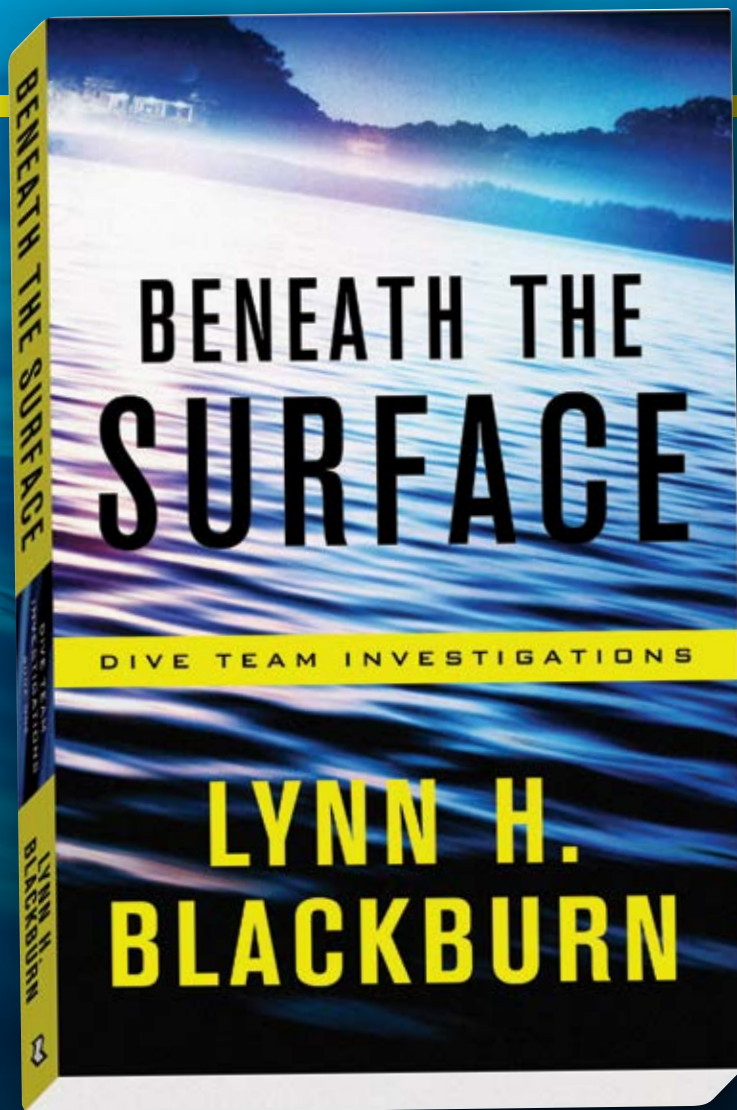


This is Book 1 in the new *World of Spies* mystery series, and the author has created the perfect roller-coaster ride.

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

Award-winning author Lynn H. Blackburn grabs readers by the throat and doesn't let go until the final

HEART-POUNDING — PAGE. —



Leigh Weston thought she'd left a troubled past behind when she moved back home to Carrington, North Carolina. But when dive team investigator Ryan Parker finds a body in the lake near her home, she fears the past hasn't stayed where it belongs. Can Ryan find a way to protect her, and maybe win her heart in the process?

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT **LYNNHBLACKBURN.COM**

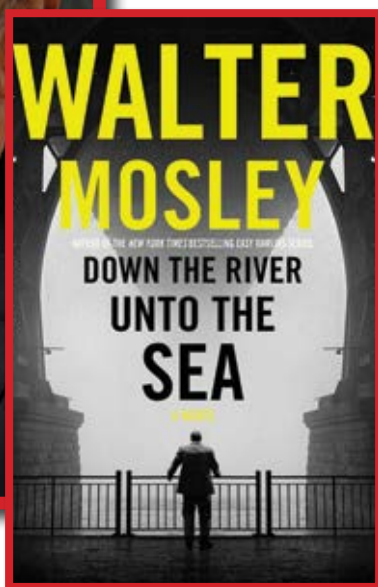


America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THE FEARLESS PEN OF WALTER MOSLEY

By Barry Lancet and Anthony Franze
Press Photo Credit: Marcia Wilson

In this series, authors Barry Lancet and Anthony Franze interview other suspense writers about “the rules” of writing. This edition, Barry talks with the legendary Walter Mosley.



The range and depth of Walter Mosley’s body of work is staggering—and something even the writer himself could not have predicted when he started. His initial goal was a modest one: simply to write a solid short story. “I wasn’t thinking about getting published,” he says. “I was thinking, ‘God, if I could write a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, that would be great.’”

And that’s where he focused his efforts. He enrolled in a variety of writing programs and studied with a host of talented writers, including the novelist-essayist Frederic Tuten and the poet William Matthews. But it wasn’t until the Scottish author Edna O’Brien jarred him from his endless toying with the short story form that he made the leap to novels.

“She says to me, ‘Walter, write your novel,’ in her wonderful brogue. That was great. That was wonderful. And I thought, O’Brien told me to write a novel, so that’s what I went out and did.” His labors eventually led to “The Devil with the Blue Dress” (1990), which launched the popular and highly



regarded *Easy Rawlins's* mystery series.

Since then, Mosley has written an impressive number of books on a range of subjects—fifty-two books in twenty-eight years. There's science fiction, plays, political treatises, and more, and a host of fictional characters, including the wise ex-con Socrates Fortlow, the P.I. Leonid McGill, and the intrepid Fearless Jones. Mosley also has a literary novel due in September from Grove-Atlantic, but in the meantime his latest effort, "Down the River Unto the Sea," adds yet another new character to the pantheon, former cop Joe "King" Oliver, named after Louis Armstrong's mentor, a coronet player and bandleader.

When a woman offers Oliver an unusually large amount of money to prove a black journalist-activist on death row is innocent of killing a cop, Oliver has mixed emotions. On the one hand, he is still a cop at heart and hates killers of any stripe, especially cop-killers. On the other, the money will help him work two cases: "His own, because he was framed by the police in his department, and the black journalist's."

Oliver expects to confirm the journalist's conviction, but his investigation takes an unexpected turn. "The guy is guilty of the killing but he's innocent of the crime," Walter says. "The cop was corrupt and killing people, and the journalist acted in self-defense."

The point is to show the other side of the coin. "There was this policeman working with black kids from different gangs, having them play football," says Mosley. "Reporters ask the parents, what do they think of the policeman's work, and the parents say, well, you know, usually when I see a policeman they hit me, they beat me, they chain me, they arrest me. Like the journalist in the book, too many people are on death row who don't deserve to be there. It's not that they are innocent, that they didn't fight or shoot back when somebody shot at them. The thing is that they aren't *criminal*. They are people who are fighting for their lives. It's the politics of the thing, and that runs through the novel."

When Oliver realizes that, despite his own innocence, he's never going to get his badge back and so can't get justice for the journalist in the usual way, he devises another solution. "And *that* solution was the reason I wrote the book," Mosley reveals. "Because there's so many people who've been set up by the cops, and you can't defend yourself against it all."

Mosley's writing methods are intriguing, and often different. During the second half of our talk, he graciously provided some tips for aspiring scribes:

BE FEARLESS

Mosley is a big believer in writing without restriction. When a poet friend told him she couldn't write about her children's experiences because it could hurt them, his pushback was immediate. Did her children read her journals or log onto her computer? No. Then what was the problem?

"What she's thinking about is sending her writing to the magazine or publisher," Mosley explains, "but they don't call us publishers. We're writers. We sit and we write as close to the bone as we can. Now if it turns out that we feel that we can't publish it because, like, we saw our uncle murder somebody one day and we don't want to get our uncle arrested or we don't want our uncle to kill us, okay then maybe we don't publish that one. But when you're writing, you write it," he insists. "If you start to hold yourself back in any way then your writing is going to suffer. It's going to be a lesser thing than it could be."

THE KEY TO IT ALL

"I write every day," Mosley says. "You kind of have to. There's so few days I don't write in a year that I can count them on one hand." He follows his own dictate with unstinting dedication. "I'm in San Francisco right now. I woke up in L.A., and I had to get to San Francisco, but I wrote this morning."

So it's like the professional musician who practices every day to keep his playing sharp? "Yes, exactly. And he gets better and better and better. Louis Armstrong, when he was a young man, could play, I don't know, say, 250 notes in a minute. When he was an older man and his fingers were slower and his lips were damaged, he'd play maybe one-twelfth of that number but



he'd still play the same music because he knew where the right notes were. He learned that over a long history of playing."

PRIME THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND

The practice of writing daily has additional benefits. "If you spend two or three hours every day writing, the rest of that day your unconscious mind is mulling over all the things that were brought up. And when you start writing the next day all those things are available to you. You have new ideas and that's amazing."

And the benefits don't stop there. "It goes from book to book, and thing to thing," Mosley says. "And as years go by you get deeper and deeper, which is the reason you should write every day. Because the day you don't write, you start to move away. And the second day, even further, and the third day, you know, it's gonna take you a week to get back to where you were. At least that's true for me."

ON REVISION: FOLLOW YOUR PERSONAL TOOL SET

"The first draft is little more than an outline of the novel you wish to write," Mosley tells us in "This Year You Write Your Novel." "Rewriting is where you make the story into song."

Fair enough, but how does he know when he's finished? "You write your novel, and after, say, the seventh month, you got your draft. Then you read through it."

Writers do this in different ways at different stages but however you proceed, you will "find things wrong with it and fix those things. And then you'll read through it again and find things wrong and you fix those things. You might go through it two times, five times, twenty times, I don't know. But the reason you go through it so many times is this: by the time you get to the final draft, you will still find things wrong but you no longer know how to fix them. Your tool set doesn't fit those things and so that's when the book is finished."

But there's a kicker. "Some months later, you'll find that now you do have the tools to fix those things because that's what's been going on in your head. You've been looking for the answers for next time."

Mosley's love of writing is contagious. It comes through in conversation and in his book on writing. So it seems only fitting to end with a last assurance, again from *This Year*: "I can't promise you worldly success, but I can say that if you follow the path I lay out here, you will experience the personal satisfaction of having written a novel. And from that point, anything is possible." ■

* *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 "The Outsider" (St. Martin's Press, 2017) and "The Advocate's Daughter" (St. Martin's Press, 2016).

Montage Press Photo Credit: Michael Palmer (St. Martin's Press), Tess Gerritsen (www.tessgerritsen.com), Steve Berry (Kelly Campbell), John Lescroart (provided by author), Gayle Lynds (www.gaylelynds.com), Barry Lancet (Ben Simmons), Anthony Franze (provided by author), Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child (provided by authors), John Gilstrap (Kensington Publishing), Catherine Coulter (provided by author), Brad Meltzer (Herman Estevez), Heather Graham (provided by author), Andrew Gross (provided by author), Robert Dugoni (provided by author), Michael Connolly (Philippe Matsas), Alexandra Sokoloff (Lawrence Smith), Karen Dionne (provided by author), Jamie Freveletti (provided by author), J.T. Ellison (provided by author), James Bruno (provided by author), and David Morrell (Jennifer Esperanza).

The background of the entire page is a dark, atmospheric painting. It depicts a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a voluminous red dress and a red flower in her hair. She stands in the foreground, looking up at a large, dark, muscular statue that is crucified. The statue has visible wounds and blood. The scene is set in a dark, stormy landscape with red-leafed trees and a cloudy sky. Red petals or leaves are falling around the woman.

Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

Alexandra V. Bach

Makes a Statement

The Martyr and the Saint



Alexandra V. Bach's exceptional artwork captures the mind and inspires intense feelings in every soul who is lucky enough to view it. Mystical detail can be seen in her works that span arenas, like fantasy and gothic horror, with the touch of old-school romance thrown in to spark the senses. A native of France, Alexandra not only does her own personal artwork but she is also a well-known and highly celebrated digital artist who has collaborated with musicians as well as leading publishers in the industry, working with them to create everything from CD to book covers, calendars, artbooks, and so much more.

Her vibrant work is equaled only by her vibrant personality, and she has taken time out to share both with *Suspense Magazine* and talk about her life, her background, and even upcoming projects that fans will be thrilled by.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Let us begin by speaking about your home country. It is a consensus among many that France is a country of romance and creativity. Can you tell us a little bit about your home; what specifically appeals to you and aids you in creating your works of art?

Alexandra V. Bach (A.V.B.): *Thanks for the compliment! Actually, France has always had this very special aura of romance seen from the rest of the world, and it's quite funny for French people for it is a bit far from what we really live. To be true, I would rather say that France has inherited a sort of "romanticism" derived from 19th century*

writers, such as Victor Hugo, and let's hope we still have this very special passion within ourselves. Honestly, 2018 France is exactly like the other countries, with its social struggles and political problems. What I like as a French artist is the possibility to explore stories from French folklore, from the very old legends and myths, and bring them to a more global audience. I bet not many people know what a "vouivre" (half woman-half snake legend from Eastern France) or a "mandragore" (mythical flying monster from the Charente region) are, and that's what I find interesting.

S. MAG.: What set you on the road to becoming a professional artist? Did you have this particular desire when you were very young?

A.V.B.: *Well, as a child I was somehow drawing all the time. I was some sort of a loner; I spent all my free time in my room, inventing stories, painting princesses and mermaids, dreaming of fantasy worlds all my own. I had a very vivid imagination. However, I had never thought about becoming a professional artist until the age of 24 years old, when I joined an online artistic community called DeviantArt.*

Way back then I was a complete beginner but I started becoming interested in digital art—more precisely, photo manipulation—and little by little, started to do my own images. After one or two years of publishing my artwork online, a band asked me to create a cover for their CD...then another...then another even more famous than the preceding ones. The rest is history. ☺

S. MAG.: You have worked in a variety of areas within the industry, from book covers to CD covers, as well as being a designer for video games. Is there one particular 'space' that calls to you the most?

A.V.B.: *When it comes to creating with others, what I like the most is the very idea of a collaboration: it's about two parties teaming up to bring a vision to life. I love to encounter other artists and find a way to make our universes merge together, may they be musicians, authors, or artistic directors. So I started as a CD cover artist, then moved to book cover artist, and now I try to combine a bit of everything! What matters also is how interested the people are in working with me. I really like to feel there's a real interest in my artwork, not just your run-of-the-mill, 'I'm looking for someone to design my book cover,' and that's when I want to give the best I can.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, is there any particular specialty that you have not yet tried in the artistic universe that you wish to in the future?

A.V.B.: *Over the past 15 years I have done many, many things; from cd covers to book covers, creating three artbooks, calendars, a 78 card tarot deck, and so on...I have just completed this tarot deck and the response has been so overwhelming that I*



Melusine

Lorelei

felt tempted to create another one. ☺ Anyway, I am logically attracted by esoterics and personal development. Let's hope I can create a beautiful oracle deck; that'd be what I logically would aim for.

S. MAG.: What are your other passions? Are you a book lover, film? If so, do you get some of your ideas from these particular arenas?

A.V.B.: *Music is my number one passion. Before becoming a professional artist, I was a musician, and music is essential to me. It has inspired so many of my artworks! Of course, I am also fond of movies, series...just like everybody else. And indeed, what I see, hear, and feel is helping me find ideas for my illustrations. I have just watched and read "The Handmaid's Tale," and believe me, this is food for thought!*

S. MAG.: Although this is a difficult question to answer, if someone were to ask you if you have a particular personal favorite from your work, which would that be and why?

A.V.B.: *If I had to choose only one, I would pick the mermaid from the "Cabinet of Curiosities" series. There's a whole story behind the creation of this one, for I visited a real personal museum/a Cabinet of Oddities in Scotland, and it's a very emotional work, so many people are relating to it! It's also the very first artwork of the 'Cabinet' series, which led to the creation of the 68 page artbook that was released in 2016. This one started many positive things, and I'm somehow grateful to it.*

S. MAG.: Is there one image/creation that you were surprised by? Does that occur often, or have you already basically "mapped out" your work in your mind before putting it on paper?

A.V.B.: *It's a bit of both: sometimes, I already know what I want to create, and sometimes I feel that the artwork is taking shape by itself which may lead to really good surprises. I would say that all the art of the "Cabinet de Curiosités" came up this way; I imagined them, but there was a little kind of magic that helped all those characters come to life, even better than I would have thought in the first place.*

S. MAG.: There is great depth in the pieces you create, from the mesmerizing backgrounds to the characters themselves. Is there a specific thing that you hope a viewer will take away from your work after seeing it?

A.V.B.: *Thanks very much! In fact, there are two things I'd like the viewer to feel: travel and emotion. I create my art to disconnect from real life, to escape from reality, and I would like to take the viewer by the hand and take him or her with me*





*Le Cabinet de Curiosites:
Le Camee des Morts*



*Le Cabinet de Curiosites:
Sepia Morphine*



ΕΙΔΟΛΙΣΜ

"Emotions are the foundation of my work. I try to add a story behind every piece I create."

into my very fantastical world. And emotions are the foundation of my work, I try to add a story behind every piece I create. I feel I have reached my goal when people tell me how they feel each time they look at my work.

