

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER/
OCTOBER 2017

A Peculiar Paradise

J.D. HORN

Meet the Reaper

AMY LIGNOR

The Corn Maze

S. R. CAMPBELL

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DEBUT SPOTLIGHT:

LIV CONSTANTINE

*Suspense
Tricks and Treats!*

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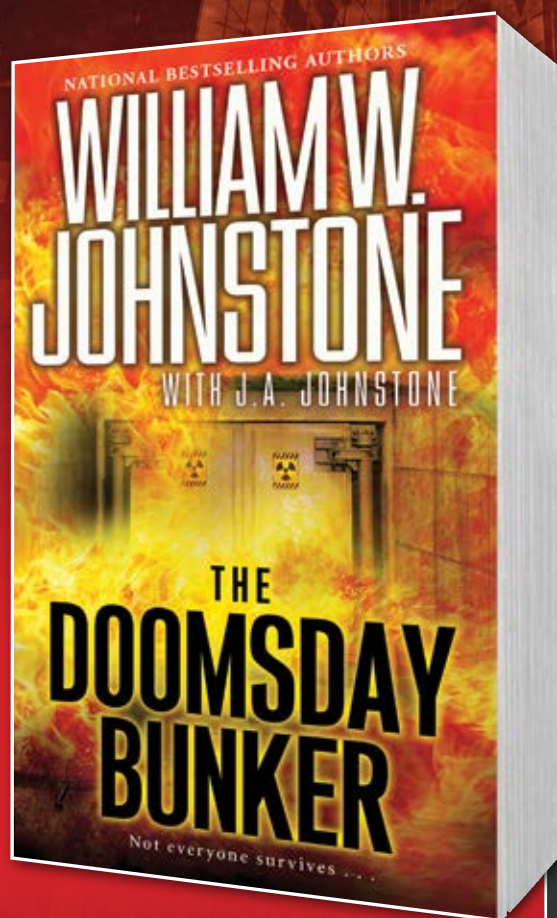
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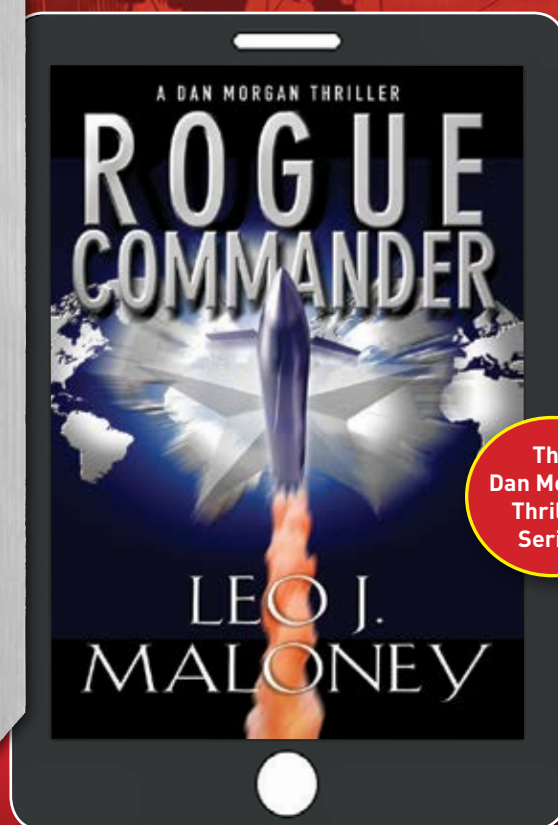
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FROM THE EDITOR



This time of year always gets me thinking about the “bad guys.” Villains, to me, are the best part of any story—that includes both books and movies. I find it fascinating to see how the author/screenwriter is able to dig deep into the abyss to find the personality traits that cause people to do truly evil things.

Years ago I wrote a “From the Editor” that shone the spotlight on the best villains in entertainment. I thought this would be a great

time to not update the list, but rather add to it. *Jaws*, *Darth Vader* and others of renown will not be included in this one; instead, a fresh new batch of dastardly characters joins the party.

First: What makes a good villain? A villain is one that does what they do with a purpose; they have a reason behind the horror they bring. While the “sane” people might not understand the reason, the villain is driven by it and it becomes their mission in life. The villain’s blood is ice cold. They show very little emotion unless cornered, which is why they are tough to find and even tougher to stop. They need to be in control of any situation and when that control is taken away, normally by the hero, they become erratic and then...get caught.

Here is a list of villains you may or may not know that fit this description perfectly. If you don’t know them, search them out and, I promise, you will enjoy their story:

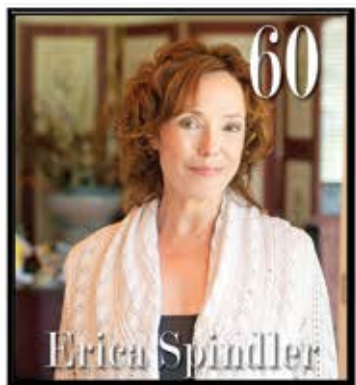
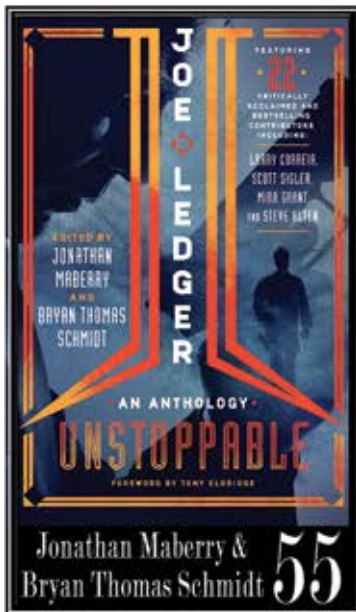
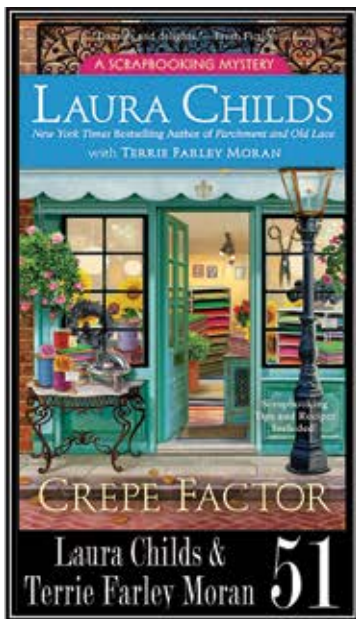
1. **Professor Moriarty.** To go up against Sherlock Holmes so many times and still come back is nothing short of amazing.
2. **Aaron Stampler** (aka ‘Roy’). William Diehl wrote the book “Primal Fear,” but you might know the character from the movie starring Richard Gere where Edward Norton portrayed Aaron/Roy perfectly.
3. **Malcom Rivers.** Seen in the movie *Identity*. Who is the real killer living inside his head? Is it just him in there? Wonderful villain!
4. **Randall Flagg.** Stephen King put this character in nine of his books. The main villain in the *Dark Tower* series, as well as “The Stand.”
5. **Mrs. Danvers.** Not a housekeeper you would want around your family, especially when she persuades a young woman to commit suicide. You can find her in the unforgettable 1938 book “Rebecca” written by Daphne du Maurier.
6. **Patrick Bateman.** Emotions are void in this “American Psycho.” Just a stone cold killer who loves his job.

Of course this list is very short, but still impactful. Villains who are smart yet get tripped up by something stupid do nothing for me. I prefer the villain who has that ultimate flaw. I *need* to know their mission—the reasoning behind their thought process. To simply create a “psycho” with no real purpose is nothing but boring.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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The Corn Maze

By S. R. Campbell

Jacey wrestled the end of her tail out of the closed door before turning the lock. She was more than thirty minutes late, thanks to her tail. This was the second time she'd gotten it caught—once in the bathroom door and now in the front door. Not to mention the glass of wine it had toppled. Jacey had considered changing out of the sexy cat costume, but the only other option she had was 'Dorothy'. And that outfit was too cliché for a farm turned Halloween haunt.

Why was she rushing to meet up with friends at a corn maze anyway? She'd rather be almost anywhere else. Flirting with the new bartender at Red Tap was at the top of her list.

I promised Amy.

Settling behind the wheel of her beat-up Honda, Jacey jerked forward to adjust the end of the tail now sharply poking her in the back. She was about to tear the damn thing off when her cell phone rang.

"Where are you?" Amy squealed, obviously unable to hear herself over the heavy-metal rendition of *Monster Mash* blaring in the background.

"Almost there," Jacey said, starting the engine.

"Liar."

"This stupid tail! I swear it will be the death of me."

"Oh goody, you wore it! Collin will be knocked on his ass."

"Wait, what?" Jacey eased off the accelerator, contemplating making a U-turn.

"Oh yeah, Collin's here with a little redhead."

"So? We broke up months ago. If this is another one of your matchmaking schemes, I'll just meet you at the bar."

Amy laughed. "No! We're waiting for you. But hurry, our beer cooler's almost empty."

Twenty minutes later, Jacey turned on to the dirt road leading up to the farm. Several cars lined one side of the drive. When she spotted Amy's blue Camry, Jacey pulled into the grass field and parked in the nearest open space.

Mindful of her tail, Jacey shut the car door and headed toward the bright lights and rattling hum of generators in the distance.

Rounding the corner, she followed a string of lighted skeletons lining the matted footpath and soon came upon a roughly constructed ticket booth. The overhead sign, torn on one side, billowed in the wind. Behind the plywood counter sat a lonely rusted stool. She looked around. The hay bales and coolers that made up the concession area were also empty.

There wasn't a soul in sight.

So much for waiting for me...

"Hello? Amy!"

A loud pop made Jacey jump.

The generators sputtered, the lights dimmed, and then suddenly everything shut off.

Surrounded by silent darkness, Jacey fumbled through her bag for her phone. Clicking on the flashlight app, she hoped to see Amy standing in front of her—a good scare well played.

But no one met her gaze.

I'm going to kill them.



Without a second thought, Jacey stormed past the ticket counter. She kept the light down to avoid tripping over any unseen obstacles. Her footfalls echoed over the stilled landscape, the crunch of pebbles and dry dirt growing louder with each step.

Where was the laughter, the shouts...where *was* everyone?

Panning her light to the left, Jacey caught splatters of red over brown stalks. A few more steps and she reached the entrance.

The maze was set up like a demonic cemetery. Styrofoam tombstones and bloody body parts littered the ground leading up to a metal gate. Two large goblin statues stood like sentinels on either side. The gate itself held an array of Halloween decorations—cobwebs, pentagrams, and impaled plastic crows.

Jacey checked the life of her phone battery—forty-five percent. She was hesitant to enter without the overhead spotlights, but decided she wasn't going to chicken out. Just as she stepped across the threshold, the generators roared back to life.

The maze lit up like a four-acre Christmas tree. Comforted by the restored light, Jacey put her phone away and entered the corn field.

Once inside, however, her confidence waned. The overhead lights created long shadows. Some areas of the maze were dark voids. She stumbled twice over the thick power cords that snaked across the narrow trails. The first two turns she made resulted in dead ends. Repeated backtracking and several near falls had her cursing her friends under her breath.

This is officially the worst corn maze, ever!

Deeper into the labyrinth, she passed several displays of torture and gore, all obviously fake and commercially gruesome. Then she came upon one so realistic she nearly gagged. A body lay on the ground—its head completely flattened. Somehow they'd even managed to incorporate the smell of death into the exhibit: a sickening sweet odor mixed with the pungent scent of iron.

The biology major in her was perplexed by the thick chunks of bone and brain matter. Jacey leaned over to get a better look. What materials did they use to make it so lifelike?

Jacey's fingers were about to grab a piece of bone when she was tackled to the ground and hauled into the stalks of corn. Before she could cry out, a large calloused hand clamped over her mouth. Her head smashed against the chest of the person that held her tight. She struggled to get away, then heard the whispered: "Shh...it's still out there."

Collin!

After a moment, Jacey relaxed into his familiar arms. So, this was another one of Amy's elaborate schemes. She should have known. Yet somehow, the way he trembled, made her wonder if he was legitimately afraid.

Caught up in the moment, perhaps...?

It had been one of the best scares of her life.

A rustling came from the right passage of the maze, then an odd clucking noise followed. Collin stiffened. The clucking grew louder, as did the scraggly scrapes of something being dragged along the dry, cracked ground.

Then Jacey saw the cause...a fully costumed clown.

The long face was covered in white pancake make-up with perfect red triangles painted above and below vacant black eyes. The mouth was wider than normal and the teeth were strange, thin and pointy. As the clown moved forward, the clucking intensified, more guttural. She could see the muscles in its neck working in rhythm with the sound. In the clown's left hand was a large mallet. Not the carnival variety, but the primitive wooden kind that could smash the hell out of someone's head.

Collin wasn't the only one shaking now. This was real. The body she almost touched had been alive at some point. It was probably still warm. Could have even been one of the friends she was meeting tonight.

After the clown shuffled past, Jacey removed Collin's hand from her mouth. "What happened? Is there anyone left?" she whispered.

A strangled cry sounded close to her ear and then Collin's arms were crushing around her once more. "Some hid in the barn, but I don't think anyone's alive."

"We have to get out of here. My car's close," she murmured.

Collin helped Jacey to her feet. Keeping hold of her hand, he placed his lips to her forehead. "Don't let go."

Jacey shivered as they crept back along the path that would lead them out of the maze. When they arrived at the entrance, they found that the gate had been blocked by a wall of hay bales seven feet high. Collin had pulled Jacey back into the corn to go around the barricade, when she stopped him short. Part of a 'step here' pad was sticking out from underneath a pile of corn husks. The pad had been purposely moved off the path. Looking around, Jacey pointed to the animatronic ghost it activated. One wrong move and they'd give their position away.

Collin sighed and squeezed her hand. At the same time, Jacey felt a slight tug on her costume. Like the tail had snagged against a stalk of corn. *Not again.* Reaching around, she gave the tail a quick yank. The tail didn't release. Instead, it tugged



back. Then she was dragged away from Collin.

Jacey shrieked. Twisting and turning, she attempted to break free from the clown. When that didn't work, she tried to anchor herself to the ground. She planted her feet and seized hold of nearby cornstalks, but the killer was too strong, and so was that damn tail.

Jacey threw her bag. "Collin, get to the car. Call 9-1-1!"

Collin fumbled his effort to catch the flying purse. The bag upended, spilling its contents. Jacey's car keys landed near his feet, while her cell phone skittered closer to the path. Collin snatched the keys and ran. Jacey lunged for the phone. On hands and knees, she gained some ground. Straining her outstretched arm, she fought against the clown's herculean strength.

Her fingers brushed the edge of the phone. The tip of her middle finger moved it closer. She almost had...

Jacey screamed.

Agony exploded over her hand and sped up to her shoulder. She looked down the length of her arm. A wooden mallet was embedded deep in the earth, where her hand should have been. Jacey swayed. Black specs invaded her vision. There'd be no escaping if she passed out now. She bit her bottom lip until she tasted blood.

The clown shook its head and made its throaty clucks, as it bent down and pulled the mallet out of the ground. Jacey rocked forward with another anguished cry. The bloody pile of mush at the end of her arm was unrecognizable.

There'd be no way to save her hand. No way to save herself.

Positioning the mallet like a baseball bat, the grisly clown was preparing to swing at her head. The horrid clucking grew louder, faster.

I'm dead.

The mallet rose higher and her killer flashed a gruesomely wide smile.

Something moved in the corn. A 'snap' echoed out of the stalks.

The clown paused mid-swing. Its smile turned to a sneer as it whipped around.

Collin rushed forward, stabbing a pitchfork through the clown's gut.

As the clown slumped forward, the guttural clucking slowly came to a stop. Pushing the motionless body aside, Collin darted over to Jacey, "Oh my god, are you okay?"

Jacey groaned and then coughed. Her response stuck in her throat. She'd thought he'd abandoned her, but Collin had come back. He'd saved her. Eventually, she found the strength to nod.

"Your hand!" Collin slipped off his shirt and quickly bandaged what was left of her appendage. "Let's get you to the hospital."

Collin grabbed Jacey's good arm and threw it over his shoulder, helping her up a second time. Despite the pain, Jacey felt a surge of relief. She glanced over her shoulder one last time to confirm the killer was dead.

A dark shadow moved.

Pulling away from Collin, she turned to get a better look. The shadow was spreading, moving forward. Backpedaling, Jacey realized it wasn't over. She bumped into Collin, her ankle turned and she fell to the ground hard.

Jacey woke to gentle hands caressing her arms, stomach, legs... It felt good. But then a tingling in her arm turned to a stabbing pain and traveled down to her hand. A heavy weight landed on her chest, suffocating her.

She bolted upright. The sun was shining, but she was still in the maze. "Collin!"

Cluck.

The clown wasn't dead.

Jacey twisted around. Collin was lying next to her, his head turned to the side. Eyes open, blood trickling from his lips. The pitchfork was buried deep in his bare chest.

"NO!"

Cluck.

She couldn't see the clown, but she could hear its sinister call. It was so close. Climbing to her feet, she noticed her hand. It was whole again. She also noticed her costume...a bloodied clown suit.

Jacey screamed.

Cluck. ■

Sandra R. Campbell has published three paranormal novels: "Butterfly Harvest," "Dark Migration" and "The Dead Days Journal." Several of her short stories have appeared in Suspense Magazine and various anthologies. Two of her horror shorts are currently in production with Chilling Entertainment. Sandra is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Maryland Writers' Association and the director of a M.W.A. critique group. Learn more at: Twitter: @Dead_Sassy, Facebook: Butterfly Harvest or sandrarcampbell.com.

MEET THE REAPER

By Amy Lignor

I always said I would die in the snow. Why? Well...I learned early on that God loves irony and always loved using me to get some laughs. Apparently presidential candidates and the platypus weren't enough for Him.

Not to mention, I hated snow. Pounds and pounds of icy-cold crap that everyone in town referred to as 'pretty.' There was nothing pretty about it. And you know that old adage about sitting in front of a roaring fire with the one you love, looking out at the beautiful, majestic deer standing in the Norman Rockwell-looking world? That is a total bunch of fictional bull that some writer made up to set a romantic scene. Frankly, a palm tree, a hot guy, and a margarita with one of those fun little umbrellas sticking out of it would be far more romantic. A snow-filled scene was meant for a serial killer; I completely understand why *they* would go bazooka in a world with no sun.

Anyway, death came quick, but painfully.

Let me set it up for you. The motorcycle underneath me is spitting and sputtering like crazy; even the metal body is sick and tired of being out in the cold, not to mention the middle of nowhere. I'm riding through my hometown—what one would call a speck on the butt of humanity. Talk about small and boring. Besides the cars rusting, there's not a whole lot of adventure to be found in these woods where I was, unfortunately, born.

I glanced to the right, barely making out the little orange balls near the road—the pumpkins were sitting in their patch waiting for the kids to come and choose one so they could take it home and carve it up. Trust me, at least one of those kids would do this with glee, enjoying their first foray into their future career as a serial killer stuck in the snow. It's not even Halloween yet and the little soon-to-be jack-o'-lanterns are already being covered with a freezing blanket that was supposed to wait for at least Christmas to get here. So much for Doplar Radar.

The town graveyard is located on the other side of me. The old, broken rock wall sits there, separating the road from the souls; a sad bit of protection for the bones that dwell inside. Headstones dating back to the 17th century are lined up like an army, their owners just waiting to be summoned from their graves to take the rest of us sorry people out. I don't worry. Even the walking dead wouldn't come out in this weather.

It's too bad I wasn't looking ahead of me instead of at the invisible beings supposedly resting in peace. If I had been, I might've seen the black sheen of ice peeking from underneath the snow. I also would've seen the headlights coming around the corner at eighty miles an hour. But all I ended up seeing was the tree—the big, old oak that was famous for being the site of many accidents over the years. Hell, even some of my high school friends bit the big one on this curve. And now, ironically enough, I was going to join them.

The impact was brutal. I actually felt what a quarterback must feel like when nine of those big brutes sack him and then laugh because the dude that makes all that money is now nothing more than a pile of broken bones and bruised skin.

But you wanna talk about *really* odd? After I hit, I stood up. I knew I was completely dead, but when I tried to get my helmet off it was impossible. It had caved in and was now permanently stuck to my head. I brought my attention back to the car I had avoided in order to hit the tree instead of the speeding, rusted body. The driver had turned away, too, apparently, and his four tires had done no better on the ice than my two. The car had careened across the road and slammed into the pathetic rock wall. But give the ancestors credit for this one—even old and broken, the wall was still sturdy enough for the car to hit and flip over twice, coming to land on its tires. As I watched, the door opened with a squeal that sounded a lot like my mother's scream; the one issued every time I didn't take the garbage out after she'd asked me to do it six times in a row.

A body rolled out of the crushed frame, and the young man behind the wheel was certainly a sight to see. Talk about long, flowing hair. If he stood up, he'd probably resemble one of those Grecian soldiers ready for battle. But he stayed there in the snow, curled up in a ball. He looked like he was just an exhausted dude who'd made a comfortable bed in the wintry slop, and was choosing to rest until dawn hit and he could see his way out of this place. I walked a bit closer to see if I could make out who he was.

Turns out my murderer was the star quarterback of our high school football team. See? Irony.

When the sky suddenly lit up it wasn't a fire erupting from the car, or a bright light coming from above. In fact, the illumination was dark blue. Almost black. It seemed to shimmer as it turned the bright white snow into a strange vision of a frozen ocean. I watched the figure step from the light. It seemed to appear out of nowhere. It just stood in the graveyard looking around as if completely lost. I wondered for a moment if a UFO had crashed and the poor alien needed directions to Roswell, New Mexico, in order to meet up with his lost pals. But the figure was most definitely not the favored green of alien myth. It wore a robe that was black and tattered. The face was almost nonexistent; only a pair of yellow eyes could be seen darting back and forth between the long, flowing blond hair of the dead guy resting in the snow bank, and me. In its' hands was a weapon—a tarnished, rusted scythe illuminated in the light.

I cringed. It was him.

I kept struggling to get the helmet off, but I couldn't. I tried to run, but it was like my feet were stuck in the ice; I had no idea why I couldn't move. *Duh, you're dead.* The truth of the moment finally came over me as I looked at the creature. I always thought it was a writer's imagination, of course, but The Grim Reaper I had heard so much about over time *was* actually real.

I wasn't scared. Not really. After all, I knew he wasn't there for me. I was seventeen and, except for my bad attitude, I hadn't done anything really sinful as of yet. So I turned my attention to the sky, waiting for that burst of white light everyone always talked about. I figured if the dark one was real, there must be some kind of angel coming to take me up to the 'good guy's' side. At least I'd finally be able to ask Him why he used me to get His laughs. But...nothing.

I glanced at The Reaper; his focus was aimed at the man covered in white who, unlike me, hadn't yet moved. But instead of perhaps shocking the sinner or poking him with the scythe to get him to snap to attention, The Reaper simply turned, stepped over the rock wall, and marched directly at me. I couldn't speak. I couldn't get the damn helmet off.

Grabbing me forcefully by the arm, I just...disappeared. It was crazy when the darkness surrounded me. I knew then that I was simply no longer a part of life.

It's too bad I didn't get to stay at the site of the accident for a couple of minutes more. Then I would have known angels *did* exist. Apparently mine was just new on the job and had gone to the wrong place. Gotta love that irony. It would've been hard to blame the angel; everything looks the same in this town so it's easy to get confused. The angel had looked at the blond hair, too, thinking it was 'the female' from the crash that he was sent to bring 'home,' and reached out to bring 'her' up. Unfortunately, he had taken the wrong one...and so had The Reaper.

And, boy, was his boss pissed off. ■

Amy Lignor has been an editor for various debut authors, magazines and websites, and began her writing career in the historical genre with, "The Heart of a Legend." Delving into the YA realm with The Angel Chronicles trilogy, she is also the author of the popular suspense/adventure Tallent & Lowery series with Book #5, "The Double-Edged Sword," releasing soon. Writer and editor for The Feathered Quill, Be First, as well as the editor for Suspense Magazine, Amy is currently working on her first horror novel entitled, "The Wake."

Funeral of a Friend

By Laura Kathryn Rogers

It was dreary in the bar, a real dive.

An experienced connoisseur of places that stank of fear and desperation, I found this place dismal even by my admittedly low standards. Every stereotype was being played out here; the unfaithful husband on business but also on the make, the wayward wife supposedly out at 'girl's night' but really looking to hook up with the stranger.

The place smelled of sweat, perfume of varying costs, spilled liquor and cigarettes. You saw the long-time alcoholic who had given up hope and drank alone in the corner. You saw the barman eyeing him, knowing exactly when to cut him off and send him on his way—likely to another bar. You saw the hooker who was sizing up who might pay her the most with the least amount of effort on her part.

I was in a great place to view it all without being disturbed.

Mostly, because I was invisible.

At least to those in the temporal state.

What I am and what I represent is hard to explain. I don't remember ever NOT being around. I don't remember ever NOT being busy. Tonight, there was a lull in business, so I decided to take a well-deserved rest.

I had about an hour. An old lady with lung problems at 11:20. She would be found in the morning by her landlady, who had come to collect the rent. A young kid who wandered into an area with a non-fenced swimming pool would be at midnight. The parents would wonder how he got out of the house, which of them should have watched him more closely, and later would divorce over it. It was an old, sad tale.

Because of the nature of my busy trade, I had numerous staff who worked for me. They handle the usual sad, but inevitable things—the heart attacks, the car wrecks, the suicides and murders. These days, I picked only those that had some element of interest for me. Whether it was something about the person being dispatched or something about their lives, or impending deaths.

I suppose you've guessed by now who I am. Over time I've been called a number of things. Anubis, Yama, Thanatos, or just plain Death. My favorite is the Grim Reaper. That one really cracks me up. For there is nothing grim about me. I'm the guy you'd gravitate towards at a really good party. Rod Serling had it right. If a human actor were to portray me, I'd more likely resemble Robert Redford than Billy Bob Thornton.

Tonight I was just soaking up the atmosphere. I never expected to have company.

Here she came, though. Beautiful, sexy, the kind you would hate to see take their last breath. Long, raven hair, ruby lips with the perfect bow curve. Emerald eyes. The kind of woman who would be beautiful without makeup first thing in the morning. A full, womanly body, plump in all the right places. I'm not a man, never have been, but for a moment this goddess made me wish that I were.

I decided to be casual as she approached me. Perhaps an applicant for a job? If so, she was hired. Who wouldn't want to follow her to the grave...or anywhere else for that matter?

She sat by me, watched the scene as I did for a time, commenting on nothing. Then, slowly, almost as if thinking about

every half inch she turned, she faced me. She drew out a graceful, slender hand. "Irkalla," she said, her voice sultry and appealing, just deep enough to make a man think of all sorts of delights. But then again, I'm not a man.

I thought quickly. No need to play games. "I suspect you know who I am," I said, meeting her smoldering eyes directly.

"Yes." She turned back to watch the predictable, sad antics of the mortals around us. "I have been one of them. Or, at least when it amused me to do so."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. I'm very well-traveled. Athens, Milan, Constantinople, London, most of Europe." She drawled out the itinerary as if talking about a not particularly exciting grocery list. As if it had all become boring for her. I heard that bit of world weariness in her voice that made her seem for a moment...vulnerable?

With a momentary surge of a lust I'd never before felt, I leaned toward her, feeling greedy to savor this lush morsel, and not just in the earthly sense. Would she be an unexpected addition to my list tonight? It seemed odd that I didn't know in advance. I didn't keep track of all deaths, there were far too many, but as I said, I did stay informed of the impending interesting ones.

"Easy now," she said calmly, reaching a hand to push at my chest. Gently, gently, she pushed, but the pressure felt like fire. I had never breathed, but I felt like I needed to catch a breath. I'd never had a heartbeat, but something inside me was making a frightful noise. I felt the sensation of a new emotion...fear?

"I feel like we've met before," I said, pulling back, hoping that these previously unknown sensations would go away. She smiled impishly, her green eyes seeming to reach out and grab at my own. Or what passed as my eyes. I had the outward appearance of a body so that I wouldn't frighten those who I came to dispatch.

"We have," she said. "In all the places I mentioned."

Her hints were maddening. Yes, I'd been in all those places. Sometimes for prolonged periods of time, but not in centuries.

I again had the perception of having bodily sensations. I could feel blood pumping in veins where there should not be veins. A shiver in skin that had never responded to cold, heat or anything else. I'd been on ships—the *Titanic*, and guided hundreds out of life. I never felt the icy cold of those waters. Now, I felt a positive chill.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked gently.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said, fear now a true part of what I was feeling. Who was this woman? What did she want with me?

She pursed her lush lips. "I'm disappointed. After all, I've told you my name."

I thought hard, conscious of a headache, something that had never happened before. Those places she'd visited, places I too had once visited long ago. They had a common thread, I was certain of it, something to do with my job...

Milan. Constantinople. Europe. London.

Plague.

I saw her smile. But she worked for me if that was what she was. She must. Why did she want me to come along with her?

"You don't quite get it, do you?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Well, it's nothing like a hostile takeover. I hate confrontation." She held up a mirror. I looked, now completely horrified. The face looking back at me was not immortal. The hair was straw white, lusterless. The eyes cloudy with age. The face lined, as if it had survived multiple eons. The mouth, toothless. I was old beyond belief. I felt the ache of every joint in a body I now realized was my own.

I had become a man.

"Yes, I am plague," she said, gently, putting the mirror down. "I'm also earthquake; I was there at Pompeii. I have been here forever. Long before you. You thought you were in charge of things. I merely let you work for me. But as with everything, there is a time to end. You were getting too jaded. I need to promote someone else who will take the job seriously. I am Irkalla. Do you know me now?"

And suddenly, I did. Irkalla was the Goddess of the Dead. I hadn't heard much about her in a few millennia. Hadn't known that while I was unaware of her, she was very much aware of me. She was in fact, if you wanted to call it thus, my supervisor, my boss.

"You may think I am unkind. I'm not. I fear that you might be at times. You were looking only for enjoyment from this job, not seeing it as a necessary part of life. Part of the order of the universe."

She waved her hand, and I saw several heads drop on tables as if falling naturally to sleep. However, I knew that they were not asleep.

She touched my arm, and I stood up, following her towards the door. I took a last look at my bar-mates who were no more.

Soon, I knew, I would understand what it was like. ■

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SUSPENSE
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A Peculiar Paradise

By J.D. Horn

JAKE PULVER DIDN'T HAVE AMNESIA. He remembered his name. His social security number, the real one at least. His current address, and the one before that where he still owed two month's rent. The happy hour Buffalo chicken wings and jalapeno poppers he'd had for dinner last night, at least he thought it was last night, at Clancy's. He could not remember, though, how he came to be walking out in these hills, overlooking the ocean, with the sun getting ready to slip beneath its surface.

Damned benzos. They were fine to sell, but—he should've learned from his last blackout—not to sample.

Jake reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He tapped the screen, but it remained dark. A second effort was equally futile. The battery must've died.

How long had he been out here, anyway?

He recognized this place. Well, thought he did. It looked kind of like California, down by Big Sur, but he spied no sign of Highway 1 snaking alongside the coast. Down below, where it should've run, there was nothing but a beach and pounding surf. The water looked bluer than he remembered, but maybe that was due to the angle of the sunlight. Then again, maybe it was a faulty memory. He'd been a kid when his family had driven through these hills, stopping long enough to stretch their legs; long enough for his puppy, Midnight, to burn off some of his energy.

Jake stopped. He hadn't given that dog a single thought in years, a decade even, but now he felt a catch in his throat remembering him. Midnight had been his best buddy from fifth grade up until the day he'd slipped out from under the fence and gotten hit. Jake saw it happen. Watched it unfold in that damned cliché slow motion people talk about experiencing when their worst moments arrive. The man who'd run Midnight over, total animal lover, had felt terrible. He'd stopped, put Midnight in the backseat of his car, and taken Jake and the dog to the vet. Paid for everything. Sat there with Jake while the doctor worked on Midnight, the man going back and forth between apologizing and praying. In the end, neither apology nor prayer had proved enough. Midnight had slipped from this world. And Jake lost the only dog he'd ever have.

Midnight would've liked it here, Jake thought, stopping in his tracks and turning a full three hundred sixty degrees and coming up with nothing but oak-dotted, golden rolling hills tumbling toward blue sea. The wind started picking up, bringing mist with it from the ocean. It would turn real cold, real quick, if he got stuck without shelter.

"Hello," he called. "Hello," he called again, spinning this time as he did and stretching the word out to last the full circle. He paused, but there was no answer. Only the rhythmic sound of the crashing surf. "Hello," he said, though this time the word came out almost like a whisper.

Behind him, from further up on the hill, he heard a bark. He turned around, expecting to catch sight of a hiker out with his dog, but there was only a large black mutt, kind of like the dog Midnight had grown into, jumping around, excited, almost as if it was happy to see him. Jake stood there, staring at the dog, waiting to hear a human voice call after it. None came. The dog stopped frolicking, then ran at full speed, making a beeline toward him. For a moment Jake felt a jolt of panic. Here was a large, unfamiliar dog charging him. But the dog stopped a few feet away, taking Jake in almost as if it couldn't believe its eyes. And then it bounded up to him, whimpering, licking his hand.

"You okay there, boy?" Jake said, overcoming his nervousness and reaching down to pet the dog's head. "You lost?" He stroked the dog's thick, black coat. "If so, we're in the same boat." He crouched down to examine the tag on the dog's collar. With the sun setting a bit more with each passing moment, he had to twist the tag to make out the engraving on it.

Midnight.

"You have got to be kidding me," Jake said to himself, to the open air—hell, maybe even to the dog. "What're the odds?" He reached out and took the dog's head between both hands to examine his face. The dog pushed through his grip and planted a sloppy, wet lick right on Jake's face. Just like Midnight used to do.

For a moment, Jake stayed there, crouched down, running his fingers through the tufts of fur behind this Midnight's ears. He glanced over at the ocean, watched the sun as it inched closer to the horizon, changing from gold to red. This childhood place. His childhood pet. "Ah, that's it," he said, pulling the dog closer, nuzzling it, breathing it in. "This is just a dream. That's what it is, isn't it?" he said, reaching down to scratch the dog's chest. "You were a good boy. The best boy."

Suddenly the dog backed away. He sniffed the air, seemed to catch wind of something, and began a low growl. He circled Jake, like he was marking a protective boundary, issuing a warning to anything that might try to come near. Midnight bumped into him, then ran a few yards away before looking back and barking again. Took another few steps and repeated the process. Jake realized Midnight wanted him to follow.

It seemed silly—this was only a dream, after all—but a sense of coldness, more tangible than the ocean breeze, skittered down Jake's spine. Midnight barked, this time sounding angry. The dog ran back to him, got behind him, and used his muzzle to nudge Jake forward. He found himself giving into the long-lost dog's sense of urgency. He began running and Midnight circled him, stopping every few yards to make sure he followed.

They carried on that way up the hill, moving away from the sea until they reached a crest. A small vale lay below, dominated by a grove of oaks and lined with chaparral. Midnight circled him and then bounded down to the grove, leaving Jake to follow as quickly as he could beneath the now purple sky.

As Jake approached the grove, he caught sight of a light—bright, electric, even though, in the illogic of dreams, there was no sign of power lines anywhere. He walked toward the light and soon found its source—the window of a small, white cottage with a narrow porch. A vacant rocking chair sat there, listing back and forth in the growing wind.

Midnight appeared in the open doorway.

Jake climbed the two concrete steps to the porch, then drew near enough to the door to poke his head in. A single room, a bed, a table, a sofa. A small kitchen with antique appliances, an old white style refrigerator with a rounded top, like the one he remembered his grandmother refusing to part with, hummed in the corner. The edge of a porcelain sink peeked out from a bathroom through a door left ajar on the far end of the main room.

"Hello?" he said. "Anybody home?"

Midnight came and caught hold of his pant leg, tugging him over the threshold. Jake carried on into the center of the room, jumping when a gust of wind sucked the door closed behind him. A sudden sense of exhaustion struck, and like some kind of fairy-tale Goldilocks certain that the world had been built for her alone, he sought out the bed. He closed his eyes, expecting to wake up in the real world. The last thing he felt was Midnight hopping up beside him, just like his mother had always insisted the dog should never do. Jake reached out his hand and rested it on the dog's back.

"You're a good boy, Midnight."

~

JAKE COULD SENSE IT WAS FULL DAYLIGHT BEFORE HE EVEN OPENED HIS EYES. He lay there for a moment in the rays of warm sun. He smelled breakfast. Eggs. Coffee. Toast.

Jake lived alone.

His eyes popped open and he was startled to realize the dream—for that's what it had to be—hadn't ended. Midnight sat before the open door, staring at the new day. There was a creaking sound out on the porch, a sound Jake recognized as boards squeaking beneath the shifting movement of the rocking chair. He swung his legs out of bed, intent on creeping up to the door to get a look at the rocker. Midnight noticed his movement and bounded over to him.

"You're awake then, Mr. Pulver?" a man's voice came through the window.

Dream or no, Jake had been caught squatting before. Experience had showed him the situation could turn real ugly in a heartbeat—and this time he was unarmed. Jake petted the dog, then took a few cautious steps toward the doorway, noticing as he did so that the table had been set. Breakfast for one. He slipped the table knife up his left sleeve.

"Listen, I'm sorry for just busting in like this. I didn't mean to trespass..." he said, as he stepped over the threshold into the morning air.

The older guy seated in the chair was dressed in a black hoodie and dark denim jeans like half the punks in Portland, but there was something timeless about him. Like one of those old prospector types. The man stroked his long, gray beard, staring at Jake with one bright blue eye, and a second that was clouded by a cataract.

"Trespass?" the man said, as he pushed himself up from the rocker. "You're not trespassing."

"This isn't your...?" Jake almost said cabin, but in spite of the porch, the small house looked more like something he'd imagine in an English seaside town than it did a California cabin. Of course, he'd never been to England, so what the hell did he know? "This isn't yours?"

The old man chuckled. "Good heavens, no. It isn't mine."

Midnight came out to the porch and approached the old man, lowering his head for a pet. The old man obliged and Midnight thanked him with a wag of his tail.

"I'm sorry," Jake said, "but who are you?"

"Oh, my apologies. You can call me Charlie. I heard you were arriving, so I came by to check up on you. I trust that all your needs have been met." The man smiled, then stroked his beard. "And if you trust, they always will be."

"Heard I was arriving?" Jake felt a flush of confused anger. "I don't even know where I am."

Charlie smirked and shook his head. "Now, Mr. Pulver...Jake, do you mind if I call you Jake?" He didn't give Jake a chance to respond. "I'm pretty sure you do know where you are. If you stop and think it all through." He approached Jake and held out his hand, palm up. "Now, I hate to stand on formalities, but I think you have something for me."

Jake shook his head. "I don't know..."

"Your fare. There," Charlie said, "in your pocket. I think you'll find it's been provided for you." The old man nodded toward Jake's upper right thigh.

Jake slipped in his hand and felt two coins. He drew them out, surprised by the heft and old-fashioned look of them. Pure silver—he had a talent for spotting it—they bore the image of a bearded guy with two faces: one looking right, the other left. The only visible difference between the two was that one had been stamped with the current year, the other minted in the year he was born.

"Yes," Charlie motioned with the fingers of his outstretched hand. "That's it. Hand them over as quickly as you can, please." Jake dropped the coins into the old man's spotted palm. "There," he said. "It's official now. That should take care of any complications."

"Complications?" Jake said. "With what?"

"Let's just say getting you here required pulling a few strings, bending a few rules." The old man turned and trod down the steps.

"But..."

"One last thing," Charlie said, turning back. "Just to be safe, until we're sure everything has been settled, never—" he waved a gnarled finger as he spoke, "—be caught outside after sunset, and never open your door until after first light. You'll keep an eye on him," he called out past Jake to the dog, "won't you, boy?"

Jake looked down at the dog, his tail thumping happily against the porch. When he looked back up, the old man had vanished.

~

DAY AFTER UNVARIED DAY PASSED. Jake lost count of how many. He kept tally at first: four vertical bars scratched through with the fifth, almost filling a sheet of paper on both sides with his marks. Midnight got hold of the paper one night while Jake slept and chewed it up. After that, it just didn't seem necessary any longer to keep track. He'd given up on ever waking to the real world. He was here. And that was all.

The sun became his clock, the seasons his calendar. Since he'd arrived here, the days had begun to grow shorter, and even though the temperature hadn't dropped and the sky above remained blue, he reckoned they'd passed the equinox and were headed toward the winter solstice.

Then came the rains.

Jake had never witnessed anything like it, torrential rains that fell only at night, bringing with them hail that tortured the poor cottage's roof, clawed at its exterior walls. During the worst squalls, Midnight had taken to lying right on top of him, growling as if he were trying to intimidate an encircling predator.

The storms grew fiercer with each passing night, howling winds like sirens, rumbling thunder like shouting voices, loud enough to shake the room, though too garbled to decipher. Wind pounded against the door. Angry fists certain to break through.

And then came a night when Jake was certain he heard voices. Voices calling his name. In spite of Midnight's whines of protest, he slid out from under the dog's protective posture. Blue-white flashes of lightning strobed through the windowpanes, alternately blinding him and then plunging him into darkness.

Midnight jumped off the bed and rushed to his side. The dog circled him, frantic, doing his best to impede Jake's progress. But Jake had heard voices calling his name. He was certain of it. Somebody other than the old prospector knew he was here and that somebody might just know how to get him the hell out of here.

"It's okay, boy," he said, reaching down to pat Midnight.

He'd miss the dog, but figured he couldn't take Midnight with him. Midnight fell to the floor beside his feet, whimpering, begging. Jake ignored the show. He went to the door and eased it open a crack.

"Are you with us, Jake?" a voice from beyond called. A blast of wind as cold as any January whistled through the door, forcing it to open wide. The scent of blood rode upon the wind. A sense of dread filled him and he leaned into the door, banging it closed.

"Clear!" the word came as a command. He stumbled back, away from the door.

The room around him flashed. Fell to darkness. A burst of lightning smashed through the windowpane, shattering it, the bolt hitting Jake straight in the chest.

"Again. Clear!"

Another burst of electricity hit him, and he jolted up from a cot, then fell again. Looking down on him were faces, masked below the eyes. Hospital green caps on their heads.

"No," the voice said, and a woman leaned over him, shaking her head. "Call it." A pause, then, "Time of death 2:53 a.m." Another moment. "Please alert the officers he's gone."

Jake tried to sit up, and though his body didn't respond, he felt his consciousness obey, rising, floating. He found himself looking down on his body lying on a hospital gurney. He tried to fight. To force his way back into his skin. But a nurse closed his eyes, then covered his face with a thin sheet as unyielding as any iron gate.

The medical team seemed to take no notice, but the edges of the room began to darken. Shadows coalesced, took form. Sharp talons, made of darkness, reached up for him. He willed himself to rise. Gravity caught hold of him, dragging him lower. A claw grazed flesh, filling him with an icy, fiery anguish. Another reached up to catch him.

Something black burst through the hungry shadows and lunged forward. He wanted to scream, tried to scream, but no sound came. His lips, his lungs, lay down below him, in that dead thing he'd once been.

Growling—fierce and desperate—filled the room. Jake focused on the lunging black creature that had found him. It danced in widening circles, Midnight, driving back the shadows.

The sun rose around them, blinding him. As his eyes regained focus, he realized he once again stood in the white cottage by the coast. Midnight stared up, panting, exhausted. A drop of blood fell from a deep scratch on Jake's arm to the floor.

"That'll heal up," Charlie's voice came from the open doorway. Jake looked over to see the old man standing there, lit from behind, a golden glow silhouetting him, making his face hard to see, "eventually. Now that it's settled, once and for all."

"I don't understand," Jake said, as Charlie stepped into the room, reaching out to take his hand, bending his arm so that he could examine Jake's wound.

"Just consider that a tiny taste of what you had waiting for you. What you had coming to you." Charlie dropped his hand, letting Jake's arm swing free. "You weren't a good man, Mr. Pulver, so you ought to consider yourself real lucky." Charlie knelt down beside Midnight. "Because this here isn't what you deserve." He stroked the dog, who, though worn out, flopped over onto his back for a belly rub. The mottled hand ran over the delighted Midnight's stomach. "You see, Jake, this isn't your paradise." He patted Midnight one last time and rose. "It's his." ■

J. D. Horn was raised in rural Tennessee, and has since carried a bit of its red clay in him while traveling the world, from Hollywood, to Paris, to Tokyo. He studied comparative literature as an undergrad, focusing on French and Russian in particular. He also holds an MBA in international business and worked as a financial analyst before becoming a novelist. He has race bibs from two full marathons and about thirty half marathons. Though knocked out by an injury, he's working on making a comeback.

*J. D.'s books have now been translated into Russian, Romanian, Polish, German, Spanish, Italian, and French, with a Turkish version of "The Line" in the works. His new series, *The Witches of New Orleans*, debuts January 2018, beginning with "The King of Bones and Ashes" (47North). J.D. is a long-time animal rights advocate, animal lover, and non-proselytizing vegetarian. He, his spouse, Rich, and their rescue Chihuahua, Kirby Seamus, split their time between Central Oregon, San Francisco, and Palm Springs. You can reach J.D. at: www.JDHornAuthor.com.*

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Goosin' Bruiser

By Jud Widing

Let's say you want a guy whacked. You know...rubbed out. In the way his girlfriend don't do. Well. Unless she *does*. Some guy's girls do. Sobotka, up in New York? Awfully generous, when it came to the dames. One of 'em gets jealous, though. Next thing I hear, the poor son of a bitch is takin' up both sides of the bed. She cut him straight in half, like she took the crack in his ass for a suggestion. Not often you see a made guy go out like a wishbone. Coulda buried him in a pair of baguette sleeves. Lotta laughs at his funeral. Closed casket; very respectful.

That's the kind of amateur hour rubbin' out I was talkin' about just a second ago. If it ain't gotta be clean or quiet, but it's gotta be done, then the only reason it ain't done yet is because you're draggin' ass to the boardwalk. Put it this way; I'd give you fifty bucks outta my pocket if you could find the one lummock down there who wouldn't do it.

But that's for your basic mess job. Let's say you want somebody taken care of. Also not the way girlfriends do, but let's not talk about Sobotka again. Sometimes two slugs to the gut sends the wrong message. Maybe you need a guy gone, like *really* gone. Like the kind of gone that gets the gumshoes scratching themselves bald. Or maybe it's gotta look like a case of the natural causes. Or the kind of accident that can't be called out by a tricky dick.

You go back down the boardwalk, try to find somebody can promise you that and deliver. I'll put my fifty back on the table. Take your time. Don't worry, I'll keep flappin' the dust off. I want it to be nice, for when I put it back in my pocket.

There's only one guy in Atlantic City can make that promise and deliver. I've seen to that. You ask anybody—who should I talk to about my problem, and they'll tell you: you want Samuzzo D'Amato.

Some people think that's a funny name, until I pop 'em on the nose.

You laughin'?

Didn't think so.

So anyway, it's four in the morning and I'm staring at my toaster. Not everybody can afford a toaster. I can. It's only right, the guy at the top of his field sets his own price. I set it high. Lets me buy nice things. Like a toaster.

It's a nice toaster. I wouldn't buy a toaster wasn't nice. It's all silver and shiny. I can see myself in it. A fat rectangle me. It's funny. I laugh, and so does the toaster.

So I pop the toaster on my nose. It throws two pieces of bread at me and clicks real loud. I jump. Anybody would.

I shake my head at the toaster and toss the toast onto the toast pile. I pull two more pieces of bread off the bread pile, stuff 'em down those stupid toaster holes, and lean on the lever.

Then I just wait. Before long this asshole breadbox is gonna screw up some courage and throw more bread at me. And it's gonna click real loud. I think it's the click that gets me.

I just gotta see it happen. Gotta keep my eyes open. Gotta not flinch.

See, here's the thing. I'm the guy you go to, you need a problem taken care of. Remember I was just tellin' you about that? I'll work for anybody. I got no formal connections. I follow the money. People respect that. And if they don't, I go ring their doorbell. They open the door, I lean in. They gotta take a step back and look up. Everybody respects that.

I'm a bruiser, is what I'm saying. A tough. I'm the tough in town. But I also got this problem. I goose easy. Somebody

slams a door too loud, I jump. Car horn honks while I'm walkin' down the street, I jump. One time I'm sittin' on this guy with bad luck and a deep bathtub. Few minutes later I climb out, start dryin' things up. I bend over to grab a towel, and I fart. Yeah, toughs fart too.

But I also jumped. Toughs don't jump. Luckily the guy in the tub was lookin' at somethin' else.

I know there's rumors. Nobody's ever come and tried them out to my face, but I hear 'em. Oh, D'Amato'll dance if you catch him right. Yeah, Sammy's feet don't get along with the floor. Ha, he's the toughest guy in the room, long as there's no Jack-in-the-Box around.

Whats my least favorite about all that is, somebody gets it into their head to sneak up and try one of those out behind my back, I might go and prove 'em right.

Is that gonna be curtains for Samuzzo D'Amato? Is somebody gonna send the second-best tough in town to punch my card? I ain't worried. Really, worst that'll happen is people stop comin' to me. Go to the second-best. So maybe I gotta beat them there. And to the third and fourth best. Maybe they keep comin' to me anyway, if all of a sudden only the fifth-best is answering his phone.

But still. They'll laugh. I can pop a few guys, but I can't pop 'em all. Wherever I go, they'll be slammin' doors and honkin' horns. Look at Sammy dance. They'll probably give me a nickname. Made it this long without one. I don't want a damn nickname.

So I gotta not jump. Gotta teach myself: Don't goose.

The toaster throws bread at me. And that fucking click. Two more for the toast pile, two more from the bread.

I got twenty hours 'til the meet. I'm gonna need more bread.

Whole ride out, Longie keeps tellin' me shit that ain't got nothin' to do with me. But what else is new? I could brain him and run his rackets, and nobody'd be the wiser. That's how much he tells me about it. I don't 'cuz I'm just a hell of a guy.

Credit where it's due, the dope's got hustle. He was a bootlegger when we first got together. Working for Luciano. He bought his booze in Canada, shipped it down on boats and trucks. Got it to Rum Row on speedboats painted black. Real exciting stuff. Meanwhile, up in Philly, Waxy Gordon's boys figure out you can still make grain alcohol, if you got the right credentials. So they have a parlay; next thing you know Longie's cuttin' Luciano's illegal booze with Gordon's legal booze. Everybody profits.

See where I fit in there? Neither the fuck do I.

But every time we're headin' for a pick up, or makin' a drop, he starts givin' me all the context. Context, that's what he says. So I says, I don't need context to knock two heads together. He always liked that. Just not as much as context.

Somebody in Washington stamped somethin', and now we don't need bootleggers no more. That was fine by Longie. He'd moved on. Last year Schultz gets whacked at the chophouse, now everybody's callin' Longie our very own Capone. I'm workin' with him all the while. Not for him. I follow the money, like I said. Just so happens Longie's got the most of it.

Sometimes as he's handin' me my cut he says, gee Sammy, you must feel pretty lucky. So I says yeah, you too. He smiles, but I don't think he likes that one so much.

Anyways, tonight we're goin' to a meet about labor unions, if you can believe it. Even more complicated than the booze. And Longie's tellin' me all about it. Most nights I'm happy to let him run it out. I don't know if he don't get out much or he don't like the sound of my voice or what. Ain't for me to know. I just gotta listen. Like, really listen. Sometimes he accidentally asks me what I think about anything. I gotta be able to answer. It's part of the job, way I see it.

I can't focus tonight though. I'm thinkin' about toasters.

Two days ago, soon as Longie tells me about this meet, Nutelli gives me a tip. That's one of Longie's right hand men. Probably got a stupid title, like lieutenant or colonel or some shit. Why Longie wants me on these meets when he's got a lunk like Nutelli, I'll never know. But he pays me, so I don't need to.

Anyway, Nutelli gives me a tip. I guess he heard some of those rumors about me. I guess he was too smart to laugh at them.

Gotta admit, the guy had balls even talkin' to me about it.

Nutelli says, listen, I'm just givin' you notice, one professional to another. There's gonna be a wiry little guy at the meet. Part of the union crew. Like a little dog thinks he's big, this guy. He likes to jump at you. Make like he's comin' for ya. To test people. See if they goose.

I just look at him for a minute. Tryin' to figure out is he laughin' at me or not. I decide he ain't, so I say whaddya mean?

Nutelli repeats himself.

So I says thanks and do me a favor and shut up about it.

He gets it. Good guy, that guy.

First thing I do is go out and buy a toaster.

After two nights and I don't know how many breads, I'm better. I don't goose as big. I still goose though. A little bit. Maybe too much.

So I'm thinkin' about toasters, all the while Longie's going on and on. Eventually he says: "SAMMY, you listenin'?"

I jump when he says Sammy. Not a lot. Just a little bit.

So I says, ah, shit.

Longie says, what's shit? You been listenin' to me?

Now, I'm not scared of Longie the way a lot of other folks are. I like the guy. And not just because he pays me. So I'm not lookin' to hurt his feelings by saying funny you should ask, I ain't listened to a good goddamn word you said because it ain't got nothin' to do with me.

So I play dumb. Never fails, with these guys. You can get away with anything, you just make 'em feel halfway smart.

I says I'm tryin', boss—they like that too, callin' 'em boss—but I don't know I can wrap my head around this union stuff.

So he shrugs and gets this little smile on his face. And he says, that's alright, it's pretty tough to keep straight, you ain't got a razor sharp mind.

So I says, that's you alright. Razor sharp mind.

He says, you blowin' smoke up my ass?

So I says, you paid me yet?

He likes that one even more than context, I guess. Rest of the ride is real quiet.

I'm not one of those guys likes knockin' heads. You want a psycho, go back to the boardwalk. I do it 'cause I'm good at it. If it were up to me, every meet would be civil as buyin' baseball cards. No reason for them to go otherwise. Then again, it's a good thing they do sometimes. I got no other skills.

Soon as Longie says we're here, I get an idea it's gonna be one of them civil nights. Nothin' kickin' off. And here's me, upset about it. Normally I'd be happy. But normally I ain't got a wiry little guy wantin' to goose me.

It's a picturehouse. Big white marquee says *The General Died At Dawn*, like I'm supposed to give a shit.

Longie, Nutelli and me, we meet the union guys in the lobby. There's three of them, and the guy in front says he's called Wilkerson. He calls the lobby a foyer. Pronounces it like he's got somethin' against the letter 'r.' I'm not worried about him.

Over his shoulders are a big son of a bitch and a wiry little guy. Real slow, I nod to the big son of a bitch. The big son of a bitch nods back, real slow. This guy gets it. I'm not worried about him either.

It's Tommy Toothpick over there I got my eye on. Whole time Longie and Wilkerson are schmoozin', Toothpick's got my full attention. He's bouncin' from toe to toe, hair floppin' around like it can't get comfortable. Before too long he sees me starin' and gives it right back. That's when he leans on the lever. Gets real still.

I got his number.

Here's the hard part. When's he gonna pop? He's gonna wait 'til I'm close, that's for sure.

What's the move? Do I keep my distance? I can look mean all night, standin' here. Harder to look mean when you're backpedaling from a guy small enough the doctor's still givin' him lollipops. So it ain't a matter of 'if.' Meet breaks, he's gonna come walkin' up to me like we're old chums. Then he'll try it. Maybe I beat him to it. Jump at him. See who gooses.

That's the move. I'm happy with that. So I settle in to wait for the meet to break...

Longie don't sound right. He's talkin' slow, sayin' um a lot. Longie ain't the kinda guy says um a lot. He works real hard to use pretty words. You always know they're comin' when the vein on his forehead starts pumpin'.

I turn to look at what's got his tongue. Only I think about that big son of a bitch over there. So I turn slow.

I guess Toothpick was bankin' on a faster turn. I catch him dartin' his eyes to Nutelli. Then back to me.

Ah, shit.

Now I get why Longie brings me out to his business meetings. When I'm plyin' my trade I do things clean, like I said earlier. But sometimes clean means messy, long as the mess don't trail to your front door.

This is gonna be one of those.

I grab Longie by the shoulder. He says hey what's the b-, then I throw him across the room, flat, so he slides like Gehrig makin' for the platter.

That's got me movin' just like I want. I swing right through the space Longie used to be takin' up, headin' straight for

Nutelli.

He's already reachin' for his gun.

I don't much like guns myself. Or knives. Time you spend learnin' how to use a gun or a knife right is time you don't spend on your body. Then somebody slaps your hardware outta your hand, whaddya got then? Whereas, I got big heavy arms. You pull 'em outta their sockets, I can still swing 'em at you from the torso.

I really like it when other people use guns and knives.

I spin out in front of him, straight on. So the angle's right. Still movin', I use one hand to snatch his bean shooter. The other one bunches into a fist. And since my arm ain't outta its socket, there's a lotta muscle drivin' it into Nutelli's face, one, two, three times. Somethin' snaps and he falls asleep.

That's one.

I keep whirlin' around and the big son of a bitch is chargin' me. Turns out slow ain't a hobby for him. It's a goddamned lifestyle. Well, not for long.

He comes shamblin' with his arms out. Stick some bolts in his neck and he's ready for Halloween. You get the picture. Here's a problem. I gotta let him get his hands on me. Only way to get the angle right. But corner of my eye, I see Wilkerson's fishin' a piece outta his sock. Toothpick's got a knife and he's makin' a play for Longie.

Toothpick's gonna fuck this up.

Finally, the big son of a bitch makes it to me. He clamps his hands onto my shoulders. I jam the gun up into the bottom of his jaw and pull the trigger. The top of his head blows off. Like he had a bright idea for once and his brain couldn't handle it.

That's two.

I push the big son of a bitch's body straight back. As he falls, I get a clean shot at Wilkerson. I plug him in the gut, so he don't die. Longie's gonna wanna chat.

Talkin' of Longie, Toothpick's practically on top of him.

So I says hey shithead.

And the shithead spins around and takes a shot at me.

It misses. But I hear a ping behind me. Left a fuckin' hole.

So I says fuck! Real loud. I guess the wiry little guy took that as my dyin' breath, 'cause he turned back to chase Longie, who finally got up off his ass. Boss finally figured there were comfier spots to lay down.

I take off runnin'. I ain't gonna catch him though. That little guy can move. I'm too big to move like that.

I got a gun. But I don't wanna shoot him in the back. I'm tryin' to make a, whaddya call it, a scene. Wilkerson might call it a tableau. Yeah, I know that word. Ain't as dumb as I look.

Point is, I gotta wrap this up in a bow. Luciano's got some cops in his pocket. Longie calls Luciano, Luciano calls his boys in blue. Long as there's somethin' pretty to write, they can make a case go away. Long investigation's somethin' else.

I had it all set up. Angles were just right. Some guys makin' a deal that went four bodies south. All I had to do was catch Toothpick right in the neck with a bullet. Simple.

Course he goes and blows it.

I run outside. Nobody's out tonight, which is nice.

It's a quiet part of town. Well lit, too. Those things ain't so nice.

Longie and Toothpick are makin' a hell of a racket. They're clompin' down the center of the street, hootin' and hollerin'.

I gotta think this reflects on me. I got played. Nutelli tells me keep an eye on the wiry little guy. 'Cause he heard those fuckin' rumors. So what do I do but keep an eye. I'm so focused on Toothpick, I tune out the double-cross.

If only I didn't goose so easy.

Ah, well.

I run back inside. Grab the car key outta Nutelli's pocket. Wilkerson's still screamin', clutchin' his belly like that'll help.

I says to him, quit screamin', you'll live longer. Who knows if that's true. But it stops him screamin'.

I go back out. Start up the car.

I look up as I'm guidin' it out into the street. Hell if Longie still ain't givin' Toothpick a workout. Gotta laugh at that. Night's goin' to shit, but that's pretty funny.

If Toothpick knew he had a Packard on his ass, he never let on. Never tried to turn around. Last thing I see of him as he's slidin' under the front bumper was the back of his head, hair floppin' every which way like it's trying to save itself.

He went under the first tire like normal. When he went under the second, I guess his ribs caved or somethin' 'cause the car dipped pretty hard before he was out from under.

The car had good breaks. Lucky for Longie.

I says to him, hey Longie!
He just keeps runnin' for another couple of yards.
So I call his name again.
He stops and turns around. I never seen him so white.
All he says is what the hell, Sammy. I liked that car.
So I says I woulda thought you'd like it more than ever now.
He just throws his hands up.
So I says you wanna talk to Wilkerson or what?

I make him walk back to the picturehouse. I gotta get rid of the car. First I double check the wiry little guy's dead. He ain't quite, so I give him a face massage. Now he is. Hit and run. Real tragic.

Then I remember that other hole in the picturehouse, the one in a place don't make any sense for my tableau. I gotta get rid of the car, then I gotta do fuckin' renovations. I'll tell ya, if it ain't one thing, it's always another.

Couple hours later I walk back in and Longie says hey Sammy, break this guy's knees.

So I go step on Wilkerson's knees. Then I say to Longie, what, this guy not talkin'?

And he says oh he's talkin' alright, he's spillin' his guts. Then he laughs and points to Wilkerson's tummy leakin' all over the foyer carpet.

I laugh because I ain't been paid yet.

And he tells me the whole fuckin' story. Basic power play. Wilkerson was workin' for Capone—the real Chicago Capone, not Atlantic City's Capone—but figured he could do better on his own. He bounces out to Jersey, gets knocked around the casino front. Wants to see how can he get a piece of anything, everybody says you gotta see Atlantic City's Capone. That'd be Longie. Well, Wilkerson wasn't too pleased about that. Figures he'll just off the boss. Not the brightest.

I'm not really listenin'. I'm puttin' the finishing touches on my tableau. Bustin' knuckles, smearin' blood, thinkin' about how I got fuckin' played.

After Longie hears everything he wants to, he says to me, how should we do it?

So I says let him bleed out.

He says what if he doesn't and he's alive when the cops show up?

I says fair enough. So I put my hand over Wilkerson's face for a few minutes.

I wipe my prints off Nutelli's gun with my sleeve. Every once in a while they get somebody on those. Better safe than sorry, I say. Then I put the gun back in Nutelli's hand.

Anybody asks, we were never there.

W'e're walkin' back towards Longie's place, thinkin'. It's still mostly night, but day's startin' to get some funny ideas behind the trees. Finally I says to Longie what I gotta say sooner or later. If I wanna keep callin' myself a professional. I says to him I'm real sorry about that, boss, I shoulda seen that comin'.

He says to me nevermind that. I should have too.

So I says that's awful nice to say, but that's not your job. It's mine.

He says no, really. I shoulda known something was up. I mean, I know all the guys in the union here, but I'd never seen that Wilkerson character in my life.

So I says what the hell do you mean, we go to a meeting with a guy you've never seen and you don't tip me?

He says how was I supposed to do that?

So I says gimme an elbow or something. Jesus.

We're both real quiet for a while. Then he says to me I really liked that car.

He didn't say anythin' about Nutelli, so I didn't bring it up.

When we got back he paid me in small bills.

By the time I get home it's tomorrow. I dump my bags out on the table and wash my hands.

I fold my arms and size it up. My project for the day. Six loaves of bread. The pre-sliced kind. I don't buy bread hasn't been pre-sliced.

I open 'em all up. Make a brand new bread pile. Put two pre-sliced slices in the toaster holes. Lean on the lever.

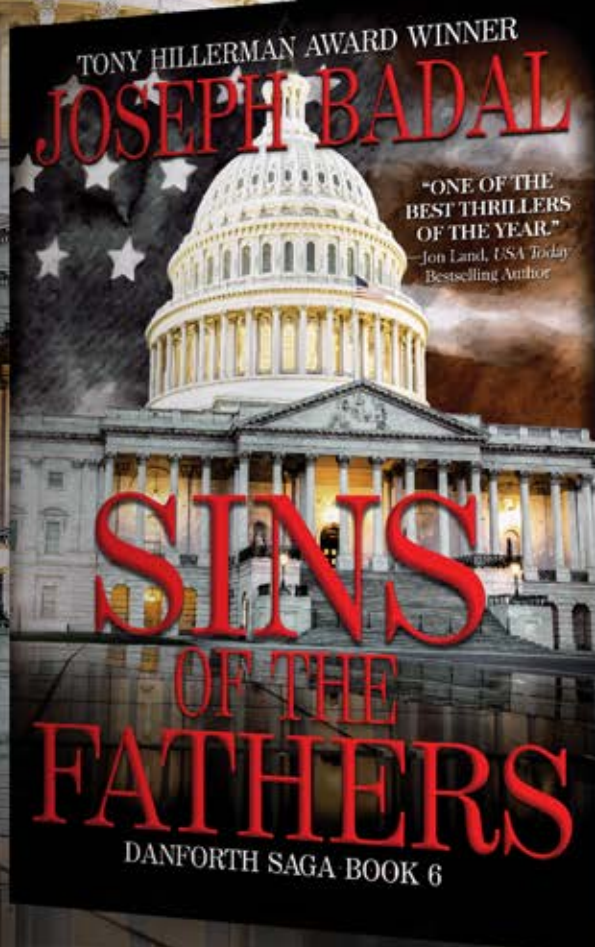
Then...I just wait. ■

NEW FROM TONY HILLERMAN AWARD WINNER

JOSEPH BADAL

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WELL-WRITTEN, INTENSE, TIMELY AND, AT
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"Sins of the Fathers" takes the reader on a tension-filled journey from a kidnapping of Michael and Robbie Danforth in Colorado, to America's worst terrorist-sponsored attacks, to Special Ops operations in Mexico, Greece, Turkey, and Syria. This epic tale includes political intrigue, CIA and military operations, terrorist sleeper cells, drug cartels, and action scenes that will keep you pinned to the edge of your seat.