S. MAG.: You speak on your website about that desire to collaborate on projects. How do you choose what you will become a part of? Does there have to be a certain "spark" that goes off when hearing about the creation?

A.V.B.: With time I have developed a kind of 'sixth sense' regarding collaborations. As I said, I love to collaborate but I have to feel the project, feel the will of the person to work with me and, of course, be able to personally relate to the project. I receive many offers a week, but sometimes they are very far from my own 'universe' so even if they can be interesting, I'd rather decline. I really trust my feelings when it comes to the collaborating process. And, yes, I definitely have to feel the 'spark' to start a beautiful project.

S. MAG.: Could you tell readers and fans about the future projects that could be in the works for you that we should keep an eye out for?

A.V.B.: Sure! 2018 is a kind of 'rest' year, since I have created those two artbooks and a tarot deck back-to-back. Let's say I am taking a deep breath before plunging in again. My tarot deck, "Le Tarot de la Nuit," created with French author Carole-Anne Eschenazi, will be available worldwide this autumn, and it is, by far, the most ambitious project I've ever done. Our collaboration was so smooth that we are thinking of working together again on another card game. In the meantime, I will have three other book covers published, and of course tons of personal artwork.

I know more than a few souls who will most assuredly be heading out to the stores to claim one of those stunning tarot decks as their very own. With work this incredible, it is easy to see that there are no roadblocks standing in the way of this particular artist's talent. The future is definitely bright for both Alexandra and her extremely happy fans. To view more of Alexandra's work, check out the beautiful website <https://alexandravbach.fr/>. ■



Irem Madigan's wedding trip to Rome turns into a desperate search for historical relics, and a struggle to stay ahead of a killer.

Strong characters, shady dealings, ruthless villains, a beautiful setting, an ancient mystery—*The Bone Shroud* has 'em all. Don't miss it!

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Meet Debut Author JACK CARR Using Experience to Inspire

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

JACK CARR IS ONE OF THOSE authors who, most definitely, writes from experience. His action-packed debut novel focuses on subjects he knows inside and out. His 20+ years in Naval Special Warfare has seen him transition from an enlisted SEAL sniper, to a junior officer leading assault and sniper teams, to a platoon commander practicing counterinsurgency in the southern Philippines, to commanding a Special Operations Task Unit in the most Iranian-influenced section of southern Iraq throughout the tumultuous drawdown of U.S. Forces.

Now that his other lifelong dream of writing a novel has come true, Jack takes a moment to speak with *Suspense Magazine* about his time in the military, his thrilling book, "The Terminal List," and discusses what comes next in the life of a man who takes on serious jobs and makes sure to do them with absolute excellence.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): For all those who are out there right now working on doing just what you have so expertly accomplished, can you tell readers how you went about writing that first novel? Did you just decide out of the blue to take on this project? Did you set aside a certain number of hours per day to work on it?

Jack Carr (J.C.): *Writing a novel was a lifelong dream. From an early age I wanted to be a Navy SEAL and a writer. As my time in the military was coming to an end, I figured it was high time to give writing a shot. I never questioned which genre would be my focus; that seems to have been pre-ordained. I wanted to write what I loved: thrillers. I wanted the first novel to be a hard-hitting story that explored the age-old theme of revenge. The inspiration came from emotions I experienced in the military, and I decided to take those emotions and apply them to a fictional narrative. This made the experience of writing it intensely personal. I wish I*

could say that I was disciplined about how and when I wrote, but the truth is, I grabbed any spare minute I could.

I was constantly jotting down sentences and ideas that always came to mind at the most inopportune times. Most of the writing was done late at night which seemed to be the only time it was quiet in our home. With three young children packed into a beach house in Coronado, CA that was about the only time I was going to get. Then, every few months I would lock down in a cabin on a remote property in Alabama. That was where the meat of the writing was done, a place with no distractions where I was surrounded by natural beauty. I love writing out there.

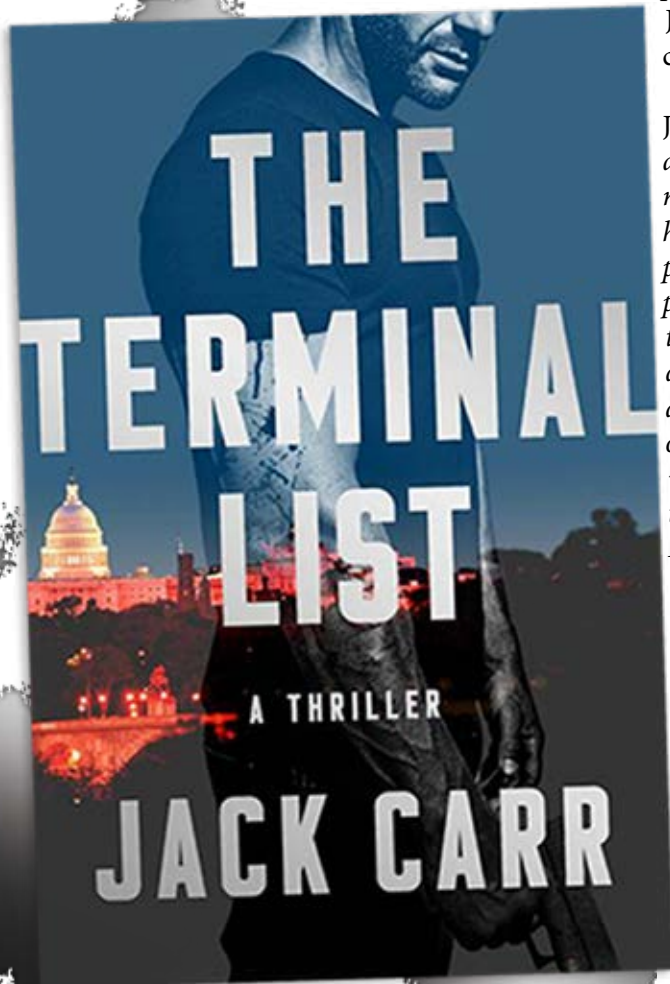
S. MAG.: Being a debut author, how much nervousness is involved while waiting to see if readers out there accept and 'love' your character, James Reece? And can you give readers a sneak peek (something not found on the back of the book) regarding the plot of "The Terminal List"?

J.C.: I wouldn't say that nervousness is the right term. It's more an excited anticipation. James Reece is a pretty likable guy and there's been incredible feedback from the beta readers, other authors, and from early reviews, so I think he is someone readers will really connect with. He's a guy with some specific skills, skills that have been tested and hardened by over a decade at war, but the character is not a superman-type robot. I think readers might be surprised at just how human he is. As to a "sneak peek," I'd say there are a few timely issues at play on the pages of "The Terminal List."

S. MAG.: Should it be assumed that this is the first in a series of Reece novels to come, or is this a standalone novel with you moving on to other projects?

J.C.: There is another novel in the works...it may be related to some of the characters in "The Terminal List" but as to which ones and in what capacity, that's a secret...

S. MAG.: You have an amazing background: a former Navy SEAL who led special operations teams; a SEAL sniper—your personal bio reads much like an amazing fictional character. Do James Reece's experiences stem from any of your own? Are the characters based on or inspired by people you have known?



J.C.: It was very natural for me to tell the story through the eyes of a protagonist with a background similar to mine. I did, of course, make him much more skilled than I could ever be, but I also made him human. I was able to take the feelings I've experienced over the past twenty years in the military and apply those emotions to the protagonist of a political/military thriller. In a sense, it was a very therapeutic book to write, as I was able to explore my thoughts on different events through the medium of a fictional novel. I think that authenticity, not just of the weapons and gear used in the book, but of the main character's emotions, too, is what has really resonated with readers. As to the second question, the best way to answer it is to say there may or may not be some characters inspired by people I've known.

S. MAG.: Was there ever a time where writing seemed more frightening than the incredibly difficult job of being a Navy SEAL?

J.C.: Interesting question. I loved being a SEAL and I was honored to have served the country for as long as I did. Now, I'm a writer and I am loving every second of it.

S. MAG.: There are some reviewers who have already said they will label your book as the "best 2018 debut novel," with others stating it is "one of the best thrillers they've ever read." How does that make you feel? Does extra encouragement come from

statements such as these that make you want even more to continue down the writing path?

J.C.: *It is humbling to hear “The Terminal List” described like that. And to be compared to some of the authors I’ve looked up to and respected for years is the highest honor I can imagine. It certainly is encouraging. I am hard at work on the second novel to make it even better than the first.*

S. MAG.: Writers are always asked about advice they would give to others on what they should do to further their writing career. Let’s flip the coin and ask, if there was one piece of advice you could give about what not to do, what would that be and why?

J.C.: *I’d just get after it and DO it, instead of studying HOW to do it. Don’t over-think it to the point of paralysis. Get after it!*

S. MAG.: With your background, can you give your opinions in regards to the defense of the world as it stands today? Is there some way you feel we, as a people, can stop violence from occurring and/or escalating in the future? Or, is it the truth that when one horrible person/ruler falls, there will always be another to take their place?

J.C.: *Unfortunately, the history of the world is replete with wars, violence, oppression, and struggle. Some of that is explored in “The Terminal List.” Much of world history is defined by that violence. We must also understand that the rest of the world is not the United States, and we must always be vigilant to ensure that the United States does not become like much of the world. As I say in the preface, the “erosion of rights, however incremental, is the slow death of freedom.”*

S. MAG.: As a reader, can you state some of the characters you were inspired by, and why? Do you have any personal action/thriller favorites in the suspense world?

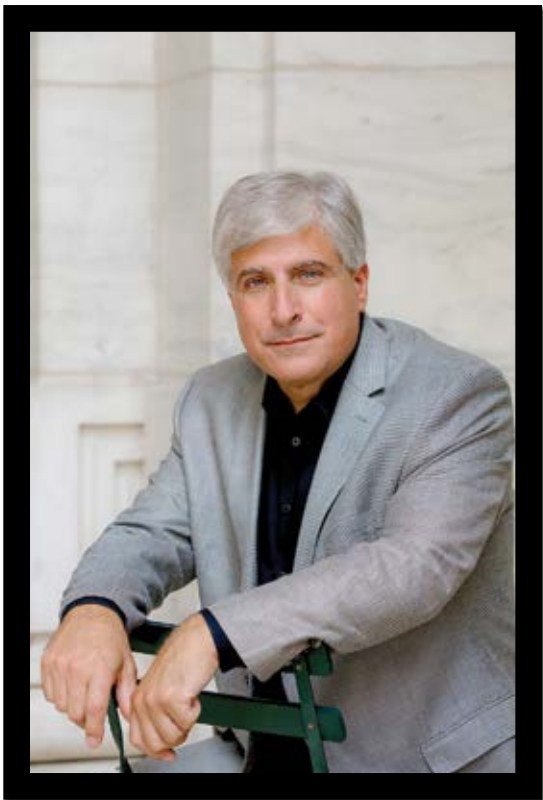
J.C.: *I grew up reading David Morrell, Stephen Hunter, Nelson DeMille, and Tom Clancy. Later I discovered Vince Flynn, Daniel Silva, and Brad Thor. David Morell’s “Brotherhood of the Rose,” “The Fraternity of the Stone,” and “League of Night and Fog” were some of my favorites in high school. “Brotherhood of the Rose” was one of the first works of fiction to mention SEALs way back in 1984. Nelson DeMille’s “The Charm School” was another one of my all-time favorites. Tom Clancy’s character John Clark was one I certainly identified with well before I joined the Navy to become a SEAL. Mitch Rapp and Scot Harvath have cemented themselves as iconic characters in the genre and I never miss a Vince Flynn/Kyle Mills or Brad Thor novel. Stephen Hunter’s Bob Lee Swagger is a character I can never get enough of. “Point of Impact” is a book I have read more than a few times. There are few, if any, characters out there tougher or smarter than “Bob the Nailer.”*

S. MAG.: If you could sit down with one author, past or present, and speak to them about their characters and books, who would that be and what is one question you would love to ask them?

J.C.: *That is a tough one! Mark Twain is the first to come to mind if for no other reason than his wit and wisdom. Hemingway, Jack London, Herman Wouk, Ayn Rand, and Anton Myrer as well. I have been so fortunate to have been able to meet many of the amazing novelists writing today that I’d have to pick an author who is no longer with us.*

It was an honor to meet Vince Flynn years ago at the SHOT Show when I was a SEAL. He could not have been more generous with his time. I am lucky enough to call Brad Thor a friend, and I certainly would not have a book deal without him. I almost feel like I’ve met Mark Twain, having been in the audience for Hal Holbrook’s incredible one man play, “Mark Twain Tonight!” All that being said, I would pick Mark Twain as much for how he saw the events during a very formative time in U.S. history as for his writing. He bridged the gap between centuries during this time period, living through decades that included the Civil War, the first flight, and the invention of the automobile. And I would have to mandate that it be a conversation rather than a single question. My only hesitation in picking Mark Twain is that I fear he might answer with a sardonic wit that I’d spend decades trying to decipher.

Although Twain would certainly add his gift of wit to any conversation, it is also true that the many readers out there who would choose Jack Carr as the author they would love to sit down with (a number that will be rising with each new person who reads his exciting debut), would receive an intelligent, thrilling conversation they would absolutely never forget. For more information, head to Jack Carr’s website at <https://officialjackcarr.com>. ■



THE BISHOP'S PAWN

By Steve Berry
Press Photo Credit: Rana Faure

PROLOGUE

PRESENT DAY

How ironic, I think, that this all started with a murder and now it appears it might end with another.

I'd been summoned to a famous address, 501 Auburn Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia. The house is a two-story Queen Anne with a porch, scroll-cut trim, porthole windows, and a gabled roof. Part of a neighborhood with a famous name. Sweet Auburn. Once the home of hard working, middle-class, urban families, sixty years ago the neighborhood became the epicenter for a movement that ultimately changed the country. The African American couple who'd lived in this house had not wanted any of their children born in a segregated hospital, so all three arrived into the world right here. The first, a girl, Christine, came early, before a crib had even been found. So she spent the first few nights of her life in a chiffonette drawer. The youngest, Alfred Daniel, found the world on a hot July day. The middle child, a boy, born ironically in the middle room upstairs, appeared on January 15, 1929. They called him Michael, for his father. But five years later, after a trip to Berlin, the father changed both his and the son's name to Martin Luther King, one senior, the other junior.

I'm standing in a quiet downstairs foyer. The invitation had arrived a week ago at my Copenhagen bookshop by regular mail, inside an envelope hand-addressed to me—Cotton Malone—and contained a note that simply read:

*Fifty years have passed.
Bring them.*

And then:

April 3. King house at MLK Center. 11:00 p.m.

With no signature.

But I knew who had sent it.

A few night-lights burn here and there in the darkened ground-floor rooms. Years ago, when I'd lived in Atlanta working for the Magellan Billet, I'd visited here one Sunday afternoon with Pam and Gary, a rare family outing of mother, father and son. We'd taken a tour of the house, then walked the entire King Center, trying to impress upon Gary the importance of racial equality. Both Pam and I prided ourselves on not having a prejudicial bone in our bodies, and we wanted our son to grow up the same way.

I glance into the front parlor with its famous piano and Victrola. The guide that day had told us how King himself had taken music lessons on that keyboard. Not one of the middle child's fondest childhood memories, if I remember correctly.

We'd also learned a few other things about Martin Luther King Jr.

He'd attended elementary and high school nearby, and college across town at Morehouse. In 1954 the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, called him to be its pastor. But in 1955 when Rosa Parks was denied a seat in the front of the bus, for 381 days he led the Montgomery transit boycott. In 1957 he became president of the fledgling Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Three years later he moved back to Atlanta and shared the pastor's pulpit with his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, which still stands just down the street.

From there he evolved into the heart and soul of a great movement.

So many memorable speeches. Two massive legislative successes with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. A Nobel Peace Prize. Thirty arrests for the cause. All leading to Memphis and April 4, 1968, when an assassin's bullet ended his life.

He'd been but thirty-nine years old.

I stare at the man standing in the shadows at the end of the ground floor hall. He'd definitely aged, but his face seems to have only become stronger with the years. His hair is grayer, the frame thinner, but the same air of gentle intellectualism remains, as does the stooped gait and short shuffle to each step as he approaches.

"Tomorrow will be a big day here," he says in the low voice I recall. "Fifty years since King died." He pauses. "Nearly twenty years since you and I last talked. I still feel the pain every day."

A cryptic comment, but I expect no less. "Out of curiosity, how did we get in here tonight? This is a national historic site."

"I have connections."

Of that I have no doubt. It was the same years ago when all of this had started.

"Did you bring them?" he asks.

I reach into my back pocket and display what he'd asked for. "Right here."

"You've kept them all these years, along with the secret. Quite an accomplishment."

"My career was the protecting of secrets."

"I kept up with you. You worked for the Justice Department what, ten years?"

"Twelve."

"An agent with the Magellan Billet. Now you live in Denmark and own an old bookshop. Quite a change."

There's a gun tucked at his waist. I point. "Is that necessary?"

"We both knew, at some point, it would come to this."

Probably so.