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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

CITY OF ANGELS

By Kristi Belcamino

"City of Angels" is a debut YA novel coming from the mind of one of the most prolific crime fiction authors in the world. Belcamino, who is famous for her *Gabriella Giovanni* mysteries, proves that YA should most definitely be on her resume of skills, since this is a book you will not be able to stop reading.

In this emotionally-charged tale, we meet up with Nikki Black. Nikki has a rough past. Living in Chicago up until the death of her mother, she hit the road and headed west, ending up in L.A. with nothing but a real jerk by her side. When said jerk explains the reasons behind why he wanted Nikki to accompany him to L.A., she once again finds herself alone and living on some pretty rough streets filled with drugs, hookers, and the money and fame all around.

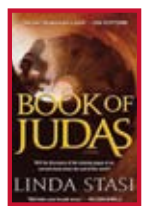
But Nikki doesn't stay by herself for long. She soon finds herself being followed around by a little twelve-year-old girl named Rain. Nikki almost feels like an older sister and should be watching out for the kid, so the odd duo end up staying together at The American Hotel. Not exactly a five-star, at least they're finding companions and people to talk to at this residential spot, and Nikki is finding herself smiling again.

Unfortunately, the smile is wiped off her face when Rain disappears. These nice people at the hotel seem to be more eye-rolling folk than people who are scared for the kid. They believe that the lure of L.A.'s streets are behind Rain's downfall, but Nikki feels otherwise.

This is one "investigation" that puts Nikki on the mean streets. She must find her friend and try to survive a secret group of bad guys that make the "City of Angels" look like a "City of Demons" with the click of a finger.

When YA awards are given out, Kristi Belcamino's name should be at the top of everyone's list.

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



BOOK OF JUDAS

By Linda Stasi

Stasi's follow up to "The Sixth Station" continues the adventures of New York City reporter Alessandra Russo, and once again she's thrown into a scenario involving a religious secret. Her son has been kidnapped, and she learns that pages of the actual Gospel of Judas have been locked away in a bank vault with some of it missing. Those pages hold the key to the real events that transpired when Jesus was betrayed and sent to His crucifixion. The quest for her son will put her in a path of both discovery and destruction.

Familiarity with the first novel would help with some of the nuances of the story, and some readers might be baffled by some of the more supernatural aspects. Those things aside, Stasi tells a gripping tale that asks hard questions in a thrilling way. Where Russo goes next will be heavily anticipated.

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* ■

DON'T LET GO

By Harlan Coben

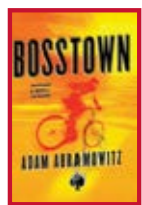
At the very beginning of this story, readers are taken back to the last few weeks of high school in a town called Westbridge, New Jersey. It was during that time period when a boy named Leo Dumas and his girl, Diana, were found dead on the railroad tracks. A tragedy that the police department back then ruled as an accident. In addition, the twin brother of Leo Dumas, one everyone calls Nap, lost his girlfriend Maura, but not by violent means. Right after the horrific 'accident,' Maura simply left town and disappeared, never to be seen again.

That was fifteen years ago and Nap still has his life focused on finding out what happened to his brother and where the heck Maura ended up. Nothing has been "put to rest" as far as Nap is concerned; there are secrets still to be uncovered.

Out of the blue, Maura's fingerprints are found in a rental car that is the central part of a crime involving murdered cop, Sgt. Rex Canton. Not only is Maura still AWOL, but now she's tied to a murder which turns Nap's fifteen year search into a manic investigation to learn what the heck is going on. Uncovering a strange path that involves the abandoned military base near his home, as well as a group of students back in high school who were all a part of Westbridge High's Conspiracy Club, Nap's questions continue to outnumber his answers. Add to this another murder of a once high school math genius, and you have every conspiracy coming to life as Nap, along with the reader, attempts to figure out what's behind it all.

In a nutshell, this is yet another fantastic book written by fantastic author, Harlan Coben. If you want a thrilling story that makes you think, Coben is always the one to turn to. "Don't Let Go," will definitely not let you go until the last page has been read.

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



BOSTOWN

By Adam Abramowitz

If you think that a superfast bike messenger burning up the streets of Boston would not be a thrilling character, I am here to tell you that you're wrong.

Boston, in this particular tale, is a place that covets gangsters, money, and a whole lot of bad things that go on in many locations that line the Boston streets. Although it's the West where people talk about bodies being buried all over the place, in this book a project called the "Big Dig" is going to commence. Costing the city twenty billion dollars, this is all about digging up pavements to better the city streets, yet exposing all kinds of dead bodies that people swore would be buried for all time.

We begin in the year 1990. A boy is talking about his father, describing said man "who sits in a high backed chair with a deck of playing cards in his left hand while his right hovers over the deck of cards like magic." In other words, Pop was a great poker player. Main character, Zesty Meyers, is one of the two sons of Will Meyers (that poker-playing Pop). But Will is now suffering from Alzheimer's, so this former poker king has left his "best" days behind him. Unfortunately, he has also lost more than a bit of data and memories along the way.

When this "Big Dig" begins to carve out the neighborhoods and bodies appear, an armored truck is also stolen and the action turns monumental. Zesty is in the middle of almost everything you can think of, as the Meyers' family name exposes a criminal past that Zesty needs to outrace. If he fails to do so, he may just be the newest body to be interred in Boston's blacktop.

Definitely an all-day read. Everything from the action-packed, caffeine-ridden main character to the amazing realm of Boston practically jumps off the pages. The author shows it all and gifts the reader with a truly wild ride.

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

Y IS FOR YESTERDAY

By Sue Grafton

For those who believed that taking on the alphabet for a series was too much to handle, Sue Grafton presents “Y,” proving that with only one to go, she’ll achieve her original goal.

As this new mystery begins, a twenty-four-year-old man is being released from prison. He was jailed long ago on a juvenile conviction, accused of murdering one of his schoolmates. As the law goes, he is now ready to walk out the doors, which is a fact that’s making more than a few folks a bit nervous.

The convicted one, Fritz McCabe, claims he did not kill Sloan Stevens. It seems there was a scheme back then to sell test answers; a scheme that ended with Sloan being shot nearly ten years ago.

Fritz’s parents have welcomed him home, but they’re not happy to have received a copy of a sex tape several members of their son’s “old crowd” made shortly before Sloan’s death. This arrives along with a ransom note demanding \$25,000 for the destruction of the original tape. Mrs. McCabe brings Kinsey into the mix to help with this until, suddenly, she changes her mind and fires the P.I.

Kinsey is pleased to be free of this case as Mrs. McCabe has not exactly been a model client. Not to mention, Kinsey already has to deal with something else: a serial killer who is on the run and has set his sights on her. But soon, present-day killings and the threat of more violence to come force her back on to both cases.

With only “Z” to come, we either have to think about adding more letters, or Grafton has to turn Greek and delve into their alphabet. Either way, it is a certainty that there is more fun to come from this terrific author.

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

BESIEGED

By A.J. Tata

If you want the definition of a “powerful” story, just read this. A.J. Tata, Brigadier General A.J. Tata, to be more precise, injects his passion for America into his amazing character, Jake Mahegan as Jake plunges head-first into domestic terrorism.

At the very beginning, a gunman is planning to open fire on an elementary school, but there is one thing that he hasn’t counted on to make his plan succeed. As the shooter enters the school intending to commit murder, he runs directly into ex-Delta Operator, Jake Mahegan, who just happened to be visiting an old friend who is a teacher at the school.

Because he’s wearing a suicide vest that is unable to be concealed, the shooter does not have the option of smiling and walking on by. Instead, the vest blows up, but when Jake comes to and gets his bearings, he finds that a girl has been taken. She’s also been taken for a reason, and all Jake can focus upon is finding her and bringing her home.

Looking for answers in his attempt to thwart an even bigger crime, Jake finds that there is a lot more to this violent plot playing out behind the scenes. Threats are being made against the U.S. from people inside its borders, which puts Jake on a path that leads to a think tank in a North Carolina factory, a top secret location of Iranian agents. The worst attack to be made on U.S. soil is about to occur, and only Jake and his courage can prevent it from happening.

Horrific at times, spine-tingling throughout, A.J. Tata once again proves capable of writing a firestorm that’s even scarier because it is all too real.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Charlatan’s Crown,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE PERSIAN ALWAYS MEOWS TWICE

By Eileen Watkins

Jersey girl Cassie McGlone is starting her life over again after finally ending a relationship with an abusive boyfriend. She recently settled in the picturesque town of Chadwick and opened her own cat-grooming business, Cassie’s Comfy Cats. Like all new businesses, it takes time to build up a loyal cadre of paying customers to make it a financial success, so Cassie is thrilled when wealthy cat lover George DeLeuw asks her to groom his handsome Persian cat, Harpo, on a bi-weekly basis. But there’s a catch—Cassie must groom Harpo at the DeLeuw mansion, not at her salon. Cassie readily agrees, and feels comfortable leaving the salon in the capable hands of her new assistant, Sarah Wilcox.

Things have settled into a comfortable routine until the fourth time Cassie arrives for her regular grooming appointment. This time, she’s surprised to find the beautiful Persian cat outside the house, quivering in the bushes. After calming the terrified cat, Cassie follows Harpo into the house and discovers DeLeuw sprawled face down on an Oriental carpet, dead from a massive head wound. When she meets the mourners who show up for DeLeuw’s funeral, including his ex-wife, sister, and former business partner, she’s surprised that none of them seem to be mourning his death. And no one seems to care about what will happen to DeLeuw’s beloved pet. Cassie feels a sense of responsibility toward Harpo and, with the permission of the attorney handling DeLeuw’s estate, agrees to board Harpo until the will is settled.

When the evidence points toward Cassie’s handyman, Nick, and his son, Dion—both of whom were overheard threatening DeLeuw right before he died—Cassie can’t help but become involved in solving the murder. And why is it, the more questions she asks, the more people become interested in Harpo?

“The Persian Always Meows Twice” is a promising start to a new cozy series. And the information the author provides about cats is fascinating.

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

THE GLAMOROUS DEAD

By Suzanne Gates

This mystery begins when a thumb, and only a thumb, is found near a nightclub operating in Hollywood. The only identifying mark is that the thumb is painted with a pink nail polish that one woman recognizes immediately. Her name is Penny Harp, and she is able to identify the thumb as once belonging to her best, now missing friend, Rosemary.

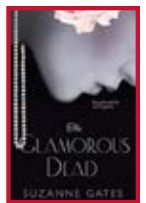
Penny is also able to tell the police that Rosemary was definitely not someone who anyone would believe to be a future victim of murder. After all, this is one young lady whose career was just starting to blossom. Everyone knew, including Penny, that Rosemary was destined for greatness. Yet the more information she supplies to the police, the more they feel that Penny was the one who chose to murder her best friend simply out of envy.

However, Penny is not the culprit, even though she cannot convince the LAPD of her innocence. The only way out of a life in prison is to find the murderer and clear her own name. And what better partner to have than the great Barbara Stanwyck—a star with powerful connections all around Hollywood.

With the woman’s help, Penny uncovers clues that lead her through Paramount’s backlot and through the maze of winding streets in Beverly Hills. But in order to keep Barbara’s help, Penny must also keep a secret; a secret that could lead her to freedom or the gas chamber.

This is truly a glorious tale set in 1940’s Hollywood, when mysteries ran amok and characters were colorful, memorable and a whole lot of fun to be around.

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





CAST IRON

By Peter May

Fans will be completely saddened when they read the line: “The Final Book in the Enzo Files.” But they will also be thrilled with the send-off that author Peter May has given to his forensic scientist detective, Enzo Macleod.

Looking back, Macleod works as a biology professor at a French university where he teaches the latest scientific methods used to solve crimes. The first novel of this series, “Extraordinary People,” had Enzo making a bet with a local police chief that he could solve old cold cases described by a journalist named Roger Raffin. As each novel in the series commenced, Enzo proved again and again that he could do just that.

This last time down the path, Enzo’s cold case comes from western France. It was back in 1989 that a brutal killer dumped the body of a girl, Lucie Martin, into a lake. It took fourteen years before the bones were uncovered during a horrific summer heatwave. The case was most definitely cold, but now finding justice for Lucie is in Enzo’s expert hands.

Her parents were sure she was killed by a serial killer who was on the hunt at that time, but he was investigated thoroughly and had a solid alibi for the crime. Unfortunately, Macleod’s daughter Sophie, and her boyfriend Bertrand are soon taken, and Macleod gets a warning to stop with his investigation of the cold case if he ever wants to see Sophie and Bertrand again.

Even though this book is the end of a monumental series, it is still one that is strong, frightening and can stand alone. Although, if you skip the other tales of Enzo, you will be missing out on a tremendous amount of incredible writing and an unforgettable character.

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

WAGGING THROUGH THE SNOW

By Laurien Berenson

It’s the day after Thanksgiving, and Melanie Travis is already stressed when she thinks about all the things she has to do in just a few short weeks to make her family’s Christmas perfect. What she doesn’t need is one more thing to add to her to-do list, which is already full of more to-do’s than there are hours in the day. With a demanding teaching job at Connecticut’s elite Howard Academy, plus a husband, two active sons and five poodles in residence, Melanie has a right to feel stressed. So when her brother and her ex-husband, successful business partners in a local country café, The Bean Counter, make a spontaneous decision to buy a dilapidated Christmas tree farm, she’s less than thrilled. Especially when they corral the entire family, including Melanie’s feisty Aunt Peg, into helping them get the farm into shape in time for holiday sales.

Unfortunately, the business venture hits a snag when the group discovers a purebred Maltese whimpering among the pine trees, right beside the dead body of his owner, Pete Dempsey, a recovering alcoholic who’s been camping out in a rundown cabin on the land. At first glance, it appears Pete died during a drunken bender after being hit on the head by a fallen tree branch. But as Melanie and Aunt Peg investigate his family history, as well as try to find a permanent home for the dog, it becomes clear to both of them that his death was no accident. Especially when his program sponsor insists Pete hadn’t had any alcohol in over four months.

“Wagging Through the Snow” is another terrific mystery from the prolific Laurien Berenson. I loved it! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of “Dieting Can Be Murder,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



ZIPPERED FLESH 3: YET MORE TALES OF BODY ENHANCEMENTS GONE BAD!

Edited by Weldon Burge

If the cover doesn’t scare you (which it should, unless you’re a zombie), the collection of tales in this third anthology in the *Zippered Flesh* series should have you cowering in the back of your closet.

The authors that appear in this work are absolutely mind-blowing when it comes to creating thrills, chills and skin-crawling moments. In fact, the lot of them deserve whatever award is passed out for short stories that scare the life out of you.

Right off the bat, in *Horns, Teeth, and Knobs*, author Billie Sue Mosiman introduces Martin. Using the funds left to him by his parents, Martin is having all sorts of elective surgery done in Mexico; surgery that creates a frightening picture for the reader that includes horns on his forehead. In the tale, he speaks online with Tina, a woman who was part of the Body Enhancement Group on Facebook. Karen is Martin’s girlfriend back home, but it seems that he gets along far better with this online pal. When Martin does get out of the hospital, his “welcome home” is not what he thought it would be. Relocation follows and even more transformation. Martin has a rough ride, so to speak, and seeing how it all ends up makes for a great “opening act.”

A fantastic writer by the name of Shaun Meeks brings readers his character named Sara, who is excited to become the best she can be in the tale of *Upgraded*. L.L. Soares offers up a seriously cool post-war tale in, *And the Sky was Filled with Angels*. Jack Ketchum pens *The Rose*, which will be a favorite of many, and the list of greats goes on and on.

There are no bad or boring reads to skip in this collection. In fact, Weldon Burge (Editor), deserves yet another pat on the back for bringing together incredible authors to produce truly memorable stories.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Charlatan’s Crown,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



REDEMPTION ROAD

By John Hart

Talk about Southern gothic, “Redemption Road” is one tale filled with plotlines and melodrama that offer three highly emotionally-charged and memorable characters.

Elizabeth Black is a police detective who has been sent home to rest and relax for a while after a very stressful incident takes place on the job: she used eighteen bullets to kill two men in a murky looking cellar. These two men certainly deserved what they got, however, being they had attacked an eighteen-year-old girl named Channing. Oddly enough, journalists aren’t entirely on Elizabeth Black’s side. The headlines ask if Black is a “Hero Cop or Angel of Death?” A formal investigation into the “excessive force” she used is on the horizon. But that’s not all. Elizabeth is also obsessed with Adrian Wall, an ex-cop stuck in prison for the killing of a woman by the name of Julia Strange. Elizabeth insists he is innocent and also has feelings for him. So much so that when Wall is released from prison, Elizabeth ignores her bosses orders and goes to look for him.

A fourteen-year-old boy named Gideon is the son of the murdered Julia Strange. Although many find the boy strange, it’s no wonder, seeing as that his mother was taken from him in such a violent manner. Taking off from home, he leaves his father behind on a mission to shoot Adrian Wall, his mother’s killer, the morning he is let out of prison.

As the three people come together and the stories collide, the tale grows larger. With the various first-person viewpoints of Elizabeth, Channing, Gideon and Adrian—not to mention the narration of an unidentified man who kidnaps several women throughout—the story is constantly moving. Hart knows emotion; he also knows how to creatively spin a tale out of control, yet be able to keep confusion at bay at all times. Readers will love the skill this man portrays bringing “Redemption Road” to life.

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

HAWKE'S PREY

By Reavis Z. Wortham

If you're a terrorist, you'd better think twice before heading into the Lone Star State and stirring up trouble. Texas is a grand place with a whole lot of heroes walking the streets, one of which goes by the name of Sonny Hawke, Texas Ranger. But who ever said terrorists were bright, right?

West Texas is experiencing one of the worst blizzards that it has seen in a hundred years. The wet, heavy snow is blinding and is covering the black ice underneath, basically stranding the Border Patrol inside their station. This is just the time that a group of terrorists come in to take over the Presidio County Courthouse. You're talking guns, massive amounts of ammunition—they look more like they're coming in to take down the entire U.S. Armed Services, not just seize a courthouse. But whatever odd plan they have in place, they begin to kill and take the survivors of their initial siege as hostages. They now have control of the courthouse, placing the U.S. government at their mercy. Trouble is, they're not free and clear by any means; not when one of the hostages just happens to be that illustrious Texas Ranger.

Sonny Hawke may be on his own against these dangerous terrorists, but this is one man who can fight an enemy on anybody's soil. He is smart, he is tough, and his ego allows him to believe that his chances are more than good that he'll win the day.

This is one of those books, settings, and characters that make you want to cheer for the U.S. of A. In addition, this is also a brand new character to star in his own brand new series, so there's a lot more of Hawke to go around. Add in humor, a great cast of characters, both good and bad, along with a terrific ending, and "Hawke's Prey" becomes a must-read for everybody.

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

LIE TO ME

By J.T. Ellison

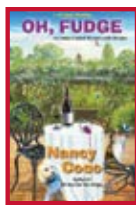
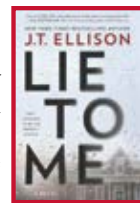
Anyone meeting Ethan and Sutton Montclair would say they were made for each other. They are that "perfect" duo that seem to have a life and a relationship most people would kill for. Ethan is a renowned novelist; Sutton is a commercial writer. The only thing that seems to be difficult is that Ethan has a wandering eye, an aspect of his character that has gotten him into trouble more than once.

One morning, Sutton vanishes. All that's left is a note addressed to Ethan telling him not to look for her; it's over. It doesn't come as a shock to Ethan, seeing as that the husband is always framed as the guilty one when a wife has vanished, that the police believe him to be responsible in some way, shape, or form. Of course, they also take into consideration the domestic disturbance calls to the couple's home, as well as the stress that was caused by a recent loss in their family. Ethan finds himself in an even worse fix when gossip begins to mount in the town between his family and people he once thought of as friends. Seems that many are looking at Ethan in a bad way since no one can find any proof that Sutton is still alive.

The incredible author, J.T. Ellison, divides this story in two. The first half of the narrative comes from Ethan's point of view, whereas Sutton's version of events comes next. The amount of twisted scenes and the list of lies this couple built their relationship on is enormous, and even though this couple looks "perfect" from the outside, the hatred they have for each other runs extremely deep. But...deep enough for Ethan to be a murderer?

Read and see. Those who do will be granted a whole lot of fun by the time this one comes to an end. Ellison has created a tale that proves remaining single is a great choice.

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



OH, FUDGE

By Nancy Coco

Allie McMurphy just can't help it. It seems that everywhere she goes on picturesque Mackinac Island, Michigan, she stumbles across a dead body. When she inherited her family's McMurphy Hotel and Fudge Shop from her grandfather, Allie was very excited to move back to the place where she'd spent so many happy childhood vacations. No way did she anticipate that dead bodies would play such a key role in her new adventure.

Take, for example, Allie's innocent appointment at the Mackinac Island Butterfly House with manager Blake Gilmore to discuss accommodations for one of their tour groups. When she and her puppy, Mal, arrive at the Butterfly House, Blake is nowhere to be found. Instead Allie finds—yes, you guessed it—a dead body. And kneeling over the victim, the probable murder weapon in her hand, is Allie's own cousin, Victoria Andrews. To have her cousin appear on Mackinac Island without warning is doubly shocking, because the cousins haven't even spoken in years.

The dead body in question belongs to Mackinac Island's middle-aged hottie, Barbara Smart, who has a reputation for seducing every man she meets, regardless of their marital status. Even though Tori has no motive to want Barbara dead, the police settle on her as the murderer due to the overwhelming circumstantial evidence. Allie's convinced that her cousin is innocent, and since she's no slouch in the sleuthing department, sets out to prove it. She starts her investigating at the primary source of gossip on the island—the senior center. And what she finds out there leads her into some pretty dangerous, unexpected situations.

"Oh, Fudge" is a charming cozy, the sixth in the *Candy-Coated Mystery* series by Nancy J. Parra, writing under her pen name of Nancy Coco. But be warned: there's a candy recipe at the end of each chapter, so don't read this one when you're hungry!

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

OSIRIS

By Eric C. Anderson

They say great things come in small packages, and that is most definitely the case here. "Osiris" is a slightly shorter read than most, but one you'll remember for a good long time.

What we have here is an issue that would send anyone into a fit, even a politician. Seems that five thousand people are trapped in the American Embassy located in Baghdad. They need rescuing and no one has the spine or courage to try. Thank god for America's Armed Services!

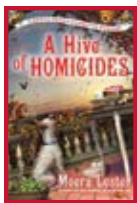
Here we have a Marine who's just about as crusty as you can get. (Remember the "Captain" in *Jaws*? This is that guy!) We have this awesome character, along with a war-starved Army officer, two Turkish spies, and a cyber-warrior who are all being told to go after an ISIS group. The definition of a motley crew, they're asked to rescue this group of Americans being held by a weapon that even Washington's big shots might not be able to stop.

So why the title? Because to start with, "Osiris" takes the reader on a trip from a very fancy palace located in Qatar to the dungy areas of central Iraq to get the tale moving. Then, you have a never-ending series of interesting characters that include Russian pilots who drink a lot, crooked American politicians and then those extremely cool, yet sometimes questionable heroes.

The best news is that this book is the first in a trilogy that will encompass events ripped straight from the headlines. The author is retired from a career in the U.S. Intelligence community, and he uses his grit and savvy well. This plot shows just what could happen in the U.S. if everyone who was tasked with something like this decided not to do anything about it. You don't want to miss this one!

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





A HIVE OF HOMICIDES

By Meera Lester

Every time a *Henny Penny Farmette Mystery* arrives, the reader gets a fantastic cover to look at, a perfect plot, great characters, and an afternoon of good, solid, fun reading.

Abigail Mackenzie left the police force and became a hard-working farmer a while back, as well as a beekeeper in the town of Las Flores, California. She traded her difficult career of investigations and murder for the calmness of a normal life. However, just when she assumed that investigative life was over, she was wrong.

Coming up on the calendar is an event where she'll combine her skills and work alongside her friend, Paola, who is the maker of some pretty out-of-this-world, delicious truffles. Paola is set to renew her wedding vows with her husband Jake, who is the owner of the Country Schoolhouse Winery, and Abby is happy to provide her friend with her trademark lavender honey for the occasion.

What was meant to be nothing but fun and beauty turns into a day of trouble when, after the ceremony, the guests of honor go missing. When Abby hunts the grounds looking for them, she hears a gunshot. She finds her friends in a car: Jake is dead and Paola is injured beside him. Abby tries desperately to unravel the crime. As clues come about, it seems that Jake has a reputation as a ladies man, and it might just be possible that one of his many girlfriends took their revenge. But the target could also have been Paola. Perhaps she had some secret in her past? But when a second killing occurs, the trail to finding the killer becomes even more confusing.

Once again a great story from the mind of Meera Lester. Not only do you get the tale, but readers also receive farming tips, like how to protect chickens during cold weather; and recipes, like the delicious "Bourbon Pumpkin Pie." This is definitely a series that never stops giving!

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

A CONSPIRACY IN BELGRAVIA

By Sherry Thomas

"A Conspiracy in Belgravia," the second in *The Lady Sherlock* series by *USA Today* best-selling author Sherry Thomas, is based on an intriguing premise: the great detective Sherlock Holmes is really a woman, Charlotte Holmes. Charlotte is estranged from her parents and considered to be a disgrace to her family for reasons best left unexplained. This is, after all, Victorian London, and the strictures of society were far tighter than those of today. Charlotte is a brilliant woman, and in order to support herself, presents herself to the world as the sister of a great detective—Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock never meets any potential clients in person; all cases must go through his "sister."

A select few people know Charlotte's secret, including the woman who has kindly taken her in, Mrs. Watson, and two brothers who have been her benefactors and protectors, Lord Ingram and Lord Bancroft. Being shunned by society has given Charlotte the freedom to put her extraordinary powers of deduction to good use. But she's not prepared for the new client who asks for her help, Lady Ingram, who is desperate to find her first love. Charlotte is torn between loyalty to her dear friend, Lord Ingram, and a desire to help the very unhappy Lady Ingram. The case becomes even more personal for the great detective when the missing man turns out to be none other than Myron Finch, Charlotte's illegitimate half-brother, whom Charlotte has never met. The game's really afoot as Charlotte, Mrs. Watson, and Mrs. Watson's niece, Penelope, follow a trail of clues that lead them all around London, culminating in the grisly discovery of a dead man purported to be Myron Finch.

With a mysterious cypher providing clues, and Charlotte's extraordinary deductive ability, the case is solved in a breathtaking climax that I never saw coming. Well researched, well plotted, well written. Thank you, Sherry Thomas.

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



PIRATE

By Clive Cussler and Robin Burcell

An adventure yarn of the tallest order, which although staged in modern times has a well-aged feel to it, stars husband-and-wife treasure hunters Sam and Remi Fargo who provide a throwback touch, reminiscent of Nick and Nora Charles. These are millionaire do-gooders who turn all the profits from their archaeological finds over to charity, but are more than familiar with weaponry and martial arts, too.

The novel whisks the reader all over the world with this jet-set couple, beginning with their vacation in San Francisco, where the purchase of an old pirate manuscript puts them into a dangerous battle with a rival treasure hunter, Charles Avery, who will stop at nothing to recover lost family treasure. From Arizona on to Jamaica and finally to England, the Fargo's find themselves beaten to the end result at every turn.

With all their moves scuppered before they get started, the Fargo's surmise that one of their trusted team members is suspect, but who and why? Caught up in the legend of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest the intrepid couple tiptoe through long lost caves and tunnels—and you'll accompany them, holding your breath alongside.

This is the first novel that these two awesome scribes have collaborated on and I can't wait to see what adventures they build for us in the future.

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

EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE

By Mark Dawidziak

Can there be a better anomaly of a book than one that brings together celebrities, such as Robert Redford and Tom Fontana (and so many more), with a writer who proves that *The Twilight Zone* was literally the end-all and be-all of life lessons? The answer to that question is no.

Rod Serling's outstanding fantasy series is what's responsible for this author (veteran TV critic Mark Dawidziak) to sit down and pen what some will see as an "out there" self-help book and what others will see as an anthology of tales that offer humor, lessons throughout life, thoughts, ideas, creations, and more.

Each chapter is known as a "lesson" and is based on a particular episode of *The Twilight Zone*. As an example, we'll use *Follow Your Passion*. This lesson comes from the episode called, *A Passage for Trumpet*. The original airdate was May 20, 1960, and speaks about an angel who offers up wisdom to those who truly need to find a way to follow their passion because that's the only thing that makes life worth living. In another lesson, *Divided We Fall*, the author takes a look at two episodes of the show: *The Monsters are Due on Maple Street* and *The Shelter*. This particular lesson is seen in both these tales; the best one being on Maple Street when neighbors are being suspected by other neighbors to be aliens in disguise. (It's awesome!)

Every lesson the author is remarking upon is clearly shown, in its own twisted way, in various *Twilight Zone* episodes. Not only does this uncover that Rod Serling was perhaps a moralist in disguise, but it also brings back memories of this remarkable TV show to all who loved it and looked forward to its airing each and every week. This is most definitely unique and a job *incredibly* well done.

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

EDITED OUT

By E.J. Copperman

If there's one thing a writer doesn't actually want, it's for their creation to come alive. Unfortunately, for Rachel Goldman, that's exactly what's occurred.

This is the second in the *Mysterious Detective Mystery* series written by Copperman (the first being "Written Off"), and both the character of the writer and her creation just keep getting better and better.

Detective Duffy Madison is supposed to have sprung from Rachel's mind. What she didn't expect was to find a very real Duffy not far from her home who investigates missing person cases. Rachel is currently working on a new manuscript, yet with the now live Duffy walking the streets, no matter how she writes the tale it simply sounds bad.

When her doorbell is rung and she opens the door to look Duffy Madison in the eye, her frustration turns to anger. Duffy is adamant about talking to Rachel, yet all Rachel wants to do is slam the door in his face. Trouble is, he's there to ask for her help in finding a missing person.

In addition, by finding this guy, Rachel could solve all her own problems and get her life and career back on track. Why is that? Because Duffy states that the man missing is the one Duffy has been looking for. (The explanation behind this will sound more than a little strange if put in a review.) Translation: You need to read it in order to truly understand.

By taking a deep breath and plunging in, you'll find yourself automatically falling in love (again) with this great duo of writer and her fictional character brought to actual life. This is the case that will bring them both a step closer to Duffy's past. Copperman always does a great job (see his *Haunted Guesthouse Mysteries*), and he continues down that path of greatness with this new story.

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

THE DEVOURING

By James R. Benn

This is the twelfth installment of the *Billy Boyle World War II Mysteries*, and these creations just keep getting better and better.

This time around, Captain Billy Boyle and his sidekick, Kaz—upon being sent out on an assignment to Switzerland to investigate the murder of a Swiss banking official—must use the Rhone River to make an emergency landing in France after their plane is hit by enemy fire. Looking out for German troops that are nearby, they make a run for Switzerland. Along their route, they find help in an abbey and meet up with a man who has been almost destroyed by WWII. He has lost his family at the hands of French occupiers and has become a lone rebel who is slaughtering Nazi's by the dozen. Boyle and Kaz tell their contact in Switzerland, Maureen Conaty, about the support they have for Lasho, but she is not pleased; she believes this rebel will be a distraction.

As they move forward, they wait in Switzerland to search for Nazi gold that is being laundered there, a sum likely to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. They know that there will be a delivery from the Germans to Switzerland and Boyle, Kaz, Victor Hyde from the American Embassy and his friend Henri Moret, all come together to usurp the German's scheme. Unfortunately, before anything can be done, one person is killed and the mystery gets shoved into overdrive as Billy once again works to bring about the fall of the Third Reich.

Benn knows his character to the nth degree. Billy Boyle is beloved by many, and even though WWII should be an out of date subject, it most certainly never will be. Suspense fiction has proved time and time again that the Nazis are still the ultimate villain.

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



FIRE AND ASHES

By Elaine Viets



Angela Richman is slowly recovering from the series of crippling strokes that almost cost her her life. Angela lives in the wealthy community of Olympia Forest Estates, Michigan, but unlike her snooty neighbors, she works for a living. Angela is a death investigator, called to the scene of all the deaths in the county that don't happen under a doctor's care.

Many of the death scenes Angela has seen are horrific, but few are worse than that of seventy-year-old financier Luther Delor, who was found burned to death after a house fire. Luther was a crude, drunken, bed-hopping man who had recently left his wife for a much younger woman. Luther's Forest neighbors were disgusted by his recent behavior, but after his death, which the police have ruled a murder, these same neighbors unite against his accused killer, his twenty-year-old fiancée, Kendra Salvato, a Forest "outsider" who happens to be of Mexican descent. All there is against Kendra is vicious gossip and racial prejudice, but both are strong enough to put Kendra, and her father, in jail on suspicion of murder. In an additional twist, and with absolutely no evidence, the pair are also accused of other recent arsons that are happening in the Forest.

As one of the first on the scene of Luther's death, Angela begins to put together evidence that completely conflicts with that of the authorities. Then she's called to the death scene of a local youth who appears to have died of a heroin overdose. Several items discovered in his car point to the fact that he was involved in setting the terrible fires. Or, perhaps he was just a scapegoat and the real arsonists are still at large?

"Fire and Ashes," the second in Elaine Viets' *Angela Richman, Death Investigator* series, is a radical departure from the cozies Viets is known for. It's a well-crafted, intelligent, roller coaster ride of a mystery. Highly recommended.

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

THE SABOTEUR

By Andrew Gross

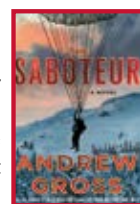
"The Saboteur" is a winner for fans of World War II tales. Based on real events, this thriller takes readers back to a time where the world was at a crossroads.

Kurt Nordstrum is a member of a group of men who want to take Norway back from the Nazis. At this point in the war, things are going badly for Germany and rumors have it that the Norsk Hydro Plant in Southern Norway is Hitler's next move, although no one seems to understand the reasons behind why he wants the location.

The Nazis have been defeated at Stalingrad, but what people are unaware of is the fact that this loss has given Hitler an idea. Why not develop a weapon that could get the Führer back in the game and turn the war back in his direction? Hitler needs the Heavy Water (*deuterium oxide*) that the Norsk Plant secretly produces. Having this will give the Germans a way of making an atomic bomb all their own. Also, the plant was built on top of a cliff, above a gorge, and is connected by a single suspension bridge that is under guard at all times, meaning Hitler's idea would remain secret. The British have assigned engineer Kurt Nordstrum and his team to get into the plant and destroy the Heavy Water as well as the means for its production. There can be no more dangerous assignment than this, and it's up to the Norwegians to make it out alive.

It's been said before, but this is truly a book that the reader will not be able to put down. Gross shows us the treasure trove of skills and courage these men possessed, and the task that was heaved onto their shoulders. It was literally impossible but, they did it anyway. This particular author brought the characters and the time in history to life, filling the pages with tension, thrills, and more than a few surprises along the way.

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





DEEP FREEZE

By John Sandford

The winters in Minnesota can get quite cold—freezing, in fact. And this story is told so well that even if you're in New Mexico, you'll want to grab a heavy coat as you race through these pages.

We're back with Virgil Flowers. He's on vacation and, wouldn't you know it, the boss calls and says he can have even more vacation days, but right now he has to get down from his perch and solve a murder. Seems that a dead woman was found in a town that Virgil frequented once before.

In another case, he actually ended up exposing the town's entire school board as murderers. But there's another murderer left in Tripperton, and they've taken out the owner of the town bank.

Virgil returns to Tripperton and stays with friend, Johnson Johnson (not a spelling error) and his girlfriend. The case is this: a class reunion of 1992 is going to be held. Gina, the corpse, has a reunion committee meeting at her house and ends up dead. Trouble is, she died in the house and yet was found in a frozen river. There are all kinds of suspects and each one has their own beliefs as to who they think committed the crime. But soon another one of the committee is killed and everything from hidden treasure to sex partners surface in the tiny town, burying Virgil up to his eyes in secrets and lies. Add in to this another case he has to do while there, helping a CA private investigator serve cease and desist papers to a person who everyone in town just so happens to be covering for, and you have a whole lot of pieces to this puzzle.

Virgil is once again sarcastic, immensely bright, and his friends are entertaining as he works to solve the crime so he can go back to his much-needed vacation. Sandford hits it out of the park yet again!

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

SCRAPBOOK OF MURDER

By Lois Winston

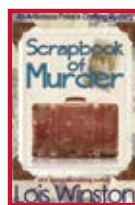
No good deed ever goes unpunished. At least, that's how it seems to Jersey girl Anastasia Pollack, the reluctant amateur sleuth and delightful protagonist of Lois Winston's *Crafting Mystery* series. She's opened her home to Lucille, the mother-in-law from hell, who's a card-carrying Communist with a coterie of other elderly Commies who are constantly feeding themselves from Anastasia's refrigerator. She's also a single parent trying to support her two teenage sons on her meager salary as the crafts editor of *American Woman* magazine, after Karl, her dead louse of a spouse, left her broke and fearing for her life (Book 1 in the series, "Assault with a Deadly Glue Gun").

Since Karl's death, Anastasia has still another problem: she keeps finding dead bodies. She's particularly upset about finding the murdered body of a much-loved neighbor, Carmen Cordova. When Carmen's daughter, Lupe, approaches Anastasia about helping her to create a family scrapbook from her mother's old photographs and memorabilia, she agrees—not only out of friendship but also from a sense of guilt over Carmen's death. But as Anastasia starts sorting through the memorabilia, she discovers a letter addressed to Lupe from her mother that reveals a fifty-year-old secret—Carmen was raped while she was in high school and Lupe has a half-sister she never knew about. Overwhelmed by the horror of her mother's ordeal, Lupe is determined to find out who was responsible for the rape and find her sister. And, of course, she enlists Anastasia to help her.

As I said previously, no good deed ever goes unpunished. But all too often, bad ones do. Anastasia is back in full sleuthing mode as she races to help her friend and unmask a crafty, psychopathic killer.

"Scrapbook of Murder" is a perfect example of what mysteries are all about—deft plotting, believable characters, well-written dialogue, and a satisfying, logical ending. I loved it!

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



I KNOW A SECRET

By Tess Gerritsen

The famous team of Rizzoli and Isles is back, and this time around they are faced with a pretty heady mix of martyrdom, murder, and mystery.

Indie filmmaker Cassandra Coyle's body is found with what medical examiner Maura Isles calls "bilateral globe enucleation." Isles' partner, Homicide Detective Jane Rizzoli, refers to it as "someone cut out her eyeballs." But either way you slice it, the corpse brings back memories, as if someone wanted the body to be seen as Lucy, the patron saint of the blind. More strange murders follow, apparently mimicking the terrible deaths of other saints. Timothy McDougal, for example, dies with three arrows in his chest; just like Sebastian, patron saint of archers.

Rizzoli and Isles learn that Coyle and her associates had been in the process of filming *Mr. Simian*, a horror flick that featured similar killings. Coyle and the other victims had a link: they were among the group of young adults who had accused a man twenty years earlier of child molestation. This man had worked at the Apple Tree Daycare, and his accusers have all died since his release from prison.

This makes the man look good for the killings, but as a Coyle colleague says: "Horror 101: The killer's always the person you least suspect." Rizzoli puzzles over the cause of death in two more apparent homicides that are linked to the case and soon this gruesome cast of characters invade the personal lives of both Rizzoli and Isles.

Gerritsen's fans will not be surprised at the horrific and grisly crimes, nor the graphic autopsies done by Dr. Maura Isles, nicknamed "Boston's Queen of the Dead." In addition, fans will love this complex web that, even though it's covered in blood, makes for a truly thrilling and enjoyable read. Once again, Rizzoli and Isles get a gold star.

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

THE HANGMAN'S SONNET

By Reed Farrel Coleman

Anyone who has followed Jesse Stone from the very beginning (and I'm not sure there are many out there who haven't) should know by now that having this police chief of Paradise's life would be hell.

As this new tale begins, Jesse is still haunted and heartbroken from the loss of his fiancée who was killed by a crazy assassin. And what could possibly be worse than having to sit through a wedding? But that's exactly what Jesse has to do. He needs to be there for his loyal friend, Luther "Suitcase" Simpson, and keep his heartbreak in check while the "I do's" are said.

It's on the morning of the wedding, however, that Jesse finds out a huge birthday bash is going to be held for Terry Jester, a folk singer who is turning seventy-five years of age. Terry is an icon, although he's kept to himself for a good, long time, ever since the recording tape of his best music, *The Hangman's Sonnet*, vanished.

Add to this morning the death of a woman in Paradise who ends up a corpse while her house is being broken into, and Jesse's world fills up once again. Of course there is a link between this woman and this missing music, yet Jesse's path is upended at every turn while he looks for the answers to it all.

From angry politicians to bloodshed around every corner to the citizens of Paradise pressuring Jesse to back away from the case, the police chief finds himself even asking for help from a mobster as well as a Boston area PI to get the solution he seeks.

Author Reed Farrel Coleman proves that his hands (and brain) are more than capable to continue Robert B. Parker's amazing character. In fact, he proves it so well that Jesse Stone may just go on for many decades to come. Parker would be proud.

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

FLASHMOB

By Christopher Farnsworth

John Smith is what you would call a troubleshooter. He “fixes” things, he saves people, he cleans up messes. All of the things on his resume he does for the people who can afford him. And that’s not many. But he’s not just your ordinary cleaner-upper, he can read minds. He can hack, so to speak, into anyone’s gray matter and find out everything he needs to know to make him the best at his job.

Working for a company that stays undercover called “One Percent” (which only the 1% can afford), John Smith begins this tale by attending the wedding of a reality TV celebrity he recently saved. Trouble is, instead of having one of those blissful wedding events, the scene turns to one of absolute bloodshed when a group of gunmen appear and take down various guests, as well as the happy couple. All Smith can take for a clue is one word that he happens to extract from one of the killers’ minds: “Downvote.”

Following this statement, and by using his talents, Smith uncovers an FBI secret in regards to a place on the Internet that offers a list of celebrities and huge payouts to anyone who can kill them. No longer are we talking about a “flashmob” that suddenly breaks into song and dance in the middle of Rockefeller Center. We are now talking about a flashmob that jumps on board; amateurs with guns and other weaponry who want those bounties so much they’re willing to take down a celebrity.

The only way to stop this nightmare is to stop the creator of “Downvote.” Smith searches from Hong Kong to the depths of the jungle. Although this vengeful creator has money and ability, what he doesn’t realize is that he’s up against a man with a talent that can lead straight to his evil mind and stop any more horror from happening.

The ultimate cat-and-mouse that’s all about skill, author Christopher Farnsworth has done a fantastic job!

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

A CHRISTMAS PERIL

By J.A. Hennrikus

What’s the holiday season without performances of *A Christmas Carol*? A “bah, humbug” season, for sure. Ah, but not all theatrical performances are created equal. In fact, some of them are proof positive that the show should not go on. Especially if the actor playing Scrooge can’t remember his lines because he’s always three (or four) sheets to the wind.

This is just one of the dilemmas that Edwina “Sully” Sullivan is wrestling with during the fast-approaching holidays. When her life on the Boston police force imploded at the same time as her marriage, Sully returned to her hometown to start a new life as general manager of the Cliffside Theater Company. For five years, she’s focused on all the nitty gritty tasks required to keep the theater company afloat. The annual run of *A Christmas Carol* is always one sure-fire hit for the theater, and frequently draws in many new patrons. But this year, in addition to the aforementioned problems with the production’s leading actor, Sully’s best friend Eric, who’s also part of the theater company, is arrested before the show opens for killing his father, the mega rich and powerful Peter Whitehall. The local police seem satisfied they’ve arrested the correct person, but Sully isn’t. And because she’s a close friend of the Whitehall family, she decides she’s in a perfect position to nose around and figure out what really happened.

The more questions Sully asks, the more confusing the case becomes. It seems like just about everyone in the family had a motive to bump off Peter. And then Sully finds out that she’s also mentioned as an heir in Peter’s will, and the hot-shot lawyer who’s been hired to represent Eric is her own ex-husband.

“A Christmas Peril” is the first in the talented J.A. Hennrikus’s *Theater Cop Mystery* series, filled with one surprise after another. A fun read.

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



FRENCH FRIED

By Kylie Logan

There are small towns across the U.S. that need cash flow to keep them alive. One of the ways to do this, to draw visitors in, is to hold a mammoth celebration that has tourists wanting to spend their money. Which is exactly what Laurel Inwood and her Aunt Sophie are doing.

The Statue of Liberty, sculpted by the French, is turning 130 years old. In Hubbard, Ohio, they’re going to hold a week-long party, if you will, serving French cuisine and honoring “Lady Liberty.” A local organic gardener, Raquel Arnaud (AKA: Rocky) grew up in France and is now living in Hubbard. She’s a friend of Sophie’s, and is going to help put together the French menu that the Terminal at the Track (the diner Laurel and Sophie own) is going to serve.

When an author comes to sign her books, Rocky accuses said author of stealing the manuscript. Later that evening, Laurel, and local attorney Declan, go to Rocky’s farm to make sure she’s all right after the fight that occurred. There, they find the door unlocked, music blaring, and the dead body of Rocky with a glass of wine beside her. Poison is found and everything—from the law assuming it’s a suicide to Laurel and Declan believing a murder has occurred—commences.

But the angry author is not the only suspect. Add in a historian and expert on the Statue of Liberty whose actions seem odd, and Minnie Greenway, a neighbor of Rocky’s who claims that she, in fact, committed the murder: although, when she’s off her meds, she confesses to almost anything. When Rocky’s safe deposit box is found filled with old newspaper articles and pictures taken during the Statue of Liberty Day parade, Laurel is sure she’s on the trail of a killer. Unfortunately, she’s the only one who thinks so.

An odd setting, a cute location, a fun and slightly strange plot, this is one you will not want to put down. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

A GRAVE PREDICTION

By Victoria Laurie

In this latest *Psychic Eye Mystery*, author Victoria Laurie returns professional psychic Abby Cooper to the spotlight.

It’s not a shock to say that there are a great number of people in the world who roll their eyes when asked if they believe in psychics or the supernatural. Abby Cooper is one of those whose had to deal with a lot of eye-rolling over time, but has never quite met up with such a staunch group of people like the FBI.

Bent sent to L.A., Abby must keep her wits about her as she works with the Bureau to help them solve a series of successful bank robberies. Trouble is, stealing turns into a far more frightening crime when Abby leads the team to a tract of land that is about to be developed. It’s there that she experiences a “vision” of bodies buried in the soil. With those naysayers rolling their eyes, and only some on her side, the tract is dug up and bodies are found. However, they are ancient bones along with bits of pottery and other implements that date back to an American Indian tribe that once lived on the land.

Since Abby knows she’s not wrong about what her “vision” showed her, she realizes that even though four new bodies may not be there, they soon will be. This truth means she must find a way to convince the FBI that there are four murders pending that can definitely be stopped... if only they’ll listen.

Author Victoria Laurie does, once again, an amazing job. She has certainly made it impossible to put down any of her books, and psychic Abby Cooper is never boring. Whether a cozy reader or not, this is a series that you will absolutely love.

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





HIDE AND SEEK

By M.J. Arlidge

Detective Helen Grace does her job well. A little too well, in fact. She has captured more than a few and angered even more than that over her career on the police force. Trouble is, this time around she's side-by-side with some of them.

Framed for a murder she did not commit, her friends now non-existent, Helen has been placed in prison and she is literally prey to some of the predators that roam the halls. She not only has to find a way to prove she did not commit this awful crime, but she also has to do so while outsmarting the inmates who are simply dying to make Helen their next kill. One life is soon taken; however, it is one of Helen's fellow prisoners, found dead behind the locked doors of her own cell.

But it doesn't stop there. Bodies continue to be taken out, and a serial killer comes alive within the walls of the prison. Helen Grace needs to find this person before they decide that she is the next one to go.

Being that this is the sixth book in the series, for new readers of Helen Grace, it would be better to start at the beginning. Yes, all books are standalones, but to really understand Helen and how her current situation came to be, the thrills and chills will be even greater if you delve into Grace's background. You will not be disappointed for one minute, I assure you. This is a terrific series and just keeps getting better and better with each page M.J. Arlidge pens.

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

TURKEY TROT MURDER

By Leslie Meier

It's autumn in Tinker's Cove, Maine, and Thanksgiving Day is fast approaching. It'll be a quiet celebration for Lucy Stone and her husband, Bill, because most of their family won't be home. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, Lucy decides to participate in the town's annual Turkey Trot Sk. Realizing she needs to train if she has any hope—covering stories as a part-time reporter for the local newspaper doesn't give her many opportunities for exercise—Lucy begins a regular jogging regimen accompanied by her dog, Libby. Early one morning, out for her usual run, Lucy is horrified to discover the body of a young woman in Blueberry Pond. The dead girl is Alison Franklin, daughter of millionaire Ed Franklin, who has moved to town and built his family a huge mansion on Shore Road. In the process, Ed's also managed to antagonize many locals.

Since it was rumored that Alison struggled with drugs, the police are quick to blame her death on an accidental overdose, but that doesn't feel right to Lucy. At Alison's funeral, which Lucy attends as a reporter, she learns that many of the attendees believe Ed's second wife, Mireille—young, beautiful, and very pregnant—divided the family and pitted father against daughter for her own personal gain. Is Mireille the villain everyone thinks she is?

Alison's mysterious death isn't the only scary incident to happen. There's an anti-immigrant sentiment building, aimed specifically at a chef who is turning a local eatery into a five-star restaurant. The hatred directed toward Rey Rodriguez and his son, Matt, comes to a boiling point when Ed Franklin is found in the parking lot, shot to death, and Matt is arrested for the murder.

"Turkey Trot Murder" is not the usual lighthearted cozy. Rather, it tackles the serious subjects of opioid addiction and immigration prejudice head-on. Meier has penned an intelligent mystery, forcing readers to make their own decisions on these difficult topics. Bravo to her.

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



ACT OF BETRAYAL

By Matthew Dunn

In Dunn's latest thriller, former intelligence operative Will Cochrane comes out of hiding. That alone should make you run to the bookstore!

It was three years ago that Will, at the request of a Delta Force colonel, found himself involved in an assassination. It was Will's intelligence and talents that took out a financier who invested money in terrorist operatives and projects in Berlin. However, once the assassination had been completed, the colonel literally vanished from sight.

A CIA agent, working alone, has been investigating the disappearance of this one-time "man in charge" because as time moved forward oddities were found regarding the killing. This CIA agent (who did have a hand in the original job) calls on Will for his help to try and figure out what, exactly, has been hidden all this time. But before he can come face to face with Will, the agent becomes a corpse, poisoned by an unknown assailant.

Because Will is the consummate professional, he finds himself on the path to figure out the truth behind the Berlin killing. Although he'll put his own life on the line once he's out of hiding, he will not rest until he figures out what and who is behind it all.

FBI Agent Marsha Gage discovers that one of America's Most Wanted has come into view, and immediately launches into detection mode to catch Will and bring him in at last. Not only does Will already have a mystery of significant proportions on his plate, but now he must out-think an FBI agent who knows her job well.

When the conspiracy is revealed in this, the seventh novel in the *Will Cochrane* series, readers will most definitely gasp. As always, Dunn has created a real page-turner and his character is as awesome as ever.

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

HOUSE OF SPIES

By Daniel Silva

Looking back on 2016, it was Silva's "The Black Widow" that had readers screaming for more. It was the ultimate read last year and, this year, Silva has been even more generous by offering up "House of Spies." Thrilling from beginning to end, main character (and fan favorite) Gabriel Allon, who also happens to be a spy, assassin and an art restorer, has returned. This time, Allon's focus is on taking out an ISIS mastermind known only as Saladin.

Four months after the worst attack America has ever experienced, the World Trade Center falling, terrorists have continued by leaving a trail of blood and death through London's West End. Although their attacks have been celebrations of achievement, no one ever said that terrorists were bright. Although they can kill, what they can't seem to do is put together a plan with no holes. In fact, there happens to be one that catches Gabriel's eye and puts him on the path of the killers.

With his band of operatives, Gabriel and crew head to the south of France to the home of a big-time drug pusher, Jean-Luc Martel, and a former British fashion model, Olivia Watson. This seems like an odd duo to one day be heroes in the war on global terrorism, but Gabriel has worked with the "odd" before.

Olivia, whether extremely loyal or frightened by what the consequences could be, swears she has no idea what the sources are behind her beau's never-ending bank accounts. And when it comes to Jean-Luc, he simply pretends not to know anything about his contacts, including one who wants to bring as much destruction to the West as possible.

Watching Gabriel bring these two over to the "good" side and use his vast intelligence to win the day, will have readers sitting on the edge of their seats. Now the only question left to ask is: What great stuff is Silva working on to make 2018 awesome? (Patience, my friends.)

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

HACKED

By Ray Daniel

Aloysius Tucker is about to go a few rounds with a true villain called the HackMaster.

Tucker is told by his ten-year-old cousin, Maria, that someone has hacked into her online account and sent her friends pictures of porn. This is a tactic that disgusts Maria's aunt and guardian, Adriana, and her wife, Catherine. It's natural in this situation that any and all would turn to a computer security consultant like Tucker, even if he wasn't already family, because he is one who can do the job. Soon, he uncovers that the hacker, or internet bully, if you wish, is the older brother of one of Maria's very own friends.

Promising to go up against the guy and get an apology, Tucker suddenly finds himself stuck in a major murder case where not only hackers but also a bounty hunter places a bulls-eye on his chest. They've gotten together to state that Tucker is actually a man who has been murdering hackers, so Tucker suddenly must duke it out with a slew of anonymous people filling his mailbox with death threats, as well as professional spies in order to clear his name and stay alive.

Tucker is on a thrilling chase to find this killer who the online world has given the name: The HackMaster. And if he doesn't succeed in finding him and proving his own innocence in this whole sordid mess, it may just be Tucker who "signs off" for good.

With each new *Tucker Mystery* this terrific author, Ray Daniel, is getting his hero into more and more trouble. His first three cases have been filled with suspense, and have also brought about many revelations when it comes to the very real subject of cyberbullying. So sit down for a fast-paced crime thriller with characters that blow the mind as they traverse the digital realm.

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

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A LEGACY OF SPIES

By John le Carré

In this newest book, author John le Carré gets back to business and returns to memorable characters that made him famous. However, although characters such as, George Smiley, Peter Guillam, Alec Leamas, and others will be familiar from the amazing spy books, "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" and "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy," the various settings and plot for this great story are fresh and exciting.

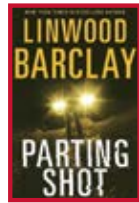
It seems that Peter Guillam is retired now. He has left the Secret Service behind and retreated to his family farm. However, it's a fact that when you've served in the intelligence community, they never go away, so he's not overly surprised when he receives a letter calling him back to London on a "matter of importance."

It turns out that some of the work done by Peter and his colleague during the Cold War is coming back to haunt him. Peter served with George Smiley while in the British Secret Service (AKA: the Circus)—he was his right-hand man, so to speak—yet George cannot be found.

The current cases that are causing such interest involve some old favorites, such as Alec Leamas. It seems that Leamas had a son and said son, along with another, is now trying to sue for damages because of the way things turned out for his father. In an effort at damage control, the British Secret Service need to find a scapegoat, and seeing as that Smiley has vanished, it's Peter who's being called out to account for his actions during those particular cases. As the questions and answers commence and old official files are re-opened, readers will remember why John le Carré became the number one author in the world of spies.

Readers are taken back to the days of the Berlin Wall and will be riveted by every second of interrogations as Peter Guillam's memories come back in full-color. This is, like all in the past, highly recommended.

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



PARTING SHOT

By Linwood Barclay

Promise Falls is a location that all Linwood Barclay fans know about. Here is where a horrific tragedy occurred, affecting the entire town and taking lives. Cal Weaver, who was once a cop in this town before the tragedy made him flee, is now a PI and has returned.

A man walks into the police station in Promise Falls to talk about being abducted. He doesn't know what the heck happened or where he was for the last couple of days. All he remembers is walking out of his favorite bar and waking up in the alley, in pain, and in need of food. Turns out pretty quickly that aliens had nothing to do with his pain. When he turns around to show Detective Barry Duckworth his back, it turns out that the "alien needles" he felt were actually the work of a human who was tattooing into this man's skin a message about a murder.

Another young man, with an extremely annoying family, needs help in Promise Falls for a completely different reason. This is a young man who drank too much and got behind the wheel of a Porsche. His joy ride took someone's life, yet he has just been found not guilty, causing the citizens to turn angry. They're even driving by his family's home and starting trouble. Cal Weaver doesn't have any reason as to why he accepts the job to be this kid's bodyguard, but his gut is bothering him on this one. And when both stories combine, a plot of pure revenge comes alive.

Author Linwood Barclay has made Cal Weaver one of the well-known characters in the thriller genre, and this is just another example of how Promise Falls may look like a storybook location, but the darkness that seems to breed in this place makes it the perfect summer home...if Satan just happens to be in the market for one.

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

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR

By Robert K. Tanenbaum

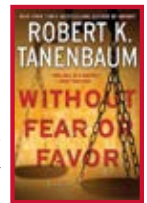
It's always a pleasure to read something by Robert K. Tanenbaum, and this incredible title was no exception.

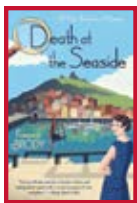
New York County District Attorney Roger 'Butch' Karp is gearing up to announce his decision on whether or not he'll charge an NYPD officer, Bryce Kim, with the shooting of an unarmed black teenager that occurred in the city a month earlier. The young Asian police officer claimed that the teenager surprised him on the stairway of a tenement building in Harlem and fired a gun at him, which logically made the police officer pull his weapon to defend himself. Suffice to say, Karp wants nothing more than to get rid of this episode in his life and get back to business. However, with the world as it is, and nationwide protests against police officers illegally shooting people on the basis of race only, Karp has no choice but to address the situation. But Karp is definitely not about to send this to the courts until he finds out exactly what happened when the shooting took place.

Promising something "big" will occur at Karp's press conference, various news people and magazine correspondents from all over have descended on the location. When one TV correspondent, Pete Vansand, arrives and cannot even find a place for their van to park, let alone a place for him to stand anywhere near the Court building, the screams for justice reach an all-time high.

Not enough space in a review to let you know what occurs on that street, nor what occurs when Karp gets into the courtroom. What can be said is that Tanenbaum treats this volatile subject extremely well and puts together a story that is complete with action, suspense and, ultimately, unveils only truth when it comes to the case at hand.

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





DEATH AT THE SEASIDE

By Frances Brody

Detective Kate Shackleton loves the fact that August has come upon England. Why is that? Because it's the one month that is more than slow in her business and allows her to take a much-needed vacation.

Heading to one of those picturesque towns that can always be found on postcards, Kate travels to Whitby to rest, relax, and spend some time with an old friend named Alma. Alma has an interesting life. She works as a fortune-teller in this seaside community. Unfortunately, when Kate does arrive, she finds out that Alma is dealing with a monumental problem. You see, Alma's daughter, Felicity, has up and disappeared, leaving only a pawn ticket behind.

Oddly, the money was lent to Felicity by the man who is currently courting Alma, yet Alma had no idea that this transaction had occurred. Kate, as always, cannot seem to back off the mystery and ends up throwing herself into an investigation to figure out what's going on and where Felicity could've gone. When she heads to the jewelry shop to attempt to get the data behind the pawn ticket, what began as a missing person case blows up into a far more intricate murder mystery.

Not only is Kate trying her best to solve this matter, but she must do so among a group of townspeople who have no desire to talk to this "outsider." They want Kate to remain silent and not spoil the paradise that is Whitby. But how far will they go to make the detective stop? You have to read and see.

This is the eighth time author Frances Brody has written a spectacular mystery for Detective Kate Shackleton to solve, and fans will be happy to note that it is definitely not the last.

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

HONG KONG BLACK

By Alex Ryan

In this terrific book, the sequel to "Beijing Red," Nick Foley, former Navy Seal, and Dr. Dazhong "Dash" Chen once again take center stage.

It is Nick who agrees, against his better judgment, to help with an ongoing investigation. It's a CIA operative by the name of Peter Yu who has vanished, and Foley's help is needed to find out where he could possibly be. However, soon Yu's extremely mutilated body washes up on a Hong Kong beach. But he's not alone. There are other victims on that beach as well, and soon Nick's missing person case has him tied into yet another horrific investigation of bioterrorism attacks being carried out by China's Snow Leopard Counterterrorism Unit and the Chinese CDC.

Nick never assumed he'd have to deal with a crime as revolting as villains who play with illegally harvested organs, but that's exactly where he ends up. In addition, his snooping around was noticed by the evil beings behind it all and Nick soon realizes that a target has been painted on the middle of his back. He needs help, and the one person he can turn to is CDC microbiologist Dash Chen to get some.

He and Dash work together to not only uncover who is stalking Nick, but also to reveal and stop what turns out to be a conspiracy dating back almost two thousand years.

Just as "Beijing Red" did before, this book is extremely interesting with a plot full of characters that are quite impossible to forget after having met them. Author Alex Ryan is actually a combination of two brave U.S. Navy veterans (Brian Andrews and Jeffrey Wilson) who should be commended for writing yet another fast-paced, intricate read that never pauses for a single breath.

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



THE CUBAN AFFAIR

By Nelson DeMille

Nelson DeMille has delivered excellent thrillers ever since his first novel, "By the Waters of Babylon." His 20th book explores a country that's rarely been covered since the days of Ernest Hemingway: Papa's old stomping grounds, Cuba.

After Daniel "Mac" McCormick finished serving in the Army as an infantry officer, including two tours in Afghanistan where he picked up medals and scar, he turned his back on his native Maine and instead settled in Key West. Now a charter fishing boat captain on the hook to the bank, Mac's forgotten about adventures. But adventure hasn't forgotten about him.

Carlos, a Miami lawyer deeply involved in the anti-Castro movement, wants to charter Mac's boat for an international fishing tournament in Cuba. At least that's the cover story. While Mac's irreverent first mate, Jack Colby, runs the charter, Mac will team with Sara Ortega, a beautiful architect whose grandfather ran a bank in Havana before the revolution. They'll join an educational tour of Cuba, but then slip away from the group and try to recover the contents of Sara's grandfather's bank vault that he hid in a cave before leaving Cuba. It's a huge fortune now, and Mac's been promised a cut of three million dollars if the mission is a success. If they're not successful, he and Sara will end up in the prison run by Cuba's secret police.

The plan appears in danger from the moment they enter Cuba. And along with concerns about informants watching them, Mac suspects that his supposed allies might be playing him for their own purposes.

DeMille competently creates the oppressive feel of life in a police state, with the potential for betrayal always a subtext of any conversation. But it's leavened by the jaundiced eye of Mac, narrating the story. Imagine a travelogue with George Carlin as the guide, and you'll have a good idea of the book's tone. In light of the recent thaw in U.S. relations with Cuba, "The Cuban Affair" is an excellent introduction to the country as it is now.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

SNAP JUDGMENT

By Marcia Clark

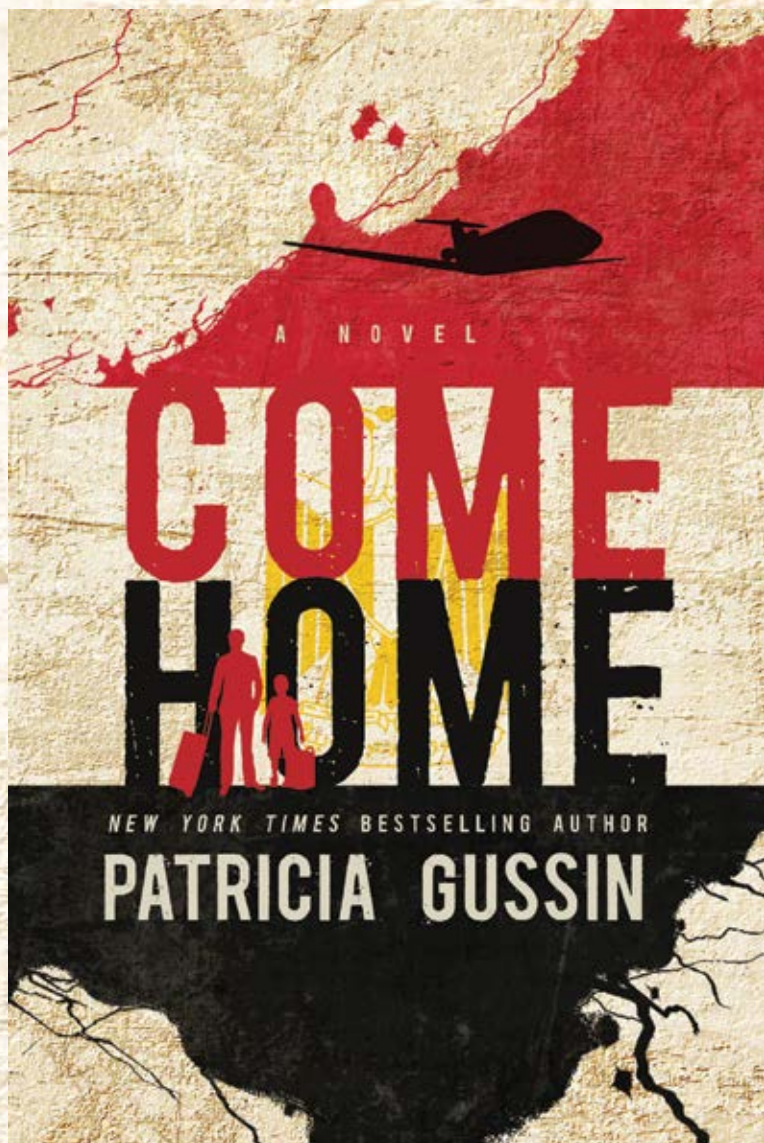
"Snap Judgment" is the third installment featuring Attorney Samantha Brinkman, who is about to investigate one family's most deeply hidden secrets. Clark is known for many other books about the inner-workings of the law, yet her real fame comes from the never-forgotten O.J. Simpson trial. What people should also remember is that Ms. Clark has been a criminal lawyer since 1979, joining the District Attorney's Office in Los Angeles in 1981, so her background in the criminal world is highly extensive and has enabled her to pen some truly thrilling novels.