"You managed to move on," he says. "Everything that happened only pushed you forward to greater things. That's been impossible for me. I'm amazed I've lasted this long."

It's true. My life had been altered in ways I could have never then imagined. But what happened also taught me a valuable lesson.

"I came, tonight, *for you*," I tell him.

"Lay everything on that side table, please."

No point arguing, so I do as asked.

"The King family lived in this house a long time," he says. "They raised three children under this roof, one of whom grew up and changed the world."

"We both know it took more than just him to make that happen. You were a big part of that."

"That's kind of you to say. But it's no conciliation."

Only a handful ever knew what really happened, most of whom are now dead.

"Do you ever think about those few days?" he asks.

My time with the Magellan Billet had exposed me to some amazing things. Templars, a ruthless central Asian dictator, Charlemagne's secrets, the lost library of Alexandria, modern-day pirates. But nothing compares to what I was involved with during my first mission.

Before there even was a Magellan Billet.

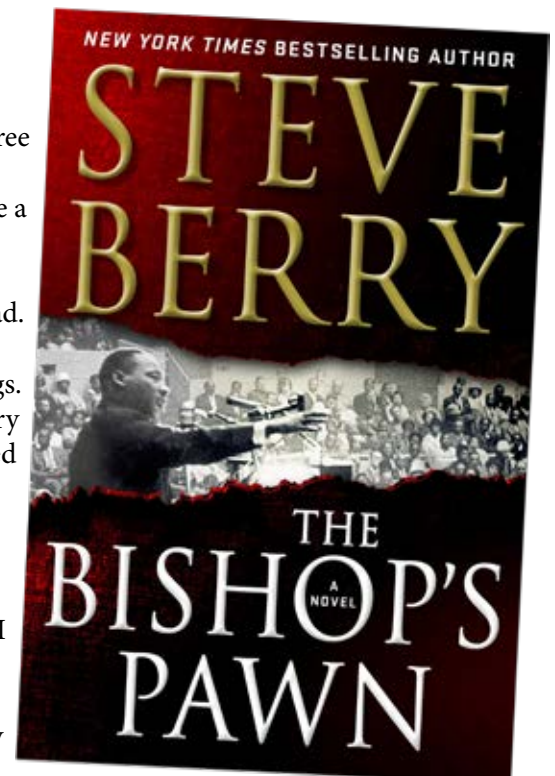
"All the time," I say.

"Should the truth be told?"

A fair question. Fifty years have passed and the world has changed. But I point again and have to ask, "Is the gun for me, or you?"

He does not immediately answer.

I learned a long time ago that people's actions were nearly always less tidy



than their minds. So I decide to be cautious.

"I want to talk about it," he finally mutters.

"And your choices of listeners are limited?"

He nods. "It's eating me up. I need you to tell me everything that happened. We never had this conversation back then."

I hear what he has not said. "Before what?"

"Before I decide which one of us this gun is for."

June 18 Years Ago

CHAPTER ONE

Two favors changed my life.

The first happened on a warm Tuesday morning. I was cruising on Southside Boulevard, in Jacksonville, Florida listening to the radio. A quick stab at the seek button and through the car speakers came, "Why does New York have lots of garbage and Los Angeles lots of lawyers?"

"New York got first choice?"

Laughter clamored, followed by, "How do you get a lawyer out of a tree?"

No one seemed to know the answer.

"Cut the rope."

"The other day terrorists hijacked an airliner full of lawyers."

"That's awful. What happened?"

"They threatened that unless their demands were met they would begin releasing one lawyer every hour."

More laughter.

"What do lawyers and—"

I turned the radio off. The disc jockeys seemed to be having fun, lawyers apparently a safe object of ridicule. Hell, who was going to complain? It wasn't like gay jokes, Polish jokes, or anything even remotely sexist. Everybody hated lawyers. Everybody told a lawyer joke. And if the lawyers didn't like it, who gave a damn?

Actually, I did.

Since I was a lawyer.

A good one in my opinion.

My name, Harold Earl "Cotton" Malone, appeared as one of thousands at the time who held a license within the State of Georgia, where I'd taken the bar exam six years earlier. But I'd never worked at any law firm. Instead I was a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, assigned to the Judge Advocate General's corps, currently on duty at the naval station in Mayport, Florida. Today, though, I wasn't acting as a lawyer. Instead, I was doing a favor for a friend, a distraught husband going through a divorce.

A favor I was beginning to regret.

The wife, Sue Weiler, possessed the cunning of a dictator and the boldness of a stripper. She'd spent yesterday parading across Jacksonville from apartment to apartment. Four in all. Men she'd met here and there. Fast sex with no strings. While sitting outside Apartment Number 3 I'd seriously wondered if she might be a nymphomaniac, as she certainly possessed the appetite.

Just past 5:00, after a surprisingly brief visit at Apartment Number 4, she folded her long slender legs into a sparkling new Cadillac and headed onto a busy boulevard. The car was a rosy shade of white, so pale that it looked pink. I knew the story. She'd specially ordered the car to enrage her estranged husband, the stunt entirely consistent with her taunting personality.

Last night she'd headed straight to an apartment complex on the south side and Boyfriend Number 5. A month ago she'd done the same thing and, being the pal that I was, I'd followed her then, too. Now the soon-to-be-ex-husband's lawyer wanted pictures and, if possible, video to use in divorce court. My buddy had already been socked with temporary alimony, part of which was going to pay for the Cadillac. Proof of adultery would certainly stop all alimony. Especially since Sue had already twice testified that she possessed no lovers or hardly any male friends at all. She was an accomplished liar, and if I hadn't seen the truth myself I would have believed her.

A light rain had fallen all yesterday afternoon, and the evening had been typically hot and humid for Florida in June. I'd spent the night rooted outside the apartment of Boyfriend Number 5 making sure Sue didn't slip away. Fifteen minutes ago

she'd emerged and sped off in the Pink Mobile. I speculated where she might be headed. An apartment complex out at the beach and Boyfriend Number 6, a title insurance agent with the advantage of forty pounds more muscle and twenty fewer years than her husband.

The morning was bright and sunny, the roads filled with commuters, Jacksonville traffic always challenging. My metallic blue Regal easily melded into the morning confusion, and following a nearly pink Cadillac presented little difficulty. Predictably, she took the same series of twists and turns across town until her left signal blinked and the Cadillac veered into another apartment complex.

I noted the time.

7:58 a.m.

Boyfriend Number 6 lived in Building C, Unit 5, with two assigned parking spaces, one for his late-model Mazda, the other for a guest. I'd discovered those details a few weeks ago. Half an hour from now, allowing plenty of opportunity for them to climb into the sack, I'd find a good spot to grab a little video and a few snapshots of the Cadillac beside the Mazda. In the meantime I'd wait across the street in a shopping center parking lot. To pass the time I had a couple of paperback novels.

I flipped on my right blinker and was just about to turn into the shopping center when a Ford pickup shot by in the left lane. I noticed the cobalt color, then the bumper sticker.

MY EX-WIFE'S NEW CAR IS A BROOM.

And knew the occupant.

My pal, the soon-to-be-ex-husband.

I'd last talked to Bob Weiler at midnight, calling in the bad news, none of which he'd liked. Him being here now meant only one thing—trouble. I'd sensed a growing resentment for some time. The seemingly blasé attitude the wife took to her husband's jealousy. A delight in emotionally building him up, then enjoying while he crashed before her eyes. An obvious game of control. His for her affection, hers for the pleasure of being able to dictate his response. But such games carried risks and most times the participants could not care less about the consequences.

Bob's pickup, in defiance to some substantial oncoming traffic, flew across the opposite lanes, tires squealing, and shot into the narrow drive, barely missing the carved cedar sign proclaiming the entrance to The Legends. I aborted my right turn, changed lanes and, taking advantage of some rubberneckers, followed. Traffic momentarily blocked my approach, and by the time I finally made the turn into the complex Bob was a good ninety seconds ahead of me.

I headed straight for Building C.

The truck was stopped, its driver's-side door open. The pink Cadillac sat parked beside the Mazda. Bob Weiler stood with a gun leveled at his wife, who'd emerged from her car but had yet to go inside. I whipped the steering wheel to the right and slammed the Regal into park. Groping through the glove compartment I found my Smith & Wesson .38 and hoped to God I didn't have to use it.

I popped open the door and slid out. "Put it down, Bob."

"No way, Cotton. I'm tired of this bitch playing me for a fool." Bob kept his gun trained on Sue. "Stay out of this. This is between me and her."

I stayed huddled behind my open car door and glanced left. Several residents watched the unfolding scene from railed balconies. I stole a quick look at the wife, fifty feet away. Not a hint of fear laced her gorgeous face. She actually looked more annoyed than anything else, watching her husband intently, the look reminiscent of a lioness surveying her prey. A stylish Chanel purse draped one shoulder.

I turned my attention back to Bob Weiler. "Put the gun down."

"This bitch is milking me while she screws whoever she wants."

"Let the divorce court handle her. We've got enough now."

He turned toward me. "The hell with courts. I can deal with this right now."

"For what? Prison? She's not worth it."

THE BISHOP'S PAWN

By Steve Berry

Berry has always 'hit it out of the park' with his books; with this, he's basically hit it to the moon and back. It is *that* good.

It is present day, and a gentleman is asked to come to the door of a very famous address. It is famous because many years ago three children were born and raised here. It was the middle son, Michael, who traveled with his father to Berlin; when they were there, the father changed their names to Martin Luther King—one Senior; one Junior. This gentleman, by the name of Cotton Malone, comes to the address. Mr. Malone knows what is going to occur. Fifty years after the infamous murder of MLK, this former Justice Department agent is going to look into what happened in Memphis and hopefully uncover the real truth that the world has not been privy to up until now.

Written into history is the story of bad blood between J. Edgar Hoover and Martin Luther King, Jr. This feud ended, and a pile of secrets were buried, when King was killed by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968. But, according to this story, what history preaches may not have been the real case.

As the story progresses, time is turned back so readers follow a young lawyer for the Navy (Malone), as he tries to come to grips with King's vicious killing that day. Another person in the mix is Stephanie Nelle, a Justice Department lawyer, who asks Malone to help with an investigation in progress. Soon, however, Malone finds there are two forces snapping at his heels: the Justice Department and the FBI who are at each other's throats over a rare coin and a whole bunch of secret files containing revelations about the killing that could destroy the legacy MLK left behind.

Berry is outstanding, taking people on a hunt through the past that brings even more suspense to a crime that has never been forgotten. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

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SUSPENSE
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Two shots cracked in the morning air and Bob Weiler let out a groan, then his body crumpled to the ground. Blood poured from a pair of holes in his chest. My gaze darted toward Sue. Her gun was still raised, only now it was pointed at me.

Another shot exploded.

I dove into the Regal.

The driver's side window, where I'd just been crouched, exploded, spraying glass on me.

She fired again.

The front windshield spiderwebbed from the impact but did not splinter. I snapped open the passenger-side door and slid out onto the pavement. Now at least a whole car was between us. I sprang up, gun aimed, and screamed, "Drop the gun."

She ignored me and fired one more time.

I ducked and heard the bullet ricochet off the hood. I came up and sent a round her way, which pierced Sue's right shoulder. She recoiled, trying to keep her balance, then she dropped to the pavement, losing a grip on her weapon. I rushed over and kicked the pistol aside.

"You no-good piece of crap," she yelled. "You shot me."

"You're lucky I didn't kill you."

"You're going to wish you did."

I shook my head in disbelief.

Wounded and bleeding, but still venomous.

Three Duval County Sheriff's cars with flashing lights and screaming sirens entered the complex and closed in fast. Uniformed officers poured out, ordering me to drop my gun. All of their weapons were pointed my way, so I decided not to tempt fate and did as they asked.

"This bastard shot me," Sue screamed.

"On the ground," one of the cops said to me. "Now."

Slowly I dropped to my knees, then laid belly-first on the damp parking lot. Immediately, my arms were twisted behind my back, a knee pressed firm to my spine, and cuffs snapped onto my wrists.

So much for favor number one. ■

Steve Berry is the New York Times and #1 internationally bestselling author of thirteen Cotton Malone adventures and four stand-alone thrillers. His books have been translated into 40 languages with over 22,000,000 copies in 51 countries. They consistently appear in the top echelon of The New York Times, USA Today, and Indie bestseller lists.

*Steve's devotion to historic preservation was recognized by the American Library Association, which named Steve its spokesperson for National Preservation Week. Among his other honors are the Royden B. Davis Distinguished Author Award; the Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award given by Poets & Writers; the Anne Frank Human Writes Award; and the Silver Bullet, bestowed by International Thriller Writers for his philanthropic work. He has also been chosen both the Florida and Georgia Writer of the Year. He also currently serves on the Smithsonian Libraries Advisory Board. In 2010, a NPR survey named *The Templar Legacy* one of the top 100 thrillers ever written.*

Steve was born and raised in Georgia, graduating from the Walter F. George School of Law at Mercer University. He was a trial lawyer for 30 years and held elective office for 14 of those years. He is a founding member of International Thriller Writers—a group of nearly 4,000 thriller writers from around the world—and served three years as its co-president.

ALMA KATSU

INCREASES "THE HUNGER" FOR SUSPENSE

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Suzette Niess



Alma Katsu was born in Fairbanks, Alaska. It is from spending a majority of her youth in Concord, Massachusetts, however, where her interest in American history first began. Her remarkable debut title, "The Taker," made Alma explode onto the suspense scene, and ever since, her storytelling has remained completely and utterly riveting.

A background in government, with positions working in various divisions from intelligence to foreign policy, Alma has been witness to some truly tragic moments that have effected humanity. With her latest tale, "The Hunger," she has combined her past career experience with her outstanding imagination to create a world of chills and thrills as she reimagines the very real and very horrific story of the infamous Donner Party.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Let us begin by speaking about your new title, "The Hunger." Could you give readers a little information on what the book is about and when the idea/plot first came to you?

Alma Katsu (A.K.): "The Hunger" is a reimagining of the story of the Donner Party, but with a twist. It follows the 90 members of the Donner Party into the Sierra Nevada Mountains, only this time there's something deadly, something hungry, following them (or is there?). It's about struggling with our demons, and how even in the darkest of circumstances, there are people who will rise above it.

Once you dig below the surface, you quickly see that the story of the Donner Party has everything: amazing characters, an incredible journey through the great unknown, and it asks deep questions of the reader. How far would you go to save your life and the lives of your loved ones? When you're facing near-certain oblivion, what is honor worth? Is it the only thing that matters?

It is also such an American story. The westward migration is what a lot of us think of when we think of America: we're a country of immigrants, everyone searching for a better life; the optimistic push ever westward; the belief that we can overcome any obstacles. It was a fun and challenging book to work on, on many levels.

"I've learned a lot from my time as an intelligence analyst. It taught me to be a good researcher, to be intellectually rigorous, and not to be afraid to tackle completely unfamiliar subjects."

S. MAG.: With almost thirty years working in various areas of the federal government, can you speak a bit about how that background helps in the creation of ideas?

A.K.: *I've learned a lot from my time as an intelligence analyst. It taught me to be a good researcher, to be intellectually rigorous, and not to be afraid to tackle completely unfamiliar subjects. Then there's the part that I consider a dark gift: for part of my career, I studied mass atrocities and genocides. Mass atrocities are only possible when neighbor turns against neighbor and people are willing to shut out logic and compassion to serve their own ends. I've channeled that experience into creating villains—really good villains.*

S. MAG.: Being that you are a graduate of the Master's writing program at Johns Hopkins University, was writing the career you always wished to pursue?

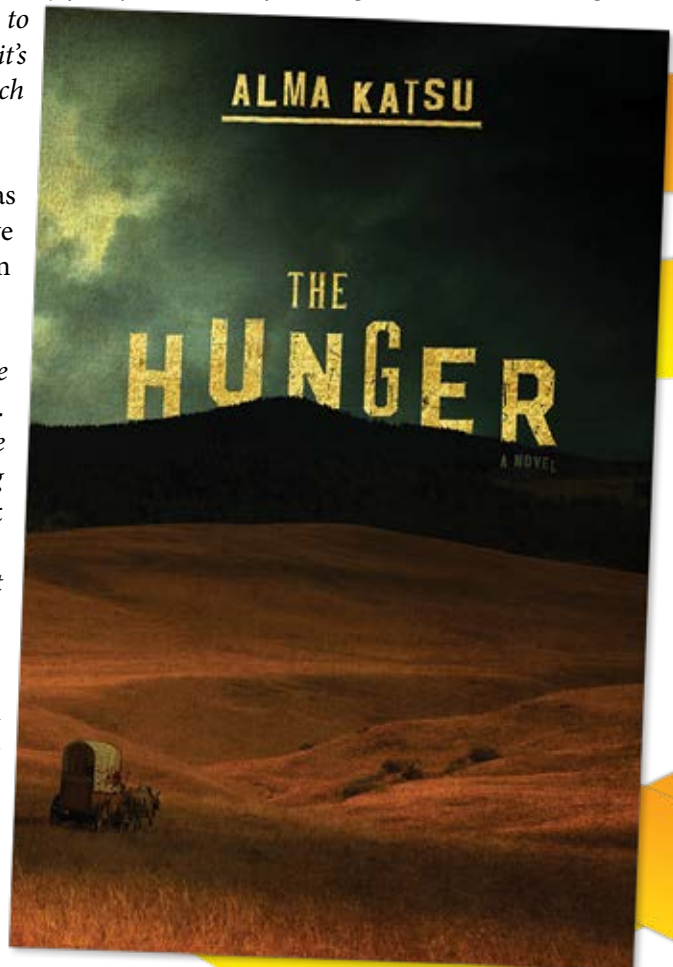
A.K.: *I'd always wanted to be a writer, but I put that on hold to take my first job with the federal government. I didn't go back for my Master's degree until I was forty, when I decided to return to writing fiction. I didn't anticipate a second career in fiction and it's amazing to be able to realize my dream at this stage in my life. I pinch myself every morning to make sure it's real.*

S. MAG.: How did you feel when "The Taker" was recognized as one of the best debut novels by the ALA? Did that distinction have any effect on the ease or difficulty that may have occurred when writing the next?

A.K.: *That was a shock. I didn't expect much for "The Taker" because it's not exactly mainstream, and it is so much darker than its peers. By that time, I was committed to writing the next two books in the trilogy and I didn't think about expectations because just writing another novel is a huge challenge! It's like they say, the second book is harder because you had all the time in the world with the first, whereas with the second, you still don't know what you're doing but now you have a deadline, too. That was probably the scariest time in my life and I've done some pretty high stress things.*

S. MAG.: In your bio it's stated that you studied with some truly amazing novelists, such as John Irving. Can you discuss some of the people you met along the way and how they influenced your career?

A.K.: *I studied with John Irving when I was a junior in college. I came from a working-class family and had never met a writer other than local newspaper reporters. "The World According to*



Garp” had just catapulted John Irving, deservedly, into the big-time—and this was the first professional writer I ever met! I was incredibly intimidated. While at Brandeis, I also had the chance to study with Margret Rey, one of the Curious George authors. I cringe to think of the dreck I subjected them both to. Undergraduate writing is a necessary evil, I guess.

What they both gave me, by being so patient and kind and encouraging, was the desire to keep trying.

S. MAG.: You have a gift for telling stories-within-stories. Is there a certain way you go about doing this? Do you create an outline before sitting down to begin?

A.K.: *That’s kind—sometimes I feel it’s just a natural tendency to overcomplicate things! You can tell the most complicated stories if you figure out the right way to do it, so the reader doesn’t get lost or tangled up in the story. Some readers—I’m one of them—love multilayered stories, so I guess it’s inevitable that I would be drawn to writing them. I don’t have a method for doing this, unfortunately, but after four books I’m finding that slipping in and out of a character’s timeline is coming more naturally.*

S. MAG.: If you had to pick the most difficult aspect of writing, and share that wisdom with people just starting out, what would that be?

A.K.: *You have to fight the urge to write something that’s ‘good enough.’ Readers want to be amazed and this is what I strive to do. My favorite stories remind you that life has an infinite number of perspectives and possibilities. What I mean is kind of hard to describe; it’s part voice, part really good imaginative, inventive storytelling. I am not a fan of lazy storytelling.*

S. MAG.: You come from Alaska but traveled to a variety of locations as you grew older. Can you share with us a special locale that inspires you to write more than others?

A.K.: *America, with all its variety, amazes me. To write “The Hunger,” I drove the second half of the Donner Party’s route—not the exact route because there aren’t roads, but close enough—and that was tremendously inspirational. There aren’t words that do justice to the terrain with its beauty and indifference to humans. I watched the prairie and the scrub brush and the salt flats unfurl beyond the car window and wondered how they ever made it, how anyone survived all this in a wooden wagon.*

For the second and third Taker books, I drew on some of my favorite locations in Hungary and Italy. Those books were an excuse to vicariously live in every amazing setting I could think of. But honestly, I’m not that well-traveled compared to some of my former colleagues who’ve been to dozens and dozens of countries.

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, is there a locale you would love to visit in the future that you have always wanted to see and perhaps use as a backdrop in a book one day?

A.K.: *I just got accepted to do a writer’s residency in Iceland that I am tremendously excited about. I’ve always loved the rugged, the austere, and the isolated and so this is about as good as it gets. I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of writing comes from it.*

S. MAG.: Who would you say are among your favorite authors, and why?

A.K.: *I divide my favorite writers into two groups: the influencers and the ones I’m enjoying now. No surprises among the influencers: Shirley Jackson, Edgar Allan Poe, Patricia Highsmith, Sarah Waters, early Anne Rice. Too many to name. Maybe more fun is giving a shout out to authors I’m enjoying now: I read everything written by Denise Mina, the Scottish crime writer; ditto for Kelly Link and local (DC) hero Keith Donohue; my agent turned me on to the spy novels of Charles Cumming; and, as a former intel officer, I’m picky about my spy novels. Like many people, I enjoyed Noah Hawley’s “Before the Fall” immensely, one of my recent favorites. The common thread among all of them is probably storytelling that is both solid and strong and yet has something decidedly unexpected about it.*

That recipe of ‘solid, strong and unexpected’ absolutely sums up Alma Katsu’s writing as well. The strength that comes from her characters, added to that completely terrifying villain that she has a true talent for creating, makes for titles that are impossible to put down and, most definitely, impossible to ever forget. You can keep up with this exciting author’s new projects, titles, and more at www.almakatsubooks.com. ■

JAKE TAPPER

Steps out of the TV and onto Your Bookshelf



Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: CNN

Although it's always exciting when a debut novelist appears on the scene, the excitement goes up a notch when the author behind the subject they're writing about just so happens to have a long professional resume in that field.

With his thriller debut, "The Hellfire Club," CNN anchor and Chief Washington correspondent Jake Tapper, creates a fantastic plot with characters that readers will absolutely root for while also witnessing the not-so-pretty underbelly of Washington politics.

Tapper has been a widely respected reporter in the nation's capital for more than 14 years, and conducts interviews with top newsmakers on politics and policy, covering Washington, the country and the world. In the midst of this busy schedule, *Suspense Magazine* spoke with Jake about where his idea came from, his thoughts on past

politics and how they mirror, at times, what is seen today, and what's next for him when it comes to walking the fiction writing path.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): First off, let me say it's a pleasure to talk about your thriller debut, "The Hellfire Club." Can you tell readers what they can expect to see?

Jake Tapper (J.T.): *Taking place in Washington D.C. in 1954, Charlie Marder is a young WWII veteran/academic thrust into a congressional seat. His wife Margaret is a zoologist. They are thrown into this D.C. world (AKA: "the swamp") and meet up with very real life people in this book, like Senator John F. Kennedy, Senator Joe McCarthy, President Eisenhower and others. Charlie, our main character, is trying to do good when he enters into this world of compromise and gets involved in a big, dark conspiracy. He and Margaret then have to figure out a way to get out of it.*

S. MAG.: What made you decide that this was the right time to bring out your debut?

J.T.: *Well, I was thinking about this book for a long time; thinking about some of the interesting parts of history that would be intriguing to include in a thriller. And there was a lot. You know they say history doesn't repeat itself but it rhymes? Well, there are things that certainly took place in 1954 that rhyme with things taking place in 2018. A lot of this was going on, like the "Washington Swamp," and in terms of Senator McCarthy who had points to make back then but things were buried under an avalanche of smears and lies. Moment after moment, while doing the research, I found things that resonated with what was going on today; from an immigration bill to debates on what needs to be done to protect and secure the United States. So now seemed definitely like the right time.*

S. MAG.: Many authors say that their main characters speak to them. So, when exactly did Charlie Marder speak to you?

J.T.: *Charlie is in a lot of ways representative of what I see in Washington D.C.: good people who come here to do good things, yet end up inevitably making compromises. These compromises start off small, but before you know it you have completely lost sight of why you were here. You get caught up in raising money, or in accruing power, or being a loyal soldier to the party. And it doesn't happen overnight usually, it happens over a long period of time.*

I wanted Charlie to be a sympathetic character; he is a hero from WWII, he has an amazing wife, he's a decent person trying to do right. But I wanted to capture a lot of what I see in D.C., as well. People selling off a little bit of themselves, selling off little bits of their soul, until they no longer know who they are and simply lose direction.

S. MAG.: You definitely have brought that across in the book. It might have been a challenge for a lot of writers, but I'm not sure how much of a challenge it was for you, being so close to politics. Was it at all a challenge to bring these ideas across? How it was for Charlie and the things he had to decide upon?

J.T.: *Actually, it was a big challenge. It was definitely a challenge for me to write someone who the reader will like and root for, but have him enter this darker world and get caught up in things, sometimes by his own decisions. Often there will be a thriller where someone is just thrust into a world and nobody has any idea if it was by some random act that he got caught up in this web of intrigue. Or, maybe he just looks like someone who should have gotten caught up in it. Or, maybe he was looking for it, like the Jack Reacher books—a character who's always looking for the intrigue.*

But with this, Charlie is getting caught up in a web because he's trying to do good work. That was difficult to portray because I really wanted the reader to connect with Charlie and to keep supporting him, while also understanding that he had a hand here-and-there into his own future and fate.

S. MAG.: Often secondary characters surprise authors and they earn a bigger voice in the book than the author had first planned. Is there a secondary character that fits that bill for you?

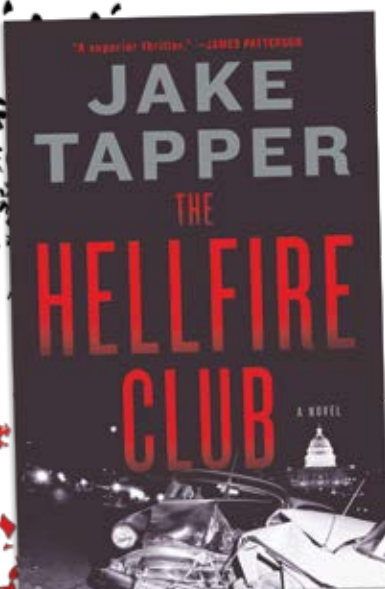
J.T.: *Actually, a lot of them do. I wrote the first scene with Charlie and Roy Cohn, who was Senator McCarthy's protégé in real life and has since become President Trump's mentor. Writing that first scene was so fun, and one of the most fun scenes in the book I then added another scene where Charlie has a longer exchange with Joe McCarthy. They kind of took on a life of their own because they were so fun to write. And I think the more I wrote, the more important they became.*

Even Margaret was supposed to be a strong character that women liked and women identified with, so that was important. But I don't think I appreciated at the beginning how strong she would eventually become. In many ways she is a hero of the book, if not the hero. So that took effect as well.

And lastly, it was the character of Isaiah, who is one of two black congressmen in the book. Although there was only one black congressman back then, because it's fiction I added a second. I made him a former Tuskegee Airman. At first he was going to be like Charlie's conscience, but as things moved along he became a much more complicated and complex character. So, as you said from talking to authors and writing yourself, these secondary characters definitely take on a life of their own.

S. MAG.: You set the book back 64 years, and that can be a challenge. How difficult was it for you to not use current technology, terminology, etc., in the book?

J.T.: *Actually, it was a huge relief. I started writing this book taking place in modern day times, and the truth of the matter is that cell phones and the internet ruin thrillers and plots in a lot of ways. Well...I shouldn't say ruin. They make it tougher and more challenging because you can reach anyone at every moment of the day. You can also do research on anyone at every moment of the day. So setting it in 1954 was a relief. In addition, it was a more romantic era and more fun to write about. After that, I started noticing how many times in movies and books where cell phones ran out of batteries, or the characters are lost in the middle of nowhere with no reception. This makes me believe that others feel technology is too difficult for plots to work. Then, I had my parents read it, and they would correct things, like editors and a lot of friends who read it would note phrases that I used that were too modern for that*



era. But, in the end, it was a relief that cells and the internet just weren't there.

S. MAG.: As with every thriller, you need that good hero but you also need a truly good villain. So tell us a bit about that process of villain creation for you?

J.T.: *Well, I don't want to spoil too much because the villain is not obvious. There are actually a few. One is McCarthy, but I don't think that's a secret to anyone that he would be a villain. But I wanted to also capture that charm and charisma he had, and Charlie notes how he feels about the man's presence.*

In terms of bad guys in general, I wanted their motivation to be more complicated than wanting to get rich or wanting to gain power. Because in this era, communists are trying to take control of the U.S. with spies, even though McCarthy is making it seem worse than it actually is. There are all sorts of people doing everything they can to protect the U.S., including developing the atomic bomb, the Red Scare, outlawing communism, McCarthyism, and more. Everyone is trying to secure the U.S., but their motivations are all over the map in terms of what they're willing to do and how far they're willing to go. So I wanted to make sure the villains were motivated by something they, themselves, thought was pure; something they thought would protect the U.S. and make it a safer place. It's not just that they want to become millionaires, because that really wasn't what the 1950s were about. Groups of people debated on how best to protect the U.S. and they just disagreed violently over what that 'best' was.

S. MAG.: What was your favorite experience in writing the book?

J.T.: *That's a good question. Last year was the 100th year anniversary of JFK's birth, so I happened to participate in a number of events and got to meet Caroline Kennedy and Robert Kennedy's oldest daughter, Kathleen. At one point I spoke with Kathleen and told her that I'd read somewhere Joe McCarthy was her godfather. She told me that wasn't true, just a rumor that'd been going around a long time. But she did say they were close, and that's because of tribalism. Because they were Irish, and the Irish at that point were still considered second class citizens in the U.S.*

Another time, I read in Ted Sorensen's book, JFK's speechwriter, where he referred to Robert "Bobby" Kennedy as "Bob." I had Kathleen's email at that point and I asked her if people did call her father Bob and she said yes, which was a revelation to me because I never heard that before. So I put all of that in the book just as information for the reader.

Then, at another point, I was at a book event where I spoke and shared this little detail. A different Robert Kennedy daughter, Kerry (who has a book about her father coming up), spoke and she corrected me. I went up to her after and told her, "Just so you know, my source was your older sister. And as an older son and brother myself, I'm always going to defer to the oldest kid because they always know the most." And that was the end of that. So those things...that was kind of fun.

S. MAG.: The question everyone wants to know, seeing as that "The Hellfire Club" had an April 24 release date is, are you working on the next thriller?

J.T.: *I have an idea for another one, but I don't want to be presumptuous. I want to see what people think of this one first.*

S. MAG.: Because it's a standalone?

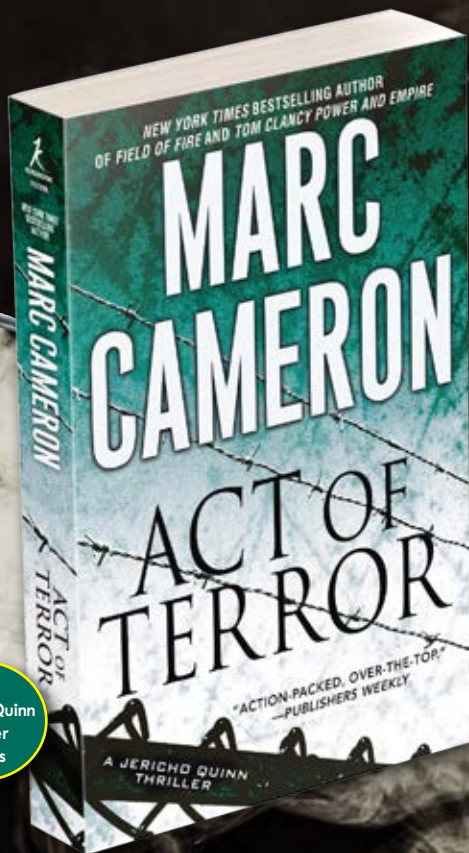
J.T.: *No, actually, a series. Because I really like Charlie and Margaret and I think they're good characters. I like the idea of watching them age together, build a family together, and put them in various historical times. I have an idea that would be set in the 60s when JFK is President that I think would be a lot of fun. But if people and critics don't like this book, if people don't buy it, then there's no point in writing a next one.*

S. MAG.: After reading some of the first reviews, and we at *Suspense* having reviewed it, I have to state that you are definitely going to have a nice career as a thriller writer if you choose to do so. It's always great to see new books from authors such as yourself.