Here, the daughter of a well-known lawyer, Graham Hutchins, is found in her apartment with her throat slit. After recently giving her ex-boyfriend the boot, it is he who is quickly focused on by police as being the killer. But only a few days after the murder takes place, the man dies in what looks to be a suicide. Or was it? Authorities sway a bit and soon place the father, Graham, as their person of interest in what they now believe was a murder and not a suicide. After all, Graham would have had the perfect reason to kill the scum, seeing as that he certainly would have been out of his mind with grief and rage that his daughter had been taken from him.

Samantha Brinkman takes Graham on as a client. Being that they are both friends and colleagues, she knows that she'll work her tail off in order to prove the man's innocence. But the deeper she looks into the family, and the more she digs up on her new client, the wealth of secrets and betrayals she uncovers makes for many motives for murder. Soon Samantha sees that one false move in this case could cost her everything she's worked for, and one mistake may just cost her, her very own life.

Marcia Clark certainly knows the ins and outs of the litigation business, and fans will be thrilled with this new mystery. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

**TORN BETWEEN TWO CULTURES
ALLEGIANCE TO TWO FAMILIES
A CHILD IN THE MIDDLE**



**“Brave, unflinching
suspense—elegant,
intelligent, and superb.”**

—LEE CHILD,
New York Times best-selling
author of *Night School*

**“The tight suspense
unfurls almost lyrically
in this high-stakes tale of
a mother’s desperation.
A terrific story, told
terrifically.”**

—STEVE BERRY,
New York Times best-selling
author of *The Lost Order*



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MIND GAME

By Iris Johansen

Eve Duncan and “crew” are back, but this time it’s Jane who’s getting all the fanfare.

For those who don’t know, Eve Duncan and her partner, Joe, have just had a baby boy who possesses some interesting gifts. Jane MacGuire is the girl who Eve and Joe took into their home a while ago when she needed help. Well, now Jane is all grown up and is a budding artist who just happens to be having nightmares of a woman that she names Lisa. She wakes up after these dreams and draws every detail of the woman’s face, discovering that with each new dream the woman is bearing more and more cuts and bruises. The woman is contacting Jane through these dreams and asking for help.

Jane has already experienced this before. She once had an ancient woman named Cira contact her about a missing treasure to let Jane know where it might be. Jane discovered this location in Scotland, and has been working with a man who is part of Cira’s family tree to uncover it. But now, even with all that going on, this Lisa person is disturbing Jane’s dreams as well as her life.

Soon Jane realizes that the woman’s face is familiar to her for a reason; she has the same facial features as a man who caused Jane grief in the past. He has gifts of his own that he has used for both saving lives and ending them and easily can manipulate people whenever he wants. This time out, however, he will not be playing games with Jane, because this time it is he who needs her help.

From finding ancient treasure to locating this woman and dealing with some pretty major villains with plots all their own, this story never stops. Fans will love to see Eve and Joe again, as they watch Jane continue to evolve as her own character and “talk” to people through her dreams.

Reviewed by Amy Lignor, author of “The Charlatan’s Crown,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

SOWEST: KILLER NIGHTS

By Sisters in Crime Desert Sleuths Chapter

Twenty top-notch stories cover subjects we hear about in today’s headlines, both nationwide and especially the Southwestern states: drug smuggling from Mexico, terrorist bomb threats, vigilante killing, human trafficking, serial killers, domestic abuse, sex crimes and dementia.

It would be impossible to review all the stories in the anthology in depth, so let me touch upon my top six. *Just Enough Rope*—a nosy neighbor comes to the rescue; *Assisting Aunt Clara*—a dementia patient has a moment of clarity; *Nightly News*—a TV news anchor is threatened by the subject of one of her stories; *Domestic Consequences*—domestic abuse victim who had it coming; *The Choking Game*—teenager’s sex games go awry; *Reservoir Road*—serial killer or copycat?

Each story has its own Southwest twist as well as being written by authors who have their own desert related experiences and news to draw from. Any one of these killer tales could be a story you see featured on your nightly news channel tomorrow—stay tuned.

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



A CATERED COSTUME PARTY

By Isis Crawford

Money is a little tight these days for sisters Libby and Bernie Simmons. They’re especially worried about paying the sales tax bill for A Little Taste of Heaven, their family bakery in the small upstate New York town of Longely.

So it’s understandable that Bernie jumps at the chance to cater a Halloween-themed costume party at the Berkshire Arms, for Darius Witherspoon, a Manhattan gallery owner and treasure hunter who wants to show off his new co-op apartment. It takes some fancy footwork for Bernie to convince Libby to agree, since the last time they catered an event there, it was a terrifying experience for both.

There’s trouble right before the party when Darius’s wife, Penelope, disappears. To be honest, she disappears because Darius has hit her over the head, filled her pockets with rocks, and pushed her into the Hudson River. Playing the role of the heartbroken widower, Darius insists the costume party must go on as planned. Then, in an odd twist, Darius visits the two sisters and gives them a sealed envelope, to be opened only if something happens to him.

When it’s finally time to start the party, the host is the only one who hasn’t arrived. Awkward, yes, but Bernie and Libby just keep on circulating with their trays of hors d’oeuvres, even though they both have a bad feeling. Then the host makes a surprise appearance at the window, dangling from a rope and—you guessed it—dead. The police rule it a suicide, but the sisters aren’t so sure. And when they open the sealed envelope Darius left for them, they find \$5000 in cash and a plea to use the money to “find out what happened.”

“A Catered Costume Party” is the thirteenth in this delightful series by Isis Crawford. I love the characters, the snappy dialogue, and the creative plot twists. A classic cozy among the best I’ve ever read.

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



PIZZA TO DIE FOR

By Lea Wait

Mikki Norden has a problem. No, that’s not accurate. Mikki Norton has several problems—a lot more than an average fourteen-year-old girl should have. First, she’s a stranger in a strange land, a reluctant new resident of New Jersey along with her mom, a mystery-writer-wanna-be who seems to spend more time figuring out plots than dealing with the real world. Which brings us to Mikki’s second, and even bigger problem—the reason they left their home in Seattle for the Garden State. Mikki’s dad is filing for divorce because he’s in love with the mother of Mikki’s best friend. So not only has Mikki lost the only home she knew, she’s lost her dad’s love (she’s sure of that) and her best friend, all at the same time. At least she has her own bedroom, although they’re now living in Gramma Rosa’s house in Edgewood, New Jersey, where nobody’s even heard of the Seattle Seahawks.

Mikki’s number one coping skill is cooking, and she finds a kindred spirit in Mr. Balducci, owner of a local Italian restaurant and a good friend of Gramma Rosa. So, imagine her horror when she and her classmate Richard go to Mr. B’s restaurant early one Saturday morning on an innocent errand, only to find Mr. B dead of an apparent heart attack.

Mikki’s learned a lot about solving mysteries from helping her mother plot them, and she’s not so sure that Mr. B died of natural causes. When she begins asking questions, starting with her own family, she finds out things about her deceased grandfather that she’d rather not know. Such as the fact that he was a big deal in the local criminal crowd. Life in Seattle was never like this!

“Pizza to Die For” is a delicious mystery starring a smart and feisty young girl coming to terms with who she is, with a supporting cast of wacky characters guaranteed to entertain readers. Yummy fun!

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

ON HER MAJESTY'S FRIGHTFULLY SECRET SERVICE

By Rhys Bowen

You have just got to love the cool titles this *New York Times* bestselling author comes up with!

In this *Royal Spyness Mystery*, Lady Georgiana (Georgie) Rannoch is about to marry her true love, Darcy O'Mara; these two are literally a match made in British heaven. Georgie has an interesting life all around. Being the cousin of the queen, she is 35th in line to the throne, which means most likely she'll never sit in that velvet chair. It's time to relinquish her spot in order to marry her beloved, which the queen is all for. The only thing is, Her Majesty wants Georgie to do one small favor for her before she takes on the role of wife.

Queen Mary's small mission sees Georgie in Italy, while Darcy is off on yet another secret assignment. Georgie must go undercover. Be a spy, if you will, at a house party being held in the stunning Italian lake country. Among the guests will be a few German gentlemen, as well as Georgie's own mother and her German fiancé. The queen has asked Georgie to keep an eye out for the well-known Prince of Wales and Mrs. Wallis Simpson. Why is that? Because the queen is terrified that this supposed house party is simply a ruse to cover a secret wedding between the prince and that horrible divorced woman.

This party goes more than a bit crazy, with Georgie's mother needing her help, as well as her beau Darcy appearing and announcing to her that the world may soon be at war. When a murder occurs, the little house party turns into a nightmare of mammoth proportions.

As always with this character and this author, the tale is a whole lot of fun. It seems like every page brings a new set of evidence and mysteries that all come together to provide a terrific ending.

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

THE ROOM OF WHITE FIRE

By T. Jefferson Parker

Iraqi War veteran, Clay Hickman, has taken off from an asylum and seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. What Clay has decided to do is end his three-year stint behind bars in the upscale asylum located in the mountains of San Diego County, and there seems to be only one person who is good enough to find him.

Former Marine, Roland Ford, has all the skills to bring Clay out of the woodwork and place him back where he belongs. Trouble is, Roland is also currently in his own personal struggle, dealing with the grief that comes with the loss of a wife.

Ford forges ahead and attempts to track down the missing soldier. Along the way, he gets all types of statements that are as varied as possible. Sequoia Blain, a friend of Clay's, is at odds with his reported history of violence. Ford keeps an eye on Sequoia, yet at the same time his instincts tell him she is one to be trusted. As Ford goes back through Clay's military record for clues, he stumbles across a list of oddities. Everything from his military record to emails regarding Clay's most recent post-military behavior is addressed, and Ford finds massive inconsistencies within the government's accounts. It's starting to seem like the escaped man is really the one telling the truth when it comes to his statement regarding a military cover-up.

When Clay returns to Sequoia, Ford waits to see what will happen instead of reporting back to his employers. Ford is all about justice being served, but to the right person, and learning Clay's side of the story will allow Ford to know exactly what's at stake and why so many people want to lock this one soldier up and throw away the key.

This is a great story that is true red-white-and-blue, unearthing the real "bad guys" as a Marine once again stands up for truth.

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



UNDENIABLE

By Tom Grace

Former Navy SEAL Nolan Kilkenny is asked to assist with a young boy who is dying of a rare genetic disease. Kilkenny is a perfect match, and he offers to donate part of his liver to keep the boy alive. Unfortunately, he's too late and the young boy dies.

When Kilkenny inquires why he was a genetic match, he learns that the boy was adopted. Further DNA tests confirm that Kilkenny's father was also the biological parent to the now deceased boy. The father denies ever having a relationship with anyone other than Kilkenny's now dead mother. Is he telling the truth or is there something more conspiratorial going on?

Grace knows how to write about the cutting edge of technology well, and Kilkenny is a perfect hero to uncover whether the machinery is being used for good or evil. If Grace is right, the world of genetics has just gotten a whole lot scarier.

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 MAN WHO WANTED TO KNOW EVERYTHING

By D.A. Mishani

For those who thoroughly enjoyed the haunting stories, "A Possibility of Violence" and "The Missing File," starring Inspector Avraham, you'll love this sequel that provides the same haunting, menacing feeling as the first two delivered. The title says it all. No one should ever risk the chance of knowing everything. After all, that's when people's true feelings are revealed and you can find yourself in absolute peril.

This is one of those that begins on "a dark and stormy night." Now having earned the title of Commander of Investigations, Inspector Avraham arrives at the scene of a crime and soon realizes that the victim is someone he knew. A widow, with seemingly no reason for being killed, has been found murdered inside her own home. Leah Yeger was her name, and the poor woman was already a victim in another crime from long ago.

The man who harmed Yeger in the past is still in prison, which leaves Inspector Avraham to follow the only lead that comes up: an eyewitness states that he saw a policeman leave Yeger's house. Even though no one wishes to believe that one of their "own" could be a murderer, Avraham is determined to solve the case, even if the solution doesn't sit well with his colleagues.

As the story progresses, yet another oddity comes up when Mazal Bengtson, a young woman who has a very strange and difficult past, enters the tale and takes the investigation in an even darker direction.

Very entertaining, this book is told from dual points of view: What the inspector sees, as well as what Mazal Bengtson sees. But, as stated above, when you want to know everything, you may just find out things that you really did not want to know in the first place. There are thrills, chills, peril, and everything else you can think of in front of the inspector, and this is one investigation you don't want to miss.

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



Featured Artist

AN AMBER



Breaks Out

THE KEY TO MY PAST



Known to the world as “Amber,” this unique artist is as mysteriously beguiling as the works she creates. A master of the visual world, Amber was inoculated with a love of art at a very early age. Since then, the passion she has for expressing her emotions through the medium has been a staple in her life.

Although her focus turned to academics at one point, Amber’s creative mind was always at work. Taking the time to share her background, both the glitz and reality of her home city of Dubai, as well as what she’s looking forward to working with in the future, Amber spoke with *Suspense Magazine* about the steps she’s taken to becoming a prolific artiste.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Where or who did your love of art come from?

Amber (A.): I acquired an innate love of art; which is to say, I take after my father. From an early age, coloured pencils, crayons, paints, etc. fascinated me. The compliments I received from my parents, teachers and friends gave me the impetus to never give up and to widen my artistic skills with more and more practice.

Initially, I was only into sketching, drawing and shading. There did come a certain point in my life where my interest for art completely ebbed away. Although, now I realise that I can take myself out of art but can never take the art out of me. And after more than seven years, the passion was revived within me, mainly due to exposure to several kinds of amazing digital artworks on the net. Every time I looked at a certain piece, it made me marvel at the artist’s skills, and my aspiration and desire to also be an artist grew stronger.

For so long I had kept my feelings caged inside, and they were desperate to be let out. Writing was something I had always turned to, to convey my feelings, but now I wanted to incorporate them into a visual image and lend them a different meaning. That is when I was introduced to Photoshop by one of my friends and began my journey of becoming the artist that I am today.

After a lot of struggle in the learning of all its’ technical features, I finally gained complete knowledge through some really easy-to-understand tutorials by Andrei Oprinca. Even though I may not be a “self-taught” artist in that sense, learning through tutorials, I certainly am a “self-bred” one.

So many moments occurred in my life which made me want to give up on art but, fortunately, now I’m so strongly attached to it that my passion and love has remained undeterred.

S. MAG.: What is your favorite part of the development of a new piece?

A.: The colours, lighting and shadings! In a way, these three factors play a major role in achieving a perfect composition in any artwork. Putting colours into my works and trying to attain the “perfect” colour schemes is my most favourite part of creation.

Whilst working, it has a very calming effect on my mind after the stress that comes from building up the basic foundation. It’s almost like a process of bringing the whole scene to life, and only an artist can relate to the feelings of delight at seeing one’s idea turn into a perfect piece, just like the one they’d imagined!

S. MAG.: Do you have an emotional connection to your pieces? Of them all, which is your favorite?

A.: A lot! Nearly all of my artworks are a visual personification of my personal feelings, so the emotional attachment I have with

**“TRAVELLING THE WORLD, LEARNING
NEW CULTURES, DISCOVERING THE
UNKNOWN AND THEN PUTTING ALL
OF MY EXPERIENCES INTO ART IS
WHAT I WOULD LOVE TO DO.”**

DRAGON WARRIOR



each of them is very strong.

Honestly, I view all my artworks equally. My very first pieces remind me of my struggles and humble beginnings as an amateur artist trying to create a niche of her own; while the others tell a story of my artistic journey.

But if I had to answer the question, I would say it's my "Bottled Dream" piece from 2016. This was my first detailed work where I managed to achieve a perfect amalgamation of both the concept of surrealism and emotions. It's that piece which gives a very deep insight into my feelings and dreams, and the one I am most proud of when it comes to execution and composition.

S. MAG.: Could you tell our readers about a "Day of Creating" for you? What inspires you?

A.: Let me first begin by saying that there are some pieces which come together on their own with complete ease; while others take a lot of time and struggle to blend in properly. So, at first, I allow the idea which I wish to incorporate visually to evolve in my head, building it up step by step, and letting my imagination paint the whole scene in my mind. And finally, when that process is done, only then do I proceed to put that onto the paper.

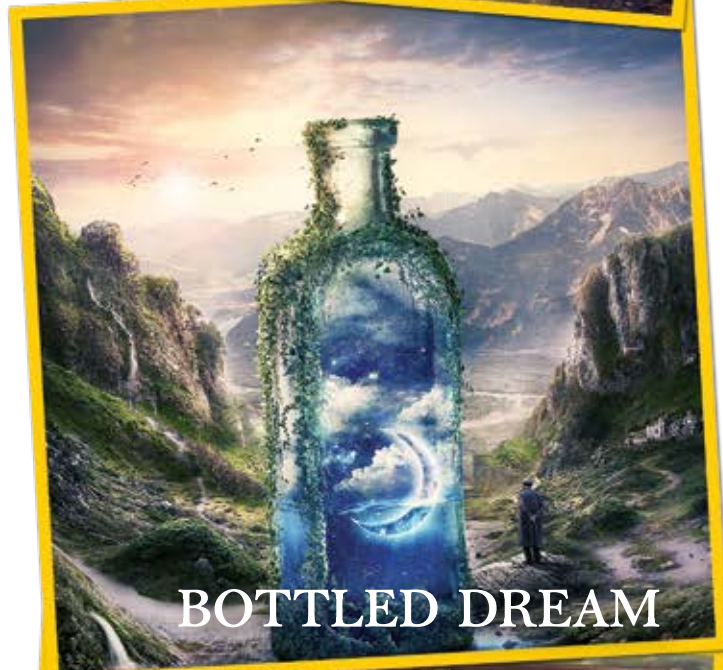
Beginning with my search for the appropriate stock images; sometimes it takes me days to find any. After this initial step, I then start to place them into the scene which, as a whole, is nothing but a trial and experiment process. It's not always easy bringing the whole scene and original idea to life as there are obstacles all along the way.

Working indoors in absolute silence and solitude inspires me the most, allowing me to work with a perfect rhythm and keep complete focus by shutting my mind to all the clutter and distractions of the outside world.

Some ideas come into being with my current mood, others come absolutely 'out of the blue,' borne out of the necessity to put my mind to work. When I am out of ideas or going through an artist's block, it rusts my imagination and makes me restless, although I try not to force myself into creating a work. Also, some ideas arise merely from looking at a certain image which catches my attention whilst browsing, or sometimes the thought of a distant memory, or even by coming across a beautiful piece that inspires me to sit down and create something out of my own imagination.

S. MAG.: What artists, if any, have influenced your work, and how?

A.: In general, my works are all influenced by my own feelings, emotions, dreams, etc. There is no particular artist who has wholly influenced my art. Although at times, when I watch or read tutorials of certain artists, I tend to pick up their techniques and style if working, then apply the same method in mine.



Russian artists and their style of arts in general have really inspired me, everything about their creations is very interesting, different and unique. Oft times I greatly aspire to reach up to their level and become an artist as amazing as them.

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

A.: If I wouldn't have been an artist, then I would be a traveller. Travelling the world, learning new cultures, discovering the unknown and then putting all of my experiences into art is what I would love to do.

In other words, the artist in me will always be there.

S. MAG.: Tell us a little about your home country/hometown that we would not be able to find in a travel brochure.

A.: I'm a Dubai-based artist. This is where I was born and brought up, and has been my only home ever since. It is one of the most talked and written about cities in the world, but one has to actually look deeper to see the unseen.

Far away from the glitz and glamour exists the simple pleasures of a common man, the beautiful warm weather befitting a desert country, with temperatures sometimes reaching to soaring heights and turning the weather intolerable.

Moving deeper into the city, one will discover that the charms of Old Dubai are still intact, with the mock old-style of architecture blending in perfectly with the modern buildings all around. It feels like the coming together of two different worlds, lending Dubai the apt description of being a "melting pot" of diverse cultures.

The other thing which will never get mentioned is the real struggles of a common man running around to earn their livings. Dubai might be classified as a "City of Gold" but, truly, all that glitters here isn't always gold.

All these things might be heard of, but actually seeing and feeling it is different; something which gives a wider and greater insight into the meaning of all things in this life.

S. MAG.: What other jobs have you had over the years? Did one of these lead to becoming an artist?

A.: My love and passion for art has always been in my genes and being an artist was influenced by my own personal choice without any outwardly influence. This is to say that nothing I've ever done in life led me to being an artist. I was born with art in my blood.

S. MAG.: Do you have another creative process that also inspires you? Reading, music, movies?

A.: It all depends on what kind of pieces I'd like to create or am currently working on. For example, emotional works always make me reach out to my inner soul. Or maybe, a surreal landscape in a movie spurs me to create something similar. In that sense, the Lothlorien and Rivendell kingdoms from the Lord of the Rings trilogy really inspired me.

Reading widens my imagination and music gives soul to that idea.

S. MAG.: What are the next projects coming up for you?

A.: I always tend to 'go with the flow' with the main driving force behind my work being my current mood or feelings. Over the years I've come to realise that nothing pre-planned works for me...it all depends on mood. Whether I'm in for something emotional, surreal, or even fantastical. With that being said, I always try to think out of the box and make a great deal of effort to get out of my comfort zone. I'm always looking out for new techniques or methods to improve my skills, which is why I'm looking forward to getting myself a Wacom tablet to dive in and discover the world of digital drawing and painting.

With the incredible imagination and off-the-charts skills Amber possesses, it will be thrilling to see what a true artiste can create with that device. Fans will look forward to watching the next step of Amber's journey. To see more of her work, head to <https://summerdreams-art.deviantart.com>. ■





America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

DEBUT SPOTLIGHT:

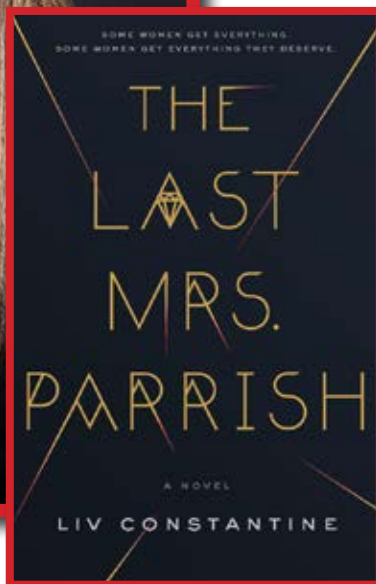
LIV CONSTANTINE'S **10** RULES OF WRITING

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

In this series, Anthony Franze and Barry Lancet interview other suspense authors about “the rules” of writing. In this edition, Anthony talks with Liv Constantine, the pen name for a sister debut team who’ve written one of the most anticipated novels of the fall.

It’s been more than five years since “Gone Girl” reinvigorated the psychological thriller, with its unlikeable protagonists and a twist for the ages. But look out Ms. Flynn, there’s a new sister act in town. Liv Constantine, the pen name for siblings Lynne and Valerie Constantine, have struck gold, or, maybe diamonds, with their debut, “The Last Mrs. Parrish,” a novel *Publishers Weekly* crowned “one of this fall’s best thrillers.”

The book follows the devilish Amber Patterson who’s decided that she wants to marry rich. And not to just any old rich guy. Amber has targeted the fabulously wealthy Jackson Parrish. There’s only one





hitch: There's already a Mrs. Parrish. But that little inconvenience isn't going to stop Amber. Soon enough, she's wormed her way into Jackson's life by befriending his wife, Daphne. Things are going just as planned until—well, you'll have to pick up the book to find out.

Dark and diabolical, yet somehow refreshing, *Parrish* makes you wonder what Constantine family gatherings must be like. The sisters took a break from promoting the novel to give their ten rules of writing. Like any great writing team, they split up the task.

Lynne's Rules:

1. *Nothing is Set in Stone*

A guiding principle for Lynne is to "stay flexible, nothing is set in stone." She knows the first draft of a manuscript will change dramatically, so that frees her up to just write without worrying about it. "The first draft is my way of getting to know the characters. Once they start to take shape they'll tell me where the story is headed." To this end, Lynne doesn't rigidly follow an outline. "I know the beginning and end, and have a rough idea about the middle, but I allow the story to change as I progress. And it will inevitably change after the first draft. The key is to keep writing and get that first draft done."

2. *Experiment with Point of View*

Lynne said that she likes to experiment with point of view because different POVs offer different dimensions for the characters. She encourages writers to write chapters in one point of view, then try out others. For "The Last Mrs. Parrish," they wrote Amber in third person, Daphne in first. "But for the current book we're working on, we've played around. We started with first-person-past for both of our protagonists. Then changed to first-person-present. Then we realized that third-person-past fit for these characters. It's good to experiment because each brings something different to the table."

3. *Be True to the Characters*

"Even if you have the best plot twist in the world, it won't work if you're not being true to the character," Lynne said. The character has to always act in accordance with her or his nature. If you have a person do something out of character simply for a plot device, it will ring hollow. "You should always ask yourself, *Is this something the character would do?* If not, you'll pull readers out of the story."

4. *Read in Your Genre*

What was the secret to writing a breakout book? Lynne said that the secret to writing *any* book is to read. She subscribes to Stephen King's advice: "If you don't have the time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write." For Lynne, it helps to read in your genre. "It's important to know what's in the marketplace, both to understand your audience and learn from the best. You can learn a lot from a book you love, perhaps even more from one you hate."

5. *Revise, Revise, Revise*

"Revisions are where your book will sink or swim," Lynne said. If you think the draft is ready, edit it again. After you do that, do it again. "I've learned that it takes five to ten iterations of a novel. And I'm not just talking about polishing the prose, but enhancing the characters, adding a little detail here and there, cutting an unneeded line." If you're not totally sick of the manuscript, there's probably more work to do.

Valerie's Rules:



6. *Keep the Momentum Going*

Valerie said that the key to a good story is momentum. This means, don't stop writing a scene to look up some minor detail that can be added later, just keep those keys clicking at a rapid pace. "I constantly remind myself to keep my inner perfectionist in check, that I can go back and fix something later. If I don't, it will slow the pace and I'll never get done." A good tip, Valerie said, is to put in notes to yourself in the manuscript to come back and fix something later rather than screeching to a halt. "I often write the word 'expand.' If I stopped to expand, I'd break the momentum."

7. *Keep Your Notebook (Or Phone) Handy*

"I keep a notebook with me because ideas often come at unexpected times," Valerie said that ideas come from everywhere. She might find a perfect character name while reading the newspaper or have a light bulb plot idea while sitting in the doctor's office. "If you don't write them down or put them in a note in your phone when they happen, they're as good as gone."

8. *Get it Right*

Valerie said she's a stickler for accuracy. While you don't want your book to read like a textbook, you want to make sure you do your research and get your facts right. If not, "the reader will lose trust, so we check and re-check our facts. For instance, if your character is looking at blooming tulips and it's September, that tiny inaccuracy may cause the reader to pause, then you've lost them."

9. *Keep it Simple*

Writers should strive for simplicity and not show off, Valerie said. If there's a choice between a twenty dollar or a nickel word for the same idea, go for the nickel. "Don't say *endeavor*, say *try*. And stay true to a core principle in *Strunk & White*: 'Omit needless words.'"

10. *Do it Your Way*

Valerie said that there's no one way to write a novel. Some people write every day, some don't. Some write in the morning, some at night. Yet she often sees authors advise that a person needs to write every day or hit a certain word count a week or write in the same place. Her advice: "Do what works for you and your life." For Valerie and Lynne, what worked was writing wherever they could and to have daily Skype calls. Given the multiple starred reviews and praise for "The Last Mrs. Parrish," it seems to have paid off. ■

* [Anthony Franze](#) is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of thrillers set in the Supreme Court, including "The Outsider" (St. Martin's Press, 2017), which the Associated Press called "a winning novel" and is in development for a television series on NBC.

* [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, 2017) 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.

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Forensic Files

Q&A: MY CHARACTER SUFFERS AMNESIA AFTER AN AUTO ACCIDENT. WHAT INJURIES MIGHT CAUSE HER AMNESIA AND HOW WOULD IT BE EVALUATED AND TREATED?



By D.P. Lyle, MD
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Q: I want my victim and her best friend to be in a car accident. One girl dies instantly, and it looks like the second girl will die too, but she survives. I need her to be in a coma, then wake up and have temporary amnesia; but then, after several days (specifically, 10 days) she completely regains her memory of the events immediately before the accident, so that she can tell the police that the driver (the deceased) was trying to use her brakes, instead of simply running a red light. Is this realistic? Could the exact cause of the coma (blood clot, structural damage, etc.) be diagnosed and, if so, how? What kind of head injury would cause these injuries? What treatments if any could be used to bring her out of the coma and amnesia? What about any long-term neurological effects?

A: The short answer is that all of this will work for your story. Comas and amnesia are funny things and virtually anything can happen.

A comatose person may remain so for days or months or years and then wake up gradually, in fits and spurts, or suddenly. The victim would likely be somewhat confused and disoriented for a period of time—this could be minutes, hours, days, or weeks—and might then return completely to normal or might be left with all sorts of mental deficits, such as confusion and disorientation, and could have personality changes. They could be withdrawn, very talkative and outgoing, paranoid, angry and combative, quiet and passive, or anything else. Or not. They could wake up and be normal in every respect. All is possible.

She would have no memory for the time she was comatose and may or may not remember what came before. This is called “retrograde amnesia.” Her loss of memory could go back any period of time before the accident—a few minutes, a few hours, days, months, years, or forever. And her memory of previous events may be partial, spotty, or complete. It may return slowly over days, weeks, or months, or may return quickly. Again, all is possible.

The bottom line is that coma and amnesia are both poorly understood and come in thousands of flavors. This is good for you since you can craft your story any way you wish and it will work.

When she came to the hospital she would go through a battery of tests designed to find out if she had any serious brain injury. These could include skull X-rays, CT scans, MRIs, EEGs (Electroencephalogram: a measure of brainwave activity), spinal taps, and other things. When the tests all came back normal, the diagnosis would be a cerebral contusion (basically a brain bruise). She would be given steroids (like, Decadron 8 milligrams IV twice a day) to lessen any brain swelling. Other

*than that, time is the only treatment.

Once the victim woke up the MD would perform a complete neurological exam to assess brain function. This is complex and I doubt you really need it for your story anyway. He would then perform a mental status exam, which is designed to assess orientation, memory, and cognitive function. He does this with a series of questions. The victim may be able to answer them all, only some of them, or none of them depending upon her mental status. This is a huge subject but a few things the MD might do would be:

Orientation means, does the person know who they and others are, the date, their location, and what situation they're in? The MD might ask: What's your name? How old are you? Point to the victim's sister, friend, etc. and ask: Who is this? What is today's date? Who is the president? What type of building are we in?

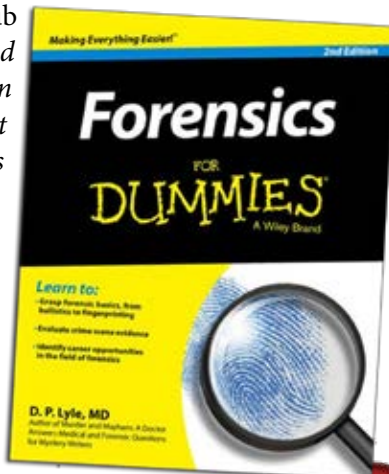
Memory would be tested by asking: What do you last remember? He might then tell your character the name of everyone in the room and ask her to repeat them. Or say a sequence of numbers and get her to repeat them back.

Cognitive function means the ability to understand concepts and connections. He might ask her to subtract 7 from 100 and 7 from that number, and so on. Answer: 100, 93, 86, 79, etc. He might ask her: What does the phrase 'cry over spilt milk' mean? Or 'a penny saved is a penny earned.' Such questions test her ability to reason and use abstract thinking.

It's more complex than this but this should help.

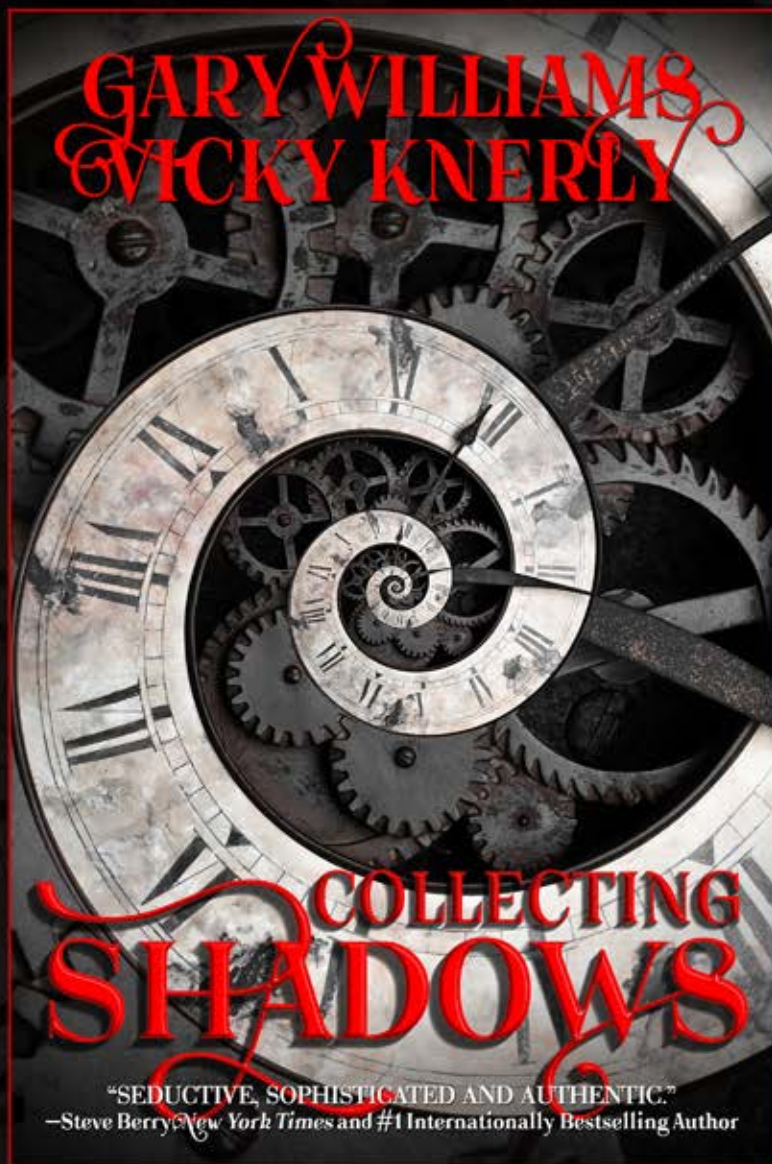
Your victim might not require anything and could go home a week after awakening—depending upon what other injuries she sustained, of course. More likely she would need psychiatric counseling and physical therapy (PT). Again, you have great leeway here. ■

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://crimeandsciencradio.com>.



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**SUSPENSE
PUBLISHING**

The Last Flight of D.B. COOPER

An Alexander Frost Story

By Richard Dean Starr

The house looked like every other one on the street, small and stick-built, probably thrown up sometime in the 1950's during the post-war construction boom. There were no sidewalks, so most of the patchy, ill-kept lawns ran right up to the edge of the street.

Frost turned his rental car into the home's driveway as if he lived there, switched off the engine, and got out.

It was late afternoon, and the Oregon sky was gray as old cotton. The light drizzle that had been falling since the morning had finally stopped. Now it was simply cold and overcast. As he slipped on his jacket, Frost felt generally miserable and more than ready to return to Los Angeles.

He'd spent much of the past nine months in Washington and Oregon but never managed to get used to the weather. It was beautiful, he thought, but in a postcard kind of way. There was just too much cold and too much moisture—not to mention too many grizzly bear warnings and banana slugs the size of cigars—for him to feel comfortable there.

Frost closed up the car and used the key fob to lock it and engage the alarm. Then he proceeded up the short cobblestone walkway to the front door.

There was a doorbell, but he tried the screen door anyway. It was unlocked, so he opened it carefully and knocked twice on the unpainted wood door. Then he waited.

After a moment or two, he heard movement inside the house. There was the sound of locks being disengaged, then the door opened and the face of an elderly man peered out at him.

"Yes?" the man said. But Frost didn't answer.

According to his notes, the old man standing in front of him was just shy of eighty-one years old. He also matched the photos and the drawings in the file locked in the trunk of the rental car.

In 1971, the FBI and the witnesses had been off by seven years. If that was the only thing they'd been wrong about, then they might have actually caught him. Instead, a perfect storm of inept investigative techniques and lax airport security had helped elevate "D.B. Cooper" into a legend.

"I'm sorry," the old man said, a trace of irritation creeping into his voice, "but is there something I can do for you?"

Frost thought: if someone came to his door and simply stood there like a deactivated automaton, he would probably be annoyed, too.

"Absolutely," Frost said with a smile. "I apologize. I'm looking for Dan Cooper."

The old man stared at him impassively. No reaction.

Frost prided himself on catching errant facial expressions—little indications of deceit in a person's eyes, or giveaways in their body language. This time, however, there was nothing. Zip, zero, nada.

"I think you've got the wrong house," the man said. "Besides, I know all my neighbors, and none of them are named Cooper."

For the briefest of moments, the man's lack of acknowledgement caused Frost to doubt his own conclusions. Was it

possible that after nine months, he'd actually found the wrong guy?

He shook his head. Well, no. As a matter of fact, it *wasn't* possible. Frost was paid extraordinarily well *not* to make those kinds of mistakes when tracking down a target.

There was no doubt in his mind that the elderly man standing in front of him was the famous sky bandit nicknamed D.B. Cooper. The same man who had done the unthinkable, and parachuted from the back of a Boeing 727 carrying a bag of ransom money, never to be seen or heard from again.

Until today, at least.

"My mistake," Frost said. "Still, I do need to confirm that. May I come in?"

The old man stared at Frost as if he'd suddenly grown a toadstool from his forehead. "Hell no, you can't come in," he said. "This conversation is over. You'd best be moving on, before I call the police."

This was steel nerves of a type Frost rarely encountered. He sighed, then pulled back the left side of his jacket, revealing the Walther PPKS .308 in the leather holster under his arm.

"Why don't we talk this over a bit more," he said. "Inside, if that's okay. And let's not fool ourselves—you won't be calling the police."

The old man eyed the weapon and frowned. "It looks as if I don't have much of a choice in the matter."

"No," said Frost, truthfully. "You don't."

He stepped into the house and the old man backed into the living room ahead of him. Frost pushed the front door closed with the heel of his shoe and smiled amiably. Now that they were no longer at risk of being seen by a neighbor, he could relax a bit.

He looked around. The living room was spartan, the furniture worn and threadbare. It appeared as if Cooper had furnished his home straight off the floor of the local Goodwill.

"So now what?" the old man said. "Is this a robbery or something?"

A small couch, two matching easy chairs, and a small coffee table filled the tiny living room. Frost nodded toward the chairs. "I'm not here to rob you. As I said, why don't we sit down and talk a bit more?"

"Suit yourself. But I'm telling you, you've got the wrong man."

Once the old man had settled himself into a chair, Frost sat down in the opposite one and grimaced. One of the springs felt blown. More importantly, it was pressing uncomfortably into his right buttock.

The couch looked considerably more comfortable. But Frost wasn't about to sit with his back to the window or be forced to turn his head to keep an eye on his quarry.

"So," Frost said, "your name is Donald Casey. Is that correct?"

The old man looked surprised. "I thought you said you were looking for somebody named Cooper?"

Frost sighed. "Please just answer the question. This will go a lot faster if you do."

"Fine." The old man sighed. "Yes, my name is Don Casey. What of it?"

"Very good. Now, you're also Dan Cooper. Or D.B. Cooper, as the media nicknamed you in 1971."

For a moment, the old man just stared at him. Then he burst out laughing. "You think I'm D.B. Cooper, the hijacker? You're off your rocker."

Frost shrugged. "Unlikely. I know for a fact that you're the same man who called himself Dan Cooper and hijacked a Northwest Orient Airlines flight the evening of November, 24, 1971."

"This whole conversation is nuts," the old man said. "You're nuts. Just completely out of your mind."

"Please don't interrupt," Frost said. "The alternative is that I stop your talking by shooting you between the eyes. Of course, if I did that I'd be taking a chance that I won't find what I came for—not even if I have to gut your house down to the studs. Do we understand each other?"

"Go on then," the old man said, smoothing the front of his shirt. "Say what you've got to say."

"I've been studying you, and the history of the hijacking, for more than nine months," Frost said. "Believe me when I tell you, it's no coincidence I've shown up on your doorstep."

What Frost didn't say was that Cooper still resembled the images on the famous WANTED posters that once hung in every Post Office and law enforcement station across the country. His hair was even parted the same way, although there was considerably less of it now, and what remained had turned as gray as the Oregon sky.

Nothing like consistency, Frost thought. Then again, how often did a man change the way he combed his hair? He suspected, not often.

The old man leaned back in his chair and stared at Frost. "Let's say you're right," he said. "Just suppose you are. You're no cop, or you'd have shown me a badge. You also wouldn't have threatened to shoot me."

Frost didn't respond.

Suddenly, the old man's eyes widened in astonishment. "I'll be damned! You're here to kill me!"

Frost shrugged. "It is an option. But it's not inevitable."

"That hijacking was nothing to be proud of, you know," the old man said, sinking back in the chair. "Whoever did it was just an ordinary criminal, nothing more."

"There was nothing ordinary about you," Frost said, ignoring the old man's implicit denial. "You're the only

person, up to that time, who successfully parachuted from the back of a cruising jetliner. I'd say that's fairly extraordinary."

Cooper stared at Frost, his gaze direct and unflinching. "Maybe. On the other hand, if I'm who you think I am, then being extraordinary is probably going to get me killed today."

"You do have a point," Frost conceded. "But remember what I said: nothing is inevitable here."

"So, what's next?" the old man said. "Do I get a last wish?"

Frost shrugged. "I don't know. Depends on what you want. This isn't a prison, and I'm not toting around an electric chair."

"No, but the way I see it, you do have that cannon strapped under your arm, which for damned sure makes you an executioner."

"If it means anything to you," Frost said, "I can assure you of one thing: there are very few certainties in life. That old saying about death and taxes represents just two of the relatively rare exceptions."

"Exactly my point," Cooper said. "You wouldn't be here if making me dead wasn't your job. So don't try to sell me life insurance, because you're here to make sure I cash in. And there won't be any payout."

He paused and smoothed the front of his shirt again. This was the second time Cooper had displayed that specific behavioral tic.

As part of his research process, Frost had read the witness reports from the hijacking multiple times. The stewardess who sat across from Cooper during the flight reported that the hijacker had continually smoothed his shirt, even though it was perfectly pressed and tucked into his pants.

She had attributed it to nervousness. Maybe there was some of that, but Frost suspected it was just one of those things people do, like picking their nose or pulling on their beard or working their wedding ring around on their finger.

If he harbored any doubts about the identity of the old man, seeing him repeatedly smooth his shirt had eliminated them. Frost was not a big believer in coincidence.

"For forty-five years, I've waited for someone to kick down my door," said the old man absently, looking down at his lap. "Or pull me over and slap handcuffs on me. Hundreds of times...thousands of times, probably. There have been so many instances where I've thought, 'This is it.' But it just never happened."

He sighed. "In a way, you being here now is kind of a relief. Although it's fair to say you're not really what I was expecting."

"I hear variations on that more often than you'd think," Frost said.

The two men sat there in silence for a few moments. Then Cooper said, "Well, you haven't shot me yet. I guess there's some hope, at least. I'm also guessing you want something,

or I probably would be dead already."

"Something," Frost confirmed. "That's true. But perhaps not what you expect."

"Either way," Cooper said, "it doesn't matter. I doubt I've got anything of value to you." He nodded toward the kitchen. "If it's all right with you, I'd like some coffee. If a man's going to go to his grave, he might as well do it with good, strong coffee in his stomach. You're welcome to a cup, too, if you want it."

"Thank you," Frost said. "I would. Black, please."

Cooper stood up more smoothly than Frost would have expected. Not too fast, not too slow. For a man just about to make his eighty-first rotation around the sun, Frost thought, Cooper's physical condition was remarkably good.

Frost leaned forward as Cooper headed for the kitchen. The old man paused and glanced back over his shoulder, his mouth twisted into a wry grin. "What are you worried about?" he said. "That I'm going to run? I don't do that much anymore."

"I believe you," Frost said, standing. "But I think I'll stick with you anyway. You never know what might happen, or what ideas you might start brewing along with that coffee. I prefer to head off any problems before they start."

"Very wise of you," Cooper said. "I used to think that way myself. Apparently, though, I'm not as far-seeing as I thought I was."

"Because here I am," Frost said as they entered the kitchen together.

"Because here you are," Cooper acknowledged.

He moved over to the nearest cabinet, removed a coffee tin, and started loading up the rather ordinary Mr. Coffee machine sitting on the counter.

Frost examined the space carefully. The whole kitchen was out-of-date. The cabinets, once painted a dark chestnut brown, were now badly faded. The appliances, in shades of avocado and lemon-yellow baked enamel, were similar to those Frost remembered from his childhood in Pennsylvania.

The house, and the kitchen, were not the kind that should belong to a man who had gotten away with stealing \$200,000 in cash—an amount equivalent to nearly \$1.3 million in today's dollars.

Curiouser and curiouser, Frost thought.

"I've got to ask," Cooper said, "how did you do it?" He opened another cabinet and set two ceramic cups on the counter next to the Mr. Coffee. "How did you find me?"

Frost noted, with approval, that Cooper stored his dishware upside down on wax paper that had been cut neatly to fit inside the cabinets. Tidiness was important, and apparently Cooper practiced it. At least somewhat.

"Your sense of humor," Frost said. "But that wasn't the first thing that tipped me off. I knew you'd worked for Boeing,

but I suspected you were not an employee. If you had been, they would have captured you a long time ago."

Cooper dug through another cabinet and produced a pink-and-white box of processed sugar. Then he did the same thing in the refrigerator, emerging a moment later with a half-gallon of milk. It was 1%, Frost noted. The label said "Fat-Free," which he thought was unlikely. Good for the digestive system, though. Perhaps Cooper's choice in dairy was a contributing factor to his spryness.

Maybe I should start drinking Fat-Free milk, Frost thought. What was that old saying...a strong body makes a strong mind? Or was it the other way around? He couldn't remember.

"You're right," Cooper said. "I did work for Boeing. But I wasn't an employee, and I wasn't a contractor. At least, not a professional one, like an engineer."

"You were a janitor," Frost said. "A temp. You worked for a company called ABI that's been in business since 1909. Unfortunately for you, they keep excellent records."

"ABI." Cooper chuckled. "I haven't thought about them in years. I suppose you know the hijacker left a tie behind on the plane?"

Frost nodded. "I do. They just recently discovered microscopic particles on it that connect it to the Boeing plant."

"Back then," Cooper said, "the FBI was looking for an engineer or some kind of college-educated suit. But it was nothing like that. During my interview, the maintenance supervisor walked me through the plant to show me the areas I'd be working in. That must have been when the particles got on my tie. Probably got on everything else I was wearing, too."

"Seems likely," Frost said.

"Things were different then," Cooper explained. "People forget, but back in those days men still dressed up as a matter of course. I didn't have much money, but I knew if you wanted a job, even as a janitor, you'd better get yourself a nice suit and tie."

"Maybe not so different from today," Frost said.

"Yeah," Cooper said. "Maybe. It's funny, but I picked up that tie from JC Penney. The chain used to be a lot higher-end, and a tie like that was fairly pricey. Turned out it was the only one I ever owned."

Frost said nothing and waited for the old man to continue.

"Anyway," Cooper said, "that's the story behind the tie. But I'm not getting you about my sense of humor. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Eighteen years ago," Frost said, "you signed up for a subscription to *Skydiver* magazine as Cooper Daniels."

Cooper took a deep breath, then shook his head. "So, so stupid. I thought there was a one-in-a-million chance

anybody would ever make the connection. Probably not even *that* much."

"It took me every day of those nine months to put it all together, so don't feel too badly," Frost said. "I cross-indexed all of the archived Boeing records against every contractor with the initials D and B. Then I started digging around. Trying to make any connections, as you put it. *Skydiver's* subscriber list was just one area I looked into."

"That was a pretty long shot," Cooper said. "If you weren't standing in my kitchen, ready to kill me, I'd probably be impressed."

"The miracle of computers," Frost said.

"Exactly why I hate the goddamn things," Cooper said. "I don't even own one. I need to use a computer, I go to the library."

"I can't say I blame you," Frost said. "I used to love them. But these days, I tend to think they create more problems than they solve."

"They don't bring people together," Cooper said, "that's for sure. When you really get down to it, they seem to push people away from each other."

"Mostly," Frost said, "I agree with you."

"There are always exceptions," Cooper said. "Like you and me, for instance. But that probably isn't the best example."

The Mr. Coffee pinged loudly, indicating the brew cycle was done. Cooper turned the machine off and carefully poured two cups, leaving Frost's black, and adding milk and sugar to his own.

"So, what is it you want from me?" Cooper said, handing Frost his coffee.

Frost took a sip. The coffee was hot and of surprisingly good quality. Cooper was definitely a man of many surprises. He wondered if Cooper's answers to his questions would be as surprising as his tidiness, his taste in coffee, or his choice in dairy products.

"Well," Frost said, "the first one should be fairly obvious."

Cooper nodded. "The money. Everybody has always wondered about that, which I suppose is no surprise." He took a sip of his own coffee, then grimaced. "Too much sugar. When I pour the stuff these days I'm not as steady as I used to be."

"And you have someone prepared to kill you looking over your shoulder," Frost said. "That probably doesn't help."

After upending his coffee over the kitchen sink, Cooper prepared a second cup. This time he was careful to measure both the sugar and the milk before putting both away when he was done.

"So," he said, "you want to know about the money. Well, that's an easy one: there isn't any."

Frost lifted his eyebrow. "None at all?"

"More or less," Cooper replied. "You see, when I went out

the back of the plane, I wasn't in the air ten seconds before I lost my grip on the money. I tried to hang on, but there was so much going on: the wind, paying attention to what I was doing. Plus, it was much, much colder than I'd expected. The truth is, I just screwed up. The bag tore open and the money spread out. In less than a second or two it was gone."

"But not all of it," Frost said. "You said 'more or less' a moment ago."

Cooper laughed. "I reached out and tried to grab the bills. It was instinctual. That's what anyone would do, I think, even if they were hurtling through the air at more than a hundred miles an hour. Reaching for flying money is just human nature, even if it might get you killed. Anyway, I managed to snag one bill." He shook his head. "Just one! Imagine that."

"Where is it?" Frost said.

Cooper turned his gaze back to Frost. "You can't be serious. You came for the *money*? That's why you're here? It's just one twenty-dollar bill, for Christ's sake!"

"I was sent here for information," Frost said. "But I was also sent for the money. If there is any left."

"Let's say I tell you where it is," Cooper said. "Then what? You shoot me?"

"If you *don't* tell me where it is," Frost said, "then I'll definitely shoot you."

Cooper shook his head. "I don't see any incentive here," he said. "It seems to me there's a pretty good chance you'll kill me one way or the other."

"The incentive," Frost said, "is simple. My employer doesn't want you dead. What he *really* wants are three things: The first is that I find you, which I've done. The second is that I discover what happened the night of the hijacking. I think I've got a pretty good idea about all of that, and you've filled in the rest of the salient details. The third and final thing is the money. Assuming you weren't dead, he wanted to know if you had any left."

"I don't understand," Cooper said. "Don't you get it? Even if I *hadn't* lost the money, I couldn't have spent any of it. Not ever. They put out an alert for all the serial numbers on those bills. If I tried to spend a single dime, they'd have caught me."

"You heard about the boy who found some of the money buried along the Columbia River," Frost said.

"I sure did." Cooper closed his eyes and sipped some more of his coffee. "It was funny, you know? In 1980, when that kid dug those twenty-dollar packets out of the sand, I felt like he'd found something that *belonged* to me. Something I'd *earned*."

"That's understandable, given what you went through to get the money in the first place."

"Not really," Cooper said, opening his eyes. "It was never mine, you see? But the feelings were there anyway. Of course, by the time he found it, I wanted nothing to do with anything

related to the hijacking."

"Human foibles," Frost said. "What can you do?"

Cooper didn't respond. For a while the two of them stood there in silence, drinking their coffee. Finally, Cooper spoke.

"Can you tell me who hired you? Was it the airline? Were they afraid if I popped up I'd make them look foolish or something?"

"Or worse, make them pay back the insurance settlement," Frost said. "There's nothing big business hates more than giving *back* money."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Cooper said. "But you're right, that wouldn't surprise me either."

"That's not it, though," Frost said. "Northwest Orient is gone. So is Northwest. All gobbled up by Delta Airlines. Unraveling that mess would probably cost more than the original insurance payout."

"Okay, so it wasn't the airline, and it wasn't the insurance company. Who sent you after me then?"

"First," Frost said, "the money. Where is it?"

"Why do you think I have it here in the house?" Cooper drained the rest of his coffee and set the empty cup down on the counter.

"Because from the look of things," Frost said, "you don't seem to have two dimes to rub together. That most likely means you won't have a storage unit or even a safe-deposit box. You're also not the type to tell anyone what you did and risk your freedom. Especially when all you have to show for it is a single twenty-dollar bill."

"That's something, at least," Cooper said.

"But not worth dying for."

"Also true," Cooper said. "But I've still got to know: who sent you after me?"

Frost considered his response and then decided he could reveal a bit without giving away the farm.

"Someone you've never heard of," he said. "My client was an integral part of security for Northwest back in 1971. Obviously, they never solved the hijacking. As far as he was concerned, you got away with the first case of air piracy in U.S. history."

"So, what you're saying is, he took it personally," Cooper said. "Jesus."

"To say the least. From what I gather, he felt as if he'd failed his employer. It haunted him for years. Eventually, he turned his attention to building a large firm specializing in aviation security. In the process, he became quite wealthy."

"So why in the hell does he want *any* of the money from the hijacking? Even if he could spend it, which he can't, it's not like he needs it."

"I can't say for sure," Frost said. "But if I had to guess, I'd say he wants it as a reminder that he finally caught you. Even if he can't tell anybody. He wants to feel like you were

punished, at least somewhat. I suppose you could say it's symbolic, for want of a better word."

"Insane," Cooper said. "That's a much more appropriate one."

"Well, yes," Frost replied. "But then again, many people are."

"So, my choices are to give up the money, and *maybe* you'll kill me," Cooper said. "Or don't give it up, and you *definitely* will."

"Essentially, yes," Frost said.

"Well, just in case you're going to kill me," Cooper said, "then my last wish is to have another cup of coffee. My nerves could use it, one way or the other."

Frost sighed. "I could refuse, but then we'd be back to the first scenario, where I blow your head off and then tear your house apart. I'd rather not do either one. The faster this is over, the sooner I can get on a plane headed for home." He waved his hand toward the Mr. Coffee. "Knock yourself out. But make it quick."

Cooper checked the coffee maker, saw that it still contained enough for another cup, then opened the cabinet to retrieve the sugar.

"What do you think he'll do with the bill," he said, his back turned to Frost. "Frame it or something?"

"Not a clue," Frost said. "Maybe he'll just burn it."

With his hand in the cupboard, Cooper said, "Over my dead body."

He turned quickly, almost faster than Frost expected. Almost, but not quite.

There was a semi-automatic in Cooper's hand, and as he brought it to bear, Frost shot him once in the chest.

The old man stumbled back against the counter, then collapsed backward into the narrow space between the refrigerator and the stove.

Frost stepped between the old man's splayed legs and crouched down in front of him.

Cooper wasn't dead yet. Although his eyes were beginning to fade, they still blazed with defiance.

"Why?" Frost said, curious. "Why did you do it? I was going to take the bill and leave."

"Because," Cooper whispered, his voice growing hoarser with every word, "it was...it was all I had left. I couldn't...I couldn't let it go."

Frost considered that for a moment, then nodded. "Well, fuck," he said. "I suppose you couldn't, could you?"

He stood up and holstered the Walther. When he looked down again, Donald Casey—the old man also known to the world as D.B. Cooper—was gone.

As it turned out, Frost didn't need to tear out the walls of the house to find the money. There was a floor safe in the master bedroom closet, and like the rest of the house, it was

well past its prime. It didn't take long for Frost to open it and locate the bill.

Cooper kept it in a plain #10 envelope, with nothing written on the outside to indicate why the note was special or why it needed to be kept in a safe.

Frost departed Cooper's house not long after that, and took the coffee mug he'd used with him. He left the old man's body lying there on the warped and yellowed linoleum. Between the gun and the cracked safe, it would look to the police like a robbery gone bad. That suited Frost just fine.

He drove precisely one mile over the speed limit all the way to the airport, stopping just twice. Once to FedEx the Walther to his office; a second time to dispose of the coffee mug and fill up the rental car with gas. Hertz charged a hefty fee if you returned the car with an empty tank. Every dollar counted when you couldn't write the costs of an assassination off your taxes.

Three hours later, having dispatched D.B. Cooper on his final flight to the great beyond, Frost was seated by a window in Delta Business Class.

The irony of that did not escape him.

By the time the jet had risen into the deepening Oregon sky, Frost was already fast asleep, his head propped on a horseshoe-shaped inflatable pillow that he'd picked up in the airport gift shop.

In his dream, he was falling into a night without stars. Around him, endless streams of twenty-dollar bills swirled away into the darkness. He tried frantically, repeatedly, to catch just one of them.

But he never did. ■

Author's Note: *This is obviously a work of fiction, and employs a great deal of literary license. D.B. Cooper was never captured and prosecuted for his crimes, and Donald Casey is not a real person. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Unless, of course, you happen to be D.B. Cooper. In which case, good news! You didn't meet your end over the Oregon wilderness; you died—at least on paper—at the hands of Alexander Frost.*

Richard Dean Starr has written or edited more than 200 articles, columns, stories, books, comics, screenplays, and graphic novels. His original fiction and non-fiction has appeared in Cemetery Dance, Science Fiction Chronicle, and Starlog, among others, and his licensed media tie-in stories have appeared in anthologies as varied as "Hellboy: Odder Jobs," "Kolchak: The Night Stalker Casebook," and "The Lone Ranger Chronicles." Starr has co-authored the first "Kolchak: The Night Stalker / Dan Shamble: Zombi P.I." team up comic with NYT bestselling author Kevin J. Anderson. "The Further Crossovers of Sherlock Holmes," an anthology edited by Starr is due out later this year.

Laura Childs & Terrie Farley Moran COZY UP WITH SOME “CREPE’S”

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

Press Photo Credit for Laura Childs: Jean Pieri

Press Photo Credit for Terrie Farley Moran: Robert Moran



When a fantastic writer pens a book, readers cannot wait to get their hands on it; that is a fact. But when two such authors get together to pen an outstanding book or series, the rush to “jump on board” that duo’s train is monumental. Laura Childs and Terrie Farley Moran put their two well-known and well-loved imaginations together when it comes to the *Scrapbooking Mystery* series, and now the newest title, “Crepe Factor,” is out there for fans to enjoy.

These women are at the top of their game in the mystery realm, and they were both kind enough to take some time out from extremely busy schedules to sit with *Suspense Magazine* and talk about how they handle the wealth of ideas they experience, share advice they believe all new writers should remember, and even tell us a bit about their careers and upcoming projects for 2018.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Laura, the number of series you pen is extraordinary. Where do these ideas first surface from, and how do you “dole” out or decide what plotline goes best with which character and location? Have you ever come across a time when you struggled to decide which series the plot best fits into?

Laura Childs (L.C.): *My previous career was in advertising, first as a writer/TV producer, then as partner/principal of an ad agency. So developing concepts, juggling several creative ideas, is second nature to me. The imagination is a creative*

muscle that you learn to flex and stretch, and coming up with a myriad of ideas is simply a byproduct of that. Because I write a sort of hybrid cozy-thriller—what I like to call a “thrillzy”—my characters and their personalities pretty much dictate the plotlines. For example, Carmela and Ava in the Scrapbooking Mysteries are young, ditzzy, and live in New Orleans. So the plots tend to be edgy and crazy.

S. MAG.: Can you give our readers some information on “Crepe Factor”?

Terrie Farley Moran (T.F.M.): *Holidays in the French Quarter of New Orleans mean cathedral concerts and fancy reveillon dinners. But when Carmela and her best friend, Ava, stroll a Winter Market, they discover the dead body of Martin Lash, a*

crusty reviewer for the Glutton for Punishment blog. Someone severed his carotid artery with a serving fork, and the police are looking hard at Quigg Brevard, local restaurateur and Carmela's old flame. When Quigg begs Carmela to help clear him, how can she possibly say no? On the other hand, she is dating the investigating detective!

L.C.: Carmela and Ava get pulled into the mystery, of course, and enjoy a wild romp as they eat the finest foods, flirt, flaunt fashion, and run for their lives through the bayous. There's plenty of outrageous humor, as well as craft tips and recipes.

S. MAG.: Laura, from the thriller/suspense path that comes with the *Afton Tangler* thrillers to the cozies/mysteries that make up the *Tea Shop Mysteries*, as well as *The Scrapbooking Mysteries* and more, can you give us a little insight when it comes to what makes each genre important to you? Is there a particular genre/series that you love to come back to?

L.C.: You know, I just love writing all four of my series. The *Tea Shop Mysteries* are sweet and cozy and a trifle Southern literate. My *Scrapbooking Mysteries* are funky and edgy. The *Cackleberry Club Mysteries* have a slight Midwestern noir to them. And the *Afton Tangler Thrillers* are fast-paced thrill rides. So that's kind of the full Monty when it comes to genre, and every time I switch from one to the other I feel a huge blip of excitement.

S. MAG.: If you both had to choose a particular character that is the closest to your personality, who would that be, and why? Does each character possess a particular aspect of your own personality?

L.C.: I adore Theodosia in the *Tea Shop Mysteries* and Suzanne in the *Cackleberry Club Mysteries* because they're both female entrepreneurs. They have heart, chutzpah, and a real sense of fair play. They want to see the bad guy (or girl) caught and brought to justice.

T.F.M.: I would love to tell you that I am brassy and flirtatious like Ava Gruix, but in truth I am more like Carmela Bertrand, who is curious by nature, extremely self-reliant, and always determined to see a problem through to its end—traits which can get us both into a bit of trouble.

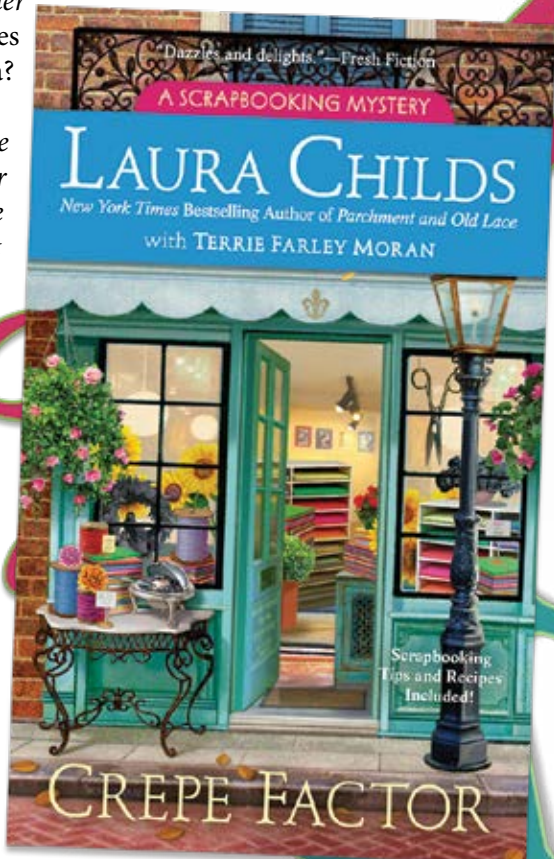
S. MAG.: Laura, was there a particular reason to publish the *Afton Tangler Thrillers* under your own name instead of a pseudonym? Are there downsides to choosing the “dual” name route when it comes to the world of social media?

L.C.: The *Afton Tangler* thrillers (“*Little Girl Gone*” and “*Shadow Girl*”) are serious hard-edged thrillers, probably not the kind of reading a true cozy lover would want on her bedside reading table. So using my own name seemed like the practical (and kindest!) way to go. And no problem with social media, just more juggling.

S. MAG.: Do you ever worry about running out of things your characters could say and do? Or is the opposite true? Does it ever get to the point where your brain is so unbelievably full of ideas that it becomes difficult to think?

L.C.: I never worry about running out of ideas, stories, plot lines, and major conflicts. Most of the shoot ‘em up/spooky murder/big disasters that kick off my very first chapters are actual events ripped from today's headlines. And yes, I work on two books at once and have tons of ideas coursing through my brain, but it's not that difficult to balance them. I work from a verrrry tight outline.

T.F.M.: Unlike Laura, I write by the seat of my pants, so my ideas are all over the map and I corral them as best I can. (When we work together it is not unusual for Laura to have to rein me in when I wander off.) I find that I



always have more story ideas (especially for short stories) than I have time to write them.

S. MAG.: Laura, where did the slight obsession with tea come from? Do a great many readers ask for your recommendations when it comes to what's best to pair with some of those fantastic recipes you include in your books?

L.C.: *My love of tea comes from traveling and sipping my way through Japan, China, and Indonesia with my husband, who's a professor of Chinese and Japanese art history. I don't get as many questions about tea and recipes as I do about travel to Charleston. Oh my goodness, I get tons of inquiries on walking tours, restaurants, and inns. I do believe I could start a travel agency as a sideline!*

S. MAG: Laura, do you have any plans to bring one of these series to television? It is a truth to one and all out there that the world needs another *Murder, She Wrote* quite badly. Or even making them into TV movies at some point?