J.T.: *It means a lot to me that you and your readers might give it a shot, so thank you so much for saying that.*

It is not a "long shot" to say that Jake Tapper will have his name on bestseller lists before the year is out. For readers who wish to find out more about Jake, "The Hellfire Club," read the reviews and find out where to go to purchase this action-packed thriller, www.jaketapper.com is a great place to start. ■

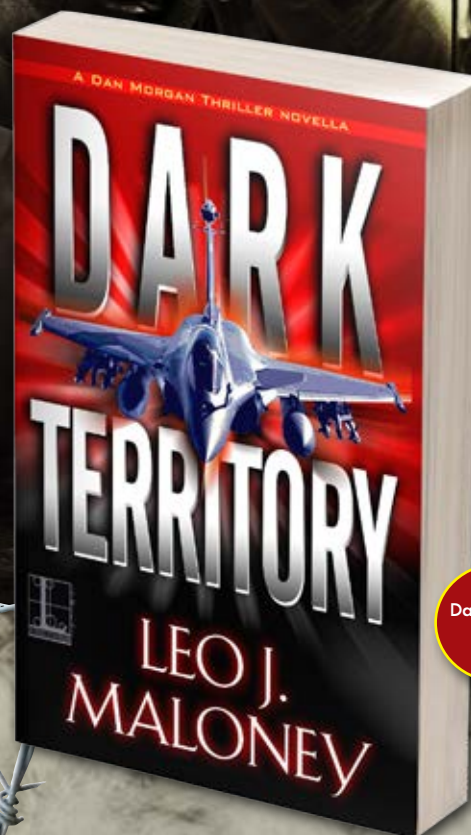
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STEENA HOLMES

On Taking a New Path & More

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



Bestselling author Steena Holmes not only has a list of amazing books loved by millions, but when readers head to her website they're also gifted with everything from a "Secret Society" they can join, to a selection of recipes, book discussions, and a super-fun blog—and those are just a few of the perks.

Labeling herself a "travelholic," Steena grew up in a small town in Canada where daydreaming, she states, was one of the few things there was to do on a daily basis. The travel bug bit and, over time, she fell in love with old castles and the romantic history of Scotland and England. She also dreamt of becoming a writer one day and, as a mother of three daughters who saw her dream come to fruition, she now teaches them to pursue their own dreams no matter what.

Here, Steena speaks with *Suspense Magazine* regarding her latest creation which is a "new path" for her genre-wise, and shares with our readers how determined she is to stick to her mantra: *Living a life with passion, and pursuing dreams, is a life well-lived.*

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Can you share with readers a little information about your home in Calgary? Does the location add to the writing (characters, plots, scenes) in any way?

Steena Holmes (S.H.): *I have three of my favorite chairs within my home that I sit down to write in. One is located in a very messy and disorganized office (which means it's not being used right now); one is a chair in my bedroom where I can look out my window onto farmers' fields; and one is in my sitting room where I have a small desk fountain gurgling in the background. Each room lends a different feel for me. Right now, for the book I'm writing, I've been secluding myself in my bedroom where I stare out into the fields and think about the scene I'm writing.*

S. MAG.: You have been a mainstay in both romance and women's fiction genres. With your newest title, you have gone into the psychological thriller realm. Can you tell us the easiest, and most difficult, thing when it comes to writing both suspense and romance? Is there a personal favorite for you?

S.H.: *The easiest part of writing romance is that I'm a romantic at heart and I tend to include things I'm passionate about in those stories (like chocolate and travel). The hardest part of writing romance for me is there's not much of a challenge with sweet romance; I need more twists and dark themes.*

Which makes writing suspense so much fun because I get to indulge myself in those twists and dark themes completely. The hardest part I'm finding right now is I have a natural tendency to shy away from allowing myself to go too dark, which is something I need to break.

S. MAG.: Can you speak a little about your latest release, "The Forgotten Ones," and how that 'darker' title came to be?

S.H.: *In the past I have been focused on writing my women's fiction stories—the ones that dove into the real heart issues of what happens within families. Over the past two years or more, my own family has had our own real heart issues to deal with and writing a story about the dark secrets families can hold seemed to come out naturally to me.*

S. MAG.: You have received many accolades during your career—from selling close to two million novels worldwide to winning the Indie Excellence Award in 2012. Can you talk a little about how indie publishing has helped you in your career? Was there one accolade received that solidified in your mind the fact that you had definitely "made it" in the industry?

S.H.: *I don't feel like I've 'made it' yet, despite all the accolades. There are still so many stories for me to tell and more readers for me to meet. Indie publishing was and is the boost that helped me to find readers, which is probably the one thing that means more to me than anything else. I love the control you have as an indie publisher; how you can respond to the market, to your readers, with more ease than ever before.*

Being named one of the top 20 women to read in 2015 was amazing, but what really touches my heart are the emails I receive from readers who tell me I wrote 'their' story and was able to put into words their fears and their truths.

S. MAG.: Everyone always gives up-and-coming writers advice on how and what to do to help their careers. But, if you could offer advice on something NOT to do that would help them as they move forward, what would that be?

S.H.: *Do Not Rush! I can't say it enough. The one mistake I regretted early on in my career was rushing my stories, thinking I had to get them out now before it was too late. Don't focus on the sales. Don't think that you're missing out, because you're not, and the sales won't be there once readers realize you've rushed the story. Give it the time it deserves—time to percolate in your head, time to learn your craft, time to get edited so it's a strong story, time to find the best cover...use this time wisely in order to give your reader the best reading experience possible.*

S. MAG.: Do you have your own personal muses in the writing field; ones that you literally cannot wait for their next release?

S.H.: *Absolutely! Karen Marie Moning and her Fever series. Trish Loye and her military suspense. Tosca Lee and James Rollins. They are all instant buys for me.*

S. MAG.: By moving into suspense now, is there another genre that you may one day want to delve into that you



have not yet tried? If so, what would that be and why?

S.H.: *Thriller and horror. There are dark aspects within me that I can now set free (I used to be a pastor's wife if that makes any sense). I believe these would be challenging to write and I'm always up for a good challenge!*

S. MAG.: By writing series fiction (from the *Stillwater* series to the *Abby* series), can you speak a bit about how you first decide on whether or not a character will turn into a series? Is this a decision made before you start the book, or is it one that comes about during the writing process? And how, exactly, do you know when they have run their course? Is it easy to "let them go" when the series ends?

S.H.: *My Stillwater series is the only real series I'd intended before I started to write. "Finding Emma" and "Saving Abby" were both intended to be standalone stories but my readers had other ideas. I have no trouble letting my characters go... wait, that's a lie—Jack from my Finding Emma series is one that still clings to me.*

S. MAG.: Can you speak about your "Branding with Intent" program, and how advertising/branding has helped in your career?

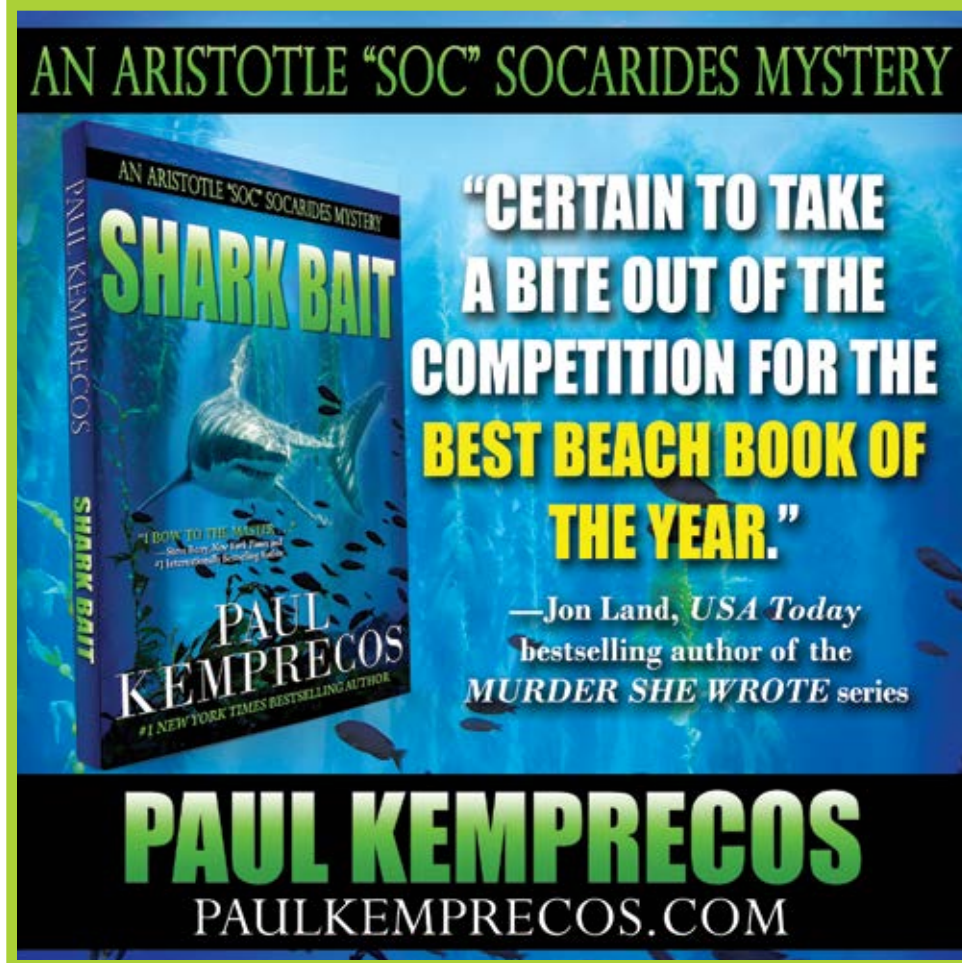
S.H.: *I first started to realize how important branding is back in 2013. To me, your brand is a promise you make to your readers and it's so crucial to have. Without that promise, your readers won't know what to expect, they'll become confused and will lose that trust with you and your books. Because I believe so strongly in the power of a brand—in the power of this promise—I created 'Branding with Intent' after realizing how many authors continue to break that trust and have no idea what branding means.*

I believe in a community where, as authors we help one another, and this is my way of helping my community. I want writers to have a brand that works for them, a brand that finds readers and keeps them, a brand that helps to tell a story, and a brand that will grow with the author and bring their readers along for the journey. That's what 'Branding with Intent' is about. I break everything down to one simple premise: what is the promise you are making to your readers with the stories you tell? Once that is discovered, then we build a brand that works.

S. MAG.: Fans wish to know...what comes next in 2018?

S.H.: *Oh, this is the fun part! I'm currently finishing up a new suspense that will come out in 2019. Once I've handed this into my editor, I plan on writing a new series under a new name, J.M. Jack, and the first book will be out this summer with another following in early winter! I won't say too much because I'm still in the plotting stage but I will say this...I can't wait to begin writing this new series!*

And the rest of us can't wait to read it! Whether women's fiction, romance or suspense, this author has definitely delivered. Her brand has been completely solid and one that millions of readers continue to count on and trust in, and for good reason. Being that "The Forgotten Ones" is an outstanding read, it will be thrilling to take part in Steena's journey as she continues to "walk down" the thriller/suspense path. To become a part of the "Secret Society" and delve into all the other perks Steena has made available, go to www.steenaholmes.com. ■



Meta in the Making:

LEE GOLDBERG

on "True Fiction" & His Literary Lineage

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Ron Scarpa



Lee Goldberg is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty novels. These include "King City," "The Walk," "Watch Me Die," and fifteen *Monk* TV tie-in mysteries; he has also collaborated with longtime friend Janet Evanovich on the popular *Fox & O'Hare* books ("The Heist," "The Chase," "The Job," "The Scam," and "The Pursuit") and novellas. In addition, Goldberg—a Poirot Award honoree and a two-time Edgar Award and two-time Shamus Award nominee—has written for and/or produced numerous television shows, including *Diagnosis Murder*, *SeaQuest*, *Monk*, and *The Glades*. As an international television consultant, he has advised networks and studios in Canada, France, Germany, Spain, China, Sweden, and the Netherlands on the creation, writing, and production of episodic television series.

Goldberg's most recent release, "True Fiction," is the first book in a new series from Thomas & Mercer featuring ... wait for it ... bestselling thriller author Ian Ludlow (the pseudonym Goldberg used for his first series of novels in the mid-80s). A potent mix of humor and suspense, the book puts Goldberg and his colleagues in crime fiction under the microscope, albeit lightly. A smash hit among critics and contemporaries

alike (Lee Child praised, "Thriller fiction at its absolute finest ..."), "True Fiction" has also resonated with readers, whose enthusiasm put it atop the Amazon bestsellers list for more than a week following its publication in March.

Now, Lee Goldberg reveals the meta in the making of his new novel ...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): What inspired you to write "True Fiction" at this point in your distinguished career—and how does this book (and your protagonist, Ian Ludlow) pay homage to your literary lineage?

Lee Goldberg (L.G.): *The book is a celebration of a certain kind of thriller...but also a deconstruction of it at the same time. Some of the tension comes from subverting the reader's expectations by pointing out that you know what they want, but this time they aren't going to get it. The hero of this book writes thrillers in the Jack Reacher/James Bond/Jason Bourne mold ... but he discovers that those tropes don't quite play in "the real world." That plays on a lot of levels.*

J.B.V.: Tell us about the significance of the title. How does the idea of dualities, or juxtapositions, play into the plot—and in what ways is this reflective of the skepticism and suspicion with which the government and its people tend to view one another?

L.G.: *Ian Ludlow was invited by the CIA to share "terrorism scenarios" so the Agency could better prepare for the unthinkable. I know authors and screenwriters who've received and accepted invitations like this from the CIA and Homeland Security. The authors basically go and spitball stories with the spies. But, in my scenario, one of Ian's stories from his CIA meeting "comes true" and he finds himself on the run, and he becomes the hero of his own story. The problem is, he's nothing like the action-hero character he created in his books. But that's not entirely true. The hero came from his imagination so, yes, he is that hero. He might not have the training, or the fictional backstory, but everything that character thinks and does is a reflection of Ian.*

Theoretically, Ian and his hero are the same. It's coming to that conclusion, and finding a way to integrate his real and fictional selves, is what will save him...or at least he hopes so. The CIA came to Ian because they lacked imagination...and that turns out to be the one weapon they don't know how to confront.

J.B.V.: In what ways does humor enhance a story such as this—and how do you endeavor to find/maintain a balance between seriousness and levity that doesn't compromise the overall suspense?

L.G.: *It's a tough balance. I believe that there's humor in almost every situation we face...even some of the darkest, most painful moments in our lives. It's a coping mechanism. It also humanizes us. The danger when using humor in a drama or thriller is that it will become a comedy or spoof. The key is striking the right tonal balances. Elmore Leonard, Larry McMurtry, Charles Dickens, Stephen King, Philip Roth, and John Irving are just a few of the novelists who are masters at striking that balance. Humor also buys you the suspension of disbelief. By winking just a little at the reader, you are willing to get away with a lot more than you would with rigid seriousness.*

But with "True Fiction," the balance might be tipped slightly more in favor of the humor than the suspense.

J.B.V.: In addition to writing novels, you have an extensive background in television. In what ways do these disciplines inform one another? Also, do you feel that working in a visual medium has influenced your storytelling sensibilities?

L.G.: *Absolutely. Screenplays are driven entirely by action and dialogue...and have to be told in a set amount of time, as little as 42 minutes in some "hour long" shows. It forces you to write lean and tight, to drive the story relentlessly forward, and to cut anything that doesn't reveal character more to push the plot to the next stage. That discipline comes in very handy when writing a book, particularly a thriller. You don't want to get bogged down in long, internal monologue, pages of exposition, or too much flowery description. Ride the action. Roll with the characters. Thinking visually and cinematically helps you from falling into the attractive, self-indulgent, lazy traps that can ensnare you while writing novels as opposed to screenplays.*

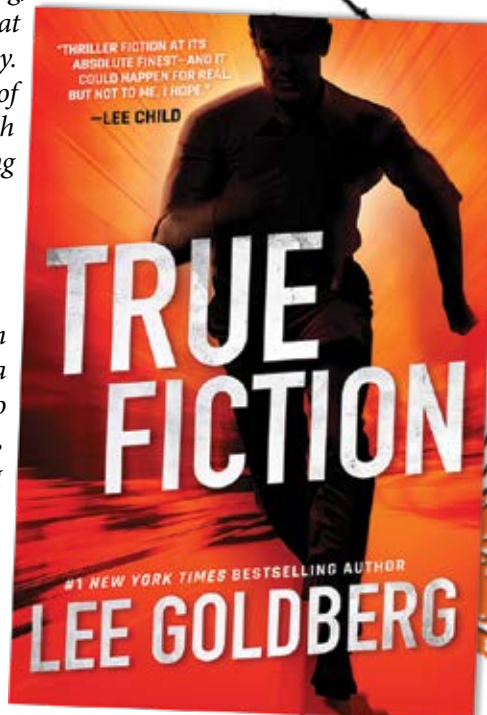
J.B.V.: You've worked with Janet Evanovich for several years. In what ways can such a collaboration both challenge and exhilarate an author—and what is the greatest lesson you've taken from this partnership and applied to your individual work?