L.C.: *At one point or another, every one of the Laura Childs' series had been optioned by one or another production company in LA. As such, they've been pitched to several networks, but none have sold through yet. Though I've written and produced TV spots and a reality TV series, I don't have any plans to produce these books myself. That would be another career in and of itself!*

S. MAG: As we look forward to 2018, I'm sure there are projects already being done or worked on. Can you speak about these books so fans will know exactly what to look forward to?

L.C.: *2018 will see the publication of "Plum Tea Crazy" (Tea Shop) in March, "Glitter Bomb" (Scrapbook) in October, and "Eggs on Ice" (Cackleberry Club) in December. Fairly soon, Terrie and I will begin work on yet another Scrapbooking Mystery and I know Terrie has some other projects going on. Terrie, will you tell us about those?*

T.F.M.: *"Read to Death" is the final book in the award-winning Read 'Em and Eat cozy mystery series. "Inquiry and Assistance," published by Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, received the Derringer Award for Best Novelette at Bouchercon Toronto. I am presently writing a proposal for the Arts and Drafts cozy series set in upstate New York. I should have more news about that in 2018.*

S. MAG.: If you could each share a piece of advice with the author out there who is striving to follow the same path as you have, what would be the one thing you hope they remember along the way?

L.C.: *I really hate to say this, but the road to publication is long and rocky so you really need to believe in yourself. Don't let anyone (and I mean anyone!) step on your skis and tell you it can't be done. Because you can do it. Wait, let me repeat that. With a little fortitude and a lot of hard work, you CAN do it!*

T.F.M. *Laura nailed it. Never allow yourself to be dissuaded. Writing is a tough business with lots of bumps and barricades, but persistence and resilience will get you through. My role model is "The Little Engine That Could." If you haven't read it since you were age six or so, a re-read will do wonders to strengthen your resolve.*

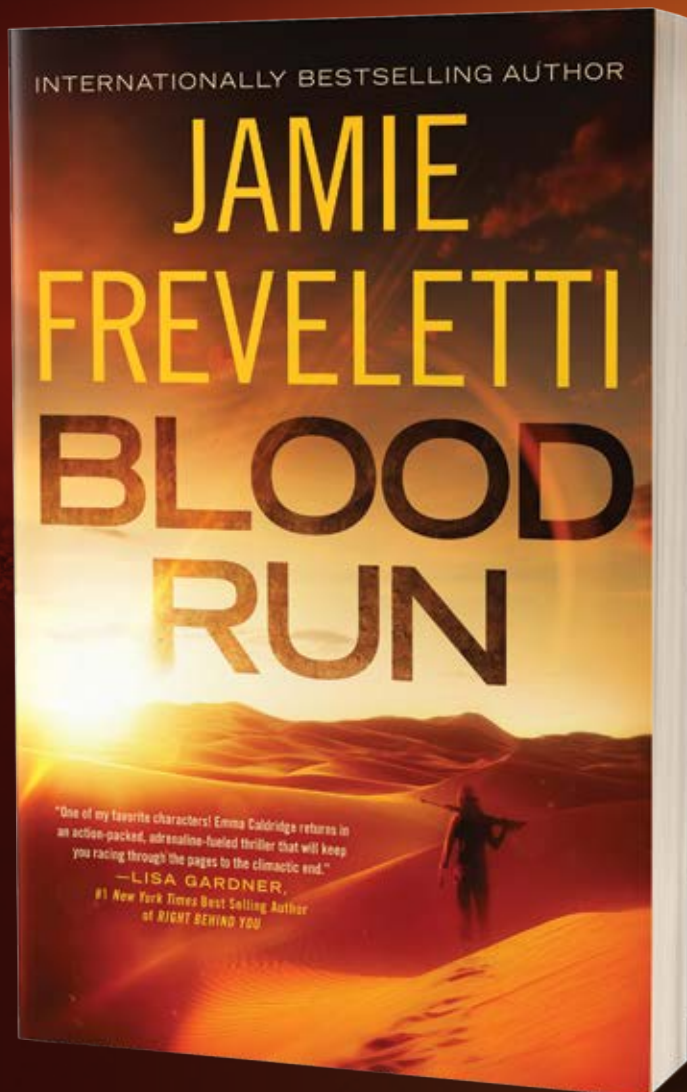
And the amount of talent and hard work these two women put into their literary creations would, most definitely, make that famous "Little Engine" proud. ■

Laura Childs is the USA Today and New York Times bestselling author of the Scrapbooking Mysteries, Tea Shop Mysteries, and Cackleberry Club Mysteries. In her previous life she was CEO of her own marketing firm, authored several screenplays, and produced a reality TV show. She is married to Dr. Bob, a professor of Chinese art history, enjoys travel, and has two Chinese Shar-Pei dogs. Find out more at www.laurachilds.com.

Terrie Farley Moran is the nationally best-selling author of the Read 'Em and Eat cozy mystery series. Her award winning short mystery fiction has been published in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, and numerous anthologies. She is thrilled to be co-author of Laura Childs' Scrapbooking Mystery series. Terrie recently fulfilled a lifelong dream by visiting the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with her children and seven grandchildren. Find out more at www.terriefarleymoran.com.

BLOOD RUN

BY INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JAMIE FREVELETTI



SMALLPOX...

a deadly virus the world
never expected to see again.

Now it's back.

But so is Emma Caldrige,
and she's determined
to stop a ruthless government
from unleashing it as
a biochemical weapon.

**COMING
NOVEMBER 2017**

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JONATHAN MABERRY & BRYAN THOMAS SCHMIDT

TALK ABOUT BEING “UNSTOPPABLE”

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

Press Photo Credit for Jonathan Maberry: Sara Jo West

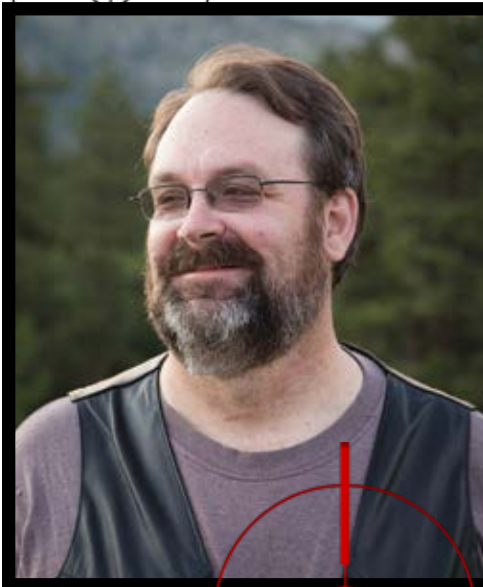
Press Photo Credit for Bryan Thomas Schmidt: Emily Meghan



Jonathan Maberry and Bryan Thomas Schmidt each have a plethora of projects, characters, and creations that they hold dear. They work non-stop, penning everything from horror to thrillers to screenplays to comics—hitting every genre, including the YA realm. Recently, they came together to work as co-editors, creating an incredible anthology focused upon Maberry’s popular character, Baltimore detective, Joe Ledger.

Bringing together some truly “cool” authors who wrote memorable tales to add into the *Ledger* universe, Jonathan and Bryan recently released that collection “Joe Ledger: UNSTOPPABLE,” spoiling fans with the great stories that lie within. Taking time out, they talked with *Suspense Magazine* about the anthology, discussed the creativity that the youth of today have been blessed with, and gave readers a rundown of what’s on the way for 2018.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Let’s talk about Joe Ledger. How and where did this alternate world and this amazing character first come about? Can you both give our readers your personal views on Joe and what you feel is the trait(s) he owns that makes people want to follow him through all his tales?



Jonathan Maberry (J.M.): *Joe Ledger was born in a diner. I was sitting at the great Red Lion Diner in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, eating eggs, drinking coffee and making notes for a nonfiction book I was writing, “ZOMBIE CSU: The Forensics of the Living Dead.” As often happens with novelists, characters suddenly start having a conversation in my head. At first I didn’t know who they were or what they were talking about, but it sounded interesting so I wrote it down. That conversation was a kind of job interview between a smartass Baltimore police detective and a mysterious guy who ran a science-based special ops team. I liked the characters and their potential so much, that when I got home I typed up that conversation, and then let the story flow from there to see where it was going to take me.*

Joe Ledger is a functional basket case. As a teen he experienced some truly horrific personal trauma, and as a result his mind fractured into three distinct personalities: the Modern Man (his idealistic and optimistic self); the Cop (his central personality); and, the Warrior (the personification of his rage). Joe has managed to make peace with all three, and they more or less work like an internal team.

Joe is hired because he is a unique individual. He is an expert in jujutsu, a former Army Ranger, and he has the rare quality of zero hesitation in a crisis situation. He is hired to lead a SpecOps team against terrorists who have a prion-based bioweapon that approximates a zombie plague. That story, "Patient Zero," was the novel that broke me away from straight horror and into the thriller genre. I'm currently writing the tenth in the series, with no plans on hitting the brakes anytime soon.

Bryan Thomas Schmidt (B.T.S.): Well, mostly that is a Jonathan question, but as far as traits, Joe is tough, but flawed; he is compassionate, but also passionate and willing to fight for it. He is rugged, yet also has a soft side, especially for people he cares about that one connects with. He is a smartass and thus amusing, and he has a great dog, so who wouldn't like that...besides cats?

S. MAG.: Tell us about "UNSTOPPABLE." Can you both offer your views on the project? What you took away from it and the work it took to bring all of these authors together to create this anthology?

J.M.: Bryan is the culprit responsible for cooking up the idea for a Joe Ledger anthology. He signed me on as co-conspirator and we had a hell of a lot of fun with this. It's especially delightful for me, as creator and—until now—solo chronicler of Ledger's adventures, to have other writers come in and put their own stamp on the characters. One of the things I liked best is that no one tried to write a 'Jonathan Maberry' story, but rather played their own A-game and wrote a Joe Ledger story from their perspective. That was pretty amazing, and I got to be a total fanboy reading those tales.

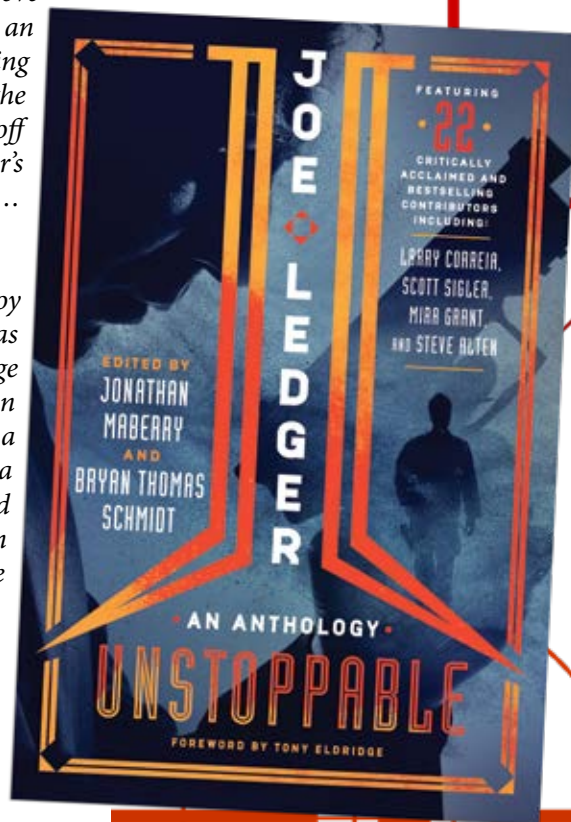
B.T.S.: You know, it was easy to convince Jonathan and St. Martins, as well as Sara Crowe (Jonathan's agent). Things went fairly quickly. The writers came aboard rapidly and very willingly, so the only problem we had to face was narrowing the list. People love this series. So we got to work with a great group of people who wrote really interesting stories, and we enjoy working together a lot, so it worked out great. I had the privilege of telling the story of Ledger's dog "Ghost" along with G.P. Charles as co-writer, and that was fun. Jonathan and I enjoyed the process enough that he invited me to collaborate on another novella of Ledger afterwards, so I wrote other characters as well.

S. MAG.: When speaking about both your backgrounds, the lists are long when it comes to creations and projects accomplished. What is a personal favorite of yours when speaking about the works you've done, and why?

J.M.: I'm fickle enough to love best whatever project is currently being written. That said, I do have some enduring favorites. For me it's been the Ledger series, because it's never the same thing twice running. I get to indulge my science junkie aspect during the research phase, and I get to go full-out snarky with Ledger. But I also love my Rot & Ruin series of post-apocalyptic zombie novels for teens. And, hey, an older, crankier and more battered Joe Ledger shows up in that series, beginning in book #3 ("Flesh & Bone"), because, as I see it, if anyone is going to survive the end of the world, it's going to be Ledger. I just finished the first in a new spin-off Rot & Ruin series, and it not only features Ledger, but Sam Imura—Ledger's former sniper (introduced in "Extinction Machine") is onboard as well. So... yeah, a lot of damn fun.

B.T.S.: Well, it will sound like I am brown-nosing here, but I really do enjoy working with Jonathan and have had him write for a number of projects as well as collaborating. My current favorite though is "Infinite Stars," a 671 page space opera anthology of 24 stories, new and classic, that I just did for Titan that got a starred review in Publisher's Weekly. By some miracle I assembled a dream cast of authors—literally every marquee series and writer of space opera past and present you can think of almost—and this book will be historical and really a nice legacy. Titan has put out a really beautiful hardcover edition which comes out Oct. 17, just before "UNSTOPPABLE." So that is the favorite as far as anthologies go.

S. MAG.: Being that you have both done young adult/speculative fiction in the past, what is your viewpoint when it comes to younger readers? Are we looking at a "cool" generation coming in that truly likes what they see? Is it more difficult to capture their imaginations now that there's so much to see?



J.M.: *Having met so many thousands of teens around the world because of my books, I now have ten times more optimism for the future than I had before I wrote YA fiction. Kids today are so much smarter, edgier, and more driven than they were in my day. We broke the world and are handing it off to them, but I like their odds for fixing it and keeping ol' Mother Nature going strong.*

As far as capturing their imaginations, the way to do that is to start by respecting their intelligence, their experience, and the fact that their lives are their own. Start there and you can open up some truly meaningful conversations. I've seen that here in the States and in other countries I've visited.

B.T.S.: *Yeah, kids today are really savvy and smarter than we often tend to give them credit for, and then perhaps past generations gave kids credit for. I think you don't need to talk down to them at all. You also can write much more complicated stuff than you might expect because the video game and TV generation is so used to that kind of thing and multi-tasking while taking it in. If you talk to them like equals, you can get all kinds of interesting insights, have fascinating discussions, and you will find them reciprocating the interest you show in them.*

S. MAG.: *Along those same lines, with the events, social media, etc. that you've participated in, do you feel that this younger generation wants to delve into the world of writing, as well as comic book creation? Do you get a lot of questions in regards to that work?*

J.M.: *Everywhere I go I meet kids and teens who are fired up with creative drive. Some want to be writers of prose or comic scripts, others want to go into different aspects of the arts, and many are exploring new creative avenues that were not even part of my childhood experience. I was born in the 50s, grew up in the 60s, and came of age in the 70s. We didn't have computers, smart phones, apps, the Net, or any of that. There are hundreds of creative opportunities in today's world that would have been wild science fiction when I was a kid. So...yeah, I think the next generation is going to conjure real creative magic, and they seem fired up to do it. I'm psyched. And, as I said, I'm very optimistic.*

B.T.S.: *You know, everyone dreams of the glamorous writing life. We still dream of that. I don't know where it is, but we do. Writing is not that glamorous. It is a lot of hard work, but certainly being able to "be your own boss" and "create cool stuff" is something many people have dreams of; so, sure. They want to do it. They want to change the world, make it better, and inspire as well as be inspired. Not that much different than my generation, so we can expect some awesome stuff to come, as Jonathan said.*

S. MAG.: *Is there a personal creation of yours that you would like to see one day move to the small or big screen that hasn't as of yet? Is Joe Ledger a character that would pull in movie-goers?*

J.M.: *A number of my works are in development for film or TV, including the Joe Ledger thrillers. Other projects in development include "Mars One" (a standalone teen sci-fi novel about the first families going to colonize Mars), and "V-Wars" (an epic story of the vampire apocalypse), and a few others I can't yet talk about. One project I'd love to see on TV is my first three novels, the Pine Deep Trilogy ("Ghost Road Blues," "Dead Man's Song" and "Bad Moon Rising").*

B.T.S.: *My Davi Rhii space operas, which often get compared to the feel of Star Wars certainly, I think, would make good films. I also feel that way about my John Simon detective series which is currently being sent out by my agent. I have a screenwriting background and went to film school, then spent several years working in production, so I tend to write cinematically anyway. I think my stuff would lend itself well to that, and I'd enjoy the money and sales boost for getting to that elusive "glamorous life" as well. But I admit, I am biased and I also have healthy reticence about giving over creative control to others as would be required.*

S. MAG.: *Is there a particular character created by another author out there that you wish you'd thought of first? On the opposite side, is there any character you look back on and wish you had not created, and why?*

J.M.: *My favorite literary characters of all time are Travis McGee (created by John D. MacDonald) and the old pulp hero Doc Savage. Love 'em both; wish I'd created either of them. I re-read the Travis McGee novels—all 21 of them—every couple of years. And the Doc Savage novels, fueled by love of high-concept science-based action storytelling.*

As for a character I wish I hadn't created, none come to mind. There are a few, though, that I loathe (because they were intended to be loathsome) and one or two I'm sad I killed off.

B.T.S.: *I'll take any Maberry character. He is well paid and deserves it. But not that I am all greedy. Just saying. I do enjoy his stuff a lot. I certainly would love to have created Harry Bosch and Star Wars, which is why I wrote Davi Rhii and John Simon—*

both heavily bear the influences of these. But I could never create them as well as Michael Connelly and George Lucas. They'd be different because I am not them; I have my own voice and need to create from that rather than someone else's.

I have no characters I wish I hadn't created, but I am not as widely published an author just yet like Jonathan. More known for editing. So I think I have not had to live with as many of the characters in a way that would lead to such thoughts of potential regrets just yet.

S. MAG.: It would be a great deal of fun to hear about a day of writing for both of you. Is this a planned day that begins in the morning, or after watching a horror flick, or when the mood just sort of comes upon you?

J.M.: Writing is my job, and I'm very disciplined in my approach to managing my career and my output. I typically 'go to work' in the morning by heading out to a local restaurant (there's one in my town that holds my favorite table for me!) and I do my first batch of writing there. The concept of going to work puts me in the right gear. I often move to another spot to finish the morning's writing and have lunch. Then I go home and write in my office there for the rest of the day. I block out ten minutes of each working hour for social media. I don't buy into the nonsense about needing to be in the right mood or waiting for the muse to whisper to me. That's part of the mythology writers have built up around their process and it's a bit silly. Writers write. If what they write isn't great, they fix it in the rewrite. It's creative, of course, but it's not magic. What it is—apart from work—is a hell of a lot of fun.

I balance my writing with business, because a writing career is a business. I deal with contracts, crafting pitches for future projects, do interviews, share a podcast (*Three Guys With Beards*, with James A. Moore and Christopher Golden), run writers networking sessions (*The Writers Coffeehouses*), answer fan mail, edit stories for anthologies, make public appearances, go on book tours, teach writing at conferences, and a thousand other things. All of this has to be budgeted into the work week in ways that do not derail the central goal of writing 2-4 thousand words per day. And every writer I know has their own process. Lots of different ways to skin this particular cat.

B.T.S.: Well, my day starts about 10:30 with emails and caffeine and a plan for what I need to get done. If there is editing, I usually do that first as my ADHD makes concentration better mid-day. Then, after 2-3 hours and a break, I switch to writing or PR. My friend Peter Wacks and I have launched *GENRE TALK*, a new podcast, and we record that usually around 3-ish a few times a week for an hour. Then I tend to do social media on breaks throughout the day for PR and marketing, etc. I do a lot of business with Messenger on Facebook, believe it or not, and then I write again at night after 7 or 8 until around 1 to 2 a.m. Occasionally I do more editing, depending on deadlines, but that is usually the gist of it. I do pitches as well and proposals during the morning emails, or at night, depending upon what state they are in. I have an office and either write there or with the TV or music on for background noise somewhere in the house. And I only go out to restaurants when I am away on a trip.

S. MAG.: Reading your biographies, I stumbled across some interesting information that I would love to ask about...

Jonathan, how does it feel to win the Bram Stoker Award? And after winning it so many times, does any of it ever get old? If you could sit down with the man himself, what would you ask Bram Stoker?

J.M.: My first novel, "Ghost Road Blues" was nominated for two Bram Stoker Awards—Best First Novel and Novel of the Year. I lost Novel of the Year to some cat named Stephen King. (And, if you're going to lose an award, lose it to Steve.) However, I won the Best First Novel Stoker and it really made a positive impact on me. Prior to writing that novel I'd been a jujutsu instructor by day and a nonfiction writer part-time, and had been doing that for 25 years. Writing the novel had been an experiment to see if I would enjoy writing fiction and to see if I was any good at it. I was trained as a journalist but never took a creative writing class. As it turned out, I loved writing the novel and was stunned—truly stunned—to have it nominated and then win. As validation goes, that's a tsunami.

Since then I've won Stokers in other categories. I shared a win for nonfiction ("*The Cryptopedia*" with David F. Kramer), won two YA Stokers ("*Dust & Decay*" and "*Flesh & Bone*," books two and three of the *Rot & Ruin* series), and graphic novel for "*Bad Blood*" (with brilliant art by Tyler Crook). In each case, I was surprised and delighted to win. And, no, it never gets old to know that something you had fun writing, something you loved to write, spoke to so many of your peers. How could anyone ever get jaded about something like that?

As for sitting down with the man himself, I would have loved to talk folklore with Bram Stoker. I used to lecture at the Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia, where all of his research notes for writing "*Dracula*" are on display. I'd love to talk to Stoker about folklore and crafting new versions of classic monsters. I am, by the way, friends with his grand-nephew, Dacre Stoker, who recently sold the official prequel to "*Dracula*." And, yeah, we've talked about his famous ancestor, books, vampires, and writing. He's a cool cat.

S. MAG.: Bryan, you did work for *The X-Files*, among others, can you tell readers a bit about this? (As a fan, I'm always hoping

they return). Also, you talk about your past jobs. What, exactly, would you say is the funniest job you ever had, and did it ever end up in a story you wrote?

B.T.S.: *I did a canon X-Files story called "Border Time" for Jonathan's anthology "Secret Agendas" which has been well-received. What a kick it is to see yourself listed as an official writer on Wikipedia and wikis! As a fan that is awesome! My co-writer was Kate Corcino and we set the tale in El Paso about murders of women happening along the border that seem like cupacabra attacks but turn out to be something else that echoes the abduction of Samantha Mulder. I wrote Mulder and she wrote Scully, and we framed it like an episode. People love me to read it at events and tell me it captures the feel and voice of the show, as well. So that is great to hear. That is also on audio book which is, too, a real kick.*

Funniest job is hard because they have been boring, routine stuff. File clerks, temp work, etc. Let me see...I have used my background in TV production and screenwriting in ways but mostly indirectly. I have also used elements of my corporate law department filing work and software testing days as well. Everything kind of gets pulled in as needed research when required. But yeah, sorry, I don't have any amusing jobs. But I was once a temp and found myself cornered in a cube by two lion cubs. Turned out they were the owner's pets and she brought them in to socialize and let them run around the office. That was kind of intimidating because I did not know what to do, I knew no one's name, and they were not full grown but not little guys either. More like the size of a larger terrier or mid-sized poodle. I look at that as kind of quirky and amusing.

S. MAG.: What projects are coming up for the both of you? Will you be teaming up again in the future?

J.M.: *Bryan and I have some pitches in development for future anthologies. We're friends and we have a good rhythm for doing collaborative projects. So, I expect there's more to that story.*

As for what I have coming up...yikes! I'm in the middle of one of the busiest years of my career. I had three novels come out this year ("X-Files Origins: Devil's Advocate," "Mars One" and "Dogs of War"); I've already written two novels for 2018 ("Glimpse" and "Broken Lands") and am writing a third ("Deep Silence"), with 3-4 more novels to write in 2018. I've had some fun and high-profile anthologies this year, including: "Aliens: Bug Hunt" and "Baker Street Irregulars" (co-edited with Michael Ventrella), "Nights of the Living Dead" (with George A. Romero), and "Joe Ledger: Unstoppable"; and will close out the year with a horror/mystery/noir anthology, "Hardboiled Horror." I'm wrapping edits for an epic fantasy anthology for 2018, "Kingdoms Fall," and am in discussions for a few horror anthologies—two for adults and two for teens. And I've been writing a slew of short stories, including a "Hellboy" story and a mixed-martial arts story for "Predators: If It Bleeds" (edited by Bryan).

B.T.S.: *This is quite a year. I have five releases in September and October, then nothing. "Monster Hunter Files" edited with Larry Correia in his NYT Bestselling universe was out October 3rd. My last Davi Rhii novel in the first trilogy, "The Exodus" released on September 28. Then I had "Infinite Stars" and "Predator: If It Bleeds" out on October 17. And then this.*

I have stories in all but "Infinite Stars," so that's kinda fun, too. I also have the podcast. And hopefully will sell some short stories and such, as well as more anthologies and the John Simon novel soon, as well. But I have had 8 books out this year, either edited or written by me or featuring a story, so it's been quite a year. It will be odd next year to have nothing on the schedule. Hopefully things turn up.

As the holidays get closer, the list of amazing projects these multi-talented authors have delivered reads a great deal like Santa's Christmas List...with just as many entries. It's a sure bet for Maberry and Schmidt fans—of all ages—that the river of creative ideas these men possess will never stop flowing.

For more information on these collaborators, head to www.jonathanmaberry.com and www.bryanthomasschmidt.net. ■

JOE LEDGER: UNSTOPPABLE

Edited by Jonathan Maberry and
Bryan Thomas Schmidt

When it comes to anthologies, anybody out there who loves suspense, intrigue and/or thrilling adventure will not want to miss this one.

Some extraordinary writers have come together to create their own tales that are a part of the world that Jonathan Maberry (co-editor of this particular anthology), made a while back that focuses upon the sarcastic, covert operative, Joe Ledger.

To begin, Tony Eldridge, producer of *The Equalizer* has put together a Foreword to speak about exactly who Joe Ledger is and the fact that even though Ledger may be "fiction," the world is also headed in Ledger's direction. After that, you are in store for twenty tales that cover all sorts of odd plots that range from sci-fi to frightening-as-all-get-out. With Maberry, himself, penning the last one and co-editor Bryan Thomas Schmidt also penning (with G.P. Charles) a seriously incredible ghost story, everyone gets into the act as they give their own views on Joe Ledger and his wealth of personalities.

Here is a morsel of what you will receive: Steve Alten writes *The Honey Pot* that literally begins with a man waking up with the hangover from heck. Not only does he have no idea how he got to Paris, he also has no clue who shot the naked girl that's in the hotel room with him.

Fans of Scott Sigler and his novel, "Nocturnal," will find his San Fran homicide inspectors meeting up with Ledger in his short story, *Vacation*. And for all you X-Files/sci-fi lovers, Jon McGoran adds his own spin on Ledger in the tale *Strange Harvest*, where a young astrobiologist disappears from a UFO-conference.

With too many memorable tales to name in a review, let us just say that Ledger is a "star" no matter where he appears in this anthology, and will have fans and future-fans lining up to learn even more about what Joe Ledger's world has to offer.

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

ERICA SPINDLER

Isn't Just "The Other Girl"

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



Erica Spindler has published a list of titles a mile long—and counting. Yet, when her career choice was to be made, Erica had her mind set on being an artist and pursued that path accordingly. But this is one woman (perhaps the only writer out there) who can teach others a true lesson: a great deal can happen when you simply catch a cold. That's right. In bed, fighting illness and being bored beyond belief, Erica picked up a romance novel and the rest, as they say, is history. It was in 1996 that she took the jump from romance to suspense, and ever since then has been hooked on creating true suspense tales that offer up thrills and chills, but still keep that vein of passion running throughout.

Erica's newest title, "The Other Girl," is yet another book fans will not be able to put down. *Suspense Magazine* was lucky enough to have a bit of time with Erica to talk about her perfect coffee-filled writing days, adapting to being a writer and marketer in this digital world, and a whole lot more.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Is there a particular fan moment you've experienced (whether it be one that was fantastic, or even a little odd) that you will always remember?

Erica Spindler (E.S.): *A fan moment that I'll always remember, happened when I was just starting to have some bestseller success with my novels. I was at one of those mega-sized writing conferences; it was registration day and I was riding in a crowded elevator. When I stepped off at my floor, I heard someone whisper loudly, "Oh my God, that was Erica Spindler!" Still makes my heart leap a little.*

S. MAG.: Being that this is basically a digital world and 90% of marketing for writers is done on the computer, can you talk a little about the positives and negatives for you when it comes to Facebook, pinning, blogs, etc.? And do you ever wish things were more personal, as they were in the past?

“Don’t waste time worrying about the balance between romance and suspense, let your story determine that, not some artificial notion about a 50/50 split.”

E.S.: I do miss ‘face-to-face’ with readers and booksellers. Tours were grueling, for sure, but I loved being able to put myself out there, to have that opportunity to meet and talk with other book lovers. That said, I can reach so many more people online and through social media—and still sleep in my own bed. (At a smaller cost, as well.) And I really do enjoy reaching out via social media, particularly Facebook. For me, the negative of the digital marketplace is definitely the time and energy involved. I mostly do all my own social media; I think it works best when it’s personal and authentic. But that means time and creative energy away from my writing. There are some days when social media feels like a hungry beast needing to be fed. And on the days I don’t feed it, I feel so guilty!

S. MAG.: Tell us a bit about your newest title, “The Other Girl.” Could you give a sneak peek at something that is not written on the back cover?

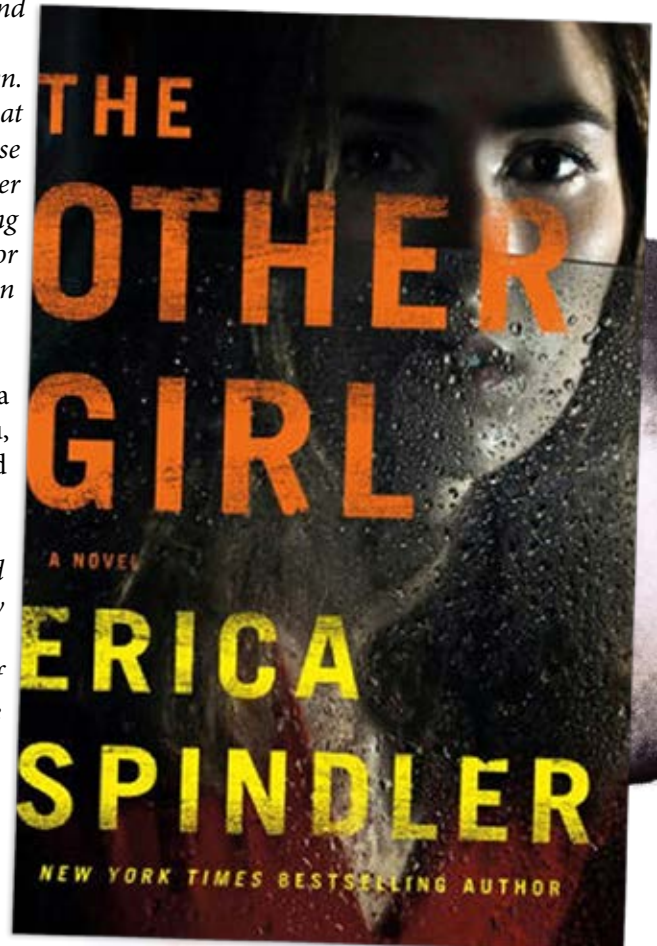
E.S.: My best books spring directly from my life, either from personal experience or something that happens in my personal sphere. It’s something that gives me a “goosebumps” moment. (I call it my Dark Gift, but that’s for another interview.) Anyway, I live in a family-oriented, bedroom community of New Orleans. One afternoon the news exploded with the account of an attempted abduction of a young girl walking home from her bus stop. The girl managed to escape and the perp got away. As you can imagine, the story was everywhere and on everyone’s lips for days. She’s interviewed; her parents are on TV. But no arrests are made, and the case goes silent. Until—the sheriff appears on TV and announces that the girl made up the whole thing.

(Goosebumps moment!) Remember, the girl’s identity is known. She’s just a kid. What happens to her when the top cop makes that announcement? And what if she really was telling the truth? And worse than not being believed, she’s labeled a liar? How would that impact her life now—and in the future? Would she bury the past? Would she long for justice? And what if she wasn’t the only girl? What about justice for them? These questions are at the heart of both this story and my main character, Miranda.

S. MAG.: You had originally planned to be an artist. Do you have a great deal of interest in the cover side of the book world? Do you, when you’ve completed a book, know or have a picture in your mind as to what you want your cover to be?

E.S.: This will sound cliché, but I know what I like. How artists—and editors, I suppose—hate hearing those words! Cover design is a very specific skill, which I believe is best left to the professionals. That said, I know what I want in terms of the look and mood of the cover, and if the design department misses, I’ll fight for changes. In the case of “The Other Girl,” my publisher nailed it in the first go around.

S. MAG.: Your books are definitely romance and thriller rolled up into one. Can you speak a bit in regards to what it is specifically about each genre that makes it interesting for you to write?



E.S.: *The same thing about both genres interests me: emotion. Thrillers/suspense turn on heightened emotion—fear, suspicion, betrayal, terror, joy, despair, horror, love and hate. And so does romance—the very same ones, in fact, although used in different ways to move the story forward, both the plot and character development. They can also balance one another; for example, the sweetness of a burgeoning relationship can lighten an otherwise dark story, or ground a character whose life is otherwise spinning out of control. Those are just two examples, there are so many ways these two genres work together!*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, what advice would you give a writer just starting out who would also like to get into the romantic suspense genre?

E.S.: *Great question! Don't waste time worrying about the balance between romance and suspense, let your story determine that, not some artificial notion about a 50/50 split. Also, remember that in taking on two genres, both have to ring true—the love story happening between two people and the life or death situation they have found themselves in.*

S. MAG.: Can you give readers a snapshot of an “Erica Spindler Writing Day?” Are there specific things you require when writing?

E.S.: *An “Erica Spindler Writing Day” has a lot of variety. Some days I'm in my office or on my porch. Others, I need to get out of the house and I work at a coffeehouse. A couple days a week, I do a writer's ‘camp’ with another writer. She writes in one room, I in another; except for a lunch break, we're all business. I also take periodic trips up to a place on a lake in Mississippi to isolate myself for a writing marathon. My only absolute ‘must have’ is coffee. A lot of coffee.*

S. MAG.: Along those same lines, do you allot yourself a specific time that you “must” write every day, or is it more up in the air in that regards? (AKA: writing when that ‘idea’ hits.)

E.S.: *Mornings are my best, most creative writing time, and I rarely give it up.*

S. MAG.: Can you speak about future projects that are coming up?

E.S.: *In October, “Fallen Five,” the fourth book in The Lightkeepers paranormal thriller series publishes. The book opens with a millionaire real estate developer plunging to his death from his penthouse balcony. And speaking of the mix of romance and suspense, there are some interesting developments in Micki and Zach's relationship.*

I'm also working on another standalone suspense/thriller for my publisher. But no title yet!

S. MAG.: If you could have dinner with one writer, who would it be and why? Is there a question you would love to ask them?

E.S.: *That's a hard one, because I love to listen to other writers talk about their writing processes. I love to hear their stories from the trenches, about their paths to success—and the pitfalls along the way—they can be incredibly inspiring and hysterically funny. So to answer your question, after considering quite a long list, I chose James Patterson. And I suppose, instead of a single question, I would just let him talk. And I would just listen.*

For fans everywhere, from the paranormal to the standalone thriller reader, Erica Spindler is one dinner date that *all* would choose. With the amazing career and the never-ending list of award-winning, bestselling novels, her stories would be a whole lot of fun to sit back and listen to. For more on Erica's upcoming titles and events, go to her website at www.ericaspindler.com. ■

THE OTHER GIRL

By Erica Spindler

Miranda Rader is a woman who wasn't always the respected police officer she is now. In fact, she was seen by the small Louisiana town as being from the wrong side of the tracks. A girl who basically got into trouble, and the only thing she was good at was lying. At the beginning of this tale, Miranda lives up to that description. Unfortunately, she is also part of a brutal attack that leaves her running off to get help while another girl is left behind to face even more violence. Miranda tries her best to convince local law enforcement that a crime is occurring in the middle of the woods. Only one chooses to believe her statement, but when they go to the location, no one is there.

Miranda is now viewed as a good woman. She works hard, keeps her nose clean, and has the skills to be a great cop. Her boss, a man who definitely gave her a chance and stood by her when others said she wasn't worth it, respects Miranda and the changes she's made.

A crime is committed. One of the town's most beloved college professors is murdered. What shakes Miranda to her very core is discovering an old newspaper clipping in the professor's possessions about the night long ago that changed her life forever. When another body is found, that of a retired cop who was also a central figure in Miranda's life on that horrible night, she suddenly finds herself in the negative spotlight yet again.

As Miranda uncovers information that leads her to believe that these new crimes have something to do with her, the “new life” she's created quickly begins to fall apart.

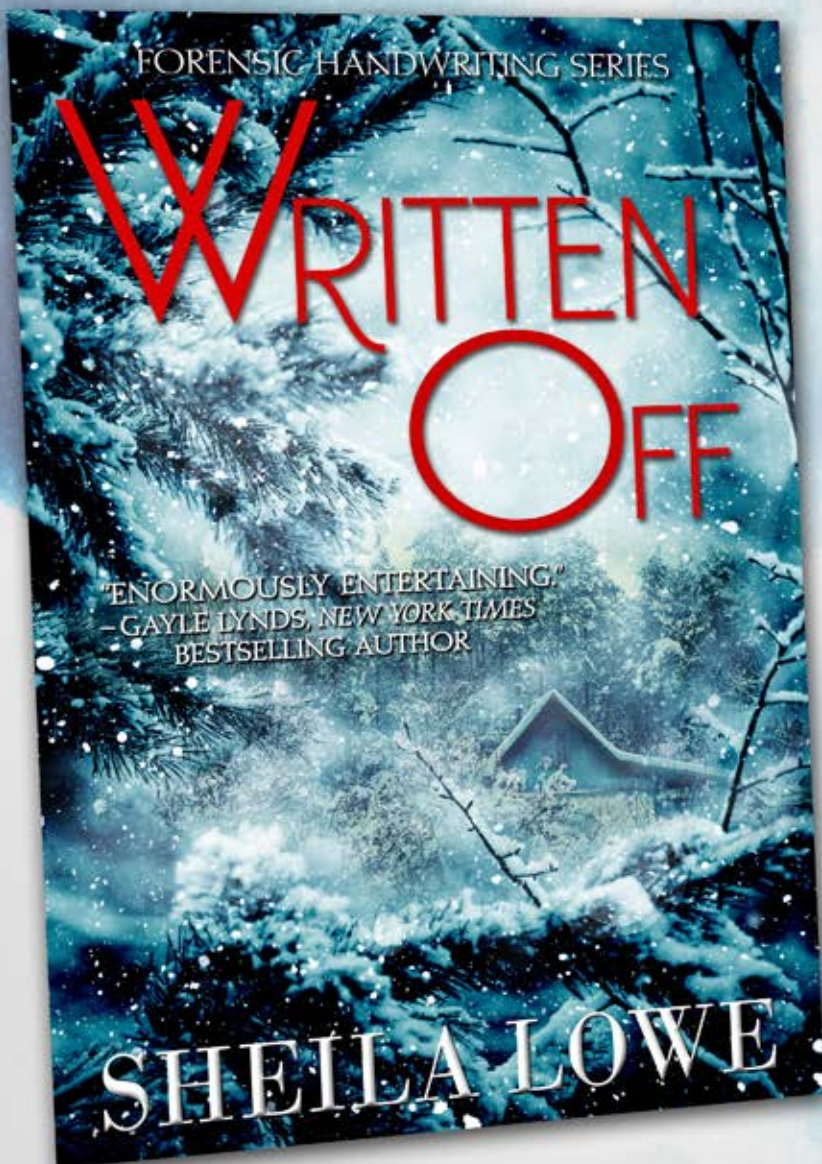
It's not a shock, of course, to say that Spindler's books are always “must-reads.” And once again, she's put together a knock-down drag-out full-on suspense that will have readers hooked from beginning to end.

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

"Utterly compelling! Joins the ranks of those rare thrillers that expertly blend nonstop plotting with keen perceptions of the characters—good and bad—who populate this wonderful tale."

—Jeffery Deaver, New York Times Bestselling Author of "The Bone Collector" on "Outside the Lines"

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.

"Lowe wins readers over with her well-developed heroine and the wealth of fascinating detail on handwriting analysis."

—Booklist

WWW.CLAUDIAROSESERIES.COM

SUSPENSE
PUBLISHING

Charlaine Harris

SOMETHING NEW IS SPROUTING IN THE “TEAGARDEN”

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Captures by Erin



Writing bestsellers for decades certainly does not come easy; to some, it even seems like an impossible task. Yet when speaking about Charlaine Harris, her constant ability to introduce characters that are unique, intelligent, and memorable proves there is *no* such thing as “impossible.”

Just think of some of the names... Sookie Stackhouse, Harper Connelly, and Aurora Teagarden. All of these females became a staple for the book lover, as well as the bestseller lists. Heck, this author even made millions of readers out there beg to “return” as fast as they could to a slightly frightening place called Midnight, Texas. Now, Aurora Teagarden arrives in

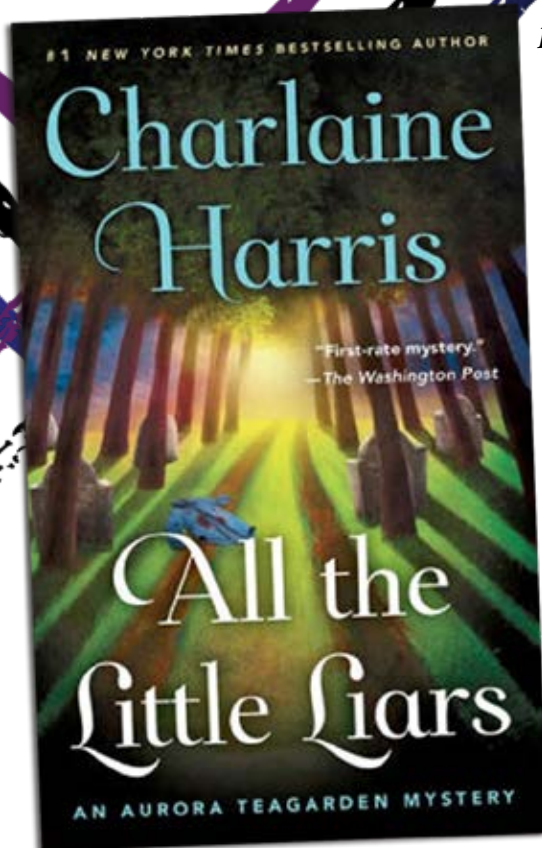
Harris’s latest title, “Sleep Like a Baby,” and the creator has taken time out to share information on the book, talk about her character that she most identifies with, and even introduce a brand new character who will soon be making her own unforgettable debut...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG): Could you share some insight with us on your newest title, “Sleep Like a Baby?”

Charlaine Harris (C.H.): “*Sleep Like a Baby*” is the continuation of the Aurora Teagarden series, the first one I tackled in my career. As you can tell, it has spread over many years now. It has truly been refreshing to return to my original protagonist and revisit her life.

S. MAG.: You have done so much in the world of television, bringing your books to TV in both series and even TV movie formats. Can you speak about how you came to see your creations on screen? If you had to choose one of your characters to be on the big screen, who would that be and why?

C.H.: You’re asking about the process of my books making it to the screen? It’s the old adage: Their people call my



people! Someone representing the interested party will call my literary agent, Joshua Bilmes, or (over the past few years) my agents in Hollywood at APA. They'll talk to me about the interested party, and we'll arrange to either decline or begin the very long process of hashing out terms and conditions. If I could choose one of my characters to make it to the big screen...I'd love to see Harper Connelly there!

S. MAG.: As a writer who has penned those “final” novels to end a series, is there ever a time you miss those characters? Such as, does Lily Bard still speak to you at times; would you ever think about resurrecting a past character?

C.H.: *I will never write another Lily Bard. Those came from a dark place, and I've exorcised those demons. When I end a series, I'm ready to move on to another challenge. I seldom say “never” because, after all, I went back to Aurora. But I am sure I won't ever write another Sookie novel, either. I told her story.*

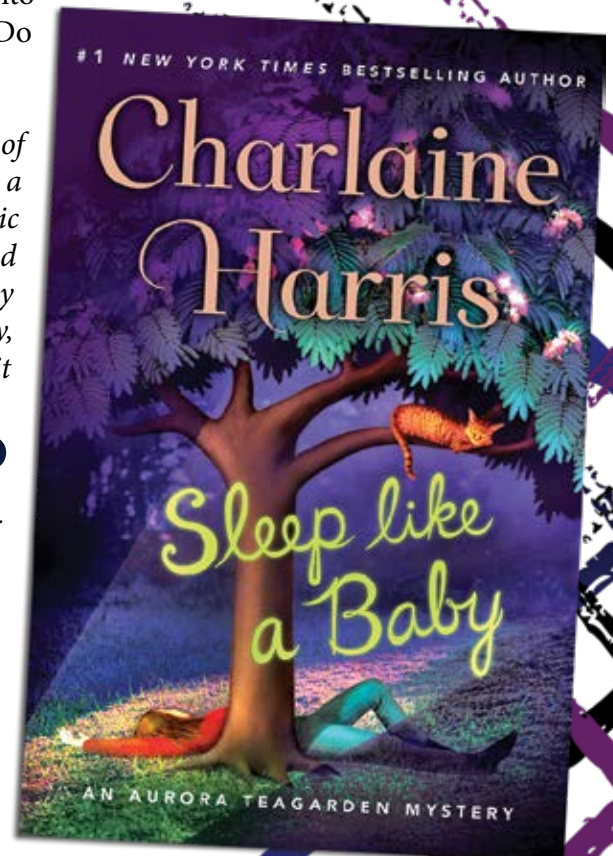
S. MAG.: You've written across such a broad expanse of genres, can you speak about the positives that come from writing the more lighthearted material, such as *Aurora Teagarden*, versus the darker tales, like those set in *Midnight, Texas*?

C.H.: *It refreshes me as a writer to move on to very different projects. I feel stagnant if I continue to write the same thing over and over. I challenge myself; I think it sharpens me.*

S. MAG.: You entered the world of graphic novels with the *Cemetery Girl* trilogy (with Christopher Golden and artist Don Kramer). Can you tell us what made you want to dive into that genre, and how it was working as a team, with an illustrator? Do you know when the finale will be released?

C.H.: *Chris and I are longtime friends. I discussed the basic plot of “Cemetery Girl” with him at a con, and he thought it would make a great graphic novel. Since he was very experienced in writing graphic novels, I thought partnering up with him would be a good move, and it was. It took me a dismayingly long time to get the hang of the very different nuances writing a graphic novel calls for. Very unfortunately, Don Kramer had to bow out after the first two installments, and it*

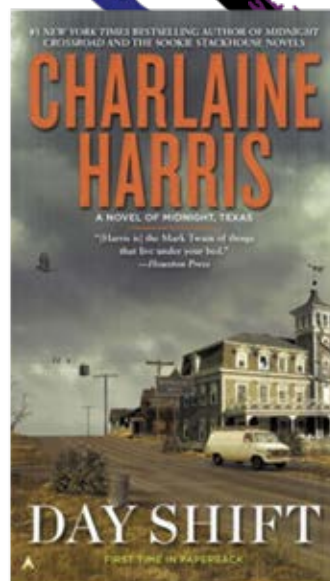
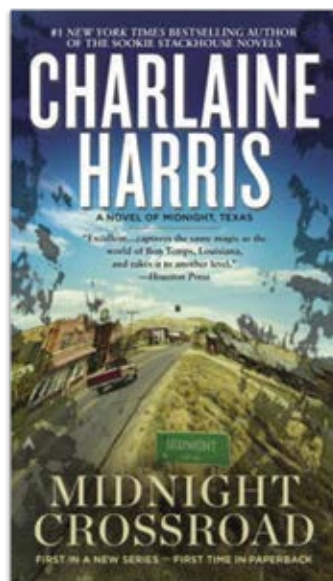
“There’s nothing you can do to change the past; you can only learn from your mistakes to make the future better, in life choices as well as in work.”



has taken a very long time to line up another artist for the third and final book. I hope it is out sometime in the next few months.

S. MAG.: Are your grandchildren eager readers? Will you ever think of perhaps doing a children's book in the future?

C.H.: I can safely say I won't write a children's book. My oldest grandchild is just learning to read, and my granddaughter is too young. They both love to be read to, which is promising.



S. MAG.: Which, if any, of your personal creations do you identify with the most? Is there one you wish did exist in the real world?

C.H.: I identify most with Aurora. She's very similar to me when it comes to her outlook on life, and her background. I think she'd be a good friend to have in the real world.

S. MAG.: Many times authors who have written beloved series will make a comment that if they could turn back time, they would have done something differently. Have you ever felt that way?

C.H.: I don't believe in looking back. I believe in moving forward. There's nothing you can do to change the past; you can only learn from your mistakes to make the future better, in life choices as well as in work.

S. MAG.: I know you have rescue dogs. Various writers state that their dogs are helpful when it comes to writing. Do your dogs have a "paw" in your creative world as well? Have (or will) any of them appear in a novel?

C.H.: My dogs are wonderful, and now that we have no children in the house, they are even more important companions. Their main function is to make me get out of my desk chair, because I have to let them in and out of their dog run! It's good (and necessary) to stand up pretty often. There is actually a dog in "Sleep Like a Baby," but he's more highly trained than any of our dogs ever are. They give back to us as much as we give to them.

S. MAG.: Looking ahead to 2018, can you tell us a bit about the sci-fi/fantasy title that was recently spoken about in the press?

C.H.: The book, originally titled "Texoma," is now called, "An Easy Death." It's a real departure for me, an alternate American western with a gun-toting protagonist. Writing Lizbeth is a real challenge for me, because she's very different from any other character I've ever written, and I worked very hard on this book.

As all readers dive in to "Sleep Like a Baby," having fun at Aurora Teagarden's side once again, it will be thrilling to know that Lizbeth is on the horizon. Another strong female who will join the ever-growing list of memorable Charlaine Harris characters. For more information on Charlaine and her works, head to www.charlaineharris.com. ■

Out with a **BANG**

By Stephen Greco

It was right after I was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer that I decided to finally do something meaningful with my life, to make good use of the short time I had left.

I decided to murder Alex Pellman.

Walking out of the doctor's office after receiving my death sentence, I realized that I'd never done anything that had really made a difference. I'd held a meaningless job in banking, and my work there hadn't benefited anyone other than the vultures who owned the bank. I'd had a failed marriage, which had resulted in nothing other than an ex-wife who now hated me. No kids; no descendants at all who might do something meaningful in the future to change the world for the better.

I'd never done any charity work. Never joined the armed services to defend my country. Never even did anything creative. Never wrote a story or painted a picture that might have brought some tiny bit of enjoyment to someone. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd bought someone a drink in a bar. As I walked out of that office and it started to rain—a steely cold and miserable winter drizzle that fit my mood—I searched my memories, thinking there must be something.

Okay, once I helped someone move to a new apartment. Does that count?

Pathetic.

But now I'd finally make a difference. I'd rid the world of Alex Pellman.

Alex wasn't a celebrity or a public figure of any kind. My beef with him was very personal. Alex was just a bully. My bully. He had tortured me endlessly in high school, twenty years ago.

I crossed paths with him about five years back, purely by chance. I was sitting in a coffee shop drinking stale decaf when he walked in and spotted me. He barreled up to me like he owned the place and expected the full attention of anyone he addressed.

"Yo, Doug, how's it goin'? It's me. Alex," he'd bellowed.

A hot flash swept over me as I recognized him. I saw beyond the wrinkles that had formed around his eyes, past the shorter hair style and the bulging waistline. I saw the stocky seventeen-year-old bully who had made my life hell. He wore the same condescending smirk that I remembered from every day back in high school. I looked up at him, and after the initial shock, it came flooding back—the pain, the humiliation. I hated him still. It was a visceral, searing, unquenchable hatred. Even back then, five years ago, I knew that I wanted to kill him. I just didn't make a final decision to do it until the cancer had me firmly in its unbreakable grip.

I stared at him, open-mouthed in disbelief, seeing him in that coffee shop. I thought, or at least hoped, that Alex would have ended up rotting in some jail by now, or maybe knifed in the back by someone else he had tortured. Those seemed logical fates for Alex. But here he was, standing three feet from me.

I could smell the beer on his sour breath. In my trance-like state, all I could say at first, in a whispering monotone, was his name: "Alex Pellman."

"Hey, yeah, go Grey Wolves," he said with enthusiasm, in homage to our high school football team. He grinned and pumped one fist in the air, our old sign of school spirit.

Somehow I found a tiny bit of fortitude. I was able to form more words. "You tortured me," I said.

"Huh?" he responded, seemingly surprised at my tiny but unexpected rebellion.

I stared at him, transfixed. "You tortured me," I repeated in a stony voice.

"Tortured? What?" he protested. "Oh, c'mon, Doug, that was just a little harmless fun, man. We were pals." He flicked away my assertion with a wave of his hand, as if my memories of the anguish I'd suffered were trivial fabrications.

"Harmless fun? Pals?" A small surge of courage emboldened me, not enough to force me up from my seat to face him eye to eye, but at least enough to speak up. I mean, what could he do to me here, right? We were both thirty-two years old... was he going to drag me into the men's room of this coffee house and push my face in the urinal, like he did in the old days?

I continued, "Do you remember stealing whatever money I had, nearly every day? Do you remember locking me in that bathroom stall and breaking the lock off, so that I had to crawl out on that dirty bathroom floor that you pissed all over?"

There were more incidents to remind him of, *many* more, but his response was quick.

"What? What are you talkin' about? I never did that," he protested, this time swatting both hands toward me as if to bat my faulty memories right back at me.

"And the time on that class trip. You took my shoes. Threw them in that pond. I had to wade in to get them. My clothes got soaked. I had to get on the bus with wet clothes. Everyone laughed at me."

He was becoming incensed. "Hell, I never did that either. You're full o' shit!"

"You forgot, didn't you? You erased it. Because it meant nothing to you. You forgot how you tortured people like me, how you made us suffer."

His tone turned firm and menacing, and that old malevolence I remembered clouded his eyes now. "Look, I don't remember doing that stuff. If maybe I teased you a little now and then, well, get over it, fer crissakes. You're still the same little sniveling dipshit you were twenty years ago, huh?"

He turned and walked out, fuming.

I didn't do anything five years ago, other than remind him about how he'd treated me. I didn't follow him out. I was too scared, like I used to be in high school. Thirty-two years old, and still scared.

But now I'm thirty-seven. And I'm not scared anymore. Amazing how a medical death sentence obliterates the fear.

How do you cope when you're bullied? Some people withdraw from life and become anti-social. Some people end up bullying others even weaker than themselves as a way of lashing out, taking out their frustrations and propping up their own feelings of self-worth. One person who was bullied by Alex killed himself. He never left a note, but I knew why he'd done it.

Well, I'm not sure why I didn't kill myself. In fact, I don't remember what I did, how I coped, how I got through that ordeal in high school. All I remember is the terrible pain and humiliation.

I didn't care if he'd forgotten what he'd done to me. He still deserved to die.

I thought about how I'd do it.

A gun. It would be so easy. I'd buy a gun.

Two days after walking out of that doctor's office, I went into a gun store and explained to the clerk that I wanted a small handgun, easily concealable but with enough power to stop a big man with a single bullet (just in case some do-gooder tried to tackle me after the first shot).

"Oh yeah?" said the burly man. His head was shaved and his forearms were heavily tattooed—a surreal combination of guns, knives, serpents, and scenes of Jesus on the cross. "One shot, eh? You the Lone Ranger? Who you plannin' to kill, friend?"

"It's just for self-defense, that's all," I replied.

"So, one shot, huh?" he repeated. "Depends on where you shoot him, chief. Any gun here will stop a man with one shot if you nail him dead square in the head, you know what I mean?"

He chuckled uneasily, maybe exposing some trace of a conscience. Then he paused, eyeing me up and down, and perhaps decided that I didn't look like a killer to him.

"Sure, friend, self-defense," he said. "I understand completely." He gave me a furtive half smile and continued, "Just promise me that before you put one into his brain, you'll fire a couple o' warning shots...into his chest, maybe? Ha, ha!"

I smiled back.

When I'd made my choice based on his sage advice (a small but easily concealable nine millimeter model, along with a sleek leather holster) and we'd completed the transaction, he asked about training classes. I politely declined. I'd never fired a real gun before in my entire life, but I just needed to know how to load it and take the safety off, and he'd already shown me that. I didn't need to be a marksman because I'd use it at point blank range. Then he suggested a short training class on how to clean and maintain it properly, which would surely allow it to hold its resale value. I politely declined. Cleaning? Not necessary. Resale value? I couldn't give a shit. I'd be using it only once.

Now I had the means, and next I would arrange the opportunity.

I did a search online and found Alex's current home address easily. He worked for an insurance agency, and the company

website had a portrait of him. Neatly groomed hair, a painted-on smile. None of it could hide the evil in his eyes.

The best way to do it would be to walk up to him from behind when he was coming out of his house, put the gun to his head, and pull the trigger. *Goodbye Alex.*

But I worried, maybe I would see him come out with one of his kids, and maybe I would lose my nerve, and maybe he would spot me when I hesitated, and maybe...maybe, maybe, maybe...

I thought about it for a few more days. I needed a better plan. And then it came in the mail.

The notice for our high school reunion.

Perfect. I'd kill him in front of our former classmates. They all said I would amount to nothing, didn't they? Well, this act would certainly be *something*, and they'd witness it. I'd rid the world of Alex. And maybe Maryanne Chalmers would be there, the girl who I'd asked to the prom and who'd said no. I certainly didn't want to harm *her*. But getting some of Alex's brains on her blouse would make a serious statement to the class.

The reunion was two months away. Would I make it? And would Alex come? As the days went by I felt steadily worse, but I had a strong motivation to hold on. I had declined the surgery that my doctor said might give me a few more months of life. The odds of success were pathetic. And the so-called "successful outcome" was only a few more months of life? Ridiculous. I told him I just had to live long enough to take care of my affairs. Only I didn't describe the affairs to him. He must have assumed I had legal stuff to do, like making out a will, or whatever. I had no will, and no intention of making one, because I had no one to leave anything to.

I went on with my chemotherapy, even though it made me terribly nauseous, but I carefully gauged my ability to function on the chemo. And I decided that even when I was at my most nauseous, I could walk. And I could point a gun and pull a trigger at least once, and hit my target, a head in this case, at close range. And that was all I needed.

And then, three weeks from the day of the reunion, I saw it on the internet—Alex's name on the reunion attendance list. I felt an electric jolt of excitement and anticipation. It was all coming together.

I looked at the rest of the list. Robert was on it. It would be good to see him again. Little Robert. He was smaller than me, and we'd pal'd around together. Robert was another of Alex's victims. Yes, I'd just make sure that I said hello to Robert before I killed Alex. There would be no time for greetings after I pulled the trigger. Someone would probably jump me as soon as I fired. Or maybe they would all just run like cockroaches when you turn the lights on.

When the day of the reunion finally came, I was ready. I'd even bought a new grey suit. I had nothing else to do with my money. So I'd go out dressed well. Out with a bang, so to speak. And, oddly enough, I still hadn't decided if I'd kill myself after shooting Alex. It would be one of those last second decisions, but suicide seemed a better option than a slow, lingering death in a bleak prison hospital...

And now I'm here.

I walk into the hotel ballroom. I'm straining to walk straight and stand as tall as I possibly can, despite the pain that causes me to want to bend over and shuffle like a ninety-five-year-old man. I didn't take my pain meds today. Couldn't take the chance that they would mess up my aim, even though I will fire only when I'm very close.

No one seems to recognize me. I know that I must look gaunt but...has the cancer ravaged my face, changed my appearance *that* much? I hope not. I want them to know it's me. I want them all to know who killed Alex.

I see Alex now. Across the room. Talking to a group of four men, all of them fat and balding. I don't recognize any of them, but it doesn't matter. I walk toward him, slowly.

"Hello, Doug," comes a voice over my right shoulder.

I turn toward the voice. It's little Robert, and he looks great. Not much changed from high school. But back then I think he always looked a little nervous...and now he seems...strangely calm.

"Robert, it's so good to see you. It really is."

"I have something for you, Doug."

"Something...?"

He looks into my eyes—a penetrating, searching look—then he says, "You don't remember, do you, Doug? How you bullied me. How you tortured me. You erased it. I suppose because it meant so little to you."

"Huh? What do you mean? We were pals. That was just...harmless fun..."

"Pals? Is that what you call it? Here's what I have for *you*, Doug." He presses the barrel of his gun to my stomach.

I beg him, "Please, Robert, I...I have to kill Alex. You remember how he treated us. I have a gun under my jacket."

"Oh, don't worry, Doug, I remember how he treated us. And I remember how you took it out on me. I have a full clip. He'll get his next. Right after you."

Well, at least *that's* a relief, I'm thinking, as little Robert pulls the trigger. ■

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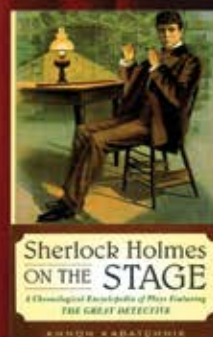
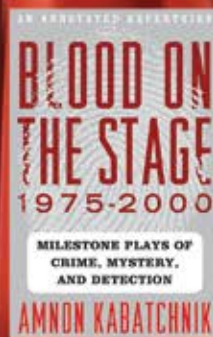
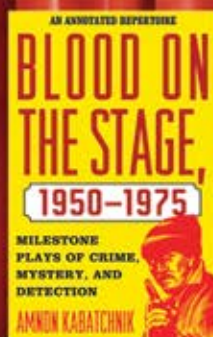
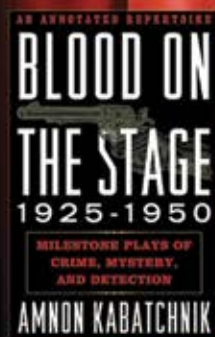
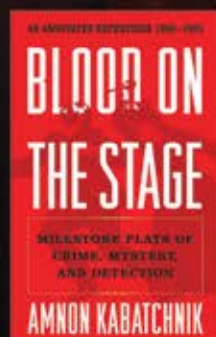
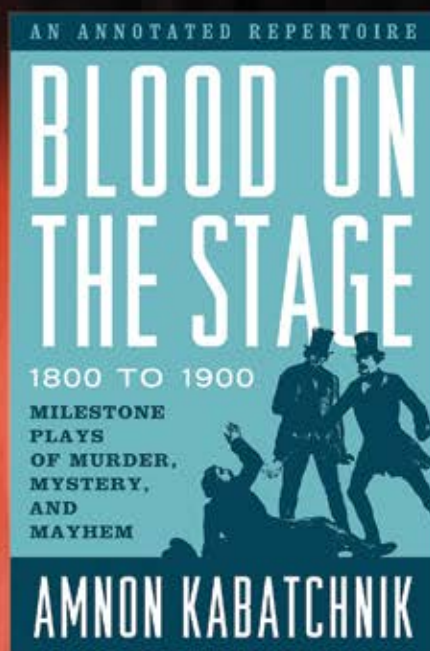
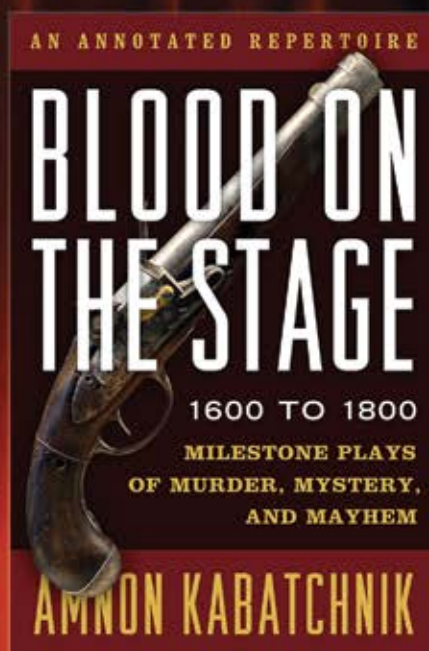
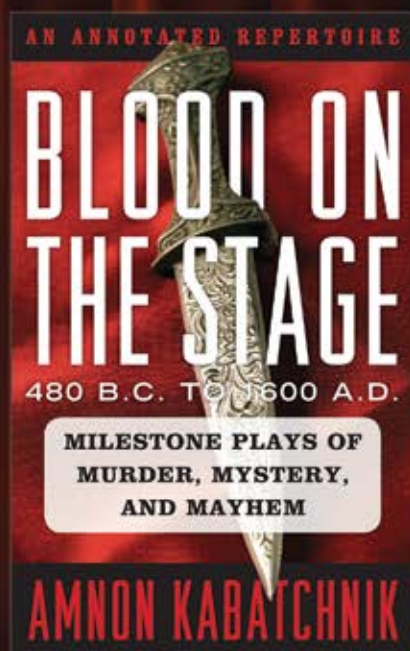
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