L.G.: *I learned so much from working with Janet on those five novels and three novellas...it was like taking a master course in writing bestsellers. The key takeaway is to write tight, not to get bogged down in description and exposition, to let the characters have the clever lines, not the omniscient narrator. Dialogue and action should move most of the story forward, just like they do in a screenplay. Our collaboration grew out of our long friendship rather than being the arranged marriage between a bestselling author and a recruited co-author. That helped us immensely and gave us an edge over other co-authoring situations. We were already friends and that made the creative collaboration an extension of our existing, strong relationship. We knew what we each liked and didn't like in fiction before we sat down to write together. We already understood each other's sense of humor and story. I've worked most of my career in television, where stories and scripts are the product of collaboration, so for me it's a very natural situation. Collaboration forces you to push your creativity and not to rely on your personal clichés and easy-outs. It's challenging in a good way and brings out my best.*

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

L.G.: *A sequel to "True Fiction." It's called "Killer Thriller" and comes out in March 2019. Bestselling thriller author Ian Ludlow is about to depart for Hong Kong, where a movie version of his Straker novels is shooting, when his former book-tour driver Margo French shows up on his doorstep, broke and suffering PTSD from their harrowing, previous adventure together. Feeling responsible for her troubles, Ian agrees to bring her along on the trip as his research assistant, unaware that he's plunging them both into another one of his terrifying plots-come-true: a deadly, global conspiracy by Chinese intelligence to topple the U.S. and bring our entire nation under their control.*

We'd like to thank Lee for spending the time. To follow this very talented bestseller, go to <http://leegoldberg.com>. ■



Historically Speaking:

RHYS BOWEN

on "The Tuscan Child" & Balancing Series and Standalone Fiction

Interview by John B. Valeri for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: John Quin-Harkin



New York Times bestselling author Rhys Bowen is best known for two long-running historical fiction series: the *Molly Murphy* mysteries and the *Royal Spyness* books. The former features an Irish immigrant woman in turn-of-the-century New York City, while the latter stars a minor royal in 1930s England. Combined, the sagas boast nearly thirty titles and have won accolades including the Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, and Readers Choice Awards.

Last year, Bowen broke with tradition to release her first WWII standalone novel, "In Farleigh Field" (Lake Union). That book became an instant #1 Kindle bestseller, expanded her worldwide audience, and earned praise from both critics and contemporaries alike; Lee Child noted: "Instantly absorbing, suspenseful, romantic, and stylish—like binge-watching a great British drama on *Masterpiece Theater*." Further, the title is a nominee for a 2018 Edgar Award (Best Paperback Original) and a Left Coast Crime Lefty Award (Best Historical Mystery Novel).

In February, the author returned with her second singular story from that era: "The Tuscan Child." The book chronicles the journey of Joanna, the estranged daughter of a British bomber pilot who parachuted from his stricken plane over German-occupied Tuscany and found love in the arms of a local woman. Their union was broken by betrayal, and only upon her father's death does Joanne find the fortitude to revisit his past—and perhaps discover the secrets of her own history.

Recently, Ms. Bowen generously entertained a few curiosities pertaining to her craft ...

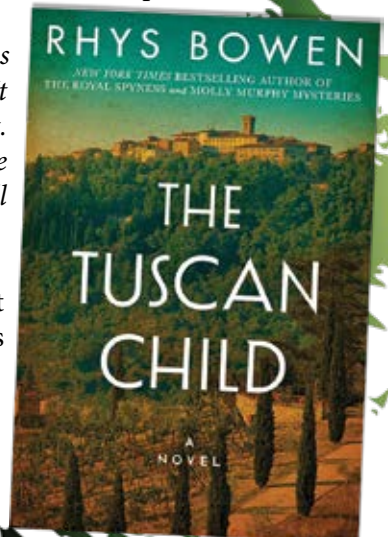
John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): "The Tuscan Child" is a standalone novel in the tradition of "In Farleigh Field." What drew you to expand your creative breadth—and how do you endeavor to balance similar works with your series output?

Rhys Bowen (R.B.): *I have so many ideas that don't fit into either series, so when I felt I was well enough established to spread my wings a little I sent out a proposal for "In Farleigh Field." It was so well received that I now feel free to explore other themes I've been itching to write about.*

As for how I'm going to balance them with my series...good question. I managed to squeeze in a Christmas Molly Murphy book last year, but three books a year is simply too much. I will definitely continue the Royal Spyness books and hope to revisit Molly when I have time.

J.B.V.: Your protagonist, Joanna, is made to reckon with her estranged father's secret. In what ways does her journey allow for organic development of both characters—and how does this lend itself to exploring the idea of perceptions vs. realities?

R.B.: *Joanna's journey is one of healing. She finds the mother figure she has been missing, she is healed through food, and she learns to trust again. As she unravels layers of her father's betrayal, she comes to terms with her own betrayal. She and her father had both locked away*



their emotions and ability to love, and for each of them that ability is awoken again in Italy.

J.B.V.: It's been said that what's past is prologue. How is the history you explore relevant to our current climate, and why does fiction make for a powerful lens through which to view reality?

R.B.: *You ask tough questions! I think we would all do well to remember the Nazi era and the sacrifices of the war. We should realize how easy it was to manipulate the press and the people. And of course, fiction is the ideal way of bringing the past to life. You can read of battles and statistics, but I can take you there!*

J.B.V.: The book is set in Tuscany, past and present. How did you endeavor to capture a true sense of time and place—and in what ways does this backdrop serve as a character within the story?

R.B.: *I love Tuscany! I have visited several times since childhood, and in 2016 I was writer-in-residence at a workshop in a Chianti hill town. I was already toying with this story, so I was able to observe things in detail—the food, the narrow streets, the way the local people interacted.*

The setting is definitely a major character within the story—it embraces and sustains my WWII hero, and it embraces and heals his daughter in the 1970s. The visual setting of the hill town and vineyards, the cooking smells and tastes are all part of the experience.

As for making it true to the past, I read several first-person accounts on German occupation and Allied invasion. I went to an old airfield in England to quiz an expert on the Blenheim Bomber, examined old flight suits, log books, etc. It is important for me to get a personal feel of things. How heavy was a flight helmet? How clumsy were the gloves? And how does one roll pici?

J.B.V.: Tell us about your process. How do you know when it's time to stop researching and begin writing—and in what ways does the preliminary work that doesn't make its way into the novel still influence your storytelling?

R.B.: *I do all my major research ahead of time—visiting the places, taking lots of pictures, reading up on the events of the time, reading biographies. Then I give myself three months to write the first draft. When I start writing I work right through, trying not to interrupt my train of thought of research details.*

There are always little things to check on—where does the train stop from Florence to Lucca? How does one walk from the train station to catch the bus to the hill town? Thankfully there is Google Earth to remind me! And I have my cookbooks and guide books around me all the time.

But in answer to the second part of your question: I reckon I use one-tenth of what I have researched. But the fact that I know the other nine-tenths makes the story richer and more real.

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

R.B.: *Well, I have a new Royal Spyness book coming out later this year. It's called "Four Funerals and Maybe a Wedding."*

And I'm just beginning a new standalone, this one set in WWI and featuring Land Girls and women learning to cope without men. Its working title is "The Healing Garden." (Oh, and yes, there is a little mystery within the story!) I think I'm in a phase of exploring stories of healing!

Thank you, Rhys, for spending the time with us. To learn more, visit <http://rhysbowen.com>. ■



THE NEIGHBORS

By Hannah Mary McKinnon
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



NOW NATE

WHEN THE U-HAUL van arrived next door, I did what most sensible human beings would do: I ignored it. Once I'd made sure it was just the new neighbors moving in, not some crazy person stealing lingering Christmas decorations, I cranked up the fire, flopped back down on the sofa and buried my nose in my copy of *I Am Ozzy*, marveling at how the guy had lasted so long.

As far as I was concerned, moving in February, undeniably the coldest month of the year, was a ridiculous notion. And I wanted nothing to do with it.

The house was my peaceful kingdom that blustery Saturday morning. Abby had gone to pick up Sarah from a sleepover, and they'd planned on a Mum and Daughter shopping spree in town. Bad weather and potential conflict be damned.

I think Abby had her eye on the winter jacket sales, and knew Sarah wanted a pair of Steve Madden combat boots. I could tell from my daughter's look she'd been impressed when I said I knew who Steve Madden was. In reality, I'd only

heard about him when I'd finally got around to streaming *The Wolf of Wall Street*, belly-laughing as Jonah Hill struggled to pronounce the designer's name whilst high on a bucket of Quaaludes. Abby hadn't been impressed by the film, not even by Margot Robbie in *that* scene. Well, never mind Margot's perfect breasts. Apparently Abby didn't like Steve Madden's boots either.

"They're awful," she'd whispered last night as we lay in bed. Then she must have remembered Sarah was out because she said, more loudly, "Grunge, punk or whatever the hell gone bad. I hate combat boots."

I lowered the stack of papers I'd promised myself I'd look over as soon as I got home but had barely made a start on. "I hope you didn't tell Sarah."

Abby pulled a face. "God, no, 'course not. I said they were great, and I might get a pair, too. Figured reverse psychology would stop her from wanting them."

"Did it?"

"Nope. She gave me one of her looks."

I laughed. "I think they're pretty cool." When Abby raised an eyebrow I added, "The boots, not the looks. And it's her money. She saved up for them. Let her do what she wants."

"Yeah, I suppose." She wrinkled her nose.

"I'd wear them if they didn't make me look like a middle-aged has-been."

Abby smiled, rolled on top of me and kissed my neck. Her hair tickled my face and smelled of something vanilla and cherryish. She always smelled nice, even when she'd been on one of her insane, million-mile runs.

"You're not a has-been, Nate," she whispered.

I wrapped an arm around her, slid my other hand underneath her T-shirt, ran my fingers up and down the soft skin of her back. "And what about the middle-aged part?" I said before nibbling on her neck.



She raised her head and looked at me with one eyebrow arched, and a sly smile playing on her lips. “Let’s see...”

As her mouth traveled down my chest, I shoved the papers off the bed, letting them slide to the floor in a heap. Reviewing Mr. Rav Ramjug’s superior programming skills could wait. Frankly it had been a while since Abby and I last got busy. People say it’s normal for a couple’s sex life to disappear for a while after having a kid. What they don’t tell you is the vanishing act repeats once said kid hits teenage years because she a) doesn’t go to bed at seven and sleep like a dead man until dawn, and b) has the hearing of a greater wax moth.

I groaned as Abby kissed my stomach. Despite us having the house to ourselves and the entire night ahead of us, we ended up in a frantic quickie, with Abby collapsing onto my chest afterward, the two of us breathing heavily.

“I think we both needed that,” she said, before sliding off me and getting up. I never had the chance to moan about my wife wanting to spoon endlessly after sex. Three minutes in and she was about as cuddly as a piece of Lego.

I propped myself up on one elbow and watched her get dressed. I did that sometimes—watch Abby—and mostly she was unaware of it. When she was baking and I pretended to be engrossed in a book or—another favorite—when she was going over the monthly bills, hair scrunched up in a messy ponytail, brow furrowed at the latest phone statement, lips moving silently as she checked the numbers.

I liked to look at her, I mean *properly* look at her. Study her as if she was a Miró at The Tate I could stand in front of and ponder, cocking my head to one side, pompously tapping my lips with one finger, wondering what the *artiste* meant to express with the masterfully applied strokes and splashes of paint. Not that I had a bloody clue about art. I could barely tell a Picasso from a stick man even if the latter tapped me on the shoulder and kicked me in the nuts.

So I silently perused Abby’s long, slim legs with the scars she hated so much but were a huge part of her, the arch of her back, her elegant, swan-like neck. A classic masterpiece.

“What?” Her voice pulled me out of my trance. She’d turned around, and I’d missed it. *Busted.*

“Nothing,” I answered with what I hoped was a charming grin, and shook my head slightly. “Just looking at you.”

As she smiled her blue eyes sparkled, and her long blond hair settled in that sexy, tousled bed-head look, the one that screamed, “Oh, yeah, I got some.” I let my gaze linger as she went to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

I lay back in bed and thought about my wife the way you do in a fuzzy postcoital state. Abby could give Jennifer Aniston a run for her money anytime. At forty-four she looked at least six years younger. It put me, with my slight paunch that I swore every January (the last one being no exception) I’d get rid of, to absolute shame. I wasn’t overly proud of the thinning spot on the top of my head either. But what can you do? I was almost halfway between my forty-sixth and forty-seventh birthday. Jesus, *forty-seven*—it had sneaked up on me like my *slight* paunch. I stretched, sighed and soon felt myself drift off to sleep, only stirring slightly when Abby climbed into bed a while later.

Back in my warm living room, I reluctantly dragged myself out of the memory, cleared my throat and concentrated on Ozzy’s extravagant tales. They kept me entertained for a further ten minutes, before, mug of fresh coffee in hand, I meandered to the window, fully intent on spying on who was moving in next door.

I sipped my drink and watched three jacket-, hat- and glove-clad figures slowly lugging boxes from the van to the house. Not professional movers, I decided. Not brisk enough. Difficult to tell for sure from the angle, but they looked like a standard family. Woman, bloke and, from what I could see, a gangly-legged teenage boy, hunched over, moving slowly, his body language screaming “get me out of here.” I couldn’t blame him. Like I said, moving at this time of year was a ridiculous notion.

I picked up my phone from the coffee table and sent Abby a text. Neighbors moving in. Look normal. How’s the shopping? Should we re-mortgage the house?

A few seconds later my phone buzzed.

HAHA. Haven’t left Camilla’s yet! Are you helping them? You’d make a good impression.

Shit. I hadn’t thought this through. Why did I send a message in the first place? Now I’d be a dickhead if I didn’t do my share of carrying. I walked back to the window.

The teenager stood at the back of the van, gesticulating to someone inside the vehicle, his arms flying around. He appeared to cross them over his chest, and, although I could only see the back of his black-and-yellow hat, which made his head look like a giant and slightly angry bee, I’d have bet money he’d stuck out his chin, too. The woman walked over and put a hand on the teen’s shoulder before waving her arms around, too, pointing to the house, the inside of the van and back to the house again, shaking her head.

I sighed loudly and made my way into the hall, where I pulled out my coat, boots and hat. I looked at the photograph of Tom, my wife’s brother, whom I’d *almost* met before he died, and gave him a nod. “You think I’m a crazy bugger going out there. Don’t you?”

He stared back at me with his forever boyish grin and early ’90s boy band haircut, which made him look like he’d stuck a fluffy palm tree on top of his head.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said, then opened the front door. The cold air whipped around my face, and the gravel scrunched beneath my feet, protesting each of my heavy steps. “Jesus, my balls will turn to ice cubes,” I muttered as I pulled my hat past

my ears and trudged to the van.

“...telling you. There’s no way we can lift it, Liam,” I heard the woman say to the person in the van when I got within earshot. “It’s not happening. It isn’t.”

Her voice was soft yet determined. It reminded me of Abby, and what Sarah and I secretly called *the tone*. My daughter and I knew there wasn’t an inch of wriggle room left when Abby used *the tone*. Capitulation was the only option. Capitulation or certain death—probably. We’d never dared find out.

I looked in the back of the van and saw the guy—Liam, apparently—put down the side of a green sofa. As he straightened his back he caught sight of me and smiled.

“Hey,” he said, tilting his head. “Can I help you?”

I smiled back and shrugged. “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

The woman and Beanie Boy turned around. I guessed him to be around the same age as Sarah. The woman smiled; he didn’t. No surprise there. There’s nothing quite like the downer of amputated teenage happiness.

“I’m Nate,” I pointed to our house. “From next door. Thought you might need a hand.”

The woman’s smile broadened, showing off immaculate teeth. Brown curls stuck out from underneath her fire engine-red bobble hat. She stood around the same height as Abby but looked as if she weighed a few kilos more. It suited her—it was hard not to notice just how well.

“Thanks,” she said and held out her hand to shake mine. “I’m Nancy. Nancy Jefferson.” She pointed to the guy in the van, surrounded by boxes neatly marked Garage, Bedroom, Living Room—FRAGILE and so on. “That’s my husband, Liam, and this is our son, Zachary.”

“Zac,” the teenager said, rolling his eyes around in his head so hard they started to look a lot like marbles. “I’m Zac.” He shook my hand, too, and now that they’d stopped their dizzy spin, I noticed he had his father’s intense eyes.

Liam jumped down from the van and gave me a hard clap on the shoulder. “Cheers,” he said. “Appreciate it. The removal company got delayed, so we decided to bring a few things ourselves. A couple of people helped us on the other end but now, well...” He whistled. “You’re a lifesaver.” He smiled again, revealing teeth as white as his wife’s.

I figured these people were either dentists or had a great family discount. Either way, Liam’s jaw was what my mother would have called “strong,” and his cheekbones probably had their own exclusive page in *Esquire*. When he discarded his winter jacket, and although he wore a fleece, I could tell he was no stranger to the weight bench.

“Happy to help,” I said. Then I did that male-pride thing—sucked in my gut, straightened my back, all the while wishing I’d been a tad more diligent with my sit-ups in recent months. “Let’s start with that sofa.”

Liam and I made a couple of trips from the van to the front door, where Zac and Nancy took over dispatching boxes to the appropriate rooms.

“So where did you move from?” I asked Liam as we carried a TV the size of a small country up the driveway. The bloody thing felt as solid as a slab of gold and probably cost more. “You don’t sound local.”

“Lancashire. Preston area.” He navigated us toward the front steps. Christ, he didn’t even seem to be sweating while I could already feel my shirt sucking mine up like a sponge.

“Really?” I straightened the TV slightly so we could get it through the door without scratching it. “My grandparents lived in Longton.”

“Yeah? You grew up there?”

“No. We went north almost every summer, though.” We put the television down in the living room, my back screaming a silent *thank god*. “But my wife grew up near Preston. She moved here after we met.”

“Seriously? What’s her name?”

“Abigail—Abby—Morris.” He shrugged so I added, “Sanders before we married.”

Liam looked at me for a few seconds, then blinked. I thought I saw a flicker of something pass over his face, but it disappeared all too quickly, so I figured I’d imagined it.

I laughed. “Don’t tell me you know her?”

“No.” He turned and headed for the front door. “The name doesn’t ring any bells.”

In hindsight I should have stopped him. Questioned the look. At least asked what it meant. If I had, then perhaps none of what was to come would have happened.

And maybe, just maybe, I’d still be with my wife. ■

From “*The Neighbors*” by Hannah Mary McKinnon, courtesy of MIRA Books.

Hannah Mary McKinnon was born in the U.K., grew up in Switzerland and moved to Canada in 2010. After a successful career in recruitment, she quit the corporate world in favor of writing. “*The Neighbors*” is Hannah Mary’s second novel. She lives in Oakville, Ontario, with her husband and three sons, and is delighted by her 20-second commute.

CRIME *and* SCIENCE RADIO

WITH AWARD WINNING AUTHORS

D.P. LYLE, M.D. & JAN BURKE

Dr. Michael Tabor

Taking a Bite Out of Crime



Interview by D.P. Lyle, MD and Jan Burke
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Authors

Dr. Michael Tabor has a long list of talents, from being a respected suspense/crime author, to a doctor, and a public speaker. Beginning his career as a family dentist, the good doctor's work took a unique turn in 1983 when he delved into the highly specialized field of forensic dentistry. Being one of only a handful of forensic dentists in the U.S., Dr. Tabor became a highly sought after expert in this field, performing identifications/examinations on homicide victims, as well as aiding police officers and medical examiners in the prosecution of thousands of crimes.

Dr. Tabor sat down with D.P. Lyle, MD and Jan Burke, to be interviewed on "Crime & Science Radio."

He talks in-depth about everything from his early background and how he got into the field of forensic odontology, as well as his work on some high-profile cases, such as the autopsy of James Earl Ray. He speaks poignantly about his work helping to identify victims of the 9/11 tragedy, and tells readers what to expect from his upcoming titles.

D.P. Lyle, MD (D.P.L.): Welcome Mike. Being a forensic odontologist (which is a big word for dentist), can you tell people what attracted you to this field in the first place?

Dr. Michael Tabor (M.T.): *In addition to dentistry I also have a passion for football, and for 25 years I have been a back judge for high school football in Tennessee. One day, while in my officiating role, our new state medical examiner at half-time came up and said, "You know, I've got an interesting body that's just been pulled out of the Cumberland River here in downtown Nashville that has numerous gold fillings in their teeth, and I have no clue where to begin. Would you like to help me?" And 20-odd years later, here we are on "Crime & Science" radio. True story.*

D.P.L.: There's a big difference between doing fillings and extractions in the office and then moving into forensic odontology, did you have any special training (like they do now) at that time; or did you just kind of learn by the seat of your pants the things you needed to know and how you were going to approach this field?

M.T.: *Actually, there weren't many training programs at that particular time. I had the good fortune, however, to be mentored by three good friends—all of whom were giants in the field then. One, Doctor Richard Souviron, in particular, I had the pleasure of meeting when he served as my opposing expert witness in the first bite mark case ever admitted into a Tennessee court*

of law. This was just a few years after he testified in the Ted Bundy case, which literally made this “David vs. Goliath” in the Nashville court case. What was strange about it is that afterwards we became the best of friends and have enjoyed a great relationship since then.

Jan Burke (J.B.): You’ve obviously had a long and storied career. I wanted to bring up that you have served as a past president of the American Board of Forensic Odontology. It is clear you’re dedicated to high standards in your field. Could you tell us a bit about the recent study/report by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences that spoke about how to maintain these high standards? In other words, what’s in and what’s out in forensic odontology?

M.T.: I have to start by saying I certainly respect the Academy and certainly appreciate all suggestions they have for the field of forensic odontology. It’s important to note that forensic odontology is not a specialty of dentistry, it is a specialty of forensic science. When it comes to jurisprudence, everyone from toxicologists to document examiners...we all want to get it right. We want the best possible chance of solving a mystery using our specific field. We have many recognized disciplines within the realm of forensic science and anytime the American Academy comes out with concerns, ideas or suggestions the American Board of Forensic Odontology, as well as the odontology section of the Academy, pay very close attention.

We’ve made several changes when it comes to the ways our diplomates consider and come up with their opinions for courtroom testimony. We’ve seen roughly 10 cases or so during the last few years that involve people on death row, who have been found guilty of a capital offense, have their conviction overturned since the refinement of DNA analysis. In other words, the wrong opinion was given at the onset and a person was falsely imprisoned as a result. We still maintain that bite mark analysis, when used by a properly vetted expert—and that’s the key term right there, a properly vetted expert witness—adds value to the case. Yet, we are going a step

further now, because we want to make sure that we don’t have ten more of these cases appear over the next decade.

I think one thing that happens, take The Innocence Project, for example, is that people are quite quick to point out these ten cases and fail to mention scores and scores of other cases where bite mark evidence was used properly, and as a result was a key tool in achieving the right verdict that the jurors came

up with. We pride ourselves in knowing this very small niche of forensic science, but there are lots of other witnesses, evidence, and factors that jurors have to consider. It was not the forensic dentist that put this person on death row. Jurors will also review the medical examiner report and one side will have an expert stating that a death was the result of, say...shaken baby syndrome, while another well-respected expert offers the opinion that it is not SBS but death by SIDS, for example. Then jurors have to decide if this is a homicide, suicide, and the list goes on. We recommend that every board certified forensic odontologist seeks a second opinion before trial, and we’re really trying to make sure we adhere to the recommendations and principles the Academy has suggested.

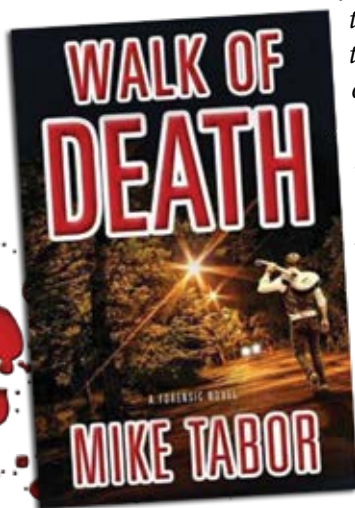
D.P.L.: Can you speak about what is required in order to enter the field?

M.T.: Interestingly enough, only knowledge in the profession of dentistry and an interest in the field of forensic odontology is required. Most of my training, and even up to this day, a lot of it has been on-the-job training. I am proud to announce for the first time however, on this show, that we are getting ready to change that because the field is linking arms with forensic anthropology. And, what better place to have it done than at The Body Farm in the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Starting soon we will offer the first post-graduate degree program in the U.S. where you can earn a masters degree in forensic human identification. We are actually linking arms because we do have a lot of overlap between the fields; forensic anthropology focuses more on age, sex, and race, whereas odontology deals with comparing a known to an unknown, which is how forensic dentistry really started out. There are 32 teeth in the human body and each tooth has five sides, the possible combinations according to what the math professors tell me is five to the thirty-second power which equals a number bigger than the actual number of people living on earth. So let’s just say that the field is going to be around a long time.

As these programs grow and develop, hopefully forensic dentistry will increase and there will be more courses available to take. Right now we have one in San Antonio and another in Detroit, with a new one starting in Las Vegas. But this in Knoxville will be the first of its kind, and not just for dentists. This is available to dental hygienists, crime scene investigators—anyone with an undergrad degree who wants to further their education in human cadaver identification. We are pretty excited about it.

J.B.: That is worth being excited over, and we are honored that you chose to announce it here. Now, some people are not really sure what a forensic odontologist does, so can you give us a brief overview of what the work entails?

M.T.: I’d be happy to. First off, most all major cities are



affiliated with or have a certified forensic odontologist on staff. We only have 105 in the U.S., so there aren't a whole lot to go around. But the National Board of Medical Examiners, which is the credentialing service for all medical examiner offices in the U.S., recognize the importance of having a forensic odontologist in their morgues. As a result, when each office has to get recertified, one of the points the Board checks on is whether the office is affiliated with a board certified forensic odontologist. If they're not, they get a 'ding' and you can only have so many of those before losing your credentials. It's like a medical school not being accredited with the AMA; they might just as well not exist.

When it comes to the job requirements, we compare knowns to unknowns. Basically, there are three ways to identify a person: DNA, fingerprints, and dental records. So, say we have a body brought into the morgue. We have to know from the investigator, before we can lend some credible info, who they think the person might be. If they have no idea, we start at the end of the fence and work backwards by making a chart of each of the 32 teeth, and each of those five sides and record any type of fillings there are, what surfaces have been fixed or altered, etc. We x-ray and photograph and make a complete record, just like when it's a live patient. Our next step is to enter this information into NCIC or NAMUS. These are national databases, with NAMUS being accessible to the general public and NCIC being for law enforcement officials only. These databases record any and all distinguishing characteristics on a body that is currently being held in medical examiner's offices. We keypunch in our data which goes into national and international databases and searches for a match. It also calls up information on missing persons across the country to attempt to locate a match.

More often than not we are trying to identify victims from auto accidents, house fires, plane crashes, etc., where the body has been harmed to the point where age, sex and race cannot be determined. That's where dentistry becomes so valuable. Teeth are virtually indestructible, yet even if a body has been lying on the bottom of the ocean for a hundred years, when they are brought up the teeth will look exactly the same as the day they died. You can't say that for fingerprints or DNA. We can compare the knowns that come from teeth analysis with the unknowns and use this to identify a victim.

D.P.L.: You mentioned anthropologists earlier. Are both forensic dentists and forensic anthropologists called out to a crime scene at same time? Do they work in tandem?

M.T.: When it comes to bones that are discovered, say, in the woods, often the anthropologist is called upon first. They are such bloodhounds they can find things no one else can. We wait and take the info the anthropologist gathers, such as the person was six-foot-two, African American, male, etc., and we will use that to try and match their data with a missing person.

From then on, we work together.

Along these lines, the book I wrote is the story of the most bizarre case I ever worked on in my career, which was actually at The Body Farm in Tennessee. I was working there with Dr. Bill Bass (the founder), and Dr. Murray Marx, and his contingency. It was there that they were actually able to develop the age, race, and sex characteristics of a body yet it still remained a John Doe for decades. At the farm what they developed was a system/program called TSD (AKA: time since death.) They have studied and honed their skills for identification by taking a body that has been donated to science and placing that body in a field (inside a protected area, of course), subjecting the body to all environmental conditions. They study and photograph the body on a regular basis to determine even more information such as, what it looks like in the decomposition process (i.e., the insects, the maturation levels of the insect larvae). They record wind speeds, humidity, temperature changes, etc., and from all that they are able to provide a very valuable tool to investigators; in addition to the norms of age, sex, and race, they are able to determine how long this body (or discovered bones) has been there. The time since death is very important to everyone from investigators to crime writers.

J.B.: You were involved in identifying the 9/11 World Trade Center victims. How did it come about that you got involved with that? What did you do as part of the team?

M.T.: That was the year I was serving as president of the American Board of Forensic Odontology. A member who held the same position in NY that I held in TN spoke to me and addressed the enormity of the aftermath. Death investigations were going on just like always, before and after 9/11, and these facilities were quite taxed. Quite a large percentage of experts volunteered their time to assist New York's medical examiner with this task of trying to identify the victims.

We first worked to accumulate accurate flight manifests so we could attain various medical and dental records for those on board the planes. When you reach a number of victims north of 25 to 30, you need to use a computerized system to organize records and data. We utilized a software program called WIN ID that was written by one of our diplomates, Jim McGivney. We entered all the information we collected and the antemortem (before death) records into the database, and began identifying remains. We had information from the manifests, port authority records, data given from wives and husbands whose significant others didn't come home that night, firefighters and police officer records, etc. We also had people who jumped from the buildings, choosing to end their lives instead of having to experience the inferno that would have taken them. We ended up identifying approximately one-third, 1,000 out of the 3,000 who died that day, with many being identified from just the dental records.

We had rehearsed being on what is called a Mass Disaster Dental ID team, and learned how we would grid off an area and how we would set up ID logistics if a 747 went down and hundreds of people perished. There were days, if you remember, where we didn't know if we were going to find 3,000 or 30,000 people in the aftermath. In fact, if the planes had hit 30 minutes later, the total would have been even more horrific. It took us approximately 11 months to a year before we had the chance to sift through each bit of evidence and enter it into the postmortem database and let the computer do its' work. Amazingly, we were pleased to be able to identify a third of them. People will ask, "How come the other 2,000 weren't identified?" But, to be honest, some just didn't even exist; they were vaporized by the crash. And, as you might imagine, there was a lot of comingling of remains...but we were (and are) just trying to get it right. To put this into perspective, jumbo jets have two black boxes on board. These are nearly indestructible and yet no black boxes were recovered.

J.B.: The 9/11 tragedy was horrific. How did it effect you personally?

M.T.: Well, I have given about two or three talks a month for the past 13/14 years. Yet it took quite a while for me to even be able to talk about this without getting choked up. We have little to no training when it comes to dealing with the emotional impact of such a tragedy. I have seen lots of things in my 39-something years and most have been pretty ugly. But I never saw or experienced anything like 9/11 that stayed with me, and still won't go completely away.

Buddies would talk about PTSD and their time in Vietnam and I had a hard time getting my arms wrapped around that emotionally. But after spending time at Ground Zero, I can say that it is for real. We were not used to dealing with this; having to walk through a sea of people holding up pictures of their missing husbands, wives, or their only sons and daughters... people coming up to us, pulling on our arms and saying, "Please help me."

After our work was done, we were told to prepare ourselves for when we returned home and our close family members commented on changes they saw in us, changes in our spirit. And they were exactly right. They did send us all through a psychological debriefing workshop before we left. Part of it to address the enormity of the situation and part was to help us deal with the emotional aspects that we were ill-equipped to deal with. The last thing is that red, white, and blue that still flutters among all of us and having to deal with the fact that a foreign entity came to our country and did that to us.

I had a dream many times in that first year after 9/11 where I was driving on a certain road in Nashville and saw a 727 going, nose-down, behind a hotel. I woke up when it hit the ground and exploded. This is a prime example of PTSD. Like opening the body bag and seeing the firefighter still clutching

his axe...it gets to you.

D.P.L.: Sobering. Thank you. I hope everyone appreciates you sharing that information. Moving on to your writing, you worked with Dr. Cyril Wecht on a case with quite an infamous name attached to it, that of James Earl Ray.

M.T.: I've actually worked on two cases with Cyril. My third book "Grave Mistake" will focus on one of those. I think the one you're referring to, however, is the forensic autopsy of Ray. In a nutshell, Ray was serving his life sentence after confessing, recanting, re-confessing and re-recanting to killing Martin Luther King, Jr.

He actually died in prison of Hepatitis C that he had gotten from being stabbed by a fellow prisoner with a broken Coke bottle. Tennessee law states that if you die in prison you have to have an autopsy done by the state medical examiner. I was called one day by our local M.E. and asked to come down to the office. I thought it was a little odd, needing me to confirm the identity of someone everyone already knew. Of course, just a few years before, there were so many naysayers and conspiracy theorists dwelling on the JFK assassination that a court order was finally gotten to exhume the body of Oswald so it could be re-identified using forensic dentistry. Oswald was in the military and had records on file, so this wasn't a difficult process. Ray's family had decided that as soon as the autopsy was complete, they would cremate the body. The family hired Dr. Wecht to oversee the autopsy on their behalf.

The second case I worked with him on was a tragic accident; a van holding six prisoners was in an accident and all were burned alive when the van caught fire. A wayward medical examiner ended up misidentifying bodies based on seat locations. These victims lived all over the United States, so Wecht and I worked together to sort out which body really belonged to which family. It is a true puzzle that we had to solve backwards. It was a wonderful experience getting to know him, work with him, and I cherish the time I get to spend learning more from him.

D.P.L.: Time to talk about the book. Please tell us about "Walk of Death."

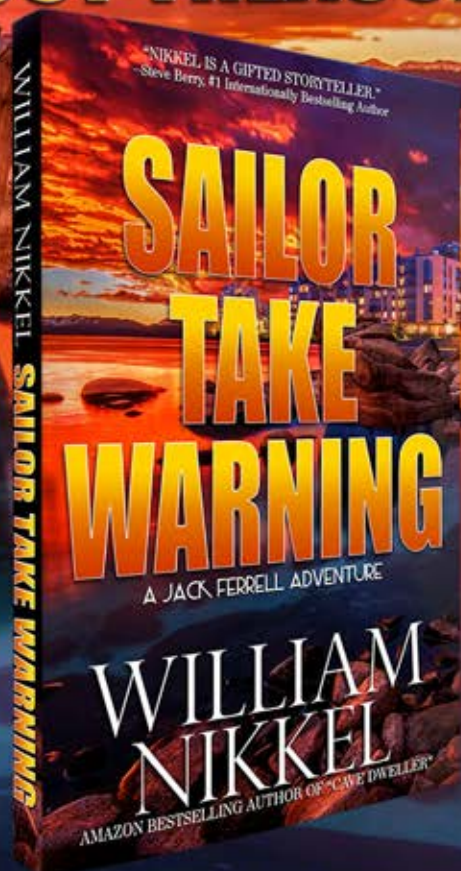
M.T.: "Walk of Death" came from me finding my most favorite thing to do in the world, write down exactly what happened on a case.

I had a cold case murder that I worked on for over a decade before finally solving. It began in 1998 and wasn't solved until Christmas of 2010. That's when my wife told me, "You're gonna write a book on this." It was actually bizarre. You cannot make this stuff up. The case involved a staged death utilizing a pair of killers, a hitchhiker, and a life insurance policy. The plan gets a little sloppy, and law enforcement does not know who is buried in a grave. The next ten years are spent trying to put a name

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with an unknown face.

This was the first time in a Tennessee court of law (and I believe in the entire U.S.) where a jury has to find someone guilty, without anyone in the courtroom knowing who the victim is. That will get you an upside-down jury. After all, you usually have someone weeping, yelling, angry about killing "Uncle Joe," and talking about the family. Here, you have a body but it's very hard to get emotional sympathy from jurors. Using forensic dentistry helped solve the crime, but I can't tell you the whole thing or you won't want to read the story.

J.B.: And you are now working on your third title?

M.T.: Actually, I just finished the second one which is called "Out of the Darkness" and involves a bite mark case in a murder trial that I testified at in Arkansas, and the controversy around the evidentiary value of that bite mark evidence in this particular homicide. The third, based on the case with Dr. Wecht, will be "Grave Mistake."

Talk about sending readers running to the library. Dr. Michael Tabor is an unforgettable interview; a man whose background and incredible work on cases has not only created amazing thrillers, but has also made the realm of forensic odontology one of the most fascinating to learn about. For more information, check out www.drmiketabor.com or listen to other fantastic interviews from "Crime & Science Radio" with Doug Lyle, MD. and Jan Burke at <https://crimeandsciencerradio.com>. ■

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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 www.dplylemd.com, <http://writersforensicsblog.wordpress.com>, or Crime and Science Radio at <http://crimeandsciencerradio.com>.



Jan Burke is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. She has won the Edgar for Best Novel, and the Agatha, the Macavity, and the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Readers Award for Best Short Story, among other honors. Her books have been published internationally and have been optioned for film and television. Jan is the author of over thirty short stories. Her work in nonfiction includes serving as the associate editor (with Sue Grafton) for MWA's Handbook, "Writing Mysteries." Her forensic science and criminal justice columns appear in *Sisters in Crime's InSinC Quarterly*.

A nationally recognized advocate for the improvement of forensic science, she has led efforts that resulted in new laws to aid in identifying remains and better funding for labs. She has spoken before the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Crime Lab Directors, and other organizations. She is a member of the advisory board of the California Forensic Science Institute. She has coordinated forensic science programming at several mystery conventions. She co-hosted the podcast Crime and Science Radio with Doug Lyle.

Jan has taught at the UCLA Extension, Book Passage, and at numerous conferences and conventions. For more information, check out her website at www.janburke.com.

The Debt

By Helen Power

I shivered in the darkness as I awaited my fate. Thick, abrasive fabric clawed against my face, obstructing my view and slowly suffocating me. My hands were unbound, but I knew better than to remove my makeshift blindfold. I knew better than to disobey a direct order.

Blind to my surroundings, all I could see was the look on my wife Anna's face when she learned I had spent our life savings on a stand-in for the war. A substitute we could not afford. She tried to hide her disgust, but I knew she was ashamed of me. As she should have been. As I was. I should have joined the war against the Confederates. I had thought I was putting her—and our newborn son, Abe—first, but in reality I had been a coward.

Strong hands tore the hood off my head. A heavy door slammed shut behind me. The scent of wet cement assaulted my lungs as I gulped in torrents of air.

I spun around, my fingers fumbling against the door, but there was no handle. I was trapped.

Soon after I had evaded the war, my father's mercantile, for which I was bookkeeper, went bankrupt. When the bank refused me a loan I sought out Mr. Westcott, a local salary lender. I had thought the war would have ended by now. I should have earned back the money, but instead, I was drowning in debt.

I hadn't been able to admit my failure, not to Anna, and not to the rest of the world. The shame was too much to bear. That was why I was here.

I knelt and retrieved the items that Mr. Lockwood had left for me by the door. I hesitated before tucking one of the items into my pocket. I collected the oil lamp and turned back around. I was in a narrow hall built of concrete and smelling of mold and oil. The muffled sounds of horse-drawn carriages carried from far above. I was in a tunnel.

Earlier that day, right before my store was set to close, a man had showed up. I had been expecting Mr. Westcott. I didn't have his money, and I was filled with both relief and trepidation at the sight of this stranger.

The man had stood in the doorway with an air of self-importance. He wore a frock coat with wide lapels over a waistcoat woven of fine, expensive material. Of course, he could afford it.

He had called me by name, Mr. Matthew Sutton, and he introduced himself as Mr. Hoyt Lockwood. He informed me in a pleasant tone that he had purchased my debt. He strolled the aisles of my shop, picking up items and putting them back with apparent disinterest.

"Why are you here?" I finally blurted out, unable to take the suspense any longer.

Mr. Lockwood's lips curled into a chilling smile. "*You* are here, Mr. Sutton, because you are in debt. You're desperate. And you do not want your honor to be tarnished by this shame."

I held a bated breath.

"I, on the other hand, am here to offer you a simple solution."

I hadn't been in the position to refuse.

With these fresh memories taunting me, I peered down the dark tunnel. The oil lamp's light only ventured several feet down its path.

Again, I turned around. This time, I pounded on the door. "I don't know what you want me to do!" I shouted.

Silence answered me.

I reached into my overcoat, but my pocket watch was gone. How long had I been missing? Would Anna be at home now, in front of the stove, cooking a meagre dinner for myself and our son? Would she be wondering where I was? Would she be worried yet? I could picture her with shocking clarity: cradling Abe in her slender arms, rocking him back and forth, humming a soothing tune as she cast nervous glances out the darkening window. My heart ached for her.

Did she suspect that anything was amiss? Had she seen Mr. Lockwood's foreclosure sign on the door of the shop? Fear rose with the bile in my throat.

Once I had completed my task—whatever it would be—my debt would be taken care of. I could laugh off the foreclosure sign and tell Anna that it had been a misunderstanding. The bank needed a better bookkeeper, I would joke, and I would suggest I could offer them my own services.

Without further deliberation, I journeyed into the tunnel.

I walked for what seemed like miles. The tunnel grew narrower. The ceiling dipped, forcing me to crouch. The oil lamp barely illuminated my path. The tunnel had flooded with foul-smelling, thick sludge that squelched under my second-hand shoes. My breath caught on the thick, sour air, which slowly suffocated me.

I hesitated when I approached a significant modification of the tunnel. A set of steep wooden stairs lay ahead. The walls narrowed further and became wooden. I thought of Anna and Abe as I continued onward.

I didn't know why I was here, or what lay beyond these walls, but I suspected that stealth was my ally. I climbed the rotting steps with painstaking precision.

When I reached the top, the tunnel ended so abruptly that I nearly slammed into a wall. A folded sheet of pristine white paper was pinned to the wooden board. "Mr. Sutton" was written above the fold.

I reached for it with shaking fingers. Voices beyond the wall stopped me in my tracks.

"I do understand that you despise being alone," a feminine voice said.

There was an audible sigh. "My husband is a busy man, Lizzie."

There was a sound of shuffling. I pressed my ear to the wall. "I'm worried about you, Mary. You haven't been the same since Willie died. It's unhealthy. Is it true that you haven't *once* stepped inside his bedroom since he passed?"

Was Willie Mary's son? I thought of my own son, at home, lying in his cradle, swaddled in his threadbare blanket. A blanket that could be replaced as soon as I had the money. Abe deserved better.

I plucked the paper from the wall and unfolded it with one hand, using the glow of the oil lamp to illuminate the three words scrawled on the page.

Kill the President.

I gasped and stepped backward, nearly tumbling down the steep stairwell. I glanced around, seeing the world anew. Could it be? Was I in one of the fabled tunnels that led into the White House? Just being here broke half a dozen laws. I would be hanged.

There was silence outside my hiding place. I held my breath. Had I made a noise? Had they heard me?

Mary, *the First Lady*, finally spoke, "My husband should be returning from one of his so-called 'promiscuous receptions.' I've begged him to discontinue them. Holding consultations with the public is dangerous, especially in this political climate."

"Well, he *is* the president," Lizzie chided.

"It isn't just the country that needs him," Mary insisted. "Our son does as well. Tad is becoming quite unruly..."

Light footfalls faded as the two women departed.

Panic washed over me. I couldn't kill the president. But I couldn't go back either. This was my only way out.

I wouldn't survive this. Even if I could reach the president, I would likely be brought down by one of his guards. I wouldn't make it out alive to see Anna and Abe. Abe—ironic that I had named my son after the man whom I would one day be coerced to kill.

I knew what had to be done, but still, I hesitated. I had no other choice. I couldn't—wouldn't—turn back. I had failed Anna too many times already. It was time for me to defeat my fear, to show some courage. Mr. Lockwood would see to it that my family was taken care of.

Certain that the women weren't coming back, I felt along the edges of the wooden panels of the wall until I found a lever and heard a soft click. A hidden door popped open, revealing an empty hallway.

I stepped into the light, allowing the secret door to drift shut behind me. I crept down an opulent hallway, admiring the

oil paintings, the rich wallpaper, and the extraneous furniture. I knew that the First Lady had insisted on renovating when her husband had taken office, but I hadn't realized how many tax dollars had been funneled into this. These were luxuries that I could never even dream of affording for Anna. After today, at least she would be able to afford bread for the dinner table.

Three men turned a corner in the corridor up ahead. The one on the left was familiar, with his looming stature, strong nose, and thick beard. I ducked into a room before I was spotted.

Breathing heavily, I pulled the second item that Mr. Lockwood had left for me in the tunnel out of my overcoat. I turned it over in my hand, feeling its surprisingly heavy weight and the coolness of its metal.

I immediately recognized the disembodied voice that reverberated down the hall, its high pitch echoing across the walls with surprising resonance.

"We do need to discuss this further," President Abraham Lincoln said.

I broke out into a cold sweat. My fingers gripped the revolver tightly against my clammy palm.

The President continued: "I will sleep on it tonight and have a decision by tomorrow. I intend to spend this evening with Mary and Tad."

I couldn't provide for my family. I couldn't fight in the war. I was a coward. But could I *kill* the President? A man I respected enough to name my own son after?

The footsteps drew nearer.

I thought of Anna. Mr. Lockwood would ensure she was taken care of. But would she be able to overcome the shame, the public disgrace, the *horror* of being married to a traitor? Our child would be raised the son of a murderer. And what of Mary and their son? If I killed the President, I would be destroying another family as well. Both Tad and my Abe would be fatherless. Was this worth the cost?

A sense of calm washed over me. I knew what I must do. Dropping the gun to my side, I stepped out of the doorway, embracing my fate. A shot rang out before I could even discern where in the group the President stood.

I stared down at my frayed waistcoat, which blossomed crimson. I clutched it with the hand that still held the letter. The pristine white was forever stained with my blood.

I collapsed to the ground, the ringing in my ears distorting their frantic voices. Someone grabbed the paper from my clenched fist, reading the three dreaded words aloud.

"Are there others?" I was asked.

"Just me," I managed to say. "I wasn't going to do it."

There was only one thing left that I *could* do. I gathered my strength to speak. "There's a tunnel down the hall... Leads into the White House... Beside—"

"The Lafayette tunnel," an older man said with an air of authority as he stepped forward.

Two of the President's guards hurried away.

The man continued, "I told you we should have filled it. The guards must be dead."

The President frowned.

"The public cannot know of this attempt on your life. That this assassin infiltrated the White House? There would be an uproar."

"I wasn't going to do it," I repeated as I took my last breath.

"The world cannot know," the advisor pressed.

President Lincoln looked down at my crumpled form. He wore a thoughtful expression on his face. Did he believe me?

"Please... make sure Anna and Abe are taken care of," I whispered.

The President nodded almost imperceptibly, then faded to black.

#

That night, Mr. Lockwood was approached by one of his men as he dined with his own wife and child.

"Was it done?" he asked, fork held midair.

"It went as planned."

Mr. Lockwood's lips spread into a smile. "They won't expect another attempt so soon." He lifted a forkful of venison to his mouth. "I assume everything is in place?"

His man nodded. "It will happen tomorrow night. At Ford's Theatre." ■

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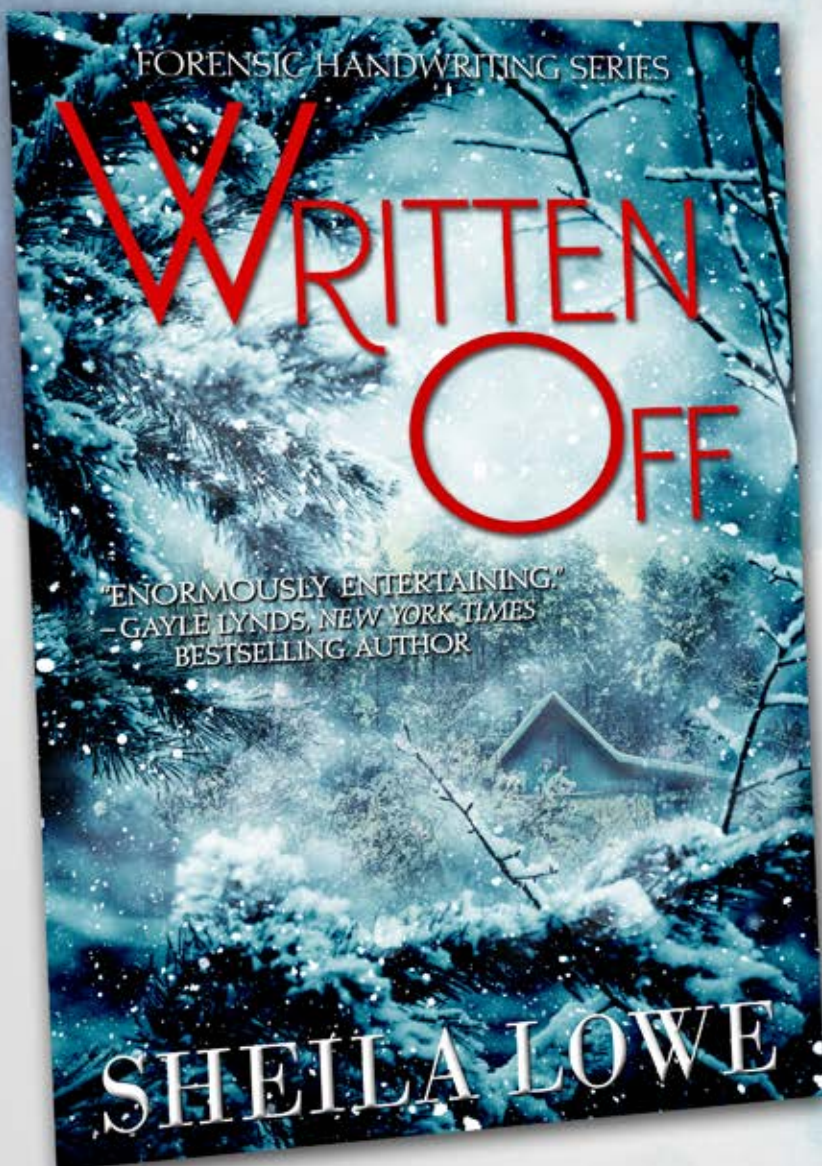
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SHEILA LOWE



In the dead of winter, handwriting expert Claudia Rose journeys to Maine to retrieve a manuscript about convicted female serial killer, Roxanne Becker. The manuscript, written by Professor Madeleine Maynard, who was, herself, brutally murdered, exposes a shocking secret: explosive research about a group of mentally unstable grad students selected for a special project and dubbed "Maynard's Maniacs." Was Madeleine conducting research that was at best, unprofessional—and at worst, downright harmful, and potentially dangerous?

Claudia finds herself swept up in the mystery of Madeleine's life—and death. But she soon realizes that Madeleine left behind more questions than answers, and no shortage of suspects. The professor's personal life yields a number of persons who might have wanted her dead. The University anticipates being the beneficiary of Madeleine's estate—but that seems in question when a charming stranger, claiming to be Madeleine's nephew, turns up brandishing a new will.

The local police chief prevails upon Claudia to travel into town to examine the newly produced, handwritten will. Rushing back to Madeleine's isolated house to escape an impending storm, Claudia becomes trapped in a blizzard. With a killer.

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